

A length of Unnamed C18th Plaiding

Introduction

In early 2020 the author had an opportunity to examine a length of plaiding¹ of a previously unrecorded tartan that belongs to a family with West Coast family links (Plate 1). The pattern is similar to that from a portion of a plaid dated 1785 but which is thought to be older;² both patterns share similarities with the MacColl tartan which itself is of a similar date. The construction is consistent with rurally woven tartan produced during the second half of the 18th century. A colour reference is shown in Plate 2.



Plate 1. Length of plaiding – overview. © The Author



Plate 2. Colour and size reference. © The Author

¹ Plaiding was tartan material that was woven to make into plaids. See - http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Joined_Plaid.pdf

² http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Unnamed_C18th_Plaid_dated_1785.pdf

Construction

The cloth is 23½ inches wide, quite narrow for the period when 25-26 inches was more common, and 75 inches long with turned ends (Plate 2). Turning and sewing down the ends was the traditional method of securing the rough warp yarns as part of the finishing process for plaids. The thread used was some of the yarn from the cloth meaning that it is probably contemporary. The cloth was hand-woven with hand-spun singles (non-ply) naturally dyed yarn. No dye analysis has been conducted but if tested, it is probable that the dyes were those typically used in pre-19th century rural tartan; cochineal and indigo for the red and blue respectively, plus indigo and an unknown yellow source for the green. Identification of the yellow, not always a precise science, would help date the piece. For example, if an imported hardwood had been used that would refine the date later in the 18th century, a native dyestuff would mean it was probably earlier.

The off-set pattern comprises three half setts across the warp and continues into the fourth sett to finish with a blue herringbone selvedge and final red stripe (Plate 3), a structure often found in 18th century plaids³. The other selvedge finishes in the middle of the broad red pivot. Whilst there is no evidence that this piece was ever joined to make a wider piece, had it been, the whole piece would have been approximately 37 inches with six half setts and a herringbone selvedge on both sides.



Plate 3. The off-set warp layout showing the half setts, joining and herringbone selvedges. © The Author

The selvedge mark is typical of the majority of surviving 18th century examples in having a broad stripe of blue finished with a finer red stripe. In this case it is formed by extending the blue bar at the edge of the large red square from 28 to 52 threads and includes four bars of irregular herringboning that start on the ninth blue thread which suggests that the warp was

³ See the articles on http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Traditional_selvage_patterns.pdf

tied into a previous length rather than the herringboning wound specifically for this piece (Plate 4). The last 10 threads of blue follow the standard twill weave direction and finished with 12 red; the last 2 ends being threaded through the same heddle. This layout makes the herringboning appear broader than it actually is (Fig 1). It would be technically better balance if the herringboning had started with a change of direction on the first blue and been arranged as 5 bars of 10 threads followed by the final red stripe. The result is a balanced herringbone that fits the width of the selvedge mark (Fig 2).



Plate 4. Detail of the herringbone selvedge © The Author



Fig 1. Original selvedge mark with irregular herringboning starting on B9.



Fig 2. Revised selvedge mark with balanced herringboning starting on B1.

The Sett

The structure of this tartan is similar to a number of surviving 18th century specimens from the Appin/Lorn area but that does not necessarily mean that this specimen was original from there. It also shares similarities with a plaid from Highland Perthshire⁴. The red, blue and green setting of this plaid shares the basic pattern discussed in the Regional Motif paper⁵; one pivot having a triple stripe centred on a large red square, the other pivot being a plain red square bordered by narrow stripes then a broad green band. In the second pivot the border stripes and band are a reversed or inverted triple stripe formed by the underlying red ground colour. The triple stripe motif is shown under the colour strip (Fig 3).



Fig 3. Sett showing the triple stripe motif.

The fine light blue pivot stripe is what differentiates this tartan from the MacColl and the Perthshire plaid and makes it unique but in overall terms it belongs to the same pattern group.

Conclusion

This beautifully spun, dyed and woven specimen is typical of 18th century specimens found throughout the country, particularly in Appin and Lorn. It may therefore represent a style of pattern that was once widely found throughout the Highlands. Structurally and technically it is consistent with other mid-late 18th century plaids; so, a c1750-1790 date is a reasonable assumption. Chemical and/or yarn analysis might help date the piece more accurately. The

⁴ http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Unnamed_C18th_Plaid_dated_1785.pdf

⁵ http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Evidence_for_a_Regional_Motif_in_old_Tartans_from_Appin_&_Lorn.pdf

pattern was laid out so that the finished cloth could be joined to make a plaid in which the design would repeat across the whole cloth with a herringbone selvedge on both sides. However, there is no evidence that this has ever been joined, and the turned ends suggest this was probably used as a single-width shawl and/or interior decoration, such a bed throw or table covering.

Although owned by a family with West Coast connections, little is known about the origins of the piece before the late 1800s, nor how long it had been in the family or whether it was acquired through marriage. Like so many piece of its age, it is unlikely that the details of the ownership will ever be known but that does not detract from the historical importance of such surviving specimens as a link to the techniques and patterns of the past.

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