

Unrecorded Engravings of Oxford Academic Dress from the Early Nineteenth Century

by Alex Kerr

In 1992 I discovered in a print dealer's shop two engravings of academic dress that were not previously known to me. They were trial proofs or what are termed 'proofs before letters' of costume plates, one of an Oxford Doctor of Divinity and the other of a Master of Arts. Later, a second example of each of these plates came to light in the same shop, together with a third engraving clearly from the same series, showing a Proctor. The proprietor of the shop, an acknowledged expert on antique Oxford prints, had yet another in his own collection; it showed a 'determining' Bachelor of Arts.¹ He did not know the source of the plates and could not identify the artist or engraver. The following year another print dealer offered for sale two more engravings in the series, an Esquire Bedel and a Yeoman Bedel, but she was unable to provide any information about them and had no record of their provenance. Intermittent researches in the years since then have not thrown up any further evidence.

These proofs are on different qualities and weights of wove paper, apparently odd sheets or offcuts, but two of them very helpfully show part of the watermark of the paper maker Whatman, with the year of manufacture: 1803 on one of the MA prints and 1808 on one of the DDs. As the hairstyles and the clothing worn under the robes belong to the second decade of the nineteenth century, it seems reasonable to date the prints to about 1810 or shortly after that.

Most series of academic dress costume plates reveal links with their predecessors or their successors. Artists, intentionally or unwittingly, copy features of earlier images, most often in the poses adopted for certain figures. Here are some examples. David Loggan copied several of his Oxford figures (1675) as mirror images, with hands, faces and accessories altered, for his Cambridge plate (1690)²—presumably because the dress was the same, and not just out of laziness! James Roberts (1792) copied most of William Huddesford and James Taylor's figures (1770), adding some life to them in his watercolours by more striking poses and melodramatic gestures. Several of Nathaniel Whittock's Oxford figures (1822, 1828 and 1840) owe their poses to Thomas Uwins (1814), and Uwins and Whittock are then used as models by Thomas Shrimpton (1870 and 1885) and by George Davis for his postcards (1902). A mirror image of Uwins's Doctor in Physic in convocation dress appears seventy years later as Shrimpton's Doctor of Medicine and again as Davis's Doctor of Civil Law or Medicine. However, our plates stand alone. Remarkably enough, they do not appear to owe anything to their predecessors such as the Loggan or Huddesford and Taylor images, which the artist must surely have known.

¹ That is taking part in the ceremonial last exercise for his degree; for this one occasion a lambswool edging was added to the fur-lined hood.

² Dates given here are those of publication, not necessarily those of drawing or engraving.



Figure 1: DD



Figure 2: MA

Two of the figures are placed in recognizable Oxford locations and the other three stand in front of plausible Oxford architectural features. (The ‘determining’ Bachelor, not shown here, stands at a reading desk in the Convocation House.)

The **DD** (Figure 1), standing under an ogee arch, is shown in a realistic pose suggesting strength of character, with his head turned, his left hand on hip, and his right foot advanced as if about to step forward. A significant feature of his dress is the length of the robe: it is very much shorter than the ones worn in costume plates before or for some twenty years after these plates were produced (if *c.* 1810 is right), reaching to two or three inches above the ankle. The doctoral robes in the pictures of Huddesford and Taylor, of Roberts and of Uwins trail the ground. His square cap and its tassel are of a size and pattern that, like the robe, are indistinguishable from a modern DD’s. This is remarkable at this date.

The **MA** (Figure 2) is climbing a flight of steps and so the man and his gown are in movement. His left hand is stretched forward and his head is turned towards us, as if he is inviting us to join him in hall, for the scene is the staircase to the dining hall at Christ Church, with a view of Tom Quad and the Mercury Fountain through the archway. His gown reaches his heels and the semicircular cut at the foot of the sleeve is in fact clearer than in any previous illustrations of Oxford dress. The hood is turned out to show a generous amount of the silk lining. But it is difficult to tell whether the liripipe points outwards or inwards. It is not remarkable at this period that it reaches down to mid-calf level and that the neckband is very narrow. The figure is carrying what appears to be a conventional square cap.

