

# A Highland Revival Drawstring Plaid

## Introduction

The late 18th and early 19th centuries were a period of great variation and change in the development of Highland Dress. Covering much of the reign of Geo III (1760-1820) and the Regency (1811-1820). Both these periods, and the later reigns of Geo IV (1820-30) and William IV (1830-37) encompass what is termed the *Highland Revival* era.

In costume terms the Highland Revival refers to the period c1782-1837 in which, as the name suggests, there was a revival of interest in, and wearing of, Highland Dress following the Repeal of the Proscription Act in 1782. This revival was led by the Highland chiefs, many of whom were members of the early Celtic Societies and the Highland Society of London. Their aim was to try and preserve the old Highland manners and customs. Unfortunately much had already been lost and a number of 'traditions' were invented to fill the gaps in their knowledge, others were amended to 'fit in' with the prevailing fashion. Although started by the Highland gentry, the use of kilts by soldiers in the victories over Napoleon and the later visit of George IV to Edinburgh served to promote tartan and Highland Dress to a national symbol that was widely taken up across the country and increasingly across the social classes.

The period from about 1790 onward is notable for the revival of complete pre-Proscription type tartan outfits comprising variously: Jacket, waistcoat, kilt and/or trews and plaid. Court and social fashion changed rapidly and frequently during the early 1800s and many variations of these outfits, some of which were worn for the King's visit in 1822, survive. A fine example is the MacGregor outfit which is still owned by the current chief. The outfit is rare in that it comprises a jacket and a joined plaid or *breacan an fheileadh* and unique in that it is the only known extant example of a plaid with keepers for a draw string.

## The cloth

Both jacket and plaid are made from the same run of MacGregor<sup>1</sup> hard tartan woven by Wilsons of Bannockburn. The single width cloth is 24 inches wide with 8 half setts to the width and with the white lines in silk, a common Wilsons' practice for paler lines in their pre-1850s cloth. The count is similar to one in their 1819 Key Pattern Book (1819 KPB).

R G R G K W  
68 52 16 24 4 3 - Plaid  
77 50 18 20 2 4 - 1819 KPB for the 24 Reed - 8 half Setts

The setting is balanced across the material which finishes in the centre of the red square (Fig 1) meaning that it could be used single width or, as in this case, joined to make a traditional plaid.

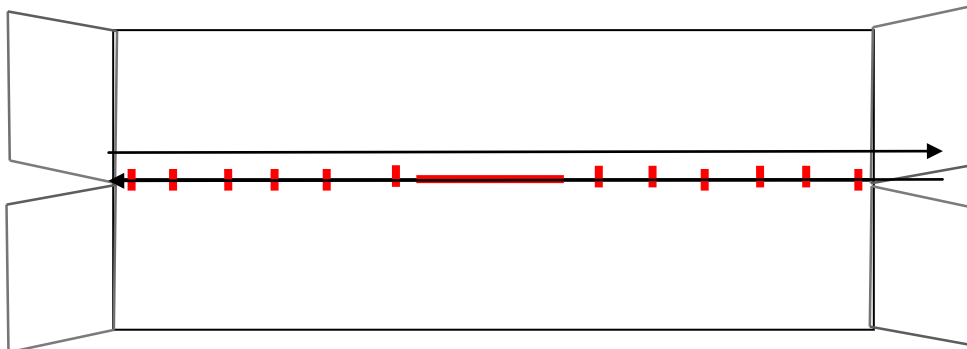


**Fig 1. Selvedge finished at the red pivot.**  
©The Author.

<sup>1</sup> Although now called simply *MacGregor*, Wilsons called it *MacGregor-Murray* in their 1819 Key Pattern Book which was how the chief's family was styled at the time.

## The Plaid

The plaid is constructed from two pieces of cloth 5 yards 27" x 24" resulting in a double width plaid almost 6 yards long which is about as long as practical and only really possible if, like this piece, the material is fine. The cloth is joined using a simple whip stitch ends finished by being turned and sewn, both techniques being the most common traditional technique use to finish a plaid. One piece is shorter by about an inch due to a difference in the weft count resulting in a misalignment of the sett when it was joined. There are however three sections where the two pieces have deliberately not been joined; each apron and a middle section. Small tape keepers have been sewn on each red square at the central join and run the length of each joined section of the plaid. Too narrow for a belt, these are presumed to have been for a draw string. Fig 2 is a diagrammatic representation of the construction<sup>2</sup>. The aprons and corresponding portion of the upper plaid are shown open; the horizontal red line shows the position of the unsown central section and the vertical red line represent to placing of the keeper tapes but not their exact number. The black arrows indicate opposing way the drawstrings work to gather the pleats.



