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A Portrait of an Oxford Nobleman, *circa* 1705

By Bruce Christianson and Joan Kendall

This interesting portrait (Fig. 1) hangs in Hatfield House, Hertfordshire.

The caption (painted, possibly much later, in the lower left corner) reads ‘James Fourth Earl of Salisbury painted by W. Sowyiens’. However the clothing and style of wig make this unlikely. The portrait almost certainly shows James Cecil the Fifth Earl, born 1691, succeeded 1694, matriculated Christ Church Oxford 1705, created MA 1707, married 1709, died 1728. The painter is most likely William Sonmans, who died in 1708.

The Earl is depicted wearing, over his partly buttoned light blue coat, a curious garment that at first sight looks like a scarf, but on close examination more like a long sleeveless gown, made in the then-fashionable colours of pale blue and brown silk lavishly brocaded with gold thread. (This thread appears brown in the portrait, as do the gold braid¹ and buttons on his coat.) In his left hand he holds a square academic cap, with a gold tassel turned toward the viewer. The portrait is therefore likely to be a memento of the Fifth Earl’s time as an undergraduate, but there are some interesting anomalies.

The square cap with a gold tassel is the first surprise, as it seems remarkably early. According to Hargreaves-Mawdsley, ‘During the eighteenth century ... [peers] wore round black velvet bonnets. The wearing of gold tassels on their bonnets by noblemen made its appearance in 1738, but was not yet countenanced by statute. The statutes of 1770, however, allowed noblemen, baronets, and gentlemen-commoners to have square black velvet caps instead of round bonnets, with tassels, gold ones for noblemen ...’² And yet here we have a square cap, with a gold tassel, apparently within a year or so of 1705.

Noblemen (along with certain other classes of undergraduate) had previously worn square caps: regarding the latter part of the seventeenth century Hargreaves-Mawdsley writes ‘gentleman-commoners had for some time been covetous of the square cap³ and in 1675 were wearing it with the permission of the vice-chancellor. ... In 1686 this practice of wearing a square cap was well established; but was forbidden and finally suppressed in 1689.’⁴

In fact, the admonishment of 1689 merely states ‘That many Gentlemen Commoners and others weare square Capps with Tuffts that have not performed any Exercise in the Theater [*sic*] to entitle them thereunto.’⁵

1 What we now call ‘braid’ was referred to as ‘lace’ in the period. To avoid confusion we use modern terms by default throughout this paper.

2 Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p 94.

3 Presumably the noblemen and baronets were already wearing the square cap, and it was this practice that the gentlemen-commoners coveted.

4 Op. cit., p. 93, n 7; p. 94, nn. 2, 3.

5 Buxton and Gibson, p. 32, clause 2, quoting Reg. Conv. Bb 29, at end. We take this ‘tuft’ to refer the black pom-pom, sometimes called a ‘tump’, such as the one worn in 1675 by Loggan’s MA, see Fig. 2, rather than to a gold tassel. See n. 9, below.



FIG. 1 James Cecil, Fifth Earl of Salisbury, who lived 1691–1728.

