

## The Oxford Convocation Habit: An Endangered Species of Academic Dress

By Alex Kerr

The Convocation habit in its modern form is a sleeveless garment worn by certain doctors on certain, now fairly rare occasions at Oxford. In fact, only Doctors of Divinity, Civil Law, Medicine, Letters, Science, and Philosophy wear a habit. Other doctors—Doctors of Music and holders of the relatively recent ‘professional’ doctorates—do not. The habit is scarlet cloth. It is worn over the black undress gown, the sleeves of which are pulled through the shoulder-level armholes in the habit and hang down at the sides. There are two buttons on the chest, near the neck, so that it can be held closed (Fig. 1). The buttons are covered in silk of the colour used to line the hood—black for Divinity, crimson for Civil Law and Medicine, grey for Letters and Science, and dark blue for Philosophy. The habit is lined to a depth of about eight inches in silk of the distinctive colour. A hood is worn over it.<sup>1</sup>

The photographs in Figures 2 and 3 show a DPhil habit. The two buttons are covered in dark blue silk. The part-lining is also dark blue silk. The buttonholes have to be cut through both the cloth and the silk lining near the top. The back of the habit has a gathered yoke with tight pencil pleating as found on clerical-style gowns at Oxford (i.e., those for undergraduate scholars, BAs, MAs, BDs, and DDs in undress), and on full-dress robes. A DD therefore has two yokes at once, one on the black MA-style gown and one on the scarlet habit. A lay doctor has a flap collar on the black gown trimmed with gimp, which is pulled out to cover the upper part of the yoke on the habit.

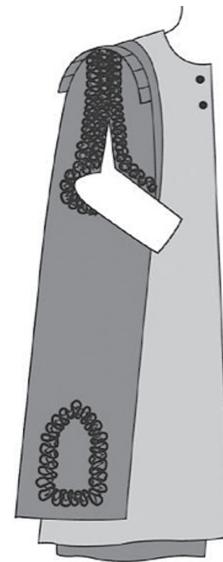


Fig. 1. Diagram of a modern Oxford habit worn over an undress gown.

### Medieval habits

Although the habit is now made in the *form* of a gown without sleeves or facings, its origin was not as a gown at all but as an outer garment worn *over* the medieval an-

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On the term *Convocation habit* see the last section of this article.

<sup>1</sup> See University of Oxford, ‘Academic Dress’ <[www.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/The-University-Year/Encaenia/academic-dress](http://www.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/The-University-Year/Encaenia/academic-dress)>, p. 4 [all online material cited in this article retrieved 1 March 2023]; John Venables, *Academic Dress of the University of Oxford*, 9th edn (Oxford: Shepherd & Woodward, 2009), pp. 4, 14–18, 30–31.



Fig. 2. An Oxford DPhil habit.

Fig. 3. Dr Neil Dickson, FBS, in his Oxford DPhil habit with undress gown, hood and square cap.



tecedent of the gown (the *supertunica* or overtunic), just as the modern form of habit still is. Graduates in the medieval English universities were required to wear a habit for many official gatherings and for lectures and disputations (Fig. 4). There was often tension between scholars wanting to adopt less cumbersome habits and conservative university authorities striving to maintain what they saw as proper standards in clerky academic dress.<sup>2</sup> There were two types of habit: the cloak or *cappa*, and the tabard.<sup>3</sup> The style of the habit reflected the wearer's status, his grade as doctor/master or as bachelor, and his faculty's rank in a universally recognized order of precedence: Theology and Canon Law—the superior clerical faculties; Civil Law and Medicine—the superior lay faculties; and Arts—the inferior faculty, but treated as clerical.<sup>4</sup> When the habit was worn, only the cuffs or the forearms of the fairly tight sleeves of the tunic underneath would usually be visible, emerging from under the habit.