**Fig 2. Diagrammatic representation of the plaid's construction.** ©The Author.

There is no other known example or record of the apron section of a plaid being unjoined. Doing this would allow the upper portion of the plaid to be drawn back for fastening to the shoulder but makes it less practical as a cloak which probably indicates that this technique was one used for Courtly appearance rather than the traditional multi-use garment.

Fig 3 shows one of the unjoined aprons as well as the slight difference in the overall length of the upper and lower pieces of cloth due to the misalignment of the sett. The turned ends of the material are also clearly visible. The last tape for the draw string is marked the 'A' and the unsown apron begins at the green immediately to the left of the tape. Depending on which way up the plaid was worn would mean that the unsown apron would be 15 or 16 inches wide which, even allowing for some wrap around of the pleated section indicates that this was made for a slim man.



**Fig 3. Unsown apron section.** ©The Author.

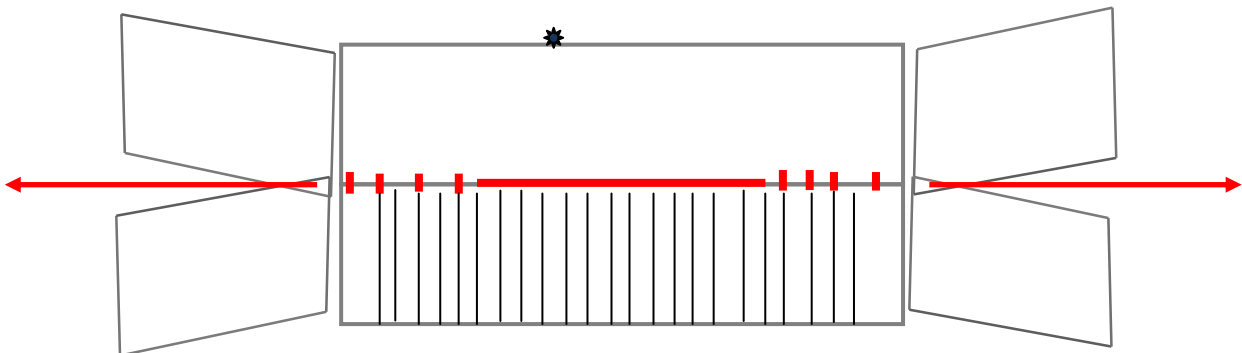
<sup>2</sup> The diagram is not to scale and original is proportionally longer.

There are 14 tapes approximately 1" long x 0.5" wide crudely sewn along the length of the plaid, 7 either side of the central unsown section. The placing of the tapes means that the wearer was either quite tall or it was tied off above the waist and then perhaps folded over. In picture below (Fig 4) a rudimentary drawstring has been added to the section on one side of the central unsown centre to show the drawstring's position on the plaid.



**Fig 4. Position of the drawstring along the central join.** ©The Author.

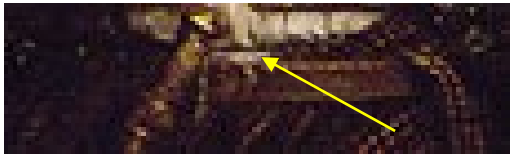
The effect of the drawstrings being pulled is to make the pleats form into a bunched arrangement like the folds of a curtain as opposed to sharp pressed ones. Whilst the original is too delicate and valuable to practise on, the effect can be seen in the schematic (Fig 5).



**Fig 5. Diagram to show how the drawstring forms the pleats and also, the position of rosette on the reverse of the cloth.** ©The Author.

