

# *Joined Plaids - Settings and Construction*

## **Introduction**

In Highland society of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the joined plaid was ubiquitous both for clothing, the *Breacan an Fheileadh* or belted plaid, Earasaid<sup>1</sup>, and for domestic blankets<sup>2</sup>. Joined plaids were a feature of a rural culture where small houses necessitated smaller looms that in turn produced narrow cloth<sup>3</sup> and thus two pieces had to be joined to make broader cloth that had greater utility. The rural practice continued until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the weaving of domestic blankets seems to have died out in favour of commercially woven double width one. Wilsons' of Bannockburn continued the practice into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century supplying the military who continued to wear joined plaids until about 1820 after which the army dropped the belted plaid completely in favour of the kilt and the technique disappeared.

We are fortunate that so many plaids (both complete and portions of) and domestic blankets survive. Many of these have either been overlooked or misinterpreted by past historians probably because they did not understand the weaving process and therefore what they were looking at; for example, below are the MacDonald of Keppoch given by Stewart<sup>i</sup> in which he gives a balanced sett, and an 1821 copy of the original plaid showing that it was a more complex offset design with a selvedge mark.



It's important at the outset that the reader understands the difference between the material, often termed *plaiding*, and the finished plaid/blanket.<sup>4</sup> Although the material for

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<sup>1</sup> Earasaid (often Arisaid or Arasaid), a square of cloth, often tartan, worn as a form of mantle by Highland women.

<sup>2</sup> Domestic blankets were joined plaids of a predominately white based tartan with a particular style of border decoration. For more information see my paper on [Traditional Selvedge Techniques](#).

<sup>3</sup> 18<sup>th</sup> century rural plaids varied in width from 20 – 36 inches with 26 inches being a common single width for belted plaids.

plaids was woven in exactly the same way as any other tartan, that intended for joining required a greater level of expertise from the weaver to working out an offset tartan with a selvedge pattern and set it for the loom and it's likely that some weavers specialised in plaiding. The theory that every home had a loom and produced their own cloth is not credible. Cloth was probably supplied off-the-loom by the local weaver and the actual garment/blanket joined at home by the user/family.

The significant difference between plaid setts and normal tartan was that plaiding was always wove offset<sup>5</sup>, generally a larger sett was used together with some form of decorated selvedge. The following two images show these techniques well. The black arrows show the single width from decorated to joining selvedge. The first is a piece of a barred blanket c1720-60; note the basic white and red/green sett with a broad barred selvedge pattern. The join between the two lengths can be seen running through the middle of the white square on the right.



The second is a recently discovered finely woven early 18<sup>th</sup> century plaid that had been reused as curtains. Although it was cut in half c1800-20 the whole plaid survives and is possibly the oldest example of its kind. The large 22" sett is apparent by comparing it against the person on the left. The join can be seen running down the middle red

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<sup>4</sup> For ease I use the terms Plaid for those intended to be worn and Blanket for those used indoors as domestic coverings. It's likely that they were similarly differentiated in Gaelic as *breacan an fheileadh* and *plaide*.

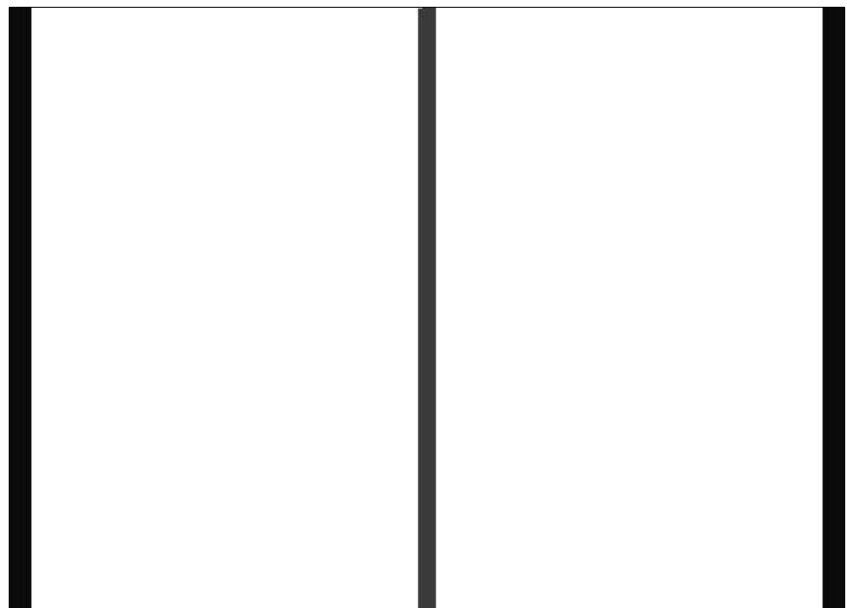
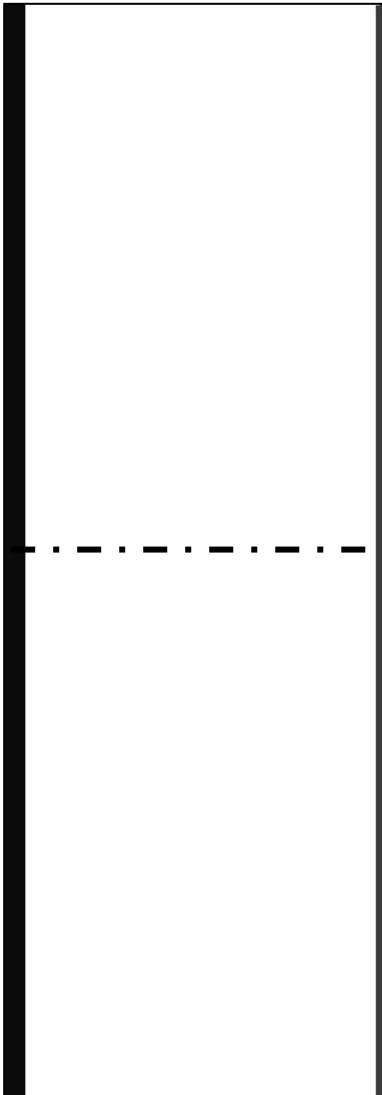
<sup>5</sup> The practice of setting the warp from the centre of one pivot that was placed on one selvedge to the selvedge mark or selvedge pattern on the other. When woven the tartan appears unbalanced until two pieces are joined at the pivot selvedge giving a double width piece with a balanced sett and border on each side.



