

## The Contemporary Usage of Academic Hoods in Oxford Collegiate Choirs

By Samuel Teague

The question of hood-wearing etiquette within choirs has always been something of a contentious one. Many who have followed this line of inquiry will know the work of the late Dr Nicholas Groves,<sup>1</sup> whose article explored many of the myths surrounding hood-wearing in a choir environment. However, despite this, arguments still persist—and, regardless of what the Canons say (be they the 1604 or 1969 revisions), tradition and personal opinion still seem to win out in most cases.

For evidence for the use of hoods, a primary source is the *Book of Common Prayer*, first issued in 1549 under Edward VI, which requires inclusion of hoods as part of the dress code for a number of institutions, including college chapels.

Further reference to the wearing of such items in the Ornaments Rubric is to be found in the 1559 Act of Uniformity and reissue of the *Book of Common Prayer* (following Elizabeth I's accession).<sup>2</sup>

Provided always, and be it enacted, that such ornaments of the church, and of the ministers thereof, shall be retained and be in use, as was in the Church of England, by authority of Parliament, in the second year of the reign of King Edward VI, until other order shall be therein taken by the authority of the queen's majesty, with the advice of her commissioners appointed and authorized, under the great seal of England, for causes ecclesiastical, or of the metropolitan of this realm.<sup>3</sup>

... that the Minister at the time of the Communion, and at all other times in his Ministration, and all use such Ornaments in the Church, as were in use by authority of Parliament in the second yeere of the Reigne of Edward the sixt according to the Acte of Parliament set fourth in the beginning of thys Booke.<sup>4</sup>

The meaning here is, famously, disputed but can be read in support of the wearing of such vestments and ornaments as laid down in the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*.<sup>5</sup>

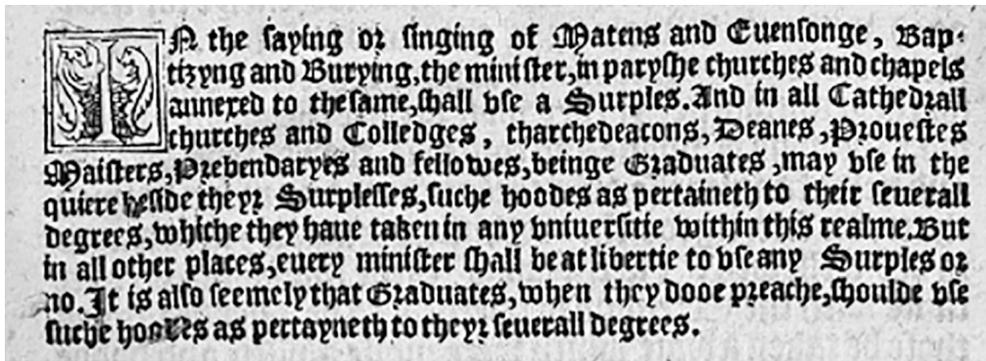
1 Nicholas Groves, 'The Use of the Academic Hood in Quire', *TBS*, 8 (2008), pp. 98–105.

2 This is the common term by which this passage is known. See, 'Ornaments Rubric.' *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 2014) at Oxford Reference <[www.oxfordreference-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/display/10.1093/acref/9780199659623.001.0001/acref-9780199659623-e-4229?rskey=vqQH87&result=4301](http://www.oxfordreference-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/display/10.1093/acref/9780199659623.001.0001/acref-9780199659623-e-4229?rskey=vqQH87&result=4301)> [retrieved 23 June 2024 but requires permission to access]. The term 'ornament' when referring to hoods was preferred by the Revd Percy Dearmer, as the term 'robes' is too general, and 'vestments' too specific to the garments worn for the Eucharist. See Dearmer, *The Ornaments of the Ministers* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1920), p. 3.

3 Act of Uniformity, 1559.

4 *Book of Common Prayer*, 1559.

5 For recent contributions on and around the debate concerning the Ornaments Ru-



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Fig. 1. Instructions from the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, at f.157v, detailing the usage of hoods within services.

This is the interpretation used by the Revd Percy Dearmer and, for the sake of this article, will be the stance adopted by this author also. Thus, the wearing of academic hoods in collegiate chapels can be traced to amongst the earliest roots of worship in the Church of England.

Of course, the rubric, as printed in the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*, avoids explicit reference to musicians,<sup>6</sup> but one should consider the development of choir personnel in such a collegiate institution. Choir membership (for those who may be entitled to wear hoods) has steadily evolved from consisting solely of clergy, through the introduction of lay clerks, and finally to the introduction of choral scholarships and, just as notably, the admission of women. Therefore, the rubrics laid down in 1549 and 1559 can be seen to apply to collegiate choirs today, remaining applicable even with the evolution of personnel.

