

Paxton House's Jacobean Nightcap

Research Report

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Spring of 2023

About the Cap

Paxton House owns a Jacobean nightcap that dates to around 1590-1620.¹ Nightcaps were a common garment worn by men in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As with most dress of that time, its purpose was multifaceted. It kept the head warm in drafty houses and was thought to ward off ailments.² It was also a way to show off wealth. Embroidered nightcaps, like Paxton's, were a form of informal dress which meant they could only be worn within the privacy of the home. It also functioned as a way to advertise wealth to friends and trades people visiting the home.³ Though a small item, it holds an important moniker at Paxton House. The nightcap is the oldest object within their historic dress collection.

The cap is made of linen and embroidered with silver and gilt metal thread making it an expensive item that not many people of the time could afford to wear. The metallic embroidery is exquisitely done and appears to be professionally worked. Very little metal thread was used on the reverse side in order to preserve the expense of such a valuable item.⁴ Acorns and oak leaves connected by scrolling branches and vines make up the motifs. It fits close to the head in a skullcap shape and has an upturned brim edged with gilt bobbin lace intertwined with oblong spangles. Internally, the cap is lined with another layer of linen to both protect the head from the metal thread and keep the expensive nightcap clean. The lining could easily be removed and washed, or replaced, when it became dirty or worn.

How It Was Made

Nightcaps of the time were usually made from one piece of linen. The cap pattern and embroidery design were transferred to the linen through pinpricking the paper design, done in charcoal, into the fabric. Another option was to hold the design under the fabric to a light source and trace the pattern onto the linen. It was

¹ "Nightcap; 603C," eHive, 2023, <https://ehive.com/collections/4646/objects/1094439/nightcap>.

²Rebecca Quinton, *Glasgow Museums Seventeenth-Century Costume* (London: Unicorn Press, 2013), 27.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Melanie Braun et al., *17th-Century Men's Dress Patterns 1600-1630* (London: Thames & Hudson/ Victoria and Albert Museum, 2016), 152.

then stretched in an embroidery frame, embroidered, cut out, and stitched together.⁵ Paxton's nightcap was similarly made, but the turned back brim is a separate piece of linen. The embroidery on this cap makes use of a variation of a braid stitch on the vines and stems connecting the acorns and oak leaves. The swirls coming off the stems are done in a chain stitch. For the acorns, both the nut and the cap are done using the single corded Brussels stitch. The variation in texture comes from the direction of the stitch. The oak leaves are done using a variation of the raised stem band stitch. All of these stitches are worked over-top of the linen, only anchoring occasionally through the fabric, leaving very little gilt thread on the backside of the linen.⁶ To assemble the cap, the arches were stitched together, and the back seam sewn up. A final embroidery of chain stitches in gilt thread went over the seams to hide them. To finish it off, the gilt bobbin lace was attached to the brim edge.⁷

While many nightcaps were embroidered with both coloured silk and metal threads, Paxton's nightcap features only silver (or silver-alloy) and gilt thread embroidery.⁸ The nut of the acorn is the only section that uses silver thread. The oak leaves, acorn caps, and remainder of embroidery was done in gilt thread. To produce these threads, it is likely the metal was hammered or rolled into thin sheets and then cut into small strips. The metal strips were then wrapped around a core yarn.⁹ The gilt thread was achieved through the same process, but gold leaf was burnished onto the base metal before it was hammered, cut, and wrapped around a core.¹⁰ Gilt threads are easily identifiable because areas of burnished gold tend to rub off. Paxton's nightcap has evidence of this.

⁵ Quinton, *Glasgow Museums*, 32.

⁶ "RSN Stitchbank," RSN Stitchbank, n.d., <https://rsnstitchbank.org>.

⁷ Braun et al., *17th-Century Men's Dress Patterns*, 152.

⁸ Márta Járó and Attila Tóth, "Scientific Identification of European Metal Thread Manufacturing Techniques of the 17–19th Centuries," *Endeavour* 15, no. 4 (January 1991): 175–84, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-9327\(91\)90124-T](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-9327(91)90124-T), 176.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 175–176.

Provenance

The theory at Paxton House about the nightcap's provenance is that it likely belonged to George Home, Earl of Dunbar and came to the house with his painting that now hangs at the top of the main staircase. I set out to try and prove if this theory was correct, but unfortunately was unable to find undeniable evidence. However, it is still possible that it belonged to him. George Home, Earl of Dunbar, (1556-1611) was a favorite of King James VI and I, and held many titles throughout his career lavished on him by the King.¹¹ One such title was Master of the Great Wardrobe which he was appointed in 1603.¹² Home met a young King James sometime in the 1580s and quickly worked to become indispensable to him.¹³ Because of his position within James' court, Home undoubtedly could have afforded a nightcap like the one Paxton holds. Additionally, undress became a popular fashion within the court of James VI and I, especially with the union of the crowns in 1603. The King brought the Scottish preference of using the bedchamber for official business to England which led to the bedchamber quickly replacing the privy chamber.¹⁴ Even though nightcap etiquette demanded one only be worn in the presence of people from a lower social rank, it is well-known that 'the chief lords and favourite [wore] on their heads richly embroidered caps' while in the King's presence.¹⁵ Therefore, it is likely, as a favorite and servant of the king, that George Home owned one or more nightcaps. The Earl of Dunbar's association with Paxton House is still a bit of a mystery. As the Lord of Berwick, he had land holdings there and began to build a house on the site of Berwick Castle that was never finished.¹⁶ However, how his portrait from 1610 ended up in Paxton's collection is still unknown

¹¹ Jared R.M. Sizer, "The Good of This Service Consists in Absolute Secrecy: The Earl of Dunbar, Scotland, and the Border (1603-1611)," *Canadian Journal of History* 36, no. 2 (August 2001): 229–58, <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjh.36.2.229>.

