

A Piece of Old Tartan labelled 'Major Grant 1780'

Introduction

In 1991 the author and fellow tartan academic, James Scarlett, was sent a length of old tartan for comment. In the covering letter to his report for the family¹ he described it as *'a piece of plaiding, enough for one plaid which would be made by cutting the piece in half and joining the two pieces along the 'blue' selvages. It is an unrecorded pattern - most of these old pieces are - but the pattern, the material and the weaving are all quite consistent with its being of 1782/4'*. In 2019 the current owner, the son of Scarlett's correspondent, contacted the Scottish Tartans Authority with some additional family information. Later that year the author of this paper¹ had an opportunity to examine the tartan (Plate 1).



Plate. 1 Section of the plaid previously labelled 'Major Grant 1780'.

In discussing the piece of tartan, the terms plaiding² (the material) and plaid (the garment³) will be used throughout this paper. Differences in the shades between images are due to them being taken under different photographic conditions. Writing of the plaid the current owner says that he remembers *"this plaid in my Grandmother's house in c1958 with a note pinned to it (now lost), in my grandmother's hand writing stating 'Major Grant 1780'."* The family names on his grandmother's side were McIntosh and Robeson but the identity of Major Grant and reference to 1780 remains a mystery to the current owner.

¹ The author is the Honorary Head of Research and Collections at the Scottish Tartans Authority.

² Plaiding is a term that refers to material, often of a large pattern, woven offset and frequently with a selvedge pattern or selvedge mark, the latter often herringboned, and intended for joining to make double width cloth rather than used for tailored clothing.

³ Plaid(Gaelic plaide—a blanket) was a term used to described the traditional Highland garment worn by men and women.

The Cloth

The cloth is a length of offset⁴ plaiding 25" x 145" with unfinished ends that start and finish at different, random points in the pattern. It has an epi of 64 and was woven with worsted spun 2-ply in the warp and singles (non-plyed) yarn in the weft. One edge of the cloth has a twill weave selvedge, the other a broad herringbone selvedge mark⁵. Scarlettⁱⁱⁱ said of the piece that the '*material was woven with a 600 reed (six hundred splits to the ell, four warp ends to the split) and corresponds to the "Old Superfine Tartan Setts" manufactured by William Wilson and Son, Bannockburn, until the end of the eighteenth century*'. How he determined this is unclear. Whilst the density is comparable with Wilsons' Old Superfine cloth, it was 19, not 25 inches wide, whereas the width is consistent with a number of old rurally woven specimens.

Offset cloth was woven in such a way that two lengths could be joined to make broad-cloth in which the pattern would repeat correctly across the full wide. A selvedge mark or selvedge pattern was usually part of an offset pattern. Scarlett's threadcount is erroneous in a number of places, none more so the selvedge mark which he described as '*woven in 20 x 20 herringbone*'. In fact, it has 9 irregular bands of green herringboning that start on the 4th green thread and then runs: 14-18-22-14-14-14-16-14-10 (146 ends) and then back to twill to finish B7 R6 LR3 R6 B6 (Plate 2).



Plate. 2 Detail of the herringbone selvedge. © The Author

⁴ The practice of setting the warp from the centre of one pivot that was placed on one selvedge to the selvedge mark or selvedge pattern on the other. When woven the tartan appears unbalanced until two pieces are joined at the pivot selvedge giving a double width piece with a balanced sett and border on each side.

⁵ The 'Selvedge mark' was a broad band of one of the main colours that was sometimes ornamented by some adjacent fine lines. In the 18th century it was usually woven in herringbone, a practice that died out early in the nineteenth century.

The quality of the cloth, the offset pattern and herringbone selvedge are all consistent with the presumed age. Unusually for specimens of this period, some of the warp stripes have a non-binary (odd number) threadcount; all the fine lines are 3 ends. Why this irregularity was included in an otherwise standard threadcount is inexplicable. It may have been a drafting error, this is discussed further in the Setting section below, but it would certainly have presented problems for the weaver⁶. In order to get around the difficulties this would have caused, all the odd numbered stripes were rounded up to 4s in the weft (Plate 3).

