

The Invention of Tradition: The Cambridge Benefactors' Gowns

By Simon Morris

This article examines the emergence of a new phenomenon in academic dress that has developed over the past twenty years—the awarding of special gowns by some colleges of the University of Cambridge to recognize individual donors and reward their munificence.¹ This appears to be predominantly—albeit not exclusively—a Cambridge phenomenon, and for reasons advanced below not replicated at Oxford University.

This article considers in turn whether benefactors' gowns qualify as academic dress, the reasons for their institution and the criteria for their design. It then looks at the two types of design that have been used, paying particular attention to the revival of the fellow commoner gown for this purpose as its historic connotations are quite different from those associated with its present use. The article concludes by reviewing the individual colleges' reasoning for and against the use of benefactors' gowns, and the consequences of their use.

Is it academic dress?

What distinguishes this new class of academic dress from all others is that while it is unquestionably academic, being awarded by individual colleges of a University for an activity that promotes their fundamental purpose of providing education, it is unconnected to scholarship. There is no examination sat or thesis defended; instead, philanthropy alone qualifies the donor for the award of a gown. Furthermore, while most recipients of a benefactor's gown will be members of their respective colleges, this is not a requirement and there are instances of gowns being awarded to individuals who have made donations to a college with which they were otherwise unconnected.

An initial consideration must therefore be whether Cambridge benefactors' gowns deserve to be included within the canon of academic dress; how do they measure against Dr Shaw's opening sentence in his *Academical Dress of the British Universities* that 'Each university of Great Britain and Eire has a system of academical dress which is used by its graduates to indicate their degree'?² An immediate response might be that they fail this test because they are not awarded for a degree. But this passage is surely descriptive rather than definitive, and nowhere does Dr Shaw suggest that a university gown unconnected with a degree falls short of being academic dress. Quite the opposite, in fact, because this volume includes undergraduate gowns, scholars' gowns and gowns

¹ An individual who makes a gift to a college is awarded with a status, such as 'Member of the ABC College Court of Benefactors', which status qualifies them to receive a benefactor's gown. These gowns are commonly referred to as 'being awarded' and this expression is used in this article as shorthand for the full explanation.

² G. W. Shaw, *Academical Dress of British Universities* (Cambridge: Heffer & Sons, 1966), p. 3.

for Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors, while his later Cambridge volume includes fellow commoner's gowns although, as mentioned below, of a different kind.³ Dr Shaw's consistent recognition of non-degree university gowns as academic dress goes a long way to confirming that benefactors' gowns fall within this category.

It is further arguable that benefactors' gowns do qualify as academic dress for the twin reasons of provenance, being issued by colleges, and of purpose, in that they recognize the provision of significant financial assistance towards the discharge of a college's educational objectives. An additional factor that tips the scales in their favour is that benefactors' gowns share a key feature with recognized academic dress, in that they are both discretionary and selective. The gowns are not available for purchase, nor is anyone entitled to receive one. Instead, like a gown and the university degree to which it corresponds, a benefactor's gown is awarded to a person who fulfils stated criteria and meets any further requirements that the awarding college may lay down. To conclude on this point, the fact that they do not denote the attainment of academic achievement does not detract from their qualification as academic dress on other grounds. The class of academic dress is not closed and is flexible rather than rigid; it is open to new entrants, and the Cambridge benefactors' gowns should qualify for admission.

Having advanced the argument that benefactors' gowns qualify as academic dress, there remain some significant points of difference between them and other academic dress. One distinction is that, unlike academic dress which is prescribed in university ordinances and awarded in a public graduation ceremony, a benefactor's gown is essentially a private garment conferred by a college on its own terms to persons whom it selects.⁴ It is consequently recognized within the walls of the college alone. Hence graduates may properly wear academic dress throughout the year within any academic institution where they work, school where they teach, or place of worship where they officiate, whereas the recipient of a benefactor's gown will only wear it within the awarding college, and only there on specific formal occasions such as an annual benefactors' dinner. Bestowing a benefactor's gown also differs from the award of an honorary degree. While they both honour an individual for his or her attainment, an honorary degree is awarded by the University rather than an individual college, and the gown is—at least at Cambridge—the same as for the substantive degree itself. A closer analogy is perhaps the award of an honorary fellowship, which indeed some benefactors receive, a distinction bestowed by a college on those whom it, rather than the University, selects. The status of a benefactor, and the gown that goes with it, is a college award; like an honorary fellowship, its recognition within one college alone does not detract from its authenticity, or from the status of the gown as a species of academic dress.

