

# **Development of a spark ignition free-piston engine**

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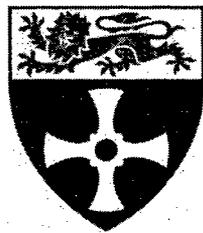
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## **Abstract**

A dual-piston type two-stroke spark-ignition free-piston engine generator prototype has been developed. A comprehensive review on recent published researches and patent documents from academia and industrial organisations on free-piston engine generator, especially on the applications for series hybrid electric vehicles, was conducted. Relevant parameters affecting the operating performance and a number of challenges had been identified as the common denominator for this technology. Modelling and simulations using one-dimensional tools were conducted in parallel with the development activities. Three main simulation models for the crankshaft engines were developed, validated and optimised before converted into the free-piston engine model. This was done by using imposed-piston motion sub-model. The two-stroke free-piston engine model had undergone parametric study for valve timing optimisation. This model was validated by using motoring experimental results using the developed free-piston engine generator prototype. From the experimental results, the free-piston engine generator motoring performance was able to meet the targeted cyclic speed and compression pressure for starting. However, the free-piston engine generator operating speed was limited to 5Hz and below due to valve delay inherent in the pneumatic actuators. The motoring results were used to validate the free-piston engine model which showed a good agreement at various starting speeds. Finally, performance and parametric investigations were conducted using the final validated and refined free-piston engine model. From the simulation, it was found that the free-piston engine had similar response to air-fuel ratio and ignition position variations compare to crankshaft engine with the free-piston engine performance was slightly reduced. Further, the reduced frictional losses contributed little to its performance gain. However, the high influence of piston motion around TDC on the engine performance, observed in free-piston engine, could be manipulated to increase its performance significantly.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	i
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	v
List of Figures .....	ix
List of Tables .....	xvi
Nomenclature .....	xvii
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
1.1 Background .....	1
1.2 The free-piston engine .....	1
1.3 Aims and objectives .....	2
1.4 Methodology and thesis outline .....	3
1.5 Contribution to existing research .....	4
Chapter 2. Free-piston engine development and challenges .....	5
2.1 Free-piston engine generator fundamental principles .....	5
2.1.1 Configurations .....	6
2.2 Literature review on free-piston engine parameters and challenges .....	8
2.2.1 Parameters affecting performance of free-piston engine generator .....	8
2.2.2 Challenges in free-piston engine generator .....	13
2.3 Patented free-piston engine technology by automotive companies .....	18
2.3.1 General Motors .....	18
2.3.2 Toyota .....	21
2.3.3 Volvo .....	24
2.3.4 Ford .....	27
2.3.5 Honda .....	29
2.3.6 Mazda .....	31
2.4 Summary .....	34
Chapter 3. One-dimensional modelling and simulation .....	36
3.1 Theoretical review .....	36
3.1.1 Engine Parameters .....	37

3.2	Modelling approach and sub-models.....	38
3.2.1	Sub-models.....	39
3.3	Modelling and simulation implementation.....	43
3.3.1	Baseline modelling, simulation and validations.....	45
3.3.2	Crankshaft engine model optimisation.....	46
3.3.3	Two-stroke model performance optimisation.....	47
3.3.4	Two-stroke optimisation results and discussions.....	53
3.3.5	Summary.....	59
3.4	The free-piston engine modelling and simulations.....	60
3.4.1	Dynamics balance equation of motion.....	60
3.4.2	The imposed piston motion modelling.....	64
3.4.3	Valve timing optimisation.....	65
3.5	Discussions.....	66
3.5.1	Effect of piston motion.....	66
3.5.2	Valve timings.....	68
3.5.3	In-cylinder pressure.....	72
3.6	Summary.....	74
Chapter 4.	Free-piston engine generator prototype and test rig development.....	76
4.1	Free-piston engine generator design.....	76
4.1.1	Conceptual design.....	76
4.1.2	Engine modifications.....	78
4.1.3	Linear electrical machine sizing.....	80
4.2	Control system.....	83
4.2.1	Engine Control.....	83
4.2.2	Linear motor driver control.....	84
4.2.3	Overall engine control and data acquisition.....	85
4.3	Engine subsystems.....	89
4.3.1	Intake and exhaust valve actuation system.....	89
4.3.2	Fuel system.....	90
4.3.3	Ignition system.....	92
4.3.4	Cooling and lubrication.....	94

4.3.5	Air-fuel ratio control .....	95
4.3.6	Vibration absorption.....	96
4.3.7	Homing and stroke limit.....	97
4.3.8	The homing sequence .....	98
4.3.9	The motoring and data acquisition sequence .....	100
4.4	Final system layout and specifications .....	101
4.5	Summary .....	106
Chapter 5. Motoring experiments and model validations .....		107
5.1	Motoring experiment objectives and methodology .....	107
5.2	Motoring performance .....	111
5.2.1	Cyclic non-compression motoring .....	111
5.2.2	Cyclic compression motoring.....	113
5.2.3	Pneumatic valve actuation assessment .....	116
5.2.4	In-cylinder pressure during motoring.....	124
5.3	Simulation model validations .....	133
5.4	Summary .....	138
Chapter 6. Performance investigations via simulations.....		140
6.1	The free-piston engine starting dynamics model.....	140
6.1.1	Implementation into MATLAB-Simulink.....	140
6.1.2	Simulation results .....	142
6.2	Engine performance parameters .....	145
6.2.1	Work, power, mean effective pressure and efficiency .....	145
6.2.2	Air-fuel ratio, fuel-air ratio, lambda and equivalence ratio .....	148
6.2.3	The theoretical impact of Lambda/equivalence ratio on performance	150
6.2.4	Ignition timing and MBT .....	152
6.3	Engine performance investigation via simulations .....	153
6.3.1	Engine specifications and sub-models .....	154
6.3.2	Power requirement during starting .....	155
6.3.3	Method of optimum ('MBT') ignition timing setting .....	156
6.3.4	The engine performance comparisons.....	161
6.3.5	The impact of Lambda on performance .....	167
6.3.6	The impact of ignition timing on performance .....	170