The relevant Canons mentioned by Groves in his article are reproduced below, cited from *The Book of Church Law*. The first, Canon 17 of 1604, details the usage of dress in the chapels of collegiate institutions:

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, holydays, 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.<sup>7</sup>

And secondly, Canon 25 stipulates the following:

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bric, see Dan D. Cruickshank, 'Debating the Legal Status of the Ornaments Rubric: Ritualism and Royal Commissions in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century England', *Studies in Church History*, 56 (2020), pp. 434–54; and Bryan D. Spinks, 'The Intersection of "English Use" Liturgy and Social Justice: Snapshots of Augustus Pugin, Percy Dearmer, Conrad Noel and William Palmer Ladd', *Journal of Anglican Studies*, 19 (2021), pp. 21–36.

6 An intention of reformers being to indicate a licence (and authority) to preach through the conferral of the MA and the wearing of the hood—degrees being presented *ad incipiendum in eadem facultate* (to incept in the same faculty).

7 J. H. Blunt, rev. W. G. F. Phillimore and G. E. Jones, *The Book of Church Law*, 10th edn (London: Longmans, Green, 1905), p. 378.

When there is no Communion it shall suffice to wear surplices; saving that all deans, masters, and heads of collegiate churches, canons, and prebendaries, being graduates, shall daily, at the time of prayer and preaching wear with their surplices such hoods as are agreeable to their degrees.<sup>8</sup>

The most recent printed edition of *The Canons of the Church of England* (Section B8) makes no mention of the wearing of hoods as an ornament for the clergy, let alone for those in the choir.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, however, there is mention in the Royal School of Church Music's *The Voice for Life Chorister's Companion* which states that: 'At some services (usually Morning or Evening Prayer) an academic hood may be worn by the minister or by members of the choir. Hoods mark the award of a university degree or diploma.'<sup>10</sup> Although this statement does little to offer any explanation (understandable, given the target audience), it does give some foundation to the wearing of hoods in any choir setting, and not necessarily just collegiate.

This article presents my research into the usage of academic hoods in Oxford collegiate choirs today. It aims to provide a record of the current situation, whilst not re-treading ground covered in Groves's article. The history of, and rules for wearing academic dress at Oxford will be explored, before moving on to view the data collected from choir members and their directors. This will be used to assess the state of the practice in the collegiate choirs at Oxford, and an overview of contemporary usage. It should be assumed that most of the discussion which follows centres on practice for Evensong, which represents the overwhelming majority of their engagements.

## Methodology

To provide a thorough basis for this inquiry, a two-stage approach was adopted. The first stage sought to engage the Organists/Directors of Music<sup>11</sup> in order to ascertain their views and approaches towards the wearing of academic dress (namely, hoods) in the setting of the collegiate choirs of which they were in charge. The aim was to provide a strong and objective baseline of information, from which some preliminary conclusions might be drawn. In order to focus this inquiry, it was decided that only the sixteen collegiate choirs that participate in the choral and organ awards (and therefore operate under the leadership of an appointed director) would be assessed. The information collected, and conclusions reached as a result, are correct as of the end of Trinity Term 2023 (mid-June).

The second stage was to approach current members of Oxford collegiate choirs, via questionnaire, to gauge the understanding of and attitudes towards the wearing of academic dress in the choir(s) of which they were members. The responses from this second stage could then be compared to the responses and baseline provided by the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 381.

<sup>9</sup> Church of England, *The Canons of the Church of England 2022*, 8th edn (London: Church House, 2022), p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Tim Ruffer, *The Voice for Life Chorister's Companion* (Salisbury: RSCM, 2009), p. 132.

<sup>11</sup> Historically, the title of the individual in charge of the choir has been given as 'Organist', despite the fact that the directing of the choir might well preclude the playing of said instrument. Increasingly, the title 'Director of Music' is used, which removes the confusion and (often) stipulation that the director may be expected to play the organ.

first, allowing an overall assessment of the contemporary usage of academic hoods in the collegiate choirs of Oxford.

I have been a lay clerk with the Choir of The Queen's College for four years (on top of an initial year as a graduate scholar). My position on the matter is that those entitled to do so should wear their hoods when appropriate. This now aligns with common usage in the choir at the end of the 2022–23 academic year, but was not the case upon joining (in 2019) and goes to illustrate potential change in attitudes and practice over a small period.

### Academic dress in Oxford

The wearing of academic dress for events in colleges varies widely. Some require one to wear a gown at formal hall (with few stipulations for the rest of one's chosen outfit; certainly not requiring subfusc), whereas others require such infrequent wearing that students may get rid of their gowns after the matriculation ceremony, only then to have to buy them again for examinations.

In 2015, a referendum was held by the Oxford University Student Union in which members were asked if they would support the continued wearing of subfusc for examinations. This resulted in 75.8 per cent of voters opting to keep subfusc, and 24.2 per cent voting to get rid of it.<sup>12</sup> An additional vote saw a similar question asked concerning the compulsory wearing of a gown and cap: the vote was similarly in favour of upholding the tradition, at 78 per cent to 22 per cent. Whilst both motions did not result in resolutions to dilute the wearing of academic dress, they both reflect the sentiment of a not insignificant (and ever-growing) faction in Oxford who believe that academic dress is archaic and off-putting to those from non-privately educated backgrounds.<sup>13</sup>

But these discussions apply only to gowns and subfusc; the wearing of hoods is even less common, and the guidance for what is required for University-level events beyond that of matriculation and examinations can be somewhat difficult to decipher. The University of Oxford does have established levels of academic dress, which can be found in three recent sources: John Venables' 2009 book, *Academic Dress of the University of Oxford*;<sup>14</sup> the Vice-Chancellor's Regulations 1 (2002, rev. 2008, 2012,

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<sup>12</sup> Damien Gayle, 'Oxford University Students Vote to Keep "Archaic" Subfusc Academic Dress', *Guardian*, 23 May 2015.

