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The Evolution of Undergraduate Academic Dress at the University of Cambridge and its Constituent Colleges

By Brian Newman

This article is the product of a number of years of research and of assembling a collection of prints and other images of the undergraduate dress of members of the various colleges of the University down the years. This collection has been augmented by those of others.

Specifically, I have researched a number of publications, from the Burgon Society and others, accessing the archive at the Cambridge University Library and making enquiry of the archivist of each of the colleges as well as of those few remaining robemakers that supply members of the University.

The University Library archive was short on detail, consisting very largely of correspondence with Heads of Houses and others about whether undergraduates should still be required to wear gowns on certain occasions (e.g., to lectures, to examinations) and very little about the actual design of the dress. Similarly, the response from the college archivists yielded very little; what I could glean is repeated later in this paper. I did however receive some images of interesting entries from very old Ede & Ravenscroft ledgers, but unfortunately the archivist was unable to date them for me. These also feature later, in the Appendix.

Introduction: from class to college

This paper charts the development of the distinctive academic costume worn by undergraduate members of England's second oldest university, Cambridge.

It follows the evolution in undergraduate academic dress from differentiation based upon social class and wealth (and regulated as such by the University) to one of differentiation, in most historical cases at least, by the college of which undergraduates are members, about which the University's only current stipulation is that gowns should be knee-length.¹ This is unlike the evolution from a similar class-based and wealth-based scheme at the University of Oxford to one based on academic achievement, a commoner's attire being very distinctly different from that of a scholar, or (in some cases) an exhibitioner. As a consequence of the abolition of entrance awards to Oxford, the sole wearers of a scholar's gown in a cohort of undergraduate fresh-men and women at matriculation are now the chapel musicians, the choral and organ scholars! Whereas at both Cambridge and Oxford

I would like to acknowledge the encouragement that I have received from Fellows of the Burgon Society in this endeavour, especially Dr Alex Kerr, whose knowledge of, in particular, the images of academic dress is nothing short of encyclopaedic.

¹ Cambridge University Ordinance relating to Academical Dress created under Statute B, VI,1, adopted by Grace of the Senate, 13 June 1889, relating to all dress for graduates and may also contain this stipulation for undergraduates. However, Dr Alex Kerr informs me that it does not appear in the Ordinances up to 1911 that he has viewed. It does appear in the *Cambridge University Reporter* of 17 May 1932.

the University regulates the academic dress of its respective graduates, both show little interest in regulating undergraduate attire, being left over the years largely to colleges and robemakers and at Oxford 'entirely governed by precedent',² the exception at Cambridge being headress.

The early classes of undergraduate were as follows:

- nobleman, heir to a peerage
- fellow-commoner (if younger son of a peer or heir to a baronetcy then a 'hat' fellow-commoner)
- pensioner (if a scholar then a foundationer)
- sizar

Today this is reduced to pensioner, scholar and exhibitioner, with, in some colleges, the term sizar relating to those with significant bursaries.³ The title fellow-commoner still exists in some colleges, but is now an honorary award of status, similar to but junior to the award of honorary fellow.

The requirement to wear academic dress on specific occasions has also altered over the years, very notably over the last sixty or so. Until the early 1960s it was required for members of the University to wear gowns after dark when out of college in the town. All Arts faculties required gowns to be worn for lectures and examinations, and all colleges required it likewise when visiting one's Tutor, Director of Studies, the Dean or the Master. It was required attire for dining in Hall every evening and for attending Chapel. Some colleges, for example King's, required the wearing of a surplice for Chapel rather than a gown.

Today, some more liberal colleges hardly require gowns to be worn at all, let alone surplices.⁴

Origins

Academic dress in England is a direct descendent of the medieval dress of those in, or preparing for, holy orders. This consisted of a closed, narrow-sleeved garment, not dissimilar to a cassock.⁵ In addition, undergraduates also had a small, unlined hood, important in winter as often their heads were tonsured. Figure 1 shows Chaucer's Clerk of Oxenford wearing this type of clothing. Some students also wore a tabard over this *supertunica*.⁶ Many of the students, but by no means all, were destined for holy orders; there is an interesting modern parallel of Roman Catholic seminarians wearing garb similar to priests, namely clerical collar and multi-button cassock, or black suit, even though not themselves ordained.

2 Andrew James Peter North, 'The Development of the Academic Dress of the University of Oxford 1920–2012', *TBS*, 13 (2013), pp. 101–41 (pp. 117–18) at <newprairiepress.org/burgonsociety> <https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1111>.

3 For example, Churchill College, a twentieth-century foundation, offers sizarships for promotion of music, theatre and visual arts. See <www.chu.cam.ac.uk/student-hub/resources/financial-support/sizarships/> [retrieved 10 June 2021].

4 At a recent formal dinner in my own college, Sidney Sussex, whereas everyone at High Table, where I was dining, wore academic gowns, many of the undergraduates did not.

5 W. N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *A History of Academical Dress in Europe until the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 4–6.

6 Alex Kerr, 'The Turbulent History of Undergraduate Academic Dress', *Burgon Notes*, 17 (Summer 2011), pp. 2–3 (p. 2).

Towards the end of the fourteenth century, scholars of King's Hall (founded in 1317 by Edward II, and absorbed into the later foundation of Trinity College by Henry VIII) were ordered to wear a long outer garment, the *roba talaris*.⁷ This ankle-length gown, similar to that worn at Oxford, would be specified also for wear at Henry VI's foundations at Eton College (1440) and King's College, Cambridge (1441), together with a short tabard and a cloth hood.⁸ This most ancient form of hood was 'that which was sewed or tied to the upper part of a coat or gown, and brought over the head for a covering, in the same manner as a cowl: but when caps were introduced the hoods became an ornament of the shoulders and back; they were then enlarged and lined with skins.'⁹



Fig. 1. Chaucer's Clerk of Oxenford.

Early in the fifteenth century we see evidence of the 'class' distinction evolving in undergraduate academic dress, which was to persist into the nineteenth century and that based on wealth into the twentieth century. By an enactment of the University Congregation in 1414 for the regularizing of the dress of noblemen members of the University, it was laid down that whilst adhering to the general *talaris* scholars' dress, noblemen were permitted silk facings, similar to masters gremial (in residence at the University).¹⁰

The sixteenth century

After 1500, the tabard was left off and the *roba talaris* tunic evolved into the early open gown. The sleeves were no longer tight like a cassock, but widened into a bell shape.¹¹ By the 1530s all college gowns were black, with a cloth hood to match. However, with the founding by Henry VIII of Trinity College in 1546, this was to change. The College's Foundation Statutes indicate that gowns should be blue, but probably violet was originally intended.

In 1549, scholars on the foundation were ordered by parliamentary visitors to wear square caps to differentiate them from non-foundationers, who were wearing round caps, as worn at the time by the general populace and having no particular academic significance. Apart from some future stipulations on head-dress, most notably in the eighteenth century, thereafter undergraduate costume is largely left to the colleges, and to the town's tailors.¹² This is in distinct contrast to the dress of graduates which was, and still is, closely regulated by the University.

7 Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 131, referencing T. Rymer, *Foedera*, 9 vols (London: A. and J. Churchill, 1709), Vol. VII (1373–97), p. 242.

8 Foundation Statutes, King's College, (De habitu Sociorum et Scholarium 1441); see also Martin Lewis, 'Weaving the Fabric of Success: Exploring Academic Attire at Eton College from 1440', *TBS*, 18 (2018), pp. 107–21 (pp. 110–12), <https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1158>.

9 Christopher Wordsworth, *Social Life at the English Universities in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell & Co., 1874), p. 487.

10 Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 128, referencing Cambridge University Library, Enactment of a Congregation in 1414, MS 4.47, §176, fols 271 (65)ff.

