

# Scholars and Literati at the University of Cambridge (1209–1800)

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This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati who taught at the University of Cambridge from its earliest days to its dissolution in 1800.

## 1 SOURCES

John Venn (1834–1923), best known as a logician and mathematician for the eponymous Venn diagrams, devoted much of his later life to compiling records of Cambridge University and its colleges. Together with his son, John Archibald Venn (1883–1958), he published the *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (Venn 1922). The first part – covering the period up to 1751 – appeared in four volumes between 1922 and 1927. John Archibald Venn then carried on the project, publishing a second part in six volumes, covering 1752 to 1900, between 1940 and 1954. This source contributed the greatest number of scholars by far. The invaluable publication has since been digitized into the *Cambridge Alumni Database* (Dawson 2001), accessible and searchable online at <https://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/>. One notable aspect of these data is the collation of diverse academic roles – students, fellows, and various other statuses – into a single dataset. For this set, we extracted fellows and professors.

For some colleges, alternative data are available, which we exploited in conjunction with Venn (1922). These are Walker (1927) for Peterhouse college, Lamb and Masters (1831) for College of Corpus Christi, and Holmes (2022) for Queen’s college.

## 2 THE UNIVERSITY

The University of Cambridge (University of Cambridge 2026; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025) traces its beginnings to 1209, when a group of scholars left Oxford after a violent conflict and settled in Cambridge. This conflict was a “town-and-gown” clash during which the town authorities blamed university men for an accidental killing, and the town’s secular officials executed (hanged) several scholars without the usual involvement/protection of church authorities.

In its early decades the University of Cambridge was a loose community of masters and students, and relations with the townspeople could be tense; Henry III intervened in 1231, placing scholars under royal protection and trying to curb exploitation by landlords. Across the later Middle Ages Cambridge acquired the institutional shape we now recognize. The first enduring college, Peterhouse, was founded in 1284, and the collegiate model steadily expanded over the following centuries. Cambridge also gained wider ecclesiastical standing: it was described as a *studium generale* by the late 13th century and received formal papal recognition as such in 1318, helping to cement its status in the universe of European universities (Rashdall 1895).

In the 16th century the university was reshaped by humanism and Reformation politics. A divinity professorship (the university’s oldest) dates from 1502, and Cambridge became a notable site for religious debate and reformist energies. Institutionally, Henry VIII founded Trinity College in 1546, and Elizabeth I’s statutes (1570) and Parliament’s incorporation of the university (1571) entrenched a governance structure that was dominated by heads of colleges and which tied university

membership tightly to college membership, an English specificity.

The Catholic Encyclopedia (Herbermann 1913) stresses that many of the features of the collegiate discipline and internal governance are related to the fact that the earlier colleges have been modelled on the monasteries. This also explains the rule imposing celibacy on the fellows.

From the later 17th century into the 18th, Cambridge's intellectual identity became strongly associated with mathematics and natural philosophy. The Lucasian Chair of Mathematics (founded 1663) famously passed to Isaac Newton in 1669, and the university's honours culture increasingly crystallized around written examinations. Architecturally and ceremonially, the Senate House, completed in 1730, became the central stage for congregations and examinations.

By 1800, Cambridge remained a powerful but socially narrow institution, collegiate, clerical in tone, and still governed largely through its colleges, even as its examination system and scholarly reputation (especially in mathematics) continued to strengthen. Notably, no new colleges were founded between 1596 and 1800: the foundation of Downing College (1800) marked the start of a new phase just beyond our cutoff.

Period	no. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1200–1347	47	38.3%	40.4%	25.4	60.7	116	27.7%	19.1%
1348–1449	328	13.4%	14.6%	28.6	72.5	92	6.4%	2.7%
1450–1526	898	22.7%	11%	23.3	58.1	94	8.5%	5%
1527–1617	2737	34.3%	25.7%	22.4	59.7	93	13.9%	13.3%
1618–1685	2330	57.7%	46.4%	23	58.7	92	11.5%	16.4%
1686–1733	1433	76.9%	68.8%	24.1	59.5	94	12.9%	21.4%
1734–1800	1909	88.2%	60.6%	24	65.1	107	16.8%	23.9%
1200–1800	9682	55.1%	42.3%	23.5	61.5	94	13.1%	16.2%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

