

MacDonald of Borrodale

Introduction

There are a relatively few surviving tartans that date to the period of the '45 and the ending of the clan system, many of those that do are small fragments of once larger pieces. All too often, little or nothing is known about these precious pieces of fabric beyond the fact that they belonged to some collector, or were found in a bog, castle, shop, jumble sale etc. Some of the pieces are large enough to allow the whole design to be confirmed, others can only be guessed at. It is rare indeed to find more than one sample from the same web and even rarer that there is a good historical audit trail to support them. The MacDonald of Borrodale tartan is possibly unique in having both elements that combine to allow an accurate reconstruction of a tartan intimately associated with Charles Edward Stuart's escape following the collapse of 1745 Jacobite Rising (the '45). Four specimens from the same web are known to exist. They are in the collections of Stonyhurst College, Lancashire, the West Highland Museum, the National Museum of Scotland and the McManus Art Gallery & Museum, Dundee.

The Stonyhurst Specimen

In 1984, the author was contacted by a Stonyhurst (SH) 'Old Boy' concerning a fragment of tartan in the possession of the College¹ (Figure 1). Stonyhurst, a Jesuit School, owns a number of artefacts associated with the '45 having acquired them via Henry Benedict, Cardinal, Duke of York, Prince Charles Edward Stuart's (PCE) brother and successor. The specimen was apparently old and said to have been part of a kilt worn by PCE during the '45. Shortly after the Jacobite defeat at Culloden PCE stayed with the MacDonalds of Borrodale, a cadet family of the MacDonalds of Clanranald. On taking his leave PCE was given '*a Sute of new Highland clothes from Angus MacDonald Boradale's spouse, the better to disguise him, & make him pass for one of the country*' (Forbes Vol 3, p.203)ⁱ. PCE was taken via Benbecula to Eilean Glas where his party arrived soaked after several hours in an open boat during a gale.² They stayed with a Robert Campbell, tenant of Scalpay, with whom PCE left/exchanged his wet clothes.³

The specimen was mounted under glass, hung in a south facing window and accompanied by a hand-written note:

"This piece of cloth is part of a kilt left by Prince Charlie in the House of Campbell, Island Glass, 30 April 1746.

Robert Hemsley, Tarber(?) House got it from a descendent of the Campbells and sent it to Walter Armstrong of Tarff House, Kirkcousan who gave it to

J S Maitland, 19 April 1887.

In landing on the Island, Prince Charlie got wet – his kilt was not dry in the morning when he wished to start, so he left his own behind and took one of the Campbell's kilts.

The story was told to me by W Armstrong of Kirkcousan, Glasgow April 1887.
J S Maitland H M Inspector of Factories."

¹ <https://www.stonyhurst.ac.uk/about-us/stonyhurst-college-historic-collections/museum-exhibitions>

² Island Glass (Eilean Glas) is better known as Scalpay, a small island situated off the east coast of Harris.

³ Forbes did not give any detail of what the *Highland clothes* comprised. It could have been some or all of a plaid, coat, trews and/or kilt.



Figure 1. The Stonyhurst specimen of Prince Charles Edward's kilt. Photo: Fairfax House

Walter Armstrong, an antique dealer from Kirkcousan (Kirkcowan or Kirkgowan), Wigtownshire, had a particular interest in Scottish artefacts. He must have had a second piece, as in August that year he offered for sale;⁴ *'A small piece of Tartan Kilt (belonging to P. Charlie) left in a house or hut; on Island of Tamasay⁵, Hebrides. R. Hornby Esqr.'*ⁱⁱ It is not clear whether Armstrong sold the collection or, if he did, whether the piece of tartan was included; the description is almost identical with that associated with a specimen in the West Highland Museum (WHM). This, the WHM piece, is the second of the Borrodale specimens (Figure 2).

The third specimen under consideration is that purchased by the National Museum of Scotland (NMS) from an unnamed seller in 1993 (Figure 3). The text reads *'Piece of Prince Charlie's kilt left by him in the House of Campbell, Island Glass, 30th April 1746'. The envelope underneath is addressed 'Isabel' and has 'Bits of Prince Charlie's kilt' written in the top left corner* (NMS). It is not known who *Isabel* was, nor when and from where the fragment had been acquired by the writer.