11 Kerr, 'The Turbulent History', p. 2.

12 Hargreaves-Mawdsley, pp. 132–33.

In 1557, Cardinal Archbishop Reginald Pole, who had the honour of being not only the Chancellor of the University but at the same time was also Chancellor of Oxford, published his Statutes. He was himself of noble birth, being a great-nephew of both Edward IV and of Richard III. He permitted noblemen and their sons to wear at the University any manner of dress that they liked, the logic being that they were living entirely at their own expense.¹³

Gonville Hall, which had been founded in 1348 and was the fourth oldest college, was re-founded in 1557 by Dr John Caius, also spelled Keys, hence the pronunciation. In 1558 Caius instructed all College members *in statu pupillari* (that is, undergraduates and those with the Bachelor of Arts degree who had yet to proceed to Master of Arts) to wear a *vestis*, a long ankle-length gown, with full sleeves and having a standing collar. This was to be made of black or violet cloth, or some colour between the two.¹⁴ This move away from black would doubtless have annoyed the fellows of Trinity, and would resonate again nearly four hundred years later when the College authorities chose a very distinctive undergraduate gown design in the 1830s. In sympathy with the Catholic revival under Queen Mary, who died in November of 1558, Dr Caius required students to wear a cassock (*tunica*) under this gown, whether or not the wearer was in holy orders.¹⁵

The University statutes of 1560 permit the wearing of a distinctive mourning dress. This is a 'sad coloured' gown of priestly shape as an alternative to normal academic dress;¹⁶ the square cap has wide black ribbons across its diagonals with a black rosette at the intersection. In addition to mark the death of the Chancellor or a member of the royal family, the skull cap part of the hat was decorated with small black bows of ribbon. However, its use was abused by undergraduates as it gave commoners the look of graduates. As we shall see later, in the following century its use was greatly restricted as a consequence. This square cap is being worn by the Master of Arts with his hood squared in Figure 16.

Cardinal Pole ceased to be Chancellor in 1559 and was succeeded by Sir William Cecil, who had entered St John's College at the age of fourteen, but never took a degree—not unusual for someone not destined for the Church. Seven years after becoming Chancellor, he instructed that noblemen's academic dress should be brought into line with those of other undergraduates though the garments could be altogether richer.¹⁷ By 1570, the prescribed dress for pensioners was the same that lasted for nigh on two hundred years, and in the case of some colleges even longer: a gown was worn down to the ankles and a round bonnet with a band and large brim—similar to lay hats of the period. This lay type of gown, similar to the commoner's gown today at Oxford, but to the ground, was the dress of all colleges with large pensioner populations. Those colleges with mainly fellow-commoners and other foundation members, namely King's, Queens', Peterhouse and Trinity Hall, had a gown similar to the Bachelor of Arts gown. Furthermore, a scholar was forbidden 'to wear a plumed hat, except he be unwell'. Those not noblemen were also 'forbidden from wearing a camisia or plaited ruff about the neck'.¹⁸

13 Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 132, referencing J. Heywood, *A Collection of Statutes of the University and Colleges of Cambridge* (London: Clowes, 1840), pp. 241–43.

14 Ibid., p. 132, referencing *Documents Relating to the University and Colleges of Cambridge*, 3 vols (1852), Vol. II, pp. 258–60, ¶27 (De Vestitu).

15 Ibid., p. 132.

16 Ibid., p. 136, referencing C. H. Cooper, *Annals of the University of Cambridge*, 5 vols (Cambridge: Warwick, 1842–53), Vol. II, pp. 161–62.

17 Ibid., p. 129, referencing C. H. Cooper, Vol. II, p. 230.

18 Wordsworth, *Social Life*, pp. 459–60.

To illustrate the rapid way that religious sentiment was changing in Cambridge at this time, in the year that Cecil was created Baron Burghley by Queen Elizabeth, 1571, the wearing of the almuce by priests, a cape covered in fur and an alternative to an academic hood, was forbidden in Cambridge. This was a mere thirteen years after Dr Caius had prescribed Catholic-leaning attire at his college at the very end of Queen Mary's reign.

In 1585, and repeated in 1588, Chancellor Lord Burghley made an order for the apparel of undergraduates:

They might walk in cloake and hatt to and fro the fields. Also within his College, Hall, Hostell or Habitation it was lawful for any student to wear a gowne, or gaberdyne of playne Turkye fashion with a round falling cape without garde, welte lace, cutt or silke except one cutt in the sleeves therof to putt out his arms onllye ... Also that everie graduate wearing the above gown and gaberdyne within the Universitie or Towne out of his Chamber or lodging doe weare withal in the day tyme a square cap and none other, no hatt to be worn except for infirmities sake with a kerchiffe about his head, or in going to an fro the fieldes, or in the street or open ayre when it shall happen to rayne, hayle or snowe; the hatt which shal be worne to be blacke, and the band or lace of the hatt to be of the same colour, playne and not excessive in bigness, without feather brooche or such lyke uncomelye for Students. And the gowne sleeves in all these tymes and place to be worn over and upon his armes (except he walke in his cloake and hatt to and from the fieldes).¹⁹

Thus, scholars and those on the foundation should wear the round cap, but allowing noblemen to have them made from velvet, in other words richer in line with his earlier edict for noblemen (this would appear to be at odds with the stipulation of the parliamentary visitors in 1549, that foundationers should be distinguished from other undergraduates by wearing a square cap). Graduates, however, would be distinguished, *inter alia*, by having the square cap. The 1588 edict also for the first time refers to the position of a sizar, one who was from a poor background and therefore contributed toward his board and studies by waiting at table, helping in the kitchen and so forth.

By the beginning of the reign of Elizabeth I, the statute dress for undergraduates had become a dark coloured gown with a cloth hood to match.²⁰ However, by the end of her reign, in 1603, marking the end of the Tudor period, the wearing of hoods by undergraduates had gone out of fashion.²¹

The seventeenth century

Dr Cosin, the Master of Peterhouse, wrote in 1636 to Archbishop Laud 'that at Trinitie and otherwise at Caius,' his order for wide-sleeved gowns was kept, but informed him also that 'others all that are undergraduates, wear the new fashioned gowns of any colour whatever, blue or green or red or mixed, without any uniformity but in hanging sleeves.'²² Whether this 'all' referred to noblemen who were undergraduates—which would seem reasonable—or to all undergraduates is not clear.

The priestly almuce having been banned in 1571, in 1603 the University, however, reinforced that surplices were to be worn in chapel by all members of the University on

¹⁹ C. H. Cooper, Vol. II, p.411

²⁰ Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 132.

²¹ H. P. Stokes, *Ceremonies of the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), p. 45.

²² Wordsworth, *Social Life*, p. 513.

Sundays and major Feasts. This was in accordance with the Canons of the Church of England, which stated that:

ALL Masters and Fellows of Colleges or Halls, and all the Scholars and Students in either of the Universities, shall in their Churches and Chapels upon all Sundays, Holy-days and their Eves, at the time of Divine Service, wear Surplices according to the Order of the Church of England: and such as are Graduates, shall agreeably wear with their Surplices such Hoods as do severally appertain unto their Degrees.²³

However, in 1643 the Long Parliament ruled that members of the University could opt out of the wearing of a surplice if they so decided.²⁴ This led to its almost total abandonment, and especially during the barren years of the Commonwealth. In a further *volte face*, following the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, the wearing of surplices was once again insisted upon. This remained so in certain colleges well into the twentieth century.²⁵

In 1651 Oliver Cromwell replaced Edward Montagu, Earl of Manchester, as Chancellor with Oliver St John, a friend of Cromwell's father-in-law. With the Restoration he in turn was supplanted and the Earl of Manchester returned to office. It would seem that following the dismal days of the Commonwealth, there was an over-reaction by members of the University. In 1662, the University sent a detailed statement to Dr Whitgift, the Archbishop of Canterbury:

'Disorders tending to the decaye of learning and other dissolute behaviours.' Specifically, it was complained that the academical habit of members of the university was disused and the 'Scholars now goe in their Silkes and Velvets liker to Courtiers then Schollers.'²⁶

It goes on to complain to the Archbishop about the specific apparel of 'Ecclesiastical Persons' indicating that night caps should only be black (but nevertheless in silk, satin or velvet!) and 'that they wear not any light-coloured stockings'.²⁷

As above, we learn that undergraduates had for some time been misusing the privilege of wearing mourning dress as it meant that they could be taken for graduates. In 1681 the Vice-Chancellor of the University finally forbade the wearing of mourning dress for anyone below the rank of Master of Arts.²⁸

During this century the various grades of undergraduate student appear to have fully matured. This, as I mentioned earlier, was more about rank in society and wealth than academic prowess, although, in some cases, scholar and exhibitioner appear to be distinguished from pensioner. A similar pecking order existed at Oxford and at Trinity College, Dublin, and in a simpler form at the ancient Scottish universities.²⁹

The list is as follows:

- nobleman or heir
- hat fellow-commoner, being either a baronet or a younger son of a nobleman

23 Canon XVII of the Church of England, 1604.

24 Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 136, referencing C. H. Cooper, Vol. III, p. 336.