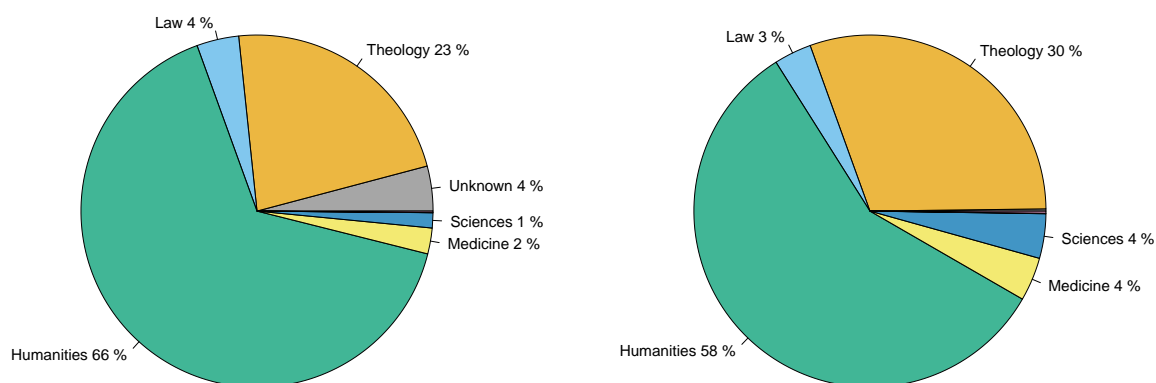


Figure 1: Broad fields at the University of Cambridge (left: all scholars; right: published scholars)

### 3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics. It illustrates well the specificity of Cambridge compared to the other European universities (Oxford excepted): teaching is mostly done by fellows who, very often, do not stay long in that position. This means that the age at election is very low (23.5 years