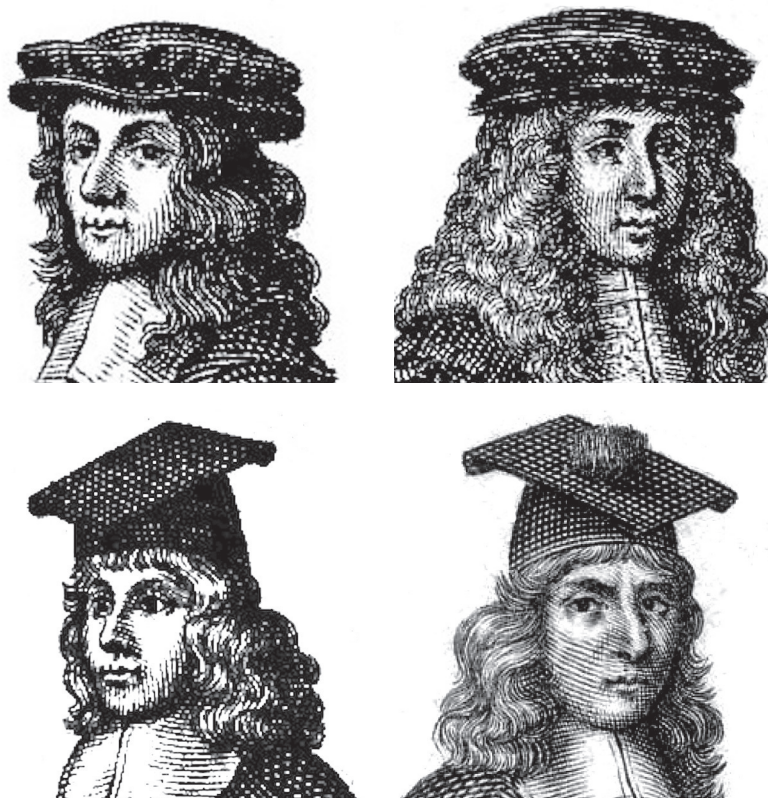


FIG. 2 Loggan
1675 (clockwise
from top left) :
Commoner, Gen-
tlemen-Common-
er, MA, Scholar.

However April 1690 did see a re-issue of Fell's 1666 instructions to tailors, with certain significant additions.⁶ The 1690 additions are shown here in italics:

Clause 9 states: 'Servitors, Battelars, Commoners, Gentleman Commoners of all Conditions being Undergraduates to weare round Caps; Gentleman Commoners to haue a hat-band upon them; Knights, Baronetts and Noblemen being Undergraduates to haue Velvett Caps with silver or gold Hat bands.'⁷ *The Square Capps not to exceed the breadth of Twelve fingers; and the Undergraduats Capps to have no Tuffts.*'

Clause 10 states: 'That persons studying the Law being about four yeares standing in the University, and being entered into the Law Booke be permitted to wear a half sleeued Gowne without Buttons⁸ and a square Cap. *And that noe other person of what Condition*

⁶ Buxton and Gibson, p. 31; italicized sections loc. cit. n. 3.

⁷ The presence of the band implies that these caps are round. The Laudian academic dress statute (Title XIV, in force from 1636 until 1770) prescribed square caps for undergraduates on the foundation of a college (in particular, scholars) and round caps for all other undergraduates (including servitors, battelars, and commoners). The italicized part of clause 9, inserted in 1690, deals with the scholars.

⁸ These are the so-called 'Students of Civil Law' (SCL). The 'half-sleeved gown', shown with additional decoration in Fig. 3 but worn in plain black by the SCL, is the precursor to the modern lay gown with flap collar and inverted-T armhole, although the bottom half of the bag sleeve is not yet sewn shut. The forbidden 'buttons' are actually the decorative strips shown in Fig. 3; see n. 20, below. Loggan's plate shows the SCL as having purely functional plain buttons closing the upper (vertical) part of the sleeve slit.

FIG. 3 Nobleman from Loggan 1675 (left), van der Aa 1707 (right).



*soever presume to wear a Square Capp, but onely those who are allowed by Statute.*⁹

Notwithstanding the statute, and the categorical insertion at the end of clause 10, there is other evidence that the ‘suppression’ of square caps referred to by Hargreaves-Mawdsley was not as successful as his rather bald statement might indicate.

Loggan’s plate of 1675 (Fig. 3) shows both the nobleman¹⁰ and the gentleman-commoner wearing the round bonnets prescribed by statute, but significantly van der Aa’s 1707 plate changes these to square caps with a tassel,¹¹ very like the one held by the Earl in the portrait. Of course, we cannot be sure of the colour of the tassel on the square cap of van der Aa’s nobleman, but it is a lighter shade than the black tassel he places on the square of the gentleman-commoner, and it is definitely a tassel rather than the pompom that van der Aa’s graduates still wear with their square cap.

Van der Aa’s plates are for the most part a smaller and inferior copy of Loggan’s, and it is difficult to understand why he would have changed the round bonnets to square caps, against the University regulations, if Hargreaves-Mawdsley’s account of practice in 1707 were correct.