2. Where a symmetrical tartan is offset but the joining edge doesn't finish on a pivot. I know of at least two old plaids in which this is the case. The reason is not obvious and the practise illogical. Perhaps the material was woven by someone that did not fully understand the requirement in order for the pattern to repeat properly.

### Joining and Finishing a Plaid

When an offset length of material is finished it will look essentially like the diagram, below left, in which there is a selvedge pattern one on side (left here) and the pattern finishes in the middle of a pivot at the other selvedge (right here). To make a double width plaid the material has to be cut in half in the middle of its length, shown by the hatched line on the diagram, then half of the cloth turned through 180°, the two pivot selvedges aligned and then sewn together to give an effect is then similar that in the right hand diagram below with the pattern repeating and the selvedge pattern now on each side/top and bottom.



The effect is clearly seen below in the plaid from Nova Scotia where the join is marked by the arrow and border pattern is at the top and bottom of the piece.



There are a confusing amount of names for what is basically an overcast stitch of stitch that was used for joining two pieces of cloth; a simple whip stitch being most commonly used for plaids but ladder stitch was also used as was the more decorative style now often called *herringbone* or *baseball stitch*. Below are examples plaids joined by whip and baseball stitch.



Which type of stitch was used on an individual plaid was probably a reflection of the level of skill of the sewer and the space available to them. When two pieces are joined with a whip stitch the work can be done with the cloth across the sewer's lap with the material on the floor. Baseball stitch is best done when the two pieces of cloth can be laid flat side by side; for example, on a table. Although quicker, the main disadvantage of whip stitching is that it causes the two pieces to skew meaning that the pattern will become misaligned unless steps are taken to ameliorate the effect. In quite a lot of plaids the need to join the cloth seems to have been more important than the look and the misaligning of stripes is quite common and can be pronounced as in the example of the domestic barred blanket shown below.



This piece also nicely demonstrates the other outcome of using whip stitch; the join is raised on one side. Today this can easily be sorted with a steam iron but may not have been an easy option in historic specimens and so was simply left as it was.

The actual joining was normally done with some of the wool yarn used for the weaving because the wool's elasticity is similar to the rest of the cloth and would also have been less likely to cut the material compared with linen. This would have been

particularly important in a plaid used for clothing. The Nova Scotia plaid is unusual in being joined with linen but as mentioned previously, it was a domestic plaid and so would not have been subject to the same level of wear and tear (strain) as a worn plaid. The choice of colour seems again to have been a matter of personal preference. White based domestic plaid always seem to be joined with white thread, presumably because a darker colour would show, whereas full tartan ones are either joined with the selvedge colour or a contrasting one from amongst the others in the tartan with red or blue being usual as was used here.



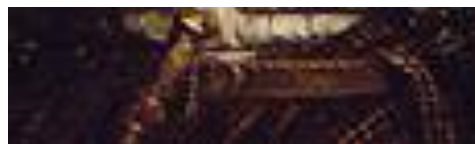
Once the cloth had been joined all that was then required was to finish the ends to prevent the cloth from fraying/unravelling. Again, the plaid from Nova Scotia is unusual in having twisted tassel ends. In every other surviving example the end are simply rolled and tacked down with a running stitch as in the 1726 plaid woven and/or finished by Christina Young shown below.



Much has been written about the technique of pleating and wearing the feileadh mor most of which is not relevant to this paper, however, the use of drawstring/belt loops added to the plaid may be regarded as part of the finishing process. The principle of either drawstring or belt loops is to make the donning of the plaid simpler by having loops to make the pleating easier. Both techniques would work like blinds or curtains allowing the pleats to be gathered or bunched. Unfortunately little is known about the technique beyond possible evidence in one portrait and the only known surviving plaid that has loops although that was made c1815-20 as part of a Highland Revival outfit.



Michael Wright's portrait of a Highland Chieftain, possibly Lord Mungo Murray, shows what appears to be a drawstring running just above his dirk belt – see detail.



Assuming this does show a drawstring it's unfortunately of little help beyond confirming the early use of the technique but gives us no clue as to how it was attached to the cloth.

In preparation for this paper it was not possible to photograph the Regency plaid but from memory the loops are made from cotton tape stitched at intervals along the back (non-apron area) below the

join of the two pieces. There is no drawstring with the outfit so it's impossible to tell whether a drawstring or belt was used to hold the pleats. As there is no other known example we cannot tell how widespread this technique was nor whether it was an old technique kept alive by the military and copied during the Highland Revival or a unique variation of the principle.

In conclusion, it's obvious that joined plaids were common throughout the Highlands 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and that their use as domestic plaids continued beyond the Proscription era when the feileadh mor became confined to the military. The technique of weaving offset designs with selvedge patterns was common in these old plaids but the skill and tradition seems to have disappeared completely from the Highlands by the later 18th century and is completely unknown in today's commercially produced double with cloth.

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<sup>i</sup> **STEWART D.W.** 1893 *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*. Geo. P. Johnston., Edinburgh