

The Coronation and Parliamentary Robes of the British Peerage

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Coronation Robes

As early as the end of the fourteenth century the greater peers wore distinctive robes of state⁴⁰. One of the first recorded instance was the robe conferred upon John Beaufort Earl of Somerset, in 1397. These included robes, mantles, and hoods of scarlet furred with miniver⁴¹. The mantles were open on the right shoulder, and guarded with two, three or four bars of miniver in the form of short stripes high up on the shoulder. As with the gowns of judges, these were of the same general pattern as mediæval doctors after the latter had adopted scarlet in about 1340.

Dukes, marquesses, and earls received robes in the late fifteenth century, which resembled the almuce. Viscounts received robes in the sixteenth century. In the early seventeenth century the robes, or mantles, were of a circular cut, open from the shoulder on the right hand side, and with a short slit at the front of the neck. They might be fur-lined. From the centre front to the centre back, across the right shoulder, and side were miniver guards, consisting of bars of white fur with a gold lace edging above each bar.

By 1685, when barons at last received robes of estate, the robes peers wore at coronations were standardised as being of crimson velvet cloaks or robes of foot length, extending slightly to trail the ground at the back, open front, lined and edged miniver fur, and a hood, tippet or cape of miniver. Later rows or "doublets" of black ermine tails⁴² replaced the bars of miniver on the right shoulder. The robes had sometimes varied to purple. The mantle was lined with white taffeta, the mantle doubled from neck to below the elbow the ermine. By 1788 a white fur turn-down collar had been added to the ermine cape.

These robes were given at the investiture and not worn again except at coronations.

Coronation robes now consist of a crimson silk Genoa velvet surcoat⁴³ and a full-length crimson velvet⁴⁴ mantle, fully lined with white silk satin⁴⁵, with a small cape or hood of

⁴⁰In 1362 John of Gaunt, created Duke of Lancaster, received at his investiture a sword, a circlet or coronet of gold and precious stones, a cap of estate, and a golden rod.

⁴¹Miniver, or minever, is a white fur, originally mixed or variegated, used for lining and trimming.

⁴²For a very long time past the original black-tipped tail of the ermine has been replaced by pieces of black fur cut out with a special steel punch.

⁴³No longer a gown but a short sleeveless garment.

⁴⁴Velvet, the most elaborate of the plain weaves traditionally made from silk, has a short plush pile surface, and is used for the gowns of some office-holders, and for the hats of some doctors. Velveteen is a cotton or mixed cotton and silk imitation.

⁴⁵Satin, with a glossy surface and dull back, is a closely-woven silk fabric showing much of the warp. Satinette, or satinet, is of a cotton warp, and woollen weft.

Canadian ermine⁴⁶ with rows of ermine tails, which extend around the full width of the cape, with the half rows extending from the right front edge to the centre back. The mantle is cut slightly longer at the back to give the effect of a small train. The rank of the wearer is shown by sealskin spots on the ermine cape. There are four rows for a duke, three and a half of a marquess, three for an earl, two and a half for a viscount, and two for a baron. A royal duke has six rows of ermine, and ermine on the front.

The robes differ from the early design only in having a triangle of dark red silk let into the centre of the ermine and miniver hood at the back. This was introduced with the advent of the tye wigs in the mid eighteenth century.

The coronation robe is more cloak-like, front-opening, and only fastened at the neck.

Beneath the mantle in the early seventeenth century was worn a crimson velvet kirtle or surcoat, lined with white taffeta. This was a long, sleeveless, loose, open-fronted garment, girdled at the waist with a silk sash. This has a shoulder cape, and the edges and opening were trimmed with white fur. During the eighteenth century the surcoats became smaller and eventually disappeared⁴⁷. The state robe or mantle is now worn over full dress regimentals, or uniform, or black velvet court dress of the old style.

The hood in the early seventeenth century was worn over the kirtle, under the mantle. It was a type of shoulder cape with a small hood proper as an appendage at the back. The hood proper was pulled out and hung down over the mantle.

Formerly, a doublet and trunk of white satin, trimmed with gold brocade of plate lace of van dyke fringe, was worn, as was a pair of white china silk pantaloons with feet, and a pair of white cotton drawers. A pair of white kid gloves trimmed with velvet check gold fringe, was worn, as were a pair of white kid shoes. A pair of knee and shoe crimson ribbon rosettes were also worn. Those peers taking part in the coronation were required to have mantle, crimson velvet surcoat, knee breeches and, coronet⁴⁸. Those not in the procession were permitted either a mantle of an order of chivalry, or parliamentary robes. These were worn over evening dress, with trousers. If of the degree of viscount or baron a cap of state was an acceptable alternative to a coronet.