The institution of benefactors' gowns

One consequence of the private nature of benefactors' gowns is that limited information is available to describe their origins, development and current use. The author conducted the research for this paper by contacting each college's alumni office and enquiring

³ G. W. Shaw, *Cambridge University Academical Dress* (Cambridge University Press, 1992). Thanks are due to one of the author's FBS examiners for mentioning this publication, and to Chris Williams for providing me with extracts.

⁴ See, for instance, the *Statutes and Ordinances of the University of Cambridge* (2020), p. 181, for that University's requirements.

whether the college awarded benefactors' gowns and, if so, on what basis. A number of colleges responded with information, while some others did not respond or declined to comment. It is also notable that college websites are reticent about benefactors' gowns, with only a few containing any reference to them. This research was supplemented by interviews held with the staff of a number of college alumni offices who agreed to meet the author and were sometimes able to provide information about the origin and use of the gowns as well as produce actual examples for inspection. In addition Professor Lord Eatwell, then President of Queens' College, and Dr Anne Lyon, fellow of Gonville and Caius College, kindly agreed to be interviewed about the use of benefactors' gowns at their respective colleges.

Most colleges within the University now actively seek and reward benefaction, recognizing that fundraising has become a necessary and important part of college life. Each college acknowledges donations in a distinctive way that can include publishing donors' names in the college magazine, issuing invitations to an annual garden party, reception or feast, awarding a benefactor's gown or even an honorary fellowship. These levels of reward can be formed into a structured ladder of recognition. Gonville and Caius College, for example, awards benefactors' gowns as the fourth of seven levels ranging from Membership of the Court of Benefactors, with an invitation to the annual benefactors' feast, through Founders of the Court of Benefactors who wear the gown, Gonville Fellow Benefactors who are admitted in the College Chapel during the annual service for the Commemoration of Benefactors, with even higher donations commanding the engraving of your name by the Great Gate and, at the summit, the commissioning of your portrait.⁵ The award of a benefactor's gown should be understood as a discretionary step in a college's hierarchy of recognition, with the decision to use it or not depending on a number of factors.

As discussed below, twelve colleges currently award benefactors' gowns and a thirteenth used to, but no longer does. Ten colleges have confirmed that they do not award benefactors' gowns: Churchill, Clare, Darwin, Girton, Homerton, King's, Newnham and Robinson Colleges as well as Peterhouse and Trinity Hall, while Clare Hall is also understood not to. Seven colleges did not respond to requests for information: Corpus Christi, Magdalene, Pembroke, St Catharine's, St John's, Sidney Sussex, and Trinity Colleges.

A Cambridge phenomenon

Benefactors' gowns have been widely introduced at Cambridge to recognize philanthropy both at individual colleges and also at the University through membership of the Guild of Benefactors. This phenomenon has not been replicated at Oxford University although major benefactors at University level are acknowledged through membership of the Chancellor's Court of Benefactors with its distinctive gowns and bonnets. The Oxford colleges, while no less welcoming of philanthropy than their Cambridge counterparts, have generally not instituted the award of gowns in recognition of individual giving. There is, of course, no reason a custom introduced at one university should

⁵ These levels, as stated on the College website in 2021, are Associate Member of the Court of Benefactors (£10,000 donation); Member of the Court of Benefactors (£20,000 donation); member of the Stephen Hawking Circle (£50,000 donation); Founder of the Court of Benefactors (£250,000 donation); Gonville Fellow Benefactor (£1 million donation); member of the John Caius Guild (£1.5 million donation) and Member of the Edmund Gonville Guild (£2.5 million donation).

necessarily find favour at another. However, it is suggested that a point of distinction is that, unlike at Cambridge, Oxford colleges do not have distinctive undergraduate gowns so that distinctive donor gowns could look out of place.⁶ Thus while a donor to a Cambridge college would not be surprised to receive a special gown reminiscent of their undergraduate days, the reaction at Oxford could be different because a college-specific gown would lack any basis in personal experience or wider tradition. These observations have not, however, deterred St Hugh's College from recently introducing a benefactors' gown, modelled on the Oxford doctors' undress gown. It should also be mentioned that the Universities of Manchester and of Nottingham have introduced benefactors' gowns.⁷