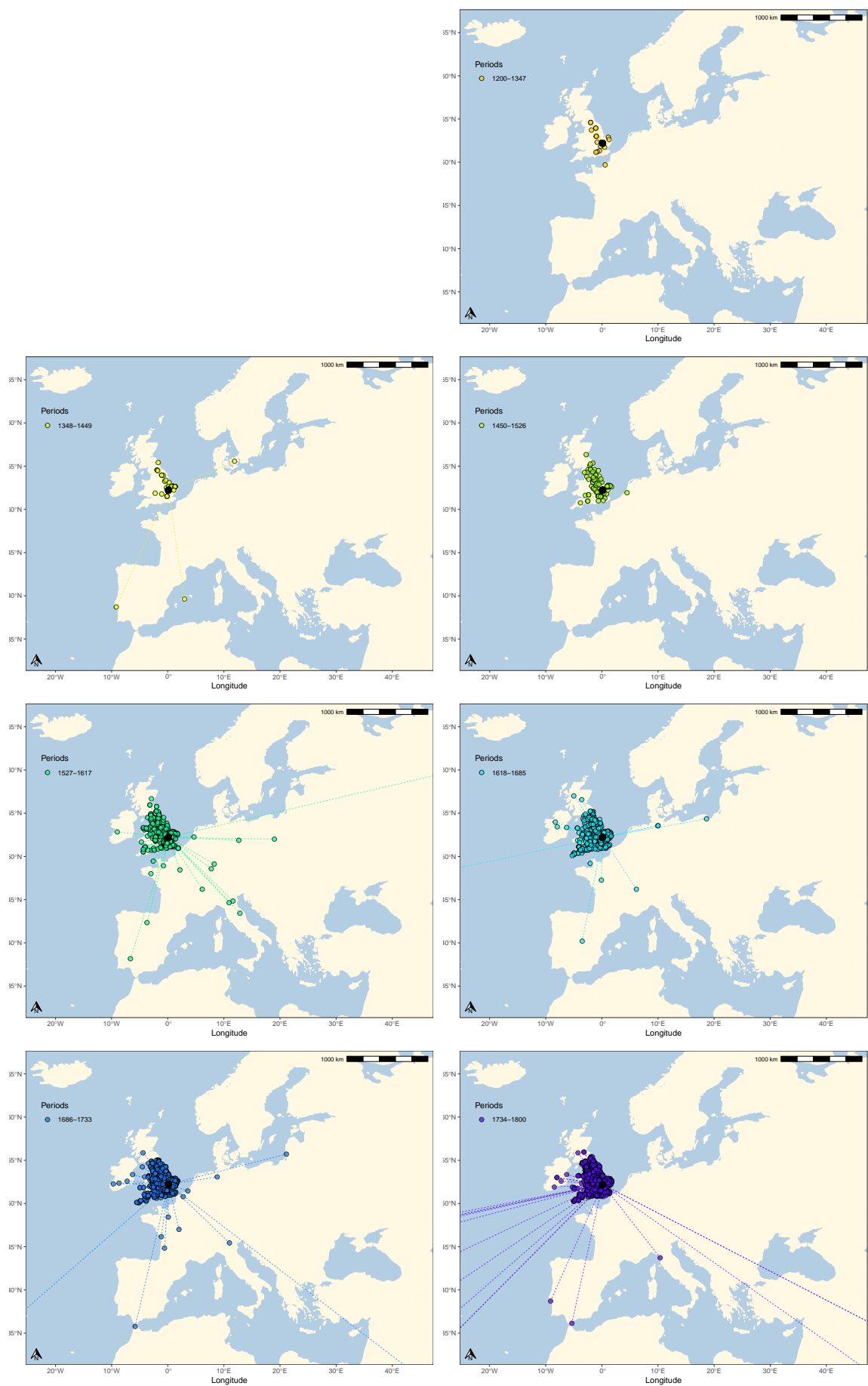


Figure 2: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Cambridge

on average) and that the dataset is huge: 9,682 scholars in total. The first period displays a selection effect on the notability statistics: in that period, we only know the top persons, who are more likely to have a Wikipedia or a VIAF page. When the coverage is high, the information on birth year is less often available, and scholars are more rarely observed in VIAF. The median distance from birthplace to university is around 100km and constant over time: recruitment is quite local. Considering the last three periods, the percentage of scholars with a known birth year is high, which makes our data on longevity more robust. We see there the typical increase in the length of life of academics from period 1686–1733 to period 1734–1800. This was already stressed by Stelter, De la Croix, and Myrskylä (2021) for the Holy Roman Empire.

## 4 FIELDS

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of teaching disciplines, for all scholars on the left, and for published scholars on the right. The low share of law, medicine and sciences is confirmed, stressing the specialization of the University of Cambridge into humanities and theology.

## 5 PLACES OF BIRTH

Figure 2 displays the documented birthplaces for the scholars who were active at the University of Cambridge by period. A few scholars come from Continental Europe, but the overall picture is one of a local hiring pool. In the last period, some professors originate from outside Europe (British colonies).

## 6 HUMAN CAPITAL OF SCHOLARS AND LITERATI

For each person in the database, we compute a heuristic human capital index, identified by combining information from VIAF and Wikipedia, using principal component analysis. We also compute the notability of the university at each date by averaging the human capital of the five best scholars active in Cambridge 25 years before that date. The details are given in De la Croix et al. (2024) (for notability of institution) and Curtis et al. (2025) (for our individual measures of human capital). Figure 3 shows the names of all the scholars with a positive human capital index. The orange line displays the notability of the university, based on how well-published its top scholars were.

The University of Cambridge was obscure until 1500, when it suddenly made a large and sustained leap upward in notability. Over 1500–1800, notability is consistently at a very high level, bolstered by a large number of top scholars.

## 7 TOP 10 PROFESSORS

We now provide a brief overview of the ten professors with the highest human capital index.

**Desiderius Erasmus** (Rotterdam 1467 – Basel 1536) was a Dutch philosopher, humanist, and theologian. In 1488, under pressure from his tutors, he took his vows at the monastery of Stein. A brilliant Latinist, he later served as secretary to the Bishop of Cambrai, where he discovered the works of St. Augustine, before pursuing studies at the University of Paris. Between 1511 and 1515, he is thought to have taught theology and Greek at the University of Cambridge, residing at Queen’s College. His prolific writings span themes including education, religion and war. His satirical dialogue, *The Praise of Folly*, has become a classic of Western literature. Erasmus also maintained an extensive correspondence across Europe with academics / humanists (the core of it), senior church figures, and monarchs. A proponent of an evangelical renewal within Catholicism and an advocate for peace, he is regarded as one of the central figures of Dutch and European humanism.

