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J. W. Burgon and the Eponymous Hood: A Trawl through Oxford University Archives

by Clifford Dunkley

Fired with enthusiasm following the 2002 lecture by Colin Lawlor on the life of Burgon, the author decided to see whether any light could be shed on the Burgon shape hood by material in Oxford University Archives. Unfortunately, no evidence was found which might connect Burgon with matters pertaining to academic dress.

The Archives staff were extremely helpful in identifying possible documentary sources. The first line of enquiry was through the minutes of the Hebdomadal Council. These were manuscript records, handwritten by the Registrar, of weekly (as indicated by the title of the Council) and sometimes more frequent meetings, consisting of terse reports of the nature of the business discussed and decisions taken. Fortunately, the first two volumes—1854 to 1866 and 1866 to 1870—have been indexed by the Archives staff. Subsequent volumes (1870 to 1879 and 1879 to 1896) are not indexed: it would have been a daunting task to read through several hundred handwritten pages within the limited time available on day visits to Oxford. In any event, as Burgon had left Oxford in 1875 on his appointment to the Deanery of Chichester, the uncompleted search relates only to the years 1870 to 1875. The only other lacuna would be the period 1841 (when Burgon matriculated at Worcester College) to 1850. It is unfortunate that the *Oxford University Gazette* did not begin publication until 1870, after which date extensive details of University legislative activity are available in printed form.

There are two minuted references to Burgon during the period indexed, both quite unrelated to academic dress, one being a memorandum on the state of the windows in St Mary's (the University Church, of which Burgon was Vicar from 1863 to 1875), and the other a letter asking for an earlier (10 a.m.) start to the delivery of the Bampton lectures.

In 1855 (11 June meeting), concern was expressed by the Hebdomadal Council at lapses in the wearing of academic dress: 'It is highly expedient that measures be adopted for restoring the general use of academic dress.' This was to form part of a revision of Statutes Title XIV to XV. On 5 November, there was discussion of submitting an appropriate motion to Convocation, but no more is heard of the matter until 1857. In the meantime (on 15 October), the Council decided to abolish the distinctive academic dress of servitors (undergraduates substituting domestic service, e.g. waiting at table for payment of college dues).

On 25 May 1857, the Junior Proctor put forward a motion that the gold trimming of noblemen's gowns be done away with and that the dress of commoners and gentlemen commoners be assimilated.

On 26 June, the Senior Proctor proposed that, 'The Council take into consideration the general neglect of academic dress on the part of undergraduates and the desirability of taking steps to prevent it.'

On 26 October 1857, the Hebdomadal Council established a committee 'to consider the entire subject of academic dress.' The membership consisted of the Principal of Brasenose, the Provost of Worcester, the Master of Pembroke and the two Proctors.

On 16 November, 'the Report of the Academic Dress Committee was read.' Infuriatingly, no details whatsoever are given. This absence of detail is fairly typical of

these minutes; very occasionally, one finds a printed notice of some legislative proposal pasted into the minute book, but this is very much the exception.

On 20 November, a draft statute was produced and discussed (again, no details are given).

By way of an aside, it is interesting to note how rapidly they got a move on in those days: a mere couple of months or so to consider the entire subject of academic dress, produce a report and frame a statute.

We then turn to another documentary source – the Register of Congregation (the University’s main legislative body), a volume alternatively referred to as University Acta, for 1854 to 1868. On 1 December 1857, Congregation discussed the form of the Statute De Habitu Academico, referred to in the foregoing Hebdomadal Council minutes. Amendments to this draft (again, no details given) were proposed by the Principal of New Inn Hall, the Revd J. P. Tweed (Exeter College) and the Revd J. J. Sidebotham (New College).

On 10 December 1857, the draft statute was defeated: Placet 38; Non Placet 59. So, whatever had been discussed and proposed sank without trace. It has been suggested that the only possible hope of retrieving any information on the matter might be located in the private papers of those who were members of the Academic Dress Committee, if indeed any such papers have been preserved and archived in the appropriate colleges.

The (as we have noted) unamended 1857 Statutes are unforthcoming as to the physical details of academic dress. Statute Tit X De Vestitu et Habitu Academico, 3 De Habitu Academico ‘singulis gradibus et facultatibus competente’ merely refers to samples in the Archives: ‘exemplar in Archivis repositum.’

In the course of consulting the Archives, an opportunity was taken to examine some drawings of academic dress, one of several such sources referred to in *Oxford University Ceremonies* by L. H. Dudley Buxton and Strickland Gibson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), p. 19. These consist of some seventeen pencil sketches by Thomas Uwins for plates of costume in Ackermann’s *History of the University of Oxford* (MS Bodley Top. Oxon. d. 130). Strange to relate, the drawings reached Oxford via Cambridge, having been presented as a gift by a Cambridge graduate through S. C. Cockerell, Curator of the Fitzwilliam Museum! As is frequently the case with early pictorial representations of academic dress, there is a lack of clarity and definition, and the liripipe of the MA hood depicted is a vague and amorphous V shape.¹ The object of the exercise had been to establish a possible pre- or proto-Burgon shape, but no useful conclusions could be drawn.

Although not exhaustive, this trawl through the Oxford Archives has failed to give any clear lead as to the genesis of the Burgon hood. Do we have any documentary reference for the story that Burgon discovered a hood of archaic design in an old chest? Is it possible that a revival design ‘took off’ at Burgon’s instigation via one or more academic outfitters in Oxford? Students of academic dress are all too aware that standardization of designs is a fairly recent development, and we know that both simple and Burgon Oxford MA hoods ran in parallel at least until the 1930s.

¹ It has been subsequently pointed out to the writer that the liripipe of the Oxford simple hood either has a blunt squarish shape or is not visible at all in pictorial representations until the late nineteenth century. (Shrimpton’s 1870 and 1885 plates are two of the first to show the liripipe with the characteristic crescent cut. See illustration on p. 29—Ed.)