A coronation sword, scabbard and belt, covered with crimson velvet, and with gilt mountings, is worn. The golden rod of the dukes disappeared with the formal investiture ceremony, but is still referred to in the patent of creation. It now appears in the investiture of the Prince of Wales. For the coronation of King George IV in 1820, a full set of coronation robes for a baron, complete with a fine linen⁴⁹ robe and coronet case, and a cedar robe chest with patent lock, brass hinges, and inscription plate, cost £250.

Peeresses' Coronation Robes

⁴⁶Ermine, the winter coat of the *Putorius erminea*, an animal of the weasel family. The fur, all white except for the black tip of the tail, is extensively used in robemaking, especially for official dress.

⁴⁷None were worn in 1838.

⁴⁸The whole cost £1,250 in 1953, and £150 in 1937.

⁴⁹A fabric woven from the fibres of flax. Cotton, or a cotton mix is now more usual.

Peeresses' wear coronation robes of the same crimson velvet, but are very different in style. Instead of the peers' edge-to-edge robe with its miniver cape, a peeresses robe is close-fitting, open down the front, and has short fitted sleeves, and a small cape across the shoulders, and a a train.

Peeresses⁵⁰ have no Parliamentary Robes, as they are not members of the Upper House. But they do have Coronation Robes. In the earliest instances these were an crimson velvet open robe or kirtle, with bodice. They were closed in front with a stomacher and had a trained overskirt, worn over a contrasting petticoat or underskirt. A separate train was tipped with a cape of miniver powdered with rows of ermine according to rank, fell from the shoulders of the bodice, where it could be sewn or attached by cords. Short sleeves and the open edges of the overskirt were cut scalloped. Borders of the neckline, sleeves, train and overskirt were of miniver or ermine, as was the stomacher. A heavy silver or gilt cord girdle around the waist knotted in front, ends falling below knee, where ended in large tassels. Gold lace and galloon often ornamented the bodice. There was usually a white silk lining to the kirtle and train.

In 1902 the coronation robes were of crimson velvet, with separate bodice and skirt, stomacher panels. In 1911 the bodice and skirt were joined. In 1953 the robe or kirtle was a one-piece gown, open the full length down the centre front, edged with miniver, either plain or scalloped. They were shaped to the waist, secured by a clasp or gold cord girdle, or left unfastened. Short sleeves have in general two miniver bands and a scalloped miniver edging, sometimes one.

In 1935 Norman Hartnell designed a new robe. This was a trained, open robe or gown, sleeveless, with an all-round cape collar of white fur, powdered with ermine according to rank. This was of crimson velvet, lined with white silk and the traditional white fur border.

The length of the train and the width of the ermine edging denote rank. The train of a duchess is two yards long, and has a 5" ermine edging. For a marchioness, the size is 1¾ yards and 4", for a countess 1½ yards and 3", for a viscountess 1¼ yards and 2", and for a baroness 1 yard and 2".

The robes are worn with long white kid gloves, at least from the beginning of this century.

In 1953 viscountesses and baronesses were permitted to wear a crimson velvet mantle with white coney cape and rows, with six yards of material. They wore a crimson velvet cap of estate, trimmed with gold braid. Duchesses, marchionesses and countesses were required to wear a crimson silk velvet mantle with ermine cape and rows, and coronet. The robe had twenty yards of material, and the whole cost ten times the cost of the cheaper version.

Parliamentary Robes

Distinct "Parliamentary robes" are recognisable in the fifteenth century. In the sixteenth century they were of close-woven scarlet pure wool cloth, and were open halfway down on each side, and edged and collared with miniver. They had miniver bars to indicate rank, on

⁵⁰Editor's Note. Presumably this only applies to wives of peers and not to Peeresses in their own right. RAL.

the right side and side to centre of back 3" bars of miniver lined with 2" bands of gold lace. They were given to barons shortly afterwards⁵¹.

Investiture, or Coronation Robes, have only been worn at Coronations since the formal investiture was replaced by the informal practice of introducing peers in 1621. The Parliamentary robes were worn till the late eighteenth century at the House of Lords, and are now only worn for the State Opening of Parliament, the giving of the royal assent, and for the introduction of new peers. They were also worn when the peers as a body processed from the House of Lords to a Church Service or other ceremony.

The Parliamentary Robe, which has changed but little since its introduction, is a full-length robe of finely-woven scarlet wool cloth⁵², and is in the form of a mantle opening on the right shoulder, with a collar of white miniver fur, guarded with rows of ermine and gold lace round the right shoulder. They are lined with white silk.