**Francis Bacon** (London 1561 – Highgate 1626) was an English philosopher, statesman, and scientist. At the age of twelve, he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, where his precocious intellect

quickly attracted attention. After further study at the University of Poitiers, he began a political career and served for many years as a Member of Parliament, including as representative for Cambridge University. Under King James I, he rose to the office of Lord Chancellor, although he was dismissed and convicted of corruption in 1621. In the final years of his life, he turned increasingly to his philosophical writings. Championing observation, inductive reasoning, and a cautious, skeptical approach to knowledge, Bacon laid essential foundations for empiricism and helped shape the development of the modern scientific method.

**Isaac Newton** (Woolsthorpe-by-Colsterworth 1642 – London 1727) was an English mathematician, physicist, astronomer, and natural philosopher. He entered Trinity College, Cambridge, around the age of nineteen, where he gradually turned away from the traditional humanities curriculum and devoted himself to mathematics and natural philosophy. He became a fellow in 1668 and was appointed Lucasian Professor of Mathematics the following year. In 1687, he published his major work, *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica*, which laid the foundations of classical mechanics and presented his theory of universal gravitation. His pioneering studies on the decomposition of light also marked a turning point in the development of optics.

**Thomas Robert Malthus** (Westcott 1766 – Bath 1834) was a British economist and Anglican priest. He studied at Jesus College, Cambridge, and served as a fellow there from 1793 to 1804. He later taught political economy at the East India Company College, a position he held until his death. His analysis of the relationship between population growth and resources, especially in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), had a profound influence on economics and the emerging field of demography. His name gave rise to Malthusianism, a doctrine later associated with various forms of population control.

**Martin Bucer** (Strasbourg 1491 – Cambridge 1551) was an Alsatian theologian, humanist, and Protestant reformer. After entering a Dominican monastery in 1506, he went on to study at the University of Heidelberg in 1517, where he engaged deeply with both medieval scholasticism and humanist thought. Suspected of heresy by the Inquisition, he took refuge in Strasbourg, where he soon became one of the city's leading figures of the Reformation. Increasing political pressure eventually forced him into exile, and he left for England in 1549. At the University of Cambridge, he was appointed to a chair in theology and briefly taught a course on the Epistle to the Ephesians before his death in 1551. Throughout his life, Bucer sought to reconcile the positions of Luther and Zwingli, travelling extensively across Europe to spread his ideas.

**George Herbert** (Montgomery, 1593 – Bemerton, 1633) was an English poet, orator, and Anglican clergyman. He entered Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1609, later becoming a fellow and reader in Rhetoric. Appointed the university's public orator, he also served briefly in the English Parliament in 1624. He eventually turned to the clergy and spent the last years of his life as rector of the parish of Fugglestone St Peter. Herbert wrote poetry in English, Latin, and Greek, exploring devotional and spiritual themes, and is regarded as one of the major figures of the metaphysical poetry movement.

**Thomas Gray** (London 1716 – Cambridge 1771) was an English poet, letter writer, and scholar. He studied at Eton College, then at Peterhouse and later Pembroke College, Cambridge. He spent most of his life at Cambridge, serving as a fellow and, from 1768, as Regius Professor of History and Modern Languages. Although he published little, Gray became celebrated for his *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, admired for its refined expertise and its contemplative, stoic tone.