⁴ Offered to Capt. Clark Kennedy, Knockgray House, Carsphairn, Kirkcudbrightshire.

⁵ Tamasay and Hornby were 1975 mis-transcriptions of Taransay and Hemsley respectively.



Figure 2. A specimen of the Borrodale tartan in the WHM. Photo: The Author

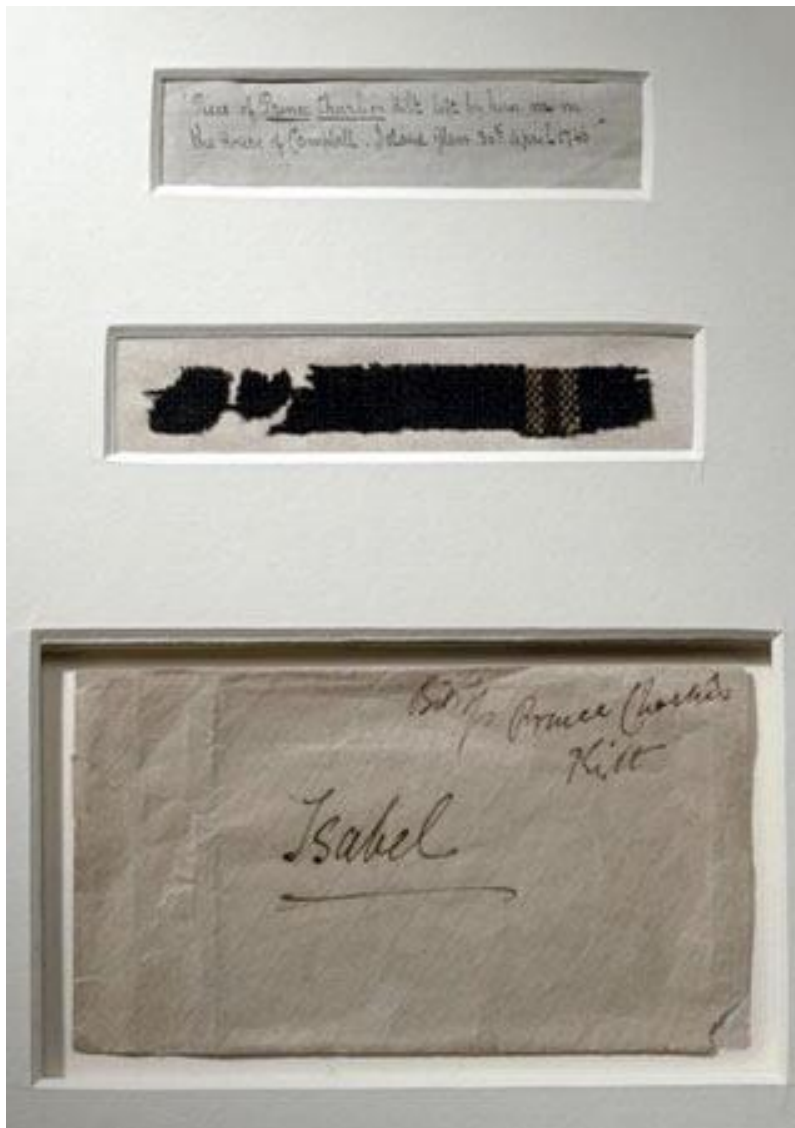


Figure 3. A specimen of the Borrodale tartan in the NMS. Photo: NMS

In 2023 the V&A Dundee brought together all three specimens as part of their Tartan Exhibition. During the preparations a fourth piece was discovered in the collection of the McManus Museum and Art Gallery, Dundee (MAG) (figure 4). The specimen had been donated by the wife of Frank Sharp, a respected music teacher in Dundee who died in 1923. There is not information of where he acquired the piece but he would have been a contemporary of Walter Armstrong and it is possible that it was another piece sold by him.



