

Traditional selvedge decoration on tartan cloth

Many readers will no doubt be familiar with the term selvedge (British English) or selvaige (generally US English), although not all those will know where to find it on a kilt or piece of cloth, and far less will be familiar with what it actually is, how and why it exists and the variations historically used in tartan.

What is a Selvedge?

The terms selvaige and selvedge are a corruption of "self-edge", and have been in use since the 16th century.

Literally it is a self-edge and is the term for the woven in edges of a piece of cloth that prevents the fabric from unravelling. Selvages form the extreme lateral edges of the fabric and are formed during the weaving process. It has been described as a form of over locking and is a result of the weaving process where the weft (cross-ways) threads pass around the edge of the warp (length-ways) threads so binding them in – see Fig 1.

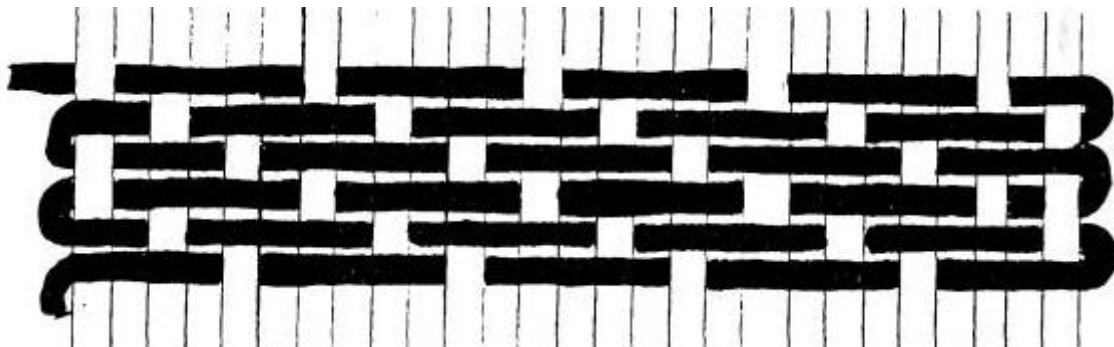


Fig 1. Representation of twill weave selvedge.

Selvedge types in Tartan

A number of selvedge types were historically used in tartan weaving but many of the techniques disappeared as mass production took over and the use of cloth changed. Today a lot of industrially produced tartan is woven without a selvedge and then finished with a type of glued hem that functions like a selvedge, certainly on finer cloth, although it bulks the edge when used on heavier cloth and looks ungainly and cheap (Fig 2).



Fig 2. Glued hem on a modern kilt.

A plain weave¹ selvedge, where the last few threads on either side are woven in plain weave, is another option sometimes used for modern non-kilting cloth.

In traditional tartan weaving the selvedge is generally of a plain 2/2 twill weave that is the same thickness as the rest of the cloth, although many pre-1800 rural plaids had a herringbone selvedge. In old specimens the tartan either repeated to the edge of the cloth or some form of selvedge mark or border pattern was included depending on how the cloth was intended to be used. A selvedge mark or border pattern is a form of decorated selvedge and was only used for plaids, domestic blankets and, in the early C19th; a selvedge mark was sometimes added to, generally military, kilt cloth. Material for general clothing was always woven in undecorated twill with the pattern repeating from the centre to both edges (Fig 3).

Closer examination of a plain selvedge sett shows the pattern continuing in standard 2/2 twill weave to the edge of the material (Fig 4) in which piece the diagonal warp running top left to bottom right is clearly visible. This basic twill selvedge is the standard way in which cloth was woven from the post-Proscription period and continued to be until the modern non-selvedge looms were introduced in the late C20th.



Fig 3. An early C19th example of a balanced weave with the sett repeating evenly from the centre to each selvedge.



Fig 4. C18th specimen with a basic twill weave selvedge

Mention has already been made of the use of herringbone selvedges. These are often found on old plaids, although not all old plaids were woven with a herringbone selvedge. Examples show that it was used on both plain and decorated selvedges well before the mid-C18th.

¹ The terms *plain weave* and *plain twill selvedge* are distinct and not interchangeable. The former refers to a weaving structure in which each thread passes alternately over one, under one thread, whereas the latter is my term to refer to the practice in tartan weaving of repeating the sett in twill weave through the selvedge to the edge of the cloth.

The effect of a herringbone is to make that section slightly thicker and looser so it probably had a dual function, principally of being decorative but also of allowing the fabric to move or flow more effectively which might have been an added advantageous in a belted plaid.



Fig 5. A C18th repeating sett with herringbone selvedge.

Herringboning was generally one to three inches wide with about two inches being most common width. The individual bands were generally 8-10 threads with 4 to 8 bands in most herringbone selvedges.

Fig 5. shows a portion of a C18th plaid sett repeating across into the herringbone selvedge.

Selvedge Marks and Selvedge Patterns

In addition to a plain or herringbone selvedge the traditional Highland weavers also had the choice of including either a selvedge mark or pattern both of which were used on plaid settings up until the Proscription period. Both techniques appear to have been purely decorative and can be found in early C18th specimens and, what appears to be a selvedge mark can be seen in some early portraits. They would certainly have been easier to paint than selvedge patterns which do not feature in early portraits. So what's the difference and how were they used?

Selvedge Marks are a form of decoration where the pattern is off-set and the sett repeats from the middle of a pivot on one selvedge towards the second where a broad band of colour that is not usually part of the sett is added. Sometimes the band was one of the colours in the tartan, usually blue or black, or in red, blue and green setts a black band was often added. The band either ran to the edge of the cloth or, there was a fine, usually red, stripe right at the edge as in this example of a fine example of a c1800 Murray of Tullibardine plaid that includes a broad black selvedge mark with the herringboning running through and into the red (Fig 6). This plaid was a copy of a much older one which one may assume also had the selvedge mark.



