



Viewpoint

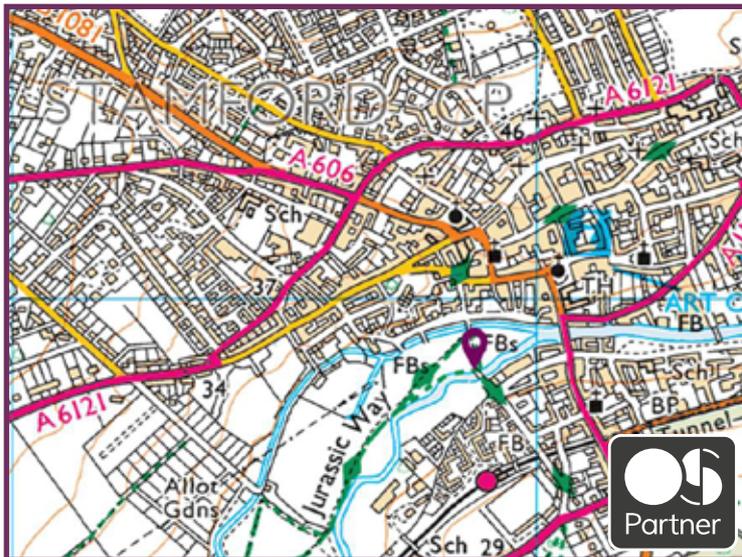
Degrees of separation



Time: 15 mins

Region: East of England

Landscape: rural



Location: Stamford meadows footpath, Stamford, Lincolnshire PE9 2WB

Grid reference: TF 02880 06861

Keep an eye out for: The Brazenose Knocker – a replica of the original door knocker from Stamford's first university buildings.

Stretching before you is a slice of the nation's first conservation area. A modest skyline of church spires, honey-coloured buildings and the winding River Welland create Stamford's Georgian elegant charm.

Quietly nestled in the south Lincolnshire countryside, with just a handful of visitors compared to its esteemed and bustling neighbour Cambridge, Stamford is a gem that is easy to miss.

But Stamford could have been a much bigger name on the map, and it has more to do with rivalling a university town than you might think...

What is missing from Stamford's elegant skyline?



Stamford's roots lie in the wool industry and today, with a large commuting population, the town has remained a charming rural escape from the bustle of city life.

So you might be surprised to know that Stamford's gentle, market town back streets could have been brimming with books, happy hour drinks and mortar board-wearing students!

But in 1333 Stamford was actually the site of a fledgling university. Had it come to fruition, Stamford's academic aspirations could have created a very different townscape today.

So what happened?

Its plethora of church spires gives us the first clue. In the 12th and 13th centuries Stamford was an important religious seat. With this came an academic tradition built on the monastic schools founded here. In fact a university was rooted in mythology long before this.

Legend has it that King Blaud set up the first ever university of Britain here in 863 BC. But there isn't much evidence to back up this romantic notion.

Instead we have to look to 14th century Oxford for the true foundations of Stamford's academic standing. In Oxford, a North-South divide sparked debate among a group of academics and master's students.

Northern academics claimed they were being denied scholarships at Merton College in favour of their southern counterparts. Backed by the Monastery of Durham, in 1333 they fled to Stamford to set up their own breakaway university. Here they could be protected by nearby St Leonard's Priory, which still lies less than a mile from where we are now.

Their anti-establishment crusade lasted less than 2 years, however. Oxford University and the King forced the rebellious academics to return.

As a result, Oxford MA students were obliged to swear the following: "You shall also swear that you will not read lectures, or hear them read, at Stamford, as in a University study, or college general". This oath remained in place until 1827.

As it was never officially accredited by the Church or state, Stamford's fledgling university failed to make it into the history books.

Instead, Oxford was dubbed as 'the city of dreaming spires' by Victorian poet Matthew Arnold. We can only imagine whether Stamford's own townscape could have resembled Oxford's grandeur had its own academic notions ever flourished.

Imagine how different this view would look if grand halls, college chapels and student bars dominated the skyline in place of a few churches, townhouses and meadows we see today...?

But maybe also consider the change in tempo the town would have experienced.

Oxford benefits from an international reputation, the spending power of over 30,000 students and provides 22,000 jobs through its two universities. However it also sees huge seasonal fluctuations in population, pressures on infrastructure and the town-gown tensions that university cities often face between resident and student cultures.

Stamford's grand aspirations for academic prowess were shrouded in both mythology and academic protest. But instead the town hides in a quiet corner of Lincolnshire, content with magnificent Georgian beauty and possibly even relishing a student-free tranquillity.