

THE EVOLUTION OF THE OXFORD SIMPLE SHAPE

Bruce Christianson

The Oxford simple shape could, with some justification, be described as one of the ugliest and least dignified hood patterns in the world. (1)

This short paper takes as premise the belief that all Oxford hoods were at one time of the full shape (2), and essays a reconstruction of the process by which the pattern of hood for the lower degrees evolved, or more accurately devolved, into the modern Oxford simple shape (3).

It will be argued that the Oxford Burgon shape "introduced" by the eponymous Dean Burgon in the 19th century was in fact (exactly as he himself is alleged to have claimed) a re-introduction of an earlier form through which the simple shape had by then already passed.

I shall begin by noting some obvious connections between the modern patterns used for the various shapes.

Figure 1 shows a pattern for the Oxford full shape, a shape which has remained relatively unchanged (4) from well before the English reformation until the present day.

Figure 2 shows the modern Oxford Burgon shape. Figure 1 can be transformed into Figure 2 by cutting off the cape, rounding off the slot to the side of the liripipe, and abridging the cowl edge.

Specifically, cut in a straight line from a' towards d , meeting the line $f-g$ at g' . (See Figure 4.) The result is what I shall call the "proto-Burgon" shape (5). The proto-Burgon turns into something very like the modern Burgon shape when the rectilinear slot ($g'-f-e-d$) in the side of the liripipe in Figure 4 is rounded into the more familiar crescent shape $g'-d$ of Figure 2 (6). To complete the transformation, cut the cowl edge from a' to b' (instead of b).

Figure 3 shows the modern Oxford simple shape. Figure 2 can be transformed into Figure 3 by putting the hood on back to front, cutting away the parts which are no longer visible (because they are now against the back of the wearer), and then sewing up the resulting seam.

Specifically, cut from d at right angles to a' , intersecting $c-b'$ at c' , then cut from c' parallel to $g'-a'$, intersecting $a'-b'$ at b'' . Sew up $d-c'-b''$.

The same construction which transforms the modern Burgon shape (Figure 2) into the modern simple shape (Figure 3), if applied instead to the proto-Burgon shape (Figure 4), produces what I shall call the "early simple" shape (Figure 5).

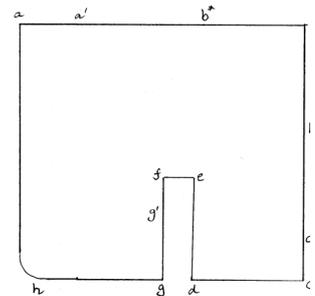


Figure 1. Oxford Full Shape

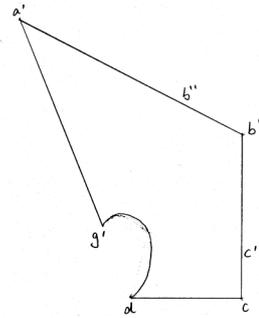


Figure 2. Modern Oxford Burgon Shape

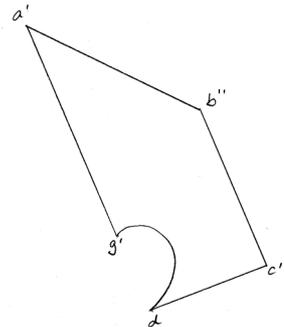


Figure 3. Modern Oxford Simple Shape

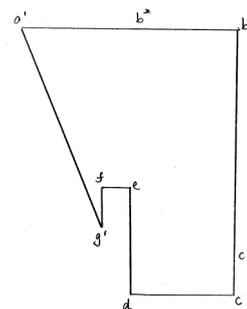


Figure 4. Proto-Burgon Shape

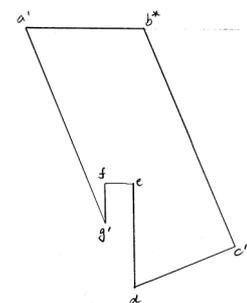


Figure 5. Early Simple Shape

The early simple shape can in turn be transformed into the modern simple shape by rounding the slot, and abridging the cowl edge (from a'-b*' to a'-b").