<sup>13</sup> It should also be noted that, even if the referendum had resulted in a resolution to make the wearing of subfusc or gowns/caps non-compulsory, the Student Union does not have the authority to change the regulations of the University—rather it would have then lobbied for change which the University would have been able to reject outright.

Additionally, one might also consider participation bias when assessing the results of the referendum. The proportion of members of the University of Oxford who actively vote in Student Union matters is low; this is because the colleges and their respective common rooms fulfil many of the same roles that a students' union would in a non-collegiate university. With this in mind, it is probable that a poll of the entire University body would produce a different result, perhaps more emphatically in favour of maintaining academic dress.

<sup>14</sup> (Oxford: Shepherd & Woodward, 2009) p. 49. On the development of academic dress at the University of Oxford, see Andrew James Peter North, 'The Development of the Academic Dress of the University of Oxford 1920–2012', *TBS*, 13 (2013), pp. 101–41.

2015);<sup>15</sup> and the most recent Academic Dress Guidance Table (2024).<sup>16</sup> The first two sources split the dress code between ‘Bachelors and Masters’, and ‘Doctors’, as follows:

**Bachelors and Masters**

1. Black gown
2. Black gown and hood
3. Black gown, hood, square (or for women, a soft cap if preferred), and *subfusc* (full academic dress)
4. Black gown, hood, square (or for women, a soft cap if preferred) *subfusc*, and bands

**Doctors**

5. Black (laced except for DD)
6. Black gown and hood
7. Black gown, hood, square (or for women, a soft cap if preferred), and *subfusc*
8. Convocation habit (black gown, hood, and sleeveless cloak (chimere), square (or for women, a soft cap if preferred), *subfusc*, and bands)
9. Scarlet robe and appropriate cap
10. Scarlet robe with *subfusc* (full academic dress for DPhils)
11. Scarlet robe with *subfusc*, bands, and the appropriate cap (full academic dress for higher doctorates)

This is streamlined in the most recent official guidance from the University, collating the separate ‘Bachelors and Masters’ and ‘Doctors’ segments into one, resulting in just seven levels of dress:<sup>17</sup>

1. Black gown (For Doctors except DD: laced)
2. Black gown and hood
3. Black gown, hood, cap (square or soft permitted) and *subfusc*
4. Black gown, hood, cap, *subfusc* and bands or Convocation habit for Doctors (chemir worn over the black undress gown and hood, *subfusc*, cap and bands)
5. Scarlet robe and appropriate cap
6. Scarlet robe, cap and *subfusc* (Full Academic Dress for DPhils)
7. Scarlet robe with *subfusc* and bands and appropriate cap (Full Academic Dress for Higher Doctors)

All three sources then go on to specify the level of dress required for each event. It is clear from formatting alone that the Guidance Table is an updated form of Venables’ work, with both providing three columns indicating the required level of dress for bachelors and masters, DPhils, and higher doctors. When the two tables are compared it is interesting to observe that in the singular instance levels of dress are not the same, there is a lowering of the level of dress required. ‘General’ Church services previously required DPhils and higher doctors to wear their hoods (and Convocation habits, if desired),<sup>18</sup> but the most recent guidance has lowered this to gowns only. The Court Sermon procession is now the only occasion where a higher level of required dress has been maintained from earlier versions of guidance (levels 2 or 4 on the Guid-

<sup>15</sup> University of Oxford. Vice-Chancellor’s Regulations 1 of 2002. Amended 24 January 2008, 19 July 2012 and 7 August 2015 (*Gazette*, Vol. 145 (23 July 2015), pp. 694–96), <[governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/vice-chancellors-regulations-1-of-2002](http://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/vice-chancellors-regulations-1-of-2002)> [retrieved 29 May 2024].

<sup>16</sup> Academic Dress Guidance Table at <[www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/Dress\\_Code\\_Guideline\\_table.pdf](http://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/Dress_Code_Guideline_table.pdf)> [retrieved 29 May 2024].

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> ‘General’ is the term that the sources use to refer to normal church services.

**Table 1. University events when the wearing of a hood is specified.**

Where two readings are given, this represents a differentiation between bachelors and masters, and doctors.

