

A Study of the History and Use of Lace on Academical Gowns in the United Kingdom and Ireland: Updates and Corrections

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This article is a supplement to my 2012 article in the *Transactions*.¹ In the last few years research has answered some of the questions I raised in the original article, and has uncovered some ambiguities that may require further study. I shall follow a similar format to the original article, but list only the laces which need updating due to new information.

Terminology

In my original article, I gave a brief description for the terms such as ‘gimp’, ‘lace’ and ‘braid’. However, these terms might need further clarification, especially in light of the publication of Annabel Westman’s *Fringe, Frog & Tassel: The Art of the Trimmings-Maker in Interior Decoration*, which details much of the terminology and usage of lace trimmings in interior decoration, and are relevant given these trimmings are also used in academic gowns. I will not repeat the history and finer details found in her work here, but draw on certain points.

‘Lace’ as it is used for academic trimmings would best be described as ‘woven lace’. Before the special looms were created to weave them, lace was done by hand in the manner we would recognize (those white open weave frilly ones, or ‘bobbin lace’)². The process was essentially the same using various knots and braiding techniques to construct the lace. ‘Passemayne’ is an old term for ‘woven lace’ that slowly fell out of usage from the 1660s.³ The product itself is a closely woven tape-like structure, in the manner of Cambridge doctors’ lace and oak-leaf lace. Gimp, on the other hand, has an open-work weave and would belong in the category of ‘bobbin lace’, but its main identifying feature is its use of gimp cord in its construction. In terms of ‘braid’, this is a general term for most flat woven trimmings so would be interchangeable with ‘woven lace’.⁴

Updates and corrections

1. Oxford gimp

There had been two attempts at re-weaving the older versions of the Oxford gimp. In 2011/12, I commissioned Haywoods Trimmings to try and re-create the old 1930s ver-

¹ Charles R. Tsua, ‘A Study of the History and Use of Lace on Academical Gowns in the United Kingdom and Ireland,’ *TBS*, 12 (2012), pp. 103–27.

² Annabel Westman, *Fringe, Frog & Tassel: The Art of the Trimmings-Maker in Interior Decoration* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2019), p. 18.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

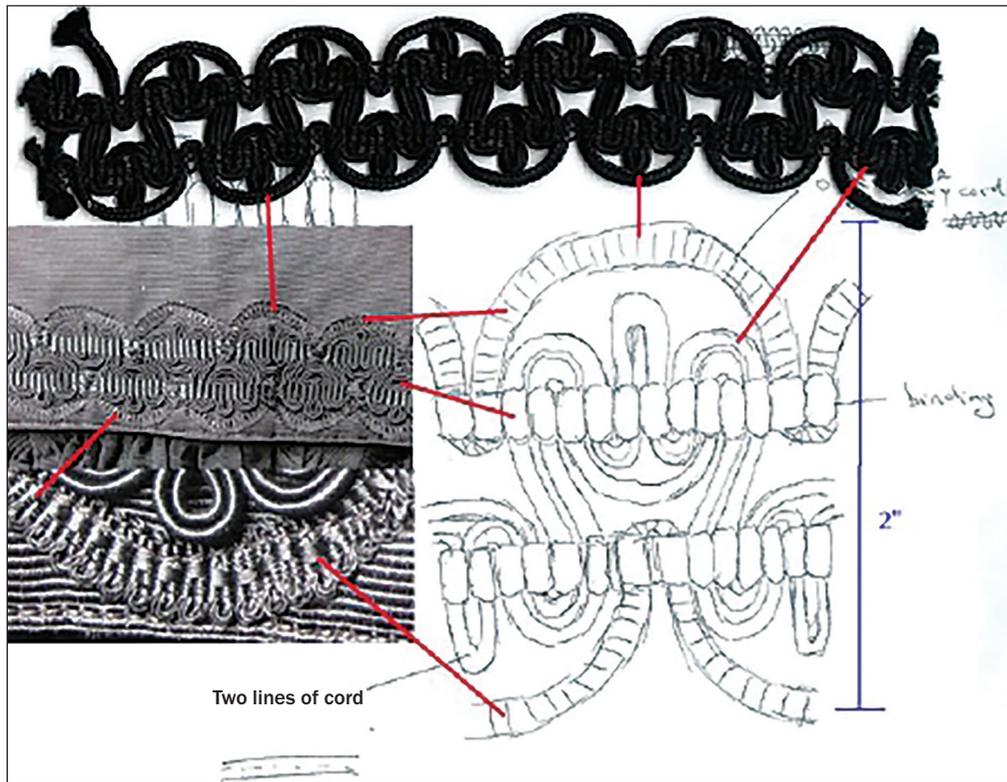


Fig. 1. My schematic diagram of the Oxford gimp, prepared for Haywoods Trimmings.