The side seams of the robe are open, and miniver bars extend from the right front edge to the side seam, and from the side seam round to the centre back. Each bar of miniver is 3" wide, and is edged with a 2" band of gold lace. The rank of the wearer is indicated by the number of miniver bars⁵³.

In 1788 parliamentary robes were of fine scarlet cloth, lined with white taffeta, doubled with four guards of ermine at equal distances with gold lace above each guard and tied up to the left shoulder by a black riband⁵⁴. A white fur turn-down collar replaced the earlier separate hood. This survives as a small triangular strip of red cloth at the back of the neck, emerging below the fur collar.

The robe is worn over uniform by peers forming part of a procession with Her Majesty on state occasions such as the State Opening of Parliament. On ordinary occasions, such as for the introduction of new peers, it is worn over morning dress. The kirtle was never used with it.

A black cocked hat is worn for the introduction of new peers, a ceremony dating in its present form, from 1621. The black tricorne hat was introduced at the end of the seventeenth century, and since the beginning of the nineteenth century has been replaced by the cocked hat, except for the Lord Chancellor⁵⁵.

Archbishops and Bishops in the House of Lords wear purple cassock, white rochet with full sleeves and wrist bands, black doctor's convocation robe, and broad stole. If peers are

⁵¹Milton, Roger, *The English Ceremonial Book* (David & Charles, London, 1972).

⁵²So-called "superfine cloth".

⁵³A Parliamentary robe for a duke cost £44 6s in 1760, and required 7 yards of superfine scarlet wool cloth, and 20 yards of white sarsnet. A barons silver-gilt coronet cost 13 guineas, that of a viscount, 14 guineas. The ceremonial sword and belt cost an additional 4 guineas.

⁵⁴By 1845 they were white ribbons, but were black again 1877, though white in 1917.

⁵⁵The eighteenth century hat with three cocks in the brim, later known as a tricorne hat, with the edge of the brim decorated with gold lace or a feather border. The hat with two cocks (the bicorne) could be folded flat, and was the most common wear for ceremonial dress after the eighteenth century.

robed, churchmen wear, in addition, scarlet and miniver parliamentary robes. The Archbishops wear the robe of a Duke, the Bishops, those of Barons.

Prince of Wales Robes

The Honours of the Principality of Wales traditionally comprised the coronet, ring, rod, and mantle. The Tudors added the sword, and the girdle. The golden rod of the dukes disappeared with the formal investiture ceremony, but appears in the investiture of the Prince of Wales⁵⁶. Since 1911 the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff has kept the Prince of Wales's Verge, Prince of Wales's Sword, Prince of Wales's Coronet, and Prince of Wales's Ring, all made in 1911. These were removed 1968, and returned 1969 with the new Prince of Wales's Coronet.

The Prince of Wales's Verge or Rod of 1911 was made to a design of Sir William Goscombe John, RA, by Garrard. 2' 8" long, ¾" diameter at foot. Head is formed by three winged cupids supporting a coronet, with a large amethyst forming the cap. Below the cupids are Prince of Wales's Feathers, and motto. A dragon forms the tip of the verge. It was used for the 1969 as well as the 1911 investiture.

The Prince of Wales's Sword, made 1911, has a 2' 7½" long blade, and a 5" hilt. It was also made to a design of Sir William Goscombe John, RA, by Garrard, and was used in 1969. The pommel of the hilt is made of two dragons grasping a coronet. The grip is interlacing bodies of dragons, and the guard their twisted tails.

The Prince of Wales's Ring (1911) was made to a design of Sir William Goscombe John, RA, by Garrard, and used in 1969 also.

The 1911 mantle or robe, with doublet and sash, was designed by Sir William Goscombe John, RA.

In 1969 the robes were similar to those of 1911. Ede and Ravenscroft made a mantle of purple silk velvet trimmed with fleurs de lys, embroidery all round, including the small train, white ermine cape and collar fully lined with white silk taffeta⁵⁷. The inside facings of the robe were lined with ermine to an extent of 10" in width. The spots on the ermine cape were of black sealskin. The collar of ermine was embroidered around the edge with gold wire in the pattern of the Prince of Wales's features. The two circular gold clasps were taken from the 1911 robe worn by the previous Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII) at his investiture. The robe is on show at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff.

⁵⁶Milton, Roger, *The English Ceremonial Book* (David & Charles, London, 1972).

⁵⁷Also called tabby, taffeta weave, linen weave, cloth weave, checker weave and so on. There is no clearly discernible right or wrong side. It includes batiste, billiard cloth, calico, cambric, canvas, chintz, gauze, grosgrain, handkerchief linen, hessian, holland, lawn, muslin, panama, poplin, and most shirting, taffeta. Some 80% of all fabrics made are plain weave. It is strong and durable, but soils most readily of the principal weaves.