

Inverness – A Royal Tartan

Introduction

Although widely regarded as ‘District Tartan’ today, the Earl of Inverness tartan was original designed by Wilsons of Bannockburn as a personal one for King George III’s sixth son, Prince Augustus Frederick (1773–1843), created Duke of Sussex in 1801 and concurrently made Baron Arklow and *Earl of Inverness*.

Early records

The exact date of the tartan’s design is unknown but it was probably created c1810-15 in order that that the Prince could have his own ‘Highland Outfit’ made to re-enforce his Scottish title at the height of the Highland Revival era. Of three known portraits of the Prince wearing the outfit, two remain along with an engraving. The oldest of the portraits¹ was destroyed by fire in 1883 but enough must have survived, or the details have been previously recorded, to enable Marks² to paint a copy two years later (Fig 1). In addition, we are extremely fortunate that the majority of the outfit survives³.



Fig 1. Duke of Sussex by Barnett Samuel Marks 1885 (based on Beechey’s 1815 portrait)
Worshipful Company of Fishmongers

In the Beechey/Marks portrait the Prince is shown wearing a Highland Revival style jacket, kilt and matching plaid of the *Earl of Inverness* tartan. The style of the jacket is c1815-18 and the original Beechey portrait was probably contemporary. A portrait of 1820⁴ confirms that the outfit originally included a tartan jacket (Fig 2).



Fig 2. Augustus Duke of Sussex c1820 by Johann Fischer - The Royal Collection.

¹ The portrait by [Sir William Beechey](#) is not generally noted as part of his body of work, presumably because it was destroyed. Marks’ version which does not credit Beechey as the original artist.

² [Barnett Samuel Marks 1827 – 1916](#). Marks’ version of the portrait which does not credit Beechey as the original artist.

³ The outfit, purchased at auction in 1990 by the Scottish Tartans Society (STS) now belongs to its successor organisation, the Scottish Tartans Authority (STA).

⁴ This was probably copied from Beechey’s original. An almost identical engraving by William Skelton survives which is said to date to 1816 and also to have been based on Beechey’s portrait. Given the closeness of the engraving to the Fischer portrait that could equally have been Skelton’s source.

Prince Augustus obviously had his 'Scottish Outfit' for long enough to need to update it by dispensing with the tartan coat in favour of a plain black velvet one reflecting the fashion at the end of the Highland Revival era (Fig 4). This outfit, including the accoutrements, is now in the possession of the STA.



Fig 4. Augustus, Duke of Sussex c1840
by Sir David Wilkie - The Royal Collection



Although an earlier portrait depicts the Prince wearing a predominately red tartan that has similarities to the later design, the miniature is less well executed and confirmation of the exact sett impossible (Fig 3).

The painting is attributed to the early 1800s, however the cut of the jacket and the sitter's apparent youth suggests an earlier date for the outfit and it is more likely to be c1790-1800. The stylistic differences compared with the later jacket make it unlikely that this was the one depicted by Fischer. So, whilst the British School portrait confirms the Prince's early use of tartan it cannot be taken as evidence as a pre-1800 date for the Inverness sett.

Fig 3. Prince Augustus Fredrick, Duke of Sussex
- British School c1805-08 The Royal Collection.

The Sett

Whilst the 19th century portraits give a good overall representation of the tartan they lack detail of the finer lines. Attempts to replicate the pattern in the past resulted in confusion amongst tartan scholars and given rise to a number of erroneous commercial variations over the years.

In 1831 Logan's Scottish Gaelⁱ was the first publication that detailed tartans. His scales were used as the authoritative source for a number of subsequent publications. In order to demonstrate how to read his scales Logan presented the Earl of Inverness tartan as his example. Of note, this sett was therefore the first tartan ever depicted in print (Fig 5) and was one of only two non-clan tartans included in the work⁵.