There were three styles of cloak, all of them ankle- or floor-length: the cope or *cappa clausa*; the chimere or *pallium*; and a version of the chimere with hanging sleeves added, the *cappa manicata* (Figs 5–7). The cope was a voluminous, sleeveless cape with an integral cowl and a slit at the front to release the arms. It was the formal habit of doctors in the superior clerical faculties—Doctors of Divinity (usually then termed Masters of Theology or Professors of Sacred Theology) and Doctors of Canon Law. The chimere was sleeveless like the cope but worn with a separate hood and it had two arm-slits at the front at elbow level. It was of slightly inferior standing and less formal than the cope. It was the habit of bachelors in the superior clerical faculties—Bachelors of Divinity and of Canon Law—and of doctors in the lay faculties—Doctors of Civil Law and of Medicine; it was also worn on less formal occasions by Doctors of Divinity and of Canon Law. The sleeved chimere or *cappa manicata*, slightly inferior and less formal again, had sleeves that hung loose, the arms being released through slits in the sides or at the shoulders. It was prescribed for Doctors of Civil Law and of Medicine as an alternative to the chimere, and seems to have been commoner for that purpose at Cambridge than at Oxford. An example features in the Holkham Bible Picture Book of c. 1330. John the Baptist is talking to a group of *mestres de la ley* ('masters/doctors of law'). One of them is wearing a *cappa manicata* with white gauntlet gloves and a coif, a headdress especially associated (but not exclusively) with senior lawyers (Fig. 8).

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2 The wording of statutes suggests that this was the case. See Strickland Gibson (ed.), *Statuta antiqua Universitatis Oxoniensis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), pp. 51–52, 56, 227; translated in Charles A. H. Franklyn, *Academical Dress from the Middle Ages to the Present Day, Including Lambeth Degrees* (Lewes: Baxter, 1970), pp. 83–85.

3 See note on medieval academic dress by F. E. Brightman in R. T. Günther, *A Description of Brassés and Other Funeral Monuments in the Chapel of Magdalen College* (Oxford: Horace Hart, 1914, reprinted in *The Magdalen College Register*, n.s. 8 (1915)), pp. v–vii; reprinted, with images, in Alex Kerr, 'Layer upon Layer: The Evolution of Cassock, Gown, Habit and Hood as Academic Dress', *TBS*, 5 (2005), pp. 42–58 (pp. 43–46), doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1038.

4 On the order of precedence of the medieval faculties see L. H. Dudley Buxton and Strickland Gibson, *Oxford University Ceremonies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), pp. 12–14. They note that bachelors ranked below masters and so a BCL ranked below an MA although the Civil Law faculty was superior to the Arts faculty. Exceptionally, however, while a BD ranked below a regent MA (one who was still fulfilling the requirement to stay on after inception to teach in the University), he had precedence over a non-regent MA.

Fig. 4. A law lecture at Oxford, c. 1330. The illuminator for convenience has used red and green for the dress. Scarlet is acceptable for the Doctor of Civil Law, the lecturer, but would someone of lower standing such as the student wear a *supertunica* in scarlet? The colour in medieval images is not always true to life.



Fig. 5. Cope or *cappa clausa*.

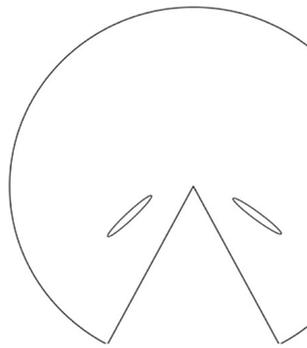


Fig. 6. Chimere or *pallium*.



Fig. 7. Sleeved chimere or *cappa manicata*.

The sleeved tabard was less full than the cloak or *cappa*, reached only to the shins and had short, pointed sleeves (Fig. 9). The tabard was inferior in status to the various cloaks or *cappas* and was the habit prescribed for bachelors in the inferior clerical faculty (Arts) and in the lay faculties—Bachelors of Arts, of Civil Law and of Medicine.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 8. John the Baptist conversing with Doctors of Law, picture c. 1330.

It was also sometimes worn as a less formal habit by holders of higher degrees (as by the person on the left in Fig. 8 dressed in a tabard with white gauntlet gloves and a doctoral *pileus*).

The cloaks or *cappas* were made from a circular piece of fabric or a segment of one. The tabard was made from two more or less oblong pieces of fabric with the sleeves added, or perhaps cut in a T shape (see diagrams in Figs 6 and 9). Pattern rather than colour was the distinguishing feature. Wills and inventories provide evidence that items of academic dress in various colours were acceptable, including blue, green, violet, and russet, as well as scarlet and black.<sup>6</sup>

In 1222 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, ordered clergy to wear the cope-style *cappa clausa* and this appears to have become the formal outer dress for graduate clerks and therefore for Masters of Arts.<sup>7</sup> By the fourteenth century MAs were wearing the slightly less inconvenient chimere-style habit, but soon were using the even less formal sleeved chimere (*cappa manicata*) as well. At Oxford, the University, unhappy with the innovation, at first forbade them to wear this habit when lecturing.<sup>8</sup> Next, MAs are found wearing the shorter, simpler black sleeveless tabard (*cappa nigra*). Like the sleeved tabard, this habit seems to have been made from two oblong pieces rather than a segment of a circle, even though it is called a *cappa* in medieval documents. It had no sleeves but had slits left at the sides to release the sleeves of the gown underneath (Fig. 10). N. F. Robinson believed this *cappa nigra*