Noblemen were certainly inclined to wear whatever they pleased, particularly when it came to hats,¹² but the University was rather particular about who could wear the square,

9 However, no mention is made in the statutes of any Exercise in the Theatre (or anywhere else) conferring a right to the square cap. See n. 16, below.

10 Figure numbered 30 on Loggan’s plate, reproduced here as Fig. 3 left. The nobleman has what looks like a gold tassel hanging from his hatband over his left ear, resembling more the decoration of a modern Cambridge PhD bonnet than the black silk ribbon of an Oxford lay doctor’s hat. Gold tassels on bonnets did not appear until 1738 according to Hargreaves-Mawdsley; see n. 2, above.

11 Beeverell, reproduced here as Fig. 3, right. The point is remarked upon in Kerr, p. 129, para 94.

12 ‘Another abuse, which was never effectively controlled, was the wearing by noblemen and

and there is evidence that the Fifth Earl was inclined on the whole to respect, if not statute, then at least customary academical practice.

In June 1705 Arthur Charlett (the Tory master of University College) wrote to the Duke of Ormonde (the Chancellor of Oxford) that Cecil was 'a gentleman of excellent parts, principles and temper, very curious and observing, so intent in observing our little rites and ceremonies that I tell his lordship that Your Grace might name him your vice-chancellor, for I am sure he can create a doctor in any faculty as well as any of us'.¹³

So our portrait apparently provides independent evidence that the wearing of the square cap by noblemen survived the 'purge' of 1689, and that their addition to it of a gold tassel pre-dates the received account by over sixty years. It may therefore be that the first 'modern' tassels to appear were the gold ones worn by noblemen.

The first regulatory mention of the gold tassel does not occur until the reforms of 1770. So our portrait is also, indirectly, further evidence that the 1770 'reforms' to the academic dress statute were to a large extent a formal legalizing of pre-existing practices; many of them by then very long-standing, and in some cases officially sanctioned notwithstanding their statutory illegality.¹⁴

This rather aggressive re-dating may throw some light on the process by which the tassel replaced the pom-pom, with the tassel appearing first on square caps worn by the higher orders of undergraduate, and subsequently being adopted by graduates in place of the pom-pom. It is not clear when scholars adopted the tassel,¹⁵ but even commoners were wearing square caps with a tassel by about 1740.¹⁶

Returning to the portrait, the second curiosity is the outer garment. This does not resemble a conventional picture of a nobleman undergraduate's dress gown.¹⁷ There is no sign of an inverted-T armhole at the wearer's right-hand shoulder, although the painting shows an irregular edge to the garment, particularly around the right shoulder; this could represent a narrow hand-made bobbin lace of metal and silk threads extending over the edge,¹⁸ which the flat wider woven lace would not.

gentleman-commoners of ordinary lay hats about the university', Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 94, n. 4, citing Wood.

13 Cockayne, Vol. XI, p. 409, citing Historic Manuscripts Commission Ormonde Mss, Vol. VIII, p. 162. We are indebted to Professor William Gibson for drawing this epistle to our attention.

14 See 'Remarks upon some Strictures', and the discussion in Gibson (2004).

15 Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 97, n. 7, asserts that in 1700 scholars on the foundation were already wearing a pompom with their square cap, but here he has misinterpreted his evidence; for details see Kerr, p. 130, end of para 97. An official University order issued as late as 11 Dec. 1738 forbade scholars to wear the pom-pom unless they were fellows or chaplains, Green, p. 325, n. 5.

16 Kerr, p. 130, para 99. The 1740 portrait NPG5588 showing Thomas Tyers, referred to by Kerr, loc. cit. n. 65, is an example of this. See <www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw08292/Jonathan-Tyers-and-his-family>, accessed 13 June 2016. Commoners were wearing squares (albeit without pom-pom or tassel) much earlier than this. For example Edward Wood of Wadham was in 1689 advised by the Vice-Chancellor that he could obtain the right to wear a square cap by speaking certain Verses in the Theatre before all the Doctors and Masters and—perhaps more importantly—paying the required fee of three guineas; Green, p. 324, n. 4. See nn. 5 & 14, above.