25 Indeed, strictly speaking, until the adoption of a complete new set of Canons by the Convocation of Canterbury in 1964, all members of Cambridge colleges should have been wearing surplices in chapel on the aforementioned Sundays and major Feasts.

26 A. G. Almond, *Gowns and Gossip* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1925), p. 9.

27 Ibid.

28 Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 136.

29 Kerr, 'The Turbulent History', p. 2; Hargreaves-Mawdsley, pp. 91–101, 148–49; Jonathan C. Cooper, 'The Scarlet Gown: History and Development of Scottish Undergraduate Dress', *TBS*, 10

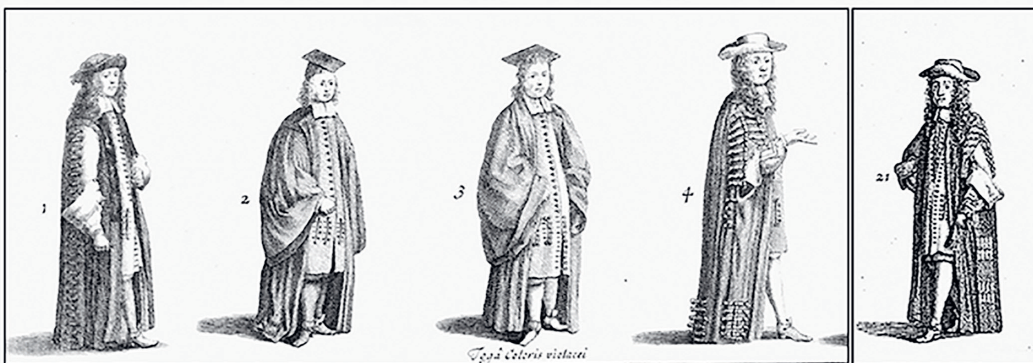


Fig. 2A. Five undergraduates depicted by Logan, *Cantabrigia Illustrata*, 1690.

- fellow-commoner
- pensioner (if a scholar or exhibitioner then called a foundationer)
- sizar
- subsizar

As a constituent of his *Cantabrigia Illustrata* series published in 1690 in Cambridge, David Logan depicts in ‘Habitus Academici in Universitate Cantabrigiensi’ the dress of members of the undergraduate population as well as of graduates (see Fig. 2A). This was copied in 1707 by publisher Pieter, or Pierre, Van der Aa of Leiden for a plate ‘Habits ordinaires des personnes qui composent l’Université de Cambridge’ in James Beeverell’s *Délices de la Grand’ Bretagne et de l’Irlande*.

This shows the dress of five different undergraduates:

- Firstly, an undergraduate of unspecified college, whose gown to the floor appears to have hanging sleeves with an armhole at the shoulder, decorated their full length with horizontal decoration and wearing a circular wide-brimmed hat.
- Secondly, a student of King’s College and certain other foundations. This shows what would appear to be a very long gown with bell sleeves and a square cap with a tump or pompom.
- Thirdly, an undergraduate student of Trinity College, wearing a gown similar to the second but specified as being violet in colour.³⁰ With the cap pushed back we cannot see if once more there is a tump on the board.
- Fourthly, a fellow-commoner, in a very elaborate long gown, with long hanging sleeves with a slit at the elbow, very generously decorated at the shoulder and all down the sleeve. He is wearing a ‘regular’ circular hat with a wide brim.
- Finally (in another part of the plate), a nobleman, also in an elaborate state gown with sleeves to the ground, the upper parts of which are richly decorated, with patterns

(2010), pp. 8–42 (pp. 18, 23–25, 34, 38), <https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1082>.
³⁰ Hargreaves-Mawdsley suggests that the undergraduate gowns of King’s College, Queens’ College, and Trinity Hall are shorter than those at Trinity College. Dr Alex Kerr in his article critiquing the work of Hargreaves-Mawdsley correctly observes that they are no different in length (‘Hargreaves-Mawdsley’s *History of Academic Dress* and the Pictorial Evidence for Great Britain and Ireland: Notes and Corrections’, *TBS*, 8 (2008), pp. 106–50 (p. 140), <https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1066>).



Fig. 2B. Engraving of figures after Loggan, *The Universal Magazine*, March 1748.

lower on the sleeve Although not clear from this black and white image the gown is probably made from fine coloured silk. He, like the fellow-commoner, is wearing a 'regular' circular hat with a wide brim.

The silk undress gowns of noblemen (different from that depicted in Loggan), as also of the fellows, specifically of King's College, were enhanced by 'bishop's sleeves', so called as they were gathered at the wrist like a bishop's rochet.³¹

The 'other foundations' would seem to be Peterhouse (the University's oldest college), Queens', and Trinity Hall. These colleges admitted primarily fellow-commoners who paid full fees and were of such a status as to sit for meals in Hall with the fellows rather than with the other pensioner undergraduates. At other colleges, which admitted fewer fellow-commoners but mainly pensioners and sizars, undergraduates continued to wear the first gown show by Loggan, which later lost its sleeves and was nicknamed 'the curtain.'

³¹ William Gibson, 'The Regulation of Undergraduate Academic Dress at Oxford and Cambridge, 1660–1832', *Burgon Society Annual 2004*, pp. 26–41 (p. 29) at <newprairiepress.org/burgonsociety> <https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1027>, referencing J. R. Tanner (ed.), *The Historical Register of the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917), p. 197.

Interestingly Loggan and Van der Aa both depict the sons of noblemen as being shorter than others—at this time many came up to the University in only their early or mid-teens. This had been the case since the early sixteenth century.

The eighteenth century

We are fortunate that in the eighteenth century a number of wealthy undergraduates, noblemen and in particular fellow-commoners, had their likenesses painted in portraits or miniatures. For the first time we can see for ourselves the bright-coloured and heavily decorated gowns sported by noblemen. There are also some more modest images in black and white of ‘ordinary’ undergraduates.

John Byrom, the polymath, is pictured in Figure 3 in 1707 as an undergraduate of Trinity College. What appear to be buttons down the facings of his gown may simply be his coat underneath. His headgear is not the traditional square but a John Knox Cap and he is wearing academic bands.

Painted in 1736 by William Hogarth, Figure 4 illustrates a portrait of Thomas Western, a fellow-commoner of Clare College. This shows a full-length gown with long, closed sleeves, much decorated with gold embellishment at the shoulder, down the sleeves and around the hem and a square cap with gold tassel.

The *Universal Magazine* published an article in March 1748 together with the plate shown in Figure 2B. Whilst it is fifty-eight years after Loggan, it is clearly copied from his engraving. Interestingly, however, whereas Loggan illustrated an undergraduate of King’s College, this image is now entitled ‘A scholar of a perticular [*sic*] foundation’ and Loggan’s nobleman has become ‘a nobleman’s son’ who, as in Loggan, is noticeably shorter in stature than the other figures shown.

The American Ralph Wormeley V, of Rosegill, Virginia, was painted in 1763 wearing his robes as a fellow-commoner of Trinity Hall. This illustrates well how lavishly decorated they were with gold braid (Fig. 5).

Most noblemen appear to have favoured a lavish gown in blue or violet. Viscount Fitzwilliam was painted, by Joseph Wright of Derby, in his nobleman’s gown when he was an undergraduate at Trinity Hall (1761–64). Figure 6 shows him in a gown of pink (as in ‘hunting pink’) with decorations of gold. The gown has inverted-T armholes and appears also to have pink strings.

By the middle of this century the distinction between the two grades of fellow-commoner, as opposed to a nobleman, was now clear. The eldest sons of, and therefore heirs to, a baronet or younger sons of noblemen, were as fellow-commoners permitted on other than formal occasions to wear a normal hat. They therefore became known as ‘hat fellow-commoners’. Ordinary fellow-commoners were required at all times to wear the academic square. At the same time a University regulation ordered those *in statu pupillari* (all except noblemen and fellow-commoners) to wear clothes of ‘grave colour’ without lace, fringe or embroidery and without bright colours.³²

In 1769 the University changed the cap of all remaining undergraduates from round to square. Why? It is suggested that this was a campaign led by Charles Farish to petition

³² Gibson, p. 35, referencing Christopher Wordsworth, *The Undergraduate: From Dr. Christopher Wordsworth’s ‘Social Life at the English Universities in the Eighteenth Century’*, rev., abridged and rearranged with an introduction by R. Brimley Johnson (London: Stanley Paul, 1928), p. 119.

