

## Chapter 1 Walter Easton

The Eastons were an old West-Country family, which can be traced back to the 1500s. The first evidence of engineering interest can be ascribed to Josiah Easton of Bradford-on-Tone in 1825, when he obtained a patent (No. 5267) for “Locomotive Steam Carriages etc.”. There is no evidence, however that he actually constructed the carriage described. One of his sons, James moved to London, and founded the company of Easton & Amos. Other descendants of Josiah included surveyors, solicitors, and land agents.

In 1879, at the age of 19, Walter William Easton, a great grandson of Josiah, started a business building steam engines, in the coach house of his father’s house in Portman Terrace, Cheddon Road, Taunton. It is probable that these engines were made using parts bought in. Shortly after, he moved the business to rented premises in Whitehall, Taunton. This allowed him to establish a foundry, and expand the business, the Census return of 1881 describing him as Engineer, Iron and Brass Founder.

In 1882, he added another workshop to house two additional smith’s hearths. The surviving plan does not specify, but it appears to have been of wooden construction. These larger premises also gave him the opportunity to experiment with electric lighting, which was, at this time, being promoted in Taunton by Mr. Massingham and Mr. Newton.

An article in the “Somerset County Gazette” for 1<sup>st</sup> July 1882 about the possibility of providing public electric lighting in Taunton describes the lighting arrangements installed at Whitehall Foundry.

*“The British Electric Light Company have established an agency in the town, which is held by Mr. Easton of the Whitehall foundry, who has his own works lit by the system, and has made arrangements for supplying any private or public demand that may be made. We had an opportunity of witnessing the light the other evening, and can speak highly of the system and its working. Mr. Easton has fitted up his workshop with two kinds of lamps, one a large arc lamp of 2000 candlepower, for outdoor purposes, and the other groups of incandescent lamps suitable for domestic lighting and workshops. The current is generated by a Gramme dynamo machine driven by a two horse steam engine, which is used on the works of the establishment; thus effecting a great economy of power. The globe of the larger lamp is opaque and thus renders the light more agreeable and less trying to the eyes. The incandescent lamps are arranged in clusters in Mr. Easton’s workshop, but they can be used separately in groups or in lines as the circumstances of a building may require. The lamps are of twenty candlepower each and are not too powerful for small rooms. The light may be seen at Mr. Easton’s workshop any evening by appointment*

There appears to have been no demand for extensions to this installation to other premise; the distance from the works at Whitehall to the commercial centre of the town (approx.  $\frac{3}{4}$ mile) may have presented difficulties. The British Electric Light Company were the sole licensees of the

Gramme dynamo in the United Kingdom; it is not known how long Walter Easton remained their agent.

At the Taunton Flower Show in August 1882, Walter Easton erected a three horse power engine for the demonstration of a Brockie-Pell arc lamp, which he installed over the entrance to Vivary Park. The report in the *Somerset County Gazette* on the 12<sup>th</sup> August stated that it “illuminated the whole of Upper High Street and High Street, and was an object of admiring attraction during the evening.” The *Somerset County Herald* was equally enthusiastic, describing it as “...both striking and useful, and the superiority of electricity to gas, for the purposes as at all events of public lamps was generally admitted”.

At the November 1882 meeting of the Taunton Market Trustees, a proposal by Walter to provide electric lighting in the Parade was rejected, on the grounds that the “*lighting of the Parade is not within the scope of the Trustees’ duties, and they have informed Mr. Easton accordingly.*” Unfortunately, the minutes do not record the terms and conditions of his offer.

In December of the same year, he gave a further demonstration of the possibilities of electric lighting, by illuminating the exterior of the offices of the Somerset County Herald, using an Brockie-Pell arc lamp of 2000 candlepower, the Gramme dynamo being driven at 900 revolutions per minute by the engine of the printing plant. The *Herald* reported on the 23<sup>rd</sup> December that “Mr. W. W. Easton, the well known engineer, of the Whitehall Foundry, Taunton, supplied the light, and carried out the whole of the