

Strathspey Tartan – A re-used mid-18th Century Plaid

Introduction

Classified by Teall and Smithⁱ as a *District pattern*, the Strathspey tartan can be traced to a piece of material used for the back of a waistcoat said to have been from a Strathspey Fencibles uniform c1795¹ that belonged to a Private soldier (Fig 1). Examination by the author confirmed that the tartan waistcoat back was an individual augmentation, confirmed by the misalignment of the pattern, and was not standard regimental issue (Fig 2).



Fig 1. Strathspey Uniform c1795.

Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Scotland



Fig 2. Strathspey Waistcoat c1795.

Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Scotland

The Tartan

It has been suggested that the tartan, which appears to be a variant of the Black Watch sett, was possibly designed by Col James Grant of Grant for his Strathspey Fencibles. However, MacKintoshⁱⁱ writing of the 97th tartan stated that “*The tartan was the same as that worn by the First or Strathspey Fencibles (of which Sir James Grant was Colonel), which has the small red stripe in it*”. The waistcoat tartan has no red stripe and one may therefore conclude that it was not the pattern worn by either the 97th or the Fencible regiment².

Whilst the setting could be described as a simplified version of the 42nd, Black Watch or Government tartan, technically it differs from other simplifications in that there are three fine black overstripes on each blue square rather than the two found in early 19th specimens of the Black Watch tartan. This is the only known example of the three-line setting and in the

¹ The uniform latterly belonged to Lt Col John Grant Smith DSO who served as the Earl of Seafield's factor in Strathspey during the first decade of the 20th century. It was displayed at the Highland Exhibition in Inverness in 1930 before being donated to the United Services Museum, Edinburgh, now the [National War Museum](#), where it is on display,

² MacKintosh's statement is misleading, the 97th wore the Government (aka the 42nd or Black Watch) tartan.

absence of any supporting evidence it should be regarded as a local variation on the typical blue, green and black tartan ground tartan rather than an adopted military pattern (Fig 3).



Fig 3. Comparison of the Strathspey and Black Watch tartans. © The Author

A Re-used Plaid

The material is hand-woven at 40 epi³ with single (not plied) hand-spun yarns in both warp and weft and is typical of non-industrial, rurally woven tartan from the mid-18th century. This was a time that saw the Proscription of Highland Dress for civilian use, a fact discussed later in the context of this plaid. The blue was with indigo, a dyestuff that is likely to have been used in combination with unidentified dyes stuffs for the green and black too.⁴

Not only was the tartan used for the back of the waistcoat, it also lines about two thirds of the interior of the back too and finishes inside at a frayed edge on one side (Fig 4). This, plus the fact that the bottom edge of one of the back sectioned is woven in herringbone (Fig 5) are clear indications that the material is a portion of what was originally a plaid.



Fig 4. Detail of the frayed tartan inside the waistcoat.
Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Scotland



Fig 5. Herringbone selvedge on the waistcoat.
Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Scotland

³ Ends per inch.

⁴ For details see [Proscription – Tartan Ban: Fact or Fiction.](#)

This herringbone decoration appears to have been included principally on material intended to be used for the male belted-plaid. It is reasonable to conclude that the plaid was damaged and that an entire portion, perhaps the sole surviving piece, was used to back the waistcoat. The remaining tartan is 23 inches at the widest point, measured from the neck seam to the herringbone selvedge at the bottom of the waistcoat, meaning that the original material must have been wider. Mention has already been made of the fact that the two back panels are misaligned; there are also two warping errors⁵ in one panel. By re-aligning the two halves to take account of the herringbone selvedge and warping errors (highlighted in yellow) it is possible to get a better impression of the layout of the original cloth (Fig 6).



Fig 6. Waistcoat back panels realigned to show the cloth layout.

Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Scotland

Unfortunately, the top of the left-hand panel (top right above) is a seam and stops short of the second selvedge on the original cloth and it is therefore necessary to make an assumption on the missing section in order to complete the warp. Fig 7 shows the warp of the extant cloth; the herringbone selvedge is on the left.



Fig 7. Warp layout of the surviving cloth. © The Author

If it is assumed that, in keeping with the majority of 18th century offset tartan, the second selvedge would have been at one of the pivots then the selvedge would have been on either the narrow black stripe centred on the green or blue⁶. Both options are shown below (Fig 8).



Fig 8. Extension of the sett to show the second selvedge options. © The Author

The cloth density of 40 epi means that the original cloth would have been either 26 or 30 inches wide depending on which of the pivots was on the second selvedge. Based on the width of other surviving specimens of 18th century plaiding the original cloth is far more likely

⁵ A warping error is where an incorrect number of threads of in individual stripe, or the arrangement of two of more stripes, does not match the threadcount for the whole pattern.

⁶ This allows the pattern to repeat across the plaid when two halves are joined;

to have been 26 inches wide. Assuming that to be the case then there would have been six half setts across the warp followed by a final green bar plus the herringbone selvedge mark. The joined cloth would therefore have had the selvedge mark at each side, the top and bottom when worn (Fig 9).