Figure 4. A specimen of the Borrodale tartan in the MAG. Photo: The Author

The SH specimen measures approximately 115 x 100mm, the WHM specimen is roughly the same size and the MAG one slightly smaller. Compared with these, the NMS piece truly is a fragment. However, the inclusion of the red stripe guarded by yellow, a feature found in all three of the other pieces, confirms it is from part of the same original material. In all four, the edges are frayed, the result of it having been cut from a larger piece, none includes a selvedge.

The Cloth

Examination of the SH specimen by the author confirmed the material is handwoven in plain weave⁶ at 11 threads per cms in the warp and 9-10 threads per cms in the weft (Figure 5). Both warp and weft yarns are singles (unplied) hand-spun wool; the warp being 'z' spun and the weft yarn 's' spun. Plain weave examples are rare amongst surviving 18th century tartan specimens, they are exclusively found in pieces from the West Coast⁷ and being less dense, may have been principally for women's wear⁸.



Figure 5. Detail of the plain weave in the WHM specimen. Photo: WHM.

⁶ Plain weave, also called Tabby weave or Linen weave is where each weft thread passes over a warp thread with each row alternating. It makes a strong cloth but is more open than a staggered 2/2 twill more often used for tartan.

⁷ Principally the Western Isles. This does not mean that the technique was not used more widely on the mainland, only that no examples survive from elsewhere.

⁸ There are a number of surviving early 19th century plain weave tartan dresses and related material made in Uist.

Due to the lack of a selvedge on any of the specimens means that it is impossible to determine how wide the original cloth was, nor whether they were from part of a tailored garment of a length of single-width or joined plaiding.

Examples of both warp and weft yarns were examined and a difference in the quality identified. The blue yarn was spun from a Generalised Medium fleece-type with no natural pigment; the yellow from a Hairy fleece-type the had 2% pigmentation (i.e. black or brown).ⁱⁱⁱ

The black stripes in the warp are made up of black and brown threads in an alternating irregular pattern.^{iv} (Figure 5).

- 1 black, 1 brown
- 1 black, 2 brown
- 2 black, 2 brown
- 2 black, 1 brown
- 1 black, 2 brown
- 1 black, 1 brown
- 2 black, 2 brown
- 1 black, 1 brown x 2
- 2 black, 1 brown
- 1 black, 2 brown
- 1 black, 1 brown x4
- 1 black



Figure 6. Athernating warp threads of black and brown in the black stripe. Photo: The Author

The distinctive irregular threading of the black warp points to the use of yarns from two different dye-lots, one darker than the other, which were then deliberately warped in an irregular way in order to mitigate the alternative of having one or more solid brown warp stripes if the colour was used on its own. There may also have been some fading and the difference may not have been so pronounced nearly three centuries ago.

The shades are very dark, so much so that it was difficult easily to distinguish between the blue, black and green without lightening the images (Figure 1). They offer good evidence to counter the oft cited claim that natural dyes are lighter and less intense than shades produced with artificial dyes that were introduced in the mid-1800s. Due to its original position in a south facing window the yellow of the SH specimen had faded almost to white on one side but the subsequent identification of the WHM piece confirmed that the shade was originally yellow. The blue, green and black shades were much less affected by the light due to the use of indigo which is much more light-fast. Dye analysis conducted by Taylor^v identified the following dyestuffs:

- Red Z - cochineal
- Yellow Z - perhaps weld
- Black Z - indigotin + tannin
- Brown Z - tannin
- Black S - indigotin + tannin
- Blue Z & S - indigotin

Indigotin⁹ was derived from either woad (a British product) or indigo (an import). Both were available in the mid-18th century and it is not possible to determine which was used. More interesting, given the fact that ‘the yellow was largely decayed’ is the assumption by Taylor that the yellow was ‘quite probably weld’.^{vi} This assumption was not asserted in a paper the following year which found that the green was dyed with ‘Indigo or woad + possible (unknown yellow) (Taylor cited in Quye et al, 2000 p.5).^{vii} Weld does not grow well in wet; acid soils and very good yellows were available from ling heather tips and bog myrtle meaning that weld would not have been needed (Grierson, 1983 p.220).^{viii}

