

The Balmoral Tartan

Introduction

The Balmoral tartan (Fig 1) is said to have been designed in 1853 by Prince Albert, The Prince Consort, Queen Victoria's husband. It is unique in several respects: it is the only tartan known to have been designed by a member of the Royal Family; has a unique construction; and is reserved for members of the Royal Family. It is worn by HM The Queen and several members of the Royal Family but only with the Queen's permission. The only other approved wearers of the Balmoral tartan are the Piper to the Sovereign and pipers on the Balmoral Estate (estate workers and ghillies wear the Balmoral tweed).



Fig 1. Specimen of the original Balmoral Tartan c1865. © The Author.

There is some confusion over the exact date of the original design. In 1893 D.W. Stewartⁱ wrote, "Her Majesty the Queen has not only granted permission for its publication here, but has also graciously afforded information concerning its inception in the early years of the reign, when the sett was designed by the Prince Consort."

Harrison (1968)ⁱⁱ states that both the Balmoral tartan and Tweed were designed by Prince Albert. Writing of the tartan specimen in Stewart's *Old & Rare* Harrison noted that "The illustrations were all woven in fine silk which did not allow of (sic) the reproduction of the pure black and white twist effect of the original. Mr Stewart compromised by using shades of dull mauve as the nearest that his materials allowed. Thus, for generations the Balmoral was looked upon not as a pure grey scheme but as a scheme of very quiet mauves" (Fig 2).

Johnstons of Elgin's records include an entry for *Super Balmoral Tweed* woven on 13 July 1853ⁱⁱⁱ. There are no details but the writer assumes that this was the estate tweed¹, also said to have been designed by Prince Albert^{iv}. Johnstons speculate which came first, the tartan or the tweed. It may be a coincidence that the date is the same as that of the tartan and may hint at confusion over whether to classify this pattern as tartan or tweed.

¹ The estate tweed is a heavy speckled cloth that had an overall appearance similar to the original Balmoral tartan.

Kinloch Anderson, founded as Wm Anderson & Sons in 1868 and Royal Warrant Holders since 1934, give the date of design as 1857. Harrison (1968) further states that *“According to Messrs Wm Anderson & Sons of Edinburgh, who have always supplied the Royal Family, they first had it manufactured in 1857”*. There is clearly confusion about the date of design and manufacture as Haag’s superb portrait (Fig 3) proves that the Balmoral tartan existed by the summer of 1853. Stewart (1893) implies that the tartan was manufactured by Romanes & Paterson, Edinburgh while Harrison (1968) suggests that Ballantynes of Walkerburn may have been the original makers of the Balmoral tartan. Given that Romanes & Paterson were tailors and suppliers of Highland Dress to the Royal Family and not a weaving firm, then the cloth must have been woven elsewhere. It seems more likely that the original weaver could have been Ballantynes. Harrison *states* *“Their pattern is not dated but the book in which it is mounted starts with the date 1842 so that it is not unlikely that this is really the original pattern. The old book quite definitely covers the required period”*. However, the Ballantyne connection is also difficult to verify as local records indicated that the firm was established sometime between 1850-54 and so possibly after the tartan was designed.



Fig 2. Balmoral Tartan, Old & Rare Scottish Tartans 1893. © The Author.



Fig 3. Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, and Prince Alfred with the jager, John Macdonald, after the salmon leistering, 9 September 1853 dated 1854 by Carl Haag. Source: Royal Collection Trust

A photograph (Fig 4) taken a year earlier shows Macdonald (on the right) wearing a kilt in the same outfit, less his head-dress, as he is shown wearing in the Haag portrait. The arrangement of stripes in the tartan appear similar to those in the Balmoral tartan and it is reasonable to assume that it is the same kilt depicted by Haag.



Fig 4. John MacDonald (Jager) wearing Balmoral tartan Sep 1852. Source: Royal Collection Trust

A painting of MacDonald's children, Archie and Annie, by Queen Victoria in 1850² depicts them wearing tartan. Archie is shown wearing a pale, greyish tartan with red overstripes that could be a representation of the Balmoral (Fig 5). Regrettably there is no mention of the tartans unlike the 1852 sketch of Annie of whom the Queen said that "*she has got a Balmoral plaid over her head*" (Fig 6). The tartan was also worn by John Brown, at least in his early service at Balmoral (Fig 7).



Fig 5. Annie & Archie MacDonald by Queen Victoria 1850. Source: Royal Collection Trust

² The painting was started in November 1845 but not finished until March 1850. Inscribed: **Archie & Annie MacDonald / with Daphne & Fanny at the Kennels VR began: / 1845 finished, March 31 1850 / (from nature); Nov'49- / June 50**



Fig 6. Annie MacDonald by Queen Victoria 1852.
Source: Royal Collection Trust



Fig 7. John Brown wearing the Balmoral tartan c1860. Source: Royal Collection Trust

A Royal Design

Writing in his seminal work D. C. Stewart^v opined that the Prince Albert used the Royal Stewart tartan as the basis for his design. It is unlikely that there is any surviving record to corroborate this and whilst that may have been the case, there is another contemporary tartan, the Hay Stewart, that is closer in structure and could have been the source (Fig 8).