The hypothesis being advanced here is that the Oxford full shape was originally used for the lower degrees, and did in fact undergo a series of modifications similar to those described above, passing successively through the proto-Burgon and early simple shapes before assuming its present form (7).

The immediate question which arises upon assumption of this hypothesis is, at what point and for what reason did the proto-Burgon shape come to be worn back to front?

To address this issue I shall begin by pointing out that shortly after separation from the cape (8), the proto-Burgon shape came to be worn by Masters of Arts not merely back to front, but inside out, ie in such a way that only the lining was visible.

Loggan's Oxford plates of 1675 clearly show both forms of the MA hood (9) being worn inside out like this (10). The "everyday" hood lined with red silk is his Figure 14 and the miniver-lined hood worn on special occasions and by the proctors is in Figure 18.

Compare in particular the silk-lined MA hood in Figure 14 with the full-shaped hood of the BD in Figure 19, and imagine the shape that would be produced by cutting off the cape from the latter hood to form the proto-Burgon shape. Note also the similarity in visibility and position of the liripipe between Figures 14 and 19: both liripipes point inwards, towards the wearer's back.

Take the proto-Burgon shape, turn it inside out, turn the lining along the cowl edge in (instead of out), and put the hood on with the cowl edge outermost (ie away from the back) and the liripipe pointing inwards (ie toward the back), and you have the same effect as shown by Loggan for the MA hoods.

The modern proctors still wear their miniver-lined hoods inside out in this manner, but by the time of Grignion's plates of 1770, the MA hood lined with red silk had come to be worn with most of the lining once again tucked inside - with the result that the hood is now on back to front. (The relevant illustrations from Grignion are reproduced in Hargreaves-Mawdsley as plates 11B and 11C.) The rectilinear liripipe in Grignion sticks out, away from the back, rather than inwards towards the back as before in Loggan.

Interestingly, however, by the time of Grignion the BA hood is also on back to front. This can perhaps be seen most clearly in the case of the 'determining' BA (11). Compare Grignion's plate with Loggan Figure 9.

In the Loggan plate the fur showing on the upper edge of the hood is the turned-back lining on the inside of the cowl (12), and stands away from the wearer's back, while the thin edging of fur visible on the lower edge of the hood (where it would join onto the cape if cape there were) is next to the wearer's back.

In the Grignion plate of the determining BA it is the fur trim on the lower edge of the hood which stands away from the back, while the fells on the upper edge are on the side of the hood worn next to the back (13). In the Grignion plate the liripipe is closer to the back than is the lower edge of the hood, and the liripipe points away from the back.

The fact that the rectilinear liripipe sticks out, away from the back, in Grignon and inwards, towards the back, in Loggan, is if anything ever clearer in the case of the BCL, who conveniently stands side on in Loggan's plate (Figure 11). Comparing this with the Grignon plate showing the BCL, not only is the liripipe now pointing out instead of in, but the fur trim (14) now runs along the edge of the hood standing away from the wearer's back, instead of along the edge next to the back as it does in Loggan (15).

In fact the only exception to this pattern of reversal between Loggan and Grignon is the BMus hood, which is already on back to front in Loggan (Figure 7) and remains so in Grignon.

According to tradition, Dean Burgon always claimed that his 'new' shape, far from being an innovation, was merely the restoration of an older shape, that of an old BA hood which he had found in a chest. If the reconstruction put forward here is correct, then his claim may well be true (16). Certainly the story is more consistent with what else we know of his somewhat reactionary character than is the hypothesis of a radical new shape from nowhere.

In its new incarnation, the revived Burgon shape has followed a different evolutionary path to that which it had followed the first time, while the simple shape (with which the Burgon shape has co-existed ever since) has itself continued to evolve.

Some of the other intermediate forms through which the Oxford simple shape has passed upon the way to its present horrible form have been preserved in the practices of certain colonial and provincial universities. For example a form of the Oxford simple shape slightly earlier than the modern form is preserved in current use at both Harvard and Edinburgh (17).

