

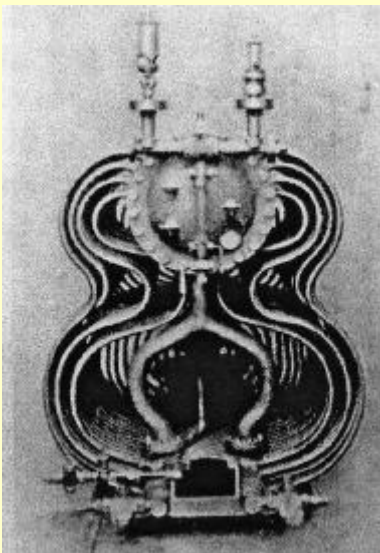
# MOTOR CARS ARE HERE TO STAY

## The Liquid Fuel Company of East Cowes

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In 1893 Mr H. A. House Senior whilst in England was fined for speeding on the Thames. The launch he had built in his factory at Teddington was propelled by a steam engine using a liquid fuel (kerosene) boiler for which he held a patent. It is said that a witness thought he was travelling at 26 knots and reported that he was fined £10. This was no doubt just the advertisement he could have hoped for and perhaps it hastened the move of **H. A. House and Son** to the world's centre of yachting and its re-establishment on the site of what became the Columbine Shed in East Cowes during 1894.

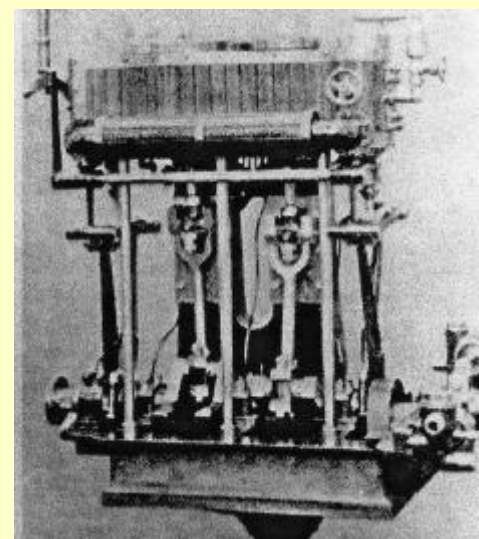
Henry Alzono House Senior (1840-1930) is better known for being an American inventor whose interests ranged widely; from sewing machines to foodstuffs, telephones to early flight. It gave him close connections with many well know American companies of the time. His first son, born in 1865, was also called **Henry A. House**, and after serving his apprenticeship, a firm building liquid fuel steam engines was set up in 1892 at Teddington on the Thames whilst his father was living and working on this side of the Atlantic in America. He had, however, come to Britain after a fire destroyed his American factory and worked with Hiram Maxin whose then interest was in constructing and developing flying machines. Backed by British financiers House was able to establish the **Liquid Fuel Engineering Company, LIFU**, which used many of the then latest American production techniques. After just two years, and the speeding fine for travelling on the river at 26 knots, the company moved in 1894 to the Isle of Wight with Henry A. House Junior left in control as he manager when father returned home.



The East Cowes firm grew to have some 12 workshops with virtually everything being done on site. It had its own pattern shop, foundry, sawmill, joinery copper and other smiths as well and a paint shop. At the peak of the LIFU Company there were some 220 craftsmen employed at the Columbine site using a then novel assembly line approach to reduce unnecessary movement of materials during production. In 1899 they produced some 30 road vehicles and 20 launches. By using standard parts for engines and all their vehicles they were also able to stock and easily supply parts.

Cowes had attracted LIFU by its position at the heart of sailing. The ever larger yachts, many over 100ft, then in fashion needed tenders to service them and their crews. Their

owners had money and were very willing to pay for fast and reliable steam launches that used the latest technology for they would save on maintenance and crew. The patented LIFU liquid fuel boiler had given the company some enormous advantages. Fuel being a petroleum product was in those days relatively cheap—just a few old pence a gallon. The space needed to bunker the fuel was far less than that needed for coal. But perhaps the greatest sales points were that the boiler did not need stoking and was very easy to control. The lack of black smoke and little smell no doubt also made these new engines more attractive to the purchaser.



On the left above is a copy, from one of their trade advertisements, of a LIFU boiler and on the right hand side of the page one of their engines. Most of these were around 35 shp,

although they produced a variety of output sizes over the years to suit individual customer requirements.



At first launches and steam yachts were the mainstay of the business. Each was equipped with a LIFU patent boiler and machinery. Robert R. Symon, who was one of the financial backers of the firm, had a 63 foot steam yacht 'Manitou' built by J. S. White's across the river but it was fitted out by LIFU and had their machinery on board. A launch which has stood the test of time and is thought to be the only LIFU one with its original engine is

'Kariat'. It was built in 1896 as a steam tender to ferry its owner from his yacht when moored Cowes to his home at Hythe. 'Kariat' moved around from place to place as owners changed, being restored and given a new boiler in 1985 at Lake Windermere. Subsequently going to County Down until in 1997 when it was bought and brought back to the Island. 'Kariat' is typical of the launches made by LIFU – length 35 feet, beam 6feet 9 inches, LIFU engine 35 shp working on a boiler pressure of 200 psi, speed 13 knots – The restored 'Kariat' photographed by Brian Smith and use with thanks is seen steaming on the Medina in 2004.

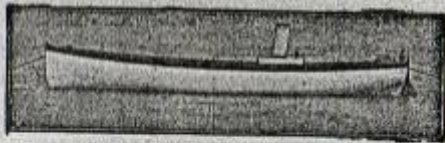
LIFU were prepared to allow other companies to manufacture their patented engines under license. They also made as general engineers other items such as their 'Simplex Stockless Anchor' as the trade advertisement below illustrates. It also shows that they had a central London office as well as one in Paris.

