

1-1-2003

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Recommended Citation

Christianson, Bruce (2003) "Oxford Blues: The Search for the Origins of the Lay Bachelors' Hood," *Transactions of the Burgon Society*. Vol. 3. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1016>

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Oxford Blues: The Search for the Origins of the Lay Bachelors' Hood

by Bruce Christianson

By way of introduction to his discussion of the system of academic dress at the University of Oxford, Franklyn writes:

At the present day, although Oxford, Southampton, and Hull undoubtedly possess the most beautiful, dignified and stately academical dress in the world, there is nothing approaching a regular system, and the Oxford academical dress is the most illogical and unsystematic of all universities.¹

One particular anomaly of the Oxford system, alluded to several times by Franklyn, is the use of blue silk hoods lined with fur for bachelors' degrees in Civil Law and in Medicine (BCL and BM). How did two such different degrees come to be given the same hood? Why blue, which features nowhere in the corresponding doctors' hoods? And why is the blue on the outside, instead of inside where a silk lining belongs? In this short paper, we examine these three questions and propose some hypotheses for further investigation.

Silk was originally introduced into academic hoods as a summer alternative to lining with expensive furs such as miniver. Expensive fur was, in turn, the mark of a higher degree, typically that of MA or above.

Bachelors in Divinity and in Canon Law were first allowed black silk linings in their hoods at Oxford in 1426 as a reflection of their relatively high status, but other Oxford bachelors (including the BCL and the BM) were still forbidden silk in 1432, and were still explicitly required in 1490 to line their hoods throughout with cheap fur.²

¹ Franklyn, p. 163. A footnote continues: 'That of Southampton and Hull, designed throughout by the writer, is perfectly logical and systematic.'

Franklyn's 1941 tract 'The University of Oxford: a Brief Statement on the Present State of Academical Dress, a Summary of the Principal Anomalies, Contradictions and Errors at Present Existing, and Some Recommendations for Reform, and the Establishment of Faculty Colours' [my italics] is reprinted in his *Academical Dress*, pp. 166–71.

² Hargreaves-Mawdsley p. 85. Masters of Arts and doctors in the higher faculties (including Divinity) were first allowed silk linings at Oxford in 1432.

At Oxford, the Doctors of Divinity adopted the same black silk lining as the BD, while Doctors of Civil Law and of Medicine appear initially to have adopted the same red silk as the regents in the Faculty of Arts. However the MAs retained their bright red lining, while that used by the lay doctors faded to pink, certainly by the time of Laud (1636), but probably well before then. The restoration of DCL and DM to crimson is recent (nineteenth century).

At Cambridge, by contrast, Bachelors of Divinity were not allowed to line their hoods with silk until 1494, and doctors in any faculty not until 1560.

The Cambridge Bachelors of Divinity initially adopted the same black silk lining as their Oxford counterparts, and by 1560 the non-regent MAs had assimilated their hood to that of the BD (Hargreaves-Mawdsley p. 122). The two have worn the same hood as one another ever since, but by 1614 this hood was of black cloth only, with no silk lining at all. The black silk lining does not reappear at Cambridge until the eighteenth century.

It is not quite clear when the regent MA at Cambridge began wearing the white silk lining as an alternative to miniver, but the practice was certainly established by the time of the royal visit in 1564

The BCL, but not the BM, appears to be permitted silk in 1533 by Henry VIII's Statute for the Reformation of Excesses in Apparel.³ In practice, however, and certainly following the Elizabethan abolition of the degrees in Canon Law, the Bachelors of Civil Law, of Medicine, and of Music all appear to have worn the same hood, although the shade of blue has varied over time.

By 1792, Music had gone its own way and the BMus wore a hood of 'powder blue', while that for the BCL and the BM was 'lavender blue'.⁴ However, there is no evidence of any difference between the BCL and the BM prior to 1815, at which point the BCL was 'dark blue' and the BM 'lilac'.⁵

When the new research degrees of BLitt and BSc were introduced in 1895 they were also given blue silk hoods trimmed with fur.