¹² Maria Hayward, *Stuart Style: Monarchy, Dress and the Scottish Male Elite* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 55.

¹³ Sizer, "The Good of This Service."

¹⁴ Hayward, *Stuart Style*, 230-234.

¹⁵ Janet Arnold, Jenny Tiramani, and Santina M. Levey, *Patterns of Fashion 4: The Cut and Construction of Linen Shirts, Smocks, Neckwear, Headwear and Accessories for Men and Women c.1540-1660* (Hollywood, CA: Quite Specific Media Group, 2008), 12.

¹⁶ Audrey Dakin, Miles Glendinning, and Aonghus MacKechnie, *Scotland's Castle Culture* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2011), 41.

since the house was not built until 1758 by Patrick Home of Billie (1728-1808). Both the painting and the nightcap date to around the same time and are some of the oldest pieces in the house. Additionally, the nightcap's dates fit into the later years of the Earl's life. Therefore, it is possible that the nightcap once belonged to George Home, the Earl of Dunbar and came to Paxton House with his portrait. But, unfortunately, there is no discernible link between the portrait and the nightcap.

Through more research, I was also able to track down two other possible owners: Sir George Home of Wedderburn (1552-1616) and his younger brother, David Home of Godscroft (1558-1629). Sir George Home of Wedderburn is, in my opinion, the most likely candidate for the owner of Paxton's nightcap as he has the most direct connections to Paxton House. For a year in 1597, he was the Comptroller of the Household to James VI of Scotland.¹⁷ His great-great-grandson was the George Home who lost the land that Paxton would eventually be built on due to being convicted as a Jacobite traitor in the uprising of 1715.¹⁸ The Reverend Ninian Home of Billie (1670-1744), the father of Patrick Home who built Paxton House, obtained a legal title to the land through claiming debts owed by George Home, the Jacobite rebel.¹⁹ Patrick Home also rebuilt the current Wedderburn Castle on the site of the old one after inheriting the old castle and land from an Uncle.²⁰ If the cap did indeed belong to George Home, the Comptroller of the Household, it likely came to Paxton from Wedderburn Castle once Paxton House was inherited by a different George Home: the younger brother and successor of Ninian Home, Governor of Grenada, (1732-1795). Ninian had bought Paxton from Patrick Home. Once Ninian's younger brother, George, inherited Wedderburn as well after Patrick's death in 1808, he had various family possessions including

¹⁷ Edgar Erskine Hume, "A Colonial Scottish Jacobite Family: Establishment in Virginia of a Branch of the Humes of Wedderburn," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 38, no. 1 (1930): 1-37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4244310>, 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 8, 21-22.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 17.

²⁰ Roger White, "Wedderburn Castle: The Medieval Castle That Became Robert Adam's Forgotten Masterpiece," *Country Life*, September 5, 2021, <https://www.countrylife.co.uk/architecture/wedderburn-castle-the-medieval-castle-that-became-robert-adams-forgotten-masterpiece-232027>.

books and painting moved from Wedderburn Castle to Paxton.²¹ Therefore, if the nightcap belonged to George Home of Wedderburn (1552-1616), it likely stayed in the family on the grounds of the castle until it was transported to Paxton almost 200 years later.

The same backtracking can be done for David Home of Godscroft (1558-1629) since he was the younger brother of Sir George Home of Wedderburn (1552-1616).²² David was a major intellectual figure in Scotland during this time, and nightcaps were often signifiers of academics or clergymen.²³ Additionally, based on Scottish sumptuary laws, if he could afford the gilt embroidery, it was legal for him to wear the nightcap. Scottish sumptuary laws differed from English sumptuary laws which were not repealed until 1604 by King James VI and I.²⁴ However, it is a relatively far reach that it belonged to him, as it would have had to find its way to Paxton House in some manner. But, since he was related to Sir George Home of Wedderburn (1552-1616), it is not impossible.

²¹ “History of the House,” Paxton House, accessed April 29, 2023, <https://paxtonhouse.co.uk/discover/history/the-house/>.

²² David Hume, Paul J. McGinnis, and Arthur H. Williamson, *The British Union: A Critical Edition and Translation of David Hume of Godscroft’s De Unione Insulae Britannicae*, St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History (Aldershot, Hants; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 20.

²³ Allan I. Macinnes and Arthur H. Williamson, eds., *Shaping the Stuart World, 1603-1714: The Atlantic Connection*, *The Atlantic World*, v. 5 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006), 44; Quinton, Glasgow Museums, 28-29.

²⁴ Maria Hayward, “‘Outlandish Superfluities’: Luxury and Clothing in Scottish and English Sumptuary Law from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century,” in *The Right to Dress*, ed. Giorgio Riello and Ulinka Rublack, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 96–120, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108567541.004>.

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