6.3.7	In-cylinder friction impact.....	173
6.3.8	Limitations of imposed piston model.....	176
6.4	Summary.....	176
Chapter 7.	Conclusions and future research.....	178
7.1	Summary of the findings .....	178
7.2	Significant contributions and findings.....	180
7.3	Recommendations for further research.....	180
7.3.1	The valve actuators improvement .....	180
7.3.2	Current control programming and deployment.....	181
7.3.3	Co-simulation .....	181
References	.....	182
Appendices	.....	188

## List of Figures

Figure 2.1: Basic configuration of a single piston free-piston engine [11].....	6
Figure 2.2: Three main configurations for free-piston engine [11]. .....	7
Figure 2.3: Typical piston speeds of crankshaft engine and free-piston engine via simulation [41].....	11
Figure 2.4: Opposed piston type free piston linear alternator (FPLA) [59].....	19
Figure 2.5: Schematic of Sigma GS-34 free-piston gas generator [5] (See also London and Oppenheim [61], Huber [26], Flynn [62].).....	19
Figure 2.6: Operation of the electrical flywheel system (omitting the variable-speed motor) [63].....	20
Figure 2.7: Specially designed piston to dissipate heat quickly while reducing the temperature rise on the permanent magnets and coils [64]. .....	22
Figure 2.8: Twin single piston system with back to back configuration [70].....	22
Figure 2.9: The characteristic curves of a free-piston engine gross work produced from combustion, $J_a$ and the resulting work, $J_b$ at various piston position [72]. .....	23
Figure 2.10: Dual piston type free-piston engine generator [74].....	25
Figure 2.11: Simulation curves for the velocity servo controller motion control [74]. ..	25
Figure 2.12: Schematic of the main components and power path for the free-piston energy converter. ....	27
Figure 2.13: Simplified diagram of the free-piston hydraulic pump by Ford [81-89]... ..	28
Figure 2.14: Single cylinder four-stroke cycle free-piston engine generator concept by Honda [91].....	30
Figure 2.15: Single cylinder four-stroke cycle free-piston engine generator concept by Honda [91].....	31
Figure 2.16: Dual piston type free-piston engine concept by Mazda [93].....	32
Figure 2.17: Free-piston engine compression ratio control using electric load force: (a) At fix lambda and generator load, (b) at fix cut-off speed [96]. .....	33
Figure 2.18: Opposed piston type free-piston engine generator with externally linked linear generator [97]. .....	34
Figure 3.1: Cylinder geometry definitions for an engine with a flat top piston (without the bowl).....	37

Figure 3.2: Three primary sub-programs in Ricardo WAVE programs suite employed in this research.....	38
Figure 3.3: Basic model variables and initial conditions.....	39
Figure 3.4: Crank-slider mechanism schematic [101]. .....	40
Figure 3.5: Profile editor for piston motion profile to model free-piston engine. ....	41
Figure 3.6: SI Wiebe combustion sub-model.....	42
Figure 3.7: Types of model developed for the research.....	44
Figure 3.8: Baseline model of 31cc Stihl 4MIX engine in Ricardo WAVE.....	45
Figure 3.9: Power curves comparison from experimental result and as obtained from Ricardo WAVE simulation. ....	46
Figure 3.10: Fitted power curve of the four-stroke 65cc engine as obtained from Ricardo WAVE simulation. ....	47
Figure 3.11: General timing diagram for two-stroke cycle.....	48
Figure 3.12: The experiments panel in Ricardo WAVE which was used during the parametric investigations for model tuning.....	49
Figure 3.13: The experiment analysis panel showed-up at the end of the experiments in Ricardo WAVE. ....	51
Figure 3.14: The sweep case generator panel used for refined optimisations. ....	53
Figure 3.15: Boost pressure effect on brake thermal efficiency ( <i>bte</i> ).....	54
Figure 3.16: Boost pressure effect on brake power. ....	55
Figure 3.17: Boost pressure effect on brake mean effective pressure ( <i>bmep</i> ).....	55
Figure 3.18: Valves anchor positions effect on brake thermal efficiency ( <i>bte</i> ).....	56
Figure 3.19: Valves anchor positions effect on brake power.....	56
Figure 3.20: Valves anchor positions effect on brake mean effective pressure ( <i>bmep</i> ).....	57
Figure 3.21: Valves duration effect on brake thermal efficiency ( <i>bte</i> ).....	58
Figure 3.22: Valves duration effect on brake power.....	58
Figure 3.23: Valves duration effect on brake mean effective pressure ( <i>bmep</i> ).....	59
Figure 3.24: Final valves timings for the 65cc, two-stroke crankshaft engine. ....	60
Figure 3.25: Free-body diagram of the dual piston free-piston engine generator dynamic model. ....	61
Figure 3.26: Typical profile of cogging force vs. position of a linear motor [107].....	63
Figure 3.27: The input panel for imposed piston sub-model.....	65
Figure 3.28: Piston position against crank angle comparison for free-piston engine (FPE) and crankshaft engine (CSE) (a) At 50Hz and (b) At 10Hz. ....	67
Figure 3.29: Piston velocity against piston position comparison for FPE and CSE.....	68

