

BURGON - A HOODED PROGRESS

John Birch, President of the Burgon Society

I presume that, as President of the Burgon Society, rather than a survey of my professional career as a musician, a description of the Academic Dress which accompanied my various appointments might not be entirely inappropriate. Clergymen of the Church of England and Organists, particularly those connected with cathedrals and their worship, most probably wear their hoods on a near daily basis; as the rubric has it:

“With scarves and hoods of your degrees
And surplices below the knees.”

With the marked increase in the number of universities in the United Kingdom (all of which, I am reliably informed, have adopted some form or other of academic dress) and the authorisation of robes by many of the colleges and learned societies, identification of a wearer’s academic achievement or distinction has become as complex a study as that of train-spotting used to be in the sorely missed bygone days of steam (when everything seemed to run to time and travel was something of an adventure.) (There has always been a close affinity between organists and railway engines—perhaps it is something to do with power— and this is underlined recently by the finalising of plans for the removal of the Royal College of Organists from London to Birmingham, to occupy eventually the oldest railway building in the world, namely, the original terminus of the London to Birmingham Railway ending at the Curzon Street Building in the latter city (1836-1838), the original Euston terminal buildings being no more).

School (where I remained perplexed for a number of years as to what manner of garb it was hanging down the back of the chaplain—eventually I had to become Chapel Warden to gain access to the vestry cupboards to satisfy my curiosity) to College (The Royal College of Music) was bridged by the acquisition of an LTCL (Licentiate of the Trinity College of Music) providing me with my first contribution for the vestry hook during my two years of National Service during which I was Organist of St. Oswald’s Garrison Church Catterick at the same time as being a member of the Band of the Royal Corps of Signals, (in which I fought in some notable battle-campaigns, mainly on the Grand Parade Bandstand, Eastbourne.) To the aspiring organist the acquiring of the extremely exacting diplomas of The Royal College of Organists is paramount. In the 1950’s only the Fellowship (FRCO) conferred the right to academic dress. A BA-style gown, (the edges of the sleeves of which had a not infrequent habit of getting caught between the notes of the keyboards) and a hood of the Oxford simple shape; brown, (of the colour of the edging/lining of the London BA/MA, lined with light blue silk. Mine received its first outing (literally) when playing for choral Mattins in my capacity as Sub-Organist at Her Majesty’s Chapels’ Royal, a post I held in conjunction with that of Organist and Choirmaster at All Saints’ Church, Margaret Street, London W1, (where cottages, (nowhere near approaching the knee-line) did not mix with hoods of degrees!) In the period from Easter to July, Chapel Royal Services were held in the Queen’s Chapel Marlborough Gate, which, with vesting in the Chapel Royal, St James’s Palace, entailed the crossing of a road. Fully accoutred, music in hand, I prepared to dodge the not inconsiderable flow of London traffic, though, to my surprise (and delight) two duty constables held up the mighty flow, in order to allow me to make my stately and solitary progress in total safety. The hood was not very substantial. On one occasion accompanying my Master, the late Dr Harry Gabb, CVO, to the Royal Maundy, as we waited outside the cathedral, the fresh spring breezes persisted in blowing his hood over his head to hang down his front, resembling, if that were possible, a kangaroo in holy orders. I solved the problem by dropping my cigarette case into the hood, not without some trepidation, for that particular hood was well worn and frayed at the base, and it was with some relief that I eventually reclaimed my property after the service.

During the course of my twenty-two years as Organist and Master of the Choristers of Chichester Cathedral, the Royal College of Organists decided to change its academic dress. The clumsy and impractical BA gown gave way to a London Master's Gown, with an additional vertical slit in the armhole, most comfortable, though it robbed one of the opportunity to blame one's technical blemishes and deficiencies, as in the past, on the gown! For the first time the gown was made available to both Associates and Fellows. In addition the new hood for Fellows, designed by Dr Francis Jackson OBE, sometime Organist of York Minster, certainly raised the profile of the Diploma on the 'Peacock' Scale from 2 to 8! Full Shape in red brocade lined throughout with RCO pearl shot silk. The Associates were also granted a hood-Oxford Simple shape edged with one inch of red brocade, which, as it was rather Ferial, should have heightened their resolve to conquer the examination requirements for the Fellowship! Perhaps a trifle unrestrained, certainly for the Penitential Seasons, Fellows now looked, from behind that is, twice as good, (even if the hood did cost three times as much) as before! My personal 'Lenten Array' was eventually resolved satisfactorily. In the early 1960's I was invited to act as consultant for the organ of The Meeting House, Sussex University, which building was then approaching completion, and when, in turn, the organ was installed, I was invited to stay on as University Organist, and subsequently, with the inauguration of the Faculty of Music, a visiting Lecturer in Music.

