

Transactions of the Burgon Society

Volume 8

Article 4

1-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Fox, Anthony W. and Cook, Dee (2008) "The Mastery of Midwifery of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London," *Transactions of the Burgon Society*. Vol. 8. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1063>

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The Mastery of Midwifery of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London

by Anthony W. Fox and Dee Cook

The Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London, perhaps unexpectedly given its name, is a City livery company. In late 2007, the Society comprised, in ascending rank, Yeomen (424), Liverymen (1244), the Court of Assistants (23 plus 6 Assistants Emeritus), two Wardens and the Master (these last three being elected annually from amongst the Assistants). By its constitution, 85 per cent of the membership has to belong to the medical professions and includes a number of pharmacists, veterinary surgeons and dentists. The remainder come from various professional backgrounds and there are a few honorary Freemen.

In 1815, almost two hundred years ago, the Society of Apothecaries began awarding its Licence to practise Medicine (LSA).¹ Following the national reorganisation of the examining and licensing of doctors in 2007, the Society has retained that capability. It also currently holds examinations for eleven specialist postgraduate medical diplomas.

Apothecaries evolved from the mediaeval spicers who had joined forces with the pepperers (whose guild dates back to 1180) to form the Grocers' Company in London in 1378. The pharmaceutical and medical skills of the apothecary members set them apart from their brother merchants and eventually, in 1617, the Society was incorporated by royal charter as a livery company in its own right. It manufactured drugs at Apothecaries' Hall from 1672 until 1922, and established Chelsea Physic Garden in 1673, where plants were grown for processing in the Hall laboratories, as well as for research and educational purposes. Apothecaries' Hall (built 1668–1672) is situated in Blackfriars Lane near St Paul's Cathedral, and is built on part of the precinct of the former priory of the monastic order known as the Black Friars. It contains many mementoes of the Company's early days. Defence of the bailiwick of the professional apothecary has formed a large part of the Society's history.

¹ The postnominal LSA was changed by an Act of Parliament in 1907 to LMSSA to denote Licentiate in Medicine, Surgery and Midwifery of the Society of Apothecaries. This was to clarify the fact that, since the Medical Act of 1886, all who qualified as medical practitioners by obtaining the Society's Licence were fully proficient in all aspects of medicine, including surgery.

From early in the eighteenth century, the apothecaries were essentially the general practitioners (GPs) of their day, and they could, in addition, dispense their own medicines.

Midwifery has always been an important component of the GP's workload, and apothecaries have had a long-standing interest in this specialism as an integral part of health care.² We tend to forget the dread and dangers of childbirth during the first three or so centuries of the Society's existence, when women were offered no analgesia, and might be attended by a rather unclean lady thought by the neighbourhood to have more experience than most in delivering babies. Apothecaries who were well-trained in obstetrics were rightly seen as addressing this important medical need and, of all the British medical organisations, it was the Society of Apothecaries that was the first to demand that medical professionals had certified experience in midwifery in order to gain its Licence. Certainly, midwifery was of no interest to the well-dressed members of the Royal College of Physicians who, while providing medical advice to the rich and famous of yore, hardly ever touched their patients at all, let alone under such inelegant and messy situations as when they were in labour. Meanwhile, the surgeons only started taking an interest in midwifery in 1825 as an optional extension of their studies. And lastly, the (now Royal) College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (COG) was only established in 1929 when, as now, it offered a postgraduate Diploma in Obstetrics. But even so, holders of that Diploma were often amongst the candidates for the Mastery of Midwifery of the Society of Apothecaries (MMSA).

Within livery companies, the term 'Master' is used to denote somebody of the very highest status. The usage survives in the commonplace attribution that someone is a 'past master' of a particular skill, in other words a master of long standing, and whose abilities are unsurpassed.³ The Apothecaries intended the MMSA to be just that, and to be awarded only to those truly expert in the art.⁴ The MMSA was awarded during the years 1928 to 1963; during that whole period, just 177 candidates satisfied the examiners.⁵

² The Royal College of General Practitioners was founded in 1952, and was accommodated at Apothecaries' Hall during its first few years.