Figure 3.30: Optimised intake and exhaust valves timing for FPE and CSE (a) Crank angle-based (b) Piston position-based.....	70
Figure 3.31: Variation of valve opening and closing timing at different speeds for the free-piston engine model (a) Exhaust valve. (b) Intake valve.....	71
Figure 3.32: Valve opening and closing positions for free-piston engine. ....	72
Figure 3.33: Cylinder pressure versus volume for optimised models for the FPE and CSE (a) At 50Hz. (b) At 10Hz. ....	73
Figure 3.34: Brake power comparison for both models.....	74
Figure 4.1: Dual-piston free-piston engine generator .....	76
Figure 4.2: The side thrust in a crankshaft engine due to crank-slider mechanism which contributes to power cylinder friction. ....	78
Figure 4.3: Original Stihl 4MIX engine components with shaded unused components for free-piston engine design.....	79
Figure 4.4: Engine components for free-piston engine prototype design. ....	80
Figure 4.5: Force require during motoring at 5Hz from simulation. ....	81
Figure 4.6: Translator velocity profile at 5Hz.....	81
Figure 4.7: Force vs. speed profile of Moog linear motor model 50204D. ....	82
Figure 4.8: Moog linear motor model 50204D selected for this research .....	83
Figure 4.9: ECU block diagram for ignition and fuel control.....	84
Figure 4.10: Parker Compax3H motor driver for the Moog linear motor .....	85
Figure 4.11: CompactRIO system hardware.....	86
Figure 4.12: CompactRIO system and modules selected and configured for the free-piston engine generator prototype. ....	87
Figure 4.13: CompactRIO program structure for the system.....	87
Figure 4.14: Components of a LabVIEW program employed on the controller of the prototype.....	88
Figure 4.15: Festo pneumatic cylinder for the valve actuation system.....	90
Figure 4.16: Completed design of the valves actuation system. ....	90
Figure 4.17: Fuel injection system schematic for the prototype. ....	91
Figure 4.18: Fuel injection system installed on the prototype. ....	92
Figure 4.19: Block diagram of a CDI system [47].....	93
Figure 4.20: Bosch-AVL integrated pressure sensor with spark plug. ....	93
Figure 4.21: Cooling fan for the linear motor .....	94
Figure 4.22: Shaft lubrication as well as additional cooling for the engine.....	95

Figure 4.23: The air-fuel ratio control system, ALM-II (Accurate Lambda Meter with Dual Channels) [8].	96
Figure 4.24: Vibration absorption system.	96
Figure 4.25: Homing and stroke limit.	97
Figure 4.26: The conventions for piston displacement and referencing.	98
Figure 4.27: The homing sequence flow diagram.	99
Figure 4.28: The user interface of the main program.	100
Figure 4.29: Flow diagram of the motoring and data acquisition mode.	101
Figure 4.30: Overall prototype system components.	102
Figure 4.31: Control box for the system	103
Figure 4.32: The prototype final assembly and components view 1.	104
Figure 4.33: The prototype final assembly and components view 2.	104
Figure 5.1: Methodology of motoring experiments.	108
Figure 5.2: Linear motor test rig.	108
Figure 5.3: The parameters and its representation during motion control of the linear motor.	109
Figure 5.4: The main user interface for linear motor driver software for parameters input setting (a) and output monitoring (b).	110
Figure 5.5: Piston velocity and RMS driving current versus translator position.	112
Figure 5.6: Piston velocity and RMS driving current versus time profiles.	113
Figure 5.7: Translator velocity against position at various engine reciprocation frequencies.	114
Figure 5.8: The current ripple of the phase current at different switching frequency [121].	115
Figure 5.9: Cyclic translator trajectories for various cyclic speeds.	116
Figure 5.10: The main controller program user interface.	117
Figure 5.11: The pneumatic valve actuator system.	118
Figure 5.12: Cylinder pressure and displacement profiles with valve timings for cylinder 1 and 2.	119
Figure 5.13: The valve delay analysis.	120
Figure 5.14: Absolute cylinder pressure development and valve actuations timings for the 2.6 Hz and the 6.5 Hz cyclic speeds.	121
Figure 5.15: Directional referencing for valve timing with a 36mm stroke length.	123
Figure 5.16: Valve actuation performance at 4.9 Hz.	123
Figure 5.17: Valve actuation performance at 2.6 Hz.	124

Figure 5.18: Hypothetical pressure diagram for cyclic representation of crankshaft engine and free-piston engine.....	125
Figure 5.19: Absolute cylinder pressure (cylinder 1) development for various cyclic speeds. ....	126
Figure 5.20: Cylinder compression performance during motoring at optimum valve timing (cylinder 1&2).....	127
Figure 5.21: Peak pressure difference between cylinders during motoring.....	128
Figure 5.22: Peak pressure variations of cylinder 1&2 during motoring (11 consecutive cycles).....	129
Figure 5.23: TDC position variations of cylinder 1&2 during motoring (11 consecutive cycles).....	131
Figure 5.24: Cylinder pressure profile in a selected cycle for both cylinders at three main cyclic speeds.....	132
Figure 5.25: Cylinder pressure profile versus translator position for both cylinders...	132
Figure 5.26: Experimental and simulation comparison for piston position and velocity profiles at 2.6 Hz. ....	134
Figure 5.27: Experimental and simulation comparison of the in-cylinder pressure profiles motoring at 2.6 Hz using imposed piston sub-model.....	137
Figure 5.28: Experimental and simulation comparison at 3.2 Hz.....	137
Figure 5.29: Experimental and simulation comparison at 3.7 Hz.....	138
Figure 6.1: Sub-models for dynamics model developed in MATLAB Simulink.....	141
Figure 6.2: General block diagram of the dynamics model developed in MATLAB Simulink. ....	141
Figure 6.3: Displacement during motoring.....	142
Figure 6.4: Velocity during motoring.....	143
Figure 6.5: Piston ring leakage during initial motoring (a) Compression-expansion in one cycle of cylinder 2 (b) Compression-expansion in cyclic motoring for both cylinders. ....	144
Figure 6.6: Indicated work per cycle calculation and <i>imep</i> representation from $pV$ diagram of a two-stroke engine [109]. ....	145
Figure 6.7: The impact of lambda on specific fuel consumption and power [47]. ....	150
Figure 6.8: The impact of fuel/air equivalence ratio on combustion efficiency of an SI engine (adapted from [8]). ....	151