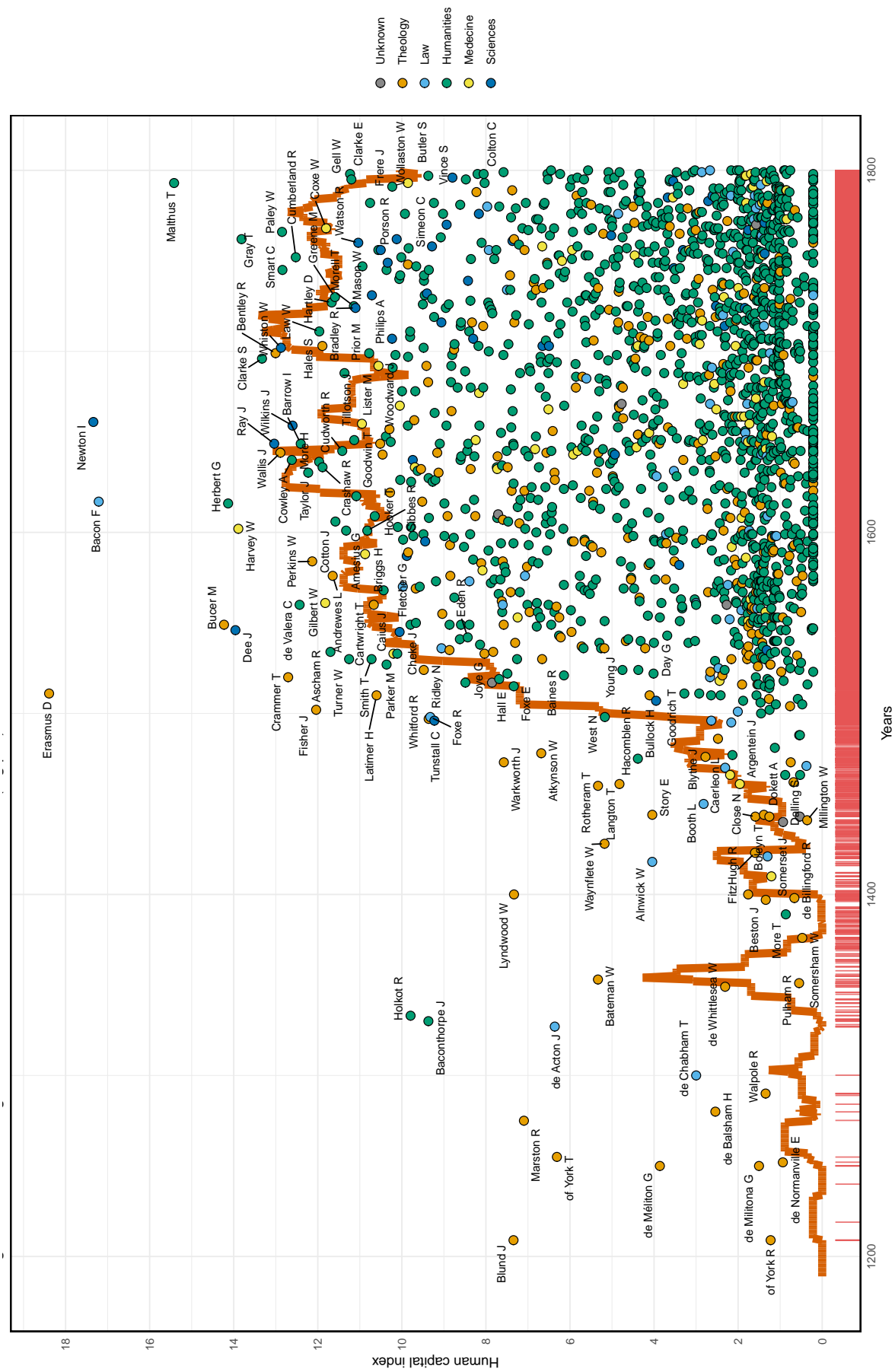


Figure 3: Famous scholars and university notability (orange)

**William Harvey** (Folkestone 1578 – London 1657) was an English physician specializing in anatomy and physiology. He studied at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, from 1593, and later at the University of Padua, where he earned his medical degree. After returning to England, he briefly served as a fellow. He spent much of his career at St. Bartholomew's Hospital and was elected to the Royal College of Physicians, for which he delivered several Lumleian lectures. From 1618, he also served as extraordinary physician to King James I. Harvey is best known for his demonstration of the pulmonary and systemic circulation of blood and for establishing the heart's role as a pump.

**John Dee** (London, 1527 – Mortlake, 1609) was an English mathematician, astronomer, astrologer, geographer, and occult philosopher. He studied at St John's College, Cambridge, where he later became a fellow, and played a role in the foundation of Trinity College. He also spent time in Leuven and Brussels, pursuing further studies. In 1558, he became a scientific and astrological adviser to Queen Elizabeth I. Dee devoted much of his life to alchemy, divination, and Hermetic philosophy, with a particular interest in Judeo-Christian mystical traditions, which exposed him to recurrent accusations of witchcraft. He was widely respected for his mathematical expertise and for his contributions to navigation.

