

MINCKELERS, Jan Pieter

Born: Maastricht (Netherlands), 1748

Died: Maastricht, 1824

Surrounded by a family consisting largely of pharmacists, Minckelers nevertheless takes up his studies of theology at the University of Leuven. After a few years however his interests weaken and he turns his mind to physics and ends up as professor. Through gifts and grants he obtained the equipment for the laboratory. His team has developed an interest in the dry distillation of coal and the resulting coal-gas. After attending in Paris a demonstration of a balloon filled with hydrogen gas the duke of Arenberg and the prince de Ligne, on their return to Leuven wish to start up and support research to provide a gas lighter than air and must be produced faster than hydrogen. Minckelers undertakes his first small-scale experiments with a rifle barrel filled with coal-dust and switches over to a larger instrument heated on a forge. Having determined the density of the gas which is four times lighter than air and very convenient for filling balloons, he discovers at the same time another property: its inflammability. On October 15, 1783 he applies this discovery to the lighting of buildings and in 1785 he gives evening lectures in the evening at the university in an auditorium lit by coal-gas (*). After the reforms of Joseph II and the political turmoil which lasts a few decennia Minckelers pulls out of Leuven for Brussels never to return to his alma mater. He becomes a prominent scientific figure in Maastricht where he becomes interested in paleontology, introduces the assay of weights and measures and (as a pharmacist) is in charge of public health. He keeps clear of the political struggles and is only concerned to do as much as possible for his beloved laboratory. He spends his last years teaching in Maastricht.

(*) The Scotsman William Murdoch lit his house and offices much later (in 1792) but is better known because he commercialized the application for street lighting.

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