

LORD WARDEN OF THE CINQUE PORTS WORN BY SIR ROBERT MENZIES

BY IAN WARDEN

Bob [Sir Robert Gordon Menzies (1894–1978)] has been staying with us at Balmoral and he's terribly browned off at the cost of his Admiral's uniform', the Queen was heard to remark one day in July 1966. The National Library of Australia has the very uniform, a splendid, custom-made ensemble, the cost of which had so upset Her Majesty's guest.

Sir Robert, who had been Australia's prime minister until his retirement the previous January, stayed at Balmoral just days before dressing up in this fabulous outfit for his investiture as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports at Dover on 20 July of that year.

He seems to have paid for his regalia himself and, because the Library has not only the regalia but also the itemised invoice of the tailor who made it, we know precisely how much Sir Robert was 'browned off' about.

Ede & Ravenscroft, London's oldest tailor (founded in 1689), had put the magnificent costume together for, in those days, the breathtaking cost of £367, seven shillings and fivepence.

The 'Coatee with gold embroidery and one pair of trousers with gold lace' had cost £208, 16 shillings and fivepence. The 'special cocked hat', a spectacular black-and-gold titfer lined with white silk, had set Sir Robert back £25 and four shillings.

The Queen's 'Bob' needed an Admiral's uniform for the great day because the Warden of the Cinque Ports (the ports are five towns in England's south-east and south) had often been, since the office was created in the twelfth century, an Admiral.

Sir Robert was the first Lord Warden ever to come from anywhere but England and the gift of the ancient office seems to have been Her Majesty's reward for a loyal Australian man who, famously, described himself as 'British to the bootstraps'.

Suitably gloved and lifting the very heavy costume, I hoped that Sir Robert had not had to wear it on a hot day. But alas it seems to have been a stinker. Sir Percy Joske, who was there, reported that Sir Robert had struggled through a long day of ceremonies. Joske heard Menzies' aides worrying that 'the Boss is feeling the heat' and that 'if he goes on much longer the Boss will collapse'.

The substantial Ede & Ravenscroft Admiral's uniform, beautifully preserved at the Library, where its golden accessories are as golden as they were on that day in 1966, added to its distinguished wearer's struggles on that hot Dover day. ●



UNIFORM

MAIN IMAGE
Ede & Ravenscroft
*Lord Warden of the Cinque
Ports Uniform Worn by
Sir Robert Menzies* c.1965
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an6138067

BACKGROUND IMAGE
Unknown photographer
*Sir Robert Menzies wearing
the costly Admiral's uniform
in 1966*
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