Event	Venables (2009)	VC Regulations (2002–15)	Guidance Table (2024)
Chancellor’s court of benefactors	Y	Y	Y
Church services (general, funerals/memorials, weekdays)	N/Y	N/Y	N
Church services (court sermon)	N/Y	N/Y	N/Y
Gazette days	Y	Y	Y
Orations and admissions	Y	Y	Y
Degree ceremonies	Y	Y	Y
Encaenia and royal visits	Y	Y	Y
Examinations	Y	Y	Y
Garden parties	Y	Y	—
Delivering a major public lecture	Y	Y	Y
Admission of proctors and pro-proctors	Y	Y	Y
Admission of Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Vice-Chancellors, and clerks of the market	Y	Y	Y

ance Table, and then only for DPhils and higher doctors). Thus, as we consider the events where one might be required to wear a hood, we must do so in an environment where occasions for wearing academic dress are already small in number, appear to be gradually increasing in their scarcity, and are often confusing depending on which of the three sources one chooses to consult.<sup>19</sup> The events at which the wearing of a hood is specified (in at least one of the three sources) can be seen in Table 1, above.

Whilst the guidance largely agrees on those events when one would be required wear a hood, what should be stressed is the infrequency with which they occur in any given year and, crucially in regard to this article, how they might coincide with choir events. The most obvious crossovers are church services, but the most up-to-date guidance suggests that one should wear a hood only at Court Sermons (and even then, only if one is part of the procession). Conspicuous in its absence is any mention of University Sermons in any of the three sources. The University Sermon is perhaps the most common University event to intersect with the activities of collegiate choirs in Oxford, as the sermons rotate through the chapels (and University Church) in a predetermined pattern.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, it is strange (if perhaps an oversight) that there is no prescribed guidance on academic dress for these services.

<sup>19</sup> For the sake of this article, it is assumed that the Academic Dress Guidance Table is the authoritative document, having been issued directly from the University, and as the most up-to-date document.

<sup>20</sup> For a list of recent University Sermons and their locations in the collegiate University see University Church. University Sermons, at <[www.universitychurch.ox.ac.uk/content/university-sermons](http://www.universitychurch.ox.ac.uk/content/university-sermons)> [retrieved 30 May 2024].

Additionally, it is not uncommon for one of the college choirs to be asked to perform at some of the other events listed in Table 1, such as Encaenia (where one college choir performs each year, on a loose rota), but as the events are not chapel services, concert dress or cassocks (without surplices and, therefore, also without hoods), are usually adopted.

What should also be noted is that the above rules apply specifically to academic dress of the University, and do not apply to any hoods granted by a degree from another institution—therefore a graduate in the University possessing a Bachelor of Arts degree from another institution would not be allowed to wear their hood with Oxford academic dress, instead having to opt for their black gown (and subfusc, where appropriate) alone. These rules, however, do not (usually) apply for a regular chapel service if hoods are permitted for those in the choir. This being said, the Vice-Chancellor's Regulations of 2002 allow for the wearing of non-Oxford academic dress (to which one is entitled) at any event where they 'would otherwise be required to wear the academic dress of the University', with the exception of degree ceremonies and Encaenia.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it is wearing the hood of another institution on top of Oxford academic dress alone that is incompatible with the regulations of the University.

### **Academic hoods and Oxford collegiate choirs**

For something so seemingly innocuous, the wearing of academic hoods within choirs can cause great rifts within collegiate environments. These rifts often become pronounced when there is a change in practice, especially at the point of the introduction of a culture of hood-wearing, which can generate a great deal of animosity.<sup>22</sup>

One would expect the tradition of hood-wearing to be strongest within the collegiate chapel, after all, those in the immediate environs are people who often own their own academic dress. Whilst this may have been true well into the twentieth century, these traditions are not as actively upheld, nor appreciated.<sup>23</sup>

Regarding the nature of the collegiate choir itself, the choral and organ awards see prospective undergraduates apply for their scholarships over a year before their entry into the University. This results in the sixteen collegiate choirs which admit by the awards scheme being heavily dominated by undergraduates, with positions for graduates and professional clerks being sparse (but gradually increasing).<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the result is the inevitable fact that the majority of collegiate choristers will not have a degree which entitles them to an academic hood,<sup>25</sup> leaving those graduates who are entitled in the minority. From this author's own experience (as well as further anecdotal

<sup>21</sup> Vice-Chancellor's Regulations 1 of 2002, Clause 3.

<sup>22</sup> Any animosity seems particularly focused amongst younger members of the choirs: those who are not yet entitled to wear a hood. It is an attitude that, from both personal observation and conversation, changes once they have graduated.

<sup>23</sup> One need only compare pictures of college life (both planned and candid) from the early- to mid-twentieth century and more recently to observe the change in attitude, as is discussed in the following paragraphs.

<sup>24</sup> The prevalence of graduate choral scholarships has, however, been increasing in the past few years. Clerkships at the foundations are more consistent, with numbers fluctuating in the other ensembles.

<sup>25</sup> This is purposefully ignoring hoods granted by diplomas, such as the Trinity College Licentiates Hood (LTCL).

dotal evidence), the smaller number of choristers with the right to wear hoods can sometimes create an odd atmosphere within a choir, where—through confusion in the practice, frustration at the perception of someone thinking they are senior/superior, disruption of uniformity, or perhaps even envy—the practice of wearing a hood can become toxic.

