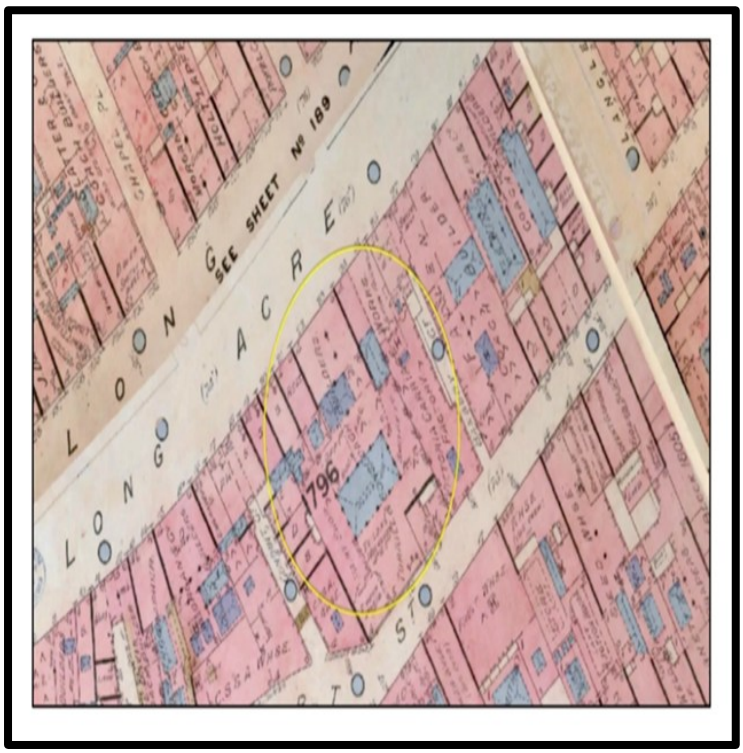
Lionel Lukin (1742–1834)



Lionel Lukin was born on 18 May 1742 in the Essex town of Great Dunmow, the youngest son of William Lukin and Anne Stokes, members of a well-established family. Baptised a month later, on 17 June, he grew up in a large family. The name “Lionel” had long been passed down through the family, a quiet reminder of their lineage, which included a connection with the naval figure Admiral Lionel Lane. Though surrounded by farmland rather than the sea, Lukin showed an early curiosity about how things worked—a trait that would define his life.



At the age of seventeen, in 1759, he was apprenticed to a coachmaker, Joseph Smith. It was a practical trade, far removed from the world of ships and storms, yet it gave Lukin the skills that would later prove essential. Around this time, he also came into a small inheritance from a maternal uncle. This financial support helped him establish himself, and by the 1760s, he had moved to London, setting up a coachbuilding business in Long Acre, a street renowned for the craft.

Lukin’s talent quickly became evident. In 1767, he joined the Worshipful Company of Coachmakers and Coach

Harness Makers, and by 1781, he had risen to become a master coachbuilder and later Master of the Company itself. His success brought him into contact with influential circles. By 1783, he was supplying harnesses to the household of Queen Charlotte, and it is possible that through such connections he became acquainted with the Prince of Wales, the future George IV.

Yet Lukin was never content with business alone. He possessed a restless, inventive mind and a strong sense of public duty. In the early 1780s, he devised a number of practical inventions: a ship's stove that could function safely in rough seas, an adjustable hospital bed that could be operated by a single attendant and which he donated to London infirmaries, and even a raft designed to rescue people who had fallen through ice—successfully used in Hyde Park.



But it was the sea, and the tragedy it so often brought, that stirred him most deeply.

In 1784, Lukin turned his attention to a problem that had long plagued coastal communities: the lack of reliable rescue boats. Shipwrecks were frequent and attempts to save those aboard were often futile. Storms powerful enough to destroy ships would easily overturn smaller boats sent to help. Lukin was appalled—and determined to find a solution.

He purchased a Norwegian yawl and began experimenting with ways to make it unsinkable. His idea was simple in principle but revolutionary in execution: a boat that would remain afloat even if filled with water. By adding watertight compartments, air-filled spaces and buoyant materials such as cork, he aimed to ensure that the vessel would remain afloat even in very difficult conditions. A heavy cast-iron keel provided additional stability.