Heads of Houses on behalf of those pensioner undergraduates who wanted removal of the class distinction in headgear.³³ At the same time a letter was sent to the Duke of Grafton by Alexander Clere of Corpus Christi College, requesting him to obtain the Government's consent so that a form of dress more decent and becoming might attend his Grace's installation as Chancellor.³⁴ The request for change was granted.³⁵ However, the foundation scholars and exhibitors continued with the round hat with the tump and no tassel. Sizars and sub-sizars had the same caps as pensioners except no tassel on the square cap. Previously their headgear had been a black cloth bonnet with a brim of prunella (worsted twill) or silk.

A number of portraits were painted in the last decade of the century by the artist Silvester Harding, which show us exactly how fellow-commoners were attired. Among these, and painted c. 1790, is a watercolour of Marmaduke Dayrell, a fellow-commoner of Christ's College. He is shown in an ankle-length gown with closed sleeves and inverted-T armholes. The sleeves are decorated by a gold band around the end of the sleeve about one inch in from the bottom. From shoulder to armhole the gown is lavishly decorated with gold braid, and the gown also appears to have external padded shoulders, also lavishly decorated in gold braid. Dayrell is wearing an academic square with a gold tassel, which appears to fall both to left and to right at the front. In 1794 the artist painted another watercolour of a fellow-commoner, this time of J. T. Nottage of Trinity College. His gown, as would be expected of a member of Trinity is not black but blue (originally specified as violet, but at some time clearly blue became preferred). The gown is similar in style to that of Marmaduke Dayrell's, but the decoration is of silver rather than gold braid. There is also the very characteristic 'Trinity' wavy pattern of braid down each of the facings. Once again, the tassel on the academic square appears to divide right and left but, as with the gown, it is silver rather than gold. Unfortunately, because of the current access restrictions it has not been possible to obtain copies of these images from the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, and there are no photographic images in their archive.

Harding painted a miniature of Charles Douglas of Jamaica in 1793. Figure 7 shows him attired as a fellow-commoner of Pembroke College, in a black gown, heavily decorated with gold lace, similar to that in the portrait of Ralph Wormeley. Although not dated, Figure 8 shows Francis Alexander Halliday, a fellow-commoner of Trinity College. His gown is in the distinctive blue of Trinity rather than black, much decorated in silver, rather than gold with a glimpse of the characteristic wavy pattern down the facings. Finally, we can see Harding's miniature painted in 1795 of J. N. Ord in the gown of a pensioner of Trinity College in Figure 9. This is clearly shown as the distinctive blue colour with black facings.³⁶

33 Gibson, p. 36, noting that Farish was also campaigning for the University to allow fellows to marry; see also Wordsworth, *Social Life*, p. 511, referencing Farish's *Toleration of Marriage in the Universities Recommended to the Attention of the Heads of Houses* (Cambridge: Hodson, 1799), p. 44.

34 Stokes, p. 47.

35 Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 134, referencing C. H. Cooper, Vol. iv, p. 355.

36 The miniatures are watercolours commissioned by Sir Busick Harwood. They are in the collections of Downing College (DCPP/HAR/4) and can be viewed in the University of Cambridge Digital Library at <culdl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-DCPP-HAR-00004/3> [retrieved 10 June 2021].



Fig. 3. Etching of John Byrom, as an undergraduate at Trinity College, 1707.



Fig. 4. Thomas Western, fellow-commoner of Clare College by Wm Hogarth, 1736.



Virginia Museum of History and Culture

Fig. 5. Ralph Wormeley, fellow-commoner of Trinity Hall, 1763.



Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Fig. 6. Viscount Fitzwilliam in nobleman's gown, by Joseph Wright of Derby, c. 1764.



Fig. 7. Miniatures by Silvester Harding. Charles Douglas of Jamaica, fellow-commoner of Pembroke College, 1793.



Fig. 8. Francis Alexander Halliday, fellow-commoner of Trinity College, n.d.



Fig. 9. J. N. Ord, pensioner at Trinity College.

Figs 7 – 9: The Master, Fellows, and Scholars of Downing College in the University of Cambridge



Fig. 10. Pensioner, by Richard Harraden, 1805.



Fig. 11. Pensioner of Trinity College, by Richard Harraden, 1805.

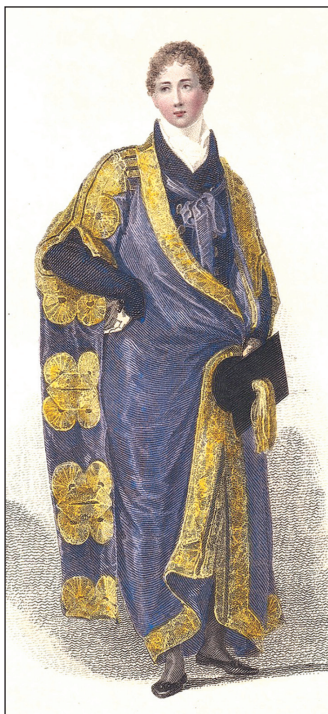


Fig. 12. Nobleman, by R. Ackermann, 1815.



Fig. 14. Fellow-commoner of, possibly, St John's College, by R. Ackermann, 1815.



Fig. 13. Nobleman and fellow-commoners of Emanuel [sic] and Trinity Colleges by R. Ackermann, 1815.

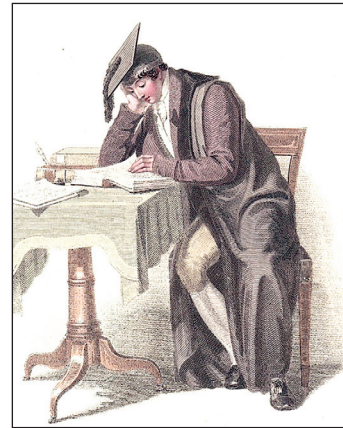


Fig. 15. Pensioner wearing the sleeveless gown, with velvet facings by R. Ackermann, 1815.

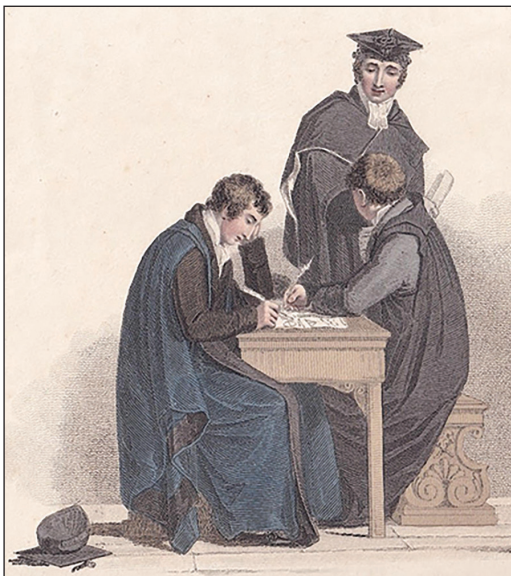


Fig. 16. A pensioner of Trinity College and a sizar with an MA in squared hood and mourning cap, by R. Ackermann, 1815.

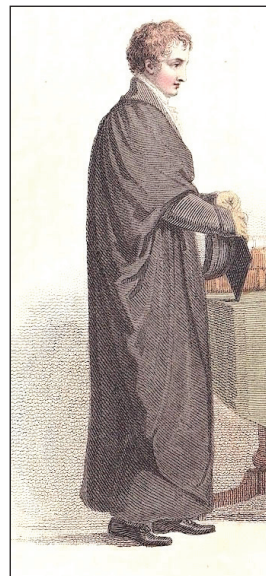


Fig. 17. A pensioner of Trinity Hall, by R. Ackermann, 1815.

The nineteenth century

The new century opened with the founding of Downing College in 1800. This was the first college foundation since the founding of Sidney Sussex College over two hundred years earlier in the reign of Elizabeth I, in 1596. It would appear from the start that this was to be a college for only fellow-commoners, and no pensioner undergraduates.

The next few decades saw the publication of a number of sets of engravings depicting Cambridge academic dress, which give us a clear idea of how undergraduates were attired in the first half of the century, and in particular illustrate significant changes that were made to gowns in the 1830s.