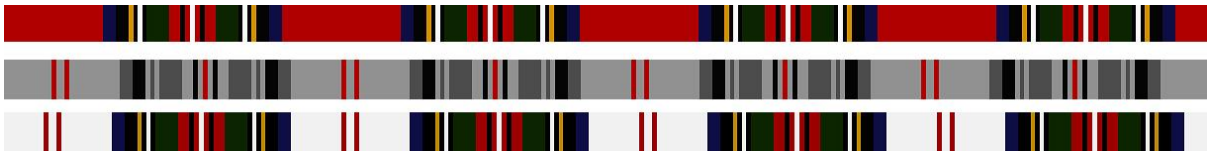


Fig 8. Comparison of the Royal Stewart, Balmoral and Hay Stewart setts. © The Author.

The similarity between the Balmoral and Hay Stewart³ is more obvious if the two are compared directly. The proportional difference is due to the Hay Stewart having an additional fine line between the white and green, which also appears in the Royal Stewart but omitted in the Balmoral, causing a misalignment of the two patterns as they repeat (Fig 9).

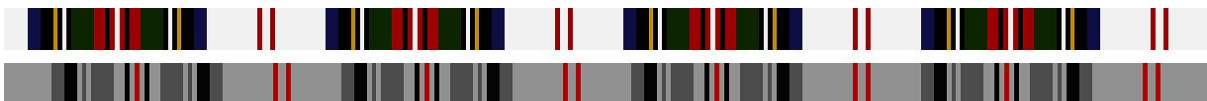


Fig 9. Comparison of the Hay-Stewart and Balmoral setts. © The Author.

Whilst predominantly grey with over-checks of red and black, the background contains threads of black and white yarns twisted together and mixed in differing proportions to achieve the appearance of the rough-hewn granite so familiar in Royal Deeside. (Fig 10):

³ The Hay Stewart tartan, it was described in an 1838 order to Wilsons of Bannockburn as being like the Victoria Stewart but with two red lines across the white. Both tartans were almost certainly designed by the Sobieski-Stuart brothers who were celebrities in Victorian Highland circles. John Carter Allen and Charles Manning Allen styled themselves *Hay Stewart* for a time before adopting Sobieski-Stuart.

- Dark Gray (DN): 2 black and 1 white singles in a three-ply yarn.
- Light Gray: 1 white; 2 black + 1 white; 1 white + 2 black; 1 white etc., alternating 1 white singles, DN 3-ply – commencing and ending with 1 white single.



Fig 10. Balmoral kilt fringe c1860 showing the yarn twists to produce the different greys.
Photo: EF Williams

In 1936 His Majesty King Edward VIII authorised the registration of the Tartan and at the same time he altered it to make it less sombre⁴. This is when the Royal Family changed to the lighter shades and weight of cloth that is worn today (Fig 11).



Fig 11. Balmoral tartan c1975 – STA Collection © The Author

⁴ Harrison 1968. It is not known where the tartan was registered.

A Restricted Tartan

Although worn exclusively today by members of the Royal Family, the Piper to the Sovereign and pipers on the Balmoral Estate, the tartan appears originally to have been worn by the Ghillies on the Estate. The author knows of no images of either Prince Albert (d.1861) or Queen Victoria wearing the Balmoral tartan and the earliest Royal use appears to have been the Princes Edward and Alfred in Haag's portrait of 1853 (Fig 3) and in photographs taken by Dr Ernest Becker the same year. At some point between c1860 and 1880 the Ghillies ceased wearing the Balmoral tartan and wore the Balmoral Tweed which they still wear today. From this period the tartan seems to have been used solely for members of the Royal Family, the Piper to the Sovereign and, occasionally others on the Balmoral Estate. King Edward VIII extended the use of the tartan in 1936, recalling in his memoirs "When I myself became King, I introduced it as the tartan for the pipers at Balmoral, who had hitherto worn Royal Stuart".^{vi}

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries it appears that the Balmoral tartan was a popular commercial design and there are conflicting stories about when its commercial use was restricted.⁵ The statement by Stewart (1893) that "*Hitherto, on account of the conditions imposed on Messrs Romanes & Paterson, Edinburgh, the manufacturers of tartans to the Royal Family, it has been impossible, even for the connoisseur, to procure an example of it*" suggests that the tartan was restricted by the time of the publication. In January 1937, Conachie & Co⁶ wrote to George VI to inquire if the Balmoral tartan could be manufactured and sold.⁷ Their letter read: "*We are tartan specialists and have been receiving enquiries from all parts of the world.*" In response one of the King's officials replied: "*I write to inform you that the tartan that the King and royal family have adopted is purely personal and private to His Majesty and the royal family and can, in no circumstances, be worn by other people, or purchased by them from any source and cannot, therefore, be manufactured for general sale.*"

