

Unnamed C18th (possibly from the Western Isles)

Introduction

In the mid-1980s the Scottish Tartan Society¹ (STS) was donated a small piece of hard tartan that had the characteristics of a mid-18th century cloth and pattern (Figure 1). A larger piece of what was obviously from the same cloth is in the collection of the National Museum of Scotland (NMS) and was included in Tartan (Cheape 1995, p.6) amongst a 'Selection of eighteenth century tartans'.ⁱ



Figure 1. 18th century specimen donated to the Scottish Tartans Society c.1985. Photo © The Author

The STS specimen was donated by a Stewart family from southern Perthshire but was recorded in the acquisition note as the 'Forbes Bequest'. The reason for the difference in attribution is unclear but it is hoped that further research may explain the discrepancy. By contrast, the NMS specimen was acquired in 1966 from a donor who thought it came from Glenmoriston.² Who the donor was and why they associated the piece with Glenmoriston is unknown. There is also a third specimen said to exist, the author has been unable to track it down despite ongoing attempts to do so.³

The Cloth

Although it is a relatively small, approx. 6.25 x 11 inches, the STS specimen (now in the STA collection) includes a selvedge on one side (Figure 1, top edge). In 2019 the author was able to examine the NMS specimen and confirm that it is a section of a full-width cloth measuring 23.5 inches selvedge to selvedge x 28 inches. There are twelve half setts, and part of the thirteenth across the width of the warp. The pattern is off-set⁴ with one selvedge, right as viewed (Figure 2), on a pivot which is where the cloth would have been joined. The pattern on the second (non-joining) selvedge finishes on the broad red separating the blue and green. This arrangement meant that the material was woven so that if two sections of cloth were joined in the traditional manner then the pattern would repeat correctly across the full 47-inch width. There would then have been a red bar at the edges, or top and bottom if used for a

¹ Superseded by The Scottish Tartans Authority (STA) in 1995.

² NMS accession number H.TTB 27.

³ A note in the STS archive states that the piece is in a museum collection.

⁴ An off-set warp is one where the pattern is unbalanced (not the same sequence from the middle to the edges) across the width.

plaid. Both ends are rough and there is no indication that this was part of joined piece meaning that it was most likely a section from a length of plaiding rather than a finished item. The relation of the two specimens is shown below, the STA (bottom) piece being a section that includes the joining selvedge (Figure 2).



Figure 2. NMS and STA specimens showing their relationship and the full width with the two selvages.
Photo © The Author.

The cloth was woven at 48 epi using hand-spun singles yarn in both warp and weft resulting in a 5¾ inch sett. It has a slightly denser weft as the slightly rectangular horizontal squares shows (Figure 3). Whilst dye analysis has not been conducted, if it was then it would almost certainly confirm the use of the traditional dyes; cochineal and indigo for the red and blues respectively, plus an as yet unidentified yellow dye-stuff combined with indigo, for the green. Brown is a rare colour amongst surviving 18th century specimens and the source of this one is also unknown. The quality points to it being deliberate rather than a failed attempt to dye a black, a colour more often used in period pieces.



Figure 3. Detail showing the individual colours and slightly denser weft resulting in rectangular squaring.
Photo © The Author

The Sett

The sett can be described as having alternating blue and green grounds with decorative overstripes and an intervening red bar. This, together with the inclusion of a broad stripe of light blue and the use of brown, is atypical of the period. Structurally it is unusual amongst surviving specimens of the same period; more often they have red and green grounds which are usually wider and separated by a blue bar (Figure 4).

