

The Mayor's chair and the oath to the University of Cambridge

By Dr N Henry (2025)

The mayor's chair preserved at the Museum of Cambridge has an important story to tell, that of the oath that all mayors until 1856 had to take in front of the Chancellor of the University.

As soon as the University settled in Cambridge, around 1209, a series of royal charters granted the institution the right to control local resources (markets and fairs, weights and measures, licensing of ale houses etc) and the right to arrest and imprison local people without trial. These rights, that gave authority to the University over the town, were often referred to as the "liberties and customs of the University" and later as the "privileges of the University". The University had essentially been granted the same rights over the town that a lord of a manor had over his tenants.

Each newly elected town mayor had to swear an oath promising to respect those privileges. This obligation started under Edward II in 1316. A charter states that the oath should be that:

...they, the said mayor and bailiffs, will maintain to the best of their power, the liberties and customs of the University as concerning the keeping of the King's peace and the assize of bread and beer and other victuals. (Cooper vol 1 p.75)

This led to many disputes between the town and the University, as in the year 1536 when the newly elected mayor "forgot" to swear the oath. The University appealed to royal power and the Corporation of Cambridge had to write to the Lord Privy Seal to seek a pardon. The town presented the lapse as an "oversight" rather than an act of rebellion against the authority of the University. The truth is that many newly elected mayors refused to swear the oath. This was the case for Robert Wallis in 1596 (reign of Elizabeth I), John Sherwood in 1641 and Bryan Kitchingman in 1647.

Fines were imposed for these refusals but the Corporation of Cambridge was happy to indemnify the mayor and bailiffs for refusing the oath to the University. What was the point of a big mayor's chair if the town had no power? Paying the fines was a way for the town to assert its authority or at least protest against the legal and economic jurisdiction of the University over the town.

In 1856 after negotiations led by Sir John Patteson (member of Queen Victoria's Privy Council) town and University came to a new agreement that:

The Mayor and Bailiffs shall not be required to take any oaths, or to make any declaration for the liberties and privileges of the University. (Cambridge Award Act of 1856, Cooper vol 5, p. 209)

The old order was challenged, probably not so much because of the mayors' resistance to the oath but because of the urbanisation of England and the rise of the town as a unit of local government. However it took another 38 years for the University to be stripped of its power over the town and its inhabitants. In 1894 a new Cambridge University and Corporation Act finally declared obsolete any jurisdiction of the University over persons who were not members of the University (ie townspeople). The Act also made provision to reinstate to the town all powers concerning the management of resources and in particular the management of weights and measures, markets and fairs.

The Mayor's chair in the Museum of Cambridge is an important reminder of the struggle of the town to free itself from the authority of the University. The oath imposed on the mayors to respect the "privileges" (control) of the University illustrates the town and gown relationship up to the nineteenth century. The town of Cambridge had been granted autonomy by Royal Charter in 1207 but two years later, when the University came, had seen its status obliterated by the privileges granted to the institution. The fact that the Corporation of Cambridge agreed on many occasions, to pay the fine imposed for refusing to comply to the oath to the University shows how deep these feelings of frustration and anger ran through the town. It took nearly 700 years for the town to recover the freedom and liberties granted by the initial charter of 1207. Stubborn mayors who refused to submit to the oath contributed to the fight for freedom. The chair in which they sat truly deserves a place of honour in the Museum of Cambridge.

REFERENCES:

Charles Henry Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, Volume 1, 1842
Charles Henry Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, Volume 5, 1908