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## Supplement to HISTELEC NEWS No.24 August 2003

### Electric Lyme

*by Martin Roundell Greene*

*A new exhibition about the story of electricity in Lyme Regis is due to open in its historic Town Mill this summer. "Electric Lyme" will trace the history from when, in June 1909, the Mayor turned a golden switch to light up the streets for the first time to when the Council gave a dinner for the department staff in March 1948 on the eve of nationalisation.*

*The research for the exhibition has taken writer Martin Roundell Greene and designer Ian Dicks as far afield as the electricity museums at Amberley and Christchurch, the Public Records Office in Kew and the SWEHS archives in Bristol. Their problem has been that many of the local electricity records were burned.*

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Dick Hitchcock, who started as a boy apprentice in 1939 at the council's generating station in Mill Lane, remembers, 'We had a new manager after the war and he told me to take all the old records outside and burn them. A few of them, like the deeds to the old Malthouse, looked important so I put them out of sight on a shelf behind the switchboard. But a few months later, in October 1947, there was a big fire. The whole of the Malthouse roof went up so they got burned anyway.'

The idea for the new exhibition came to Martin when he and Ian were preparing the Town Mill's main exhibition at the end of its £800,000 restoration to working order in 2001. 'We had the history of Town Mill right back to 1340, but in the 1920s it suddenly stopped. All we knew was that the council, who in those days ran their own electricity company, had bought the mill. In the 1930s they replaced the waterwheel with a turbine to supplement the generators in the Malthouse next door.

Then someone suggested, "You ought to talk to Dick Hitchcock. He worked in the Malthouse from before the war." So we went to see him. He's got an amazingly clear memory, and opened up a completely new world.

'I hadn't realized that in the 1930s there were hundreds of electricity companies all over the country, with their own prices and voltages. Today we take electricity for granted but in those days they used to work hard to sell the idea. In Lyme Regis there was an Assisted Wiring Scheme. For five shillings, Dick told us, you could get your house connected and you got four lights. His mother paid seven and sixpence and got an extra light on the

stairs with a two-way switch.'



**Fig.1 Dick Hitchcock(left) with Martin and Ian  
outside the former generating station  
at the Malthouse in Mill Lane**

The other problem for Martin was that his knowledge of electricity was minimal. 'Some hazy memories lingered from O-level physics but my most up-to-date knowledge had come from the other contractors working on the Town Mill restoration project. I noticed they all treated the electricians with quiet respect. When I asked them why they said, "There are only two things you need to know about electricity, mate: you can't see it and it can kill you".'

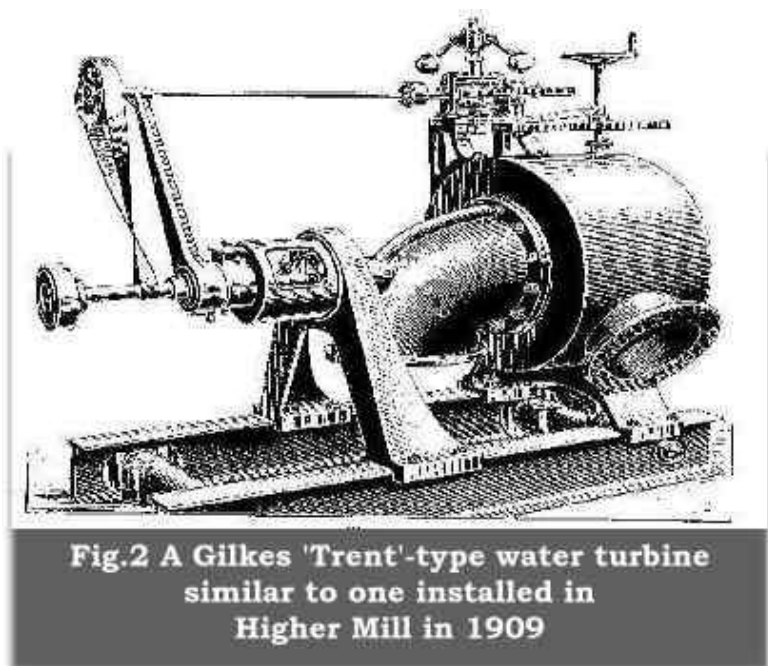
Western Power Distribution, who agreed to sponsor the design of the Electric Lyme exhibition, put Martin in touch with Peter Lamb, the Secretary of SWEHS. 'Peter was my central contact', says Martin. 'He realized that I did not know anything about the subject and patiently guided me to relevant sources of information and answered some stunningly basic questions. What are volts? What is the difference between AC and DC?

