

Interpretation of Vestments in Bishops' Portraits

Most of the sitters are depicted wearing a rochet (a white full length sleeved tunic worn over the cassock), often with frilled cuffs caught at the wrists with black or red silk bands or ties, with chimere (a black sleeveless open-fronted overcoat worn over the rochet) and tippet (a black silk scarf worn over the chimere). This, in addition to a black square cap or a skull-cap, or sometimes both, comprised the usual outdoor dress while preaching, at Court, or in the House of Lords where attendance as peers spiritual was obligatory though not always practicable. Two are shown wearing copes – Bradfield in the Coronation cope on display in the Long Gallery, and Carey, as archbishop. The crozier features but once (Bickersteth), and where on two occasions it has been replaced by a walking stick the sitters are known to have been incapacitated by blindness (Fox) and old age (Godwin).

Cassocks were traditionally black (Moss, Lake, Fox), though the more distinctive and symbolic purple, and even red, begins to predominate during the last century, continuing into the present (Wynne Willson; Underhill; Bradfield; Thompson; Carey, as archbishop; Bickersteth). A plain white collar, popularly known as the dog collar, a minimalist descendant of the full ruff of the Tudor and early Stuart periods (Curl; Laud; Montagu; Still; Lake; Godwin) and later white stock (Moss) starts to appear in Law's time and has remained characteristic of clerical dress since. Sometimes starched bands (of seventeenth century origin, compare Kidder; Ken; Mews; Piers; Hooper;) were worn, continuing into later times when they become narrower (Wynne; Beadon; Willes; Bagot; Law; Hervey; Underhill), though dispensed with in less formal attire or everyday dress (Moss; Eden; Law). The pectoral cross of various designs, usually, though not always in gold embellished with precious stones, features in the later portraits, and was worn with or without the rochet over the purple or red cassock (Wynne Willson (beneath cope); Bradfield (beneath cope); Henderson; Thompson; Carey, as archbishop (beneath cope); Bickersteth; Wand).

Hats appear to have declined in fashion before the middle of the last century, though might still be worn according to personal choice, the black cap and purple biretta shown respectively with Kennion and Wynne Willson being exceptions among the modern bishops portrayed. Wolsey's red biretta is part of his dress as cardinal archbishop. The late medieval and early Tudor plain black cap covering the ears, familiar in one style from the portrait, after Hans Holbein the younger, c.1527, of the saintly Bishop Fisher of Rochester (1503-35), appears once only, on Fox. Its descendant, the flat square cap of late sixteenth-century origin, originally soft and worn over a skull-cap, also dating from the same period, appears on Montagu and Laud, and evolves later into a style resembling the academic mortar board, tasselled (from the mid eighteenth century) and usually held in the hand (Bagot), though sometimes shown on a side table as in the town hall portrait of Kidder. The skull-cap in its various styles worn alone becomes particularly prominent during the early Stuart and Restoration periods (Curl; Ken; Mews; Piers; Creighton; Still; Lake). Its disappearance during the late seventeenth century coincided with the fashion for long, stylishly curled or dressed hair (Kidder; Hooper; Blackall), while wigs, initially full and later short, throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth (Wynne; Moss; Beadon; Willes; Law) made it an impractical and pointless form of headwear. Law was the last bishop of Bath & Wells to wear a wig, a short one in the style of the day, and one of the earliest to be seen in private dress consisting of subfusc frock coat and breeches (compare also Eden). Victorian bishops cut a dash with hats, while gloves (Bagot; Hervey; and Chapman) seem also to have been de rigueur during this period. Bagot's blue silk gloves were apparently part of his dress as chancellor of the Garter.

Distinctions, such as insignia of the Garter (Bagot; Curl; Montagu; Mews), badge of H M College of Chaplains (Bickersteth), and medal ribbons (Wand), are shown where worn, as are occasionally personal or official arms (Curl, Montagu, (each impaling Winchester, their Garter see); Wolsey, as cardinal archbishop of York; Godwin; Underhill; Bradfield (Bath & Wells only); Henderson, displayed at top left or right of the canvas. Formal dress might be supplemented by full doctoral robes (Underhill) or simply the hood on its own (Laud; Kennion; Hervey; Wand). A silk patch covering an old war wound and a helmet on a side table are reminders of Mews' previous military career in the royal service. As an Oxford Doctor of Civil Law and former soldier his path to the episcopacy was an unconventional one, as was Godwin's with his degree in medicine among the more usual theological attainments.

Source: Original 20 century detailed report on the Bishops' Portraits