However, one should not to dismiss all the perceived issues with the wearing of academic hoods out of hand, particularly concerning uniformity. These issues tie into many conversations about being presented as equals within the environment of a church, which Groves did touch upon in his article,<sup>26</sup> and is only exacerbated when only one or two members of the choir are graduates entitled to wear hoods—further segueing into the discussion of internal hierarchies and perceptions of seniority/superiority.

Up to this point the entitlement to wear a hood has been assumed to accompany the conferment of a degree but this is not necessarily the case. Professional qualifications entitle many musicians to wear an academic hood well before they graduate from university with a degree. The most common are the diploma qualifications, from the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (DipABRSM and ARSM)<sup>27</sup> and Trinity College London (LTCL) which many will have achieved prior to arriving in the Oxford collegiate choir scene. Additionally, those who play the organ (particularly those who are scholars on the instrument) may have already achieved or will work towards those diplomas offered by the Royal College of Organists across the duration of their scholarships/degrees: first the Associate of the Royal College of Organists (ARCO) and then the Fellowship (FRCO), each level with a different hood.

Therefore, what may be concluded from the above is that whilst there is still a strong tradition of academic dress within the University of Oxford and its constituent colleges, occasions when hooded dress is required are infrequent; those entitled to wear hoods are often in a minority; and should a University occasion arise when the wearing of a hood is appropriate, said wearing of the hood is often incompatible within the choral setting. In addition, the practice of hood-wearing within the collegiate choirs themselves is an almost entirely separate tradition, with the potential variety of external hoods being quite pronounced, and the decision as to whether the wearing is allowed being in the hands (functionally, at least) of the Organist/Director of Music or Chaplain.<sup>28</sup>

At least in the case of The Queen's College, true authority in deciding conventions on wearing academic dress (and by extension, hoods) during services lies with the Governing Body. However, this is not a question which has ever been raised, and unless such a conversation should occur, functional decisions regarding dress reside with the Organist/Director of Music and Chaplain. Historically, members of the College, both junior and senior, would have to wear gowns when attending services in the chapel. This was never included in the statutes or bylaws, but rather official practice as mandated by the Governing Body. The tradition is now only regularly upheld by senior members and, despite having never been rescinded by the Governing Body, the wear-

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<sup>26</sup> Groves, p. 102.

<sup>27</sup> DipABRSM was discontinued at the end of 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Further work on this topic might include a survey of the Chaplain of each chapel as, in some instances, his or her view on the wearing of hoods may be as important as that of the Director of Music (if not more so).



Burgon Society Archive WAMT-008



Burgon Society Archive WGC-049

**Fig. 2. Common non-degree academic hoods to which choir members may be entitled.**

**Fig. 2A (left): Associate of the Royal College of Organists. Fig. 2B (right): Licentiate of the Trinity College, London.**

ing of gowns for services is not enforced for junior members.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, in addition to the intricacies of University regulations against collegiate practice, what should occur in any given chapel (i.e., gowns being worn by all members, and presumably hoods, when entitled and appropriate) is not necessarily what does occur.

### Contemporary usage of academic hoods

Two separate questionnaires were circulated to those sixteen choirs which admit members through the choral and organ awards scheme,<sup>30</sup> one to the directors, and a second to the members of the choirs.

It should be noted that the type of collegiate choir in Oxford varies among colleges. The three choral foundations, Christ Church, Magdalen College, and New College,<sup>31</sup> operate in a manner more closely akin to that of a cathedral (Christ Church, of course, being the Cathedral for the See of Oxford since 1546).<sup>32</sup> This means one might expect an active tradition of hood-wearing; however, as will be seen below, this is not the case for these institutions. The three foundations are accompanied by a further

<sup>29</sup> I am indebted to the Revd Peter Southwell (Chaplain of The Queen's College, Oxford, 1982–2010) for his accounts of practice at the College and University, as well as his input across several drafts of this article.

<sup>30</sup> These being: Brasenose, Christ Church, Exeter, Harris Manchester, Keble, Magdalen, Merton, New, Oriel, Pembroke, Queen's, St Edmund Hall, St Peter's, Somerville, University, Worcester.

<sup>31</sup> The provision for chorister scholarships exists within the original foundation statutes of each college, with each having an attached school from which these choristers are drawn.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Curthoys, *The King's Cathedral: The Ancient Heart of Christ Church, Oxford* (London: Profile Books, 2019), p. 74.

three college choirs which operate with child choristers. Both Pembroke and Worcester Colleges have choristers with scholarships based in Christ Church Cathedral School, available for those boys who do not hold scholarships for the main Cathedral choir, and since 2016, Merton College has operated a girls' choir drawing choristers from local schools, and who sing on Mondays and Wednesdays.<sup>33</sup>

There is then a group of choirs which wear cassocks and surplices (Pembroke, Worcester, and Merton), and another group which opts to wear gowns instead. From these three, albeit rough, categories of collegiate choirs in Oxford one might extrapolate a tiered approach to the wearing of hoods within the constituent colleges of the University, consistent with the level of choir dress they adopt.

From the data collected, the dress code for those choirs which admit members via the choral and organ awards appears in Table 2.