In 1222 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton,

<sup>5</sup> The style of *cappa* or tabard reflected the time required to complete the degrees in the superior faculties: usually eleven years for the DD and DCanL, seven years for the BD, BCanL, DCL and DM, three or four years for the BCL and BM; see Charles Edward Mallet, *A History of the University of Oxford*, 3 vols (London: Methuen, 1924–27), Vol. 1, pp. 190–96; Buxton and Gibson, pp. 9–10.

<sup>6</sup> Buxton and Gibson, pp. 22–24.

<sup>7</sup> Janet Mayo, *A History of Ecclesiastical Dress* (London: Batsford, 1984), p. 39; Franklyn, p. 109.

<sup>8</sup> S. Gibson, p. 56; Franklyn, p. 84.



Fig. 9. Sleeved tabard.



Fig. 10. Sleeveless tabard or *cappa nigra*.

rather than the chimere-style *cappa* was the garment that evolved into the Oxford Convocation habit, and Charles Franklyn agreed with him.<sup>9</sup> The more conventional view, as expressed by T. A. Lacey, was that the Convocation habit derived from the *cappa* with two slits, the chimere.<sup>10</sup> W. N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley took the two garments to be essentially the same thing, the *cappa nigra* being merely a lighter, cut-down version of the chimere.<sup>11</sup> It seems these writers were going by what the garments looked like rather than their origins or how they were constructed. F. E. Brightman had taken the view that this was a mistake.<sup>12</sup> Be that as it may, it seems impossible now to establish for sure whether one replaced the other, one evolved into the other, or the two just coalesced.

We have medieval images of the chimere-style habit on monuments and illustrating manuscripts but I am not aware of images of the sleeveless tabard/*cappa nigra* except on monumental brasses.

Longer side slits on the sleeveless tabard or *cappa nigra* freed more of the sleeve of the *supertunica* or gown underneath, which in the early sixteenth century allowed them to be made much wider than before (Fig. 11). Outer habits were being worn less anyway, so that the tunic or gown was more often the outermost body garment.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> 'The Black Chimere of Anglican Prelates', *Transactions of the St Paul's Ecclesiological Society*, 4.3 (1898), pp. 181–220 (pp. 188–93); Franklyn, p. 110.

<sup>10</sup> 'The Ecclesiastical Habit in England', *Transactions of the St Paul's Ecclesiological Society*, 4.2 (1897), pp. 126–34 (p. 128).

<sup>11</sup> *A History of Academical Dress in Europe until the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 79, 193.

<sup>12</sup> Brightman, p. vii; Kerr, 'Layer upon Layer', p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 80.



1490 1501 1523  
 Fig. 11. Widening sleeves on gowns worn with the sleeveless tabard/*cappa nigra*.

**Use of the habit in the early modern period**

By the early seventeenth century an interesting development had taken place. Cambridge had retained the cope or *cappa clausa* as the habit for DDs and the sleeved *cappa* or *cappa manicata* for MDs and LLDs (Fig. 12). On the other hand, Oxford had kept a chimere-style garment, deriving either from the *cappa* with two slits or from the sleeveless tabard/*cappa nigra*, as the habit for all doctors (Fig. 13).

In 1636 Chancellor William Laud’s Code of statutes for Oxford was promulgated.<sup>14</sup> Among its provisions it ordered that the habit must be worn on certain occasions, on some of them by MAs and possibly other graduates as well as by doctors. Masters were to wear silk habits, no doubt black or another dark colour. The DMus was to wear white damask, the DCL, DM and the DD, scarlet. The term used is *capa* and it is clear that in the Code the word means ‘habit’ and nothing more or less. In his sometimes eccentric translation of the Code in 1845, G. R. M. Ward uses the word ‘cape’ for this and some writers have tried to interpret that word as something different on occasion—a cape of a hood, a full-dress robe—but I am sure this is Laud’s term specifically for the habit. It is striking to see that a black silk habit was still prescribed for MAs.<sup>15</sup> The DMus was to have a habit in the characteristic white damask with a wavy pattern, but this may have just been hypothetical. All but one of those who had incepted in Music before 1636 were now dead and no DMus degrees were conferred under Laud’s chan-

<sup>14</sup> Latin text in John Griffiths (ed.), *Statutes of the University of Oxford Codified in the Year 1636* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1888); English translation by G. R. M. Ward, *Oxford University Statutes*, 2 vols (London: Pickering, 1845–51), Vol. I. For a summary of the Code see Mallet, Vol. II (1924), pp. 320–39.

