

Ernst Abbe (1840 – 1905)

Important social reformer

Ernst Abbe grew up in a family of simple means in Eisenach. He studied mathematics and physics on a college scholarship. In the year 1863, he was awarded a doctorate degree in Jena, where he later taught as a professor of physics. Besides his academic post, he also worked in the optical workshop of Carl Zeiss (1816 – 1888), and, starting in 1875, was even a silent partner. His theory of optical imaging of the microscope established Abbe as the founder of scientific optics. This theory – combined with new optical glass materials from Otto Schott (1851 – 1935) – gave the Zeiss company an enormous technological advantage. When the »Schott & Associates Glass Technology Laboratory« was founded, both Abbe and Zeiss certainly counted as »associates«. After the death of Zeiss, Ernst Abbe founded the Carl - Zeiss - Stiftung (Foundation) in 1889 to protect the long-term independence of the Zeiss and Schott companies from owner interests and to offer their employees a high level of personal, social and economic security. The foundation statute written by Abbe in 1896 ranks as one of the most important documents of German economic and social history. It guarantees employees of both companies increased protection against being fired, paid vacation, sick time, profit sharing, a company-sponsored pension plan and worker representation. These social rights, which were extraordinary for those times, later made their way into mainstream social legislation and union contract conditions in Germany.

