

The Curious Case of Couailliet and Elieson

Not just clocks but cars!

By Leigh Extence



Armand Couailliet

I have in my collection an interesting postcard that throws light onto a relationship that encompasses two well-known names from the early period of electric car manufacture.

All carriage clock collectors will know of the Couailliet clockmaking family based in the horological town of Saint-Nicolas-d'Aliermont, near the northern French coast near Dieppe.

Armand Couailliet in particular was more than just an *horloger* but an inventor and innovator who tried his hand at many things including the manufacture of the motor-car. On first reading, this one postcard gives no indication of this but my delving deeper adds a story of intriguing collaboration.

In summary, in the 1880s Armand Couailliet, originally a farm-worker, worked for the carriage clock maker and town mayor Albert Villon in the large clockmaking workshops set-up by Villon in Saint-Nicolas-d'Aliermont. This business was to become Duverdry & Bloquel and finally Bayard.

Never one to stand still, in 1891 Armand decided to leave Villon's employment and set up on his own account working freelance for the various makers in the town. Then in February 1892, along with seven workers, he opened his own carriage clock making workshops in an uninhabited premises located at Bout d'Aval, the original lower end of the town where most of the original *horologers* of Saint-Nicolas-d'Aliermont were then situated.

His success led to enlarging the factory in 1896 and it was at the Universal Exhibition of 1900 that he received a silver medal for the quality of his carriage clocks.

In 1903 Armand brought his brothers Ernest, Henri and Gustave into the business and so Couailliet Frères were established. Henri assisted in running the business whilst Armand was away on his many trips whilst Ernest was in charge of supervising the workshops and directing the production, with Gustave a clockmaker at the bench.

Due to the size of the business Couailliet opened workshops in various locations within the town and all within a few hundred yards of each other. At one point even finding a use for the

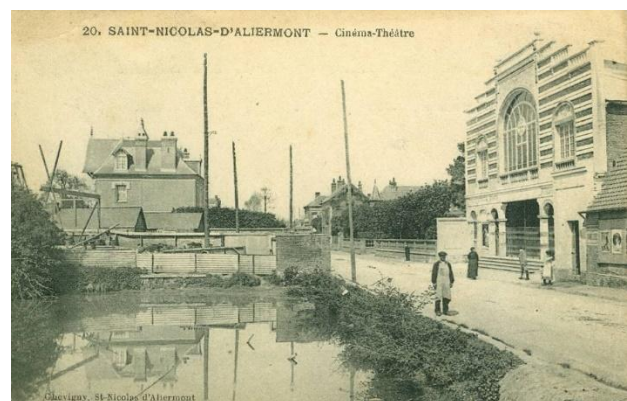
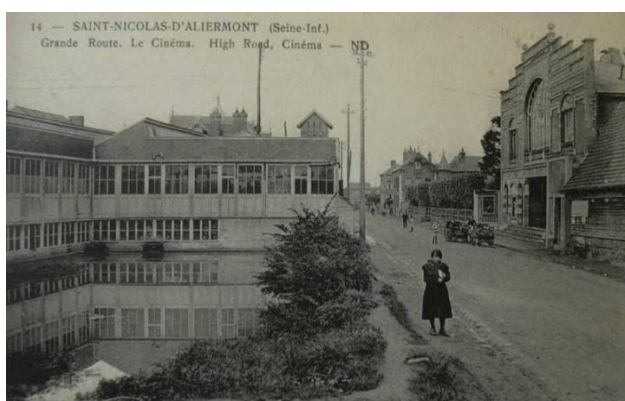
town cinema across the road from the main workshops, which themselves were located across a fence from the well-known carriage clock maker Alfred Baveux. From circa 1909 Couaillet utilised workshops built into the grounds of Armand's home, Château Le Bréjal, situated just off the main high road.



A rare photograph of the workshops, seen here on the left, in the grounds of Château Le Bréjal, home to Armand and his family from 1909.

