

Leonce and Georges Frere

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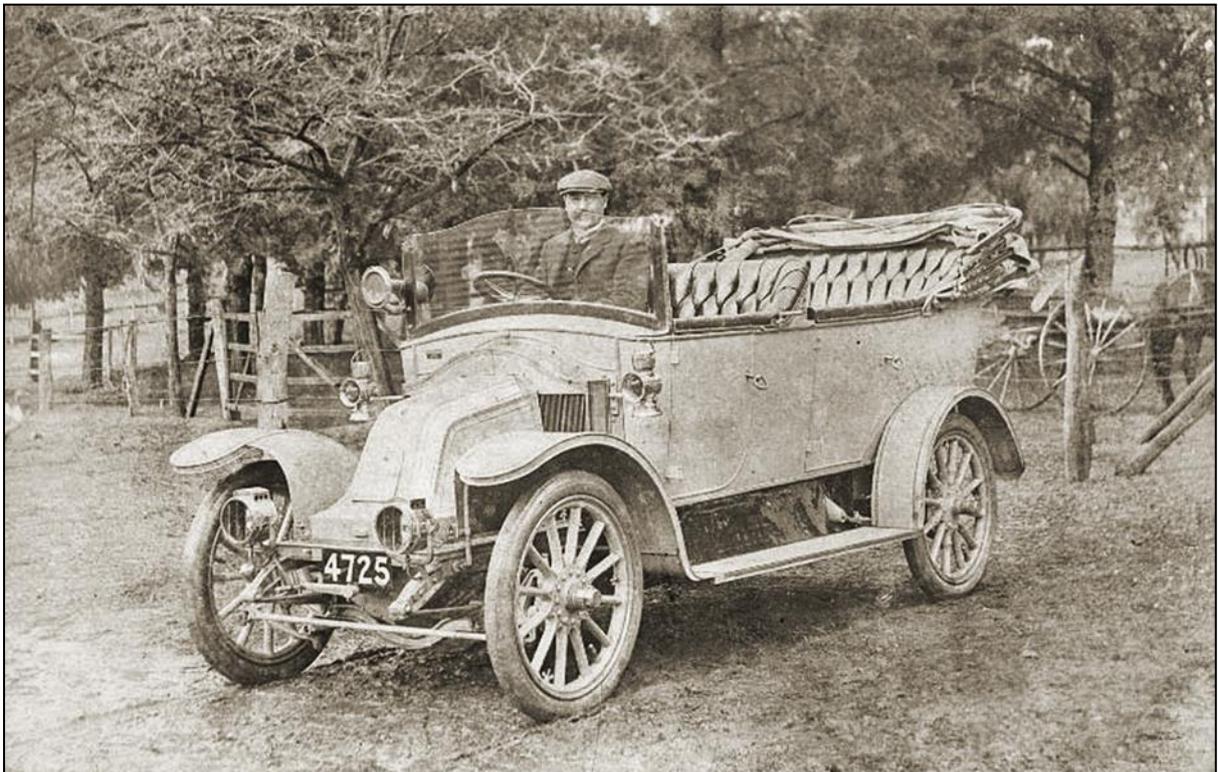
Francois Gaston Leonce Frere was born in 1837 at Barbezieux-St Hilaire, Charante, in the north-west of France, about 480 km from Paris. The family fortunes were ruined by the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71.

Albury vigneron James Fallon, on a trip to Paris in 1873, engaged Leonce to come to Albury to make champagne. The Freres travelled via London where they stayed with Charles Kelso, a successful wine and spirit merchant. Kelso would follow the Freres to Albury in 1889 and their daughter Madeline married Georges Frere in 1892.

Leonce, his wife Marthe and their eight year old son Georges reached Melbourne in September 1874, and the following January came on to Wodonga by rail. From there they were transported to Albury's Globe Hotel, stepping into the dust of an unsealed Dean street in a hot, dry Australian summer.

It was the start of a new life. Leonce started making champagne. In 1876 he moved to St Hilaire, Thurgoona, which he named after a family property in France. The champagne was popular in London at £3 a dozen, and awards were won in 1880 in Melbourne, Calcutta and London.

However, champagne making did not last long. Refrigeration was not available and summer temperatures in the Albury cellars could not match the 10°C needed for champagne which was easily achieved in France. Bottle breakages due to high temperatures were so frequent, that the venture had to be abandoned.



Georges Frere at the wheel of his Renault car in about 1913, when he was Mayor of Albury

By the late 1870s, some 3000 acres (1200ha) of land around Albury was under vines, of which St Hilaire had 180 (73ha). After the failure of champagne, St Hilaire cellars were restricted to making still wines. The vineyard maintained an output of about 25,000 gallons (almost 100,000 litres) of wine a year and in addition, up to 40,000 gallons of wine a year for distillation.

Leonce Frere died in December 1909, the same year that phylloxera, a sap sucking insect, arrived in Albury, devastating local vines. Georges Frere and his wife continued St Hilaire, replanted with vines on resistant stocks during World War I with their first decent vintage from the new stock in about 1920.

Georges was elected an Albury alderman in 1906 and in 1913 was elected mayor. He continued at St Hilaire before selling up in early 1946, not long after Madeline, his wife, had died. Georges Frere died in January 1951 and is buried in the Albury Pioneer Cemetery.

Albury has a Frere street off the western end of Logan Road.