

# An Unnamed Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Plaid that belonged to John Robertson

## Introduction

In May 2025 the author had an opportunity to examine a joined and fringed plaid. It was taken to Australia by John Robertson, a pastoralist who emigrated there from Inverness-shire in 1839 at the same time as his two brothers.<sup>1</sup> The plaid (Plate 1) remains in the family's possession. There were two other plaids taken to Australia by the family but their whereabouts are now uncertain.



Plate 1. Joined plaid with fringed ends. Photo: The Author

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Robertson\\_\(pastoralist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Robertson_(pastoralist)) accessed 30 May 2025

## Construction

The garment was made from two lengths of single-width plaiding 27 x 108 inches that were joined with a whip stitch (Plate 2) and finished with twisted fringed ends (Plate 3).



**Plate 2. Whip-stitch join of the two halves.** Photo: EF Williams



**Plate 3. Twisted fringe end.** Photo: EF Williams

The material was woven at 40 epi<sup>2</sup> using Z-spun singles (unplied) yarn in both the warp and weft (Plate 4). The pattern is offset with five half setts in the 27-inch warp. This width was atypical for the period when the standard width produced by the principal tartan weaver, Wilsons of Bannockburn, was 25 inches. However, the shades are consistent with their stock colours and the weight with their 'Coarse Cloth' meaning that it could have been woven by Wilsons. Alternatively, another, unidentified, weaver with access to similar dye shades could have been responsible.

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<sup>2</sup> Ends per inch, a reference to the cloth density.



**Plate 4. Detail showing the Z-spun yarns in the warp and weft.** Photo: EF Williams

No dye analysis has been carried out but if it were, it would undoubtedly confirm the use of the traditional natural dyestuffs cochineal and indigo for the red and blue respectively, plus a combination of indigo with a yellow dyestuff such as fustic<sup>3</sup> or quercitron<sup>4</sup> for the green. There is no evidence of fading which points to the plaid having had very little prolonged exposure to the elements, particularly sunlight.

## The Tartan

The tartan can be described as a red, blue and green symmetrical pattern with a decorated red ground and equal sized bands of blue and green that form the alternating sixteen square ground. This tartan had not previously been recorded in any official record. The basic structure is found in surviving 18<sup>th</sup> century tartans and was a feature of a number of Highland Revival tartans<sup>5</sup> such as Drummond, MacGillivray and MacQuarrie (Plate 5). It was also the basis for many of the Allen Brothers Vestiarium designs<sup>6</sup> such as Fraser (Plate 6).