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the habit seems still to have been worn by MAs, in Convocation at least, as late as 1658. See William Gibson, “The Remembrance Whereof is Pleasant”: A Note on Walter Pope’s Role in the Attempt to Abolish Academic Dress during the Commonwealth, *TBS*, 10 (2010), pp. 43–46 (pp. 45–46), doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1083.

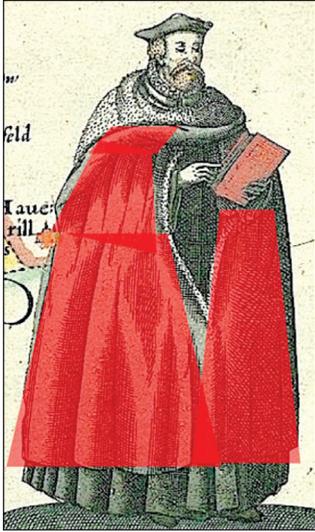


Fig. 12. A Cambridge DD (left) and an LLD or MD (right) in Congregation dress, c. 1610.



Fig. 13. An Oxford DD in Convocation dress, 1612.

cellorship.<sup>16</sup> I do not know of any image of a DMus in Convocation habit. It is said that a DMus did not have a Convocation habit because the degree did not give the holder membership of Convocation.<sup>17</sup> It should be remembered, however, that the habit was worn on a range of occasions and not only for attendance at Convocation; indeed, it seems not to have been called a Convocation habit until much later.<sup>18</sup>

Title VII of Laud's Code set down regulations for the General Inception, an annual event for admitting to degrees. This comprised Vespers and the Act. Vespers, on a Saturday in early July, were public disputations and lectures, commendations of the inceptors, and other speeches. The Act, on the following Monday, marked the completion of degrees. It included admission of the inceptors, sermons, lectures, music, etc. Laud's Code laid down that at solemn lectures at Vespers doctors and masters were to wear a habit over their gown.<sup>19</sup> At Vespers and the Act new doctors and masters were to wear the habit—white damask, scarlet or (presumably) black or nearly black, as the case may be.<sup>20</sup> Later in the seventeenth century the Act was replaced by Encenia, a celebration of benefactors and an occasion for the conferring of honorary degrees.

Title VIII concerned disputations, formal debates that were still an integral part of the teaching and examination curriculum. Ordinary disputations were these regu-

16 See C. F. Abdy Williams, *A Short Historical Account of the Degrees in Music at Oxford and Cambridge* (London and New York: Novello, Ewer & Co., 1894), pp. 74–81. Matthew White, BMus and DMus 1629, died in 1641; see Roger Bowers, 'White, Robert (c. 1530x32–1574)', in *ODNB*.

17 For example, Hargreaves-Mawdsley, pp. 77–78.

18 See section on 'The habit and Convocation' at the end of this article.

19 Griffiths, p. 67; Ward, p. 58.

20 Griffiths, p. 78; Ward, pp. 70–71.



Fig. 14. DCL (left) and DD (right) in Convocation dress, from Loggan's *Oxonia illustrata*, 1675.



Fig. 15. DM in Convocation dress, engraving by Agar after Uwins, 1814.

lar occasions as opposed to additional, special or so-called extraordinary disputations. Disputants were to wear the habit.<sup>21</sup>

Title X dealt with membership of Congregation. The last clause details the ceremony of depriving an offender of his degrees. To quote from Ward's translation: '... one of the inferior bedels shall strip the delinquent first of his cap, next of his hood, then of his cape [i.e. his habit] and lastly, of his gown, and drive him, in that plight, spoiled and denuded of all his academical distinctions from the House of Convocation.'<sup>22</sup>

Title XIV dealt specifically with dress—academic dress and subfusc clothing. At solemn sermons, that is University sermons, Court sermons, and other such formal events, it seems all graduates were to wear the habit. It was reiterated that participants (readers and professors) in solemn lectures at Vesperies were to wear the habit. The habit was required of masters and doctors for attendance at Congregation and Convocation. The pattern for the *capa*, the habit, would no doubt be included in the contents of Laud's wardrobe or chest.<sup>23</sup>

After the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 it seems the habit for graduates below the level of doctor had been dropped—and for the DMus. In Loggan in 1675

