

Ancient University of Northampton

2015 marks the 750th anniversary of the dissolution of ancient University of Northampton which had been established (and then dissolved) in the reign of King Henry III. However, higher education in Northampton goes back as far as the 12th Century and seems to have been popular with King Richard I (the 'Lion-heart').

According to one historian, between 1176 and 1193 the *studium* at Northampton 'rivalled or even eclipsed the Oxford schools'¹. But when Richard went off on crusade (and ended up getting captured) the focus shifted to Oxford. The schools at Northampton continued however and under the patronage of Simon de Montfort and Henry III it looked possible that Northampton would be recognized as a *studium generale* (or a fully-fledged university).

By the mid-13th century England had two universities, Oxford and Cambridge but scholars from both of these traveled to Northampton and some settled here. In Cambridge fights between 'town' and 'gown' in 1249 led some students to decamp to Oxford and in 1260 there was a major outbreak of rioting in Cambridge that resulted in the execution of 16 townsmen and the severe punishment of many more; in the aftermath several scholars fled seeking sanctuary, some of whom arrived in Northampton. In 1261 Henry III granted permission for the settlement of a university in the town.

Henry III and Simon de Montfort (the King's brother-in-law and Earl of Leicester) started off as best of friends but the relationship soured. More importantly perhaps de Montfort and many of the king's barons were unhappy that Henry seemed to be riding roughshod over the tenets of Magna Carta and the more recently agreed [Provisions of Oxford](#). It led to a civil war and on 5th April 1264 King Henry III won a major battle at Northampton 'taking the town and castle and capturing the entire Montfordian garrison'².

During the siege of Northampton the scholars had resisted the King's forces and so the angry monarch supposedly eked revenge by revoking the town's license to have a university. But an interesting proclamation from Henry III suggests a more parochial and self-interested reason for the folding of the town's 13th century university.

On 1 February 1265, Henry wrote to the mayors and burgesses of Northampton:

"We acceded to their request [to establish a university in 1261] because we believed then that this would benefit your town and that advantage would accrue to us; but now we have learned on the testimony of men worthy of belief that, if the university remains at Northampton, no small damage would be incurred by our borough of Oxford, which is of ancient creation, confirmed by our ancestors, and is generally approved as a convenience to students. We should on no grounds be willing that this should happen, especially as all the bishops agree that for the honour of God, the advantage of the Church of England and the well-being of the students, the university should be removed from Northampton".³

So it would seem, as F.M.Powicke noted that 'one feels that it was the borough of Oxford that really mattered; it had got the better of Northampton'. So it wasn't just the siege and the opposition to the king, it was the vested interest of Oxford University in preserving its status as the primary *studium generale* in central England that persuaded the king to revoke out license.

However, Alan Cobban's final remark that the 'capture of Northampton by Henry III probably marked the end of an attempt to launch a university in the town'⁴, is, of course, wrong; the University was finally established in 2005, some 740 years after the first attempt failed.



Dr Drew Gray
Senior Lecturer in History
The University of Northampton

¹ Alan B Cobban, *The Medieval English Universities*

² J.R. Maddicott, *Simon de Montfort*

³ F.M.Powicke, *Ways of Medieval Life and Thought*

⁴ Alan B Cobban, *The Medieval English Universities: Oxford and Cambridge to c.1500*