

Transactions of the Burgon Society

Volume 9

Article 8

1-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Crawford, Kenneth (2009) "On the Making of the American Doctoral Gown," *Transactions of the Burgon Society*: Vol. 9. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1076>

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On the Making of the American Doctoral Gown

by *Kenneth Crawford*

The US doctoral gown is an elegant piece of academical wear. Worn open or closed, the gown features velvet facings which begin at the centre of the yoke and continue to the hem. The gown has a distinctive feature—optional, but often used—in that the front panels continue round the neck as three pleats, meeting at the centre of the yoke behind a cord and button. The other distinctive feature of the American doctoral gown is the placing of three velvet bars (the colour of the velvet usually matching that of the facings) on each sleeve. The bars are placed horizontally on the sleeve, one above the other.

The gown which features in this paper I made for a doctoral graduate—and friend—from Union Theological Seminary (herein-after UTS) in New York City, The Revd Dr Nancy Duff, now a member of the Faculty at Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey. The pictures of Dr Duff wearing her gown are reproduced with her permission. The gown is a black coat with red yoke and sleeves, the gown faced from around the neck, and with sleeve bars of black velvet.

The cut of the gown is the usual coat with vertical seams under the armholes. Normally, if the gown were to be of one colour only, the cut of the neck pleats extending from the facings to cover the yoke would be in one piece. However, the prescription for the UTS gown demands that the red pleats be sewn to the black coat at the base line of the yoke front. The pleats are cut slightly on an angle so that the resulting bias stretch will allow



Fig. 1. Red pleat fabric joined to the gown coat at the yoke base line. The pressed pleats are visible. Picture shows bias cut for flat lie of the pleat.



Fig. 2. Pleats overlapped on creases, as they will sit when sewn to the yoke.



Fig. 3. Marking out the gathers—4 rows x ½ inch apart; gathers spaced at ⅜ inch apart



Fig. 4. Drawing threads sewn up and down vertically rather than stitched through horizontally—the fourth row in progress to show the process.

for the curved line of the pleats on the yoke to sit flat (*Fig. 1*). *Fig. 2* shows the pleats overlapped and as they will appear on the yoke when sewn down.

The gathering for the rear panel is done as described in my paper on trends in the manufacture of academical dress.¹ *Fig. 3* shows the marking out with the actual fabric. The fabric for this gown is 55% terylene and 45% wool, quality 358 produced by Marton Mills of West Yorkshire, black and red (shade 541). This particular fabric, because of its high wool content, presses flat and gathers beautifully. *Fig. 4* shows the four rows of drawing threads, the fourth row being stitched. The thread is Gutermann's polytwist buttonhole thread, which has enough tensile strength to pull a mini—critical when drawing back the threads to gather the panel. If the thread breaks in the process, it has a tendency to cause the surrounding air to turn a rather deep shade of ultramarine!

Gathering back the panel requires the yoke to be completed first. The reason for this is that the gathers on the rear panel need to be measured against the width of the yoke base so that everything is drawn back to the required width. This means that the

¹ Kenneth Crawford, 'The Cutting Edge of Academe: Trends in the Manufacture of Academical Dress,' *Transactions of the Burgon Society*, 8 (2008), pp. 60–80.



Fig. 5, left. Fig. 6, above.

gathers need to reach the finished edges of the yoke base, just overlapping them so that the gathers will sit fully across the yoke base. *Fig. 5* shows the gathers drawn back and ready to be sewn off to the required width. The fourth thread is

drawn tighter to shape the gathers to the curve of the yoke base.

The yoke is made with the canvas interlining. On to this interlining, on the underside, is sewn the fabric to the finished size to which the gathers are sewn back. On the front is sewn the yoke fabric—in this case the red terylene/wool. *Fig. 6* shows the yoke shape for the US doctoral gown, from the underside, with the underside fabric pinned ready for sewing. Once the yoke is complete, the gathers are measured against the width of the yoke base, against the underside, and then sewn to the yoke, right sides together. *Fig. 7* shows the gathers sewn to the yoke, from the underneath, with the gathers reaching the edge of the yoke's finished width. *Fig. 8* shows the gown from the right side, as the observer will see the gathers and red yoke.

Once the rear gathers are sewn to the yoke base, the front panel neck pleats are hand-sewn to the yoke top. *Fig. 9* shows the pleats being stitched to the yoke and *Fig. 10* the finished pleats with traditional cord and button. This completes the gown coat.

The sleeves are made up of the outer sleeve, the inner sleeve (which determines the length of the sleeve to the wrist), usually of fabric of a bemsilk² weight, and the cuff. The cuff is made from the gown fabric—in the case of the UTS doctoral gown from the black coat fabric rather than the red—interlined with a heavyweight lining and lined inside with bemsilk. A 'bridge' separates the outer sleeve from the cuff. *Fig. 11* shows the pieces of the cuff (sewn) and the red bridge (sewn)—the pattern

² Bemsilk is a light-weight, silk-finish synthetic lining used in coat tailoring for men.



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.



Fig. 10.

piece is the bridge section laid flat.

The outer sleeve is worked first, with the hand-sewing of the three sleeve bars. The velvet is steam-pressed around a card pattern of the bar, placed on the outer sleeve and sewn to the fabric. The sleeve bars need to be adjusted in relation to the top of the outer sleeve, depending on the sleeve length, so that they are placed as centrally as possible between the top of the sleeve and the wrist. *Fig. 12* shows the first of the sleeve bars being stitched to the outer sleeve; *Fig. 13* shows the completed set of bars on the outer sleeve.

The sleeve fabric is turned under, around a board, so that the bar is sewn in place only to that portion of the fabric. The thread used here is very thin, catching the velvet just enough on the edge to secure it to the outer sleeve fabric whilst leaving the stitch bedded within the velvet pile.

