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The Origins of the University of Wales Robes

by *William Gibson and Nicholas Groves*

For those of us who regard the range of University of Wales shot silks as among the most beautiful and dignified of silks that adorn academic robes, the fact that details of their origins are unknown has been a source of irritation. The University of Wales Registry has often denied any knowledge of the origins of the University's robes, and the University of Wales archives in the National Library of Wales contain no papers relating to the design of the robes. However, the recent development of the British Library's Nineteenth Century Newspapers digital project, available through the Gale Group, has at last revealed something of the origins of the robes.¹

The colleges of the University of Wales preceded the foundation of the University itself. In 1872 University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, in 1883 Cardiff (at that time the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire) and in 1884 University College of North Wales, Bangor were founded as university colleges, but they prepared external candidates for degrees of the University of London. In 1893, Queen Victoria granted a charter to the University of Wales to examine and award degrees to those who had studied at the colleges, and each became a constituent institution of the new University. The 1893 Charter established all the structures of the University: Visitor, Chancellor, Court, Vice-Chancellor, Senate Guild of Graduates and degrees. The Charter forbade the constituent colleges from teaching theology, which was the preserve of the Welsh theological colleges, and which, as the University's faculty of theology, could present candidates for the graduate degree of BD.² Similarly the University was prevented from awarding degrees in medicine and surgery—probably because of the need to meet the requirements of the various medical regulatory statutes passed

¹ Details of this digital service is available at <<http://www.bl.uk/collections/wider/eresources/colindale2.html>>.

² The theological colleges were: the Theological College, Aberystwyth; the Theological College, Bala; the Baptist and Congregational Joint School of Theological Studies, Bangor; the Memorial College, Brecon; the Baptist College, Cardiff; the Presbyterian College, Carmarthen and St David's College, Lampeter. Though Lampeter was listed as a theological college by the University of Wales, it was not, of course, such a college, possessing its own degree of BD. Additionally Mansfield College, Oxford, was recognized as having the status of a theological college by the University of Wales.

earlier in Victoria's reign. The final article of the Charter on degrees read 'the Court may authorize academic costumes for members of the University.'

Accordingly, on 26 January 1895 the *Liverpool Mercury* reported that, at the University of Wales Court meeting at Shrewsbury, 'it was decided that the established faculties of the University shall for the present be the faculty of arts or letters, the faculty of science, the faculty of music, the faculty of laws and the faculty of theology or divinity; the initial degree in each faculty to be of a bachelor.' The faculty of theology was to be a graduate school, with the BD as a second undergraduate degree. Emrys Evans remarked that '... the framers of the charter [i.e., the 1893 Charter], in deference to popular opinion, and without having received any instructions from the conference,³ recommended the immediate establishment of a Faculty of Theology. Its degrees should require a period of study in an 'Associated' theological college to have been preceded by a degree in arts or in some other secular faculty in one of the constituent colleges of the university or in some other approved British University.'⁴

In May 1895 the Court established an executive committee with the responsibility for proposing academic robes for the University. The committee reported back to the Court in October 1895. The recommendations were reported slightly differently in a number of newspapers, but these various accounts provide a range of details about the proposals. The *Daily News*, on 5 October 1895, described the Court meeting as follows:

After discussion on academic costume, it was agreed on a division, to adopt the Cambridge rather than the Oxford gown for Bachelors of the Welsh University, but for masters a gown similar to that of either Oxford or Cambridge is to [be] used, with a slight alteration in the sleeves. The ordinary colours having been adopted by established Universities to distinguish the different faculties, it was recommended that hoods of Mazarin blue, shot with various hues should be adopted to distinguish the wearers of Welsh degrees, but the adoption recommended was postponed.

The *North Wales Chronicle*, on 12 October 1895, reported the proposal in a little more detail. It included the robe for the Vice-Chancellor: 'a scarlet doctoral robe, faced with silk, the sleeves and hood lined with the same'. As far as hoods were concerned, the report described black silk hoods for bachelors and masters, bordered and lined respectively with 'silk of the colours proper to their respective faculties'. Bachelors' hoods were to be Oxford shape, masters' were to be Cambridge.⁵ Doctors' hoods would be scarlet with a lining of faculty silk. It went on:

³ Presumably indicating that the Court established a working group or committee to work on this.