Figure 6.24: The brake thermal engine efficiency contour plots at various ignition timing (a) FPE (b) CSE. ....	171
Figure 6.25: The brake power contour plots at various ignition timing (a) FPE (b) CSE. ....	172
Figure 6.26: The <i>bme<sub>p</sub></i> contour plots at various ignition timing (a) FPE (b) CSE. ...	173
Figure 6.27: The performance curves for different <i>Ccf</i> values to observe the in-cylinder frictional impact on the performance of FPE. (a) <i>bte</i> (b) Brake power (c) <i>bme<sub>p</sub></i> . ....	175

## List of Tables

Table 3.1: Empirical design data for valve capacity and head design in relation to the actual design for the 31cc and 65cc Stihl 4MIX engines. ....	47
Table 4.1: The prototype specification .....	105
Table 5.1: Pneumatic valve delay values for various cyclic frequencies.....	122
Table 5.2: The valves actual positions (including the pneumatic actuators delay) schedule at increasing cyclic speed. ....	122
Table 6.1: The engine specifications used for developing the crankshaft vs. free-piston engine performance investigation. ....	154
Table 6.2: Sub-models employed the simulation models. ....	154
Table 6.3: CA50 values at MBT timing for each engine speed range. ....	161

## Nomenclature

### Abbreviations

ID	one-dimensional
ABDC	after bottom dead centre
ATDC	after top dead centre
BBDC	before bottom dead centre
BDC	bottom dead centre
BTDC	before top dead centre
CSE	crankshaft engine
EGR	exhaust gas recirculation
ETI	Energy Technologies Institute
EVC	exhaust valve close
EVO	exhaust valve open
FPE	free-piston engine
FPEG	free-piston engine generator
HCCI	homogeneous charge compression ignition
IPM	imposed piston motion
IVC	intake valve close
IVO	intake valve open
<i>MBT</i>	maximum brake torque
<i>pV</i>	pressure-volume/indicator diagram
TDC	top dead centre

### Symbols

<i>a</i>	crank radius (half the stroke) [m]
<i>A<sub>p</sub></i>	piston area [m <sup>2</sup> ]
<i>A<sub>cf</sub></i>	constant portion of the Chen-Flynn friction correlation [-]
AFR	air-fuel ratio [-]
<i>a<sub>me<sub>p</sub></sub></i>	accessory mean effective pressure [bar]
<i>b<sub>mep</sub></i>	brake mean effective pressure [bar]
<i>b<sub>te</sub></i>	brake thermal efficiency [%]
<i>B</i>	cylinder bore [m]

$B_{cf}$	term which varies linearly with peak cylinder pressure in the Chen-Flynn friction correlation [-]
$c$	clearance distance [m]
$C_{enht}$	user input multiplier [-]
$C_{cf}$	term which varies linearly with the piston speed in the Chen-Flynn friction correlation [-]
CA	crank angle [deg]
CA50	50% mass burnt point location [deg]
$(CR)_G$	geometric compression ratio [-]
Exh_Anchor	engine crank angle at maximum exhaust valve lift [deg]
Exh_Dur	exhaust valve open duration [deg]
$f$	engine frequency [Hz]
$F_{cog}$	cogging force [N]
$F_f$	frictional force [N]
$F_{mot}$	motoring force [N]
$F_{p_1}$	force from pressure in cylinder 1 [N]
$F_{p_2}$	force from pressure in cylinder 2 [N]
$(F_p)_c$	combustion force [N]
FAR	fuel-air ratio [-]
$h_g$	Woschni heat transfer coefficient [ $\text{W m}^{-2} \text{K}^{-1}$ ]
$H_p$	enthalpy of the products [J]
$H_R$	enthalpy of the reactants [J]
$imep$	indicated mean effective pressure [kPa, bar]
Int_Anchor	engine crank angle at maximum intake valve lift [deg]
Int_Dur	intake valve open duration [deg]
$I_{phase}$	phase current [A]
$I_{pw}$	injector pulse width [s]
$K_{f-\Delta}$	motor constant for delta winding [ $\text{N A}^{-1}$ ]
$K_{f-Y}$	motor constant for wye winding [ $\text{N A}^{-1}$ ]
$K_{AWI}$	internally calculated parameter to allow $\theta_{dur}$ covering the range of 10-90% [-].
$l$	connecting rod length [m]
$L$	ultimate stroke [m]
$m$	moving mass [kg]

$m_f$	mass of fuel [kg]
$\dot{m}_f$	mass flow of fuel [kg s <sup>-1</sup> ]
$mep$	mean effective pressure [kPa, bar]
$MFB$	mass fraction burned [%]
$N$	engine speed [rpm]
$N_{rpm}$	cycle-average engine speed [rpm]
$p_1$	pressure in cylinder 1 [Pa, bar]
$p_2$	pressure in cylinder 2 [Pa, bar]
$p_{mep}$	pumping mean effective pressure [bar]
$P$	pressure [Pa, bar]
$P_b$	brake power [kW]
$P_i$	indicated power output produced by the engine [W]
$P_{max}$	maximum cylinder pressure [bar]
$P_o$	standard air pressure (101.325 kPa)
$p_{off}$	wrist pin offset [m]
$P_{tf}$	total friction power [W]
$r_{fmep}$	rubbing mean effective pressure [bar]
$Q_{cf}$	term which varies quadratically with the piston speed in the Chen-Flynn friction correlation [-]
$Q_{HV}$	heating value of fuel [J/kg]
$\dot{Q}_{in}$	rate of heat input [W]
$R_{air}$	ratio of universal gas constant over molar mass of air
$R_f$	fuel injector delivery rate [kg/s]
$s$	piston position in reference to its TDC position, with positive being away from its TDC position [m]
$S$	cylinder stroke [m]
$t_{fmep}$	total friction mean effective pressure [bar]
$T$	temperature [K]
$T_A$	ambient temperature [K]
$T_o$	standard air temperature (288.15 K)
$v_c$	characteristic velocity [m s <sup>-1</sup> ]
$V_C$	clearance volume [m <sup>3</sup> ]
$V_S$	swept volume [m <sup>3</sup> ]
$\dot{V}$	volumetric flow of air [m <sup>3</sup> /s]