In an early set of prints by Richard Harraden from 1803, *Costume of the Various Orders in the University of Cambridge*, we have confirmation of the attire of a pensioner at the turn of the century. This is a full-length sleeveless black gown. There appear to be no streamers, and the headgear is a standard black square (see Fig. 10). There were exceptions to this design. In 1805 Harraden states 'The pensioners of Trinity College are distinguished from all others by a blue gown with full sleeves made of Princes stuff (Fig. 11). The gowns of pensioners at Peterhouse, Queens', Trinity Hall and King's are nearly all the same as Trinity except that the former are all black'.³⁷ We can safely assume that, with these five exceptions, at the turn of the century all other pensioners wore the sleeveless pensioners' gowns, with, except for sizars, velvet facings and collars.

The series of excellent prints by John Samuel Agar after Thomas Uwins, published in 1814–15 by Rudolph Ackermann in his *History of the University of Cambridge*, is a wonderfully detailed record of undergraduate (and graduate) dress at this date.³⁸ The series contains the following of interest here:

- A nobleman (see Fig. 12). The image of the noble gentleman has been hand-coloured in blue (sometimes they were hand-coloured in violet) with very large gold embellishments on the long sleeves, shoulders and facings. Another is shown (see Fig. 13) in non-formal dress of black gown with short bell sleeves and a top hat.

- Fellow-commoners (see Fig. 13) of Emanuel [*sic*] College and Trinity College. The former wears a black gown heavily decorated in gold on the sleeves, shoulders and back, with a black velvet collar and carrying a top hat, signifying he is the son and heir of a baronet or younger son of a peer. The latter wears the characteristic blue gown of Trinity, richly decorated in silver and once again featuring the twisting silver braid on the facings. He is wearing the black square with a silver tassel.

- A fellow-commoner of, it would seem, St John's College, given the two horizontal gold strips of gold braid at the extremity of the sleeves, is also featured (see Fig. 14). The black of the gown could be in dispute, but it is heavily adorned with gold, and appears to have velvet facings. He wears a square with gold tassel.

- Three pensioners are shown. Figure 15 depicts a member of a college at that time still wearing the old-style pensioner's gown. The facings and flap collar are covered in black velvet. In Figure 16 we see a pensioner of Trinity College in a blue gown with slit bell sleeves and black facings. It appears that the inside edge of the blue sleeves is lined to about three inches in black. A standard black square lies on the floor beside him. The third is from Trinity Hall

³⁷ Almond, p. 17, referencing R. Harraden, *Costume of the Various Orders in the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge: Harraden, 1805), unnumbered pages.

³⁸ See Nicholas Jackson (ed.), *Ackermann's Costumes of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge* (London: Burgon Society, 2016), pp. 33–64.

(see Fig. 17). This is the 'basic' long open-sleeved gown also worn by members of Peterhouse and Queens'. Trinity Hall's gown is later split partway up the arm and secured by a cord and button.³⁹ This is not clear from the Ackermann print and must be a later modification.

- Figure 16 also shows a sizar. He wears a very basic black sleeveless gown, with no velvet trimming.

Etchings from 1824, by the unknown 'R.A.R' (see Fig. 18), illustrate a nobleman in dress (here called 'State Robe') very similar to that as depicted in Ackermann's image of only a decade earlier, also in blue rather than violet, with hanging sleeves decorated in gold.

A second image (see Fig. 19) depicts a number of fellow-commoners. Those of St John's and Emmanuel Colleges appear very similar, save that there are three strips of horizontal gold at the base of the long, closed sleeve of the Emmanuel gown whereas the Ackermann print show only one. That for St John's College is shown with two. Both are wearing academic squares with gold tassels. The fellow-commoner of Trinity College is in the characteristic blue gown, with silver adornment, and the wavy pattern on the facings and at the base of the closed sleeve.

The Downing College black gown is heavily adorned on the sleeve, shoulder, back and facings, with black braid and tassels, quite different from the gold and silver trimmings of the other colleges.⁴⁰ The hat is square with a gold tassel.

The final member of the group is a bit of an anomaly. It is a 'Married' fellow-commoner, wearing a very plain black mourning gown with full sleeves gathered at the wrist and a plain square with what appears to be a grey tassel. He also rather poignantly is wearing very glum expression—probably a joke at his loss of single state!

Harraden's son, Richard Bankes Harraden, published a further two plates of engravings entitled 'Costume of the University of CAMBRIDGE' in around 1830. One depicts nine UNDER GRADUATES (see Fig. 20) and its companion GRADUATES (not here included) featuring the Chancellor and eight graduates holding different degrees. In the Undergraduates image we see noblemen in 'dress' and 'undress' gowns, the former in blue with elaborate gold decoration and black square with gold tassel, the latter a plain black gown with full sleeves gathered at the forearm and a top hat. Whilst an elaborate black gown with considerable braid-and-tassel decoration, the Downing College fellow-commoners' gown nevertheless is not adorned with silver or gold, as are the other fellow-commoners depicted here from Trinity College, Emmanuel College (now once again showing a single horizontal gold strip at the base of the blind sleeve) and an unnamed college but, based on the earlier Silvester Harding portrait, almost certainly Christ's College. The Downing College square hat is nevertheless distinctive by having a gold tassel.

More interesting here are the pensioners' gowns. For St John's College it is the sleeveless 'curtain' at this date; the blue, long open-sleeved gown of Trinity College; but most particularly the very new design of gown for Corpus Christi (Benet's) College. This was the first of a new set of undergraduate gowns for those colleges which up until now wore the sleeveless black gown. It is black with open sleeves, similar to the basic Peterhouse design, but the facings are in black velvet. Unlike the Ackermann image, here we can see the gathered sleeve.

³⁹ Almond, p. 18.

⁴⁰ See Charles Rupert Tsua, 'A Study of the History and Use of Lace on Academic Gowns in the United Kingdom and Ireland', *TBS*, 12 (2012), pp. 103–27 (pp. 116, 118), <https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1103>.

Up until this time, the dress for scholars and exhibitioners, unlike at Oxford, conform to that of pensioners. The exceptions were scholars of King's College, Rustat Scholars of Jesus College, Patchett Scholars and Duchess of Somerset Exhibitioners of St John's College all of whom wore a bell-sleeved black gown of fine 'costume' cloth. Arms appear through gashes in the middle of the upper arm of the sleeve. Westminster scholars of Trinity College wore a black (not the usual Trinity blue) bell-sleeved gown with a violet button and loop at the bottom of the forearm sleeve.⁴¹

As mentioned above, the undergraduate gown of Corpus Christi College was the first of the old sleeveless gowns to be replaced by something similar to those worn at Peterhouse and Queens' College. In 1828 the undergraduates sent a petition to the College fellows requesting a more becoming gown. The minutes of a fellows' meeting of 27 November 1828 record that it had been 'Agreed that the gown which had commonly been worn by undergraduates of this college, be changed for one of the same gown as that commonly used by Bachelors of Arts, with the distinction of velvet facings. This change to take place at the beginning of next term'.⁴² This therefore dates the Richard Banks Harraden print to later than 1828 and, although undated, is believed to be 1830.

A further minute from a Corpus Christi fellows' meeting, of 14 December 1835, reports, 'Agreed that in compliance with the order of 27th November 1828, the gown worn by fellow-commoners of this College be changed for one of the same form as that commonly used by Bachelors of Arts and that it be made of silk with facings (of gold)'.⁴³ This design is confirmed by later images by Whittock and Hyde (Fig. 21) and others and was still in use in the 1960s.⁴⁴

A Clare College order of 18 May 1836 stated 'That the undergraduates of the college, having applied to be allowed to change the form of gown at present worn by them, the Master be requested to make application to the Chancellor of the University for his permission, the new form of gown being approved by the Master and Fellows in College'. It is understood that the wife of the then Master, William Webb, designed the new gown, by incorporating three velvet chevrons on the sleeves. These were mimicking the chevrons on the College's coat of arms.⁴⁵

In Gonville and Caius College there is a record dated 13 May 1837 'To adopt a new gown of the pattern agreed upon'.⁴⁶ There can be little debate but that the Caius gown is the most elaborate and decorative of any, blue with the whole forearm seam open, and with a strip of black velvet either side of the open seam. The facings and yoke are covered in black velvet. The blue colour harks back to the re-founding of the College by Dr Caius.