Telegraphic Address: PADRINO, LONDON. THE Telegraphic Address: PADRINO, EAST COWES.

# LIQUID FUEL ENGINEERING CO.


Trade LIFU Mark.

Steam Yacht and Launch Builders, Marine and General Engineers, &c.



Patentees of the 'SIMPLEX' STOCKLESS ANCHOR

Made in Two Pieces only—without rivets, screws, or other fastenings.



Can be supplied in Annealed Steel (Galvanized), Brass, Gun Metal, Phosphor Bronze, or other metals.

Made in sizes weighing 4½ lbs. and upwards.

The advantages claimed for boats built by this Company are—Light Weight, Light Draught, No Smoke, No Smead, High-Class Workmanship, Automatic Action, Simple Construction. 100 lbs. of Steam can be raised within 15 Minutes.

Patent Water Tube Boilers, with Patent Liquid Fuel Burners, designed for Electric Light Installations, Pumping Plant, &c., &c.

London Office—20, ARCHURCH LANE, E.C.

Works—EAST COWES, I.W.

Paris Office—26, RUE DE LA CHAUSSEE, D'ANTIN.

However, soon after being established in East Cowes, LIFU went into the manufacture of steam road vehicles. For simplicity all had the same chassis serving a wide variety of applications. There was their lorry carrying some 3 tons with a speed on level ground of 6 to 8 mph, but only a maximum of 4 mph on a 10% hill. The 40 gallons of fuel was sufficient for 50 to 80 miles and the 80 gallons of water on board lasted for around 25 miles. The goods van reached a maximum speed of 9 miles with a load of 3 tons. The General Post Office used some LIFU vans as did several London firms. The waggonette had knife seating but was constructed still on the same chassis as the rest. The LIFU waggonette gained the dubious honour in 1896 of being the first motor vehicle to be caught speeding on the Isle of Wight, but more of that below. Mansfield and Portsmouth also bought omnibuses constructed by LIFU of East Cowes. Although LIFU nearly always kept all their production on site it is recorded in a 'Century of Progress, 1852-1952' published by the long established Island firm of Chiverton's that "Messrs R. Bird Cheverton of Newport, Isle of Wight trimmed bodies and made and bound wheels for the Liquid Fuel Company's steam cars and lorries".

For the summers of 1898 and 1899 the Midland and South Western Junction Railway ran a road train from Cirencester to Fairfield through Ampney Crucis along what is now the A417. Besides goods and parcels it was able to carry up to twenty passengers. Sadly proving too expensive to operate it was replaced by a horse bus but all the same it was the first example of a rail bus service.



It is thought that the engine used by Hiram Maxim for his first attempts at flight in 1890 was made by LIFU. Although the craft was tethered it is said to have left the ground. Hiram Maxim was closely associated with both H. A. House Senior and Junior. It may have been Maxim that re-financed the firm after it had left the Island in 1900.

1899 some six years after his father, Henry A. House Junior was also prosecuted for speeding but this time it was in a LIFU built steam driven road vehicle thought to be a waggonette. He was said to have covered on a January night at 10 o'clock a distance of some 1,633 yards down York Avenue in 3 minutes – some 18 miles an hour. It was the first prosecution for speeding on the Island. In his defence Mr House pointed out that he would be one of the last men to wish to endanger the public by the use of motor cars and there was absolutely no one about at that time of night. There was an outcry in the local press and in reply House pointed out that:

### ***motor cars are here to stay***

He was fined £3 with 11 shillings costs.

But motor vehicles needed to be tested for their speeds to be quoted in advertisements. York Avenue was ideal for hill runs and Clarence Road was perhaps the only then reasonable good flat and straight road in the area.

No doubt the speeding charge and the strong opposition to testing on Island road, together with the inherent difficulty of transport to and from the Island, contributed somewhat to the firm moving from the Island. But more importantly was the death of one of the firm's financiers, Robert Rintoul Symon, for his executors sold every last item from the Columbine Yard. So ended the production of LIFU road vehicles on the Isle of Wight resulting in the loss of over 200 skilled jobs.

Whilst on the Isle of Wight Henry A. House Jnr lived in Cambridge Road. A London office of the company was established at 20 Abchurch Lane in the city area and LIFU used the Columbine Works as their East Cowes Address. Kelly's Directory for the Isle of Wight in 1900 describe the firm as just '*marine and general engineers, steam yacht and launch builders*'. Although there is the stress on the marine side it is known that in trials between 1897 and 1901 their two ton wagon '*performed well*' in Liverpool and that their steam buses were tested and used in Mansfield, Edinburgh and also between Dover and Deal. However the two 15 horse power steam omnibuses operated by Poole & Sandbanks Motor Omnibus Company by 1904 were proving difficult to operate and maintain and were replaced by petrol powered buses. But perhaps it is natural for the marine side of a very successful

Island based business to be emphasised at the expense of road vehicles in some local historical accounts of LiFu. The East Cowes Heritage Centre have amongst its industrial archive of the town most useful material relating to the Liquid Fuel Company of East Cowes.

The firm first moved to Hamworthy near Poole and then by 1910 was located at Bitterne, Southampton. Who financed the plant on the mainland is not know. It may well have been Hiram Maxim proprietor of the armament firm for whom Henry House Junior had worked for a fairly short time following his apprenticeship in his father's firm.

In the East Cowes Heritage Centre at 8 Clarence Road, East Cowes there is a good collection of material connected with LiFu. It has provided much of the foundation for this essay.

[www.isleofwightsociety.org.uk](http://www.isleofwightsociety.org.uk)

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