$W_{exp}$	user-entered exponent in Wiebe function
$x$	piston linear position [m]
$x_1(t)$	cylinder 1 piston linear position at time $t$ [m]
$x_2(t)$	cylinder 2 piston linear position at time $t$ [m]
$x_{ivc1}$	intake valve fully close position for cylinder 1 [m]
$x_{ivc2}$	intake valve fully close position for cylinder 2 [m]
$\ddot{x}$	piston/translator acceleration [ $\text{ms}^{-2}$ ]

### Greek Letters

$\gamma_c$	compression polytropic index [-]
$\eta_c$	combustion efficiency [-]
$\eta_v$	volumetric efficiency [-]
$\theta$	crank angle from TDC [degree]
$\theta_{dur}$	user-entered combustion duration (10%-90%).
$\theta_{EVC}$	exhaust valve closing angle[° ATDC]
$\theta_{EVO}$	exhaust valve opening angle[° ATDC]
$\theta_{IVC}$	intake valve closing angle [°]
$\theta_{IVO}$	intake valve opening angle [°]
$\rho$	air density [ $\text{kg/m}^3$ ]
$\tau$	torque [N.m]

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background**

The recent report by Energy Technologies Institute (ETI) has highlighted that light vehicles contribute around 16% of UK CO<sub>2</sub> emissions [1]. It was proposed that a drastic approach for reducing such emissions would be to adopt electric vehicles and phasing out internal combustion engines. The less risky route is by using a combination of different fuel types such as bio-fuel and ethanol as well as increasing hybrid vehicle use on the road.

In recent years, free-piston engine generator has increasingly been developed by a number of groups worldwide [2-4]. One of the vital motivations of these research efforts is arguably the potential of free-piston engine generator to provide a compact and efficient power generator for hybrid electric vehicles. free-piston engine generator inherit variable compression ratio capability with fewer modifications compared to conventional crankshaft engine, hence is suitable for multi-fuel operation [5]. Further, its high efficiency and rapid transient response makes it suitable for hybrid electric vehicle application [6]. Due to these reasons, free-piston engine generator is a suitable technology for substituting conventional crankshaft engine in light vehicles.

In this research a free-piston engine generator specifically suited for series hybrid vehicle application was developed with the aim of achieving high thermal efficiency and low emissions.

### **1.2 The free-piston engine**

A free-piston engine is an engine which operates without the crankshaft or any other rotating mechanisms. The engine operates directly via dynamic balancing of the longitudinal forces acting on a single moving translator which can be coupled with an air compressor, a hydraulic pump or a linear generator.

The free-piston concept has a long history which conceptually begins with the Otto-Langen atmospheric free-piston engine in 1867 [7, 8]. This early prototype of a free-piston engine was meant for rotary applications which were made possible by the use of rack and pinion mechanisms. Among the fundamental problem with this configuration was the difficulty to sustain the cyclic operation. Later, this issue was solved by integrating a crank-slider mechanism for cyclic operation and a flywheel as energy storage device to sustain the cyclic operation. This configuration produced the basic form of crankshaft engine for internal combustion (IC) applications.

With increasing concern on global warming and sustainability, crankshaft IC engine technology has been under intense scrutiny due to its relatively low efficiency and poor exhaust gas emissions. The modern IC engine efficiency for hybrid vehicle application has been reported as 30-37% for SI and 40% for CI [9]. Therefore, an alternative prime mover is seek, especially one that can give higher efficiency and low emission for the application of hybrid electric vehicle; i.e. the free-piston engine generator.

The appeal of the free-piston engine lies in its promising advantages, such as high power to weight ratio, multi-fuel capability, and low manufacturing cost and low maintenance due to less components plus its mechanical simplicity [5, 10-12]. This technology when coupled with a linear generator and energy storage system can fulfil the essential requirements of the electric vehicle or auxiliary power unit [13].

Further, the absence of the crankshaft and flywheels may result in higher thermal efficiency and capable of operating with varying compression ratios. It has been reported that the indicated thermal efficiency could be as high as 56% in rapid compression expansion machine experiments [14].

Previous successful operation of a free-piston engine coupled with a hydraulic pump and air compressors have been reported [5]. However, the free-piston engine coupled with a linear generator is still hindered with problems such as misfire, unstable operation, piston motion control challenges and complexity in the control system design [15-18]. Although the published work on free-piston engine generators is extensive, very few report successfully running prototypes. These are the main motivations for embarking on this research work.

### **1.3 Aims and objectives**

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#### **1.4 Methodology and thesis outline**

The content of the thesis was organised according to the methodology of the research and comprised of the following chapters:

Chapter 2 introduces the free-piston engine generator fundamental principles and then presents literature review on the parameters and challenges in the area as reported by major research groups worldwide. In addition, patented concepts and technologies by key automotive companies were described. These patents review illustrate key design aspect and technological mitigation on some of the challenges highlighted by free-piston engine researchers. From the review, a number of challenges have been identified as the common denominator for this technology amongst academic and industrial researchers.

Chapter 3 describes the development of four main simulation models using one-dimensional simulation tools. All models were a single cylinder engines. Both four-stroke crankshaft engine models had been validated while the two-stroke crankshaft engine model was optimised for performance through parametric investigations. The final optimised two-stroke crankshaft engine model was converted into the two-stroke free-piston engine model by using the imposed-piston motion (IPM) sub-model. The free-piston engine model was optimised for maximum performance and the findings are discussed.

Chapter 4 presents the development of the prototype and test rig of the free-piston engine generator. The design and components selection are outlined and relevant procedures and data acquisition sequences established prior to experimental investigation are described.

