

Cromwell's Head & the King's Head

In the 1640s there was a civil war in England between King and Parliament, and this put Cambridge in turmoil. The University was largely royalist supporting Charles I and the townspeople were mostly parliamentarians supporting the side of Oliver Cromwell, the local MP. The King asked the Colleges to help with fund raising, gifts of silver and cash, but Cromwell blocked the wagons taking materials and money to supply the King's army. Instead, Cambridge Colleges were forced to house Cromwell's troops. His men used King's College Chapel for military exercises. Graffiti left by the soldiers is still visible near the altar.

Everything was disrupted during the 1640s including the civic and ceremonial roles of Mayor and Aldermen, whose special mace (a symbol of representing the monarch locally), with a crown on top, was publicly decapitated. So when Charles I was executed, you can see how the Cambridge mace was also executed, a jagged edge showing where the crown was ritually hacked off with a butcher's knife to represent the King's Head taken off with a sword.

Revenge on Cromwell's head came decades later, because although he was not King he had ruled England as 'Lord Protector' until he died from natural causes in 1658 and given a fitting burial place in Westminster Abbey. However, on the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 his body was dug up and his head ended up on a spike above Parliament in Westminster. Years later it blew off in a storm and eventually was given back to his family. Cromwell's head is buried in a secret location nearby the Market at Sidney Sussex College, the exact location not publicly known, for fear of Royalists digging it up again!