sion of the gimp, using the photos I took of the University of London Bedell of Convocation gown,⁵ which had such gimp on it.⁶ I also provided a diagram to aid their design team (Fig. 1). They made a sample for me, which was woven on their specialist gimp looms (Fig. 2).⁷ There are some differences from the original version; most notably they use stiffer material (cotton overspun with polyester or rayon), unlike the soft silk of the original. Also, the central cords overlap on the outer scallops making for a bulky look. Although it does not completely match the finer details of the original gimp, it nonetheless proves that re-weaving such gimps mechanically on looms is still possible. Of course, this was a private venture in the interests of research, but I imagine after some improvements this could be ordered and used for substantive robe-making commissions.⁸

In 2015, Kenneth Crawford (who trades as Robes of Distinction) undertook a commission for an Oxford gimp gown. For this project, he decided to hand-construct the gimp (based on a 1970s version⁹ of a sample he had obtained from Ede & Raven-

⁵ Burgon Archive, WBS-163.

⁶ Tsua (2012), p. 114, Fig. 3.

⁷ Burgon Archive, WBS-257l.

⁸ I had originally undertaken this gimp re-weaving due to someone wishing to commission an Oxford doctor's undress gown in pure silk grosgrain from me, but they pulled out at the last minute. For the record and future reference as to the outlay, the cost of the weaving the sample at the time was £34 + VAT. [How long was the sample piece for this price?]

⁹ Tsua (2012), p. 114, Fig. 2.



Fig. 2. The sample of re-woven 1930s Oxford gimp by Haywoods Trimmings.

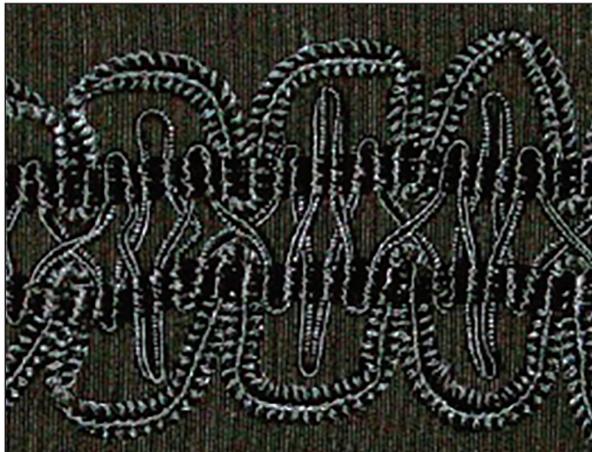


Fig. 3. Sample of Oxford gimp as it was used at the time by Ede & Ravenscroft in 1987.

scroft in 1987,¹⁰ see Fig. 3) directly on the body of the fabric. This he did by marking out the pattern on the frame-stretched fabric then hand-sewing the lines of cord and braid on, which harks back to when the gimp might have been originally ‘embroidered’ onto the gown, before the pre-made loom-woven version existed.

Ultimately, this took a considerable amount of time to do (75 hours in total for the gimp panels alone), but the results can be considered to be a pinnacle achievement in modern robemaking, since many craftsmanship and workmanship skills had been consigned to history with the advent of machinery and looms. Currently, Crawford has only made two such gowns. Figures 4–6 show the step-by-step process of constructing the gimp for the flap-collar. Figures 7 and 8 show the gimp on the completed gown at various places.

Most recently, in 2020 Antone Martinho-Truswell¹¹ commissioned from a lace-maker a length of Oxford gimp to create two extra pentagons of gimp to install on the body of the gown at elbow level to convert his Oxford master’s gown (which had 1930s

¹⁰ Personal correspondence with Kenneth Crawford, 22 April 2021.

¹¹ AB (Harvard), DPhil (Oxon), Fellow by Examination in Biological Science at Magdalen College and the Department of Zoology at the University of Oxford, Research Associate of the Department of Zoology at the University of Oxford. Dean and Head of House of Graduate House at St Paul’s College at the University of Sydney.

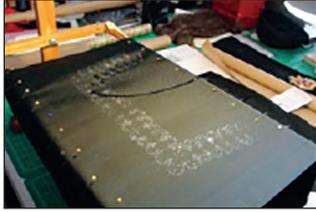


Fig. 4.

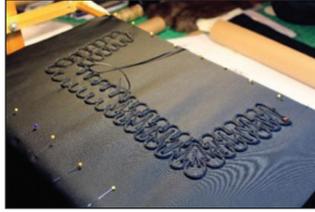


Fig. 5.