Chapter 5 presents experimental investigations conducted on the prototype for motoring performance during starting, pneumatic valve actuators and in-cylinder

pressure assessments. The motoring results were used for validating the free-piston engine simulation model developed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 6 presents the dynamic modelling and simulations in MATLAB Simulink to improve the piston motion profiles in the imposed piston motion IPM sub-model. The final dual-piston type free-piston engine generator model was developed from the single cylinder free-piston engine model in Chapter 3. Parametric study and performance investigations were conducted on the final models of the free-piston engine generator and crankshaft engine.

Finally, Chapter 7 summarised the significant findings and research contributions together with proposed improvements and future research.

## **1.5 Contribution to existing research**

A substantial number of publications on free-piston engine generator technology revolve around the numerical modelling and simulations. A small number of running prototypes have been reported and no significant effort towards commercialisation has occurred.

This work contributes to existing research by developing running prototype of a free-piston engine generator. The engine is a two-stroke dual-piston type with poppet valves to control the gas exchange process which has the potential of major operational benefits.

The simulation tool used for this research has been used for a direct comparison between crankshafts versus free-piston engine models. The free-piston model results have been validated against an actual running prototype during its starting operation over a wide range of engine speeds. Further, the simulation has shown the positive impact of piston motion around TDC on the free-piston engine performance.

## **Chapter 2. Free-piston engine development and challenges**

This chapter is dedicated to the literature study of recent designs and concepts for free-piston engine generators amongst industrial organisations and key areas focused by researchers. By studying recent patent documents and publications, an insight into research effort on free-piston engines is obtained. Further, these publications provide a useful indication as to what these developers see as the main technical challenges for this technology.

Several numerical investigations are studied and reported efficiency and performance are highlighted. Further, parameters affecting performance and operation of such engine are discussed. This review aims to correlate various crucial reports on free-piston engine generator in order to identify gaps in the area and to assist prototype development.

Parts of the work presented in this chapter were presented by Hanipah, et al. [19].

### **2.1 Free-piston engine generator fundamental principles**

A free-piston engine works on the principle of dynamic forces which produces linear reciprocation motion. Such an engine is said to be dynamically constrained as opposed to a kinematically constrained crank-slider engine [11]. Dynamically constrained means the piston stop positions (TDC and BDC) are not constant and its motion profile is not governed by any mechanical component as in the crankshaft engine.

In the crankshaft engine, the piston stop positions are consistent and can be represented by a kinematic relationship between crankshaft radius, connecting rod length and crank angle. Further, due to the absence of the crank-slider mechanism, the fundamental principle of operation of this engine requires a new approach.

The basic configuration of a free-piston engine is shown in Figure 2.1, which is a single piston configuration. Primarily, for cyclic operation to be possible, a free-piston engine requires a bounce device to ensure the piston returns to initial top-dead-centre position for the next engine cycle.

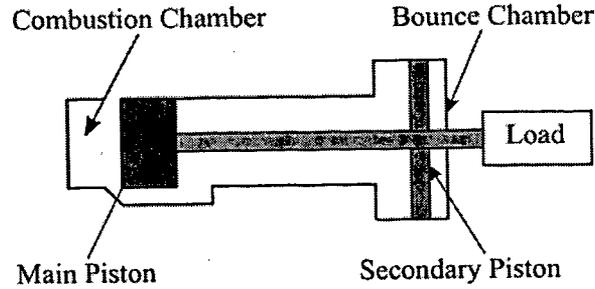


Figure 2.1: Basic configuration of a single piston free-piston engine [11]

This cyclic operation can be achieved in the following forms:

- second combustion chamber [17, 20]
- compressed air storage [21]
- hydraulic fluid storage [22]

Since neither a flywheel nor a crankshaft is available to provide inertial energy for continuous operation. Farmer [23] described a ‘cushion’ cylinder which may be utilised as an energy storage device. In conventional crankshaft engines, the angular momentum of the crankshaft mechanism and the flywheel aids starting. Different techniques have to be devised for starting a free-piston engine and generally, for a free-piston engine, the starting mechanism can be provided using:

- wound springs [23]
- compressed air [23]
- hydraulic fluid [22]
- linear motor [17]

In terms of the engine cycle, a free-piston engine naturally operates as a two-stroke cycle although complex four-stroke cycle versions are possible [24, 25]. The two-stroke version is simpler and thus more widely adopted since combustion occurs at every stroke to provide expansion energy required for reciprocation thereby increasing its power density.

### 2.1.1 Configurations

Generally, free-piston engine design can be categorised into three main configurations as shown in Figure 2.2 reported by Aichlmayr [11] and Mikalsen and Roskilly [5].

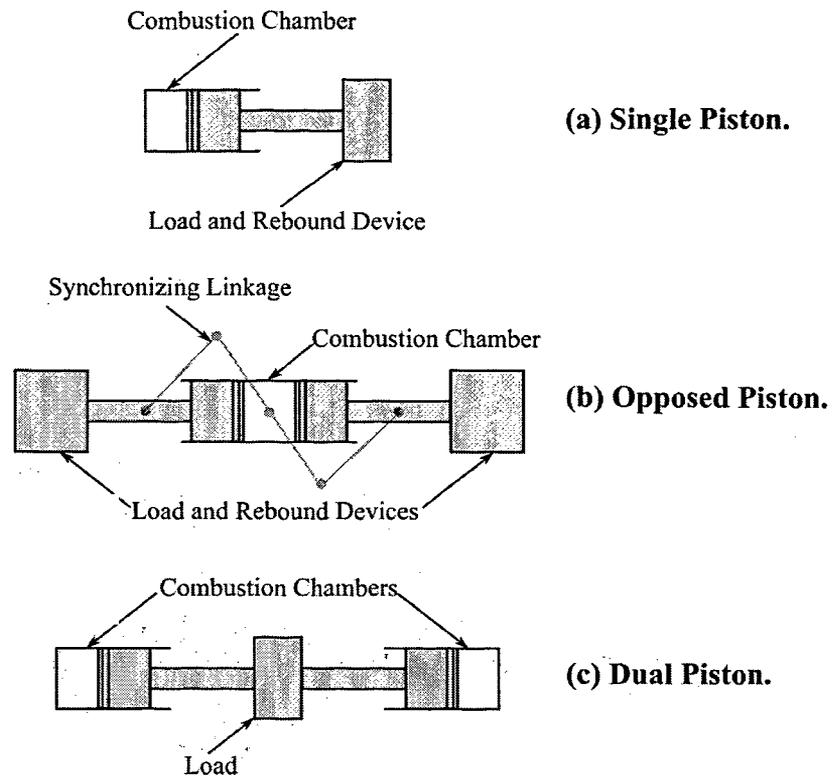


Figure 2.2: Three main configurations for free-piston engine [11].