21 Griffiths, p. 83; Ward, p. 79.

22 Griffiths, p. 138; Ward, p. 146.

23 Griffiths, pp. 144–45; Ward, pp. 153–54. On the press or chest, see Alex Kerr, "Different Forms of Gowns for All Sorts of Scholars in their Several Ranks": Academic Undress at Oxford in 1635', *TBS*, 20 (2020), pp. 14–50 (p. 16), doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1178.

the habit was still closed, with an opening reaching only partway down the front (Fig. 14).<sup>24</sup> Laud in 1636 referred to the habit being closed or open. Perhaps he meant closed up to the neck or open just on the chest.<sup>25</sup> By the early nineteenth century the habit was open all the way down (although it would be held shut at the top with the two buttons); Uwins' image of 1814 has one side of the front turned back to show the silk part-lining in the appropriate colour, here pink (at this date) for the Doctor of Medicine (Fig. 15). Notice that lay doctors were still wearing the round bonnet with the habit, although Combe in 1814 says the square was considered the correct headwear, and in modern times that is the rule.<sup>26</sup>

From the early nineteenth century, the cope at Cambridge (now open right down the front) became the official dress for the vice-chancellor in Congregation, whatever his (or later sometimes her) degree, and was worn by those presenting candidates for higher degrees.<sup>27</sup> The lay doctors' *cappa manicata* habit fell out of use.<sup>28</sup> At Oxford, however, the chimere-style habit lived on as one of the academic dresses of DDs, DCLs and DMs and, later, of DLitts, DScs and DPhils. A version of this garment had from the Reformation become established as the episcopal chimere in the Church of England, worn over a rochet and with a scarf over it. The rochet, like the surplice, corresponds in choir dress to the undress gown. Despite some debate on the matter, it is generally agreed that the chimere is essentially academic in character. When all bishops held doctorates it was often scarlet rather than black, and still is although now some bishops are doctors and some are not.<sup>29</sup>

### Modern academic dress and the habit

At Oxford there are still three different graduate dresses: undress gowns for all degree holders; full dress robes for all doctors except professional doctors, who (with masters and bachelors) wear an undress gown and hood for full dress; and Convocation

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24 *Oxonia illustrata* (Oxford: the engraver, 1675), Plate x, nos 24 and 27.

25 Griffiths, p. 145; Ward, p. 153; Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 68.

26 William Combe, *History of the University of Oxford*, 2 vols (London: Ackermann, 1814), Vol. II, Plate IV and p. 250; Nicholas Jackson (ed.), *Ackermann's Costumes of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge* (London: Burgon Society, 2016), pp. 19, 13.

27 They take off their gown before donning the cope (I am grateful to Professor Benedikt Löwe and Timothy Milner for confirming this). This seems to have been the custom since the mid-seventeenth century: Speed, c. 1610, has doctors with a gown under their habits; see Alex Kerr, 'Academic Dress on John Speed's Maps', *Burgon Notes*, No. 25 (Autumn, 2013), pp. 3–4, but Logan, in 1690, has the DD in a cassock and LLD/MD in a coat, but with no gown; see *Cantabrigia illustrata* (Cambridge: the engraver, 1690), Plate VII, nos 19 and 20. The cope was worn by vice-chancellors at Dublin, all of them DDs, up to the late eighteenth century; Alex Kerr, 'Hargreaves-Mawdsley's *History of Academical Dress*', *TBS*, 8 (2008), pp. 106–50 (pp. 144–45), doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1066. It was also worn at Manchester by the vice-chancellor from 1882 to 1926; Philip Lowe, *Manchester Academic Dress* (Manchester: the author, 2002), p. 36, and still is by the vice-chancellor at the University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee <johnseibelswalker.com/john-m-mccardell-jr>.

28 But was still described by Combe and illustrated by Agar after Uwins in *History of the University of Cambridge*, 2 vols (London: Ackermann, 1815), Vol. II, p. 312 and Plate IV; Jackson, pp. 47, 53.

29 Mayo, p. 143; Franklyn, pp. 154–57.

habits for all doctors except professional doctors and the DMus.<sup>30</sup> The wide-sleeved BA gown is the direct descendant of the medieval *supertunica*. The hanging-sleeved clerical-style gown for MAs, BDs and DDs comes from dress brought in from outside the universities in the sixteenth century. The same is true of the flap-collared lay-style gown with inverted-T armholes and gimp ornament for graduates in lay disciplines such as Civil Law, Medicine, Music and more recently Letters, Science, Philosophy, etc. The full-dress doctors' robe has the same origin as the BA gown.<sup>31</sup> Late-seventeenth-century images show that the doctors' robe and the BA gown (and indeed the proctors' wide-sleeved gown) all had the same shape of sleeve at that time.<sup>32</sup> The habit, worn over the undress gown, has its origins (as we have already seen) in one of the medieval outer habits.