³ This livery company usage of the term 'Master' contrasts importantly with Masters of universities, who have been outranked by Doctors since the sixteenth century. In its entire history, the Society has used the term 'Master' for only one other qualification: the Mastership in Medical Jurisprudence, which outranks the Society's own Diploma in the same specialty, but has no academical dress.

⁴ P. Hunting, *A History of the Society of Apothecaries* (London: Society of Apothecaries, 1998).

⁵ Hunting's opinion, *op. cit.*, p. 239, that the MMSA was 'in the shade' of the College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists' qualifications may be questioned given the number of candidates for MMSA who already held the Diploma of the COG. Furthermore, her inference that the MMSA was discontinued because the numbers of candidates dwindled in the early 1960s is not supported by evidence from the Society's archives, nor by the fact

It is the robe for the MMSA that we are pursuing here. While most city livery companies (including the Society) have costume for their yeomen and liverymen, these indicate membership and not the achievement of an academic standard.⁶ The distinction of the MMSA qualification is emphasized by the fact that it is the only one for which the Apothecaries seem both to have designed and brought into use a specific academic dress. While the robe for the MMSA relates to a diploma of the Society and not a university degree, this does not detract from its academical nature.⁷

that relatively large numbers of candidates sat the exam in its final years. The decision to discontinue the qualification can be traced in the minutes of the Society's Examinations Committee and those of its governing body, the Court of Assistants. Between 1960 and 1963 Mr Richard Alan Brews, MS, FRCS, FRCOG, FRCP, the second most senior Liveryman of the Society, sat on the Examinations Committee. He had a London MD in Midwifery (1927) and had become a Fellow of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in 1940. His current appointments were Surgeon and Recognised Tutor to Pupil Midwives at the London Hospital, and Director of Obstetrical Studies at the London Hospital Medical College. Minuted in the Examinations Committee report, which was presented to the Court of Assistants at its meeting on 20 October 1960, was the following: 'The Mastery of Midwifery papers were very satisfactory—but as this examination was originally designed for the examination of Assistant Medical Officers, particularly in connection with ante-natal child welfare clinics, it was suggested that the Society might at some time have to re-consider the terms of the examination; with a view to stressing the neo-natal and not so much the obstetric aspects. After some discussion Mr Brews agreed to prepare a report upon the whole examination for submission at the next meeting.' It was minuted on 21 March 1961 that 'The Committee considered a short report from Mr Brews—which had been circulated—upon the Mastery of Midwifery Examination. After certain views had been expressed, it was decided to submit the report to the full court for discussion.' The Court minutes of 21 March 1961 reveal that 'After full consideration of a Report from Mr Brews it was resolved that the examination for the Mastery of Midwifery be discontinued: that a public announcement to this effect be made in March 1962, the final examination to be held in November 1963.' The report has not survived. It would seem from this end-result that Alan Brews may have allowed his affiliation with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (he had a very obvious conflict of interests here) to influence the recommendations made in his report.

⁶ P. Goff, *University of London Academic Dress* (London: University of London Press, 1999), pp. 9 and 17–21 (re: hoods, their components, and epitoges). See also A. Kerr, 'Layer upon Layer: The Evolution of Cassock, Gown, Habit and Hood as Academic Dress', *Transactions of the Burgon Society*, 5 (2005), pp. 42–58, especially p. 54.

⁷ Another gown, for Licentiates, was designed in 1901 but does not seem to have been brought into use for academical or ceremonial purposes. In a letter addressed to Percy Lodge, FRCS, dated 9 July 1901, the robemakers, Ede & Son, describe the gown thus: 'The L.S.A. Gown is made of dark blue stuff, trimmed with old gold-coloured silk and the price is 63/-.' A contemporaneous watercolour of the design exists in the Society's archives and is labelled: 'painted and mounted by Ede & Son, Robe Makers, by special appointment to the Society of Apothecaries'. The picture shows it without any hood or epitoge, and with the Licentiate holding a black mortarboard. A lone specimen, perhaps prototype, survives at Apothecaries' Hall.