Fig 6. c1800 plaid with a black herringbone selvedge mark.

Selvedge marks seem to have been a decorative feature of double plaids that were intended to be worn i.e. the *feileadh mor* or *belted plaid* with the cloth typically 26-28" wide. Where a feileadh beag was made for a cut down plaid or simply for a single piece of plaid material the selvedge mark was sometimes a feature too; the best example of which is the feileadh beag worn by the elder of the MacDonald Boys in Mosman's c1750 portrait.

With the ban on the wearing of Highland Clothes during the Proscription (1747-82) selvedge marks would probably have died out but, like other aspects of traditional dress, they continued on in cloth for the military. It's logical to assume that at least some of the early military plaids that were woven in the Highlands would have had selvedge marks and if not already standard, this feature was probably adopted uniformly once larger runs were being ordered from the Lowland weavers. Early C19th military counts include specifications for selvedge marks on plaids for the 42nd, 78th, 79th, 92nd and 93rd regiments². This practice continued until about 1810-15 when the belted plaid was dropped in favour of the kilt for all uses. The fact that plaid material was sometimes used for kilts during the early 1800s is evident from the Officers' weight cloth used in a c1810-20 kilt with a broad black herringbone selvedge mark (Fig 7).



Fig 7. Black herringbone selvedge mark on a c1820 78th Regiment kilt.

Selvedge Patterns are a more elaborate form of selvedge decoration on a warp that is again off-set but where towards the second selvedge the last section is an arrangement of striped bands composed of some or all the colours in the main sett. Selvedge patterns are commonly, if not exclusively, found on domestic plaids, that is, those designed for use in doors as bed covers, hanging etc rather than to be worn. A majority of the surviving examples are white based blanket patterns that are often mistakenly called arisaid tartans in the belief that they were worn as an Earasaid³. Evidence for these blanket patterns being used in this way is highly dubious and based solely on Martin Martin's comment at the end of the C17th⁴. These white based plaids show no evidence of having been worn and many would have been quite impractical as clothing. They were generally 40-52" wide when joined and often featured a number of stripes in different widths at their edges leading to them being referred to as *barred blankets*.

An example of such a blanket is at Fig 8 where the barred arrangement is clearly visible. The basic sett is similar to a number of surviving domestic plaids know throughout the Highlands which suggests that there was a form of default setting for such patterns. A slight variation of

² Wilsons of Bannockburn's 1819 Key Pattern Book.

³ Earasaid (often Arisaid or Arasaid), a square of cloth, often tartan, worn as a form of mantle by Highland women.

⁴ "...called Arisad, is a white plaide, having a few small stripes of black, blew and red".

this one continued to be woven by Wilsons of Bannockburn, including the 'border' until the 1820s at least. The Scottish Tartans Authority has details of at least ten such setting from the 18th and early 19th centuries.



Fig 8. A typical selvage pattern on an early C18th barred blanket.

Undoubtedly the best example is the plaid woven on Skye by Christina Young, initialled CY and dated 1726. The complete plaid survives which, with a 36" warp, is unusually wide for tartan of that era and the finished 72" blanket has a rare double bar selvage pattern that is also herringboned over the full 8" width (Fig 9). Tradition has it that she wove this for her wedding so perhaps it was a form of dowry and is likely to have been used as a bed cover or surround.

But for the chance discovery of two plaids in Nova Scotia it might have been assumed that these selvage patterns were restricted to white (arisaid) type domestic blankets. Full details of these plaids are [here](#) but for the purposes of this paper this important point is that both, one single width and one a joined plaid, are all tartan (as opposed to a white arisaid sett) and are surrounded by a complete border of a different sett (Fig 10).



Fig 9. Christina Young blanket showing the double barred selvage pattern.

The two plaids are the only known examples to show this technique, which I've termed a *total border*. It's an extraordinarily difficult feature to weave and can be regarded as the zenith of the tartan weaver's art. The dimensions of the joined plaid, together with tasselled ends, means that it was not made to be worn and so was probably intended for domestic use in the same way as the blanket pattern plaids.



Fig 10. Nova Scotia plaid showing total border pattern.

Conclusions

Decorated selvages are a feature of many surviving examples of old tartan. They were a feature of plaiding, that is, cloth intended to be joined as double width plaids/blankets and were never used on cloth intended for tailoring into coats, dress etc.

Most simple of the selvedge techniques was a herringbone threading of the last 2-3 inches, generally in a dark colour, that was part of the normal repeat of the sett. Herringboning was also often used in combination with selvedge marks and patterns.

Selvedge marks were a broad band of colour that ran the length of one side of the cloth and so once joined the finished plaid would have the *mark* at the top and bottom. Selvedge marks seem to have been a feature of plaids intended for wear whereas selvedge patterns appear to have been confined to domestic plaids not intended to be worn. Most surviving examples of the latter are predominately so-called arisaid tartans although at least one full tartan example survives.

The ban on the wearing of Highland Dress heralded a change in the use of tartan and with it the need for decorated selvages. Whilst the plaid continued to be worn in the Army selvedge marks were still employed and this plaiding was sometimes used for kilts however, the technique had disappeared entirely by about 1820. The weaving of arisaid type blanket patterns died out in the Highlands in the late 1700s and along with them their related selvedge patterns. Wilsons continued to weave a *Blanket sett* that included a *border* (selvedge pattern) into the early C19th. As an aside, in the late C20th their notes for the 'border' were mistakenly taken as details for a Border tartan.

Today these traditional selvedge techniques are completely unknown on commercial cloth and so the reader is unlikely to see modern examples. That is not to say that they cannot be done given the desire and knowledge to do so – see Fig 11.



Fig 11. Modern kilt with herringbone selvedge.