The raw data illustrates a large variety across the collegiate choirs. Whilst there is a good amount of strong opposition to the wearing of academic hoods—reasoning for which we will examine below—there is no matching force on the other end of the spectrum; rather there is a marked ambivalence towards the practice. To paraphrase several conversations that took place during the course of the research, it would seem that most directors do not care whether their members wear hoods, as long as the music still sounds good. Additionally, whether choir members are permitted to wear hoods is not always necessarily at the discretion of the choir director. In at least two instances above, direction from the Chaplain has been the deciding factor. Suffice it to say, seniority (in regard to the internal hierarchy of the college) tends to hold sway in such decisions.

The reasoning for opposition to the wearing of hoods varies, but there seem to be three grounds for such opposition:

1. Incompatibility with base dress code (i.e., gowns)
2. Lack of uniformity/promotes elitism
3. Distraction from worship

The first of these is simple enough to understand. The addition of a hood to the wearing of one's academic gown essentially elevates the dress code to one that is reserved for some of the most significant university events (such as Encaenia and graduation ceremonies), and therefore would be inappropriate in the majority of instances.

The reasoning that the addition of hoods ruins uniformity would seem to be the most strongly held opposition to the practice, and one can understand why. With an ensemble such as a choir, a sense of unity and cohesion is an important factor, so differentiating oneself from the crowd is often perceived to have the opposite impact. This is sometimes perceived as going so far as to promote a form of elitism within the group. A further contributing factor to this argument comes as an unlikely (though, perhaps, inevitable) side-effect to Covid-19: the livestreaming of services. Since March 2020, there has been a marked increase in the introduction of livestreaming equipment in many of the Oxford college chapels. The sudden bounds in exposure to new audiences all over the world have necessitated, in some instances, a rethink in how choirs present themselves. At the end of Trinity Term 2023, for instance, the choir of

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<sup>33</sup> Merton College Girl Choristers, at <[www.merton.ox.ac.uk/merton-college-girl-choristers](http://www.merton.ox.ac.uk/merton-college-girl-choristers)> [retrieved 17 July 2023].

**Table 2. Information on dress code and usage of hoods within the sixteen collegiate choirs which admit choristers through the choral awards scheme.**

<b>Choir</b>	<b>Dress Code</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Choristers</b>
<b>Brasenose</b>	Academic gowns	Does not wear a hood	Wearing of hoods is permitted
<b>Christ Church</b>	Cassocks and surplices	Does not wear a hood	Not permitted to wear hoods
<b>Exeter</b>	Cassocks and surplices	Would wear a hood if entitled	Wearing of hoods is permitted, but is not common practice
<b>Harris Manchester</b>	Academic gowns	Does not wear a hood	Not permitted to wear hoods
<b>Keble</b>	Cassocks and surplices	Wears a hood when directing services, when deemed necessary	Wearing of hoods is permitted <sup>1</sup>
<b>Magdalen</b>	Cassocks and surplices	Will usually wear a hood when directing services	Hoods are not commonly worn and are permitted only at a small number of pre-determined special services/occasions during the year
<b>Merton</b>	Cassocks and surplices	Often wears a hood during Evensong	Only Oxford hoods are permitted
<b>New</b>	Cassocks and surplices	Does not wear a hood	Not permitted to wear hoods
<b>Oriel</b>	Cassocks and surplices	Elects not to wear a hood as they view the practice as an intrusion to, and distraction from, worship	Wearing of hoods is permitted, left to the conscience of each individual member
<b>Pembroke</b>	Robes <sup>2</sup>	Wears a hood when directing services	Wearing of hoods is currently not feasible over the robes (not academic gowns), but will be allowed once dress code transitions

<sup>1</sup> Practice briefly changed during Hilary Term 2023, taking advantage of the temporary departure of the Chaplain, who enforced the hood-wearing policy. Non-Oxford graduates took the opportunity to wear their hoods without repercussion before the standard policy was reinforced.

<sup>2</sup> To transition to cassocks and surplices for the academic year beginning Michaelmas Term 2023.

Choir	Dress Code	Director	Choristers
<b>Queen's</b>	Cassocks and surplices	Usually elects to not wear a hood unless essential (see, University Sermons), but increasingly will wear a hood on Sunday so to match the usage of other members	Wearing of hoods is permitted. Currently, usage is reserved for Sundays and special services, such as feast days, at the discretion of the choir members. The choir in the 2022/23 academic year had a higher than usual intake of graduates, which aided in the changing of standard practice
<b>St Edmund Hall</b>	Academic gowns	Wears a hood when directing services	Wearing of hoods is permitted, but is not common practice, as the addition of a hood to the gown (rather than over a cassock and surplice) would essentially constitute full academic dress. Additionally, the majority of the choir are undergraduates, who may not have any entitlement to wear a hood
<b>St Peter's</b>	Dark suits, white shirts and the green college tie (men); All black or black bottoms and white tops (women), with flexibility for those who may not conform to that binary	Does not wear a hood	Have never asked to wear hoods, but would be largely incompatible with dress code
<b>Somerville</b>	Concert blacks with gowns	Does not wear a hood	Not permitted to wear hoods, as the dress code is incompatible
<b>University</b>	Smart clothes with gowns	Does not wear a hood	Not permitted to wear hoods
<b>Worcester</b>	Cassocks and surplices	Will often wear a hood <sup>3</sup>	Wearing of hoods is permitted

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<sup>3</sup> There has recently been a high turnover of directors at Worcester, with a new permanent Director of Chapel Music appointed to begin in Michaelmas Term 2023.

the University Church (admittedly, not an Oxford collegiate choir) was awaiting the arrival of cassocks, having simply worn surplices over normal clothing in the past, as a direct result of comments from livestreams, and the desire for a tidy and uniform presentation of the ensemble. The arrival of the cassocks for the 2023/4 academic year has forestalled further such comments.