Although the **Proctor** (Figure 3) is shown from behind, to display his ermine hood, he is clearly walking briskly away; interest is added by the inclusion

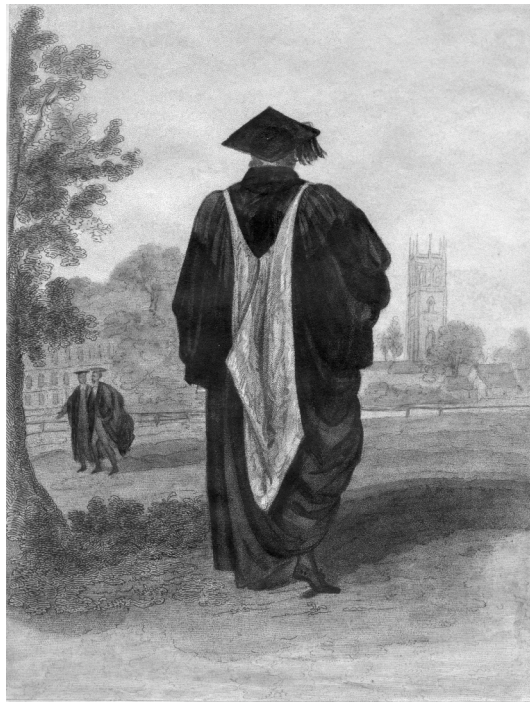


Figure 3: Proctor

of two gowned figures in the distance looking in our direction, and the scene is by a tree in Merton Field, with the south range of the Fellows' Quad of Merton College to the left and a cottage to the right with the tower of Magdalen College behind it—a scene that is just the same today. The gown seems to be fuller than the DD's robe, although the same shape; it reaches the heel, like the MA's. The hood, turned inside out to show only the fur lining, as has always been the custom, is very narrow and has a narrow neckband. This very slender style of hood seems to have been adopted only in the very early years of the nineteenth century. The square cap looks slightly larger than the modern style, but similar to contemporary ones.

The **Esquire Bedel** (Figure 4) trips lightly down a flight of shallow steps. He wears a gown similar to a lay bachelor's, with gimp on the upper part of the sleeves and in panels at the foot of the sleeves and near the hem on the skirt. These lower panels are in the five-sided pattern normal from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. Here they are in the fairly rounded version also found in the drawings of Uwins. (Later, Whittock's gimp panels are ovals and in the late nineteenth century the pentagons have slightly concave sides—all these possibly reflecting passing fashions or varieties favoured by different tailors.) He wears a bonnet probably of velvet and the curious chain of office that had been usual since the seventeenth century for Esquire Bedels.³

The **Yeoman Bedel** (Figure 5) looks more stolid and immobile beside the buttress of a university building. He wears a plain gown with glove sleeves, the armholes of which appear to be in a rounded triangular shape, the predecessor of

³ The office was abolished in reforms of 1856, but the last Esquire Bedel continued in post until his retirement some ten years later.

the inverted T. He wears a cloth bonnet fuller and higher in the crown than the one worn by his modern successors.

The Esquire Bedel carries his stave the right way up, as is customary before the Chancellor or royalty. The Yeoman Bedel's is inverted, as it would be before the Vice-Chancellor. However, these staves are slender mace-like objects compared with the genuine article. It is all but impossible that the artist could have known different ones at Oxford; the staves in use now were acquired by the University in 1723 (apart from one renewed in 1803),⁴ and even the ones shown in Loggan's 1675 plate look as hefty as those in use today.

Perhaps these engravings never proceeded beyond the trial proof stage. If that is so, the most likely explanation is that the plates prepared from Uwins's drawings and published in Ackermann's lavish and hugely successful *History of the University of Oxford* in 1814 eclipsed them completely. This is a pity, since the artist seems to have possessed some talent and created a lively and unique set of images worth preserving.⁵



Figure 4: Esquire Bedel



Figure 5: Yeoman Bedel

⁴ Wells, pp. 94–95.

⁵ The material in this paper was given as a presentation during the Burgon Society's study day at Trinity College, Oxford, on 27 November 2004.

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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