Ancient seats of learning

Here are some comments on my 2016 calendar. The title is “Ancient seats of learning”; the photos are not all of ancient universities, but maybe of their towns.

Here are the universities and their foundation dates. Bear in mind that these dates are only approximate, especially the earlier ones. Each university is the oldest in its country, except of course for Cambridge.

- Bologna, Italy: 1088
- Paris, France: 1150
- Oxford, England: mid-12th century
- Cambridge, England: 1209
- Coimbra, Portugal: 1290
- St Andrews, Scotland: 1314
- Prague, Czech Republic (Charles University): 1348
- Leuven (Catholic University): 1425

St Andrews received its charter in a papal bull dated 1314. Unfortunately, this was during the Great Schism, and they chose the “wrong Pope”.

Universities seemed to flourish best away from the centres of ecclesiastical power, not too closely observed by Church censors. The exceptions are Paris and St Andrews. The case of Paris is interesting. Some scholars argue that the condemnation of Aristotle’s teachings on science in 1277 by Bishop Tempier of Paris caused scholars to take a fresh new view on the questions Aristotle had discussed, and led indirectly to the very important work of Jean Buridan and Nicole Oresme.
Cover: St Andrews  The picture shows St Andrews from the West Sands, famously the setting of the opening scene of the film *Chariots of Fire*. It is early morning, and an onshore wind is blowing sea spray over the beach. It is maybe easy to imagine that the people in the picture are pilgrims. (There is a Pilgrims’ Way from Edinburgh to St Andrews, which I hope to walk some day.)

January: Cambridge  Afternoon light on the playing fields of St John’s College Cambridge. This college was in some way a model for St John’s College in the University of Queensland, which I attended in the 1960s.

February: Prague  The Prague astronomical clock was installed in 1410 in the Old Town Square; its designer was Jan Šindel, a mathematician at Charles University. Its mechanism shows, as well as the time and date, the positions of the Sun and Moon and other astronomical details, and an hourly show with figures of the Apostles, a skeleton representing Death, and so on. Since Prague has become so popular with tourists, on the hour the space round the clock is completely impassable for all the tourists holding up their phones to record the clock’s performance.
March: Bologna  Bologna is the oldest European university. (The Medical School of Salerno may be older, but did not develop into a university.) I can’t resist quoting this description of the conditions of employment for academics in mediaeval Bologna, from David Knowles’ *The Evolution of Mediaeval Thought*:

The professors were kept in absolute and even humiliating subservience to their students. They had to swear obedience to the student rectors and to the student-made statutes, which bore very hardly upon them, e.g. the professor was fined if he began his teaching a minute late or continued a minute longer than the fixed time, and should this happen the students who failed to leave the lecture-room immediately were themselves fined. In addition, the professor was fined if he shirked explaining a difficult passage, or if he failed to get through the syllabus; he was fined if he left the city for a day without the rector’s permission, and if he married, was allowed only one day off for the purpose. The city, for its part, took a hand in controlling the professors, and they were forced to take an oath not to leave Bologna in search of more lucrative or less onerous posts.

April: St Andrews  There used to be a railway line around the Fife coast, but it has been closed for some time. The viaduct across the Kinness Burn is now a pedestrian and cycle path, and is on my route to work. The railway is very unlikely ever to re-open, as the line crossed the famous Old Course. It is said that once a golfer hit the ball and it went through a carriage window of a passing train. A bit further up the line, a passenger threw the ball out. The golfer was required to play his next shot from this point!
May: Oxford  The view from Carfax Tower in Oxford. The college whose tower features prominently is Merton, the first “real” Oxford college (with statutes, a Warden and Fellows), which was founded in 1264 and served as a model for subsequent colleges, where I spent fourteen very productive years.

June: Paris  This picture was taken somewhere in Paris, I forget where: not in the Quartier Latin, though. The figure on the right is trampling on a demon who may represent ignorance.

July: Cambridge  Trinity College was founded by King Henry VIII. Is this why it displays the Royal arms?
August: Prague  The big building on the left in the picture is St Nicholas Church in the Little Quarter (Malastrana). It is worth a visit for the astonishing Counter-Reformation sculpture, e.g. St Ignatius smiting the unbelievers with a bolt of lightning. The other half of the building is now the Department of Applied Mathematics and Computer Science, but was formerly a college for training Jesuit priests. It is the nicest mathematics department in which I have worked, with marble staircases and a very roomy cellar!

September: Oxford  Spring blossom in the High Street. The tree grows in front of St Mary the Virgin church, where University lectures were held in the early days of the University.

October: Coimbra  Fado is a very popular folk music of Portugal, sometimes compared to the blues. Coimbra has its own special genre of fado, distinguished
from the more popular Lisbon fado in several ways: it is performed only by students; and the instrumentation is more prominent. The instrument shown is a Portuguese guitar, which is used alongside the Spanish guitar. As the mirrors suggest, the café used to be a church, but now has regular fado performances.

**November: Leuven** The most spectacular building in Leuven is the old Town Hall. The outside is covered in stone figures of local worthies. But the plinths on which they stand also tell a story. The picture shows, in just two panels, the story of *Paradise Lost*. In the first, Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit; in the second, the angel with the flaming sword casts them out of Paradise.

**December: St Andrews** James Gregory was the first Regius Professor of Mathematics in St Andrews. Various universities have Regius chairs in different subjects; technically they are appointed by the monarch. (Last year, Igor Rivin was appointed as the 16th occupant of the Regius chair.) As well as being a mathematician, Gregory was an astronomer, and established an accurate meridian line through the old library. The post marking the southern end of the line is shown in the picture. It is in the garden of a farm cottage, but research by John Amson suggests that it has been moved from its original position in a field on the hillside, where probably it was a nuisance to the farmer.

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New Year’s Eve 2015