Almost all UK universities use gowns with different sleeves for bachelors and masters, and have distinctive full-dress robes or festal gowns for doctors. Some universities, particularly older ones, also have undress gowns for doctors, in either the MA or the lay pattern; although some, particularly more recent foundations, prescribe only full-dress gowns for them, on the assumption that academic dress is now seen only at formal, festal occasions. Oxford alone retains a habit for doctors as an item of academic, as opposed to official, dress. Cambridge (as we have seen) has kept the cope but only as an item of official dress, and Durham has its senior officers in a scarlet cassock, worn under the gown, but seems to have had an Oxford-style habit for doctors in the early days.<sup>33</sup>

### Decline in the use of the habit

In 1935 Buxton and Gibson wrote: 'In Convocation and Congregation gowns, habits and hoods are worn [by Doctors]; those Doctors who prefer to sit among the Masters wear their gowns but no habits' (p. 33). This was echoed by D. R. Venables and R. E. Clifford in 1957 but they dropped the option of the habit and hood for these occasions from 1966.<sup>34</sup>

Until 2004, for degree congregations and certain other formal occasions, Oxford vice-chancellors wore their academic 'business' dress: in the case of a doctor, that was a black undress gown with habit and hood. Figure 16 is a photograph of Richard Southwood, professor of zoology and fellow of Merton, with his successor Peter North, prin-

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30 J. Venables, pp. 4–39; University of Oxford, 'Academic Dress' <[www.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/The-University-Year/Encaenia/academic-dress](http://www.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/The-University-Year/Encaenia/academic-dress)>.

31 Kerr, 'Layer upon Layer', pp. 47–51.

32 See, for example, George Edwards, *Omnium ordinum habituumque academicorum exemplaria* (Oxford: the engraver, 1674). A fashion for larger sleeves on the BA gown was brought by Cambridge men migrating to Oxford from 1649 but was condemned by the Oxford vice-chancellor in 1666; the fashion persisted, however, through the eighteenth century and resulted in the pendulous sleeves on the modern BA gown (Hargreaves-Mawdsley, pp. 89–90).

33 See Nicholas Groves (ed.), *Shaw's Academical Dress of Great Britain and Ireland*, 3rd edn, 2 vols (London: Burgon Society, 2011–14), Vol. 1: *Universities and Other Degree-Awarding Bodies*, pp. 7–10, passim. Franklyn asserted (pp. 155–56) that doctors of any university could have a habit made up in the colours of their full-dress robes, and indeed that MAs and bachelors in superior faculties could have one in black silk.

34 *Academic Dress of the University of Oxford*, 1st edn (Oxford: Shepherd & Woodward, 1957), p. 6; 2nd edn (1966), p. 4.

cial of Jesus College, in 1993. Vice-chancellors were appointed from among the senior dons within the University—in modern times always heads of colleges until Southwood was elected to the post. In 2004 the University went over to appointing professional administrators as vice-chancellor: John Hood was brought in from outside Oxford.<sup>35</sup> Congregation approved a simple black lay gown for him with some gold chain trimming on the arms and the flap collar, in other words an enhanced version of the University servants' gown as worn by the bedels and University verger. Within two years Hood had a special gown designed with gold foliage ornament on the hanging sleeves and flap collar and including the University's and colleges' arms on the sleeves and the University's arms on the collar. Louise Richardson, the first woman appointed as vice-chancellor (2016–22), chose to wear the Oxford ladies' soft square cap with this official gown.<sup>36</sup>



**Fig. 16. Richard Southwood (vice-chancellor 1989–93) and Peter North (vice-chancellor 1993–97) in Convocation dress, photographed in 1993.**

The vice-chancellor's regulations, last revised in 2015, indicate, in a table, what dress is worn and when.<sup>37</sup> In relation to the Convocation habit they refer to 'DPhils' and 'Higher Doctors', but in practice the DMus, who is a higher doctor, does not wear the habit. The professional doctors (Doctor of Clinical Psychology and Doctor of Engineering), brought in soon after 2000, also do not wear the habit: indeed they are not treated as doctors at all so far as academic dress is concerned. They do not get the doctoral shape of hood [f5], but rather the Burgon shape [s2]. They have no full-dress robe but only a black gown trimmed with gimp, and that without the extra panel of gimp under the sleeve that distinguishes the other lay doctors: in this respect the professional doctorates are treated as inferior even to the MCh.<sup>38</sup>

- College deans of degrees who are DPhils or higher doctors are to wear the habit when presenting candidates. In reality, almost all deans now just wear MA

<sup>35</sup> David Cohen, 'John Hood the Outsider', *Guardian*, 2 December 2003 <[www.theguardian.com/education/2003/dec/02/highereducation.academicexperts](http://www.theguardian.com/education/2003/dec/02/highereducation.academicexperts)>.