The lack of uniformity, or perception thereof, seems to be intrinsically linked with the opposition on the grounds of elitism. Once again, one can perhaps understand this opposition, as the wearing of an academic hood is a visible indicator of achievement. However, disregarding the politics of hood-wearing in other settings displaying one's academic status in a collegiate choir would seem to be an appropriate practice, not least because every member of the institution will, presumably, one day be entitled to wear an academic hood themselves.

The final ground for opposition—that the wearing of hoods is a distraction from worship—is the one which would seemingly bear the least weight. As shown above, canon law, until the most recent revision, stated quite clearly that both clergy and choir (where entitled) should wear academic hoods. Therefore, one might resolve that the wearing of academic hoods, when stipulated, is both a necessity and an integral part of worship. It should, however, be considered that uniformity once again comes into play here. It is held by some that the purpose of liturgical dress is to make everyone equal, and that wearing an academic hood would make one stand out as a result. One can appreciate this stance, but can counter that hoods may be worn by members of the clergy: if it is permitted for them (and acceptable in a theologically democratic aesthetic), then why not for members of a choir?

At this juncture of the inquiry, one can see that the of wearing academic hoods in Oxford collegiate choirs is very much a continuing tradition, with half of the colleges in question promoting a culture of hood-wearing without any barriers to awarding institution. However, this culture is mixed, and does often pivot on the discretion of whoever has authority to decide whether or not hood-wearing will be permitted. Various oppositions, as seen above, play into these decisions, with arguments of uniformity tending to win out in the established choral foundations.

### **Contemporary attitudes of members of collegiate choirs**

Aside from the raw data about the collegiate choirs which admit members via the choral and organ awards, as given above, the consultation with those who actually live the tradition—in this instance, the members of each of these choirs—is essential to the understanding of contemporary practice.

The questionnaire which was devised and circulated to members of the collegiate choir community in Oxford from October to December 2022, consisted of the following questions.

1. To which College Choir do you belong?
2. What base dress code does your choir have for services?
3. Does your choir permit the wearing of hoods?
4. Are you entitled to wear any kind of academic hood? (Including those from the RCO, ABRSM, TCL or similar institutions?)
  - a. [*If 'Yes' to 4.*] Which hood(s) are you entitled to wear? (Name the degree/award)

b. Do you wear this hood in service? (/would you wear it if you were allowed?)

5. [*If No' to 4.*] Would you wear a hood if you were entitled to do so?

6. If you answered 'sometimes' [*in response to 4b. or 5.*], please explain the occasions for which you would wear a hood.

7. What is your opinion towards the wearing of academic hoods in a collegiate choir setting? (Please explain your stance, be it aesthetic, theological, liturgical, etc.)

8. Do you wish to add anything further concerning the wearing of academic hoods in a collegiate choir setting?

The 66 responses draw an interesting picture of attitudes across the 16 college choirs included in this work.<sup>34</sup> The dress codes (perhaps unsurprisingly) correspond with the information given by the Organists/Directors of each ensemble. In response to question 4, a large array of hoods was cited, with a particular abundance of hoods awarded for degrees from Oxford. The specific hoods cited are as follows:

BA (Oxon)	MEng (Cantab)	LTCL
MA (Oxon)	LLM (Cantab)	LRSM
BTh (Oxon)	BA (Dunelm)	DipABRSM
MMath (Oxon)	LLB (Dub)	ARCO
BCL (Oxon)	MEd (Chichester)	
MSt (Oxon)		
MPhil (Oxon)		

Whilst the abundance of Oxford and Cambridge (over half of the responses) is not surprising, attention should be drawn to the third column. These represent hoods for non-degree awards, and confirm the suspicion, above, that many undergraduates coming into the collegiate choirs may well be entitled to wear an academic hood though they are yet to have been awarded a degree. Further analysis shows a marked lack of first degrees within the mix, with only the Oxford and Durham Bachelor of Arts, Oxford Bachelor of Theology, Oxford Master of Mathematics (a four-year first degree) and Trinity Dublin Bachelor of Law, the remaining seven represent six higher postgraduate degrees and the Oxford Master of Arts (which is a change of status conferred to those eligible upon application).

There were two erroneous responses to this question, from one respondent clearly not a current member of any of the collegiate choirs (their whole response was not used for the purposes of the data) which listed hoods of an Associate of the Royal Schools of Church Music and a Fellow of the Guildhall School of Music—one would expect both to be beyond the reach of even the most accomplished postgraduate student.