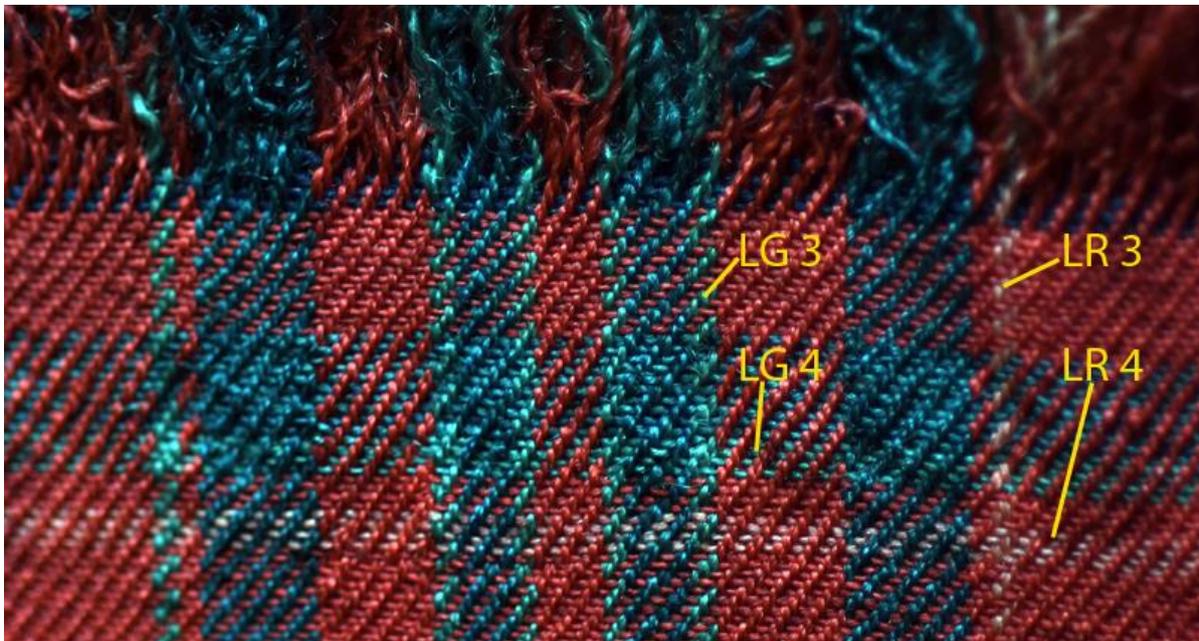


Plate. 3 Detail of the difference in the warp and waft of the small stripes. © The Author

No dye analysis has been carried out on the piece but if it is tested at some point it is likely that the results would show the following traditional dyes were used:

- Red and Pink – Cochineal.
- Blue and Light Blue – Indigo.
- Green – Indigo + an imported or local yellow dyestuff.

Both cochineal and indigo were widely used for tartan once they became available from the beginning of the 18th century. Yellow was generally a local dyestuff until the 1770s when imported hardwood dyestuff were introduced and quickly found favour.

The Sett

This previously unknown pattern can be described as having two decorated red grounds, each enclosed alternately by blue and then a green bands which in turn are separated by a stripe of the ground colour. The layout is of a type found in a number of 18th century tartans, such as the MacDonald of Glenaladale and a number of unnamed specimens. In this case the arrangement is less obvious because of the width of the intervening stripe between the blue and green (Fig 1).

⁶ Normally, the shuttle is introduced and exits on the same side of the cloth meaning every weft stripe has a binary count i.e. a multiple of two. This allows the warp threads on each side to be captured and bound in. The process also results in a 'clean selvedge' with no loops where colour changes are floated. Throwing an odd number means a shuttle would end up on the wrong side at a colour change, the warp threads would be missed at that point and would need to be bound in manually.