Since I was, without exception, the only member in the University without a degree, I thought I ought to take steps to study for one, but just as I was about to put pen to paper, independently, the University decided to confer on me an Honorary Master of Arts, the second in the history of the university. The hood, basic Oxford BA, is black alpaca, lined dove-grey, which saw me respectably through Advent and Lent. Not so the gown! Some years after receiving the degree it was ordained that any Masters Degrees awarded *honoris causa* should wear the Full Dress Doctor's Robe, but without the shoulder ribbons. It is very striking, and would stand out in a crowded Wembley Stadium, being of gamboge silk. I wore it once at an academic function at The Royal College of Music. The silk of the robe is not ribbed but I was by my colleagues! Some years before that, I was invited to lunch by the distinguished artist, John Piper, and in his studio on the table were some pieces of silk, samples for the new Doctors Robes he was designing for the University of Sussex. So to wear something designed by such an eminent artist gave an added pleasure (though I gather that not all robes designed by experts in other fields have been so successful.)

Having entered The Royal College of Music as a student in 1947, I became, shortly after leaving in 1953 (in which year I attended the Coronation as a member of the Coronation Choir when hoods were not to be worn—no room!!) a deputy professor, and then, in 1959, a Professor of Organ.

Apart from two years National Service, I remained at the College for over half a century. In 1981 I was made a Fellow of the College (FRCM), an honorary award, which carried with it a hood in the Full Cambridge shape in the College Royal Blue, lined with College Gold, (FRCM's and B.Sc's of the University of Strathclyde are difficult to tell apart) (During the intervening years both the ARCM and the LRAM were entitled to gowns and hoods, but, by that time, the vestry hook was shewing decided signs of metal fatigue, so that was two fewer cheques to the Robemakers) This hood carried me forward, as it were, to my time as Organist and Director of the Choir of the Temple Church London, until the day when a Lambeth Doctorate of Music was conferred on me by Archbishop Runcie. I inherited the robe of my predecessor, Sir George Thalben Ball, CBE, the hood of my former professor, Sir John Dykes Bower, CVO, and the bonnet of my friend and

colleague, Dr Herbert Howells, CH CBE. On my appointment I was only the fourth organist of the Temple since 1841, though, surprisingly, this was not at that time the record; the Organist of Bath Abbey being only the fourth since 1837! Of the four of us at the Temple, three were honoured with Lambeth Doctorates, the fourth, Sir Walford Davies, having acquired one of his own from Cambridge by the more conventional method early in his professional career.

The disintegration of 'the vestry hook', overburdened and with metal fatigue, more or less coincided with the transition of my regularly wearing academic dress to my designing it for others to wear. For the Royal College of Music (which has the right by its Royal Charter to confer degrees in music) I designed the robe for the Director, much assisted then by Dr George Shaw (particularly on the assurance that my design did not infringe that of some other institution.) Subsequently I added the gown worn by Fellows. The gown and hood from Honorary Members (Hon.RCM), the Post-Graduate diploma hood, and subsequently the B.Mus. (together with a full dress gown after the style of London University), the M.Mus. robes, and then, with a subtle distinction, the Full Dress robes for D.Mus by examination and the honorary Doctor of Music. (The robe for the Chancellor has been designed but not, as yet, made.)

The Royal College of Organists has in recent years widened the number and scope of its diplomas. In addition to designing the robe for the President, which, eventually, will be complemented by robes for the other honorary officers, the Honorary Treasurer and the Honorary Secretary, the FRCO hood has been recut on more 'generous' lines, closer to those of the Durham BA, the ARCO hood has been altered to Full shape with a little more of the College brocade on show, and new hoods have been designed for Honorary members (Hon.RCO), the Choir Director's diploma (DipCHD,) and for the new Teachers Diploma, (Dip.TCR) which brings us full circle using, for its lining, the light blue silk of the original FRCO hood

My task at The Royal College of Music was made significantly easier, and so much the more educative, by the help of Mr Chris Bottley of William Northam and Sons, the College Robemakers. Work on the Royal College of Organist's Robes brought me into contact with Ede and Ravenscroft, and, in particular, with The Reverend Philip Goff, which happy chance may possibly have some bearing on my Burgon connection.

At the age of rising 73 I considered that my academic 'wardrobe' had attached to it the notice so beloved by seaside boarding house landladies - NO VACANCIES. No final coda, in the form of an Hon.FBS and the most distinguished hood which accompanied it, could have given me so much pleasure, particularly so since it was linked to the high honour of becoming the first President of the Burgon Society.