<sup>36</sup> 'Oxford Vice-Chancellor's New Gown', *Burgon Notes*, No. [6] (February 2008), p. 2; J. Venables, p. 51; University of Oxford, 'Academic Dress' <[www.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/The-University-Year/Encaenia/academic-dress](http://www.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/The-University-Year/Encaenia/academic-dress)>, pp. 3, 6.

<sup>37</sup> <[governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/vice-chancellors-regulations-1-of-2002#collapse1437046](http://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/vice-chancellors-regulations-1-of-2002#collapse1437046)>.

<sup>38</sup> See Andrew James Peter North, 'The Development of the Academic Dress of the University of Oxford, 1920–2012', *TBS*, 13 (2013), pp. 101–41 (pp. 134–35), [doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1111](https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1111); J. Venables, pp. 20–21.

gown and hood with subfusc. Doctors attending who are not deans of degrees are to wear undress gowns and hoods, but not habits, which rather undercuts the tradition that any member of Congregation can be asked to ‘make up a house’ if the deans find themselves short of the required number.

- The regulations show the habit to be worn by an incoming vice-chancellor and pro-vice-chancellor and the clerks of the market at their admission, if DPhils or higher doctors. There are two clerks of the market, who were originally empowered to set the price of grain in Oxford. The title is now an honorary one, a sine-cure, and is bestowed by the chancellor and vice-chancellor. On 20 January 2023 Irene Tracey took up office as vice-chancellor. She is literally Oxford born and bred and an Oxford graduate, a renowned neuroscientist and formerly warden of Merton College—so on this occasion a return to an internal University appointment. Although an Oxford DPhil, she wore MA gown and hood in the procession to the Sheldonian Theatre for her admission and changed into the gown of office during the ceremony.

- Heads of houses, if DPhils or higher doctors, wear the habit when presenting their college’s candidate at the admission of proctors and assessor. These officers are elected annually, the proctors by two colleges and the assessor by a third according to a rota.

On all other occasions when a DPhil or higher doctor may wear the habit, an undress gown and hood without the habit are permitted as an alternative:

- At certain church services such as the University and Court sermons
- The pro-proctors and others at the admission of proctors and assessor
- Others attending the admission of the vice-chancellor, pro-vice-chancellors and clerks of the market.

It is difficult to see a rationale in all this. These regulations appear to be arbitrary leftovers from more extensive and coherent provisions. It is astonishing that there is no reference to what pro-vice-chancellors are to wear when standing in for the vice-chancellor at degree ceremonies. In practice I think they do wear the habit if DPhils or higher doctors, or, like most deans of degrees presenting, just wear MA gown and hood. Two figures in a procession in Balliol College on its way to the admission ceremony for the new proctors in 2019 are wearing the habit (Fig. 17). One is Anthony Kenny, DPhil, DLitt, HonDCL, a former master of Balliol, but he is incorrectly wearing an MA hood and a round bonnet with his Convocation habit, although when he was a pro-vice-chancellor he frequently wore Convocation dress when conferring degrees. He and the other figure in Convocation dress are probably wearing the habit just as ‘others attending’ the ceremony.

When many of the dons in the University were either Oxford graduates with an Oxford doctorate or were from Cambridge or Dublin and had incorporated, there would have been a good number of them eligible to wear the habit. Now that many have doctorates from universities other than Oxford, far fewer will have that option.

