

# ***An 18th century Tartan Dress Coat of the Ancient Caledonian Society***

In 2018 this stunning late 18th century<sup>1</sup> tartan coat belonging to the Ancient Caledonian Society was secured at auction by the Scottish Tartans Authority (Plate 1).



**Plate 1. Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century Coat belonging the Ancient Caledonian Society.** Photo credit: Bonhams.

## **The Ancient Caledonian Society**

Little is known about the Ancient Caledonian Society (ACS) beyond the fact that it was founded in London in 1786. That was a few years after the Highland Society of London (1778) and it is possible that at least some of the members (the great and the good of Scottish Society) were the same. The ACS appears to have been a quasi-Masonic organisation with Rules that were evidently modelled on that of Freemasonry. One of the rules of the Society made obligatory the wearing of Highland Dress.<sup>1</sup>

The original ACS had ceased to exist by 1837, the year in which the Caledonian Society of London was founded<sup>2</sup>, but there were other, later, Ancient Caledonian Societies such as the one in Dundee established in 1822.

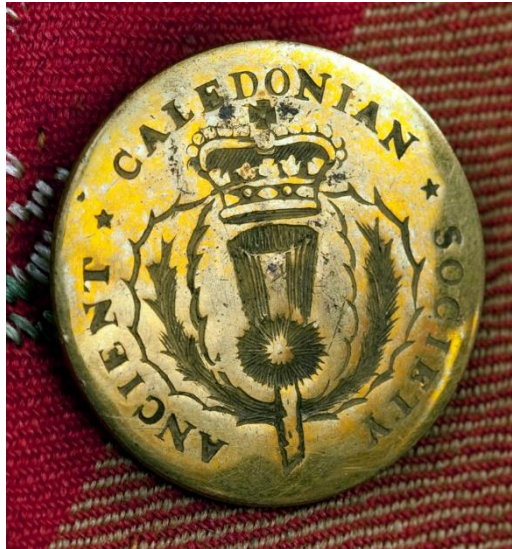
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<sup>1</sup> The years 1780-1840 are known as the Highland Revival period.

<sup>2</sup> It seems likely that the Caledonian Society of London was the successor of the ACS but the direct connection has not been established.

## The Coat

The coat is typical of late 18th century frock coats. It was made for a slim gentleman with a 34-36-inch chest, a narrow waist and shoulders; not an uncommon size in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is adorned with thirteen large brass buttons engraved with a thistle surmounted by a crown and surrounded by the Society's name (Plate 2).



**Plate 2. Buttons stamped with the ACS name, the Crown and Thistle.** Photo credit: Bonhams.

One button (top left as viewed – Plate 1) is missing, as are the two that would have been at the top of the rear vent. The cuffs are fastened by single, small plain brass buttons, whilst the purpose of the larger button covered by the collar on the left-hand side is unclear. It could possibly have been used to secure a plaid or sash (Plate 3).



**Plate 3. Plain button concealed below the collar about the left shoulder.** © The Author

Externally, the tartan is biased cut and beautifully matched, especially on the back and sleeves. Internally, the coat is partially lined with red woollen twill material and includes two internal tail pockets. Elsewhere, the rough seams are visible, not an uncommon practice in clothing of the period (Plate 4).



Plate 4. Interior showing the partial lining and two tail pockets. © The Author

Given the Society's location, it's likely that the coat was made in London but there is no indication of the maker. There are no details of what was worn with it. However, given the similarity of the style with that worn by the Royal Company of Archers about the same time (Plate 5), it is possible that the ACS Coat was worn with breeches. As this is the only known example, it is impossible to know whether this coat with its decorated motif was reserved for the President or some other official of the Society, or whether it was the style worn by all members.

A record exists of a coat like this one being loaned by the Banff Museum to the 1911 Glasgow International Exhibition where it was described as the 'official Dress Coat of the Ancient Caledonian Society of London'. What happened to that coat after 1911 is unclear but it was not included in the Museum's 1933 Inventory. Given the rarity of the coat and the fact that relatively few would have been made it is possible that this and the Banff coat are one and the same. It is hoped that further research will identify the original owner of the coat.



Plate 5. George Douglas, 16th Earl of Morton by William Beechey c1790

### The Tartan

The previously unknown tartan was almost certainly designed for the Society. It can be described as a red and green based design with finer overstripes (Plate 6). It shares elements with a number of tartans that were designed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century; for example, the various Caledonia based tartans produced by Wilsons of Bannockburn.

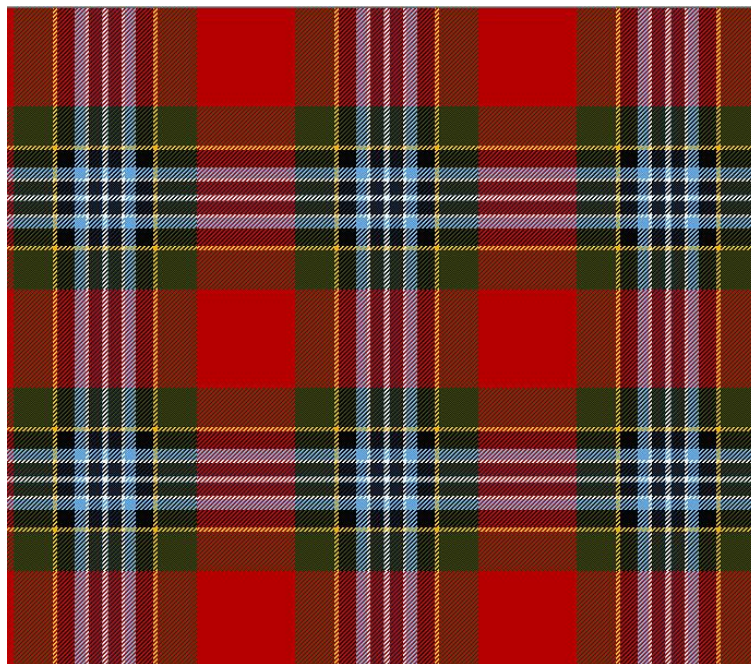


Plate 6. The Ancient Caledonian Society tartan.