At Edinburgh, however, the devolution of the simple shape assumes a final ironic twist. The hood used at Edinburgh for the three senior Doctorates (DD, LLD and MD) has resumed the cape, but because the hood has turned back to front, the cape has been re-attached to the opposite side of the cowl to that from which it originally became detached (ie now to a'-b' rather than as originally to a'-g').

To add insult to injury, the cape itself has been reattached back to front (ie with the lining facing outwards rather than to the back.) Interestingly, this would be the correct alignment were the cape re-attached to the original side (18).

Notes:

(1) Even if the great Charles Franklyn never actually said this, he probably should have. Following his example, I shall give no justification whatsoever for any aesthetic judgements.

(2) Those who object to this premise on religious grounds, and believe that all hoods have always had their present shape, need read no further.

(3) A task made infinitely more difficult by the stubborn refusal of the figures in a number of engravings and portraits to turn around upon request.

(4) In Figure 1 the sewn edges are b-c-d-e-f. As with all the Figures, the pattern is merely schematic. No systematic attempt is made in this short paper to capture the detailed changes in length and angle which have occurred over the years. Nor do I do propose here to entertain discussion about exactly when the corners of the cape became rounded.

(5) This is essentially the same construction as that shown in Plate II of Buxton and Gibson (opposite page 24), although their description in the text on page 25 confusingly talks about inserting a ribbon at the point they label b (which corresponds to our point g'). The point they label a (corresponding to our a') would be a more logical place if the ribbon is intended for a neckband.

(6) There is also a rounded slot on the Cambridge full shape.

(7) In fact the rounding of the slot is relatively late, occurring some time after 1840, and thus after devolution from proto-Burgon to early simple. Rounding of the slot of the simple shape had certainly occurred by the time of Shrimpton, about 1870, but the exact date of the (re)introduction of the Burgon shape remains so far an unsolved mystery. Consequently it is still an open question whether rounding occurred before or after re-introduction of the Burgon shape.

(8) There is room for debate about whether the cape was simply lost, or whether in the first instance it merely became detached from the cowl and liripipe resulting in two separate garments. Proponents of the latter theory may argue that this is the origin of the "shoulder piece" worn under the hood by Masters of Arts as late as 1636 (Hargreaves-Mawdsley p 81) and depicted by Loggan in the proctors' dress (Figures 17 and 18.)

(9) The miniver-lined MA hood is now the exclusive preserve of the proctors, but even as late as 1770 the statutes technically permitted any MA to wear one (Hargreaves-Mawdsley p 81.)

(10) Buxton and Gibson (p 26 n1) relate this practice by the proctors to the 'caputiis obversis' clause in the Laudian statutes of 1636 governing the admission of proctors (Griffiths, 172; Corpus Statt Add 575). But the practice of wearing the MA hood inside out is older than this. The practice of wearing the silk hood in this way was already well established by 1592 (Hargreaves-Mawdsley p 81 n5 citing Clark p 231.)

(11) In Loggan's time the BA wore their hood with the fur lining displayed at the time of determination, ie while performing the final exercises for the degree, after admission but before commencement. Hargreaves-Mawdsley asserts (p 90) that thereafter the fur lining was not turned back to form a facing when the hood was worn, although his source for this assertion is unclear.

(12) The BA hood was originally fully lined with fur, but this gradually reduced until there was but a facing of fur on the upper edge of the hood and an edging of fur on the lower, although it is not clear how far this process had advanced by the time of Loggan. Certainly by the time of Grignon, the fur facing on the upper edge has disappeared entirely from the ordinary BA hood, and has been replaced by a wool fell (a piece of sheepskin attached, fur side out, to the hood) for the determining BA. See also note (14) below.

