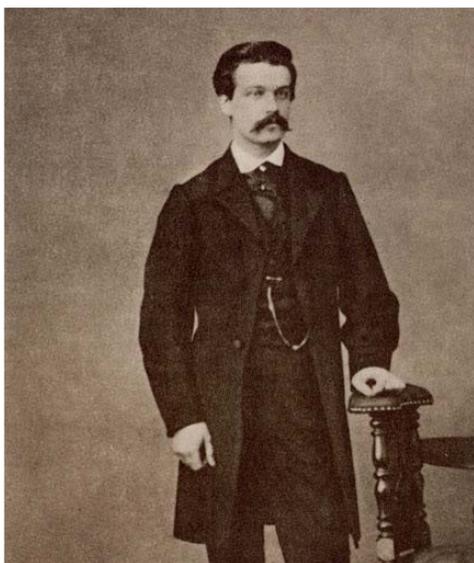


**Ernest Solvay,
industrialist, philanthropist, passionate about science**

April 16, 1838 (Rebecq, Belgium) – May 26, 1922 (Brussels, Belgium)



Ernest Solvay, son of a quarry master from Rebecq in Belgium, exhibited from a very young age a passion for physics, chemistry and natural history. He was nevertheless prevented by acute pleurisy from going to university. Despite his consistently fragile health, he lived a full and intense life until the age of 83. The contributions he made to society during his lifetime, and his industrial and social legacy, are both impressive and an inspiration to many.

He worked in his uncle's coal gas factory near Brussels from the age of 21, where he was exploring ways to use the ammonia there produced as by-product. Two years later he patented a process for the industrial production of sodium carbonate from salt, ammonia and carbonic acid.

With help and financing of several business partners, Ernest and his brother Alfred founded the company Solvay & Cie on December 26, 1863. They flirted with bankruptcy on several occasions during the nearly 10 years it took them to persevere and perfect the production process on an industrial scale in their first production plant in Couillet, Belgium.

With Solvay's industrial process now well established and the growing glass, textile, chemical, paper and soap industries needing evermore cost-effective soda ash, the company managers promoted a global expansion of the company between 1870 and 1890. As predicted early on by Ernest Solvay, factories were set up in France, England, Germany, Russia, Austria and the United States. Ernest Solvay oversaw the organization and development of this industrial empire with remarkable insight. He never ceased urging his teams to innovate to stay ahead of their industry.

Ernest Solvay was also a man of progressive social ideals: "The society of the future must be fair or face death," he said. His company established before legal obligations a social security system, pensions for the workers in 1878, an 8-hour workday in 1897, and paid vacations in 1913. After becoming wealthy, he looked to society at large, and founded several scientific, philanthropic, and charitable foundations, including the Institutes of Physiology (1895) and of Sociology (1902), as well as the prestigious Solvay Business School (1903) which all still bear his name.

His overriding passion for science materialised again in 1911 when he organized a meeting in Brussels of most of the famous physicists and chemists of the time. He was convinced science was the engine driving human progress. In his letter of invitation he explained that he conceived the first meeting as an *international scientific council to solve several current problems of the molecular and kinetic theories*. Participants included Marie Skłodowska-Curie, Albert Einstein, Max Planck, Hendrik A. Lorentz, Ernest Rutherford, Walther Nernst, Henri Poincaré and Maurice de Broglie. This was the birth of the Solvay international physics council, which still meets regularly in Brussels, bringing together some of the most brilliant scientific minds in the world.