Earlier researchers have discussed, and indeed disagreed, on whether the drawstring was worn on the outside or inside of the plaid. There is a rosette towards the corner of one of the aprons (shown above) but which is on the opposite side of the cloth to the drawstring so it

doesn't really help in determining which side the drawstring was worn. If worn on the apron then the drawstring would have to be on the inside of the cloth but if worn on the corner of the upper or cloak section of the plaid then the drawstring would have to be on the outside. As the pleats are unsown then technically the plaid could be worn with the drawstring inside



**Fig 6. Detail of the drawstring plaid c1680.**  
©The Author.

easily be tied off and the excess tucked away, or even wrapped around the waist first and then tied off. Michael Wright's c1680 portrait of Lord Mungo Murray shows an early example of a drawstring plaid (Fig 6).

or out and either way up. Which way was correct we cannot be certain however logic suggests that the drawstring was worn on the outside because once the pleats are formed then the drawstring would be perhaps as much as a yard long on either side. This would be more difficult to manage if it were sticking out from the folds of the material however if on the outside of the cloth then it could

Finally, there is the question of the unsown section in the middle of the plaid (Fig 7). At 32" long, perfectly balanced across the sett and with drawstring tapes at either end to strengthen it, this is clearly a deliberate feature as opposed to a section where the sewing has come undone. Although there aren't too many complete extant examples, no other plaid of any age



**Fig 7. Unjoined central section of the plaid.** ©The Author.

is known to include this feature so the question arises as to its purpose. The most likely explanation is that it is a work around to a fashion style that was at odds with a true belted plaid. 18<sup>th</sup> century Highland jackets worn with a plaid tended to be short and thus there was no obstruction to arranging the upper portion of the plaid. This shorter coat was retained by the Highland Regiments because of their continued use of the plaid but jackets for civilian dress, especially during the Highland Revival, tended to follow the civilian fashion, a prominent feature of which was longer coat tails. It therefore seems probable that the unjoined section of the plaid was intended to accommodate the tails of the accompanying coat. These can clearly be seen in Fig 8 where they are considerably longer than the front at the waist.

The coat itself, *which will be the subject of a separate paper*, has a number of interesting features; notably, the two epaulette strips on either shoulder to take a matching tartan strap for fastening the plaid meaning it could be worn on either shoulder.



**Fig 8. MacGregor jacket showing longer tail.**  
©The Author.

## Dating the Plaid

It has long been assumed by the family and researchers that the outfit is the one worn by Sir Evan MacGregor in Denis Dighton's 1822 portrait *The Honours of Scotland*<sup>3</sup> (Fig 9) in which the chief and a number of other figures are shown wearing tartan outfits thought to have been made for the George IV's visit in 1822; however, the facts suggest that this outfit is somewhat older. The type of cloth, hard tartan with a silk stripe, was woven by Wilsons c1790–1850 and so would have been used throughout the Highland Revival era but the cut of the jacket is pseudo-military of a late 18<sup>th</sup> century style that had gone out of fashion by c1810. The jacket is relatively roughly made compared with many surviving Regency ones which, together with the cut, indicate that it was made and used some years before the 1822 Levee that followed the discovery of the Crown Jewels in 1818.



Fig 9. *The Honours of Scotland* by Denis Dighton 1822.

## Conclusion

It's unlikely that there was only one method of donning the full plaid and whilst we cannot know how widespread the use of this method was it is certainly practical and Wright's portrait provides evidence of the early use of the technique. However, this Highland Revival plaid is the only known extant example of a practice that was possibly widespread in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Honours of Scotland* is the collective term applied to the Scottish Crown jewels which were rediscovered in 1820.

Based on the style of the jacket the outfit, of which this plaid is part, probably dates to c1800-1810. It seems unlikely that the construction was 'invented' at that time and it's probable that the tape and drawstring method was copied from older examples or from information handed down. Some portraits of 18<sup>th</sup> century plaids show them pleated all the way around which is probably the way that around 6 yards of material would have been worn. That option would not have been possible in this case due to the unsown apron sections.

The unsown aprons and central section for the coat tails are however much more likely to have been a contemporary 'fix' in order to allow for the coat style with longer tails of the early Highland Revival period and the Dress or Ceremonial nature of its use as opposed to the original outdoor all-in-one plaid. The apron sections would have allowed for a much neater arrangement of the upper portion of the cloth meaning that the ends of the plaid could be swept around the cut away sides of the jacket so avoiding the need to gather the excess material across the front at the top of kilted section. Again, there is no known historical precedence for this style and whilst it is something that works in a ceremonial setting it's impractical if using the plaid as a traditional outdoor multi-role garment.

This truly unique example of a Highland revival era plaid offers some fascinating insights into a transitional period in the development of highland Dress. The original plaid is too valuable to experiment with but much could be learnt from working with a reconstruction.