⁴ Emrys Evans, *The University of Wales: A Historical Sketch* (Cardiff, 1953), p. 49.

⁵ The eventual shape of the masters' hoods was an adaptation of the Cambridge shape. Evidence from Ede & Ravenscroft's work book, which was updated between 1925 and

The committee further recommended that the colours proper to their respective faculties be: faculty of arts Mazarin blue shot with 'old gold', faculty of theology Mazarin blue shot with red, and faculty of music pearl colour (shot silk of three hues).⁶ Patterns of the different combinations were submitted to the Court, and a number of alterations were suggested, one member proposed, amid laughter, that the matter should be remitted to a committee of ladies.

The *Liverpool Mercury*, which took a closer interest in the development of the University than some Welsh papers, reported on 25 October 1895 with rather different details of the meeting. It noted the division to adopt the Cambridge gown for bachelors. But on hood silk it went on:

The committee recommended that the Welsh University gowns [*sic*] should be distinguished by hoods of shot silk, each faculty having a different colour, but the final decision of the distinguishing colours was postponed. The Deputy Chancellor explained that the ordinary colours had been already adopted by British universities, and that Lady Verney had suggested shot silk for the Welsh faculties, the colour ground in arts, sciences and theology being Mazarin blue, in music pearl colour.

There are a number of features in these accounts which are noteworthy. Firstly the design of bachelors' gowns based on Cambridge rather than Oxford was a distinct choice by the committee and, on the basis that there was a division, or vote, on the matter, clearly a contentious point for the Court. But more significant is the evidence of the hood silk. From the *Liverpool Mercury* it seems as if the executive committee was perplexed by the fact that most 'ordinary colours had been already adopted by British universities.' Lady Verney (1844–1930) was the wife of Sir Edmund Verney Bt, and had long been a promoter of university education. In Wales her activities extended to higher education in connection with the University College of North Wales at Bangor; she was an original member of the Court of governors, and a memorial scholarship in her name was set up shortly after her death. She was a member of the University of Wales Court (afterwards the Council) from 1894 to 1922, and she continued thereafter to represent that body on the Court of the National Library of Wales and on the Bangor Council. In 1919 she

1937, suggests that the shape may have been changed between these two dates. This indicates the Wales hoods had shapes as: bachelors—current shape [s5]; masters—with rounded cape [f3]—then later (n.d.) altered to square [f1]; doctors—with square cape [f1]. This source also indicates that music hoods were all blue, lined 'peacock shot'—which sounds like blue shot green, though this seems to be an error if pearl was assigned from the start. (It has BMus as blue and bordered 'peacock shot'; MMus as blue and lined 'peacock shot'; DMus as MMus, then altered to scarlet lined 'peacock shot'. Having the DMus the same as the MMus is paralleled by London use—as is giving the music faculty blue hoods.)

⁶ The pearl silk is orange and yellow warp, with pale blue woof. The overall effect is pinky-pearl, with highlights of green and rose.

was appointed Junior Deputy Chancellor of the University, and received the honorary degree of LLD.⁷ The report that the suggestion to use shot silk was her idea at last locates the source of the design.

The *Daily News*'s reference to Mazarin blue shot with different hues seems to be confirmed by the *Liverpool Mercury*'s reference to a standard 'ground' of Mazarin blue for the three faculties. The most extraordinary of the three, however, is the reference in the *North Wales Chronicle* to arts faculty silk as 'Mazarin blue shot with "old gold"' since the final selection was Mazarin blue shot with green. Moreover, the final science silk was yellow shot with black to make a bronze colour.⁸ It is clear that the decision to postpone the decision on the silks resulted in a major re-think of the original proposals. Only theology silk remained unchanged as Mazarin blue shot with red. The other issue not resolved is the shape of the bachelors' hood, which was not eventually what is now known as the Oxford shape, but a variation of it. It may be that the Wales shape was the Oxford simple shape used in the 1890s.⁹