The Prince of Wales is said to have taken an interest in Lukin's work, although the extent of any financial support is uncertain. Lukin tested his design on the River Thames. On 2 November 1785, he was granted a patent for what he called his "unimmergible" boat.

His first prototype, *The Experiment*, proved its worth in trials. Lent to a pilot at Ramsgate, it successfully navigated rough seas and was reportedly used to cross

the English Channel in dangerous conditions. Yet its success led to an unexpected consequence—the boat was eventually impounded in a foreign port on suspicion of being used for smuggling.

Undeterred, Lukin built another boat, *The Witch*. Tested at Margate by naval officers, it attracted attention for its ability to remain afloat. Still, despite these trials, his designs struggled to gain widespread acceptance. Maritime tradition and scepticism stood in the way of innovation.

In 1786, however, his work found practical application when he converted a traditional fishing coble for use at Bamburgh, Northumberland. This vessel is widely regarded as one of the earliest dedicated rescue lifeboats stationed for service—a quiet but significant milestone.

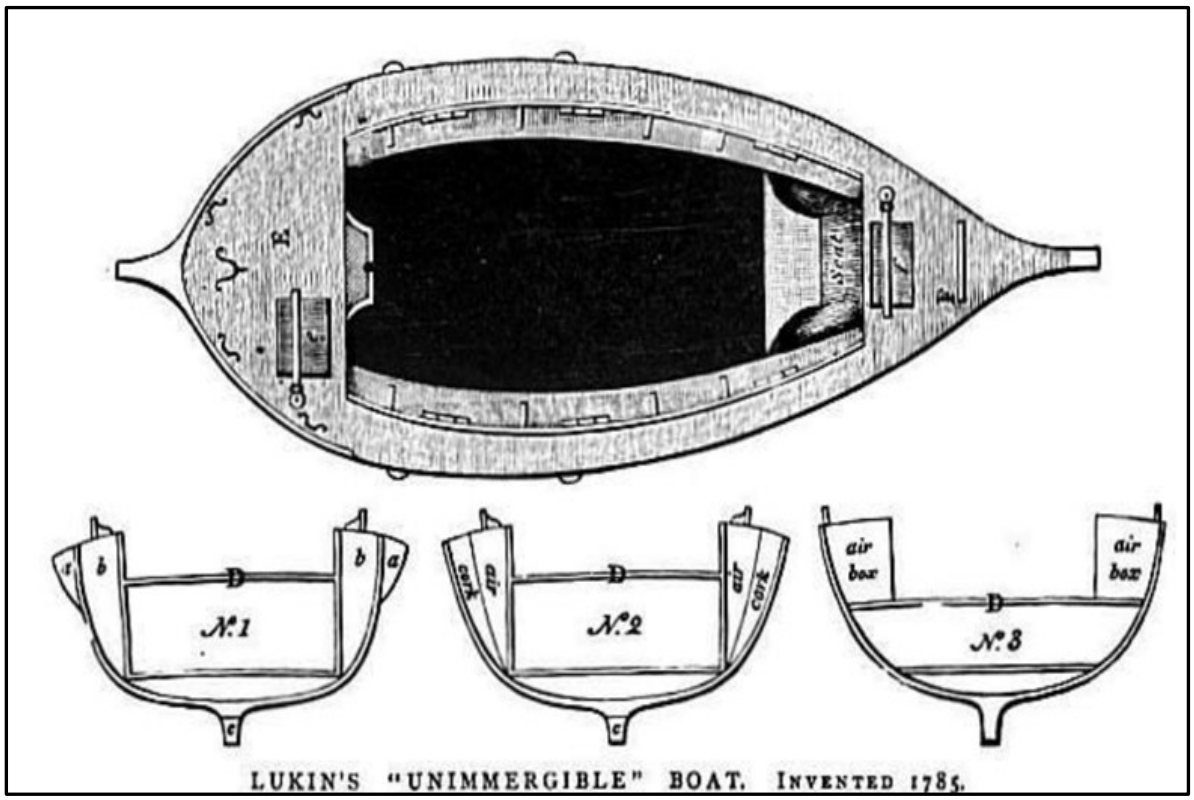


The years that followed brought both recognition and frustration. After a tragic shipwreck near the River Tyne in 1789, a competition for lifeboat designs was launched. Others, including William Wouldhave and Henry Greathead, entered the field. Greathead's design gained public acclaim, and although it drew on similar principles, Lukin found himself overshadowed. In 1790, he published a defence of his work, asserting his priority as the originator of the lifeboat concept.