There would appear from my research with college archivists to be no other easily accessible records of fellows' meetings at which in the years 1835–37 all remaining colleges

41 Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 135, referencing Tanner, p. 196.

42 Almond, p. 19, having been permitted by Dr Pearce, when Vice-Chancellor, to see the College minutes.

43 Almond, *loc. cit.*

44 In 1969, Francis Davey, MA of New College, Oxford, who taught me the little Latin that I know, and went on to become Headmaster of Merchant Taylors' School, held a one-term teacher fellow-commonership at Corpus Christi College, and wore just such a gown when at Corpus, not himself being a Cambridge graduate. See also George W. Shaw, *Cambridge University Academic Dress, with Notes on Oxford Academic Dress* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 27–29.

45 Almond, pp.16–17.

46 Almond, p. 14, referencing the Caius Bursar having turned up the record, and then Dr Venn in his history of Caius states that use of the 'blue gown' commenced in 1837.

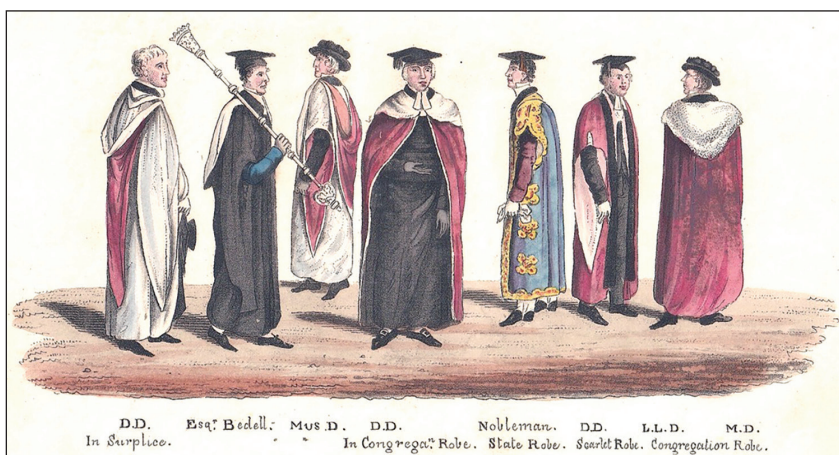


Fig. 18. Etching with hand colouring showing, third from right, a nobleman in a State Robe, by 'R.A.R.', 1824.



Fig. 19. Etching with hand colouring showing six fellow-commoners, by R.A.R., 1824.

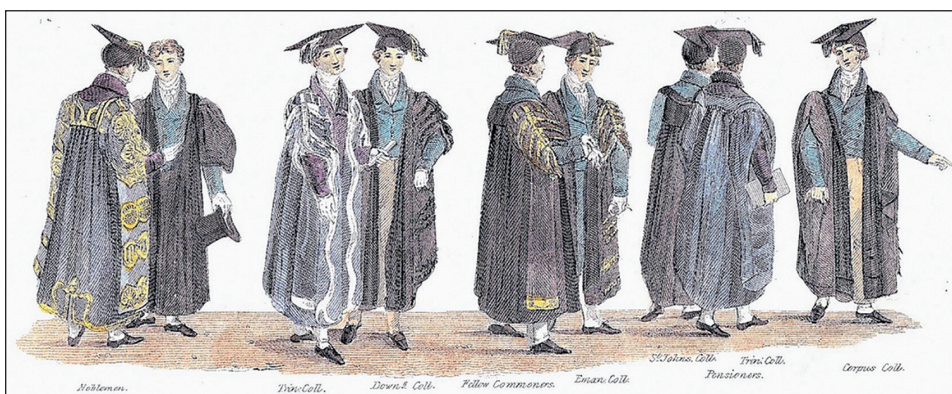


Fig. 20. Nine undergraduates, by Richard Banks Harraden, c. 1830.

agreed a variation of the Peterhouse and Queens' College gown. Whilst it was clearly not a matter for the University authorities, it is unclear whether the fellows had a hand in it, or simply delegated the 'customizing' to one of the tailors in the town. But by 1837 St John's, St Catharine's, Pembroke, Magdalene, Emmanuel and Sidney Sussex Colleges had all also adopted their own distinctive gowns for undergraduates, as had Downing, which heretofore since 1800 had made provision only for fellow-commoners.

Such large-scale changes to the undergraduate gowns brought forth several pocket-sized directories, in accordion-fold or folded-map format:

- *The Costumes of the Members of the University of Cambridge*, published c. 1843 by Nathaniel Whittock of London and Cambridge;

- *The Costumes of the Members of the University of Cambridge*, published c. 1850 by H. Hyde of No. 34 Richard Street, Islington, and sold by B. Stiel, Paternoster Row, London, and all Book and Printsellers in Cambridge (copied from Whittock, but a superior production—see Fig. 21).

- *Costumes of the University of Cambridge*, published 1862 by W. Metcalfe of Green Street, Cambridge (also copied from Whittock, but a much inferior production).

As well as details of the dress of the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor and of those with various degrees, and a nobleman, for each college these show a picture of a fellow-commoner and a pensioner.

Specifically, the changes to the pensioners' gown unique to each of the colleges as depicted in the three sources above and hitherto not elsewhere described, are:

St John's	four black velvet bars horizontally across each unslit sleeve
Jesus	unslit sleeve gathered in pleats and velvet strip from the pleats to top of forearm seam
Pembroke	unslit sleeve gathered and held by cord and button (as Trinity Hall)
Emmanuel	basic gown with slit sleeves and box pleats on the facings
St Catharine's	basic gown with slit sleeves facings in long vertical pleats
Magdalene	sleeve gathered in pleats
Sidney Sussex	four pleats in the sleeves
Downing	basic gown

Several colleges adopted a fellow-commoners' gown much in design like the pensioners' gowns but with trimmings in gold rather than black (as Downing College).

Whittock and Hyde show the fellow-commoners' gowns for Emmanuel and Sidney Sussex Colleges with gold trimming while Metcalfe shows it in black—this, however, looks like a fault in the printing. All three booklets have the undress gown of a nobleman with 'bishop's sleeves' in contrast to the earlier Ackermann image with short bell sleeves, and R. B. Harraden's with a gathered short sleeve.

There were some further changes to the distinctive pensioner gown designs after the 1830s. For example, Sidney Sussex College changed from four pleats on the closed sleeve to pleats in chevrons either side of the slit in the sleeve in the late 1870s.⁴⁷ At some point the Downing gown changed to an unslit sleeve with six broad pleats held by three black cords and buttons and also Trinity Hall, where the sleeve below the slit is left open and held across by two buttons and a cord.

47 Almond, p. 18, referencing the 'oldest maker of robes in Cambridge' as stating this change.

Apart from velvet trimmings on some gowns, the cloth of these pensioner gowns, whether black or blue, was 'Prince's stuff', the sole exception being King's which were 'costume cloth', as were some of the scholars' gowns. The former is made from a yarn of wool and silk, used at the time in making clerical gowns and mourning attire, whereas costume cloth is altogether heavier. Fellow-commoners' gowns were typically made of silk.

Six new institutions were founded towards the end of the century. The year 1869 saw the founding of Girton College, the first college in Cambridge for women, followed two years later in 1871 by the second women's college, Newnham. Two new men's colleges followed, Selwyn College in 1882 and in 1887 the formalizing of the Non-Collegiate Students' Board as Fitzwilliam Hall (later Fitzwilliam House and now Fitzwilliam College).

In addition, Hughes Hall, founded in 1885 for the postgraduate training of teachers, and St Edmund's House, founded in 1896 for admission for the first time of Roman Catholic students, became full colleges of the University only in 2006 and 1996 respectively; they are mainly for postgraduate students, who wear gowns appropriate to that status, but now both also admit mature (older than 21) undergraduates.

Homerton College was originally founded in London in 1695 for the education of Calvinist ministers, as English dissenters were barred by law from Cambridge or Oxford. In the early nineteenth century, it was, for a time, affiliated to the University of London, but this ended when theological teaching was transferred to New College, London. Thereafter it was re-founded solely for the training of men and women teachers for Board schools. It moved to Cambridge in 1894 to escape the industrialization of London's East End, and immediately became women-only, a mixed college being anathema to an all-male University at that time. It first re-admitted men in 1976, the year it also became an 'Approved Society' of the University, and students were awarded the Cambridge Bachelor of Education degree. It became a self-governing college of the University on 2010, offering study in all subjects. Gowns for these 'adopted' colleges are discussed in the next section.