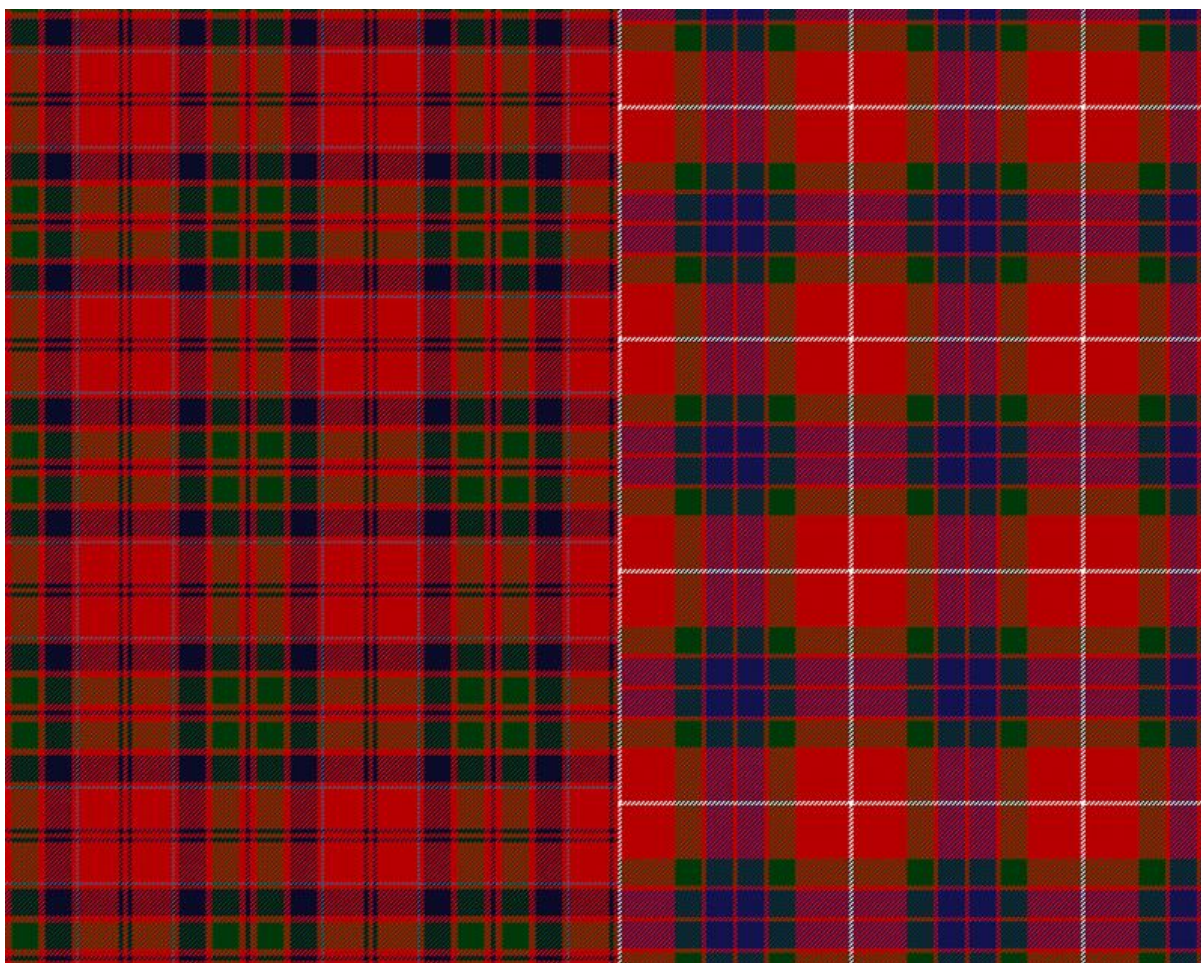
**Plate 5. A comparison of the Unnamed Plaid sett with those of Drummond, MacGillivray and MacQuarrie**

<sup>3</sup> Old fustic, or yellowwood, derived from dyer's mulberry, a tropical American tree (*Chlorophora tinctoria*, or *Maclura tinctoria*).

<sup>4</sup> American Black oak, *Quercus velutina*, native to the Eastern and Midwestern part of the United States.

<sup>5</sup> The Highland Revival covered the period approximately 1780-1840.

<sup>6</sup> The Vestiarium Scoticum by John Sobieski Stuart and Charles Edward Stuart (born John Carter Allen and Charles Manning Allen), published in 1842.



**Plate 6.** A comparison of the Unnamed Plaid sett (left) and the Allan Brothers' Fraser for their Vestiarium.

## Conclusion

Dating old tartan specimens can be difficult without contemporaneous supporting evidence. The plaid is in very good condition with no evidence of fading. Dye analysis could help provide a rough time period but is not currently available for this piece; however, the width and shades support this being a Highland Revival piece.

Surviving examples of joined plaids made from offset patterned cloth were typical of pre-Highland Revival rurally produced pieces but are much rarer after the introduction of mass production and marketing. The width is also atypical of early-mid 19<sup>th</sup> century tartan from the likes of Wilsons of Bannockburn. This points to the cloth and finished plaid having either been a special commission, perhaps a copy of an older example, or possibly woven by a different, unknown manufacturer; for example, someone in the Inverness area where John Robertson was from. Given the family tradition that there were three plaids, it may be that one was given to/purchased by each of the three brothers as a reminder of their Scottish origins.

Whilst it is known who the plaid originally belonged to, it is not known who purchased it, nor what, if anything the pattern was called by the weaver. As such, the design has now recorded by The Scottish Tartans Authority as an 'Unnamed C19th tartan from a plaid belonging to John Robertson.