The worsted wool cloth is narrow, 15-17 inches wide, which is uncharacteristic of traditional 18<sup>th</sup> century tartan intended for plaids, kilts and other clothing. This piece is unique amongst examples of 18<sup>th</sup> century tartan in having a decorative weft-faced silk motif (brocade) woven into it. On each of the red squares there is a white rose and two buds representing the Old Pretender, titular King James VIII/III, and his two sons, Princes Charles and Henry (Plate 7). The use of such obvious Jacobite iconography only 33 years after the last execution of a Jacobite leader<sup>3</sup> is extraordinary and shows just how safe it had become to make such references without fear of reprisal.



**Plate 7. Woven silk motif representing James VIII/III and Princes Charles and Henry.** © The Author

Tartan with a secondary design such as the rose motif would have been woven on a Draw-Loom, a pre-Jacquard type loom, used for weaving complex patterns. This type of weft-faced brocade is a technique known as 'Floredda' and was a specialty of the Norwich weavers. Records show that one Norwich supplier had 3,340 pieces of floredda made (including a few checked) between Nov 1794 and April 1799. There are no earlier records of checked floredda from Norwich but it is possible that the material was woven there.

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<sup>3</sup> Doctor Archibald Cameron, younger brother of Cameron of Lochiel, was executed in London on 7th June 1753.

## Flowered Tartans

In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century The Caledonian Mercury<sup>4</sup> included advertisements by two Edinburgh for merchants<sup>5</sup> for *Flowered Tartans* and *Flowered Plaids* (Plate 8). In 1767 an advert for Sundry Goods included ‘.....tartans, flowered stuffs or Caledonians.....’.

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†‡† That *WILLIAM TAYLOR*, at his Shop near Liberton's Wynd, South side, Lawn-market, Edinburgh, is the Maker, and sells, in Wholesale and Retail, all sorts of Tartans Worsted, Silk and Worsted, and Flowered, also sells Scarlet Plaids, and Carpets of different Figures and Dimensions, with other Scots Goods: Where is likewise sold, Broad Cloths, Hats, Stockings and Silk Plaids; all at most reasonable Rates.

**WILLIAM TAYLOR.**

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†‡† That *JAMES BAILLIE*, at the Sign of the ARCHER, has removed to the Shop formerly possess'd by Patrick Manderston, North side of the Lawn-market, nigh opposite to the Old Bank close, where he sells all sorts of Worsted, Silk and Worsted and Flowered Tartan Plaids, and all Scarlet Plaids, having always on hand great Choice and Variety of the newest and prettiest Patterns, at as low Rates as any can afford, he being the Maker himself; likewise all kinds of Scots Carpets of different Figures and Sizes, with several other kinds of Scots Manufactures.

Plate 8. Advert for Flowered Tartans and Flowered Plaids, Caledonian Mercury 27 May 1742.

Source: The British Newspaper Archive<sup>ii</sup>.

It's not clear what *Flowered Tartans* were, nor if '*flowered stuffs or Caledonians*' were the same type of cloth. The terms are not widely known amongst textile historians and appear to have been a Scots' name(s) for a type of pattern(s) popular in Scotland in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. This coat may be an example of what 'Flowered Tartan' might have looked like. If it is an example of the technique then it is the only known surviving specimen. It also raises the possibility that the material could have been woven in Scotland rather than somewhere like Norfolk.

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<sup>4</sup> The Caledonian Mercury was a Scottish newspaper, published three times a week between 1720 and 1867.

<sup>5</sup> James Baillie and William Taylor described themselves as makers and sellers.

## Conclusion

This is one of only two early Highland Revival tartan coats known to survive<sup>6</sup>. It belonged to a member of the Ancient Caledonian Society, a quasi-Masonic organisation that exist between 1786 and the mid-1830s. The style is typical of late 18<sup>th</sup> century frock coats and it is likely that it dates to the early years of the Society c1786-1790. Where it was made and for whom is not known. It is thought likely that it was made in London where the Society was based possibly using cloth woven in Scotland. The cost of weaving such elaborate cloth means that it would have probably been used for all the members' coats rather than just for the office holders.

The previously unknown pattern is the only known historical example of a tartan with an additional weft brocade design (Plate 9). It may be a specimen of *Flowered Tartans*, a type of design apparently popular in Scotland in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. The use of such overt Jacobite iconography within living memory of the last Rising to reclaim the Throne for the Stuarts is extraordinary. It shows how the perceived threat from the Jacobites effectively ceased with the death of Prince Charles Edward Stuart in 1788, a date roughly contemporary with the coat.

As the only known historical example of an augmented or decorated tartan pattern, and possibly of what was called *Flowered Tartan*, the coat is a unique piece of Highland Revival material culture. It is hoped that further research may discover more about the original owner of the coat and the Ancient Caledonian Society.



Plate 9. Internal and external detail of the silk brocade motif. © The Author

Acknowledgement: The author would like to thank The Scottish Tartans Authority for making the coat available for study.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/> Aberdeen Press and Journal 27 Aug 1930 accessed 7 May 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/> The Caledonian Mercury accessed 25 September 2020.

<sup>6</sup> The other coat is discussed in in this paper - [http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/An\\_Early\\_Highland\\_Revival\\_Coat.pdf](http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/An_Early_Highland_Revival_Coat.pdf)