The choice of design

There are a number of considerations that underlie the choice of design. First, and most important, the gown must be decorous and becoming of a benefactor, male or female, reflecting the generosity of the donor and conferring dignity upon him or her. It cannot be tawdry, although the gown must be sufficiently festive because it will typically be worn, and possibly only ever worn, with evening dress on college feast days and must not look drab alongside a doctor in scarlet. This necessarily excludes any design that is too sober, such as black. Next, the gown must be distinctive and clearly that of a benefactor; it must bear no resemblance to an academic gown of any type as a donor would not wish to be mistaken for the holder of a certain degree, nor vice-versa.⁸ This is a significant restriction, because it excludes the adoption of anything bearing resemblance to a doctor's dress gown. At Cambridge, this has effectively eliminated scarlet from the palette of available colours. There is also no hood, cap or bonnet; while an undergraduate may wear a cap with a shortened tassel, University practice is that these are otherwise reserved for degrees alone. Oxford takes a different approach, and members of the Chancellor's Court of Benefactors wear bonnets with their gowns. Lastly, it must be traditional. Some colleges are named after their founders, while others will celebrate centuries of benefaction at annual services in chapel, formal feasts in college and in other ceremonies. It is on these occasions that benefactors' gowns will be worn. The donor stands in the shoes of the college's founders and past benefactors, and is therefore recognized by the award of a gown which, through use of traditional cloth, style and colours, is redolent of the college's history. The instigation of benefactors' gowns may be a novelty, but the gown itself cannot look novel.

Against this background, where did the colleges look for inspiration? The short answer is, perhaps unsurprisingly, backwards to the nineteenth century. This is a long-standing practice and there are many examples of newly introduced academic dress drawing upon, if not actually imitating, older examples. Writers both in the *Transactions of the Burgon Society* and elsewhere have identified a number of significant instances. The University of London determined in 1843 that both graduates and

⁶ Nathaniel Whittock, *Costumes of the Members of the University of Oxford* (London, c. 1850–60), shows only University gowns and, unlike in his *Costumes of the Members of the University of Cambridge* (London and Cambridge, c. 1850–60), no college gowns at all.

⁷ I am most grateful to Mr James Middleton of Ede & Ravenscroft for alerting me to these gowns (personal communication, 4 August 2021).

⁸ A risk noted by Neil Dickson, 'Degrees of Degrees', *TBS*, 19 (2009), pp. 183–203 (p. 200).

undergraduates might wear gowns in the Cambridge style with distinctive hoods.⁹ Later in the nineteenth century the University of Wales selected a Cambridge gown for bachelors, while for masters it chose a gown similar to that of either Oxford or Cambridge 'with a slight alteration in the sleeves'.¹⁰ Oxford University adopted a gown for its new degree of DPhil around 1920. While there is no explicit record of why dark blue was chosen for sleeves and facings, it has been suggested that this colour was designated in recognition of both German and American universities' long-established use of this colour for the faculty of philosophy.¹¹ More recently, the period from 1960 to 1990 saw the creation of a significant number of new universities, each of which required to adopt its own academic dress. On many occasions the university or its advisers were guided by considerations of tradition when formulating their recommendations. In the 1960s the University of Stirling 'drew on a number of themes and traditions in Scottish universities' academic dress' when designing its hoods and gowns.¹² The University of Bradford chose a combination of Oxford, Cambridge and London styles,¹³ while the University of Westminster was advised to follow the basic Oxford patterns.¹⁴

This adoption of precedent can be viewed as an example of how an institution can successfully create a new tradition. The phenomenon of inventing a tradition was noted by the historian Eric Hobsbawm, who described tradition as a set of symbolic practices implying continuity with a historic past, and governed by rules that sought to inculcate norms of behaviour. Hobsbawm specifically cites academic dress as an example of invented tradition, referring to the forty years before the outbreak of the Great War when new academic institutions adopted an older style of hood and gown in the hope of attracting the status associated with it.¹⁵ Colleges' use of benefactors' gowns is a further example of an invented tradition.

