

## Joseph Priestley (1733 – 1804)

He was a chemist, ‘discovered’ oxygen. He made contributions to fields such as the study of electricity. Priestley wrote history books and spent time as a teacher.

Joseph Priestley was born on March 13, 1733 at Birstal in the environs of Leeds. His mother died when he was six, and his father, a cloth-dresser by trade, later arranged for Joseph to be brought up by his aunt in Heckmondwike. He attended local schools, making good educational progress despite a tubercular illness.



At the age of eleven, he had imprisoned spiders in bottles to ascertain how long they would survive without a replenished supply of air. The charcoal discovery was actually part of an experimental attempt to restore air which had passed over burning charcoal or through lungs.

Priestley's career took him through contrasting environments as teacher, minister, tutor and librarian. He was given support by like-minded men. When, for example, he moved to Birmingham in 1780, it was through the considerable financial aid of such people.

Priestley believed in the possibility of the continual moral and material betterment of humanity through science, education, religious and political reforms. He maintained a high public profile as a leading religious Dissenter, and as a champion of political liberty in the age of the American and French Revolutions, gaining a notoriety which eventually resulted in the destruction of his house and laboratory in Birmingham in July 1791. The laboratory's equipment was valued at more the 600 lbs, a figure which compares very favorably with valuations of public laboratories of the period. As he emphasized the importance of instruments for scientific teaching. He was also a political activist – a radical – who was finally forced to flee to America after being persecuted at home for his extreme views.

Priestley died on February 6, 1804. His life bore many features; discoverer, champion of liberty and free speech.