Fig 9. Probable warp layout of the original cloth once joined. © The Author

Offset tartan weaving and use of a herringbone selvedge mark are techniques found in a number of surviving c1740-70 rurally woven Highland plaids⁷. Notwithstanding the obvious warping errors, offsetting a pattern to include a selvedge mark and a plain selvedge finishing on a pivot to allow the pattern to repeat once two pieces are joined is an advanced weaving technique.

Which Regiment?

The Strathspey Fencibles⁸ and the 97th (Inverness) Regiment⁹ were both raised by the chief of Clan Grant, Col Sir James Grant of Grant. There were also two Companies of Militia (or Volunteers) raised in Abernethy parish, Strathspey and one in Rothiemurchusⁱⁱⁱ.

There are inconsistencies in the design of the coat and waistcoat that suggest that it may have been wrongly attributed and/or re-used. Kay's engraving of Sir James Grant and the Strathspey Fencibles and the description elsewhere^{iv} confirm that the regimental waistcoats were white, not red, meaning that this is unlikely to have been a Fencible uniform (Fig 10). This is supported by wording on the uniform's buttons (*Strathspey Vol Battalion*) which does not match those for those shown by MacKintosh (Fig 11).



Fig 10. Col Grant & the Strathspey Fencibles.
John Kay



Fig 11. Comparison of 1st Strathspey Fencibles and Strathspey Volunteer Battalion buttons.
© The Author

⁷ Tartan had been woven in the Edinburgh and Glasgow areas from at least the early 1700s and often sold into the Highlands but the use of offset warps and herringbone selvages appears to have been solely a traditional Highland technique.

⁸ Strathspey Fencibles. Raised 1793, Disbanded 1799.

⁹ 97th (Inverness-shire) Regiment: Raised 1794, Disbanded 1796.

It therefore seems likely that the uniform was originally issued to a soldier of the 97th and that it was later re-used by him or someone else as a member of one of the Strathspey Militia Companies. Alternatively, it was initial issue for the Strathspey Volunteers.

Conclusion

The tartan is clearly the remnant of a plaid/plaiding material, the construction of which is consistent with it being rurally woven. Dating a piece of tartan like this is always difficult. We know that it must pre-date the waistcoat, but by how much? The structure of the cloth is consistent with c1730-1780 rurally woven specimens which in 18th century Highland culture covered a lot of disruption and changes. This specimen is one of the few dark tartans (patterns having little or no red) to survive from this era, a period partially influenced by the Proscription on Highland Dress (1747-82). The notable exception were Officers and Soldiers in his Majesty's Forces, including Highland Regiments where military tartans were worn.

The tartan itself is clearly of a 42nd type sett but with a simplified triple black stripe on every blue square as opposed to the standard alternating 2/4 arrangement of the 42nd setting and is a unique surviving example. Whilst the coat may have been re-used from an earlier regimental one, the use of the tartan was a personal addition and not standard issue for the Strathspey Volunteers. Most of the early Highland Regiments are thought to have worn the Black Watch tartan. Could this be a piece of a previously unknown regimental cloth, or perhaps more likely, a local weaving error for the Black Watch tartan? It's possible that it is even older and dates from the time of the Independent Companies whose plaids were woven in Speyside. Alternatively, this might be a section of a family plaid from the Strathspey area that has been kept and included as a keepsake, talisman or some such. It is reasonable to speculate that it had significance to the owner of the waistcoat and may presumably have been a family heirloom.

The yarn is uniformly spun and the quality of the dyeing very good, the shade of blue in particular is very bright. Dye analysis would confirm whether this was produced by natural or sulphonated indigo¹⁰ which in turn would help date the specimen. Further research may provide an answer but for the moment all that can be said with certainty is that it is a mid-late 18th century tartan from the Strathspey area and that it has connections with one particular Grant family.

The claim by Teall & Smith that this was a District tartan is wholly without foundation. That aside, the pattern was adopted by the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (RSCDS) in 1984, not as the RSCDS tartan but merely a sett recommended for use by members.

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ⁱ **TEALL of Teallach D.G. and SMITH P.D.** *District Tartans*. Shephard-Walwyn, London 1992

ⁱⁱ **MACKINTOSH H.B.** *The Inverness Shire Highlanders or 97th Regiment of Foot 1794-1796*, Elgin 1926

ⁱⁱⁱ **FORSYTH Rev W.** *In the Shadow of the Cairngorm.*, The Northern Counties Publishing Co. Ltd, Inverness 1899

^{iv} **MACKINTOSH H.B.** *The Grant Strathspey or First Highland Fencible Regiment 1793-1799*, Elgin 1926

¹⁰ Sulphonated Indigo, a technique invented in Germany in 1740 and patented in England in 1748 was much used as a substitute for natural indigo as it was easier to handle.