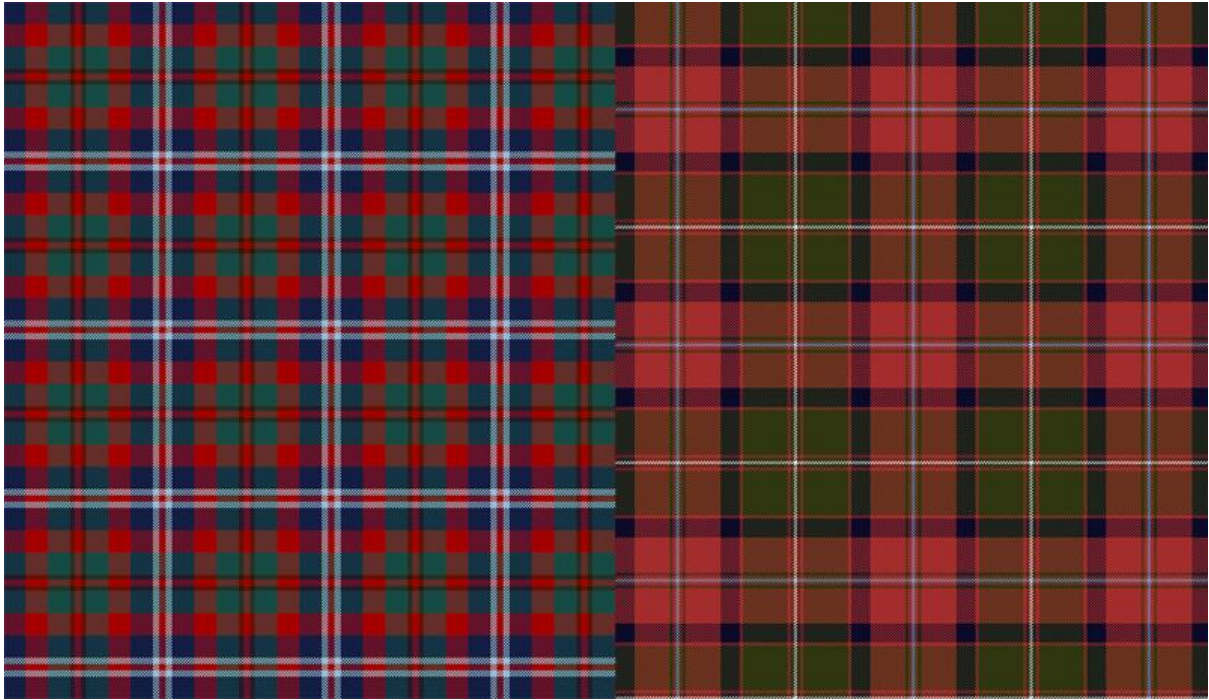


Figure 3. Comparison of the Unnamed tartan with a typical mid-18th century sett, this one from Glen Tilt.

Reconstructing the sett

In 2022 the author undertook a project with Lochcarron of Scotland to recreate the tartan in a weight and sett size suitable for kilting using their 'British Wool' yarn range. Whilst the red, blue and brown could be closely matched from stock shades, the green and the light blue proved to be atypical of modern commercial shades and had to be specially dyed. The results demonstrate how close a match can be achieved given time and determination (Figure 5). In 2022 the tartan was adopted by the Royal Celtic Society in keeping with their aims to promote the language, literature, music and culture of the Scottish Highlands and Islands. Their use does not confer ownership and it remains an Unnamed 18th Century pattern.



Figure 5. The STA specimen and the Lochcarron cloth showing close match of the colours.
Photo © The Author

Conclusion

The STA and NMS specimens are clearly cut from the same length of cloth; there is thought to be at least one other piece in existence. The width, colouring and construction are consistent with the presumed age and, based on other specimens, it is reasonable to refine the date to c.1750 +/- 20 years.

It is not known when the two, possibly three, pieces were separated, nor how they ended up in different rural parts of the country over a hundred miles apart. A number of other 18th specimens collected in the Western Isles by the folklorist Alexander Carmichael were subsequently cut up by him and pieces shared with friends. This tartan may well be another example of such a cavalier approach to textile collecting.

With a likely 18th century date, and no definitive place of origin, it is not possible to associated this tartan with a particular clan. Nor is it like any traditional clan tartan. Accordingly, it is recorded by The Scottish Tartans Authority as an 'Unnamed C18th tartan, possibly from the Western Isles.'



Figure 6. The author wearing the reconstructed tartan.

¹ Cheape, H. 1995 *Tartan The Highland Habit*. National Museum of Scotland