

# *Tartan Colour Terminology*

When travelling around Highland Games or talking to people who are unfamiliar with the colour variations available for a given pattern it is not unusual to be told by someone that; '*.....our clan has three tartans, the ancient one, the modern one and a very nice muted one.....*'. There is often misunderstanding about the terminology used by tartan manufacturers. The terms apply to generalised ranges of shades used to produce variations of the same tartan. The fact that the same pattern can look completely different when produced in different colour ranges can result in the impression that they are in fact different tartans.

It is important to understand that the term used to describe the overall shades of a particular piece of material does not refer to the design in any way and has no bearing on the antiquity of a pattern. In the early 1980s The Scottish Tartans Society suggested that terms referring to the colours should come after the name and those which refer to the antiquity or use of the pattern e.g.; Old, Hunting etc., should come before the name. For example, Old MacLachlan - Modern, and MacLachlan – Ancient, the former being the Old MacLachlan tartan in modern colours and the latter being the later/contemporary MacLachlan tartan in old colours. These examples show how easily two different patterns might be understood to be the same tartan when in fact they are not, and how the same tartan can be construed as two different tartans when presented in different colour shades. The idea a uniform nomenclature is logical but unfortunately it has not been widely adopted and is unlikely to be so because of the manufacturers' individual practices. It is also self-evident that unless applied universally such a proposal would only add to the confusion.

The reader should bear in mind that the colours used today are ALL produced using chemical dyes and that the natural dyes used until c.1856 could produce every colour and shade from light to dark depending on the type, quantity and quality of the dyestuff used and the desired effect – Plate 1.



**Plate 1. Examples of the colours available from natural dyes. © The Author**

By the last quarter of the 18th century the famous weaving firm William Wilson & Sons of Bannockburn were working with large quantities of natural dyes to produce standard colours. They continued to develop these until the increasing availability of artificial dyes made natural ones uneconomic. The skill with which Wilsons produced their colours from natural dyes can still be appreciated by examining some of their many surviving specimens (Plate 2) and studying their dye recipes<sup>1</sup>. These recipes combined both traditional Highland dyes, such as native Cudbear<sup>2</sup> and imported Cochineal with newer imported dyes like Fustic<sup>3</sup>.



**Plate 2. A collection of Wilsons of Bannockburn's natural dyed tartan specimens c.1820-40. Photo: Bonhams**

<sup>1</sup> Wilsons' 1783 Dye Recipes can be found in [The 1819 Key Pattern Book - One Hundred Original Tartans](https://www.1819keypatternbook.com/).

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orcein>

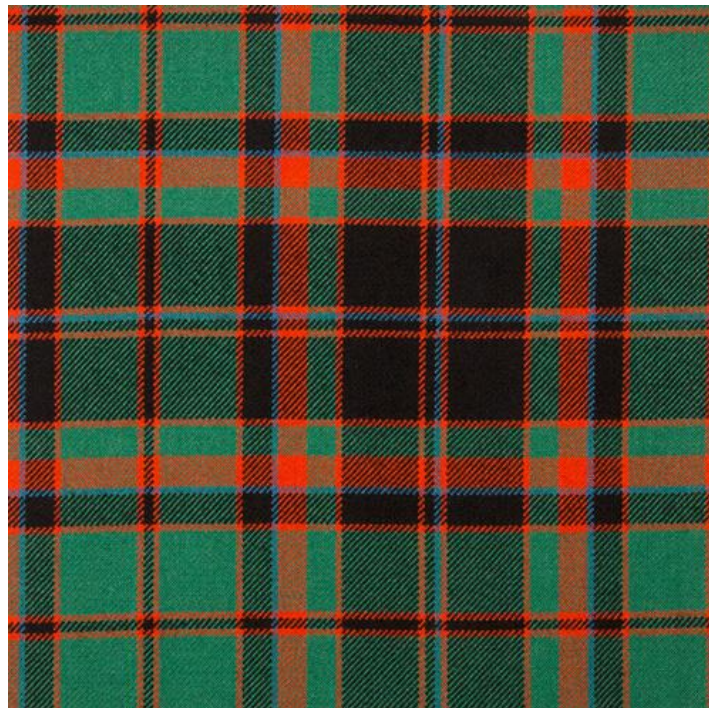
<sup>3</sup> <http://www.wildcolours.co.uk/html/fustic.html>

From the mid-19th century artificial dyes offered a cheap, quicker and easier way of obtaining standard colours albeit often to the detriment of the original patterns where the design subtleties often became obscured. Below are listed the major colour groupings and the various contemporary names applied to them throughout the Trade.