17 For example, contrast Fig. 1 with Figs 3, 6, and 7.

18 Garments in those days had no facings. A very clear black-and-white reproduction of the painting, from which much of the fine detail can be made out, is to be found in Auerbach and Adams, p. 271, Ill. 117, Cat. No. 153. The pattern of the damask shows a design of generous proportions with the edge of a flower or separated leaf not inconsistent with the fashionable Bizarre designs of c.1705



FIG. 4 Details of Fig. 1.



Fell's 'Orders to Taylors' of 1666, mentioned earlier, specify the gown of a nobleman undergraduate incrementally as follows:¹⁹

Clause 4: The Gentlemen Commoners Gowne to be halfe sleeued, and if they please to haue Buttons²⁰ not exceeding four dozen nor the rate of Five shillings the dozen, nor the bignesse in the publike patterns.

Clause 5: A Baronetts and Knights Gowne the same with the former, only distinguished (if they please) with gold²¹ or silver Buttons.

Clause 6: Noblemen to wear (if they please) coloured Gownes of the same forme with the former.

This last is the garment depicted in Figure 3; the Loggan plate shows it as a lighter grey than the gowns that are prescribed to be black.²²

It is possible that the damask garment in the portrait was not painted from life, or is deliberately intended to be a stylized representation, as the brushstrokes are very free here compared to the rest of the painting. However the cap, tassel, and damask gown were painted in the same period of time as the figure,²³ and we hypothesize that the garment is a nobleman's dress robe of the period, but draped fashionably off the wearer's left shoulder.

There is a hint of a flap collar resting over the curve of the left shoulder, which would indicate that the gown has been pulled round in that direction, thus allowing the lower half of the right-hand sleeve to fall completely behind the body where it cannot be seen.

There is also, on the left side of the garment, almost hidden in the folds falling from the left shoulder, a narrow shadow indicating what could be the vertical section of a sleeve opening beginning just below the seventh buttonhole down and disappearing in the shadow just below the tenth buttonhole. If the left sleeve were pulled well round the shoulder to hang in front of the gown this would indeed be the position of the top of the sleeve opening.

We tentatively conjecture that this rather *louche* manner of wearing the gown—almost *à la Hussar*—may have been facilitated by the adoption of hook and eye fastening,²⁴

to 1715. See Kendall, p. 23, Figs 3–5. (A smaller version of our portrait also appears there as Fig. 1 on p. 22.)

¹⁹ Buxton and Gibson, p. 31.

²⁰ These 'buttons' are the decorative strips of button-and-braid illustrated in Fig. 3. Each row consists of three buttons (or toggles) joined by loops of braid, with only the middle button in each row being functional. See Tsua, pp. 116, 122 and p. 119, Fig. 14, for further details. At some point in the eighteenth century, the rows of braid and buttons were replaced; in the case of noblemen by patterns of lace, like those in Figs 6–8, that are similar to what is still in use on doctors' undress gowns today.

²¹ The braid would have been gold, as well as the toggles.

²² Noblemen were free to choose the colour for themselves. Fashions for various colours came and went, but it is also possible that the choice of colour sent a coded message about political adherence, to which we have lost the key. See Gibson (2004), pp. 28 ff.

²³ We are grateful to independent paintings conservator Clare Wilkins for confirmation of this. A bill in the amount of £5/7/6 for 'The Earl's head and canvas', which we believe to refer to this portrait, was presented for payment by William Sonman's widow in October 1708, Sonmans having died in July, so it is possible that the outer garment was painted by a different hand than the rest of the figure.

²⁴ Hook and eye fastenings, previously known as 'crotchets and loops', have been around since the Middle Ages. For example, they are visible c. 1442 as the fastening on the collar of the Ferrara Court Jester Gonella in Jean Fouquet's painting: <<https://adamselindisdress.wordpress.com/2014/03/12/fastenings-across-the-ages/>>, accessed 8 June 2016. They did not become popular in England until the middle of the seventeenth century, but by the time of the Great Fire in 1666



FIG. 5 Memorials to Thomas Bodley 1615 (left) and Dr Peter Turner, 1614 (above).

in place of the button-and-braid shown in Loggan. The fastening of the half-sleeve was originally designed to be done up all the way down the forearm seam to below the elbow, once the arm had been put through the armhole. Some wearers do this (Fig. 5 left: Thomas Bodley, 1615), and some don't bother (Fig. 5 right: Peter Turner, 1614; and indeed Fig. 3: Loggan's nobleman, 1675), instead leaving the sleeve sufficiently unbuttoned to enable the arm to move in and out freely as the gown is donned and doffed.