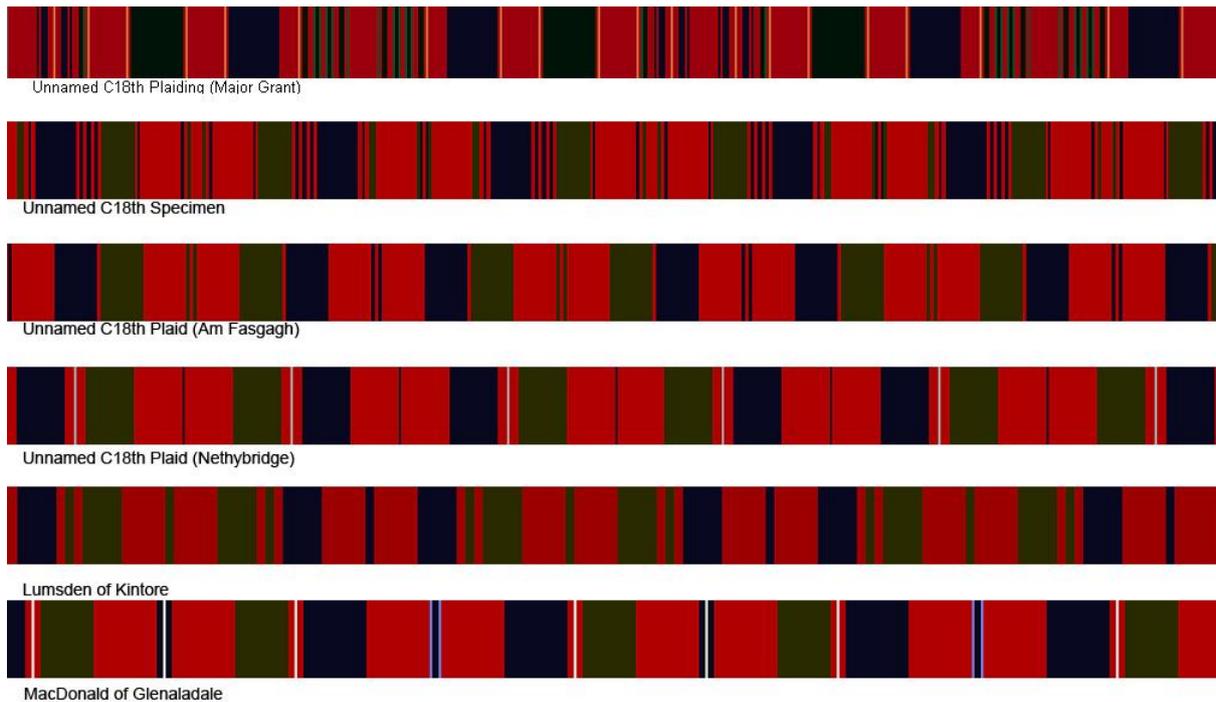


Fig. 1 Comparison of the 1780 Plaiding with other 18th century specimens showing the red ground enclosed by alternating blue and green bands. © The Author

Mention has already been made of the fact that the warp is offset. This, together with the large sett size which involves 42 colours changes over the 14" half sett (Fig 2), may explain the incorrect layout of the warp.



Fig. 2 Half sett. © The Author

When working out the warp arrangement for an offset pattern it should be done so that one pivot⁷ occurs on one edge (selvedge), the pattern is then repeated cross the warp and finished on the other side with a selvedge mark. The warp should therefore comprise three parts;

- One or more half setts, dependent on the size of the sett and width of the warp.
- A partial half sett i.e. from the last pivot to the beginning of the selvedge mark.
- The selvedge mark. The three parts are shown in Fig 3.