The MMSA gown was devised by Dr Cecil Wall in October 1929, and his four-page typescript rationale is in the Society's archives.⁸ His intention was that the basic structure of the gown should imitate that of the livery robes of the senior members of the Leathersellers' Company (another City livery company), as depicted in their charter, dated 1604, but differing in colour. His description reads as follows:

A long loose gown open in front reaching from the shoulders where at the back the material is gathered into a yoke, down to below the knees. The gown has long hanging sleeves in the upper part of which are openings for the arms to pass through. In front and round the neck the gown is trimmed with budge [i.e. lambskin dressed with the hair outwards]⁹ 2½ inches wide. The opening for the arm in the sleeve is trimmed with budge 2 inches wide, and the lower dependent part of the sleeve has two strips of budge of the same width, one at the level of the hand and the other near the bottom. Guarding the upper part of the sleeve where it is inserted into the gown is an epaulette or wing about 1 inch wide in front and 1½ inches wide behind. This epaulette is found in all the robes of the jacobean period and apparently is reminiscent of the time when sleeves were detachable from the body of the garment ... The colour of the gown is blue and the material is a reproduction in artificial silk with a woollen back of antique satin which was much used in the Jacobean period, so much so that satin became a generic term for people of fashion ... The ribbon used for binding is sarcenet, a thin silk material originally of oriental (Saracenic) origin which has been in use in England since the thirteenth century.

Dr Wall goes on to specify a cap and hood for the MMSA. The former was of 'city flat cap' design, again commonplace amongst London liverymen of the early seventeenth century. This cap had a semi-stiff rim, a soft circular crown of 13" diameter tied round with a gold cord, and was to be of blue velvet, matching the gown; in its design, this resembles the Tudor bonnet that is prescribed for higher doctorates of the University of London.¹⁰

⁸ C. Wall, 'Mastery of Midwifery' (1929). Another Wall typescript in the Apothecaries' Archives collates extracts from some of the Society's manuscripts (chiefly the Court minute books) which document and testify to its historical interest in midwifery. Dr Wall was subsequently Master of the Society (1932/3).

⁹ Budge was a common facing on the robes of City livery companies of this period and is consistent with the Jacobean theme (see footnote 8).

¹⁰ P.Goff, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

Dr Wall described the MMSA hood as follows:

The hood consists of a padded roundlet 5 inches in diameter to the lower edge of which is gathered a short curtain 6 inches deep by 36 inches wide, and to the upper edge is joined a tippet or 'liripipe' 32 inches long and 1½ inches wide. The roundlet is fastened to the back of the right shoulder so that the curtain falls down the back and the tippet passes over the shoulder to be fastened in front just outside the budge. The hood is made of velvet and in colour is half blue and half cream ...

The hood as worn by liverymen was not a descendant of the cucullus or monk's cowl as are the university hoods but appears to be a 'vestigial remain' of the turban cap of the 14th century. The turban is a headdress made by winding a scarf or strip of cloth round the head, one end being often left loose so that it may form a skirt or pugaree to shield the nape of the neck. From this was evolved the 14th century headdress which consisted of a close fitting cap encircled by a roll of cloth which formed the brim: above this was sewn a broad piece of cloth frequently jagged at the edges which was worn sometimes as a skirt falling behind, sometimes forward, and sometimes to one side. These caps appear to have been of Italian origin (cf. Fairholt's *Costume*—Dillon's 4th edition, Vol. II, p. 226 & Vol. I, pp. 334 & 177). The tippet was added as a 'hat guard' to secure the cap when it was thrown off and usually passed across the right shoulder to be fastened across the breast. The cap was sometimes termed a 'casting 'hood' [*sic*]' and the tippet a 'liripipe'. The cap fell into disuse but its vestigial remains may be found in the hood worn by liverymen of the Jacobean period; this hood consisting of a roundlet much too small to fit the head, a jagged skirt or curtain and a tippet. These hoods were often bicoloured, those depicted in the Charter of the Leathersellers were half red and half black.



