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Historical English Academic Robes: A Basis for a ‘National’ System

by *Nicholas Groves*

From time to time, various writers on the subject, Franklyn included, put out a call for a ‘national’ set of robes, which could be worn by any British graduate, whatever their degree and institution, as an alternative to the robes of their alma mater. Leaving aside any benefits it might have (one can see the attraction of it for graduates of the University of East Anglia and Kent ...), the great problem would be: who would design it, and who would approve it? My thesis here is that the remains of such robes in fact still exist, and that it is possible to piece together the ‘national’ system fairly easily.

We need to look, of course, at Oxford and Cambridge. (The three pre-Reformation Scottish universities. St Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen, had their own way of doing things, and do not concern us here; on the other hand, Dublin will be of great import.) Stripping away the accretions of modern degrees, such as DLitt, BSc, and certainly PhD/DPhil, we are left with the following degrees, which would have been recognizable to a late medieval member of either university: Doctor of Divinity, of Law, of Medicine (‘Physic’); Master of Arts; Bachelor of Divinity, of Law, of Medicine, of Arts—and arguably the Bachelor and Doctor of Music.¹

At Oxford, first, we find the doctors wearing scarlet cloth lined with miniver—an expensive fur.² These were inconvenient to wear in the summer, and silk linings were allowed to them in 1432.³ The BD had already adopted a black silk lining by 1426, and this was also adopted by the DD. The DCL and DM used red, as did the MA.⁴ Over the years, the doctors’ lining became paler, while the MA lining stayed the same; they were realigned in the nineteenth century, and now the DCL/DM and the MA hoods are both lined with crimson shot silk—a further development.

At Cambridge, doctors were not allowed silk linings until 1560,⁵ and the scarlet and miniver robes remain in use as those of the vice-chancellor: they are

¹ I am deliberately ignoring the degrees of Bachelor and Master in Surgery, as they had a somewhat shadowy existence, and on the whole did not develop their own robes until the nineteenth century. Likewise the degrees in Canon Law, which in any case appear to have worn the Divinity robes.

² What I have to say will bear principally upon the hoods, but may be taken, in the case of the doctors, to refer to the robes also.

³ Bruce Christianson, ‘Oxford Blues’, *Burton Society Annual*, 2003, pp. 24–28 (p. 24, n. 2).

⁴ I avoid the question of whether this is the regent hood, as being irrelevant to my case.

⁵ Christianson, *ibid.*

not robes of office, but the medieval doctoral robes. When they adopted silk linings, it would appear that they chose a rose-colour silk, quite certainly the same as that used at Oxford. The sole difference was that the DD used the same robes (scarlet and rose) as the LLD and MD.⁶ These linings drifted apart in colour over the years, and by the late nineteenth century, the LLD became pink ('light cherry'), while the MD became magenta ('mid-cherry'), and at the same time, the DD took to using a shot silk lining, which had been introduced by London tailors, and was not officially approved.⁷

The Cambridge MA was more conservative than the Oxford counterpart: the difference between regent and non-regent MAs was still marked by the colour of the hood lining: white silk for regents (arguably representing the former miniver lining) and black silk for non-regents.

So far, so good: we have doctors wearing initially scarlet cloth lined with miniver, and later lined with rose silk; we have the MA wearing black silk lined with miniver, and later with varying shades of silk. The DD becomes an exception, too—though much later at Cambridge than at Oxford. We are starting to see differentiation between the two sets of robes.

The degree of Doctor of Music was a late medieval invention: 1464 at Cambridge, c. 1499 at Oxford.⁸ Initially, they were allowed to wear the same robes as the other lay doctors, but during the sixteenth century, their ambiguous status (graduates, but not members, of the Universities) was recognized by denying them the scarlet robe and hood (and convocation habit, for which they had no use), and allowing them instead to use cream brocade—but they retained the rose-coloured lining.⁹

The University of Dublin was chartered in 1591, and its robes are thus of great use in throwing light on sixteenth-century practice. Effectively, they did not bespeak a new design from the forerunners of Conan Phelan, but simply wore the robes proper to the various degrees: in other words, *there was no concept of a particular university being indicated by unique robes*.¹⁰ Thus, we find the Dublin doctors and MA wearing:

DD: scarlet lined black
LLD: scarlet lined rose (>pink)
MD: scarlet lined rose (>crimson)

⁶ 'The hood uniformly worn over the surplice being precisely the same by the DD as by the DCL viz., scarlet cloth lined rose-coloured silk.' *Notes & Queries*, 2nd ser., VI, 147 (23 Oct 1858), 337. (The correspondent held that the correct terminology for the degrees in Laws at Cambridge was DCL/BCL, as at Oxford.)

⁷ 'They [London robemakers] also substitute for the rose-colour of the higher degrees of [Cambridge] a very pretty shot silk, (light blue shot with crimson, I think) without the smallest authority.' *Notes & Queries*, 2nd ser., 129 (19 June 1858), 502.

⁸ *Oxford Companion to Music*, tenth edn, s.v. 'Degrees and Diplomas'.

⁹ It would be very interesting to learn (a) when this substitution happened, and (b) why cream brocade was chosen.

¹⁰ It has also to be borne in mind that the various distinctions in cut are a very late development. Both Cambridge and Oxford doctors wore the same pattern dress robe: and that pattern is preserved (of all places) in the Cambridge MusD. At Cambridge, the sleeves grew longer, while at Oxford the lining silk crept up the outside of the sleeve.

