

Academical Dress at Platt Hall, Manchester

by Susan North

On Thursday 11 August 2005, several current and former members of Burgon Council visited the Gallery of English Costume at Platt Hall, Rusholme, Manchester to look at the academical dress in their collections. They hold some early-twentieth-century examples from Liverpool and Manchester. Notable items include gown, hood, facings and caps from James Smith and his wife Dorothy (née Johnson). Both won scholarships to Liverpool University and graduated in 1909. Phil Lowe thinks these may be the earliest surviving Liverpool academical dress, pending information from Liverpool Museum. Also interesting was the comparison of quality between the two gowns. James's was made by L., Y. & J. Nathan of Liverpool and Dorothy's by C. & S. Burkinshaw. Although of similar fabric, Nathan's gown was better quality than Burkinshaw's with more hand finishing and better binding. Nathan's sleeves hang better. While the Burkinshaw label says 'robemakers', curator Anthea Jarvis pointed out that they also made and sold 'civilian' dress. Another observation made on the whole collection was that while the length of the gown was obviously relative to the height of the wearer, sleeve lengths appeared fairly standard. The 'vertically challenged' might end up trailing their sleeves on the floor!

We looked at a spectacular set of robes for the Chancellor of the University of Manchester, worn by the Earl of Crawford and Lord Woolton. Equally interesting were some DMus Manchester robes belonging to E. C. Jarvis (Anthea's father-in-law). He was organist for Liverpool University and of St George's Hall, Liverpool, and wore his robes regularly for many years. They were probably originally made in 1930, but the pale gold silk facings of the scarlet robe wore out and were replaced in the 1960s with a synthetic fabric. A torn and mended hanging loop, thread-bare label and shoe polish-smudged hem attest to a very hard-working gown.

Other academical dress at Platt Hall includes: an MA Manchester gown and hood worn by Miss C. M. Davey (1926); an MA Manchester gown and cap belonging to Howard Axon (1960) and an MA Manchester gown, hood and two caps worn by Mary Mabel Barber (1909). We wondered if the predominance of gowns from women (compared to their small number as students) indicates the value that university education represented for those women determined and clever enough to pursue it in the early twentieth century, and for their descendants.

Robemakers' labels were very interesting, often bearing addresses. A valuable future research project lies in studying city and telephone directories, and newspaper advertisements to gather more information about the companies which made academical dress in Manchester and Liverpool in the early twentieth century and their relationship to mainstream tailoring as well as specialist legal and clerical robemaking.

Our sincere thanks to Anthea Jarvis for allowing us to study the academical dress at Platt Hall.

Burgon Society On-line Bibliography

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- The aim is to build up a comprehensive resource for those researching the design, history and practice of academical dress.
- The *Introduction* is a brief survey of the key materials on academical dress that are either in print or available in the larger public and university libraries.
- The *Alphabetical list* that follows is intended to cover what has been published on the subject since the beginning of the nineteenth century; earlier items are listed if they include engravings that provide important evidence of robes of the period.
- Suggestions for additions (or corrections) are welcome. Please e-mail editor@burgon.org.uk