(13) Is the BA hood in Grignon on back to front, or inside out? Reaching inside the poke of the hood in Grignon, grasping the boot of the liripipe from the inside and by this means pulling the hood inside out, and then hanging the bag over the fur-trimmed lower edge would also produce exactly the effect shown in Loggan, with the lower edge right next to the back and the liripipe pointing in towards it. For an unlined hood this achieves the same effect as simply putting the hood on back to front. For a lined (or partly lined) hood however it also interchanges the lining with the outer. The answer to the question thus depends on determining whether the fells are on

the inside of the hood, or sewn to the side against the back and turned as a facing. I incline to the former view, in which case the hood is on back to front, and right side out.

(14) It is not clear when the fur lining of the BCL degenerated into an edging. All bachelors were ordered to have their hoods fully lined, and not merely edged, with fur in 1490, but as usual with sumptuary regulations, the very existence of the rule is evidence that it was by then being regularly broken. No fur is visible at the upper (ie outer) edge of the BCL hood in Loggan, but this just could be because the hood is folded, as the ordinary BA hood then was, in such a way that no facing is displayed (see note (11) above). But by the time of Grignon, the fur trim on the lower edge is clearly all that remains. BCLs were forbidden the use of silk in 1432, but appear to have been allowed it by the time of Henry 8th's act of 1533.

(15) I am indebted to Alex Kerr for verifying that Loggan's plates do indeed verify the hypothesis of reversal, and for his other correspondence on this issue.

(16) I am grateful to Nick Groves for suggesting that the old hood 'found' by Dean Burgon may actually have been an old determining bachelor's hood, with wool fells on the upper edge, dating from a time when the proto-Burgon shape was still in use for determiners. At any rate subsequent to its revival the Burgon shape was worn as in Loggan, with the liripipe pointing in towards the back, although the remarks on this issue by Wells (p 71) and Buxton and Gibson (p 40 & n1) may indicate a (brief) later fashion for wearing the Burgon shape back to front.

(17) The general hypothesis, that cadet foundations tend to preserve relatively unchanged the forms and practices of Academic Dress then current at their mother house, in fact gives rise to a number of fruitful lines of research, upon which I hope to expand more fully in a later paper. As a further example of this type of argument, Nick Groves has raised the fascinating possibility that an old form of the Oxford proto-Burgon shape, with rectilinear liripipe, may effectively be preserved in current practice at Belfast and at the National University of Ireland, having migrated thence from Oxford via Trinity College Dublin.

(18) A similar evolution has occurred with the Doctoral hood used by the American Intercollegiate Code, which has also re-attached a cape to the "wrong" side of the modern simple shape. In this case however, the lining on the cape is aligned with that of the cowl, allowing the seam a'-b' to be re-opened, in contrast with Edinburgh where it remains closed.

References:

L.H.D. Buxton and S. Gibson, *Oxford University Ceremonies*, Oxford 1935.

A. Clark, *Register of the University of Oxford vol ii (1571-1622)*, Oxford 1887.

J. Griffiths (ed), *Codex Authenticus (1636)*, Oxford 1888.

W.N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *A History of Academical Dress in Europe until the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford 1963.