Grimm's 1783 ink wash drawing (Fig. 6) shows lace decoration replacing the button and braid, and the sleeve seam is unfastened almost all the way up to the shoulder. This lengthy split would make it easy to pull the gown over to the wearer's left side. This would put the shoulder end of the left sleeve slit at the level of the left elbow, with the flap collar resting on the upper arm, and the flaps at the bottom of the open section of the right sleeve pulled up to the level of the right shoulder, causing the sleeve to drop behind the shoulder.

Roberts' nobleman in 1792 (Fig. 7 left) has his sleeve unhooked further up above the armhole than does his baronet (Fig. 7 right). Hook and eye fastenings (or something very similar) are still clearly visible in 1814, in the upper part of the split in the sleeves of Uwins' there were two hook-and-eye makers in Pudding Lane alone (William Burgis and Nicolas Carter): <<https://nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/education/fire-of-london.pdf>>, p. 6, accessed 8 June 2016.

The term 'hook and eye' features revealingly in John Aubrey's description of the death in 1628 of Fulke Greville at the hand of Ralph Heywood: 'his death, which was that a servant of his (...) as he was trussing up his lord's pointes comeinge from stoole (for then their breeches were fastned to the doublets with points—then came in hookes and eies—which not to have fastened was in my boyhood a great crime) stabbed him.' Aubrey, *Life of Sir William Davenant*, our dashes.

Aubrey was born in 1626, and we infer that in his boyhood points (laces with a pointed end, like an aiglet) were still the fashion for keeping up breeches. His *Brief Lives* were set down between 1669 and 1696, by which time he assumes that his younger readers would need to have this use of points explained to them.

**FIG. 6 Nobleman in full dress,
Grimm 1783**



**FIG. 7 (Below) Roberts 1792 :
Nobleman (left), Baronet (right)
in full dress.**



nobleman (Fig. 8). The modern inverted-T armhole on the Oxford doctor's undress gown simply standardizes the extent of the fastening, by sewing closed the top half of the seam split above the elbow, and leaving the bottom half permanently open.

Ambient fashion often becomes incorporated into academic dress *de facto*, and is formally accepted—and regulated—only some time later. But there may be a considerable delay—sometimes many decades—between the emergence of a lay fashion in the outside world, and the appearance of the first university sanction for it;²⁵ in such cases it is interesting to enquire when the feature was first tacitly adopted and used in academic dress. If our conjecture is correct, this portrait of the Fifth Earl constitutes a relatively early instance of the academic use of hook and eye, as well as a very early sighting of a gold tassel for a square cap.



FIG. 8 Nobleman in full dress: detail from Uwins 1813.

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²⁵ See n. 14, above; and also Gibson (2004) for other examples.

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Sources for Figures

- Figures 1 and 4. The portrait of the Fifth Earl is reproduced here by the kind permission of the Marquess of Salisbury. Our thanks to Dr Nicholas Jackson for adjusting the perspective (skew).
- Figures 2, 3 and 8 were provided by Dr Alex Kerr from his private collection, together with a great deal of useful information for which we are also grateful. Figure 2 and the left half of Figure 3 are from Loggan; the right half of Figure 3 is from Beeverell; Figure 8 is from Combe.
- Figure 5. The memorial to Thomas Bodley is in the chapel of Merton College, Oxford; that of Dr Peter Turner was recently restored to St Olave's church, London: <www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/jul/10/statue-looted-in-blitz>. The images are reproduced here by kind permission of the photographers, Dr Alex Kerr and Sophia Evans <www.sophiaevans.com>, respectively.
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