### **OLD, ANCIENT or VEGETABLE COLOURS**

These are the mid-light shades that are supposed to represent the colours obtained in the past from natural dyes, their use can be dated to the mid-1930s. A 1936 catalogue from Andersons (now Kinloch Andersons) described the range as *exceedingly popular*. Whether they were a result of a movement against the dark shades of Modern Colours, or designed by the Trade to increase their range and thereby commercial success, is unclear. There is a story to the effect that shortly after the war (WWI) someone was seen wearing a kilt at a highland games where the original Modern Colours of the cloth had faded by use and exposure to the elements into something like what are now call Old Colours. The author has demonstrated this process by placing a piece of cloth in Wilsons' Colours (see below) under glass in direct sunlight with half the sample covered. Over a period of about 18 months the section in the light faded out towards the Old or Ancient range.

In general, Old/Ancient colours do not reflect the shades obtained from the natural dyes which were used in old tartans. They are far too insipid in comparison and have a uniform paleness unrepresentative of the old highland specimens (Pate 3).



**Plate 3. Cumming Hunting/Buchan tartan in Old Colours.**

The term Old/Ancient colours has no bearing on the age of the particular pattern which they describe and it is therefore possible to have a recent tartan woven in Old Colours and called Ancient. An additional complication is the use of the term 'Ancient' as part of the name, a good example is the Ancient Atlantic tartan which was designed in the 1970's and features a mix of Old and Modern shades.

## MODERN or ORDINARY COLOURS

The early aniline or artificial dyes were a by-product of the coal and chemical industries, the first of which, Perkin's Purple, was produced in 1856<sup>4</sup>. This was quickly followed by the other artificial colours and new names, for example; Fuchsia/Magenta<sup>5</sup>. Although cheap and easy to use, these dyes did not have the subtlety and versatility of those they replaced and as a result the shades were typically very strong and dark. It was by using these shades that the Black Watch regimental tartan became so dark as to be almost black. Once the use of natural dyes ceased these aniline colours continued to be used as the standard shades, until the invention of 'Old Colours'. Indeed, the Ministry of Defence still specifies the exact shades of the colours to be used in military tartans and thereby maintains the myth of their dark origins in the face of extant specimens of the early 19th century which are woven in the middle range Wilsons' shades.

When put together, the modern shades of blue, black and green give an overall dark appearance and can tend to obscure the actual pattern. Ironically, some of these shades, especially the reds and blues, are quite good matches to the shades obtained from natural dyes and frequently used in 18th century rural tartans. There are at least two examples of pre-1750 tartans in which the blue, green and black are all dark and which by contemporary parlance would be classified as modern colours<sup>6</sup>. However, the use of such uniform dark colours does seem to have been the exception rather than the rule during that period.



Plate 4. Cumming Hunting/Buchan tartan in Modern Colours.

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<sup>4</sup> Mauveine or Perkin's Purple - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mauveine>

<sup>5</sup> Fuchsia or Magenta - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magenta>

<sup>6</sup> Discussed in papers on the [64th Regt - Loudoun's Highlanders](#) and [MacDonald of Borrodale](#) tartans.

## MUTED COLOURS

These are of fairly recent origin, early 1970's, and fall somewhere between the old and modern colour ranges (Plate 5). Broadly speaking, they are the best commercial match to the overall shades of natural dyes used prior to 1856. Once again, the problem with these shades is that they are of a uniform hue and therefore inconsistent with the old practice of counter balancing shades.



Plate 5. Cumming Hunting/Buchan tartan in Muted Colours.

## REPRODUCTION & WEATHERED COLOURS

Although slightly different to each other, these two ranges are used by different weavers for roughly the same colour palettes. The term 'Reproduction' is restricted to those patterns produced by D.C. Dalgleish Ltd, Selkirk, who were the originators of this range. The story surrounding the origin of these colours is very romantic but quite false. It was claimed that a piece of tartan was dug up at the Culloden battlefield in 1946 and after 200 years buried in the peat, the colours had become very drab, hence the term 'weathered' by some manufacturers. Unfortunately, the firm who gave us Reproduction colours has declined to answer questions concerning the shade's origins and it is perhaps significant that there appears to be no record of the 'original specimen'. Given the historical importance of such an artefact it is not unreasonable to expect it to have been examined, photographed, the claims verified by an independent observer and the specimen preserved. It is the author's opinion that the story is apocryphal and an invention designed to sell more cloth.

