



0. Discovering Electricity - Story Preface

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Lightning, as depicted in this image, is a form of naturally produced electricity. Benjamin Franklin devised experiments to test that concept. Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

*I've found out so much about electricity
that I've reached the point where
I understand nothing and can explain nothing.*

Pieter van Musschenbroek
On His Experiments with the Leyden Jar

Everyone knew something wonderful was going to happen that night, but few could have predicted the evening's entertainment would ultimately change the world.

The London crowd was sitting in a darkened room. Candles and oil lamps—the way people lit their homes (with fire) in the early 18th century—were doused. Francis Hauksbee (Hawksbee) was about to conduct an experiment.

It was 1706, and this British scientist had produced an electrostatic generator. In a way, he was studying a type of lightbulb with an eye toward understanding electricity. Beginning his career as Isaac Newton's lab assistant, Francis now held a respected position within the Royal Society.

Since Newton had become the Society's President, in 1703, he had staffed the scientific institute with people he could trust (and on whom he could rely) to help with weekly demonstrations.

It was one of those fantastic demonstrations which Hauksbee was about to commence.

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