There are weaving errors evident in all four specimens; in one, the WHM piece, it is a weft error, whereas the other three are warp errors which is more unusual. Comparison of the errors in the MAG and SH pieces show they were contiguous meaning that the two were either once a larger piece that was further divided, or more probably, cut sequentially by Armstrong from the remaining cloth at the point he was offering specimens for sale (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Alignment of the SH and MAG specimens with weaving error highlighted. Photo: the author

⁹ Indigotin is the crystalline compound in indigo which produces the blue colour when the textile is exposed to the air due to a reaction with oxygen.

Both the dyes and weaving techniques are typical of those found in early-mid 18th century rurally produced tartan when cloth was generally 22-26 inches wide. Due to the small size of the four specimens, and the fact that none includes a selvedge, it is impossible to know what size the original material was.

The Sett

Surviving examples of blue, black and green based tartans from the first half of the 18th century are relatively unusual. This is in part due to the fact that generally only the better off could afford to own more than one set of cloths and such people preferred red based tartans for best. The MacDonalDs of Borrodale were Highland gentry, this cloth may therefore be an example of everyday wear, rather than best.

Despite the small size of the individual specimens, each includes the red stripe enclosed by yellow guards. This, combined with the other elements in each piece allowed the pattern to be reconstructed with a high degree of confidence to which they can then be aligned relative to each other (Figure 8). This shows their individual alignment to the sett but not necessarily to each other (except the contiguous MAG and SH pieces), nor where each was as part of the full garment or length of cloth.