The main differences are that with Reproduction shades that the usual blues become slate blue, black a less intense charcoal black, red a deeper shade and green a sort of khaki (Plate 6). In the Weathered range the blue become grey and green becomes brown whilst the red is closer to the scarlet/orangey shade found in Old colours (Plate 7).

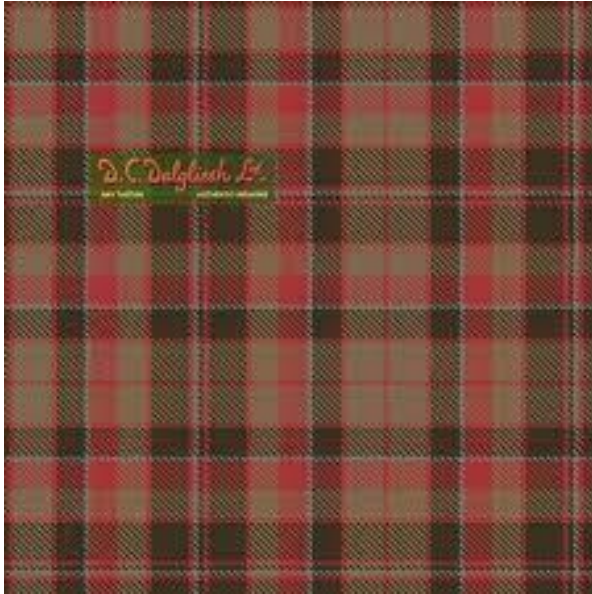


Plate 6. Cumming Hunting/Buchan tartan in Reproduction Colours.



Plate 7. Cumming Hunting/Buchan tartan in Weathered Colours.

## NATURAL DYES

Until the latter part of the 18th century there was a great deal of variation in the shades produced from natural dyes. This was due to the individual production constraints and techniques available in the rural highlands, for example; the size of dye vessels and the availability and quality of raw dyestuffs.

As a result of the failure of the '45 Jacobite Rising, Highland Dress was proscribed for a period of 35 years '*.....in that part of North Briton called Scotland*'<sup>7</sup> i.e., the Highlands. This led to the skills needed to spin, dye and weave tartan disappearing completely from much of the Highlands within fifty years. That the traditional skills were not completely lost is evidenced by the survival of a number of plaids dated during the mid-1770s and the fact that tartan production, initially for the huge number of Highland Regiments, moved to the Lowlands and in particular, to the firm of Wm Wilson & Son of Bannockburn. They scoured the Highlands for old patterns and by 1780 were working with stock patterns and colours based on historic examples.

When using natural dyes, either industrially or rurally, it was the common practice to counterbalance the colours against each other. The main colours used in a majority of extant 18th century pieces were a combination of some or all of the following; black, blue, red and green (Plate 8). Reds at that time ranged from pink to scarlet and any shade was highly prized due to the cost of the imported dyestuff, cochineal. When a darker red was used as a ground colour, light red (pink) was sometimes used as a guard colour to highlight stripes or to separate ground colours in the same way as white, yellow and pale blue were used. The two colours that

<sup>7</sup> The **Act of Proscription** (19 Geo. 2, c. 39). An Act for the More Effective Disarming of the Highlands, 1746.

seem to have varied least were green and blue, the former usually being an olive shade whilst blue was often a mid-dark navy. Wilsons continued to use their colours in much the same way as the earlier rural dyers with mid greens juxtaposed by darker reds and blues (Plate 9).



**Plate 8. An 18<sup>th</sup> century plaid in natural dyes. © The Author**



**Plate 9. Wilsons' plaids c1828-40 in natural dyes. © The Author**

## Conclusion

The decline in the use of natural dyes began with the introduction of the first aniline dye, Perkin's Purple, in 1856 and within a few years chemical dyes had completely replaced traditional natural dyes which in turn lead to the proliferation of colour ranges seen today.

It is import to understand that changing the shades does not change the colour and therefore the tartan (Plate 10). No one colour range is more correct than another unless the intent is to replicate a tartan for a particular period. For example, as a broad range, Old Colours and Weather Colours are historically incorrect when trying to replicate tartans of the Jacobite period.



**Plate 10. The Buchanan tartan in Wilsons' (natural dye), Modern, Old and Weathered Colours showing how the pattern remains unchanged. © The Author**

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