MusD: cream brocade lined rose
MA: black lined rose pink.¹¹

They would seem to be copying from Oxford—at least as far as the DD and MA are concerned.

Turning to the lower degrees, things are a little more complicated. All are agreed that the BA hood is black, lined with cheap fur¹²—even with lambswool,¹³ although rabbit-skin has become the norm. This hood is used at Oxford and Cambridge, and was taken on by Dublin too—and, very tellingly, was copied by Durham (1837).¹⁴

The other lower degrees (Bachelor in Law, in Medicine and in Music) are a little more tricky. As Bruce Christianson has demonstrated, at Oxford they wore the same blue silk hood lined with cheap fur—though the shade of blue has varied: to such an extent that the BMus has now finished up with a lilac hood!—and that this use of blue may reflect the standing of these bachelors in the Faculty of Arts.¹⁵ This was precisely what happened at Cambridge, where the Bachelors in Law, in Medicine, and even in Music, wore the non-regent MA hood in 1545, the BA hood in 1690, and reverted to the non-regent MA hood by 1815. Bachelors in Divinity have consistently worn the non-regent MA hood, and they still do (black lined black). Thus we seem also to have historical backing for modern systems such as Reading, where all bachelors wear the same hood! (It should be borne firmly in mind that the degrees of BD, BCL/LLB and BM/MB at Oxford and Cambridge are regarded as higher degrees, and require a BA as a preliminary qualification.)

Thus, it is seen that there is, and always has been, a system of ‘national’ robes for degrees. Further, we are now in a position to state that the robes for Lambeth degrees, far from ‘stealing’ the robes of Oxford or of Cambridge, are in fact following in this tradition, and merely use the two local variants simply because the original archetype no longer exists.

So, if we were to reconstruct the scheme for use today, how does it work? I would suggest as follows:

All Doctors:

scarlet cloth lined with rose-coloured silk.¹⁶

Masters of Arts, and other degrees of equivalent status:

black silk, lined with rose-coloured silk.¹⁷

¹¹ The change to dark blue took place in the early nineteenth century: it has not been possible thus far to find out exactly when—or why. (See Bruce Christianson’s article, ‘In the Pink’, on pp. 53–58 in this *Annual*—Ed.)

¹² All bachelors’ hoods should be fully lined with fur—as the masters’ and doctors’ were: the reduction to a 6" border – or even a 1" binding in the case of the [s1] BA Oxon—is dictated by cost, and has, eventually, become the accepted way.

¹³ ‘The BA hood of Oxford ... should be lined ... (as at Cambridge twenty or thirty years ago) with lamb’s wool.’ *Notes & Queries*, 2nd ser., 129 (19 June 1858), 502.

¹⁴ And the Lampeter BA (1865)—though its (mock-)miniver lining would seem to make it a de facto MA hood!

¹⁵ Christianson, ‘Oxford Blues’, p. 25.

¹⁶ We may ignore the two DD outfits as local variations.

Bachelors of Arts, and other degrees of equivalent status:
black silk or stuff, lined with rabbit-skin or lambswool.

The scheme might be refined by introducing a modern development, which is to use crimson/claret cloth for the body of the robes of ‘lower’ doctors—PhD, EdD, DClinPsy, etc. The doctors’ dress robe ought to follow the Cambridge MusD pattern [d3]—but I leave it to others to suggest what the various gowns and the shape of the hoods ought to be!

To finish, perhaps I may just glimpse at the reasons for university-specific robes. I have referred above to Durham which gained degree-awarding powers in 1837, and while it stuck with the traditional scheme up to a point (BA: black and fur; BD: black and black) it introduced its own ‘corporate colour’ of palatinate purple to line the MA and DD hoods.¹⁸ But it is London which is really at the root of it: they invented a scheme in 1844 which had no resemblance to the traditional one at all, and its revised version of *c.* 1862 (still in use) was no closer. In the meantime, the doctors’ rose lining at Cambridge had, as we have seen, degenerated by 1889 to pink (Laws), magenta (Medicine), maroon (Music), and was replaced by shot silk for Divinity. These then became seen as ‘faculty colours’—quite possibly under the influence of London: so much so, that when the degrees of LittD and ScD were introduced, they were allowed to choose their own faculty linings (scarlet for Letters, and shot grey for Science¹⁹). Oxford had managed to keep its lawyers and medics in the same robes, but the new degrees in Letters and in Science provoked the use of grey linings for the doctor. The bachelors were made to share the blue and fur hood of the BCL and BM—though in course of time, they drifted apart, leaving the BCL/BM hood as mid-blue, while the BLitt/BSc became light blue. They are now trying to accommodate their systems, as new degrees are added, to a faculty-colour based scheme, which is proving unworkable. Cambridge’s case was made worse by the ill-advised revision of 1934.

The faculty colour system had in fact become so unworkable—especially as there was no consensus over assigning the colours to the faculties—that it was in danger of collapse. A start had been made with the ‘grade-hood’ system at Bristol (1909) and Reading (1926) (one hood for bachelors, one for masters, etc.), and many of the 1960s foundations, and also of the 1992 creations, have gone down this road. I think it is the right one. As there is no difference in the status of a BA, a BSc, and an LLB in virtually any university, do we really need to differentiate their robes? After all, as we have seen, the different robes came about to indicate different status, not different faculties.

¹⁷ Again, the two MA hoods are local variants, and Dublin probably kept the true hood.

¹⁸ These were the original degrees it granted; other followed later.

¹⁹ Far too close to the DD lining to be really distinctive.