**Samuel Clarke** (Norwich 1675 – London 1729) was an English philosopher, theologian, and Anglican clergyman. He studied at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, where he was elected a fellow in 1696, a position he held until 1700. After taking orders, he served as chaplain to John Moore, Bishop of Norwich, and later to Queen Anne. Clarke delivered the Boyle Lectures in 1704 and 1705, setting out his rational proofs for the existence of God and his theory of the foundation of rectitude.

## 8 FAMILIES OF SCHOLARS

Despite the requirement that fellows remain celibate while in residence at Cambridge, we identify 152 father–son pairs among them. This figure is a conservative lower bound, since additional pairs likely remain unobserved due to incomplete or ambiguous identifications. Given that the total number of father–son pairs documented across European academia is about 2,000 (De la Croix and Goñi 2024), Cambridge fellows account for a substantial share. Beyond father–son ties, we also find a large number of brother pairs in which both siblings were fellows.

## 9 UNIVERSITY NETWORK

Following De la Croix and Morault (2025), our assumption is that a professor's involvement in multiple universities throughout their career establishes a link between those institutions. We present the universities that were connected to the University of Cambridge during each period in Figure 4.

These figures are striking. Despite the size of the faculty, the University of Cambridge did not see much mobility of its professors with other universities. The period 1527–1617 stands out as the period with the strongest integration in European Academia. In the last period, mobility is limited in England and its colonies, i.e. not a single fellow of Cambridge occupied an academic position on the continent.

## 10 WHO'S WHO ON THE MOON

There are various indicators of an individual's notable achievements, such as the recognition they receive through the naming of streets, schools, research institutes, prizes, and even lunar craters. Eight scholars associated with the University of Cambridge have been honored by having a crater on the surface of the Moon named after them. This underlines the fact that the sciences were not absent from the University of Cambridge, despite its strong focus on humanities and theology.