Are the University authorities shifting towards treating the Convocation habit just as a kind of gown of office? The occasions when DPhils or higher doctors attending an event without any specific role to play in the ceremony may wear the habit have been reduced over the years. Might it quietly become obsolete without many in the Univer-



Fig. 17 (above and right). Procession from Balliol College for the admission ceremony for the proctors, 2019.

sity noticing? Certainly, the Oxford Convocation habit is now an endangered species in the world of academic dress.<sup>39</sup>

### The habit and Convocation

The term *Convocation habit* may have been coined as late as the mid-nineteenth century. Documents in English in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries refer simply to the *habit* and those in Latin to the *capa* or *capa coccinea* ('scarlet habit'). The title 'Doctor in Divinity in Convocation' appears on a plate by Agar after Uwins in 1814 and 'worn in convocation, congregation [etc.]' in Combe's accompanying text.<sup>40</sup> The first use of the phrase *Convocation habit* I have found so far is in George Trevor's *The Convocations of the Two Provinces*, published in 1852: 'The chimere is the Convocation habit of a doctor of divinity in Oxford.'<sup>41</sup> This statement is then quoted in *Notes and Queries* the next year<sup>42</sup> and the phrase appears in various publications thereafter. Oxford's own current regulations also refer to the garment with the quaint spelling *chemir*.<sup>43</sup>

The membership of Convocation formerly comprised all Oxford MAs and holders of certain higher degrees. Its duties have been steadily reduced, its powers passing to Congregation, essentially the University's parliament, made up mainly of academic and senior research and administrative staff. Since 1969 Convocation's only role, as

39 In 2023 the University announced that registration for the DD, DCL, DLitt, DSc and DMus would be suspended indefinitely while further work was undertaken 'to determine what the future of higher doctorates should be'. See <[www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/higher-doctorates](http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/higher-doctorates)>. This will no doubt lead in due course to a further reduction in the number of those eligible to wear the habit.

40 Combe, *Oxford*, Vol. II, Plate II and p. 250; Jackson, pp. 17, 13.

41 London: Mozley, p. 195.

42 1st Ser., 7, no. 183 (30 April 1853), pp. 437-38.

43 University of Oxford, 'Academic Dress' <[www.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/The-University-Year/Encaenia/academic-dress](http://www.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/The-University-Year/Encaenia/academic-dress)>, p. 4.

recommended by the Franks Commission, has been to elect a new chancellor for the University (an appointment for life) and the professor of poetry (a four-year appointment).<sup>44</sup> Members of Convocation wishing to vote in these elections had to attend in person wearing a gown; there was no mention of a habit as an option for doctors.<sup>45</sup> In 2002 membership of Convocation was extended to all holders of Oxford degrees except honorary degrees.<sup>46</sup> In 2003, for the election of the chancellor, the requirement to wear a gown when voting was dropped<sup>47</sup> and in 2010, for the election of the professor of poetry, online voting was introduced.<sup>48</sup> Ironically enough then, this means that the so-called ‘Convocation’ habit is unlikely to be seen again in Convocation itself while still appearing elsewhere in the University, if only sporadically, and usually now as a symbol of the wearers holding a specific office, rather than of their academic status as a doctor of the University.

### Figure credits

1. Drawing by Kate Douglas, in Nicholas Groves (ed.), *Shaw’s Academical Dress of Great Britain and Ireland*, 3rd edn, 2 vols (London: Burgon Society, 2011–14), Vol. I, p. 31. Courtesy of the Burgon Society.
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12. Figures from John Speed’s Cambridgeshire map (c. 1610), one of them already on his Oxfordshire map (c. 1605), and published in his *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine* (London: Sudbury & Humble, 1611/12). Wikimedia Commons, with colour added by the author.

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<sup>44</sup> *Report of Commission of Inquiry* [Franks Report], 2 vols (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1966), Vol. I, p. 221, paragraphs 498 and 499.

<sup>45</sup> For example, for the election for the chancellor in 1960, the first contested election for the post since 1925, the notice had ended: ‘Attention is called to the fact that voting papers can only be handed in by the voter in person, who must be wearing a gown.’ See ‘Convocation—Election of Chancellor of the University’, *Oxford University Gazette*, 90 (1959/60), p. 762.

<sup>46</sup> ‘New University Statutes and Congregation Regulations’, *Oxford University Gazette*, 133 (2002/03), Supplement No. 4633, 9 October 2002, pp. 91–167 (‘Statute III—Convocation’, p. 99).

<sup>47</sup> ‘Election of Chancellor of the University’, *Oxford University Gazette*, 133 (2002/03), Supplement 4645, 22 January 2003, pp. 659–60.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Election of Professor of Poetry’, *Oxford University Gazette*, 140 (2009/10), pp. 667–68.

13. Portrait in Wadham College, Oxford, of Philip Bisse, DD, 1612. Photograph courtesy of Studio Edmark, Oxford.
- 14 and 15. Author's collection.
16. Photograph by Neil Turner/Alamy.
17. Photograph by Stuart Bebb. Courtesy of Balliol College, Oxford.