There is, surprisingly, no connection between the antiquity or size of the college and a decision to award benefactors' gowns. Of the colleges that award these gowns Christ's, Gonville and Caius, Jesus, and Queens' Colleges are large and ancient foundations, Downing, Selwyn and Fitzwilliam date from the nineteenth century while Murray Edwards, Wolfson, Hughes Hall, Lucy Cavendish and St Edmund's are relatively mod-

9 Philip Goff, *University of London Academic Dress* (London: University of London Press, 1999), p. 27.

10 William Gibson and Nicholas Groves, 'The Origins of the University of Wales Robes', *TBS*, 8 (2008), pp. 91–97 (p. 92).

11 Alan J. Ross, 'Togas gradui et facultati competentes: The Creation of New Doctoral Robes at Oxford, 1895–1920', *TBS*, 10 (2010), pp. 47–70 (p. 62).

12 Colin Fleming, 'The Academical Dress of the University of Stirling, 1967–2006', *TBS*, 6 (2006), pp. 54–76 (p. 56).

13 Peter William Clarke, 'McKinlay's People: A Study of the Academic Dress of the University of Bradford', *TBS*, 16 (2016), pp. 13–29 (p. 16).

14 David Avery's initial report on academic dress for the University of Westminster, quoted in Philip Goff, 'Academical Dress in the University of Westminster', *Burgon Society Annual*, 2003, pp. 37–62 (p. 38).

15 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 263–307 (p. 304). See also David Cannadine's observation on universities founded in the late nineteenth century adopting antique gowns in 'The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the "Invention of Tradition", c. 1820–1977', in the same volume, pp. 101–64 (p. 137).

ern and the last three fairly small. Of those colleges that have confirmed they do not award benefactors' gowns, four are ancient and six more modern.

Designs based on the MA gown

Nine colleges, the majority, have adapted the MA gown for use as a benefactor's gown. Six have taken the standard black gown and added coloured facings, ribbon on the sleeve (or both), three have chosen to use the gown in college colours with contrasting facings or embroidery, while one college has adopted a gown of each type:

1. **Christ's** The black MA gown with facings in the College colour of blue.¹⁶
2. **Emmanuel** The College awarded benefactors' gowns during the mastership of Norman St John Stevas, Lord St John of Fawsley (1991–96), but these fell out of use following his mastership and have not subsequently been used or awarded. They are recalled as being based on the black MA gown with blue facings and gold stripes on the sleeves.¹⁷
3. **Fitzwilliam** The benefactor's gown is the black MA gown with facings in the college colours of grey and dark red; the 1869 fellow benefactor's gown is structured similar to an MA gown in cerise with facings of light grey with a cerise stripe.
4. **Hughes Hall** A major benefactor has been awarded a Pfeiffer Fellowship, the gown for which is of MA shape in dark blue with lighter blue and gold facings, which are carried over to a decorated yoke, and with gilt ribbon around the armholes. Uniquely among Cambridge benefactors, a Pfeiffer Fellow also wears a matching doctor's bonnet.¹⁸
5. **Murray Edwards** A benefactor's gown is awarded to donors who qualify as foundation fellows. It is based on the black MA gown, distinguished by a row of silver lace in Greek key pattern on the sleeve horizontally above the armhole.¹⁹
6. **Queens'** Structured similar to an MA gown in the College colour of dark green with narrow strips of white embroidery on the facings and horizontally above the armhole.
7. **St Edmund's** The black MA gown with facings in the College colour of blue with a strip of gold embroidery; there is a gold cord and a blue brocaded button on the yoke.
8. **Selwyn** Structured similar to an MA gown in the College colour of burgundy with strips of gold embroidery featuring a design of rose, thistle and daffodil on the facings and surrounding the armhole (see Fig 1).²⁰
9. **Wolfson** The college elects major donors as Bredon Fellows, who wear the black MA gown with a strip of gold embroidery running from the top of the sleeve to the armhole.²¹

¹⁶ Personal communication from Samuel Venn, Fellow, Darwin College and formerly Development Officer at Christ's College, 18 May 2017.

¹⁷ Personal communications from Dr Sarah Bendall, Emmanuel College, 24 and 26 May 2017.

¹⁸ Information and images kindly provided by Jack Clarkson, Development Officer at Hughes Hall, in a personal communication, 17 August 2021.

¹⁹ Information and images kindly provided by Lexie Hoskins, Head of Communications at Murray Edwards College, in personal communications, 5 to 23 August 2021.

²⁰ Sourced from Selwyn College website, with permission.

²¹ So far as can be judged from illustrations in the *Wolfson College Review*, 2012–13, on its website.