When compared to the responses from the Organists/Directors of Music, what is interesting is the larger degree of support towards the wearing of academic hoods in the setting of an Oxford collegiate choir, regardless of whether the rules of the choir actually permit it (see Table 3).

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<sup>34</sup> There were 67 respondents in total, representing the colleges as follows: Brasenose (2), Christ Church (5), Exeter (3), Harris Manchester (1), Keble (7), Magdalen (9), Merton (6), New (2), Oriel (4), Pembroke (2), Queen's (13), Somerville (3), St Edmund Hall (2), St Peter's (2), University (1), Worcester (4), and one (1) ineligible respondent.

**Table 3. Support for wearing of hoods in collegiate choirs, collected from members of eligible choirs in October–December 2022. (Figures rounded.) *n* = 66**

63%	27%	12%
Yes	No	N/a

The statistics for complete support broadly match the data gathered above (with 50 per cent of the choirs allowing hoods compared to the 61 per cent support from responding members) but when one accounts for the reasonable portion of respondents who stated that they had no opinion either way, this results in only a 27 per cent complete opposition to the wearing of hoods in a collegiate setting. This should, however, be caveated with the fact that many respondents in support of the wearing of hoods stated that they would reserve this for particular occasions of importance, including Sundays, feast days, and major college services/events. This usage would seem to depend on the college choir, and the culture of use within each.

To address the opposition to the wearing of hoods from this questionnaire, we may once again return to the categories of opposition which were defined above:

1. Incompatibility with base dress code (i.e., gowns)
2. Lack of uniformity/promotes elitism
3. Distraction from worship

It should be immediately noted that the first category of opposition—incompatibility with dress code—does not feature at all within the responses. This is unsurprising, as one would expect that particular opposition to lie exclusively with whoever is in charge of setting the base dress code; the members of the choirs would not concern themselves with that particular aspect of the argument. What may be deemed more interesting, however, is the fact that the number of respondents who simply did not understand what or why academic hoods may be worn (referred to as ‘Other’ in Table 4) is directly matched by the number of respondents who opposed the wearing of hoods for reasons of distraction from worship. The lack of opposition on the grounds of distraction from worship reinforces the sentiment above; that being the wearing of academic hoods is broadly accepted as a normal (and perhaps, required) part of worship, despite any impacts it may have on a theologically democratic aesthetic.

The largest degree of opposition to the practice of hood-wearing is clearly on the grounds of uniformity and/or elitism. These two are, once again, intertwined—with

**Table 4. Reasons for opposition towards wearing academic hoods, collected from current members of eligible choirs in October–December 2022. *n* = 66**

78%	(Incompatibility: 0%)	11%	11%
Uniformity/elitism		Distraction from worship	Other

the lack of uniformity seemingly leading inevitably to a creation of an elitist hierarchy within the choir. It is, perhaps, worth noting that of those who opposed on the grounds of uniformity/elitism, only 29 per cent were entitled to wear a hood—an opinion which might well alter once this entitlement changes (which, at least anecdotally, tends to be the case). Whatever the case, as discussed above, the lack of uniformity created by the

wearing of hoods is well within the bounds of what is allowed by canon law, as well as a practice echoed by the clergy, before considering the academic nature of the setting of a collegiate chapel.

## **Conclusions**

As has been seen, the wearing of academic hoods as part of the liturgical dress of a choir member is permitted in so far as canon law is concerned and can trace its roots back to the earliest documents of the Church of England. The sources of guidance for the wearing of academic dress in the University of Oxford show that the requirement to wear an academic hood itself is limited to a small handful of events, and it has been explained that the overlap these have with any need for choirs to be in liturgical dress is minute. The University did relax its own rules concerning the wearing of another institution's academic dress, but this, again, has little bearing on the use of hoods in collegiate chapels, other than perhaps providing a legitimate argument for the wearing of non-Oxford hoods in those college choirs which rigorously uphold that restriction.

The two-stage approach of the inquiry allowed for a detailed, overarching view of the tradition of hood-wearing in Oxford collegiate choirs. From the data collected from the Organists/Directors of Music, three main areas of opposition towards the wearing of hoods in a collegiate setting were identified: an incompatibility with base dress code; a lack of uniformity and/or the culture promotes elitism; and that the wearing can be a distraction from worship. Whilst the roots of these three oppositions are understandable, it has been shown that they bear little weight under interrogation.

The responses from current members of the collegiate institutions illustrate an interesting picture in themselves, indicating a large majority in support, with a little over a quarter of respondents actively opposing the practice. Additionally, when the reasons for this opposition are explored, most respondents based their complaints on the lack of uniformity and/or fostering an attitude of elitism, which would seem to ignore both the practice of hood-wearing for the clergy, as well as the very environment of an Oxford collegiate chapel (that being an academic one).

It is clear that the practice of hood-wearing in the collegiate choirs of the University of Oxford remains active, despite constantly shifting. On the whole, the evidence presented in this article shows that attitudes are in support of the tradition.

## **Acknowledgement**

Photos from the Burgon Society Archive by Chris Williams.