The prevailing view (following Franklyn) is that the blue silk was originally the mark of the Faculty of Law, but that the hood of blue silk lined with cheap fur, and worn by the BCL who held no MA, was subsequently adopted by those in the same position who held the degree of BM or of BMus. In this way, blue at Oxford became the mark of a bachelor's degree in a faculty other than Arts or Divinity, rather than remaining distinctive of the Faculty of Law, or, as Buxton and Gibson put it (p. 38), 'ceased to be faculty colours and became associated with rank.'

But why blue? On the Continent, the faculty colour associated with Law was, almost universally, some shade of red.⁶ The one exception of note is Italy, where blue was indeed the colour generally associated with Law, and still is.

There was a great deal of movement between universities in the Middle Ages, and Bologna was the greatest law school in Europe. The summer substitution of silk for expensive fur had already begun by 1410 at Bologna⁷ and it is intriguing to speculate

(Cooper, II, 195). Following 1560 the Cambridge doctors, including the Doctors of Divinity, seem all to have settled upon the same pink silk hood lining used by the lay doctors in Oxford. The use of pink by all doctors, irrespective of faculty, survived at Cambridge until the modern system was created in 1889 (see n. 11 below).

³ It is not clear whether this represented a change from the *status quo ante* or silk had been previously allowed to the BCL. Certainly the statutes of All Souls College in 1438 already lump Bachelors of Canon or Civil Law, but not of Medicine, with Masters of Arts for this purpose. The purport of Henry's Act also depends upon the precise meaning attributed to the term 'tippet' in this context. Certainly civil lawyers were allowed to plead in the ecclesiastical courts from about this time.

⁴ These are Hargreaves-Mawdsley's observations (pp. 86 and 87) based upon an examination of the 1792 watercolours by Roberts. Despite the 1490 injunction, the fur lining had by this time become a mere edging.

Wells (p. 78), writing in 1906, draws no distinction between BCL, BM and BMus, bracketing all three together as simply 'blue'.

It is a general observation that the shade of coloured silk used in a particular type of academic hood has a tendency gradually to become lighter and brighter over the generations, unless abruptly regulated by statute.

⁵ Hargreaves-Mawdsley (p. 87), citing Combe and Uwins. Buxton and Gibson (p. 40) in 1935 describe BMus as 'violet', BCL and BM as identical and 'light blue', and BLitt and BSc as identical and 'should be, not light blue, but grey blue'. However, their use of the word 'should' is revealing of actual practice.

When the DLitt and DSc were introduced in 1900 the silk lining used (French grey of not 'too dark a hue') was different from that used for the BLitt and BSc, paralleling the case for Civil Law and Medicine.

⁶ This association of red with Law obtains remarkably widely in Western Europe; throughout Spain, Portugal, France, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and as far east as Prague.

Indeed, examination of Volume II of Smith shows that red remains the colour of Law today, virtually throughout continental Europe, and even in Norway.

⁷ Hargreaves-Mawdsley (p. 16). Interestingly, an Oxford Doctor of Civil Law in about 1408 is depicted wearing a mid-blue shoulder-piece lined with white fur (Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 72, n. 3, referring to Digby 'De Regimine Principum'). Cf. n. 14 below.

that the use of blue as the colour of Civil Law at Oxford may have resulted from a Bolognan influence. The hypothesis that blue denoted Law at Oxford as a result of a tradition imported from Bologna certainly merits further investigation. However, on the Continent the colour blue was most often associated with study in Philosophy.⁸ Philosophy was in effect the postgraduate division of the Faculty of Arts,⁹ going beyond the basic Arts syllabus required of all undergraduates before they were permitted to commence study in Law or Medicine¹⁰

An alternative hypothesis is therefore that the blue silk originally denoted the wearer's status, not in the Faculty of Law, but in the Faculty of Arts. The notion that bachelors in other faculties should wear a hood denoting their standing in the Faculty of Arts is not so far-fetched as it may seem. Indeed exactly this practice was consistently followed by the University of Cambridge throughout much of its history, right up until the ill-starred reforms of academic dress in the 1930s.¹¹ In Oxford, by 1666 any undergraduate of four years' standing could enter his name in the law-book and become a 'civilian', entitled to wear the blue silk hood of the BCL but without the fur trim.¹²

Our second hypothesis thus amounts to suggesting that the Faculty of Law at Oxford, innately conservative, simply preserved an old practice of the Faculty of Arts which subsequently passed out of use there and became forgotten.

