

A Tribute to Nicholas Groves

By Philip Goff

It is almost impossible to imagine the academic dress world without Nick Groves, such was his contribution to it from high up in his Norfolk tower, that was certainly not ivory! And that contribution was so immense that he will live on forever, linked with Shaw, the brilliant Groves Classification Scheme, and the founding of this Society, in which he played a major part, as its first Dean, and as a Council member until 2011.

In the mid-1960s, aged fourteen, I already knew of all the robemakers in the British Isles, and was in regular correspondence with most of them. Then, and later in the decade, on visits to the academic tailors based in London and Cambridge, the name, Nicholas Groves, was mentioned regularly, and I was intrigued that there should be anyone else in the known universe with a similar interest; and it was not long before we made contact.

So it was that an acquaintanceship, then friendship, was born, that has spanned more than half a century. In the early 1970s, as part of my training for ordination, I spent a blissful year in Norwich, living, for part of the time, in the Cathedral Close. Thus, it was impossible not to know one of its most devoted sons, and we found that we had many mutual friends.

Of course, in those days we wrote letters and reserved telephone calls for urgent matters, but during my time as Academic Consultant at Ede & Ravenscroft, from 1996, Nick and I began to meet more frequently, and the burgeoning internet, and use of email, had become established, changing forever the way people communicate. For work, and for interest, I had begun to make regular searches for anything connected to academic dress. This was an easy task since the pages numbered in the low hundreds. As I wrote this, a quick check revealed some 530,000,000 of them.

On discovering Br Michael Powell's lone SETI-like message, on his newly formed Yahoo academic dress eGroup, in 1999, and with great excitement, the very first thing I did, after responding to Michael, was to tell Nick Groves. From that time onwards, and as others joined us, we were in frequent contact: sharing knowledge; sparking ideas; hatching plans; moaning about the fading quality of the robes of yesteryear; complaining about the liberties taken by robemakers and sharing information on publications and textiles as well as news of new, obscure or defunct hoods.

From the outset of those contacts and meetings it was clear that Nick was hugely talented. Widely read, erudite, scholarly, articulate, opinionated, unusual, amusing, a little old-worldly, perhaps, he was a one-off and, in more than one sense of the word, nonconformist. He was a gifted musician, antiquarian, historian, teacher, linguist and, perhaps, even theologian.

Fr Goff delivered this tribute at the 2023 Congregation at the University of Chester in October.

As an alumnus of London, Wales, York and East Anglia universities, he might equally have pursued a successful career teaching history, or music, or English, or the Welsh language or theology (I suspect this list is not exhaustive), but although he was a teacher for a while, and a lecturer, subsequently, he never really fitted into a mould, but was a genuine free thinker.

In another person this combination of academic gifts might have led to a certain dryness and introspection but, coupled with Nick's personality, it led to a rich and generous outpouring of knowledge and wisdom, readily shared with his huge circle of colleagues, friends, devotees, disciples and the upcoming generation of academic dress enthusiasts. He wore his learning lightly, however, and his humour and outrageiosity (if there is such a word) threatened to break out at any moment. He was the David Starkey of academic dress, at once erudite and naughty: a mixture of solid learning and high campery.

Words fascinated him and his vocabulary was rich and wide. 'Nugatory' was one of his favourites, along with 'recondite' and he had some unusual turns of phrase which were his hallmark. 'Hello Nick', I would say on the phone, 'I did a new design for Ede's last week.' 'Did you though?' he would reply. He was a true one-off.

Underneath his learning and solid research, into the subject we all love, was his enjoyment of it all and a huge sense of fun. I cannot emphasise enough, to the present day custodians of our Society, how important a driver this having fun was for us all, and how we founders wished this to continue. Indeed, the agreement given by colleagues, in our pre-Burgon academic dress group, to my desire to see our hobby grounded in a formal society, was only finally given on the condition that we continued to have fun and not become another dreary organisation, hidebound by management speak and corporate nonsense. In this Nick was an enormous support and he understood completely the need to balance scholarship with enjoyment.

With regard to academic dress, Nick had an encyclopaedic knowledge of virtually every scheme in existence in the UK and far beyond. His workbooks illustrating the academic hoods of various universities, hand-coloured and presenting them all together on a page, were wonderful to see and conceived long before robemakers picked up the idea, using sophisticated software. Fortunately, they are now available to us and to posterity in our splendid archive. Moreover, his invention of the Groves Classification of Academic Dress is brilliant in its conception and simplicity and has allowed aficionados, robemakers and students of the subject to communicate more easily.

Enthusiastic and supportive, from the very beginning, of the idea of forming a society for the enjoyment, promotion and formal study of academic dress, he also gave it the name 'Burgon' and when the inevitable fellowship hood was adopted, out of a large list of contenders, he found a brilliant way of connecting the colours to the life of the eponymous Dean.

Nick served as the first Dean of Studies of the Burgon Society and did the spadework for its constitution, largely drawing on that of the Royal Historical Society, of which he was also a fellow.

Publications followed, which are important contributions and will become even more important as the years go by: music colleges, theological colleges, Shaw, *Transactions*, and all the while working and researching for his doctorate on Norwich church-

es, at Lampeter, University of Wales, for which he was offered the choice of the faculties of Arts or Theology and chose Theology because he liked the red shot blue silk and already had the MA with the blue shot green.

There was so much more to come and his death is a huge loss.

Interestingly, for one so fascinated by university costume, Nick had no time for dressing up (except it be in a gown and hood). He refused to own a suit and, like Dr Franklyn, as Nick tells us in his recent book on the irascible physician, wouldn't attend functions at which very formal dress was required. He also wasn't pompous about academic dress and refused to condemn some of the rather spurious societies which sprang up, each of them with their garish gowns and hoods. Indeed, he designed costumes for many of them, and some he had created himself, such as his Norwich University, through which he awarded degrees to several of his friends. I like to think that Burgon reined him in a little and gave that brilliant mind a forum in which to focus his talents.

His flat in Norwich was a sort of cross between the London Library and a robe-maker's stockroom, surrounded as he was with books, and boxes and boxes of hoods, bought, borrowed, given, some he had made himself and some from his own designs.

Visits to him in Norwich were always full of laughter, such as that made by Bruce Christianson, Paul Coxon and me, last November. The visits were a sort of liturgy and followed a form, as first we sat in a pub putting the world to rights. Then the walk through Town, via the Cathedral, to sticky buns and tea at his place, with the inevitable hood fondling, all along commenting on what had once been where and what was being built. He was a natural guide and what he didn't know about Norwich was not worth knowing.

His health deteriorated rapidly in early 2023: his back began to play up and some of his emails began to be rather vague. Eventually, it dawned that something was up. Not hearing from him for a couple of weeks, I mailed him in early June. His reply was prescient: 'the back's a bit better thanks, but I feel terminally fatigued.' None of us foresaw quite what was happening, and the end was swift.

We have much to think about as a Society by way of preserving his work and honouring his memory, but for now, farewell Nick, thank you for all the scholarship and laughter. God bless you and thank you.