The Selwyn and Fitzwilliam gowns are both distinctive. Selwyn is the 'standard' Peterhouse gown but with blue facings, Fitzwilliam with a velvet strip either side of the sleeve slit. Strangely, neither of the respective college archivists has been able to unearth any record of when or why these designs were arrived at. It might simply be that they also delegated the design and subsequent supply to one of the tailors in the town.

The twentieth century

With all of the changes occurring in society at large, gone now is the distinguishing academic dress for noblemen, although noblemen's sons and daughters still attend the University—but with greater anonymity than previously; indeed two of the present Queen's sons studied at the University and are Cambridge graduates. Whilst the title sizar has remained in a limited way, linked to very specific bursary support, the role of the sizar as little more than a servant 'working his passage' to a degree finally ceased in 1902.⁴⁸

Undergraduate gowns of 1862 are shown by Metcalfe as full-length, following Whittock and Hyde. The depiction of undergraduates of Trinity and Clare Colleges in the set of cards published in 1908/09 (with the Duke of Devonshire and Arthur James Mason pictured as Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor respectively) (see Fig. 22) show gowns reaching only to the knee.⁴⁹ At what date and why this shortening first took place I have annoyingly

⁴⁸ Gibson, p. 33.

⁴⁹ See Alex Kerr, 'Academic Dress on Picture Postcards Published by Davis's of Oxford,



Fig. 21. Undergraduates from *The Costumes of the Members of the University of Cambridge*, by H. Hyde, c. 1850.



Fig. 22. Undergraduates of Clare and Trinity Colleges from set of cards published by Davis's of Oxford, 1908/09.



not been able to establish completely beyond doubt with the University Registry. The regulations regarding the dress of graduates were adopted by Grace of the Senate on 13 June 1889. It seems possible therefore that the simple regulation, 'Undergraduate gowns shall reach to the knees', was first formally adopted then also, certainly fitting the timeframe between 1862 and *c.* 1900, albeit not appearing in the regulations up to 1911 as noted earlier.

The photograph in Figure 23 taken, judging by the attire, at the turn of the previous century, clearly also shows undergraduates in gowns only to the knee. Interestingly too all of these undergraduates are either wearing or carrying squares, today never seen except at graduation ceremonies.

In 1931 a subcommittee was established by the University authorities to examine academic dress and its use. A. G. Almond, a leading tailor and robemaker in the town, wrote to the subcommittee in response to their initial report of 3 August 1931 that 'the undergraduate gowns of different colleges should be kept distinct ... and their due use should be insisted upon by University and College authorities'.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Prof. E. H. Minns, Master of Magdalene College, wrote, 'The committee suggests that in certain colleges where the undergraduate gown has little to distinguish it from those of other colleges the present enquiry offers an opportunity for the adoption of new differences in design'.⁵¹ The final report adopted these proposals, encouraging colleges to adopt uniquely distinctive gowns. Very little would appear to have come of this. The *Cambridge University Reporter* of 17 May 1932 simply states that undergraduate gowns should be of the form prescribed by the

their Rivals and Successors', *TBS*, 18 (2018), pp. 75–106 (pp. 86–87), <https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1157>.

⁵⁰ Letter to the sub-committee from A. G. Almond, 7 August 1931, held in the archives in the University Library.

⁵¹ Letter to the sub-committee by Prof. E. H. Minns, Master of Magdalene College, 14 October 1931, held in the archives of the University Library.



Fig. 23. A group of undergraduates, c. 1900.

several colleges and that the gown should reach to the knees. The *Cambridge University Reporter* of 6 February 1934 restates that undergraduate gowns should ‘reach to the knees’. No more than that.

Women were not formally members of the University until 1947, although they had attended lectures and supervisions and sat examinations prior to that. At a roll dinner in Girton College on 3 July 1948 Dr Helen Cam in a speech reminded the ladies present that ‘Miss Wodehouse [Mistress of Girton 1931–42] led us in the tentative, but I think profitable practice of exercising our hitherto unused privilege of wearing academic dress when engaged in academic work; a practice which became general in the conduct of examinations during the war.’⁵² This implies therefore that some time before 1947 the governing body of Girton College had arrived at a suitable gown for the female undergraduates, but nothing has been found in the College records of meetings.

By contrast, the Newnham College Governing Body record in 1947 that ‘a specimen was exhibited of the type of gown suggested for women students. This differed from the type worn by men students in that the slits in the sleeves had been sewn up to prevent the exhibition of bare arms by students wearing short-sleeved dresses’.⁵³ So, whilst the slits in the sleeves of their gowns were indeed sewn up, the lower twelve inches for Girton and four inches for Newnham of the seam respectively were left open. Girton ladies could therefore reveal eight inches more of forearm than their Newnham counterparts!

Today, most undergraduates will not even possess a square and will wear one for the first time at graduation, and often not even then. Why and when did this important part of undergraduate academic dress cease to be seen? The carrying of a square by undergraduates was dispensed with in April 1943, supposedly because of wartime shortages.

⁵² *The Girton Review*, Michaelmas Term 1948.

⁵³ Newnham College, Governing Body meeting minutes, 28 November 1947.

In November 1947, the Senior Proctor wrote to the Registry that 'wearing of the square was originally a privilege granted to the undergraduate body at its own petition in the 18th century [see above]. This privilege has by custom become a requirement. Police and proctors are in favour of the square being worn, and not simply carried, to aid undergraduate recognition.' However, this was never again insisted upon and following the Second World War they were made compulsory, but only for graduation ceremonies in the Senate House. In 1953 even this was deemed to be optional. That said, no other form of head covering is permitted when wearing a gown.⁵⁴

Another example of how the use of undergraduate dress changed rapidly in the twentieth century, reflecting the change in respect for tradition and the old order in post-war society generally, was the wearing of gowns after dusk in the town. In July 1962 the Proctors and all but five colleges had ruled that wearing of gowns after dusk should continue. However, by November 1963, a proctorial syndicate resolved that after dusk wearing of gowns was no longer necessary⁵⁵ and this was ratified overwhelmingly by Heads of Houses in 1964.⁵⁶

After the Second World War, there was pressure to increase student numbers at Cambridge and in particular to make greater provision for postgraduate study and for mature students, often with families. This led to the founding of seven completely new colleges and the incorporating of three other learning institutions.

The three new colleges whose members included undergraduates, graduates and fellows were New Hall (subsequently re-named Murray Edwards) for women only, in 1954, Churchill College in 1960 and Robinson College in 1977. There appear to be no records of how the colleges determined what undergraduate dress should be and indeed checking with foundation fellows of Robinson still today on the fellowship they have no recollection that the matter was ever discussed. Perhaps therefore unsurprisingly, Churchill and Robinson, by default, have adopted the basic (Peterhouse) gown and New Hall, being a women's only college, adopted the Newnham version of the women's gown.

The mid-1960s saw the founding of four graduate only colleges, Darwin (1964), Lucy Cavendish (1965), Wolfson (1965) and Clare Hall (1966). In addition, Hughes Hall, St Edmund's House (now College) and Homerton College became full colleges of the University. Once again there appears to be no written record of how their gowns for undergraduates came to be selected. Perhaps, by default, because Homerton was training women teachers (although now with male and female members, as is Girton) the gown used is the Newnham model, with no split in the sleeve and the bottom four inches of the seam left open.

I am disappointed not to have discovered the origin of the undergraduate gown used by all of the other new colleges as they all use an identical design. Strictly Darwin and Clare Hall being graduate colleges only do not require academic dress for undergraduates as their students, if not Cambridge graduates, are all entitled to a BA gown or, if aged 24 or over, an MA gown, in both cases without strings. The design is the basic gown but with a gathered, unslit sleeve, held in place by a blue cord and blue button. It is described as

⁵⁴ Cambridge University Heraldic and Genealogical Society, 'The Square Cap', at <cuahgs.soc.srccf.net/gowns/squares.html> [retrieved 10 June 2021]; Wikipedia, 'Academic Dress of the University of Cambridge', at <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academic_dress_of_the_University_of_Cambridge> [retrieved 10 June 2021].