Fig. 1. Three Selwyn College benefactor gowns.



Fig. 2. Downing College Wilkins Fellow.



Fig. 3. Gonville and Caius College benefactor gowns.

Selecting the MA gown can be viewed as an intuitive choice. First, it is a familiar and traditional design, having been the standard for most Cambridge undress gowns since the nineteenth century. Next, it denotes senior status, and will be recognized as such by all Cambridge graduates who have proceeded to convert their first degree to an MA. Further, where the gown is coloured rather than black, the use of colour with an essentially conservative design renders it both festive and dignified. While of MA shape, the addition of facings, use of colour or both make it distinctive and recognizable as the gown of a benefactor rather than the holder of a degree.

Designs based on the fellow commoner gown

Three of the three older colleges and Lucy Cavendish (which used the Caius gown as a template) have based the design on their nineteenth-century fellow commoners' gowns:

1. **Downing** Awarded to a Wilkins Fellow, this is structured similar to an MA gown in the College colour of magenta with black velvet facings and yoke (see Fig. 2).²² It draws on the nineteenth-century gown by using three rows of black tassels and frogging on the upper part of the sleeves. The original gown featured brocaded yoke and facing with multiple rows of tassels and frogging on both the sleeves and towards the

²² Sourced from Downing College website, with permission.



Fig. 4. Jesus College fellow benefactor gown.

bottom hem (see Fig. 5). Too heavy and elaborate for modern use, Downing has omitted most of the tassels and frogging. Downing's choice of a fellow commoner's gown is apposite because in the 1870s it admitted two-thirds of the University's fellow commoners, as well as possibly the last one in the entire University.²³

2. Gonville and Caius The benefactor's gown closely follows the original nineteenth-century fellow commoners' gown, being full-length in dark blue cloth with broad strips of gold oak leaf braid embroidery on the facings and each side of the split sleeves (see Fig. 3, which shows the gowns being worn at a reception).²⁴ This new gown is very close to the original, differing only in that the yoke is in black velvet rather than gold embroidery (see Fig. 6). If stripped of the gilt and shortened by a foot, it would resemble the present-day Gonville and Caius undergraduate gown which is said to have inspired the choice. Caius ceased admitting fellow commoners after 1855.²⁵

²³ *Cambridge Independent Press*, 22 April 1876; obituary Grp Capt C. R. J. Randall, *The Times*, 15 June 1956; personal communications from Catherine Middleton, Downing College, 6 October 2017, Dr Paul Millett, Downing College, 30 July 2021, and from the Master, 31 July 2021.

²⁴ Kindly supplied by Dr Maša Amatt, Fellow of Gonville and Caius College.

²⁵ Personal communications from Dr Anne Lyon, Gonville and Caius College, 19 Septem-



Fig. 5 (far left). Downing pensioner's & fellow commoner's gowns.

Fig. 6 (near left). Gonville and Caius fellow commoner's & pensioner's gowns.

3. Jesus There are three gradations of Jesus College benefactors, expressed as different ranks of members of the Society of St Radegund, named after the convent on which the College was founded. Each of these is based on the design of the original Jesus College fellow commoners' gown. A Member of the Society wears a gown similar to a Cambridge BA gown but with split sleeves and a single strip of gold embroidery along the split. A Companion of the Society has two strips of gold embroidery on either side of the split sleeve, while a Fellow of the Society has additional facings of gold embroidery and a gold cord and braided button on the yoke (see Fig. 4).²⁶ Jesus College, unusually, has sought to make its donors' gowns more rather than less elaborate than the original fellow commoners' gown by substituting gilt embroidery for more sombre velvet yoke and facings.²⁷

4. Lucy Cavendish College Lucy Littleton Benefactor Fellowships are awarded to major donors, who are recognized by a blue gown with black facings matching the College colours. Selected after consultation with Gonville and Caius, it is based on the Caius benefactor's gown.²⁸

The choice of a design based on a fellow commoners' gown calls for review because it is both rational and intriguing. On the one hand it is a logical choice because the fellow commoners' gown is unique to the college and has unquestionable historical

ber 2017 and 2 August 2021; J. Venn, *Biographical History of Gonville and Caius College, 1349–1897*, Vol ii (Cambridge University Press, 1898).

²⁶ Photograph of the gown kindly arranged by the Development Director, Jesus College and used with permission.