He also put me in touch with another SWEHS member, David Hood from

Exeter, and David accompanied me on a return visit to Dick Hitchcock where he acted as a sort of technical translator. When Dick spoke of a mercury arc rectifier, at least there was someone else in the room who knew what on earth he was talking about.

Martin's other sources of research were newspaper archives in Taunton and Yeovil and the old Borough records stored in Dorchester. 'The records are not always where you expect to find them. There was a missing bundle of documents dealing with the council's purchase of the original Electric Light & Power Co back in 1923. The papers eventually turned up in a box marked Water.'

Newspaper records and a firm in Cumbria answered a question that had baffled local experts. It was known that waterpower had played an important part in the original plant in 1909, but where had the turbine been sited? There was mention of a mill, but surely at that time the Town Mill was still using its waterpower to grind corn. Then the original manufacturers, Gilkes Ltd of Kendal, discovered in their archives that the turbine had been ordered for a 5.79



metre head of water: far too high for the Town Mill where the head is nearly two metres less. Finally an old newspaper report revealed the answer: the company had leased the water rights and sited the turbine at another watermill, Higher Mill, nearly a mile upstream.

Wartime censors, however, stopped one dramatic story ever reaching the papers. In February 1942 one of the great diesel engines in the Malthouse blew up, launching a massive piece of the machinery into two of the other generators. Dick Hitchcock was in the cinema when the lights went out. "When I got to the Malthouse the engine hadn't stopped. The crank shaft was still going round with a six foot connecting rod smashing everything to hell. There were flames coming out where the exhaust pipes had broken off and the water pipe had broken too so there was a hundred gallons of water a minute going up in the air from the cooling system."

The explosion had knocked out three of the power station's four generators, leaving only the smallest 50kW equipment to supply the entire town. Next day Dick and his colleagues went round every house in Lyme removing the power fuses so that consumers were only able to use the remaining current for lighting. It was more than a year before a supply was brought along the

was on the national grid. The technical details



of Lyme Regis electricity are briefly as follows. The supply began on 1st June 1909 using a 110 volt DC system supplied by 20 Kw dynamo driven by a 35HP Gardner horizontal paraffin engine and a 5 kW dynamo driven at Higher Mill by a Gilkes 7 1/2 HP turbine. There were 90 public street lamps, 16 of 75 candle-power and 74 of 23 candle-power. They were to be lit from half an hour after local sunset to 11.30pm except on Sundays when they would be switched off at 10.30pm. The contract allowed the Lyme Regis Electric Light & Power Company not to light the streets on nights when the moon was bright. The entire capital cost including equipment and premises was about £3,000. Lyme was only the third town in Dorset, after Bournemouth and Christchurch, with a public electricity supply. Sherborne followed in 1912 and Dorchester in 1913.

By 1923 there were 97 street lamps and 144 consumers in a town of 2,300 people. A further Gardner engine had increased output by 18 kW. But the business was struggling and the borough council bought it from the Dorset Electric Supply Co for £3,400. In 1924 it re-equipped the power station and changes the town over to a 440 volt three-wire DC system. One of the Gardner sets was converted and a new 50kW Marshall set installed. A year later two more 75kW Marshalls were bought. Back-up for the DC system was in the form of a 264-cell battery.

In the early 1930s an assisted wiring scheme was introduced and by 1936 more power was needed. A 15kW Gilkes water turbine was installed in the Town Mill next door to the power station and, in 1937, a second-hand 100 kW Petters' set from Totnes.

By 1939 there was talk in the council of moving over to the national grid but nothing happened until February 1942 when the explosion occurred.

In November 1947, when two thirds of the town had been converted to grid AC, a fire destroyed the power-station. However, through temporary measures the council's electricity department managed to restore power to the town during the following afternoon.