⁸ Particularly in Spain, Portugal, and the mediaeval German-speaking areas, although the Philosophy colour is nearer blue-purple in some parts of what is now Germany (cf. Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 12). In Italy, Letters and Philosophy are now white or pink, depending on the region. At Bologna they are white.

⁹ Before the German reforms of the eighteenth century, the degree of Doctor of Philosophy on the Continent was often awarded jointly with the degree of Master of Arts, and in Germany eventually replaced it altogether. At Oxford and Cambridge, the MA has prevailed—at least so far—as the primary degree.

¹⁰ In the case of Divinity, several years' study of Philosophy was normally required in addition to the basic Arts syllabus before the study of Theology could even begin. Some perpetual graduate students, such as William of Ockham—known as the 'venerable inceptor'—never made it as far as the Theology Faculty at all.

¹¹ Although the precise status of bachelors in higher faculties relative to the Arts Faculty at Cambridge, and hence the hood they wore, did seem to fluctuate in line with the standing in Arts required for initial admission to the faculty concerned.

For example, the MusB wore the non-regent MA hood at Cambridge in 1545. Bachelors in Law, Medicine and Music at Cambridge all wore the non-regent hood in 1654 at the time of the royal visit (Baker, n. 24), but were wearing the BA hood in the time of Loggan (1690), the non-regent MA hood again by 1815 (Combe and Uwins, pp. 312–13), and so on.

Bachelors in Divinity at Cambridge have worn the non-regent MA hood continually since the sixteenth century, and still do (see n. 2).

Systematic faculty colours were first adopted at Cambridge in 1889, for the silk linings of hoods for doctors' degrees. Prior to that, the shade of the lining revealed more about a doctor's tailor than about his faculty. The 1889 revolution at Cambridge (described in Baker *his*, pp. 38–39) may have been partly influenced by prior developments at the University of London, which had settled on what is more or less the present system of faculty-coloured silk linings there by 1860.

Apart from the strange case of the MusB, the faculty colours used by Doctors were not extended to the hoods of lower degrees at Cambridge until the reforms of the 1930s. The history of this recent process is set out in some detail in Franklyn, pp. 177–96.

In between the first (1932) and second (1933) reports of the Council of the Senate, the faculty-coloured silk proposed for bachelors' degrees moved from being an inside lining (with a fur edging) to forming the outer body, which is where it is now. This was apparently done so as to bring the other bachelors' hoods into line with the aberrant Cambridge MusB hood, which was described without apparent irony by the Council in their second report as 'perhaps the most beautiful of all academic decorations' (Franklyn, p. 183). All is not lost, however: the relatively recent degree of BEd resolutely follows the old system of interior silk lining, with the wrong faculty colour.

¹² I am indebted to Nicholas Groves for pointing out the possibility of a connection between the use of blue to denote the secular study of Philosophy and the origin of the blue silk scarf used by Anglican lay readers. See also his 'Who may wear the "Literate's Hood"?'.

Was the blue silk of the BCL and BM originally a lining? We know that at the time of Loggan (1675) the Oxford MA wore his hood inside out, so that only the lining showed, and it would appear that the BCL and BM did so as well. The MAs have now turned their hoods the right way out again,¹³ but perhaps the BCL and BM have not. Was the blue silk originally an alternative lining to the cheap fur enjoined by statute in 1490? Of course, we cannot be sure. But it is interesting to note that in that same year of 1490, John Doby, bursar of the Arts Faculty of Glasgow University, was instructed to purchase six hoods of blue (blodius) cloth ‘sufficiently furred’ for the use of the regent Masters of Arts and of the students taking this degree at Glasgow.¹⁴ The academic dress of Glasgow was itself modelled upon that of Bologna at the time of Glasgow’s foundation in 1451.¹⁵ So by a fascinating conjunction of our first two hypotheses, the use of blue cloth for the MA hood at Glasgow thus appears to reflect fifteenth-century practice in the Arts Faculty at the University of Bologna!