⁵⁵ Proctorial syndicate resolution, 11 November 1963.

⁵⁶ Heads of Houses vote, 27 November 1964.

‘the undergraduate gown for the graduate colleges’,⁵⁷ which, in truth, is what it is! It would seem to bear a remarkable similarity to the gowns worn in earlier days by the Westminster Scholars at Trinity College, as described earlier, albeit with violet rather than blue button and cord, but this is probably simply a coincidence.

The future

The transition over hundreds of years from undergraduate academic dress design as an indicator of wealth and position to one which in some but by no means all cases, can indicate your college is now complete. Gone are the noblemen’s gowns. Colleges of modern foundation have no fellow-commoners and at the older colleges the award of a fellow-commonership is an honorary title similar to but junior to honorary fellowships. Most fellow-commoners will wear an MA gown, but a few have a special gown with echoes of their nineteenth-century predecessors.⁵⁸

Should there in the future be further foundations of new graduate only or undergraduate/graduate colleges, given the recent apparent apathy of founding fellows in the matter of specifying a distinguishing undergraduate academic gown, it is likely that any such new colleges would adopt one of only two styles, namely the basic (Peterhouse) design, as did Churchill and Robinson Colleges, or the ‘undergraduate in graduate colleges’ design. It is hardly conceivable that any further women’s only colleges will be founded, so the ‘women’s gown’ will not proliferate.

For so long as the wearing of undergraduate gowns is specified by the University when receiving a BA degree (or four-year taught master’s equivalent) their future is probably safeguarded. Even on that most formal of occasions a square is not mandatory, although many graduands wear or carry one for the first time in their Cambridge lives! However, there has been a gradual reduction in the requirement to wear gowns since the middle of the twentieth century (no longer required to be worn: ‘after dusk’ in town, for lectures or examinations, very few anyway attend college chapel services, self-service college meals and even not being required for ‘formal hall’). So, it would seem, that undergraduate dress at the University of Cambridge could, after eight hundred, years, become an endangered species.

⁵⁷ Hughes Hall, ‘What You Need to Wear’ <www.hughes.cam.ac.uk/student-centre/academic/graduation/what-you-need-to-wear/> [retrieved 10 June 2021].

⁵⁸ Shaw, pp. 27–29; Tsua, p. 118.

Appendix

Historic ledgers at Ede & Ravenscroft—robemakers

I am indebted to Gemma Field, the Archivist and Record Collections Manager, at Ede & Ravenscroft for nine images of extracts from their ledgers, giving descriptions of the construction of the following gowns:

- nobleman's gown (two separate entries)
- fellow-commoner's gown (four separate entries)
- undergraduate's gown
- sizer's [*sic*] gown (two separate entries)

Where there are duplicate entries for a particular type of gown there are minor differences between how they are described (e.g. number of loops, buttons, length of lace etc.). For ease of reading, here below are one of the entries for a nobleman's gown and one for a fellow-commoner's gown (Figures 24 and 25 show how the actual ledger entries appear). These are followed by the entry for an undergraduate's gown (clearly for a pensioner of Trinity College) and one of the entries for a sizar's gown.

A Nobleman's Gown for Cambridge

Is made either of Scarlet, Purple, Crimson, or Skye Blue rich flowered Damask, the body and Sleeves cut the same as Kings Council's Gown with a Back Slit. Trimmed as Pattern, a rich Gold lace all round the Bottom. The common Gown is made of rich Armazeen Silk and Oxford Crape the body and Sleeves cut and made the same as a Clergyman's Gown only the sleeves shorter there is a Pattern to cut the sleeves by — — —

Refer to Lord Powis's account.

The Nobleman's cushion is of crimson Velvet a yard long and the Width of the Velvet the under part of the cushion is of crimson Silk a rich broad Gold Lace to cover the seams the same lace that Goes on the Robe.⁵⁹ — — —

Fellow Commoners Gown of fine Princes Stuff faced down the front with Blk Velvet, and Velvet Cape, the back cut as pattern and trimd in the fullest manner, on the top of each sleeve 2 Dozn black and gold loops, 1 Dozn black & gold buttons, 1 Dozn of the loops are made with holes in, 1 Dozn long loops & buttons at the bottom of the sleeve, 10 long loops & buttons behind, no back slit, 7 long loops & buttons on each side seam, the sleeve to be trimd as pattern. Black Velvet Cap with Gold Tassel

4 Dozn small loops 2 Dozn of them made with holes to button.

4 Dozn long

6 — — — buttons

6½ Yds lace

⁵⁹ This matching cushion is the ultimate academic dress fashion accessory! I am indebted to Timothy Milner, Ceremonial Officer of the University of Cambridge, for his suggestion, having also consulted a learned colleague of his, that it was perhaps for sitting on in Chapel or at Great St Mary's for University Sermons. A sort of place-marker perhaps!

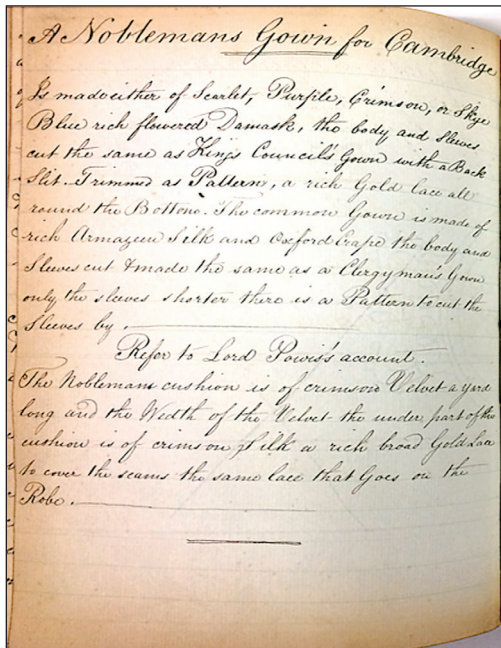


Fig. 24. Specification for a nobleman's gown for Cambridge. Extract from an undated document in Ede & Ravenscroft's archive.

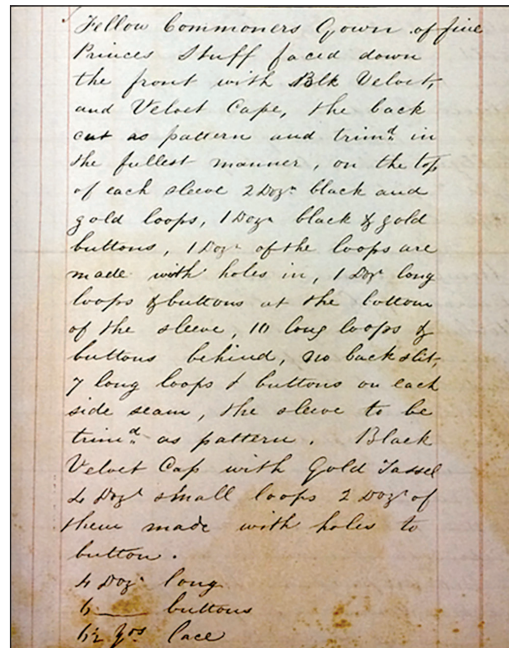


Fig. 25. Specification for a fellow-commoner's gown for Cambridge. Extract from an undated document in Ede & Ravenscroft's archive.

Under Graduate's Gown. Blue Camlet faced with Black, cut as B.A. hem of Sleeve faced with Black Stuff 3 inches wide 3 Gnas
Sizer's Gown, Princes Stuff with Facings ½ a quarter wide, Cape the same as [no] sleeves, Cloth Cap

Unfortunately, Gemma Field was unable to date these entries for me. However, the descriptions of two of the four fellow-commoners gowns add the phrase 'which is worn at any of the Colleges of Cambridge except Emanuel [*sic*] and Trinity Colleges', which therefore dates them prior to the 1830s. There is an adjacent reference in the ledger to what peers (not noblemen undergraduates) were wearing at the funeral of George II, so would date that entry after 1760. Furthermore, the reference to Lord Powis seems likely to refer to the 1st Earl of Powis, who as Baron Clive, son of Clive of India, was elevated to an earldom in 1804. We can presume that he would have ordered a gown for his son and heir, who was a nobleman at St John's College, 1803–06, and so the entry for a similar gown for another customer would have been soon after that.

In summary there would appear to be material here for some further fruitful research.