By the early 1940s the council's electricity department was headed by the Borough Electrical Engineer, Arthur Brown who had been in post since he left the Navy at the end of the First World War. There were three shift engineers: Charlie Camplin, Les Sharley and Stan Stocker manning the power-station 24 hours a day. When Charlie and Stan went off to the war they were replaced by Rolf Hawker and George Rice. Then there were three labourers headed by Tom Tabberer, and two apprentices: Edgar 'Eggy' Loosemore and Dick Hitchcock.



**Fig.4. The Town Mill**

If any readers have any more information, photographs or artefacts about electricity in Lyme Regis before nationalisation, Martin Roundell Greene would be very grateful to hear from them. Contact him on 01460 77434 or [mrg@clarityenglish.co.uk](mailto:mrg@clarityenglish.co.uk) He has begun writing a little book about "Electric Lyme".

Electric Lyme will be a semi-permanent exhibition sponsored by Western Power Distribution, and is due to open this summer at the [Town Mill, Lyme Regis. 01297 443579. www.townmill.org.uk](http://www.townmill.org.uk)

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## "ELECTRIC LYME" APPENDIX

### Information from Dorset Records Office, Borough Records (Council Meetings Minutes)

- 1895 Kelly's Directory "Streets are lighted by gas and well paved."
- 1907 Kelly's Directory "The streets are lighted by gas by the Gas & Range Company, Church Street, Proprietor W.R.Wallis." The directory lists one electric light company in Dorset, in Bournemouth, one electrician in Bournemouth and one in Weymouth, and an electric bell fitter in Pound Street, Lyme Regis and another in Bridport.
- 1911 Kelly's Directory "The streets are lighted by electricity by the Lyme Regis Electric Light and Power Company Limited in Coombe Street, Manager Cecil John Charles Street. The directory lists two electric light companies in Dorset, the one in Bournemouth and now the one in Lyme. There are now electricians in Boumemouth, Shaftesbury and Dorchester.

From Kelly's Directory 1915 we see a gradual spread of electricity and services through the county and that the Electric Light & Power Co's manager is now a Frederick Cheshire. By 1920 there is yet another manager, Arthur Brown, and Lyme Regis boasts "The Cinema & Tea Lounge in Broad Street, proprietor J Raymond." By 1927 there are two electricians in town and also "Gordon Williams, wireless dealer, 8 Monmouth Street." Nevertheless, in 1936 electricity is still considered something of a luxury: the Bay Hotel's advertisement in the town's official guide boasts, "Wash basins (h&c) in bedrooms. Baths. Electric light."

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- 1905 Gas & Range Co Fitting up Town Hall stair lamp
- 1906 Gas at Town Hall from October 1 to December 3 13/-
- 1908 April Council seeks arrangement with Charmouth re: telephones - could it be that, if Charmouth would pay £4 and Lyme £11 - 13 -4, they would be connected?
- 1908 Council paying for gas for the Marder Bequest Almshouses.