²⁷ Information kindly provided by Nikki Williams for the Development Director, Jesus College, June 2017.

²⁸ Personal communication from the Development Director of Lucy Cavendish College, 12 August 2021, together with information from Mr Steve Chamberlain of Ryder & Amies in conversation, 19 September 2017.

precedence, and thus fulfils the twin criteria of distinctiveness and antiquity. Cambridge has long permitted the use of distinctive gowns for socially prominent undergraduates. Hargreaves-Mawdsley notes an enactment dating from 1414 allowing noblemen to wear silk facings on an undergraduate gown while Loggan and Harraden, respectively three and four centuries later, recorded elaborately decorated gowns.²⁹ Fellow commoners were less exalted than noblemen, being undergraduates whose families were sufficiently wealthy to pay extra fees for their sons to dine in hall at high table alongside the fellows of the college and enjoy some other privileges. Both Loggan and Harraden record distinctive, but less elaborate, gowns while surviving portraits show how at the end of the eighteenth century some colleges had adopted distinctive gowns for fellow commoners: Trinity chose blue, while Christ's and Emmanuel used black with gold embroidery. Brian Newman has recently explained how fellow commoners' gowns evolved during the eighteenth century, while Whittock's *Costumes* (discussed below) shows them at their apogee in the mid-nineteenth century, when each college had a more-or-less distinctive and elaborate gown for its fellow commoners.³⁰

Despite its pedigree, the decision to reward a modern benefactor with a fellow commoner's gown is paradoxical for a number of reasons. First and foremost, a fellow commoner was an undergraduate who wore an undergraduate gown which indicated his junior status within the college, albeit at an elevated level. There is an obvious inconsistency in inviting graduates to return to their college and, in recognition of a substantial benefaction, clothing them in an undergraduate gown. Furthermore, contemporaries sometimes viewed fellow commoners as lacking social cachet and 'very far from possessing that superiority in station and wealth which their gown intimates'. They were often 'military officers, broken tradesmen, married men and fools ... licensed sons of ignorance' who were distinguished only by the 'tawdry gilding on their backs'.³¹ A 'Member of Trinity College', defending the University against a pamphleteer who was mounting an attack on its alleged corrupt morals, pointed out that its author had been 'a fellow commoner, one of a class of men hanging between the noblemen, and pensioners, acknowledged by neither, and despised by both. Wrapped in the importance of his tinsel gown, [he] hath mistaken the lip of scorn to be the look of envy'.³² In contrast, it was the pensioner (meaning the ordinary undergraduate) who was a man of fortune and independence, superior to the fellow commoner in point of respectability.³³ Lastly, fel-

29 W. N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *A History of Academical Dress In Europe until the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 128–37, citing David Loggan, *Cantabrigia illustrata* (Cambridge: the engraver, 1690), Plate VII, and Richard Harraden, *Costume of the Various Orders in the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge: Harraden, 1805).

30 Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *loc. cit.*; see also Brian Newman, 'The Evolution of Undergraduate Academic Dress at the University of Cambridge and its Constituent Colleges', *TBS*, 20 (2020), pp. 67–93 (pp. 75–86).

31 A Trinity graduate signing himself as 'Senior Wrangler' in *London Magazine*, April 1825, quoted in *The Globe*, 2 April 1825. These and other contemporary periodicals cited in this article were consulted using the British Newspaper Archive and the Times Digital Archive, both accessed via the London Library.

32 *Remarks upon Mr Beverley's Letter to the Duke of Gloucester by a member of Trinity College Cambridge* (1833), responding to R. M. Beverley, *Letter to His Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester, Chancellor, on the present corrupt state of the University of Cambridge*, 3rd edn (London, 1833).

33 'Senior Wrangler', in *London Magazine*, April 1825.

low commoners were seldom model undergraduates; writing in 1837 a fellow of Trinity pointed out that, together with undergraduates of nobleman status, they rarely featured in University prize lists, fared disproportionately badly in the *tripos* examinations and were 'not an intellectual class' but tended to vanity and indolence.³⁴ Although these historical associations have long since slipped from memory, it is ironic that donors whose industry has enabled them to give so royally to their college are rewarded with the gown of what was once viewed as a *déclassé* idler.