Fig. 1. Illustrations in the text of Fairholt's *Costume* referred to by Dr Cecil Wall
(The authors are grateful to Dr Alex Kerr for contributing this figure)

Thus did Dr Wall conceive, as far as hoods are concerned, the infidel London Leathersellers versus the Christian English universities!

This vestigial hood is more accurately called an epitoge. While Dr Wall's rationale demonstrates considerable interest in its evolution, more modern research finds that the epitoge indeed has the same ancestors as the hoods of the English universities. The thrown-over-the-shoulder 'casting' hood is now thought to be a transitional form known as a *chaperon*.¹¹

The lambskin wool was intended to be yellowish or cream, and so the overall colour scheme of this robe matches the colours of the Society's livery dress. The Leathersellers, in contrast, have red and black epitoges, with black gowns carrying yellow, orange, or brown budge facings and stripes. In 1929, Dr. Wall thought that the cost of materials for an MMSA gown would be £2. 6s. 8½d.¹² This comprised four yards of antique satin with an artificial silk face at 7s. 11d. per yard, two lambskins for 11s. 6d., five yards of Sarsenet riband at 2½d. per yard, and half-a-crown's worth of sundries such as sewing silk, wadding, tape, and linen for the yoke. The tailor's labour was not included in this estimate, and the cost of the velvet cap and 'hood' was reckoned at probably less than an additional £2. 0s. 0d. from a good milliner.

Although it has never been official policy, the Society has a happy tradition of maintaining a wardrobe at Apothecaries' Hall; its members and diplomats usually do not need to bring their own gowns for formal occasions. In spite of the fact that it is now almost forty-five years since the MMSA was last awarded, there remain three surviving specimens of the MMSA gown at the Hall.¹³

These three MMSA robes have been made at different times and places, and are of varying quality. However, they all approximate closely to Dr Wall's seminal design, even though his final sketch (dated 16 November 1929) is annotated 'Rough idea' in pencil (see Fig. 2). We shall refer to them as Specimens A, B, and C. In all three the 'budge' is white, not yellow or cream, although Dr Wall's dimensions for it have been followed. No headgear has survived.

¹¹ See footnote 6.

¹² Except for the fact that the tailor's labour is not estimated, the sum of £2.33 in today's decimalised currency for the materials in an MMSA robe compares with the total cost, say, of a new robe for a London MD of about £400 + VAT; with bonnet and hood the total is about £640 + VAT.

¹³ Two were known at the start of this project. The third (Specimen C) was found in a bundle at the bottom of the bag of one of the others by Dr Paul Simmons, a Court Assistant. A separated epitoge that seems to match Specimen C was recently found by the Archivist in a dark corner of Apothecaries' Hall, after a search prompted by this project. Specimens A and B have recently undergone cleaning and conservation by a specialist textile conservator. We are grateful to Dr Simmons for modelling the gowns shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4.



Fig. 2. Dr. Cecil Wall's design of 1929.
Note the faint, handwritten text in pencil 'Rough idea'

Specimen A appears to be the oldest of the three (Fig. 3). This is a well-made, unlined robe, and the 'budge' appears genuine. Its blue cloth has faded unevenly and, had it been silk, then its appearance from a distance might have been described as watered. It is a much paler shade of blue than the other two specimens, and is almost turquoise. The epitoge is halved, with white medially and a matching blue laterally. Specimen A has an early-looking Ede & Ravenscroft label, black embroidery on white, which features the emblems of two Royal Warrants, namely those of the King and of the Prince of Wales. This dates it to the reign of George V, and consequently, Specimen A almost certainly dates from the very beginnings of the MMSA qualification. It appears to have been last worn, as denoting academic distinction, at a British Medical Association (BMA) meeting at which academic dress was required more than twenty-five years ago by liveryman Dr Frank Collings, MBBS, MMSA, MRCP, DCH, when accompanying Sir John Peel (Past President of the BMA). At that function, Dr Collings received a message from Prince Charles (the then President of the BMA), enquiring as to its provenance.¹⁴

¹⁴ Letter from Dr Frank Collings to the Clerk of the Society of Apothecaries (29 August 2007); the Princess Royal expresses a similar curiosity to her brother in her preface to P. Goff, *op. cit.*, p. 5.