**George Atwood** (London 1746 – London 1807) was an English physicist and mathematician. He

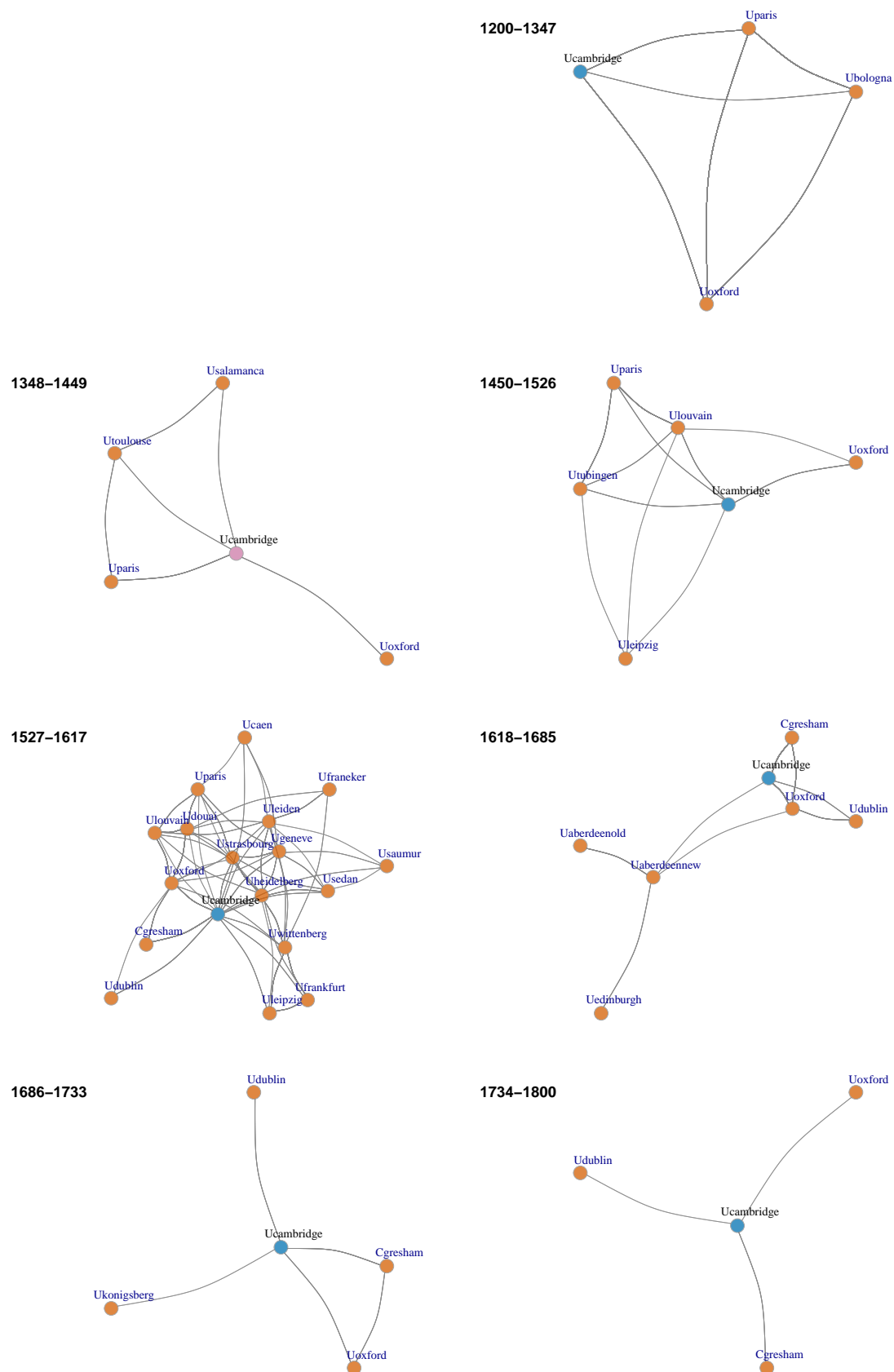


Figure 4: Links between Cambridge and other universities through scholars' mobility by period



graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1769, and simultaneously received the very first Smith's Prize, awarded to the most outstanding students in mathematics and physics. He then served as a fellow and tutor at Trinity from 1770 to 1784. Atwood is best known for inventing the Atwood machine, designed to demonstrate the mechanical effects of Newton's laws of motion. He was also reputed to be a highly skilled chess player.

**Isaac Barrow** (London 1630 – London 1677) was an English philologist, mathematician, and theologian. In 1645, he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, with the support of the aristocratic Walpole family. His diligence allowed him to distinguish himself in both mathematics and classical literature. Although considered for the Greek chair, he refused to sign the Engagement pledging loyalty to the Commonwealth, and consequently left England to travel across Europe. After the Restoration, he was appointed Regius Professor of Greek at the University of Cambridge, and in 1663 he became the first holder of the newly established Lucasian Chair of Mathematics. He also founded the Trinity College Library and served as Master of the College until his death. His pioneering investigations into the properties of the tangent played a crucial role in the early development of infinitesimal calculus.

**Henry Briggs** (Halifax 1561 – Oxford 1630) was an English mathematician best known for his work on logarithms. He graduated from St John's College, Cambridge, in 1581 and became a fellow there in 1588. In 1592, he was appointed reader of the physical lecture. He later spent more than twenty years teaching at Gresham College in London and also held the professorship of geometry at Oxford. Briggs is renowned for transforming John Napier's original logarithms into base-10, or common, logarithms. His research in astronomy and geography made an important contribution to early modern science.

**Richard Dunthorne** (Ramsey 1711 – Cambridge 1775) was an English astronomer and surveyor. While he was a pupil at Ramsey Free Grammar School, his abilities were noticed by the astronomer Roger Long, who became his mentor. He continued his education at Cambridge, probably not as part of the traditional university curriculum. He subsequently became a butler at Pembroke Hall, a position that enabled him to assist Long, then Master of the college and professor of astronomy and geometry. Dunthorne also planned and financed the construction of an observatory at St John's College. He is best known for his study of the changing apparent speed of the Moon in its orbit.

