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**Hauksbee
Electrostatic
Generator
(circa 1706)**

In a darkened room, in central London, Francis Hauksbee (Hawksbee) rubbed his hand over the top of his electrostatic generator. Those actions caused a strange blue light to appear inside the generator's globe. (Today, a similar strange light is sometimes called St. Elmo's Fire.)

The fascinated audience let-out a collective gasp. In this day of reading by firelight, Hauksbee's gadget produced enough illumination to read large print!

His experiments, which Hauksbee performed before the Royal Society at Gresham College—then and now a place dedicated to offering free public lectures—were amazing. His demonstrations—during which Hauksbee actually created the world's first neon light (but didn't realize it)—included these:

Shewing that Light is Producibile from Mercury, by Passing Common Air through a Body of it, after the Receiver is exhausted.

Shewing that a Considerable Light may be Produced from Mercury in a Glass, by giving it Motion before the Receiver is Quite Exhausted.

Shewing Very Odd flashes of Light, Upon the Repetition of the Experiment, Resembling a Shower of Fire.

One of the world's unsung heroes, Francis Hauksbee is not instantly recognized as a pioneering scientist. However, the Royal Society (which still exists and is the "oldest scientific academy in continuous existence") is trying to change that fact.

Beginning in 2010, to honor Hauksbee, the Royal Society initiated an award named after him. It goes to the "unsung heroes of science, technology, engineering and mathematics."

Hauksbee wasn't the first to discover static electricity (caused by an imbalance between negative-and-positive charges in objects). Before recorded history, people may have observed the phenomenon.

The first person who *wrote* about it seems to be a Greek philosopher called Thales of Miletus. Around 585 BC, he discovered that rubbing a piece of amber (with an object like fur) caused the amber to attract lightweight objects (like feathers).

Thales, however, had no clue what caused the rubbed amber to attract the lightweight objects.

Hauksbee, also, didn't understand what was at work in his experiments, but his efforts led to more crowd-pleasing demonstrations by other electricians (as these early-pioneering experimenters were known).

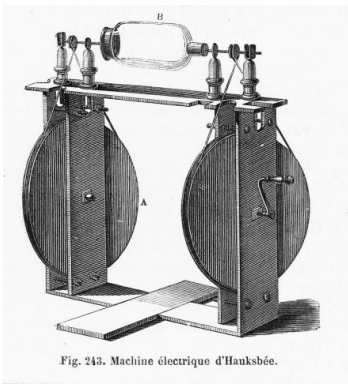
Stephen Gray, for example, had discovered that electricity could *move* - but - it couldn't move through everything (like silk ropes).

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/EARLY-PIONEERS0)

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Hauksbee Electrostatic Generator and Neon Light

Image, from a French-language work, depicting Hauksbee's modified electrostatic generator as it appeared, circa 1706.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Hauksbee-Electrostatic-Generator-and-Neon-Light>



Gresham College - Original Location of Royal Society

Image, described above, is part of the Crace Collection at the British Museum.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Gresham-College-Original-Location-of-Royal-Society>



Thales of Miletus - Discovers Static Electricity

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Discovering Electricity - Early Pioneers

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