Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

SCHOOLMASTER'S ACADEMIC DRESS H271

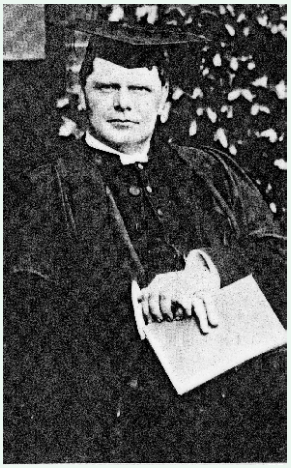


The items belonged to Mr G. R. Dolby, MA. Mr Dolby was born at Stamford in 1905 and was educated at Stamford School and Merton College, Oxford. He was a schoolmaster all his working life. He was the physics master at the Nautical College (now Pangbourne College) from 1946 to 1976.

Although not widely worn by teachers today, such clothes were once the standard uniform for the teaching profession, particularly in secondary schools. The photograph to the right shows a chemistry class at Bluecoat School, Reading. It was taken in 1945. The teacher, in his gown, can be seen on the left of the photograph.

Such clothes indicated a teacher's authority, both in terms of academic qualifications and as a member of staff. Although widely worn in class up until the Second World War, they are an uncommon sight today and, if used, are usually only donned for school assemblies or other formal events.

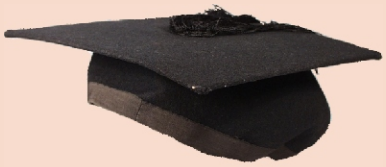
The set of clothes consists of three items a gown, a mortar board (hat) and a hood. All three are derived from the academic dress of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, which themselves are a development of academic and clerical dress common throughout the medieval universities of Europe.



Left: the headmaster of Rugby School in the late nineteenth century, wearing academic dress.

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The mortar board consists of a horizontal square board fixed upon a skull-cap, with a tassel attached to the centre. Its colloquial name derives from its resemblance to the board upon which mortar is placed by a bricklayer. The mortar board is believed to have evolved from the biretta, a similar-looking hat worn by Christian clergy. This example was made by Wilton Woodward of 110, High Street, Oxford. Wilton Woodward's business amalgamated with that of Arthur Shepherd in 1929 to form Shepherd & Woodward, so this hat must date from between 1923 and 1927, the dates when Wilton Woodward operated as an independent tailor.



The modern gown is derived from the long black cape which was worn in early medieval times by all students at university. At this date only men went to university and they were required to take preliminary priestly vows, although they were not yet full priests. They were required to wear clothes of black or other dark colour. This gown was made by the tailor Arthur Shepherd. Torn seams and worn patches have been stitched together by its owner!



The hood was originally a functional garment, worn to shield the head from the elements. In the English tradition, it has developed to an often bright and decorative garment worn only on special occasions. The colour and lining of the hood indicates the college that the wearer attended, in this case the purple indicates Merton College, Oxford.