D. Loggan, *Oxonia Illustrata, Plate X (containing 37 Figures)*, Oxford 1675.

T. & G. Shrimpton, *Shrimpton's Series of the Costumes of the Members of the University of Oxford*, Oxford c1870.

J. Wells, *The Oxford Degree Ceremony*, Oxford 1906.



*Bachelor
of
Divinity*

*Master
of
Arts*



*Bachelor
of
Civil Law*



**Grignion
Plates**



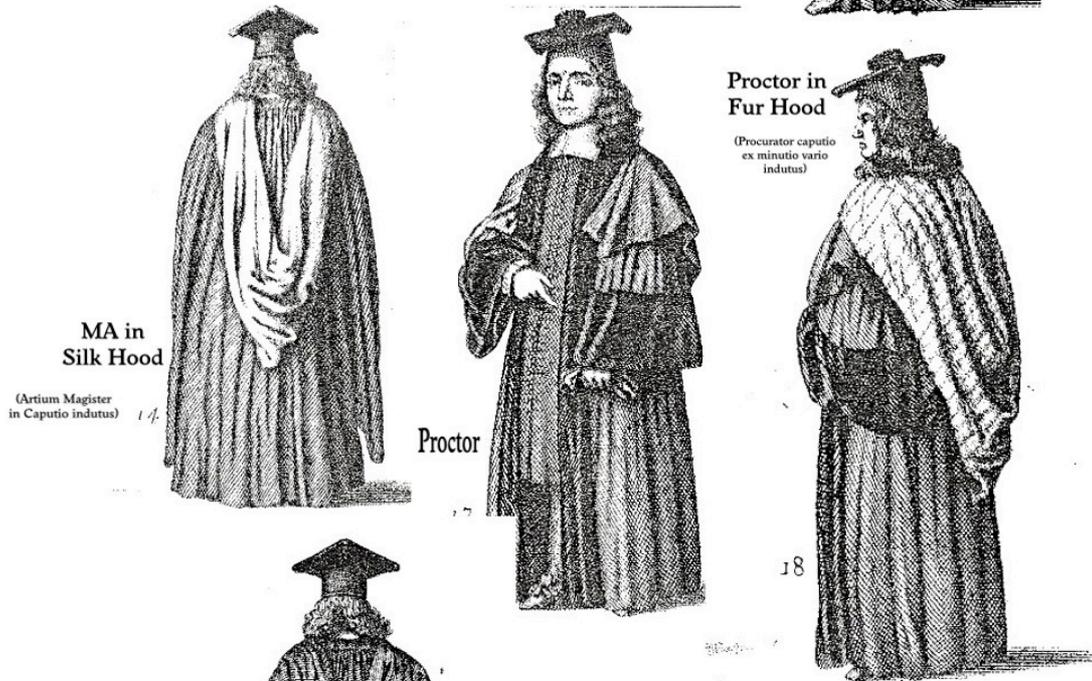
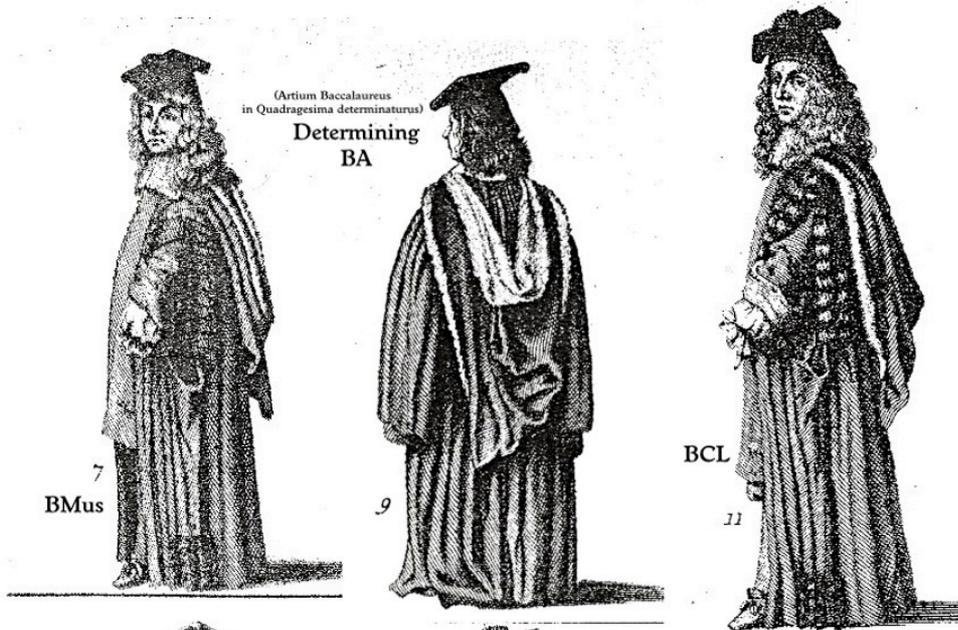
*Bachelor
of
Music*



*"Determining"
Bachelor
of
Arts*

*Bachelor
of
Arts
with
"ordinary"
hood*





Loggan Plates