Fig. 3. Specimen A



Fig. 4. Specimen B



Fig. 5. Specimen C



Fig. 6. The epitoge on Specimen A



Fig. 7. A comparison of the colours and cloths of (left to right) Specimens A, B, and C

Specimen B has an epitoge as before, but the material of the robe is blue grosgrain (i.e. blue art silk). It, too, is well-made, heavy, partly-lined, has an overall ‘wrinkle-free’ appearance, and the ‘budge’ would seem to be genuine (Fig. 4). This specimen carries a more modern Ede & Ravenscroft label, gold on black, with the single emblem of the Royal warrant of Queen Elizabeth II. It was made in 1982 at the behest of Dr Collings, who was then a member of the Court of Assistants, specifically for the presentation by the Master of the Society of an MMSA *Honoris Causa* to Professor Ian Donald at Apothecaries’ Hall. Afterwards, this gown was given on permanent loan to the Society by Dr Collings.¹⁵

Specimen C appears more modern still, and is the lightest of the three, being made wholly of some type of artificial silk (Fig. 5). It is unlined and unlabelled. Its ‘budge’ is quite unconvincing, being described by one well-respected commentator as looking like strips torn off a fluffy nylon bathroom mat.¹⁶ This specimen has only a telltale piece of white cotton in the seam of its right shoulder, but a matching, amputated epitoge has recently been found at the Hall. The shade of blue seems very similar to that of Specimen B, although the material is much more reflective. No living memory of the use of Specimens B and C exists now amongst the staff of Apothecaries’ Hall. However, there are still four liverymen in the Society’s List of Members who hold the MMSA.

In the pursuit to define what exactly is academical dress, contrasts with livery dress can be instructive. One criterion for academical dress, if not exclusively, is that it is worn at formal occasions only by those who have completed a course of study to the satisfaction of some examiners.¹⁷ The MMSA robe is the only one that fulfils this criterion at the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London,¹⁸ and we know of no other among any of the other 106 livery companies in the City of London.¹⁹ Moreover, its epitoge (Fig. 6) distinguishes the MMSA robe from any

¹⁵ See footnote 14.

¹⁶ Fr Philip Goff, personal communication at Apothecaries’ Hall (14 May 2007); see also footnote 6.

¹⁷ Within universities, officials’ robes and undergraduate dress for those aspiring to this criterion (see W. Gibson, ‘The Regulation of Undergraduate Academic Dress at Oxford and Cambridge, 1660–1832’, *Burgon Society Annual*, 2004, pp. 26–41) are obvious counter-examples of the non-exclusive criterion. Lambeth degrees, it can be argued, fulfil the criterion by reason of a course of study (professional experience) and examination by the Archbishop or his designates, if in an unorthodox yet well-earned manner; see also N. Cox, ‘Lambeth Degree Academical Dress’, *Transactions of the Burgon Society*, 2005, pp. 64–75.

¹⁸ See footnote 7.

¹⁹ Liverymen of the Worshipful Company of Hackney Carriage Drivers, however, must have passed ‘the knowledge’. Consequently, when the livery dress of this modern London guild becomes defined, this will create another complexity, being indicative of *both* academical and livery status.

university academical dress in use in England.²⁰ One of the authors is working on a larger project to define exactly what academic dress *is*, using objective criteria. Any future formulation must be able to accommodate this sort of exceptional case which has clear and consistent practice over a prolonged period of time, yet is without any written regulation or university degree.

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Dee Cook, BA(Hons), MA, DARM, RMSA, is the Archivist of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London; she is also a Freeman of the City of London and a member of the Guild of Freemen of the City of London.

²⁰ However, we are grateful to Dr Nicholas Groves, who has pointed that Brunel University used an epitoge for its sub-degree awards until 1998, and Edinburgh and Aberdeen use one for their Licentiates in Theology.