- 1908 Council committees include Almshouses, Burial Board, Highways, Sanitation, Horse Committee, School Attendance committee and Watch & Light.
- 1910 May The first reference to the Lyme Regis Electric Light & Power Company Ltd: a payment of 1 3/4d. This is almost certainly the first of regular quarterly payments by the Council for electricity for the Marder Bequest Almshouses. In 1897 Captain Nicholas Marder had bequeathed £2,000 for 6 almshouses in Coombe Street for old mariners. (In 1910 the captain's nephew, a Major Marder, made a gift through the Council to the almshouse occupants of six pipes, tobacco, six pictures and some flower seeds. The Council recorded its thanks.)
- 1911 13 Feb Alderman Bickley moved that the recommendation of the Borough committee be adopted: that incandescent burners be placed in the Town Hall and Committee Room. Seconded by Cllr. Long and carried. Sub-committee also given power to connect Assembly Rooms if it thinks fit.
- 1911 13 March - Letter from Lyme Regis Gas & Range Company read, asking why the lights of the Assembly Rooms & Victoria Hall had not been let by tender. Alderman Bickley explained that the Committee considered that electric light was the best light for public rooms, and had received an offer from Lyme Regis Electric Light & Power Company to light the whole building for £5, and that the Committee had therefore accepted the offer.
- 1911 May 8 - Payments approved:  
 Lyme Regis Electric Light & Power Co Wiring Assembly Rooms for Electric Light: £5  
 Lyme Regis Electric Current - Assembly Rooms: 5/2d, Marder Bequest.....13/4d  
 Bradford and Sons - coal etc.....£1-2-11d  
 Gas & Range Company Town Hall and Assembly Rooms.....£2-10-0d  
 Gas & Range Company - coke.....2/4d
- 1911 April to June The Council let the Victoria Hall for 12 weeks for some cookery for classes girls. The rent included fuel for the stove so electricity was clearly only being used for lighting. The population of Lyme Regis in 1911 is 2,772 "including 473 on board one of His Majesty's ships".
- 1911 June 12 - "The Council sanctioned with thanks the offer of the Electric Light & Power Co to illuminate the Assembly Rooms free on the Coronation Night." (King George V 1910-36).
- 1911 July 10 - "On the proposition of Councillor Brown, seconded by Alderman Wiscombe, a role of thanks was passed to the Electric Light & Power Co for their excellent illumination of the Assembly Rooms on Coronation Night."
- 1911 August 14 Electric Light & Power Co Assembly Rooms and Victoria Hall 8/6d
- 1912 May 13 - Electric Light & Power Co Assembly Rooms £1 - 13 - 0d Victoria Hall 2/-  
 On 23rd May the Assembly Rooms were let free to Mrs. Radford for an entertainment in aid of the Titanic Relief Fund.
- 1912 August 12 - Electric Light & Power Co (Additional?) Wiring Assembly Rooms £2 - 10-0 Lighting Victoria Hall 116d, Assembly Rooms 3/6d.
- 1913 April The Borough's outstanding liabilities are shown as including Lighting £256, Repair~ to bridge £430, Salaries £240. The Lighting figure is, I guess, the annual cost of power for street lighting.
- 1920 September 20. A significant motion was adopted by the Council: "that it is desirable that al undertakings of Public Utility be under the direct control of the Council, and that the mayor be empowered to enter into any negotiations to that end".

- 1923 Although the Council's own papers relating to electricity from 1920-1924 are missing from the Dorset County records Office, Kelly's Directory in 1931 says "The streets are lighted with electricity by the Lyme Regis Electric Light and Power Company Limited, whose powers were in 1923 transferred to the Corporation".

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**Pulman's Weekly - Taunton County Library Archives. 20 February 2003**

- 1909 5 January LYME REGIS. PROPOSED ELECTRIC LIGHT FOR THE TOWN. At a meeting of the Borough Council with the Lyme Regis Electric Light and Power Company Ltd, a scheme for electric light for the town was provisionally adopted. A letter from Mr. Alban Woodroffe had been received some days before saying he had been asked by the promoters of the Company to become a director, with power to nominate other directors. He was willing to accept this invitation, but only if the Corporation granted the Company a seven-year contract (with powers to terminate it, if the lighting were unsatisfactory). The Company was proposing to light the town at a cheaper rate with a '100-volt working pressure'. For generation, water power would be used as far as possible, but the works would be fitted with sufficient machinery to avoid being in any way dependent upon water power. The total cost of the scheme was estimated at £1, 902. The Electric Light Company was offering 15 more lamps for the same price, as the Council was now paying the Gas Company, or to make a reduction of £40 per year by using the same number of lamps as at present. After discussion the proposition was unanimously carried.
- 1909 17 January. The Council agreed a seven-year contract providing that the Company "would lay the wires underground in the principle thoroughfares.
- 1909 25 May. The undertaking to light the town was being rapidly pushed forward. This week two of the workmen were injured. Mr.D.Board received a burnt hand from hot pitch being used for insulation, and Mr.White's leg was broken by a falling paving slab.
- 1910 22 February TOWN IN DARKNESS A gale on Monday night was responsible for breaking overhead cables shortly after seven o'clock in the evening with the resulting failure of the electric light. The damage was repaired expeditiously by the Company's engineer, Mr. Balbani, so that the streets were only in darkness for about 15 minutes, although almost an hour had elapsed after the mishap, *before the occupiers of private houses and business establishments could avail themselves of the electric light.* (My italics - so the electricity supply extended beyond just street lighting).