#### 2.1.1.1 **Single Piston**

Single piston type free-piston engine is the basic design which is comprised of single piston, single combustion chamber, a load and a rebound device. This design is mainly employed for air compressor and hydraulic pump applications [5]. Thus, the load and rebound device in such application can be integrated. The main advantage of this design is its simplicity and easier to control but the design is not mechanically balanced [11].

#### 2.1.1.2 **Opposed Piston**

An opposed piston type free-piston engine comprises of two opposing single piston design linked together with a synchronising linkage. A common combustion chamber is placed in the middle while each individual piston can have its own load and rebound device. It has been reported in compressor [23], gasifier [26] and hydraulic applications [27]. The main advantage of this design is; it is inherently balance when symmetrically designed, with equal masses of pistons and synchronising linkage added [5, 11]. However, the overall design is more complex and bulky than single or dual piston type. Further, the synchroniser linkage pose additional frictional losses and mechanically constrained the piston, hence it is not exactly 'free-piston' design.

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background**

The recent report by Energy Technologies Institute (ETI) has highlighted that light vehicles contribute around 16% of UK CO<sub>2</sub> emissions [1]. It was proposed that a drastic approach for reducing such emissions would be to adopt electric vehicles and phasing out internal combustion engines. The less risky route is by using a combination of different fuel types such as bio-fuel and ethanol as well as increasing hybrid vehicle use on the road.

In recent years, free-piston engine generator has increasingly been developed by a number of groups worldwide [2-4]. One of the vital motivations of these research efforts is arguably the potential of free-piston engine generator to provide a compact and efficient power generator for hybrid electric vehicles. free-piston engine generator inherit variable compression ratio capability with fewer modifications compared to conventional crankshaft engine, hence is suitable for multi-fuel operation [5]. Further, its high efficiency and rapid transient response makes it suitable for hybrid electric vehicle application [6]. Due to these reasons, free-piston engine generator is a suitable technology for substituting conventional crankshaft engine in light vehicles.

In this research a free-piston engine generator specifically suited for series hybrid vehicle application was developed with the aim of achieving high thermal efficiency and low emissions.

### **1.2 The free-piston engine**

A free-piston engine is an engine which operates without the crankshaft or any other rotating mechanisms. The engine operates directly via dynamic balancing of the longitudinal forces acting on a single moving translator which can be coupled with an air compressor, a hydraulic pump or a linear generator.

The free-piston concept has a long history which conceptually begins with the Otto-Langen atmospheric free-piston engine in 1867 [7, 8]. This early prototype of a free-piston engine was meant for rotary applications which were made possible by the use of rack and pinion mechanisms. Among the fundamental problem with this configuration was the difficulty to sustain the cyclic operation. Later, this issue was solved by integrating a crank-slider mechanism for cyclic operation and a flywheel as energy storage device to sustain the cyclic operation. This configuration produced the basic form of crankshaft engine for internal combustion (IC) applications.

With increasing concern on global warming and sustainability, crankshaft IC engine technology has been under intense scrutiny due to its relatively low efficiency and poor exhaust gas emissions. The modern IC engine efficiency for hybrid vehicle application has been reported as 30-37% for SI and 40% for CI [9]. Therefore, an alternative prime mover is seek, especially one that can give higher efficiency and low emission for the application of hybrid electric vehicle; i.e. the free-piston engine generator.

The appeal of the free-piston engine lies in its promising advantages, such as high power to weight ratio, multi-fuel capability, and low manufacturing cost and low maintenance due to less components plus its mechanical simplicity [5, 10-12]. This technology when coupled with a linear generator and energy storage system can fulfil the essential requirements of the electric vehicle or auxiliary power unit [13].

Further, the absence of the crankshaft and flywheels may result in higher thermal efficiency and capable of operating with varying compression ratios. It has been reported that the indicated thermal efficiency could be is as high as 56% in rapid compression expansion machine experiments [14].

Previous successful operation of a free-piston engine coupled with a hydraulic pump and air compressors have been reported [5]. However, the free-piston engine coupled with a linear generator is still hindered with problems such as misfire, unstable operation, piston motion control challenges and complexity in the control system design [15-18]. Although the published work on free-piston engine generators is extensive, very few report successfully running prototypes. These are the main motivations for embarking on this research work.

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## **Chapter 3. One-dimensional modelling and simulation**

Towards the development of a free-piston engine generator, the need for a simulation model is inevitable. The model should be able to assist the design and development while capable of pushing the boundaries in predicting the performance of the prototype without jeopardising the systems' hardware.

This chapter describes one-dimensional modelling and simulation for the single cylinder gasoline spark ignition two-stroke free-piston engine using Ricardo WAVE. Two-stroke free-piston engine model was developed from validated four-stroke crankshaft engine model as explained in Section 3.3. The simulation results were used for prototype development in Chapter 4 and free-piston engine model validation in Chapter 5. The optimised single cylinder free-piston engine model in this chapter formed a basic model for dual-piston free-piston engine generator model in Chapter 6 for final performance investigations.

### **3.1 Theoretical review**

One-dimensional (1D) modelling of an internal combustion engine is one step beyond standard engine thermodynamic analyses. The coding comprises fundamental thermodynamics equations and empirical relationships which are able to simulate the overall engine behaviour sufficiently to provide preliminary performance and emissions characteristics of an engine under development.

