

Priestley and Lavoisier

Image: Antoine Lavoisier, the French chemist, whom Priestley met in 1774

Image from: Birmingham City Archives, Priestley Collection by Samuel Timmins

Among the numerous academicians whom Priestley met in Paris in 1774 was Antoine Lavoisier (1743-1794) whose work would place chemistry on entirely new theoretical foundations by the end of the century. Sadly, most of the Priestley-Lavoisier correspondence was lost during the Birmingham riots of 1791. I think that only one letter survives; but we do know that their meeting in the autumn of 1774 had momentous consequences for Priestley gave Lavoisier a verbal account of how he had recently stumbled upon a new gas which he had labelled “dephlogisticated air” since it supported combustion so much better than ordinary air. With his vastly expensive, high-precision apparatus Lavoisier quickly replicated Priestley’s experiments and in due course re-labelled the newly isolated gas “oxygène”.