

## **Is the name “Cambridge” a trademark?**

Over the last ten years there have been many trademark disputes over the name “Cambridge” involving Cambridge University and a number of companies such as the Cambridge Rowing Ltd, Cambridge Neurotech, and the company that brewed Cambridge Blue beer. Cambridge as a web domain name, [cambridge.com](http://cambridge.com), was also disputed by the University but the World Intellectual Property Organisation refused to uphold their objection.

Disputes between townspeople and the University of Cambridge are nothing new. They have simply evolved into new areas.

When the University first settled in Cambridge in 1209, the town was a flourishing trading centre with a well known fair on Stourbridge Common. Goods were freely exchanged in a town that had been granted the status of free borough by royal charter in 1207.

Things changed very soon after the University’s arrival as the Crown granted the University legal jurisdiction over the town, just as in Oxford. The University was given the sole right to grant licences to book dealers, wine merchants and other trades that had previously operated freely. The University of Cambridge, together with that of Oxford, also had the exclusive right to print almanacks and calendars. The Universities could sell these rights to printers of their choice (often in London), thereby raising money for their institutions.

This right was later challenged in court and in 1781 the Almanack Duty Act stated that, by a decision of law, the right of printing almanacks was found to be a “common right”, therefore ending the monopoly of the two universities.

The idea of “common right” is important here in considering the use of the name “Cambridge” which, after all, is only the name of the town where scholars happened to settle in 1209 when fleeing disputes with townsmen in Oxford.

Although the privileges of the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford (their legal jurisdiction over the towns) were formally abolished in 1894 by an act of Parliament, the weight of the past remains very visible as the trademarks of “Oxford” and “Cambridge” are some of the best protected in the world. Whilst battles between townspeople and the University of Cambridge were previously centred around legal privileges granted by royal charters and letters, they have now shifted to trademark disputes that underline the continuing existing tensions between Town and Gown.