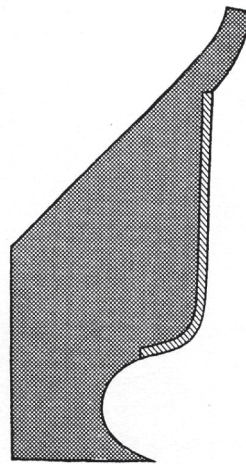


Fig. 1. Wales bachelors' hood

⁷ H. E. D. Blakiston, 'Verney, Margaret Maria, Lady Verney (1844–1930)', rev. H. J. Spencer, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004); online edition, October 2006.

⁸ For more on the use of gold in academical dress, see B. Christianson, 'Lined with Gold', *Transactions of the Burgon Society*, 5 (2005), p. 80.

⁹ In 2000 the former Librarian of the University of Wales, Lampeter, George Lilley, wore a black hood of Wales shape, lined with a pinky-red. It was an Oxford MA which had belonged to the father of a friend, who had graduated about 1890. So it may be that Wales had adopted what was the Oxford simple of the 1890s—as Edinburgh seems to have adopted the Oxford simple of the 1870s.

There is no explanation for the change of colours for the faculties of arts and sciences. One simple possibility may be the widespread fashion for Mazarin blue shot with green. The popularity of this coloured silk is well documented in the newspapers of the time. On 4 March 1891, 18 March 1893 and 16 October 1899 the *Glasgow Herald* reported the fashion for Mazarin blue shot with green silk. In the *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* on 8 October 1892 the silk was described as strikingly beautiful, ‘like a bird’s wing’. Perhaps the popularity of this colour influenced its selection. The source of the science yellow shot with black silk remains a mystery, however.

In 1904 the *Boy’s Own Paper* printed a hopelessly confused chart, which may reflect that the designs of the University of Wales robes had been fairly recent. The BA, BSc, and BD hoods are shown as simple, black, and bound on the cowl (about 1” inside and out). The silk shown for both the BA and BD was blue shot green; for the BSc plain yellow; the ‘BacMus’ is sky blue fully lined white (presumably meant for pearl).¹⁰ The MA is also shown simple, black lined green. There are two doctors’ hoods, but shown only in schematic form: DSc: black, lined yellow shot black; DLitt: black, lined red shot blue.¹¹

The University of Wales did not finalize its academic dress in October 1895, though there are no subsequent reports on the new proposals. For some time additions and amendments were made to the scheme. On 7 November 1896 the *Liverpool Mercury* reported that the University of Wales Court was debating the status of ‘scholars of the University’ and proposed that they should hold scholarships of various values and have the ‘privilege and distinction’ of ‘a special academic costume.’¹² And in April 1897 the University adopted a gown for the President of each constituent college. The *Western Mail* on 24 April reported the design as follows:

A gown of black corded silk, shaped like a chancellor’s gown and trimmed with gold similar to a chancellor’s gown but to a less [*sic*] extent and without a train.

There also remained a number of issues which were only resolved in the following century. The first of these was the doctoral gown and hood. The 1895 regulations specified that doctoral robes were to be scarlet. However from the early years of the century the arts doctorate was described as either a PhD or a DLitt, the latter not becoming a higher doctoral degree until after 1923, when a PhD could be awarded in any subject. At this time the present PhD gown was introduced and was designed in crimson, distinguishing it from the gowns of higher doctors.

¹⁰ This is almost certainly a confusion with the London BMus convocation degree hood.

¹¹ ‘University Hoods’, *Boy’s Own Paper*, 26, number 25 (19 March 1904), pp. 413–14.

¹² This scholar’s distinguishing gown was never established.

The second issue was the hoods for Bachelors and Masters of Music. In 1895 they were described as black silk with binding or lining in pearl silk, made up of three hues. As late as 1923 the MMus was still described in the regulations published in the *University Calendar* as black rather than blue silk. However, at some point, again probably in the 1920s, the outer silk for both hoods changed to dark blue, to further distinguish the faculty of music hoods from other faculties.