Fig. 14 shows the outer sleeve laid flat—this is the left sleeve. The bars sit centrally in a 24-inch measurement (for this particular gown) from shoulder to wrist. Also, they are placed slightly further forward, allowing the bars to sit towards the



Fig. 11.



Fig. 12.



Left: Fig. 13.

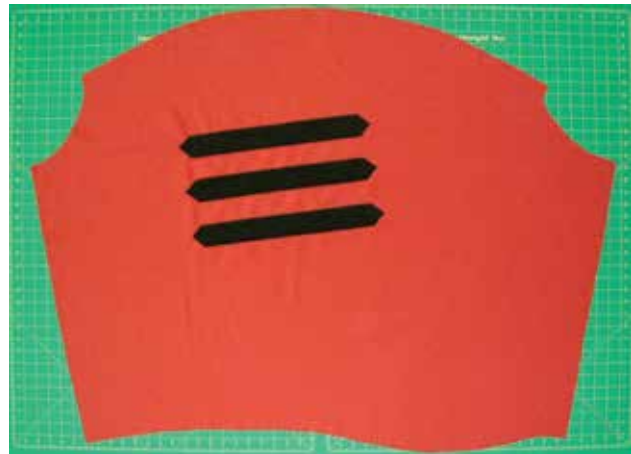


Fig. 14.



Fig. 15.



Fig. 16.

front of the arm when the sleeve is assembled. The bottom of the sleeve appears far too long in the illustration: this allows for a 3-inch return for the sleeve to turn under to meet the bridge on the cuff.

The sleeve is gathered in the same way as the gown rear panel. The rear side of the outer sleeve with the fabric padding pinned is now ready to be sewn prior to marking out the gathering graph. *Fig. 15* shows the marking out of the graph, and *Fig. 16* shows the gathered sleeve.



Fig. 17.

The cuff assembly begins with the outer cuff, the interlining and the bemsilk lining all being sewn on their side seams. The interlining is sewn to the outer cuff from the inside, seams together, $\frac{1}{8}$ inch from the wrist edge, allowing a 1-inch turning at the wrist for the outer cuff to turn back on to the interlining on the inside (*Fig. A*). This is hand-stitched back (*Fig. B*). A $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch hem turning is pressed on the inner bemsilk cuff at the wrist which is then hand-sewn to the inside of the cuff, seams

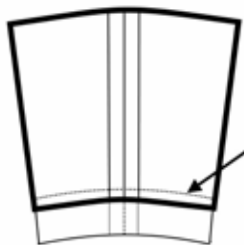


Fig. A.

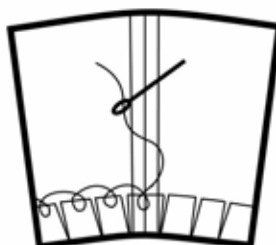


Fig. B.

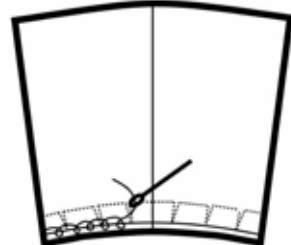


Fig. C.



Fig. 18.



Fig. 19.

together *Fig. C*. One-eighth of an inch is allowed between the outer cuff edge and the inner lining. When this assembly is complete, the top of the cuff is sewn with all three fabrics together, $\frac{1}{4}$ inch from the edge.

The bridge in the red fabric is sewn across the side seams so that it makes an ellipse. When laid flat, as in *Fig. 11*, the rear of the bridge curves upwards to allow for the bell shape of the turning from the outer sleeve. With seams matching, the bridge is sewn to the cuff at the top. The bemsilk sleeve lining is sewn together at the sides, then pleated into the inside of the cuff against the bemsilk cuff lining, seams matching. The complete cuff with bridge and sleeve lining is then sewn round the top again. The sleeve lining is then pulled through the top of the cuff. *Fig. 17* shows the cuff, the bridge and the sleeve lining as one piece.



Fig. 20.

The outer sleeve sides are sewn together and the sleeve turned out. The bottom of the sleeve is then joined with shallow pleats to the bridge, seams matching. This completes the sleeve assembly. *Fig. 18* shows the joining of the outer sleeve to the bridge, and *Fig. 19* shows the complete sleeve unit with cuff, bridge and outer sleeve. Once the sleeve is sewn into the yoke and armhole, and the gathers sewn back to the yoke underside, the sleeve lining is brought up flush with the top of the gathers, pleated, and hand-sewn right round the gathers and the armhole. The lining determines the length of the sleeve to the wrist, with the bell shape of the outer sleeve sitting flush with the cuff at the wrist.



Fig. 21.



Fig. 22.



Fig. 23.

Fig. 20 shows the left sleeve sewn into the yoke, with the first of the black velvet sleeve bars just visible at the bottom left of the picture. *Fig. 21* shows Dr Nancy Duff wearing the finished gown, with velvet facings extending round the neck of the yoke. The picture has just caught her gesturing, fortuitously, showing to advantage the bell sleeve with the cuff and bridge. *Fig. 22* shows the sleeve bars sitting at a slight angle downwards towards the back of the gown, complementing the lie of the sleeve in the yoke and the shape of the bell turning. *Fig. 23* shows the back of the gown with the gentle curve of the yoke base and the lie of the velvet and pleats round the neck.

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The pattern for this American doctoral gown is from the style of the former New York company **Bentley & Simon, Ltd.** Sadly, along with Cotrell & Leonard, Bentley & Simon, E. R. Moore, the Collegiate Cap & Gown Company and many others, the American manufacturers are now almost under the sole ownership of the Oak Hall Company in Virginia.