Interestingly this tartan was not included in his Table of Scales and the choice to use this sett as an example of his scales method may seem illogical. It was probably a somewhat unsubtle attempt by Logan to recognise or appeal to Royal patronage. Writing of the plate he said '*His Royal Highness the Duke of Sussex has a pattern, peculiar to himself, which is represented in the explanatory plate. It is worn for Inverness, from which he has the title of Earl.*'

Logan's recording method was to measure the colours in $\frac{1}{8}$ th inch '*Commencing at the edge of the cloth, the depth of the colours is stated throughout a square, on which the scale must be reversed or gone through again to the commencement*'

Writing of the plate Stewartⁱⁱ (founder of modern tartan research) says that '*Unfortunately, though he places his measurements against each band of colour in the diagram, he omits to name the colours*'. And that '*No attempt is made to reproduce them exactly*'. Not only that, but the colour quality was poor and differed between copies. Stewart found that interpreting the pale lines was particularly problematic; his compromise was to make the double ones green and the enclosed stripe blue. In the plate above they are yellow and black which reflect the colours used in the material for the Duke's outfit. However, the half tones are shown as green and blue which may have been the source of Stewart's confusion. Less understandable was Stewart's rendering of the obvious white stripe as yellow. By the time of his 2nd edition Stewartⁱⁱⁱ had had access to a Wilsons' letter of 1829 that contained a sample of the Inverness (Fig 6). The sample left no doubt as to the correct colours and as a result Stewart revised his setting making the intervening stripe black and the single pale

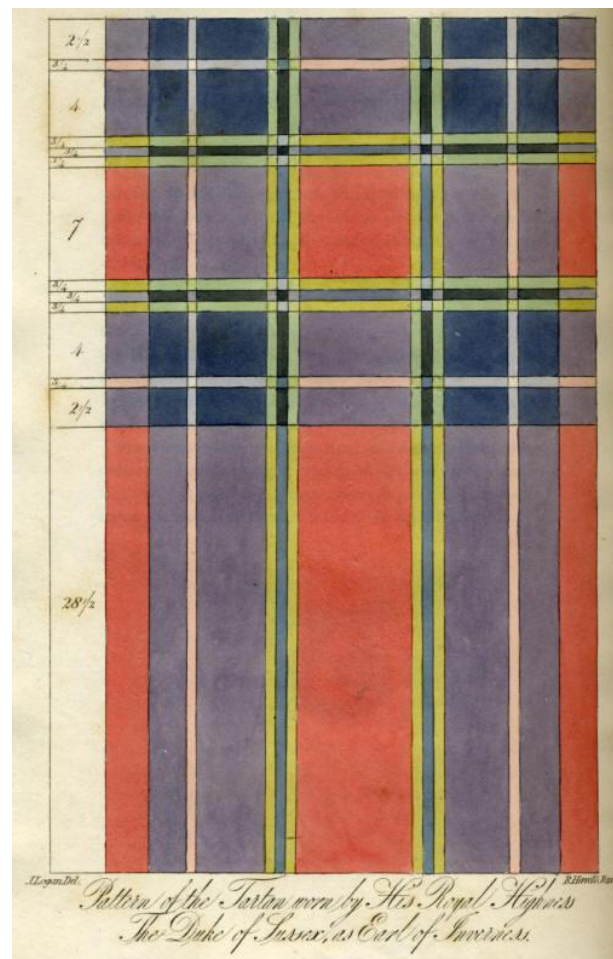


Fig 5. Logan's plate for The Earl of Inverness Tartan.
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⁵ The other being the Breacan Na'n Clerach or Clergy tartan.

stripe white. The letter from Harvey & Co, London includes an order for '1 Ps⁶ Earl of Inverness, same as pattern N^o 1 encl^d without Silk' and that the cloth was 'intended for the Duke of Sussex'. The request for cloth 'without silk' was a reference to Wilsons' practice of sometimes using silk for yellow, white, light red (pink) and light blue to enliven their patterns.



Fig 6. Sample of Earl of Inverness tartan (all wool) from a letter of 1829.
Photo credit National Museums of Scotland.

The correct setting

Stewart's revised setting in light of the 1829 letter was thought to have resolved the question of the correct pattern. However, the acquisition of the Duke of Sussex's 1815 outfit, by the STS in 1990, added to the confusion because that cloth used white and yellow silk (Fig 7)., the latter being substituted with green in the 1829 sample.



