

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE BURGON SOCIETY

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The Burgon Society has been in existence for a little over a year – we take 20th October 2000 as Foundation Day – and so this will be a very short history!

The origins of the Society lie in a web-based discussion group founded by Michael Powell on July 10th 1999. Initially, there was little activity, until it was discovered by Philip Goff (now Chairman of Council). He sent invitations to join to various other people he knew who had a similar interest, including myself, and it gradually gained members. (The current membership stands at 221; the address is http://groups.yahoo.com/academic_dress)

An informal meeting of members was held in The Wheatsheaf Inn in Rathbone Place on 13th November 1999, and two further meetings followed on 17th June and 2nd September 2000, both at the University of London Chaplaincy, Gordon Square. From the very first, a desire was expressed to complement the e-group with a more formal society, which would undertake to promote research into the topic, and to publish it in a more permanent form. Out of the third meeting the Society was born, and the inaugural meeting of Council was held in the University of London Senate House on 21st October 2000 (which by a happy chance is the day in 1841 when Dean Burgon matriculated as an undergraduate at Worcester College, Oxford). It is good that the Council represents, in terms of the universities from which its members graduated (and in many cases, work) the entire spectrum from Oxford and Cambridge, through the 19th century federals (London, Wales, Victoria) and the redbricks (e.g. Exeter, Bristol) to the 1960s foundations (e.g. East Anglia, Brunel) and the re-designated polytechnics (e.g. Hertfordshire).

It was determined from the beginning that, while maintaining an open membership policy, there would be an examination available to those who wished, leading to Fellowship of the Society (FBS). In order to make it as flexible as possible, the examination was laid down as being a substantial essay (or an equivalent number of shorter ones) on an approved topic, either published already or specially written; published is interpreted to include web-published work. Whenever possible, new Fellows are invited to read their work before the Society as a form of formal examination. As the Fellowship is examined, and as the Society deals with academic dress, it was felt right that a hood should be designed for Fellows. Many and varied designs were submitted and considered, but the final design won unanimous approval as being both distinctive and restrained.

Once the Society was on a secure basis, we were able to invite other people well-known in academic dress circles to become honorary Fellows –all of whom accepted; and we were also delighted to be able to secure Dr John Birch as President and the Bishop of London as Patron. At the time of writing, membership stands at 54 with 2 Fellows by submission.

So why the *Burgon* Society? Several years ago, I had tried to get a similar society off the ground, but without any success. It seemed right that it should be named after the only person who had designed and become the eponym for an article of academic dress (the John Knox cap seems to have been named for him because he wore it, but did not design it). The Very Rev'd John William Burgon (1813–88) spent much of his life in Oxford, where he matriculated at Worcester College in 1841, and became a Fellow of Oriel College in 1846. He held a number of curacies between 1849 and 1863, when he returned to Oxford to become Vicar of St Mary-the-Virgin, the University Church. He held this post until 1876, when he became Dean of Chichester, where he remained until his death. As is known to those who study academic dress, the Oxford MA and BA (and indeed hoods for other degrees) may be

made in one of two shapes – the ‘plain Oxford’ [s1] and the Burgon [s2]. This latter is a fuller cut, and allows more of the lining to be turned and seen. One theory we have heard is that it was introduced to stop the robemakers skimping on the fur lining of the BA hood! It is still unclear exactly what the connexion is between the Dean and the hood pattern, and this is a topic of research we intend to pursue.

It is from Dean Burgon’s two colleges that we take our colours – the corporate colours of blue, crimson, and white are from the Oriel colours of dark blue and silver, with the crimson of the Oxford MA hood lining added; the FBS hood, of black lined shot pink, comes from the Worcester colours of black and pink.

This is a short history, chronicling a short time, but I hope it will save a future historian of the Society a great deal of effort!

