Chapter 1. The first partners

James Easton.

James, the fifth son of Josiah Easton of Bradford near Taunton was born in 1796.[1] From an early age, he began to assist his father in surveys of land enclosures and other works. In 1822, his attention was drawn to a new French invention of M. Montgolfier, one of the brothers who developed the hot air balloon, the "pulsation engine". This was the first practical version of the hydraulic ram. James bought the English patent from Montgolfier, and visited him in Paris in order to obtain all possible information. This was not enough to make an efficient machine, but James was confident that the device could be greatly improved, and persevered with experiments until the ram was perfected.

He began manufacture from premises at 281, Strand London. Well aware of the virtues of publicity, he had a ram set up in his office, which could be seen in operation on payment of one shilling! With his improvements, it had become a very reliable device and some worked for a century with little attention.

During this period he was also engaged in surveying and executing various civil engineering works, among which, in 1825, was the projected London Northern Railroad, for which George Stephenson was consulting engineer. James Easton made the surveys and parliamentary plans of the section from London to Peterborough and, in order to obtain information as to the construction and mode of working, made numerous visits to colliery railways. In expectation of parliamentary opposition, James had made numerous experiments on the relative tractive forces required on canals and railways, and published a table dated January 1825, showing the resistance of levels and gradients, and the cost of working locomotives under various circumstances. The Bill was placed before Parliament in 1826, but a financial panic in that year put a stop to it for some time.

In 1827 he married Sarah, the daughter of Benjamin Shaw, who was well known in City circles, and twice in succession prime warden of the Fishmongers Company. The effects of the financial crisis induced James to turn towards mechanical engineering and in 1827 he went into partnership with Mr. Leahy of The Grove, Southwark, and traded as Leahy & Easton, Grove St. Borough. For some years previous to this, Mr. Leahy had been in partnership with a Mr. Dovey. It is possible that the capital represented by his wife's dowry enabled James to buy Mr. Dovey out. After the dissolution of the partnership with Mr. Leahy in 1829, he carried

[1] Appendix 1 reproduces a partial family tree of the Eastons

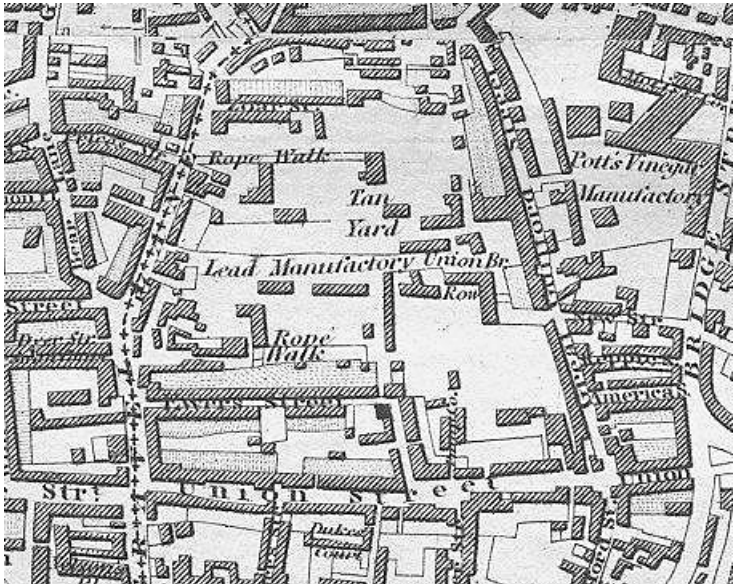

Figure 1

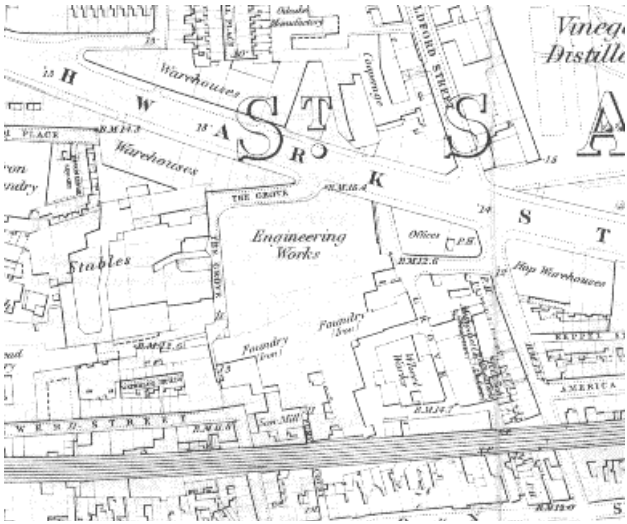

Figure 2

on business as James Easton, Hydraulic Machine Manufacturer, 160 Regent St. & Grove St. until 1837. The map (Fig 1) is taken from "Greenwoods Map of London 1827", and shows the area as it was before the construction of Southwark St. As the manufacture of lead pipe was part of the business when the partnership with Charles Amos began, it is likely that the lead manufactory shown on this map is the original site of the works. Mr. Leahy took up premises in Great Guildford St. nearby and continued in business as a millwright. Fig 2 is from a more recent map, and the engineering works shown is the rebuilt factory after the construction of Southwark St in 1864.

In the 1830s James became involved in land drainage, in Somerset[1] and elsewhere, and engineer to the Dartford and Crayford navigation in 1834. He advised on and carried out the drainage on all the marshes from Woolwich to Dartford. In 1832, he was living at 42, Upper Stamford Road Southwark.

He also became involved in "room and power" factories. These were factories that were rented out to small concerns that could not afford to build their own premises and power plant, the forerunner of the modern industrial estate.

At this period, besides numerous waterworks, hoists and cranes, he constructed the, at that time famous, ascending room at the Colosseum, in Regent's Park. In 1835, he commenced the works for the supply of water to Ramsgate and Deal by sinking wells into the chalk. These were then extended by tunnelling at right angles to the fissures in the chalk, so as to intercept the springs which he had observed running into the sea. The same plan was later repeated at Brighton where he was appointed Engineer to the Waterworks and elsewhere. Brighton Water Works were described in a paper read to the Brighton Health Congress in 1881 by his son, Edward. James was also responsible for sinking a well at Camden Town for the London & North Western Railway. While water was obtained, it was so soft as to be unsuitable for locomotive boilers, as it could not be kept in the boiler on account of priming[2]. It was however, according to the LNWR

[1] *One of James' brothers, John was, in 1830, appointed commissioner for the newly constituted Middlezoy, Othery & Westonzoyland Drainage Board, and was probably instrumental in engaging Easton's of London to build the beam engine and scoop wheel for the then new land drainage station at Westonzoyland.*

[2] *From "The Proceedings of the Inst. Mechanical Engineers" May 1876, in discussions on a paper by Edward Easton.*

engineer, Mr F.W.Webb, only sufficient to supply the two hotels at Euston, where it was so soft and in such demand that there was none to spare for other purposes, and water for locomotives was drawn from other sources.

By 1838, James had moved to 80, Great Surrey Street, (now Blackfriars Road.) and was still living there in 1856.

He retired from the company in 1866, and died in 1871. According to his obituary in "*The Engineer*" of November 3rd. 1871, his last illness was a case of blood-poisoning "caused by breathing the foul air of an ill-drained cottage while he was endeavouring to persuade the inmates to adopt a more healthy and cleanly habits."