Couaillet Frères became major suppliers of carriage clock *blancs roulants*, rough movements for others to finish and case up, as well as suppliers of finished clocks, although very few are known actually signed with their name, most being stamped with their distinctive hand-setting arrow mark to the movement backplate.

On January 28, 1912, a gigantic fire devastated the main factory destroying the buildings, the machine tools and all the stock of clocks. The Couaillet brothers were close to bankruptcy as the property was only insured for 300,000 francs, when in actuality it was valued in total at nearly 1.5 million francs.



The lower end of the workshops prior to the fire and following the fire. Note the cinema across the road that became a temporary workshop. The hedge to the left of the cinema houses the entrance to the Delépine-Barrois premises.

As it was, the assistance provided by their workers, suppliers, and neighbouring carriage clock making businesses such as Baveux Frères and Delépine-Barrois helped keep the business running, and before long three hundred workers quickly resumed manufacturing *pendules de voyage*.



The original Couaillet workshops following the rebuild, with the smelting chimneys of Baveux visible behind to the right and Delépine-Barrois to the left, showing the close proximity of all three major carriage clock suppliers.

It was by coincidence that at this time Ludovic Delépine and his wife Marie Barrois, Delépine-Barrois, decided to move to Paris, from where Marie originated, and agreed to sell their large house and workshops to Couaillet Frères. This also adding eighty employees to the three-hundred already utilised by Couaillet either in their other workshops or as home-workers.

And this is where this story begins.

The historically interesting postcard, shown below, is a view of the Delepine-Barrois premises as mentioned and was sent from Saint-Nicolas-d'Alhiermont to a Mrs Elieson of 24, St. Mary Abbots Terrace, High Street Kensington, London.



This card is signed from *Father* and reads in French:

Vendredi Mars 22 – 1912

Cette vue vous donnera a la nouvelle fabrique de M. Couaillet.

Love to all, Father.

Je quitterais de moin Samedi.

The English translation being:

Friday, March the 22nd – 1912.

This view gives you a glimpse of Mr. Couaillet's new workshop.

Love to all, Father.

I'll leave sooner rather than later on Saturday.

The writer, Mr. Elieson, seems to have a familiarity with Couaillet as he notes that this is the new workshops, hinting at a relationship of sorts.

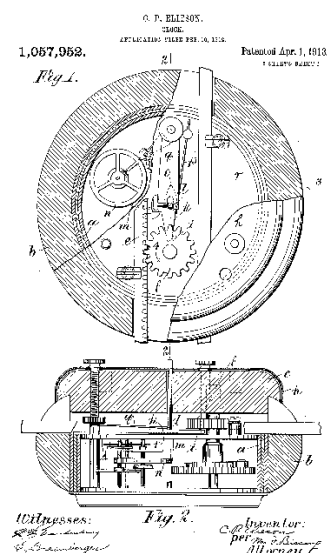
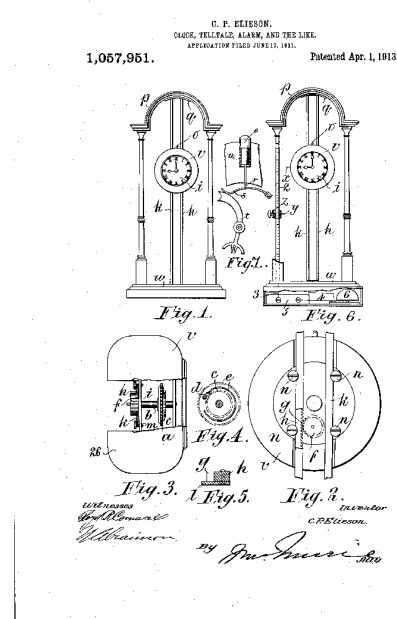
Note that the postcard still has the Delépine-Barrois name printed on the front and hasn't been changed to Couaillet as yet, this being the exact time in 1912 that Couaillet moved in.



The same image as on the Elieson postcard but now updated with the Couailliet Freres name.