Fig 7. Detail of the Duke's plaid with stripes of white and yellow silk. ©The Author

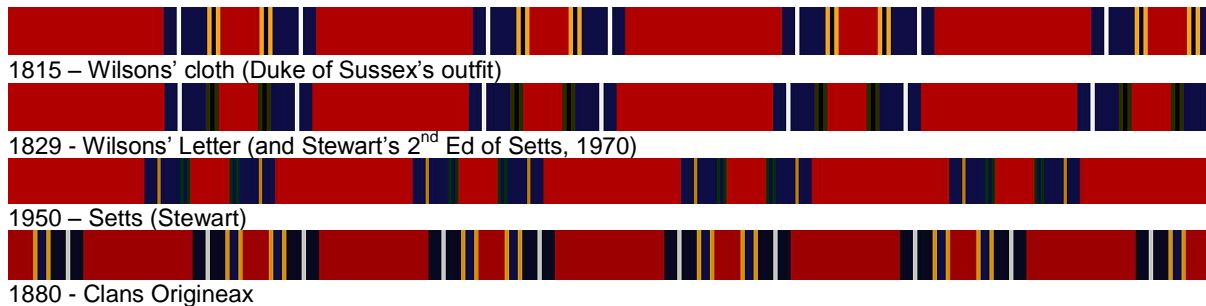
There is nothing in the surviving records to account for the discrepancy in the colour of the double stripes and we cannot therefore be certain what the original colour was. Given the date of the Duke's outfit it's possible that when they originally designed the pattern they used yellow silk but that for some reason they subsequently changed the colour to green. The 1829 sample uses Wilsons' *Shade Green* which was the paler, yellower of their three stock greens⁷. In none of their surviving specimens is *Shade Green* ever woven in silk. Perhaps

⁶ A 'piece' refers to the entire length of a standard warp. Today a piece is approx 60 yds but it may have been less in 1829.

⁷ Shade Green, Green and Dark Green.

the Duke asked for something less showy or perhaps the all wool version was always intended to have *Shade Green* in place of *yellow silk*. We know that the green version was being produced by 1829. It is of course possible that Logan misread the sample supplied by Wilsons⁸ and took the *Shade Green* as *Yellow* but as he didn't make that mistake with any of their other specimens that seems an unlikely scenario; Wilsons appear to have woven the Earl of Inverness in two versions, not an uncommon practice with some of their designs.

Although the tartan was originally designed as a personal one, following the 1822 Levee⁹ Wilsons appear to have been quite happy to sell it more widely. By 1880 a variation of the tartan was being sold simply as *Inverness* in a setting closer to Logan's but with blue between the yellow stripes.¹⁰ However, it then disappeared from public view until the 1970s, with the rise of interest in so called 'District Tartans' and most recently it appeared in a book of that name^{iv}. The development of the pattern is charted by the colour strips below.



Conclusion

Although Wilsons produced the tartan in two versions, specimens were not available to early researchers and consequently their reliance on imprecise portraits lead to a number of variations and errors, something that would not have happened had researchers had access to the original outfit or the Wilsons' letter. This serves as a cautionary note on the reliability of tartans found in some portraits. Both the 1815 and 1829 settings can be regarded as historically correct, anything else is a subsequent error, although it must be acknowledged that several of these have been around for quite some time.

Whilst the Earl of Inverness tartan originally appears to have been a private design for the Duke of Sussex, by c1820 Wilsons seem to have been happy sell it more widely. The territorial designation of this Royal tartan means it has been used for some years as a district tartan for the town and county of Inverness and that is how it is generally encountered today.

Acknowledgements:

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ⁱ LOGAN J. 1831 *The Scottish Gael*. Smith, Eldar & Co., London

ⁱⁱ STEWART D.C. 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Oliver & Boyd., Edinburgh.

ⁱⁱⁱ STEWART D.C. 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Oliver & Boyd., Edinburgh. Revised Edition Shephard Walwyn., London 1977

^{iv} TEALL of Teallach D.G. and SMITH P.D. 1992 *District Tartans*. Shephard-Walwyn., London

⁸ Wilsons provided all the samples for Logan's work.

⁹ Levee – A Royal Reception. George IV's visit to Scotland was the first by a British monarch for 170 years.

¹⁰ Clans Originaux was produced by the Parisian firm, *J. Claude Fres. & Cie.*, as a sample book of patterns for sale. The actual material was undoubtedly woven somewhere in Britain, probably Scotland but the identity of the weaver remains a mystery.