Fig. 3 Parts of an offset warp; Half Sett, Partial Half Sett and Selvedge Mark. © The Author

In this case, the warp was wrongly set up meaning the pattern does not finish at the correct point on the plain (non-selvedge mark) edge. As a result, if joined, the pattern would not repeat properly. In order to allow the cloth to be joined and the pattern repeat correctly, the plain or joining selvedge should have been on the second pivot (Plate 4). However, that would have required the calculation for the warp to be completely reworked or the result would have been cloth some 4" narrower. This layout may suggest that the warp was produced by someone other than the weaver and without knowledge of the width of the loom, including the

⁷ Pivot – one of two points in a symmetrical pattern, the majority of tartans, where the pattern repeats in the same number and colour sequence in every direction.

number of ends threaded in the herringbone. Alternatively, it's possible that despite having a selvedge mark, it was laid out by someone unfamiliar with the offset technique. This is not the only piece of 18th century plaiding that has a similar incorrectly offset warp in an otherwise well woven piece of cloth. The error, or disregard for the proper balancing of the pattern, was obviously more common than this single example might suggest.

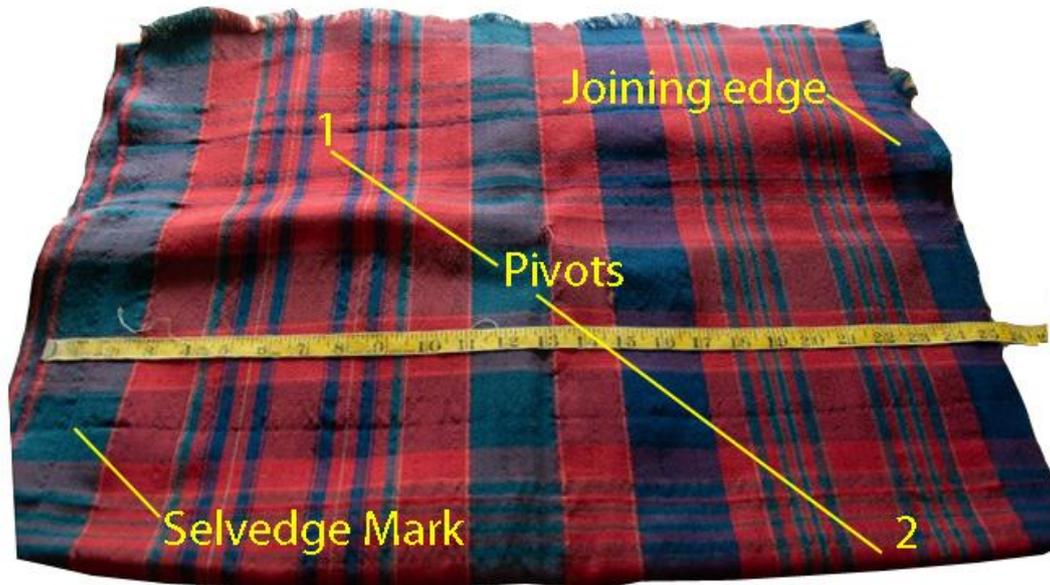


Plate. 4 The plaiding with the Selvedge Mark, Pivots and Joining Edge identified. © The Author

Notwithstanding the error in laying out the pattern, the design is so large that only a half sett and selvedge mark can fit across the width of the warp. This does not explain the stripes of three threads in the warp. Had there been a need to reduce the number of threads in the width it would have made sense to do so in the broad areas where the difference would not have been noticed. The logical deduction is that this was a deliberate choice but the reason is inexplicable. Had the pattern been correctly warped and had the finished material then been joined in the traditional manner then the full pattern would have been obvious across the width of the cloth as the alignment shows (Plate 5).