Rather than seeking profit, Lukin chose a different path. He published his designs openly, allowing others to use and improve them. The Royal Humane Society praised this generosity as "very praiseworthy liberality." It was a decision that likely cost him fame and fortune—but helped save countless lives.

In his personal life, Lukin was twice married. His first wife was Anne (née Walker), widow of Henry Gilder of Dunmow. They had a daughter and a son, also named Lionel. He married Hester Clissold of Reading secondly in 1803. He continued to defend his work, publishing letters in 1806 and later a pamphlet outlining the principles of his invention.

One of the greatest vindications of his ideas came in 1807 with the launch of the *Frances Ann* at Lowestoft. Built on Lukin's principles, the vessel proved capable of staying afloat even when filled with water and carrying fifty people. Over its long service, it is credited with saving more than 300 lives.



LUKIN'S "UNIMMERGIBLE" BOAT. INVENTED 1785.

By 1824, at the age of 82 and with his eyesight failing, Lukin retired to the coastal town of Hythe in Kent. There, in Elm House, he spent his final years in relative peace, continuing to observe the world through scientific pursuits such as daily meteorological records. That same year, he offered his support to a newly formed organisation dedicated to saving lives at sea—the Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck, later known as the RNLI—but received no recorded reply.

In 1832, he made his will, leaving financial provision for his wife, daughter and granddaughters, while leaving his son just £10. It was a practical and somewhat unconventional decision, reflecting his independent thinking.

Lionel Lukin died on 16 February 1834 at the age of 91. He was buried in the churchyard of St Leonard's Church in Hythe. His gravestone bore a bold claim—that he was the first to build a lifeboat and the original inventor of the principle that had saved so many lives.

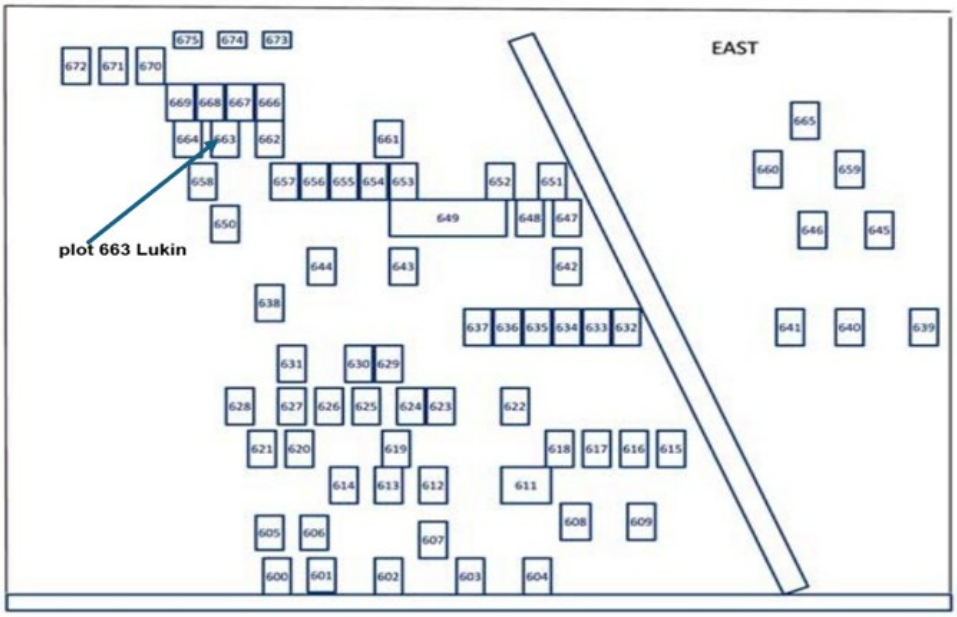


Lionel Lukin's gravestone at St Leonard's Church, Hythe

Plot 663



Map 8





THE KENT HERALD.

