

Academic Dress in Museum Collections

A Survey Is Launched

The Burgon Society has initiated a programme of contact with museums in the UK in order to discover those that hold examples of historical academical dress and also to inform them of our purpose. In April of 2003, 101 letters were sent to museums known to collect dress, as well as the three auction houses and a number of costume-hire companies. As of December, we had thirty-five responses: nineteen with examples of academical dress in their holdings and sixteen confirming that they hold none. Follow up of those non-responding is ongoing.

Those museums responding 'yes' were asked to describe, as far as possible, what they had. The degree of detail in these replies varies, depending on the quality of documentation each museum has. However, it is clear that the Burgon Society can be of great benefit in identifying precisely the degrees and institutions these gowns and hoods represent. Indeed, the response from all those with academical dress in their collections was very gratifying. They are thrilled to know that someone is interested in what they have and that we can verify what it is.

As an experiment, Council organized a visit to Normanby Hall near Scunthorpe where we were told two eighteenth-century gowns and hoods from Oxford were in the collections. Nine Council members braved the wind and rain to visit on 22 September 2003 and we were welcomed by Adam Smith, Keeper of Social History at Normanby Hall. What we discovered were, in fact, two nineteenth-century gowns and corresponding hoods belonging to two generations of the same family. Using a variety of documentation such as *Alumni Oxoniensis* and *Burke's Gentry*, with examination of the gowns and hoods themselves, we determined that one gown and a DCL hood belonged to John Posthumous Wilson b.1809. The other gown, BCL and MA hoods belonged to his son Robert John Hinman Parkinson b.1844. The earlier gown was hand-sewn and the later one machine-sewn, a very helpful clue to which gown had belonged to whom.

Clearly our museums are a significant source of interesting gowns and hoods, and their holdings will help in furthering the Burgon Society's goal in establishing an authoritative history of academical dress. It is also our aim to provide a final list of museums and their collections of academical dress, after all responses have been collated and verified. Watch this space for further developments!

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