A 1D modelling and simulation tool is used for engine development by major automotive companies to assist prototype development due to its capability to produce realistic results quickly. Further, it requires less overhead cost and computational cost without the need for three-dimensional computer aided design (CAD) design of the engine. Therefore, 1D tool was selected to assist the prototype development for the aforementioned advantages.

WAVE is a computer-aided engineering software package developed by Ricardo which allows the analysis of the dynamics of pressure waves, mass flows, and energy

losses in ducts, plenums, and manifolds of the engine. It provides a time-dependent solution of fluid dynamics and thermodynamics 1D equations. The software has complex sub-models to simulate friction, heat transfer, scavenging, combustion, knock and exhaust emissions.

### 3.1.1 Engine Parameters

The terms and definitions used in this section is a combination of information obtained from Heywood [8], Blair [100] and Pulkrabek [40] for crankshaft engines.

The definitions for combustion chamber and cylinder geometry are shown in Figure 3.1. The diameter of the cylinder is the bore ( $B$ ). The stroke ( $S$ ) is defined as the distance travelled by the piston from (bottom dead center) BDC to (top dead center) TDC and the volume within the stroke is known as the swept volume ( $V_s$ ). For a free-piston engine, the nominal stroke ( $S_{nom}$ ) will be defined as the stroke length is not constant. When the piston is at TDC, the remaining space between the top of the piston and the cylinder head is known as the clearance volume ( $V_c$ ), which is contained within the clearance distance ( $c$ ).

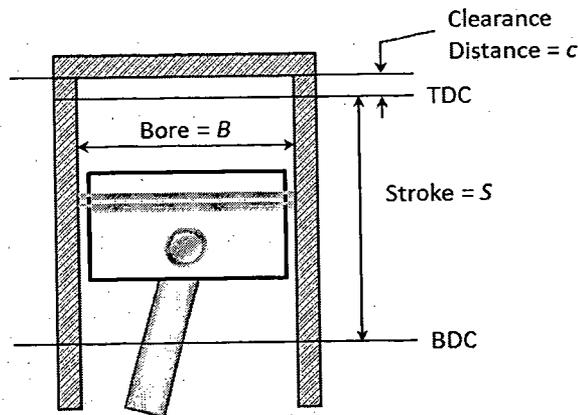


Figure 3.1: Cylinder geometry definitions for an engine with a flat top piston (without the bowl)

Further parameters and definitions are given by following equations:

- Swept volume,  $V_s$ :

$$V_s = \frac{(\pi B^2 S)}{4} \quad [\text{m}^3] \quad 3.1$$

For a known clearance volume ( $V_c$ ) above the piston at TDC:

- Geometric Compression Ratio,  $(CR)_G$  is defined as:

$$(CR)_G = \frac{(V_s + V_c)}{V_c} \quad [-] \quad 3.2$$

### 3.2 Modelling approach and sub-models

Modelling and simulation in Ricardo WAVE programs suite is conducted using three sub-programs as shown in Figure 3.2. WaveBuild is the main pre-processor program used for initial setup of the simulation. The geometrical properties of the model and its boundary conditions are defined in this sub-program using its graphical user interface which is then converted into input format appropriate for the solver. WAVE is the solver used in this research to solve all the 1D fluid dynamics and thermodynamics time-dependent equations. Finally, the results are viewed and interpreted using WavePost post-processor in the form of 2D or 3D graphs, pictures, text-reporting or other media.

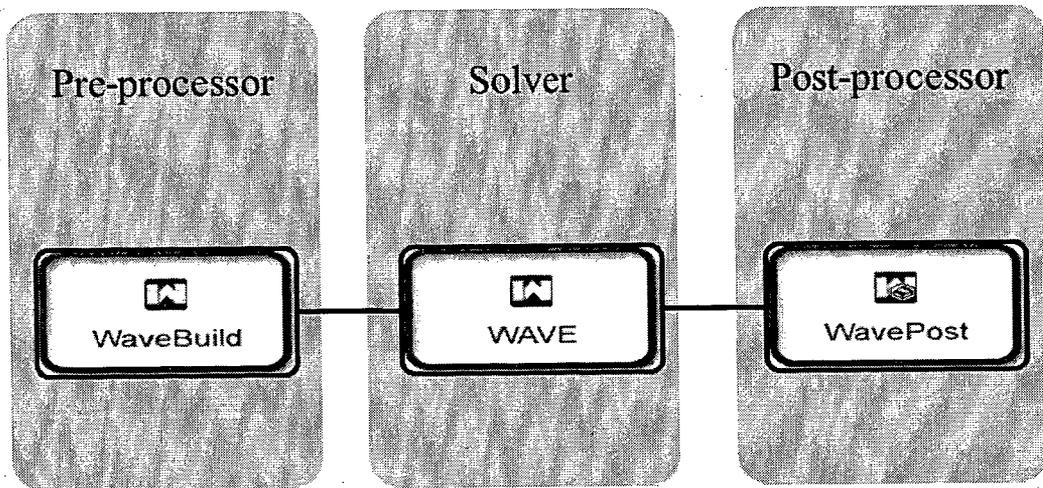


Figure 3.2: Three primary sub-programs in Ricardo WAVE programs suite employed in this research.

The first step in building an accurate model is to gather the geometric data. The engine can be broken down into the main subsystems, i.e. intake runner, intake valve inlet, cylinder, exhaust valve inlet, exhaust runner. The dimensions and characteristics related to the engine required are bore, stroke, connecting rod length, compression ratio, valves diameter, valves lift and valve timings. Engine operating parameters initial conditions must be defined and identified as engine operating speed, fuel type, air/fuel ratio and ambient conditions (i.e. temperature and pressure).

The model was built in the WaveBuild tool with the variables shown in Figure 3.3. In this basic model, the intake and exhaust sides are directly exposed to the ambient conditions. The throttle valve, intake and exhaust manifold dimensions were added during the optimisation phase of the simulation as presented in Section 3.3.2.