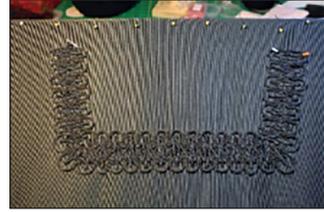


Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.

version gimp on it) into a doctor's undress gown. Sevinch Passementerie of Giza, Egypt, created the gimp, which in Figure 9 is installed on the gown.¹² Sevinch successfully replicated the gimp construction on the inside to near perfection of the 1930s version; however, it used a different kind of construction for the outside arcs, which had an inner metal wire core, rendering it different from the original. Martinho-Truswell notes that the stiffness made it difficult to handle the gimp when installing it onto the gown.¹³

2. Birmingham and Leicester braid

In the original article, I stated that I had difficulty in ascertaining the existence of the black version of the Birmingham braid.¹⁴ It turns out I had been using the wrong terminology in my correspondence with E&R enquiring about it. In 2019, Kenneth Crawford

¹² See <www.passementerie.org/index.html> [retrieved 19 May 2022].

¹³ Facebook comment on photo post on Academical Dress Facebook group, posted 17 January 2022, online at <www.facebook.com/groups/AcademicalDress/posts/2782447825181696/?comment_id=4715328248560301&reply_comment_id=4715787878514338> [retrieved 19 May 2022].

¹⁴ Tsua (2012), pp. 110, 125.



Fig. 9. Oxford gimp, created by Sevinch Passementerie, in 2020. Used with permission from Antone Martinho-Truswell.



Fig. 10. Black Leicester braid.

was commissioned to make a Lancaster PhD undress gown (more on this below), and needed the black Birmingham braid to trim the armholes. After his correspondence with E&R, they managed to provide the appropriate braid (Fig. 10)¹⁵ once they realized that the braid we refer to as ‘black Birmingham braid’ is what they refer to as ‘black Leicester braid’.

This mix-up in terminology is rather typical in the world of robemaking, where one person’s lace is another one’s braid. Kerstin Fröberg mentioned to me in passing that the lace and braids used for academical dress are technically ‘weaves’.¹⁶ But we are familiar with the terms currently used, and so it is usually better not to introduce newer terms, even if they are more accurate, in order to avoid future confusion.

It is understandable that E&R refers to this specific braid as Leicester’s given that the red version is extensively used for Leicester PhD dress robes. The black version is rarely used at all, as undress gowns are now not usually worn or made. Even though Birmingham used this braid first, it is perhaps appropriate to now refer to it as ‘Leicester braid’ to reflect current usage. I had also originally questioned whether Reading and Nottingham used the black version of the braid, but I can firmly answer that in the affirmative now that the issue of its existence is resolved.

To return to the point about the Lancaster PhD undress’s braid trimmings: this information was not included in my original article, as it was not specified which braid it has in *Shaw 2*.¹⁷ I had overlooked it for that reason; an oversight on my part. However, in *Shaw 3*, the Lancaster undress braid is identified as ‘black Birmingham braid’.¹⁸ I

¹⁵ Burgon Archive, WBS-257m.

¹⁶ This was at the Burgon Society Congregation at the University of Birmingham, 13 October 2019.

¹⁷ George W. Shaw, *Academical Dress of the British and Irish Universities* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1995), p. 140.

¹⁸ Nicholas Groves, ed., *Shaw’s Academical Dress of Great Britain and Ireland*, 3rd edn (London: Burgon Society, 2011), p. 241.



Fig. 12 (above).

Fig. 11 (left).

have yet to find out the source for this new information; however, Crawford made the Lancaster PhD undress gown using this braid and so it should be a settled matter that Lancaster uses black Leicester braid.

3. Southampton and Exeter laces

On 19 October 2018, I was alerted on the *Academical Dress* Facebook group, through a posting by Nicholas Groves, of a Wippell's gown sold on eBay that had lace trimmings on it.¹⁹ I immediately purchased it (see Fig. 11 and 12), as it had what looked like the Southampton lace described by George Shaw in his books: i.e., 'three vertical bars alternating with a lozenge shape'.²⁰ This description perfectly matched the lace in question. But on examination and reflection, the gown is most definitely not a Southampton PhD undress gown for several reasons.

Firstly, the Southampton PhD undress gown is in the Oxford masters cut [m1], whereas this one is Cambridge cut [m2]. Secondly, it does not have the cord and button on the yoke as Southampton gowns all have, which rules this gown out of being a Southampton gown at all.

This poses some interesting questions: what gown is this? How did Shaw come to the conclusion that the lace he saw was Southampton lace? What exactly was the lace sent to me by Wippell's in 2010?