Harrison (1968) appears to have confused and conflated dates and personalities when he wrote "*Now her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II has most kindly given us leave to reproduce the Tartan correctly. We appreciate that this is a great privilege, for at the expressed wish of King George V the Tartan has been, and is now considered as absolutely the private property of the Royal Family. I think this wish has been almost universally observed. We manufacturers all withdrew the Balmoral from our collections. In 1936 finding that there was still some leakage of the design, His Majesty King Edward VIII authorised the registration of the Tartan at the same time he altered it a little to make it less sombre in shade. The Duke of Windsor as he now is, says in his autobiography that the Prince Consort based the design on the Royal Stuart Tartan. According to Messrs Wm. Anderson & Sons of Edinburgh, who have always supplied the Royal Family, they first had it manufactured in 1857*"

It is unclear whether there was some form of constraint on the use of the Balmoral tartan during Queen Victoria's reign as suggested by Stewart. If there was it was obviously considered ineffective some years later as the correspondence from the National Archives (Footnote 7) confirms that it was George VI who called for the restriction in 1937. This restriction of the use of the Balmoral tartan remains in force today.

⁵ The Scottish Tartans Authority's collection includes a number of woven specimens.

⁶ Conachie & Co, a former clothing wholesaler based in Edinburgh.

⁷ Documents in the National Archives and quoted in the Scotsman. <http://www.scotsman.com/news/royals-banned-public-from-wearing-official-balmoral-tartan-1-4203624>

Variations on a theme

There have been a number of commercial attempts to capitalise on the Balmoral tartan both in the UK and America in the 1950-70s either as straight copies of by producing designs that were similar and sold as Balmoral. None are still available. Other than the lighter version (weight and shades) worn by the Royal Family today, the only official variations of the design are the versions with either blue or green lines replacing the red ones. According to James Cant⁸ these were woven in 1951 by James Ives & Co. Ltd⁹ and made into car rugs for King George VI. A blue line version was produced by Pendleton Mill in Portland, Oregon during the 1970-80s (Fig 12) but today both it and the green line version are woven exclusively for the Royal Family. His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales (HRH The Prince Charles, Duke of Rothesay when in Scotland) is known to wear the green setting in a coat (Fig 13).



Fig 12. Balmoral – Blue lines, Pendleton Mill specimen c1970-80. © The Author



Fig 13. Balmoral – Green lines, worn by HRH The Prince of Wales.
Photo credit: Getty Images

Conclusion

A series of early photographs showing Ghillies wearing kilts in the Balmoral tartan prove that the pattern existed by the summer of 1852. In the same year, Queen Victoria captured the likeness of Annie MacDonald who is clearly wearing a shawl made from Balmoral tartan cloth, a fact corroborated by Queen Victoria's own reference. Whether the tartan was designed that year, or earlier, is unknown. Given the time required to weave the material and have kilts made up, the Balmoral tartan may well have been designed a year or two earlier and most certainly before 1853, the year most commonly quoted by historians as the year of its creation. However, if the painting of Archie and Annie MacDonald by Queen Victoria also depicts the tartan, then it would have existed by 1850 which was before the family bought the Estate.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the tradition that both the Balmoral tartan and tweed were designed by Prince Albert, the technical construction of both suggest that, in the opinion of the author, the designs are more likely to have been the work of a manufacturer following a request by the

⁸ James Cant, a Dundee based tartan collector active in the 1950s.

⁹ James Ives & Co. Ltd, a former weaving firm based in Yeadon, Leeds.

¹⁰ Balmoral was purchased for Queen Victoria by Prince Albert in 1852, having been first leased in 1848.

Prince Consort. The identity of the original weaver of the tartan is by no means certain. It could not have been Romanes & Paterson as suggested by Stewart; it is possible that it was Ballantynes of Walkerburn but this claim by Harrison requires further research into their early history and exact date of the founding of their mill.

The heavier Ghillies' weight cloth was replaced by a lighter weight and shades in 1936 and the following year the commercial sale of the tartan in Britain was restricted at the request of King George VI. Versions of the Balmoral tartan were still produced in the USA until the late 1970s after which the production and sale also seems to have ceased.

All current literature and advice indicates that the Piper to The Sovereign is the only person outside of the Royal Family who is authorised to wear the Balmoral tartan. Whilst not widely known, it is clear that Balmoral Estate pipers also wear the Balmoral tartan in the course of their piping duties (Fig 14).

This paper was compiled from a limited research base and it is possible that more detailed access to Royal Archives might assist in clarifying a number of unanswered questions and areas of supposition.



Fig 14. Current and former Pipers to the Sovereign and estate pipers wearing the Balmoral tartan in 2016.
Source: New Hampshire School of Scottish Arts website, accessed 22 Jan 2016.

Acknowledgement:

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ⁱ STEWART, D.W. 1893 *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*. Geo. P. Johnston., Edinburgh

ⁱⁱ HARRISON, E.S. 1968 *Our Scottish District Checks*. The National Association of Woollen Manufacturers. Edinburgh

ⁱⁱⁱ HARRISON, E.P. 1995 *Scottish Estate Tweeds*. Johnstons of Elgin. Nairn

^{iv} *ibid.*

^v STEWART. D.C. 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh.

^{vi} WINDSOR, THE DUKE OF. 1960 *A Family Album*, Cassell & Company Ltd, London

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