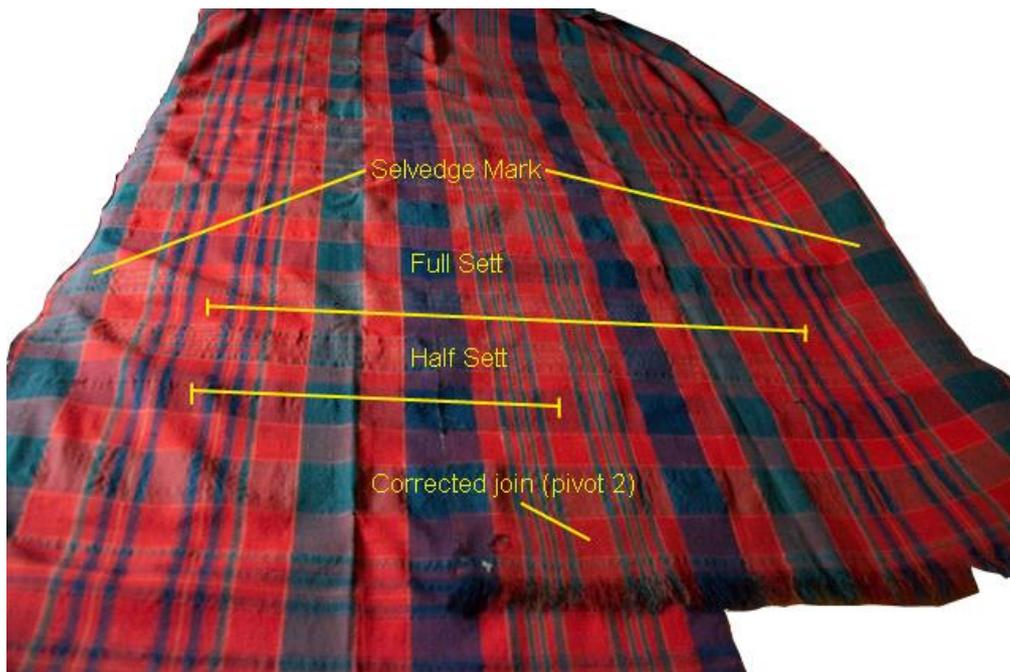


Plate. 5 Alignment of the cloth to show how the pattern would appear if correctly woven & joined. © The Author

Conclusion

The quality of the material, its colours, pattern and herringbone selvedge are consistent with its supposed age, a broad date of c1775-1800 is therefore a reasonable attribution. Whilst it is possible that this cloth was commercially woven by an embryonic manufacturer such as Wilsons of Bannockburn, the warping error and misaligned herringbone selvedge makes it much more likely that this was rurally woven by a local weaver. The quality of the weaving and dyeing are of a consistent and high quality that suggest a level of professionalism which is at odds with the warping error. The most likely explanation for this discrepancy is that the warp was produced by someone other than the weaver and that he/she had to work with what they were presented.

The large sett size is typical of 18th century plaiding that was intended to be joined to make double-width or broad cloth. It is only when this is done that the pattern with a selvedge mark on each side can be appreciated fully. In this case, the cloth is in its raw off-the-loom condition with unfinished ends. There is no evidence that any attempt was made to join the cloth or use it in any way. These types of patterns pre-date the concept of clan tartans and it is likely that it was made and/or purchased based on a preference for this type of red based pattern. In the time before artificial dyes, red was an expensive and prized colour that conveyed a level of social status. It was therefore possibly produced/purchased for a particular event or reason.

Dating old pieces of tartan is an imprecise art and a degree of latitude often needs to be applied, particularly in cases where there is no corroborating evidence. The 1780 date on the missing piece of paper needs to be treated with a degree caution. It was apparently written by the current owner's grandmother and so probably at some time after 1900, presumably referencing family tradition. The identity of Major Grant remains a mystery, the name was common in Inverness-shire where this family had connections. It is hoped that further research might identify the individual and the connection to the family and/or date.

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ⁱ SCARLETT J.D. 1991 *An Old Piece of Tartan*. Shephard-Walwyn, Unpublished

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*