"THE END OF ALL GOOD GOVERNMENT—IS THE BENEFIT OF THE GOVERNED."

No. 1674. THURSDAY, May 29, 1834. Price 7d.

DESIRABLE FREEHOLD PROPERTY,
HYTHE.
TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION,
By COCKS and HORN,
AT THE SWAN INN, HYTHE,

ON THURSDAY, 12th day of June, 1834, at two o'clock (by order of the Executor of the late Lionel Lukin, Esq. deceased) a respectable

DWELLING HOUSE,

with large walled garden, and requisite outbuildings, pleasantly situate on the Side-hill, Hythe, commanding a view of the sea and of the opposite coast.

Immediate possession can be had.

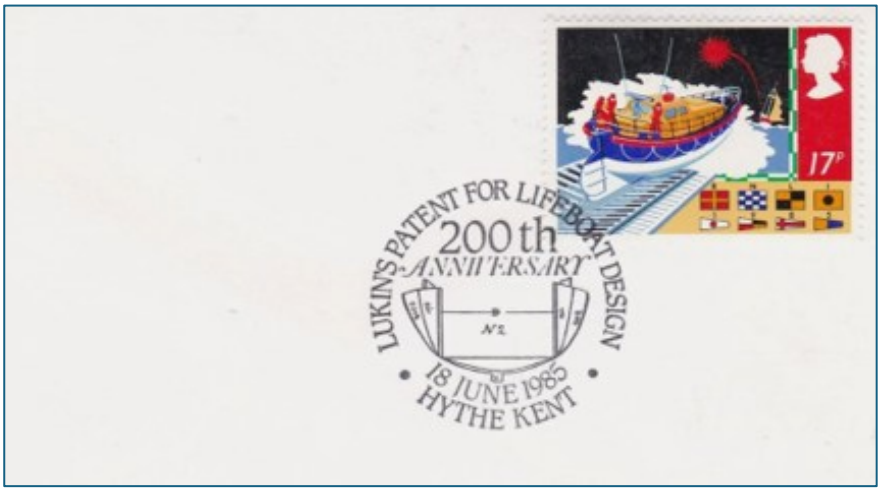
For further particulars, and to view the premises, apply to the AUCTIONEERS, Hythe; or to Messrs. BAKER and HODGSON, solicitors, 52, Lincolns' Inn Fields, London.

May 29, 1834- late Lionel Lukin

For decades, his contribution remained underappreciated.

Then, in the autumn of 1892, nearly sixty years after his death, recognition finally came. A stained-glass memorial window was installed in St Leonard's Church in his memory. It was unveiled in October by his great-grandson, the Reverend Charles J. Robinson. At last, his achievements were publicly honoured.

Sadly, the window was destroyed in 1940 during wartime bombing. Lukin's legacy, however, endured. In 1985, the bicentenary of his patent was marked by commemorative "Safety at Sea" stamps, supporting lifesaving efforts.



Today, Lionel Lukin is recognised as a pioneer. His “Unimmergible” boat laid important foundations for modern lifeboats, and his decision to share his invention freely helped ensure that its benefits reached far beyond his own lifetime.

Because of Lionel Lukin, the idea of a boat that wouldn’t sink became a reality—and a lifeline.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to:

- *Anne Petrie, for her research on Lionel Lukin (https://hythehistoryblog.wordpress.com/2018/09/21/three-men-and-a-lifeboat/)*

References

- *Hythe Library- Pikes and /Kelly’s Directories*
- *Wikipedia*

Books:

- *John Woodward, Hythe Celebrities (Hythe Civic Society, 2010)*

Websites

- *Heritage Hythe and Hythe Civic Society, for local historical information https://www.hythecivicsociety.org/*
- *https://www.hythecivicsociety.org/post/st-leonards-graveyard*
- *https://www.hythecivicsociety.org/hh-e-books*
- *https://lifeboatmagazinearchive.rnli.org/*
- *Genealogy sites-British newspaper-census,*

Research and compilation:
Iris Pearce, author
October 2026