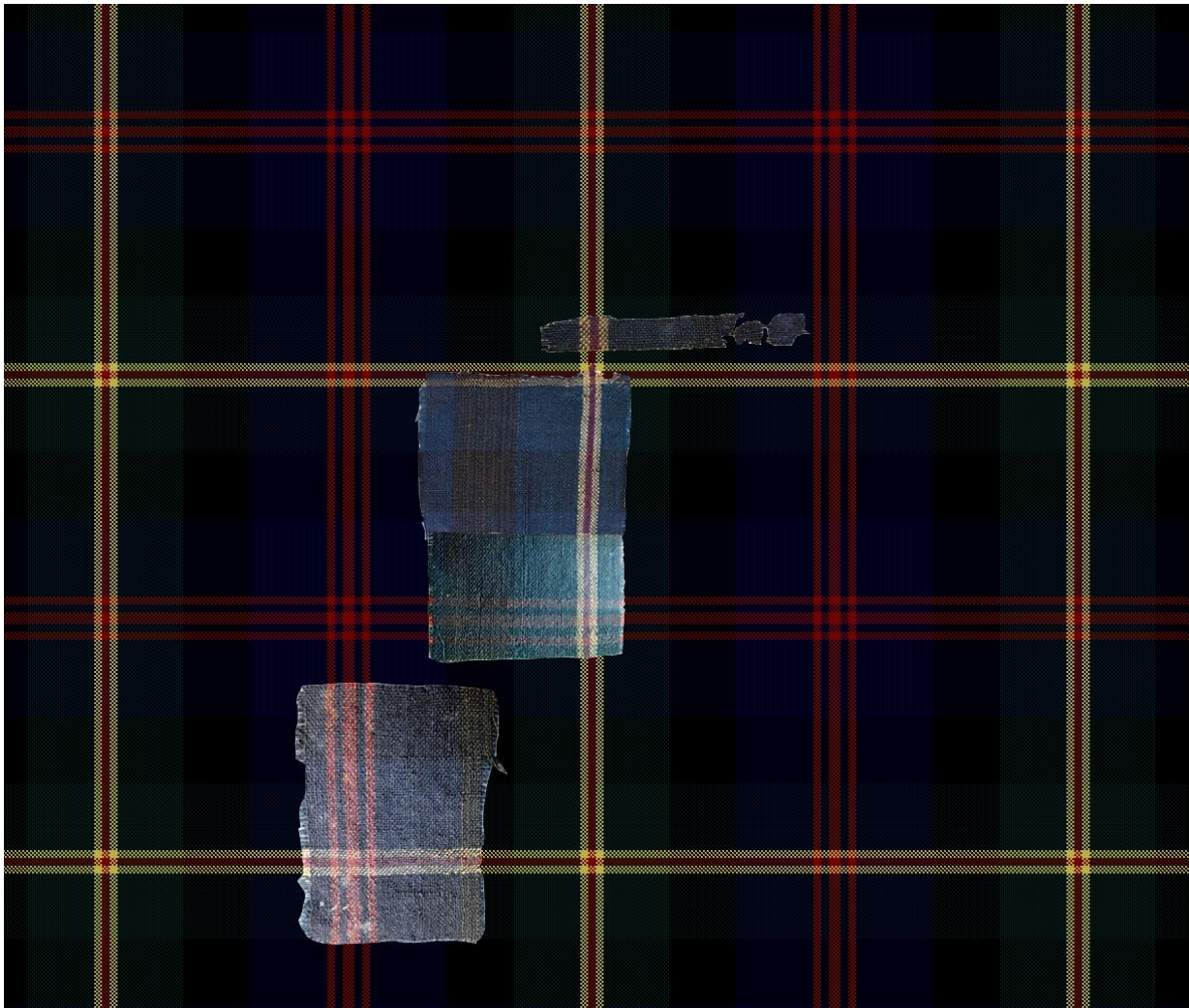


Figure 8. The four Borrodale specimens aligned to the reconstructed pattern. © The Author.

In 1990 Stonyhurst commissioned a reconstruction of the tartan based on the author's research. A length was presented to Her Majesty The Queen when she visited College in 1991 (Figure 9); it was later made into a pair of trousers for HRH The Prince Edward (Figure 10). The tartan was subsequently adopted as the school tartan and is worn a part of girls' uniform (Figure 11).



Figure 9. HM The Queen presented with a length of Borrodale tartan by Stonyhurst College, 1991.



Figure 10. HRH The Prince Edward wearing the Borrodale tartan.

Conclusion

There are several examples of tartans bearing similar stories of having been worn by Prince Charles Edward. Some of them certainly could not have been worn by him at the time and place stated. Armstrong acquired his specimens over 140 years after the date the Prince is supposed to have worn the material, plenty of time for a story of romantic attachment to have grown up around it. Various authorities have written that the Prince never wore the 'kilt' as such during his time in Scotland, preferring trews and plaid. That does not necessarily invalidate this particular story; it is generally accepted that he did use several plaids and the belted-plaid is sometimes referred to as the 'great-kilt'. Thus, in some instances the words 'kilt' and 'plaid' may be taken as synonymous.

The structure of the material and dyestuffs used are consistent with the claimed antiquity and are similar to several other 18th century specimens from the west highlands. Whilst it cannot be proved that the Prince actually worn this, he is known to have stayed with MacDonald of Borrodale following Culloden and on the balance of probabilities it seems likely that the story is true.



Figure 11. Borrodale tartan used for Stonyhurst Girls' uniform. Photo: Stonyhurst College

ⁱ ['Lyon in Mourning', Bishop Robert Forbes's collection of Jacobite papers. \[Volume 3\] | SFU Digitized Collections](#) Accessed 28 Jan 2024.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.dgnhas.org.uk/tdgnhas/3051.pdf> Accessed 17 Sep 21.

ⁱⁱⁱ WALTON P. *Fragment of tartan from Stonyhurst College*. Textiles Research Associates Report, 11 December 1988.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v TAYLOR G W. *Fragment of tartan from Stonyhurst College: Dye Test results*. Textiles Research Associates Report, 14 December 1988.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Quye, A., Cheape, H., Burnett, J., Ferreira, E., Hulme, A. and McNab, H. *An historical and analytical study of red, pink, green and yellow colours in quality 18th and early 19th century Scottish tartans*. Dyes in History and Archaeology. 2000.

^{viii} GRIERSON S. *The Colour Cauldron - The History and use of Natural Dyes in Scotland*. Oliver McPherson Ltd., Forfar 1986.

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