

Mr James Middleton: Fellow of Birkbeck

President, Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues:

Today, I have the delightful task of welcoming Mr James Middleton as a Fellow of Birkbeck.

It was a phantom of delight
When first it gleamed upon my sight,
A scholarly distinction, sent
To be a student's ornament.
The hood was rich beyond compare,
The gown was a unique affair.
By this, by that my mind was drawn
Then, in my academic dawn;
A dancing shape, an image gay
Before me then was my M.A.

This is from a poem by Robert Fuller Murray, published as The Scarlet Gown in 1891. It is a celebration of graduations: of the pomp and the beauty, the glamour and the pageantry. None of this would be the same without our ceremonial gowns.

And that is one of many reasons why we are incredibly thrilled to welcome James Spencer Middleton as a Fellow of our College today. Middleton is a director of Ede and Ravenscroft, which he and his family run.

As you know, Ede & Ravenscroft is the famous court and robe outfitters, whose splendid gowns you are wearing today. Sitting on the main Board, Middleton is responsible for all academic, photographic, and ceremonial operations in the UK and overseas. He is responsible, then for the

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Of course, the tradition of academic costumes – the gowns, hoods, capes, hats – date back to the establishment of the ancient universities in Italy and France in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Then, the title “universitas” was conferred by the Pope, which is why there are still similarities between academic dress and church robes. In medieval Britain, the term “bachelor” referred to the assistant of a small landowner, while the term “master” referred to an already skilled person. In those early days, flowing gowns with capes or cloaks draped over the top conveyed worlds of meaning that were understood by people – the different silks or furs and style of the sleeves communicating messages about the scholar’s expertise as well as his (and it was only “his”) social status. From the sixteenth century, scholars began adopting the practice of professionals and clergymen in also wearing caps, of which there are two main types: the “Oxford mortarboard” with its skullcap, flat, square top, and silk tassel, and the softer, more rounded Tudor Bonnet.

Ede and Ravenscroft also supply most of the English market in wigs. They take orders from throughout the world. In 1822, Humphrey Ravenscroft designed the famous “Bar wig”, with its “frizzed crown, below which are 4 rows of seven curls, then one row of 4 curls with one curl vertically between them, and two tails, looped and tied”. There are other, more full-bottomed wigs, which are worn on ceremonial occasions and by the Lord Chancellor. By the 1970s, Ede and Ravenscroft were making 700 lawyers’ wigs every year.

Ede and Ravenscroft, which was started by the Shudalls family, are the world’s oldest tailor, having started work in 1689 (and probably earlier). In the nineteenth century, Joseph Ede married Rosanna Ravenscroft, member of a famous wigmaking firm based in Lincoln’s Inn and started in 1726 by Thomas Ravenscroft. And, so, the two trades combined.

The monarchy was so impressed by their tailoring work that they were asked to create the coronation robes of their Majesties William and Mary. Ede and Ravenscroft have gone on to be tailors and robemakers for twelve coronations. They hold three Royal Warrants, supplying robes

and clothes to the Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh, and the Prince of Wales. In 1906, the Senate of the University of London appointed Ede and Ravenscroft as official robemakers to the university.

Their exquisite suits and shirts have also made them the quintessential British tailoring company. Crucially, they have a flexible business model. They change with the times. Admittedly, there was a bit of anxiety when they started making suits for women. But by 1992, they were selling tailored shirts for pregnant lawyers and businesswomen. In whatever market, however, in the complex and delicate craft of tailoring, they have no rivals.

Who is James Middleton?

His early education was at St. Faiths School in Cambridge, well-known for other famous alumni including many great sportsmen, as well as the economist John Maynard Keynes and his younger brother, Geoffrey Keynes, scholar and surgeon who made huge contributions to blood transfusions and breast cancer surgery. He went to The Leys School, Cambridge, followed by a BSc Honours in Industrial and Business systems. Middleton then moved south to the University of Wales College Cardiff where he was awarded a Master's in Business Administration. He also holds professional qualifications in marketing, granted by the Chartered Institute of Marketing. While still at university, he established Life Science Press.

Relocating to London, he started work for an international company in Savile Row before joining Ede & Ravenscroft. He became a Director by the young age of 28. He is directly responsible for generating £24 million of Ede and Ravenscroft's turnover, with additional oversight for a further six companies. During a career with the firm which has lasted more than twenty-five years, he has been responsible for many innovations in the design and production of academic dress and logistical systems for graduation services, like our one today.

Middleton also manages the majority of Ede and Ravenscroft's philanthropic activities. They currently offer significant financial support through a series of prizes, scholarships and support for various projects to benefit students and the academic community as a whole.

It is timely to remember that its support for Birkbeck dates from the very early years of the London Mechanics' Institution (that is, our college). Francis Ravenscroft was governor of the Institution for half a century and he guaranteed the cost of the new premise for the London Mechanics' Institution.

Indeed, if you wander into the Council Room, next to the Master's rooms, you will see the original bust of Francis Ravenscroft: the one held at Ede and Ravenscroft in Chancery Lane is a copy.

Since 2001, under the careful oversight of Middleton, Ede and Ravenscroft has provided invaluable support for PhD students in the School of Arts at Birkbeck, as well as prizes for student's academic achievements in our School of Law. Ede and Ravenscroft has enabled us to support an archivist to prepare the College's archives for our bicentenary and is currently supporting a postdoctoral Research Fellow – Dr Lorraine Blakemore – to conduct an Oral History of the College. What she is finding is nothing short of extraordinary. She is interviewing physicists who worked with J. D. Bernal (one of the most influential British scientists of the twentieth century) and David Bohm, whose influence on quantum mechanics had him proposed for a Nobel Prize. Blakemore is uncovering previously unknown facts about the college, including our sports, which took place at the College's grounds at Greenford, and the early, pioneering work on cancer that took place in our department of biology. Blakemore will also be providing training in oral history (using Birkbeck as the focus) for the new MA in Public History. None of this would have been possible without the support of Ede and Ravenscroft.

Let me conclude, then, by reciting some of the words from the College song sung at Middleton's school, The Leys in Cambridge, with its repetition of the Greek word, Heritete, or "joy", "hullo", "salutation":

Whatsoe're shall be your station
In whatever clime or nation
There shall come our salutation
Χαίτετε.

Mindful of a home which never
Distance from her sons can sever,
Mindful of our friends forever:

Χαίτετε.

Because of the intense history of friendship between Ede and Ravenscroft and the College – in which we have often saluted each other with the word “Χαίτετε” – we are incredibly proud to welcome James Middleton to a College Fellowship.