My research has now unearthed that the Elison who sent the card was Charles Prosper Elieson and he had two interests in common with Armand Couailliet.

Firstly, Elieson had an horological patent published in April 1913, less than a year following his visit to Couaillet, for a *telltale alarm gravity* clock. Is it possible that he made the visit looking to Couaillet Frères to help in the future production of the clock? Maybe as a supplier of movements for when he went into production?





And did conversation between the two spark a further interest for the entrepreneurial Armand? At this time Couaillet was switching to the manufacture of other mechanical objects, such as steam engines, weighing machines etc. and the workshops were developed to undertake the making of these larger objects.

With the advent of World War I in 1914, clock manufacturing stopped and production was switched over to make parts for airplanes and telegraph machines. In 1919, following the cessation of hostilities, Armand Couaillet, always a visionary, put into production a lightweight, three-wheeled electric car, known as the *Electricar*. With a $\frac{1}{2}$ hp engine, this single-seat three-wheeler model, with a single front wheel, went into production from 1920, but having produced approximately 250 of these cars in just over a year, the firm ceased production and eventually went bankrupt.



Armand Couaillet demonstrates his Electricar at Place Vendome, Paris in September 1919.

My investigations into the father of Ms Elieson may show another outcome of his visit to Armand Couailliet and why Couailliet went into motor-car manufacture, and more specifically the electric car.

So who was Charles Elieson who sent his daughter a postcard?

Chaimsonovitz (Charles) Prosper Elieson was born in Kovno, Poland in 1849 and moved to England in 1869 by now married to Antoinette. By 1885 a news item stated that 'Great progress appears to have been made with Mr. C. P. Elieson's patent electric engine for drawing tramcars and other purposes, and it has been shown that it possesses superiority over horse or steam power for such service. An engine has for some time-past been tested and run at the works of the North Metropolitan Tramway Co., at Leytonstone, London. An engine of greater power is now being constructed with a view of shewing what can be done on a railway....'

By 1886 he was director of the Electric Locomotive and Power Co., with an address given as Drayton road, Leytonstone.

A further news item in 1887 states: 'An experimental trip has been made with the Elieson electric locomotive on the tramway which runs from Stratford Church to Manor Park, a distance of about two miles, and if a bill is passed in the present session of Parliament, it is intended to run electric locomotives alternately with the horse cars. The locomotive carries 80 storage cells, which are charged at the Stratford depot, and is propelled by means of an Elieson electromotor placed under the flooring of the car' following which are the technical details of the tram.


In 1894 Elieson became a naturalised British subject with his address given as 75 Edith Road, West Kensington, Fulham, London and is known to have five children.

By 1911 he is recorded as living at 24 St Mary Abbotts Terrace, Kensington, the address as given on the postcard, along with his wife Antoinette and his actress daughter Olga, aged twenty-one, along with her daughter and Charles's grand-daughter, Odette Alphandery Elison, aged 5 months. Can we assume that Olga was the recipient of the postcard sent the following year? On the 19th March, 1919 Charles died at the same address.

An advert dated 1897 indicates that Elieson was also the inventor of an *Electric Motor Car*.

ELIESON'S PATENT ELECTRIC MOTOR CAR.

Fewer
Working Parts
than any other
Motor Car
in existence.



One Motor
Direct
Transmission.
• • •
No Differential
Gear.

For Particulars apply to **THE ELIESON LAMINA ACCUMULATOR CO., LTD.**, 4, Greenland Place, Camden Town, N.W.

That one of the pioneers of the electric car, and specifically a model similar to that later produced by Couaillet, was in Saint-Nicolas-d'Aliermont, albeit on horological matters, suggests that Armand Couaillet may well have taken an interest in Elieson's invention of an electric car and seen an opening which provided inspiration for him to later switch production from First World War armaments to the manufacture of the *Electricar*.

Did a meeting between these two innovators, initially on matters *horological*, blossom into the production of Couaillet's *Electricar*?

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