Did blue silk simply replace blue cloth at Oxford? I shall end on a provocative note by tentatively advancing an even more outrageous hypothesis. When Masters of Surgery were distinguished from the Doctors of Medicine during the nineteenth century, they were given the MA hood with a dark blue lining instead of a red one.¹⁶ When the degree of Doctor of Philosophy was introduced into England by the University of Oxford in 1917, navy blue silk was also used to line the hood.

Could the hood now worn by the MCh at Oxford be a reincarnation of a hood anciently worn there by the MA before the crimson silk lining of the regents was adopted by all Masters of Arts?¹⁷

¹³ Except for the proctors, who still wear their hoods (which are still lined with expensive fur instead of silk) inside out. For more on this fascinating inversion and its later consequences see my ‘Evolution of the Oxford Simple Shape’.

Incidentally, Doctors of Civil Law from Oxford or Cambridge appearing as advocates in the Court of Arches wore a scarlet cloth hood lined with scarlet taffeta and edged with miniver. The lining was on the inside (Hargreaves-Mawdsley *bis*, p. 94, Doctor’s Commons). A similar hood with pink silk inside and miniver edging is worn by Sir Charles Scarborough, MD, in a 1651 portrait (Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 76, n. 3).

¹⁴ Innes, II, 256: ‘sex capucia sufficienter foderata de panno sufficiente blodei [sic] coloris ad usum communem dicte facultatis et studencium in eadem’ (six hoods adequately furred, of cloth of an appropriate blue colour, for the common use of the regents and students in the faculty). The spelling ‘blodei’ in place of ‘blodie’ may be a transcription error or an original mistake. In either case, the word is likely to refer to a dark shade of blue, such as navy. Coutts (pp. 28–29) translates this colour incorrectly as ‘red’, possibly as a result of confusion with the scarlet hood bequeathed by Patrick Leich earlier in the narrative.

I am grateful to Dr Alex Kerr for providing me with the material from Coutts and Innes, and for a number of helpful discussions. Nicholas Groves very kindly allowed me access to his unpublished work on medieval fabric colour-words.

¹⁵ Innes, II, p. 24, although in practice Paris may have been a greater influence. While the colour of cloth may have reflected nothing more significant than the quality (scarlet being the highest, then blue/violet, then mulberry, on down to russet and so on), this simple explanation is less likely in the case of silk.

¹⁶ Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 79, n. 2, asserts that the blue was the same shade of navy blue that was then used by the BCL, although not by the BM. However, he gives as his source Buxton and Gibson, p. 39, n. 2, who assert that the colour of the MCh lining was ‘light blue (not navy)’ by a decree of 1923. (Once again, the prohibition is possibly more revealing of contemporary practice than the prescription.) The MCh lining has certainly become dark blue again since then.

¹⁷ To the objection that the non-regent hood, if there ever were one at Oxford, would surely have been the same as the BD hood, as at Cambridge, it can be replied that the process of the adoption of silk linings proceeded very differently at the two universities (see n. 2 above).

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At Oxford in 1432, Bachelors of Divinity ranked above the non-regent MAs but below the regent MAs (Buxton and Gibson, p. 15). Black is therefore unlikely to have been sanctioned for the silk lining allowed to the non-regent MA in 1432. Conversely, although the regent MAs may have argued that their regency entitled them to adopt the coloured silk of the Doctors in Civil Law and Medicine, who ranked next above them, this argument would not have availed the non-regents—who ranked immediately above the Bachelors of Civil Law.