

Caps and cloaks – a heritage of style?

A heritage of style? We all look great don't we? Admiring glances from our brethren in the lodge rooms (at least I think that's what they are) and envious looks wherever we go. In line with my usual talks I'm going to talk about what we do now and how it relates to what our ancestors used to do rather than spend half an hour drawling on about historical facts.

So, our stylish clothes....

No member of a Knights Templar Preceptory needs to be reminded of the significance of his garments. From the moment that he removes his pilgrim habit and assumes the first items of his garb as a Soldier of the Cross, he is made aware of its scriptural significance.

The passage from the Epistle of Paul to the Christians at Ephesus was implanted in our minds so that not only was this an outward investiture, as we had already experienced in the Craft and Holy Royal Arch, but it was an especially inward dressing.

“Put on the whole armour of God that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil”

It is worth remembering that St Bernard (of Clairvaux as I'm sure you remember from one of my previous talks), was the one who made the decision to clothe the Templars in the same sort of white woollen garments as had been adopted by the Cistercian Order to which, of course, he belonged. He explained his choice as signifying 'that those who have cast behind them a dark life, may know that they are to commend themselves to their Creator by a pure and white life'.

The Templars were allowed to forego wool as an undergarment from Easter to the end of October in which period a linen shirt was permitted.

Unlike the Cistercian monks, however, the knights wore a tunic that only reached as far as the knees and this was held in place by a leather belt. This was because they, being horsemen, needed to be able to ride and carry a sword. That is why to this day the same dress is followed and knight has his 'loins girt about with truth'.

As the ceremony of installation proceeds the knight will be further robed with a mantle, again of pure white, and this is 'ennobled with the Red Cross of the Order'. It may be some relief to us today to know that originally the knights were required to have two such cloaks, one plain as with us but ANOTHER one trimmed with velvet! Imagine the modern day cost of that!!

What is still the case with us is the way in which the mantle is fastened. In the middle ages it was customary for noblemen to have chains or elaborate brooches to fasten their outer garments. The Knights Templar, despite their noble ancestries, were only allowed laces or cords for this purpose.

Not only was this a curb to their vanity but it served a very practical purpose of making it easier for them to dress or undress, especially before the onset of battle.

The cords that we still use might also remind us of that penitential cord that each knight, like the Cistercian monks, would wear under his garments. This was to remind them of the cords used to beat our Saviour before his crucifixion.

Unhygienic as we may regard it we need to remember that the knights slept in their clothes so that they were ready to respond to the call to arms at any moment.

Whilst it is fully acknowledged by all present knights that it is permitted for any member to wear Knight Templar clothing when a Priory of Malta is opened, the fact remains that there is a distinctive garb for those who are, or who are about to become, Knights of St John. As increasing numbers are ready to so dress for this ceremony, it will obviously be of some interest and value to consider some matters relating to their attire.

It might, of course, seem sensible for the two Orders that served pilgrims in the Holy Land to be distinctively dressed. Bearing in mind, however, that the Malta cross was assumed by the Hospitallers at a considerably later date, and there is certainly no connection whatever between the original knights of St John of Jerusalem and the Order we can join, the fact that there are similarities between what was worn of old and the costume of today can be seen to be by design and not tradition.

It is interesting to know, for instance, that whilst the Knights Templar copied the white-clothed Cistercians, the Hospitallers originally followed the customs of service of the black-robed Benedictines. What is also intriguing is the fact that whilst the normal Templar dress was much as we know it today, the dress of their serving brothers was a black cloak with a tunic, also black, but with a red cross on the front and back.

The red tunic worn by Malta Knights today certainly reminds its members that they were fighting men as well as the carers of the sick and thus have a relationship with their Templar brethren.

As far as the two present Orders are concerned it has to be admitted that fascinating and instructive as the Malta degree is, it is an appendant step to the truly authentic and more ancient Templar knights.

So, from our bodies to our heads... We've dealt with our cloaks, mantles, belts and fastening cords. But why do we wear such hats? Were *they* a fashion statement?

The most obvious answer to this question is that the hats we wear are the type worn by the knights of old when they were not dressed for battle. Yet anyone who is interested as to the question of this part of knightly attire will probably want to go further and discover why this particular form of head cover was adopted.

When we come to answer such a question, there are some very interesting facts to be discovered.

The first fact concerns the required appearance of a Knight Templar. Contrary to the custom of the time, the knights were expected to have their hair trimmed above the neck even though they were encouraged to grow beards.

These two requirements were extremely practical.

If their hair was allowed to grow too long, it could impede their sight or make the fitting of head armour awkward. The trimming of locks also removed the need to prepare their appearance or show if one was more favourably blessed in this regard. After all, these men were no longer in the business of attracting the ladies.

The growing of a beard was equally practical. Not only was shaving unnecessary, the beard could be easily brushed and accommodated under the chin when in full armour. Also, it disguised the knight, hence the appearance of Knights Templar in illustrations of the period.

There was another factor of which we need to be made aware. Just as regular monks clipped their hair or shaved the crowns of their heads to show they were dedicated to God, the knights were ever reminded of the tapping of the sword on their heads and shoulders when they were dubbed as knights in the service of God.

It was a perpetual mark of their dedication that their hair was shorn and shoulders never bared. But why the hats I hear you ask?

With their head hair trimmed, it was essential that the knights be protected from the sun in the Middle Eastern lands in which they served. A form of hat was therefore crucial and it had to be both functional and fitting.

When we consider the particular requirements of such a head covering, we appreciate how it developed into what it is. As they were required to cut their hair short to ensure clear sight, a hat would not only have to be comfortable but *also* allow unrestricted vision – this was no place for peaks, brims or varied styles.

A round, close-fitting headpiece was the answer.

However, there was another factor that had to be considered. What would happen when the knight was preparing to wear his body armour? The form of helmet that the Knights Templar wore was not rounded but cylindrical and the simple round hat fitted perfectly inside it.

When you consider that there was no felt padding inside the helmet, the wearing of such a hat provided additional comfort.

Moreover it meant that no time was lost in replacing hat and helmet before or after an engagement. It can be seen that the Templar headgear was indeed a masterpiece of design.

That it had to be red to match the red crosses on the rest of their clothing and also permit them to be visible in a crowd, when the lower clothing might not be seen, was a further reason for this choice.

There can be little doubt that the headpiece adopted by the Masonic Knights Hospitaller was fashioned on an earlier style of hat that was worn by the Masonic Knights Templar.

You can still see in some Masonic museums and lodge showcases the Templar black and white aprons with the emblems of mortality and the black sashes that were also worn.

With that regalia a black hat was worn by some and it may surprise any visitors to the York Conclave of Redemption B in Kingston-upon-Hull that members there still have the right to wear the black headgear instead of red ones in their Knight Templar meetings.

It was, of course, just because the Knight Templar authorities eventually decided to revert to the more traditional and authentic form of dress that elsewhere a black hat and cloak were regarded as the dress for the sister order. As that fitted the traditional St John design a happy solution was reached.