Nicholas Groves posited in his original post that the best possibility was an Exeter PhD undress gown, which seems to fit everything apart from the lace: Shaw had from

¹⁹ Nicholas Groves, *Academical Dress* Facebook Group (posted 19 October 2018), at <www.facebook.com/groups/AcademicalDress/permalink/1916472988445855>

²⁰ Shaw (1995), p. 4.



Fig. 13. Exeter lace.

the beginning identified the Exeter undress gowns as using Cambridge lace.²¹ Given that Wippell's was Exeter's robemaker until recently, I corresponded with Wippell's in November 2018, enquiring whether they have any records on the gown in question and if they could send me a sample of the lace if they still have any. They replied saying that the gown could have been made in either 1965 or 1976 (going by the gown's serial numbers), but they could not provide any further background information about the lace in question.²² They had a length of the lace left (not enough to trim a gown) and sent me a cut of it (Fig. 13).²³

It appears that Shaw was mistaken in regard to both the Southampton and Exeter laces, and that the authentic Southampton lace is the one originally provided to me for Southampton by Wippell's. The present lace we can safely call 'Exeter lace', notwithstanding that it is the lace described by Shaw for Southampton. It is a moot point given that no further undress gowns of either PhD can be made: the supplies of lace have run out and the likelihood of their being re-woven is now remote. As I suggested in my original article, Cambridge lace can be substituted for the authentic Southampton lace, given their similarities, but for the Exeter lace it will be hard to find a satisfactory replacement.

4. Gold and silver lace

In addition to the usual official and fellow-commoners' robes, a number of universities have included gold and silver lace on their academics, which have been adopted since (or were overlooked during) the original article's completion. They are as follows:

Gold oakleaf lace

Dublin Institute of Technology – Honorary Doctors: 1" on the outer edge of the facings of the robe.²⁴

Queen Mary, University of London – Higher Doctors: 1 ½" on the outer edge of the facings, and on top of the silk cuffs of the robe.

²¹ Shaw (1995), p. 108, also Shaw 1.

²² Personal correspondence with Robin Richardson, Sales Manager of J. Wippell & Co, 9 November 2018.

²³ Burgon Archive, WBS-257k.

²⁴ Groves (2011), p. 152.

Silver oakleaf lace

University of East London — Doctors: 1” between the silk cuffs and body of the sleeve of the robe, also on the outer edge of the facings. The hood is edged 1” on the cape and cowl.²⁵

University of Gloucestershire – Higher Doctors: 1” on the outer edge of the facings and on top of the silk cuffs of the robe.²⁶

University of Plymouth – Higher Doctors: ½” on the outer edge of the facings of the robe; the hood is bordered on the cowl inside with the same lace.²⁷

Sheffield Hallam University – Higher Doctors: ½” on the outer edge of the facings of the robe; the hood is bordered inside the cowl with the same lace.²⁸

Teesside University – Higher Doctors: ½” edged on the outside of the cape and the inside of the hood of the University hood.²⁹

The common theme for these is that they are used on the dress robes of higher doctors. Given that higher doctors are more often than not awarded *honoris causa*, the intended purpose might be to mark honorary doctorates out from PhDs and professional doctorates by the use of metallic laces.

Conclusion

Even though it has taken a few years, some of the original questions have now been resolved, and a few other discoveries noted. It is worth noting that the robemakers have managed to preserve the use of gimp, lace and braid in their craft, and some universities have even taken to using lace not only on their degree gowns but also their hoods, albeit using an easily available lace such as the gold and silver oakleaf ones. It would be interesting to see if any new institutions adopt the more traditional black gimps and braids, but since their use is rather niche and sometimes limited to the rarely used doctoral undress gown, it might be a tall order.

As can be seen by the case of the rarer laces and braids of Southampton, Exeter, and Durham, survival rests on common and regular usage, so creating and using special one-off braids might be an untenable exercise. But there is no danger of that for the gimps and laces used by the ancient universities, and so the rather special use of such trimmings on British and Irish academics will continue safely into the future.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Dr Nicholas Groves for originally alerting me to the Exeter PhD undress gown on eBay, leading to a significant discovery. My gratitude to Kenneth Crawford for obtaining the black Leicester braid from E&R and sharing a sample with me, and for the images of his Oxford gimp gown craft. And my thanks to Dr Antone Martinho-Truswell for letting me use his images of the gimp he commissioned.

²⁵ University of East London: Gowning and Photography, online at <www.uel.ac.uk/about/graduation/gowning-photography> [retrieved 27 May 2022].

²⁶ Groves (2011), p. 194.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 330.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 372.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 403.