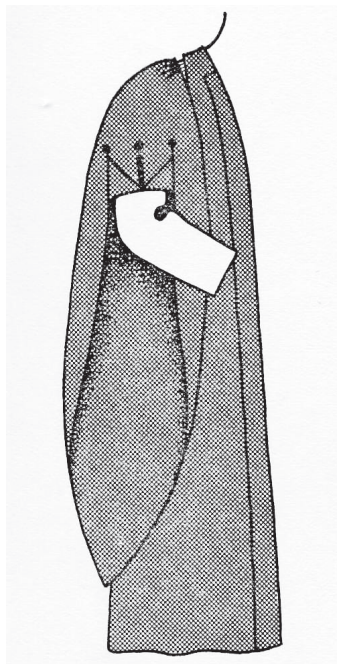


Fig. 2. Wales bachelors' gown

Thirdly there is the sleeve of the bachelors' gown. The masters' gown, according to the *Daily News* had 'slight alteration in the sleeves' but so did the bachelors'. On the Wales bachelors' gown there is a cut along the upper surface of the sleeve allowing the cloth to be turned back, and the two points thus created and the central seam are secured with three buttons. It may be that this was a design to create a forearm sleeve ending which echoed the three plumes of the Prince of Wales's feathers. The Northam work book described the sleeve thus:

Ordinary P[lain] S[leeve] hvg the Forearm split 4¼" and the 2 sides thrown back 3" each side from the seam. A piece of Prussian bdg,¹³ 3" long is laid on the seam & 3 buttons sewn on, that is one on each point.

The following measurements were taken from a gown bought at Ede's for a Lady. L= 56". H[ind]arm 40". F'arm 18" & then split up the 4¼".¹⁴

The newspapers also reported something of the earliest degree-awarding ceremony in the University of Wales. On 28 October 1898 the *Western Mail* described the degree congregations held in the Pier Pavilion at Aberystwyth.¹⁵ The report referred to the Senate and Court in 'gaily coloured robes' and the University

¹³ binding.

¹⁴ Northam MS workbook in the possession of the Revd P. Goff. The workbook, begun c.1859, includes the BA (Wales) design inserted c.1895. From the reference to Ede's, it clear that Northam obtained a gown to see how their competitor made them. This source also indicates that Aberystwyth had its own undergraduate gown—the Oxford scholar, but the sleeves gathered (like London BA) with green cords and buttons.

¹⁵ Originally the University held only one degree ceremony each year, which went to each of the three Colleges in turn.

of Wales graduates in ‘more sober lined academic gowns.’ The congregation proceeded as follows:

After entering the congregation, each candidate for a degree was individually presented by the principal of his college with a Latin formula to the Vice-Chancellor of the University, who was seated on the right of the chair. The Vice-Chancellor then took the candidate’s right hand in his own, and pronounced the Latin formula for admission to a degree. The candidate thus admitted, having bowed to the Vice-Chancellor, gave place to the next candidate in the division, remaining in the congregation until all the candidates in the same division had been admitted. When all the candidates in each division had been admitted they advanced to the chair, and received the diploma of their degrees from the presiding Deputy Chancellor,¹⁶ who pronounced a form of allocution after delivering them. After the allocution from the chair the candidates bowed to the chair and to the Warden of the Guild of Graduates,¹⁷ who was seated to the left of the chair.

By 22 November 1900, when there was another degree congregation, the *Western Mail* called the event ‘a festival of hoods’.

It seems unlikely that much further information will be uncovered to fill in the gaps of exactly what happened in the weeks after the University Court meeting in October 1895. Clearly Mazarin blue shot with old gold was abandoned for the silk of the faculty of arts and letters, as was the common theme of Mazarin blue as the ground for all faculty silks. The familiar bronze of yellow shot with black was also adopted for science. What is clear, however, is that we owe the suggestion of shot silk for the University’s faculty colours to Lady Verney.

The two figures in this article are taken from George Shaw’s *Academical Dress of British Universities* (1966).

¹⁶ Lord Kenyon held the post of Deputy Chancellor.

¹⁷ Graduates of the University of Wales are admitted to the Guild of Graduates of the University, a formal alumni society.