Fellow commoners and their gowns were all but forgotten before their recent revival. There are few records of actual fellow commoner gowns; no examples are known to have survived and there are no known photographs of undergraduates in these gowns, or portraits dating later than around 1800. An authoritative source of reference is Nathaniel Whittock's *Costumes of the Members of the University of Cambridge*. Dating from 1850 to 1860, this publication comprises twenty-three pages of miniature hand-coloured engravings each measuring 3" x 4.5" on a continuous strip of paper folding concertina-form into hard covers.³⁵ These engravings, which are clear and informative within the constraints of the medium, depict the formal dress of the Chancellor, doctors, proctors, graduates and also the distinctive dress of the undergraduates of each college both as pensioners and as fellow commoners (see Figs 5 and 6). Whittock's *Costumes* would have been bought by visitors, and also by students who wanted to show the University's distinctive costumes to their friends and families, and it is likely these engravings form the template for the modern revival.

Whittock depicted the fellow commoners' gowns towards the end of their lifespan; as a distinct class of undergraduate they were already obsolescent, and within a few years all but obsolete. The last references in the Cambridge press to groups of fellow commoners seen together on the streets or in college date from the mid-1850s.³⁶ Thereafter there were probably no more than a dozen such undergraduates at the entire University and, although this increased to around three dozen after the Prince of Wales was admitted a fellow commoner of Trinity in 1861, the number eventually dwindled and they came to be viewed as curiosities.³⁷ When presenting an honorary degree in 1913, the Public Orator jocularly noted Admiral Sir Wilmot Fawkes' distinction of being the last undergraduate at St John's to wear the fellow commoner's gown when admitted in 1872. The biographer of Queen Victoria's grandson Prince Albert felt bound to mention that the Prince wore a fellow commoner's gown at Trinity in the early 1880s, while a fellow commoner's gown worn at Downing as late as the 1930s was described with aston-

³⁴ Henry Lushington (attributed), *Fellow-Commoners and Honorary Degrees by a Resident Fellow*, (Cambridge, 1837).

³⁵ This dating is based on the entry for Whittock in L. Worms and A. Baynton-Williams, *British Map Engravers* (London: Rare Book Society, 2011).

³⁶ D. A. Winstanley, *Early Victorian Cambridge* (Cambridge University Press, 1955), p. 414; *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal*, 8 May 1852 (at a fire in the town); 6 November 1852 (in Caius Chapel).

³⁷ Numbers of matriculants, including those admitted as fellow commoners, were published each term by the University and reported in the Cambridge press; see *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal*, 21 October 1854, 12 October 1867, 22 April 1876 and 17 November 1877, and *Cambridge Independent Press*, 16 November 1861, 17 October 1863, 14 November 1868 and 28 May 1870.

ishment as ‘an adornment now rarely seen’.³⁸ Indeed, no college founded after Downing (in 1800) admitted an undergraduate fellow commoner, and four later colleges take the MA gown as a template for their benefactor gown.

For completeness it should be mentioned that some colleges currently elect non-fellows, such as visiting researchers, to temporary membership of their Senior Combination Room. They may be designated as ‘Fellow Commoners’, and writing in the early 1990s Dr Shaw noted that four colleges had instituted distinctive gowns for their use. These individuals are wholly different from the nineteenth-century undergraduate fellow commoners discussed in this paper, although the modern fellow commoner gowns noted by Dr Shaw have some of the characteristics of colleges’ benefactor gowns.³⁹

The prevalence of design

The MA degree denotes scholarship, whereas historically fellow commoners were rich undergraduates. One might therefore have expected more benefactors’ gowns to have been based on the latter design to reflect the wearer’s *richesse*. Nonetheless, the choice seems to have been driven less by strict logic than by idiosyncratic considerations based on college traditions and individual preferences with the result that most colleges have based their benefactors’ gown on the MA gown, and only four on the old fellow commoner’s gown.