**William Harvey** See Section 7: Top 10 professors.

**Nevil Maskelyne** (London 1732 – Greenwich 1811) was a British astronomer. He graduated from St Catharine's College, Cambridge, in 1754 and became a fellow of Trinity College two years later. After his ordination, he served as rector of Shrawardine and of North Runcton. From 1765 until his death, he held the prestigious office of Astronomer Royal. Maskelyne was elected to numerous learned societies during his lifetime, including the Royal Society of London, the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and the American Philosophical Society. He was the first scientist to measure the mass of the Earth and developed a method for determining longitude using the position of the Moon.

**Isaac Newton** See Section 7: Top 10 professors.

**William Hyde Wollaston** (Dereham 1766 – London 1828) was an English chemist and physicist. He studied at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, where he earned a doctorate in medicine and later served as a fellow from 1787 to 1828. After practicing medicine for a few years, he turned to chemistry, becoming a leading figure of the Royal Society, of which he eventually became president. His method for processing platinum ore on a practical scale enabled him to amass a considerable fortune. Wollaston is known for discovering two chemical elements, palladium and rhodium. He also made significant contributions to electricity and spectroscopy, and he patented the camera lucida.

## 11 INTERACTION WITH THE ROYAL SOCIETY

Figure 5 shows the extent of the interactions between the University of Cambridge and the main academy in England, the Royal Society (De la Croix and Mytilinaios 2022) up to 1800. The interactions are based on scholars who were members of both institutions. The intersection contains 108 scholars. We believe it is significant, and shows that the world of the university was not completely disconnected from the trends of its time, represented by the academies.

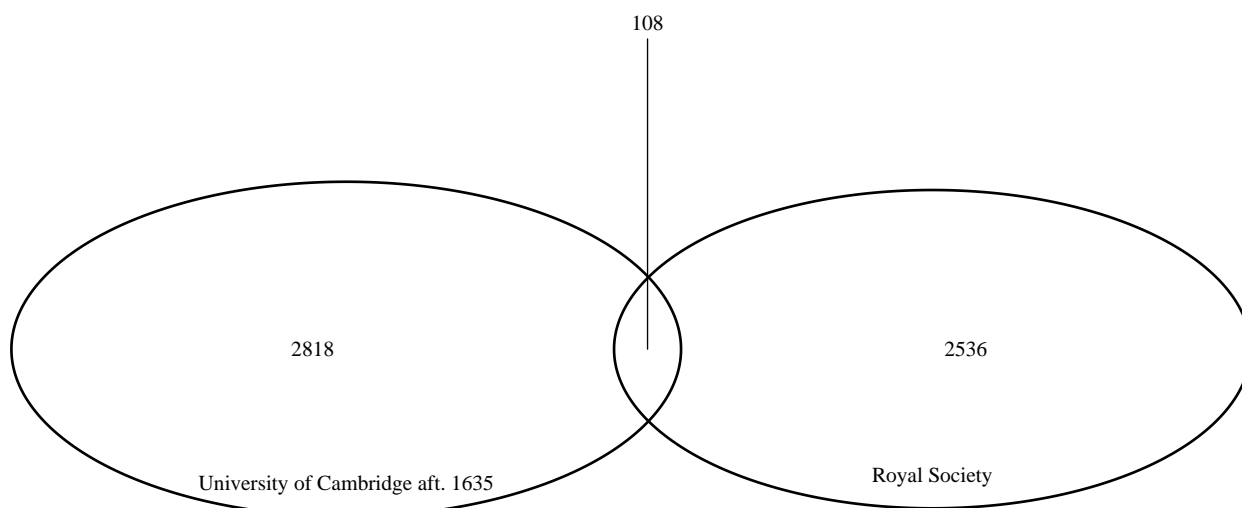


Figure 5: Interaction between the University of Cambridge from 1635, and the Royal Society, until 1800.

## 12 FINAL THOUGHTS

The University of Cambridge is full of surprises. Although it became one of Europe’s leading universities, it was not a major player before 1500. Its strengths lay in the humanities and theology, yet it produced scholars whose scientific contributions were so significant that lunar craters bear their names. Strikingly, this record emerged from a largely local professoriate with limited academic mobility, particularly relative to Continental Europe.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 883033 “Did elite human capital trigger the rise of the West? Insights from a new database of European scholars.”

Homepage: <https://perso.uclouvain.be/david.delacroix/uthc.html>

Database: <https://shiny-lidam.sipr.ucl.ac.be/scholars/>

First version January 20, 2026.

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