Professional assistance

Colleges intending to introduce benefactors’ gowns of either design have generally sought professional advice from an established academic outfitter; Ede & Ravenscroft confirm that this involves the same process as for any new gown: first ascertaining the client’s requirements, then suggesting possible designs and, once selected, producing a sample before going into production.⁴⁰ Ede & Ravenscroft is responsible for the distinctive and successful Guild of Cambridge Benefactors, Downing and Queens’ gowns. Sometimes the design process will include trial and error, and it is interesting to note the influence that expert guidance can have on the final design. The original proposal for Fitzwilliam’s 1869 fellow benefactor’s gown has been described as resembling ‘a town crier’s outfit in bright blue with red facings and a crest on the back’, and was supplanted by Ede & Ravenscroft’s stylish design. Selwyn at first considered using a black gown with burgundy facings and gold trimming, but this was thought to be too close to an MA gown and Ede & Ravenscroft proposed the present elegant design.⁴¹ Other outfitters that have played a part in the introduction of benefactors’ gowns include Ryder & Amies, who developed Gonville and Caius’ chosen design, and A. E. Clothier, who designed the Christ’s gown.

³⁸ Honorary degree bestowed on Admiral Sir W. H. Fawkes, *The Times*, 12 June 1913; J. Vincent, *HRH The Duke of Clarence and Avondale 1864–1892*, as reviewed in *The Times*, 5 December 1893; obituary Grp Capt C. R. J. Randall, *The Times*, 15 June 1956.

³⁹ Shaw, *Cambridge University Academical Dress*, pp. 27–29.

⁴⁰ Personal communication from Mr James Middleton, Ede & Ravenscroft, 16 August 2017.

⁴¹ Personal communications from The Master’s Assistant, Selwyn College, 31 August 2017 and 19 September 2017.

The use they serve

What are the reasons that inform the decision whether or not to introduce a benefactor's gown? A number of colleges have determined not to do so; some such as Clare believe that an annual feast is sufficient recognition for benefactors.⁴² King's rewards major donors with the titles of Fellow Commoner and Fellow Benefactor but, while it has considered awarding special gowns, currently has no plans to institute them.⁴³ Other colleges consider that a special gown would be inappropriate. Churchill feels it would be out of keeping with the college's informality, Newnham avers that its alumnae would not welcome one, while Emmanuel withdrew the gown when initial enthusiasm waned.⁴⁴ It seems that some colleges consider that a benefactors' gown is inconsistent with their values and others view it as unnecessary.

In contrast, those colleges that award benefactors' gowns evince a uniformly positive view, describing the gown as a successful tool in attracting and recognizing donations. Gonville and Caius has raised over £100 million between 2001 and 2016 through fundraising campaigns that included the award of over a hundred benefactor gowns. Other colleges for which numbers are available have awarded fewer gowns; Downing around twenty, Selwyn nine, Queens' and Fitzwilliam (both instituted around 2010) at most half a dozen and Hughes Hall, Lucy Cavendish, Murray Edwards, St Edmund's & Wolfson possibly only one or two. These colleges, when discussing the consequences of awarding benefactor gowns, talk about similar results. First, they speak of the gown's inclusive effect, describing it as creating a sense of community and enhanced association, a way for a non-resident to feel a greater part of the resident college; the donor will consequently feel accepted and his or her attainment recognized. The provision of special attire for use on formal and celebratory occasions provides a further element of reward, making the donor feel special and looked after. Lastly, the gown is also aspirational and inspiring, incentivizing others who see it to donate to college funds.⁴⁵

In conclusion, and returning to the original issues that this paper has sought to discuss, it is submitted that these benefactors' gowns qualify as academic dress. Each college's choice of design is both individual, taking into account its particular traditions, and appropriate, using either the established MA design or its historic fellow commoners' gown as a template. These gowns provide a novel example of academic dress falling within the genre of invented tradition as the colleges seek to cloak a new need with the semblance of tradition. While evidently a topic on which opinions are divided, with some colleges strongly in favour and others clearly not, they are effective tools of stewardship enabling colleges to raise significant sums of money, principally from alumni/ae, when government funding has materially fallen.

42 Personal communications from Samuel Venn, Fellow, Darwin College (formerly Deputy Director of Development at Clare College), 18 May 2017.

43 Personal communications from Amy Ingle, Development Officer, King's College, 31 May 2017 and 1 September 2021.

44 Personal communications from Elizabeth McWilliams, Alumni Officer, Churchill College, 18 May 2017; the Development Office, Newnham College, 23 May 2017; and Dr Sarah Bendall, Emmanuel College, 26 May 2017.

45 As discussed in person by Professor Lord Eatwell, President of Queens' College, 7 September 2017, and Dr Anne Lyon, Gonville and Caius College, 19 September 2017. Number of Selwyn gowns kindly confirmed by the Master's Assistant in a personal communication, 30 July 2021.