

Bed Hangings from Culloden House

Introduction

Details of the tartan Hangings¹ from a bed in Culloden House, in which Prince Charles Edward is said to have slept prior to the Battle of Culloden in April 1746, were recorded in the early 1970s in the archives of the Scottish Tartans Society (STS)². Other than a threadcount and reference to the story of the tartan's use no other details were given including the whereabouts of the Hangings which were no longer at Culloden House. Scarlett mentioned them in his 1990 book³ and included a threadcount that differed slightly at the pivots from that in the STS records (Fig 1) but again does not appear to have known their whereabouts.



Fig 1. Comparison of the STS and Scarlett's counts for the Bed Hangings – the pivots are marked 'x'.

The fact that the complex tartan had been recorded suggests that there must have been an earlier record that the STS/Scarlett reproduced. The difference in the two was probably the result of a transcription error by one or other but it was not clear at the time which setting was correct and without either the earlier record or the actual Hangings the discrepancy would in all likelihood have endured.

The Culloden House Bed



At the time of the battle in April 1746 the [house](#) belonged to Duncan Forbes of Culloden³. It was requisitioned for the Prince's use in the days before the battle and whilst he no doubt slept there, no contemporary evidence of the décor of the bedroom he occupied survives. Because of the need to pay Death Duties on the death of the then Duncan Forbes the contents of the house were sold over three days in 1897. The [List of Contents](#) includes several bedsteads and a *Piece of Prince Charles' tartan plaid* but no further details are known and it seems improbable that a set of bed hangings would be described in such terms. A photograph of *Prince Charlie's Bed* from about the time of the sale shows an Four Poster bed with ornately embroidered drapes typical of the style favoured by a wealthy 18th century landowner rather than the tartan ones allegedly in use during the Prince's visit (Fig 2). So what of the original Hangings?

Fig 2. Prince Charlie's Bed.

Photo acknowledgement – [Am Baile](#).

¹ Hangings were actually a form of curtains that served both as decoration and as insulation.

² The STS was founded in 1963 as a Scottish Charity and survived until the 1990s. Its role and work is now fulfilled by the [Scottish Tartans Authority](#).

³ Duncan Forbes was Lord Chief Justice of Scotland and a prominent government supporter.

A remarkable discovery

In 2008 the auctioneers Bonhams held a 'Scottish Sale' that included *the tartan curtain from a bedroom of Culloden House*⁴. The Lot details stated:

'Of Jacobite interest

A piece of hard plaid with label printed with hangings from bed in which slept Bonnie Prince Charlie the night before the battle of Culloden, 16th April 1746, Culloden house Moy hall collection and on the reserve Capt. Charles Hepburn of hillhead Glasgow.' [sic]

Claims for the antiquity of this piece appear to be based solely on the type written label which looks to date to the first half of the 20th century (Fig 3). It's unclear from the Bonhams' note whether the Lot came directly from Moy Hall but the reference on the reverse points to the piece having been in collection of Capt. Charles Hepburn⁵ and it's likely that he or someone else purchased the various items comprising the Lot at an earlier date. Support for this theory can be inferred by lack of any reference to the hangings in Scarlett's records⁶.



Fig 3. The label attached to the Hangings. Photo credit: Bonhams

Following the sale the main piece from the Bonhams' Lot⁷, variously described as a *curtain* or *drapes*, was mounted in a frame and presented to the Culloden House Hotel⁸ together with some accompanying text supporting the story of their use as hangings for the bed in which Prince Charles Edward slept before the Battle.

Unfortunately the mounting makes detailed study of the cloth impossible, especially to confirm the dimensions, but the arrangement does reveal that the cloth is in fact a joined plaid made from two sections of material approximately 22-24 inches wide. One end has been embroidered with the initials 'SV', a letter on either side of the join (Fig 4). The embroidery is old but it's difficult to determine whether it's contemporary with the actual cloth or added at a later date. Such personalisation was not uncommon in 18th and early 19th century plaids and was often done to commemorate a significant event such as a birth, coming of age or



Fig 4. The central join and initials SV.
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⁴ [BBC News 18 April 2009](#).

⁵ Hepburn was probably Charles A. Hepburn the philanthropist and Glasgow University benefactor.

⁶ Jamie Scarlett lived locally and studied the small number of tartan pieces at Moy Hall in the 1980s. Had the hangings been there, he would surely have mentioned the fact and would have recorded their details including photographing them.

⁷ The Lot comprised two plaids and a tartan coat. The other plaid and the coat are both of a later date and were either included because they were misidentified as mid-18th century or added to bulk out the Lot.

⁸ In the Hotel's booklet *The History of Culloden House* the pattern is erroneously called 'The Duncan Forbes Tartan'.

marriage. Regrettably we have no idea to whom the initials referred nor do we know if the plaid may have had a previous use and was reused for the bed hangings; however their condition suggests not.

Whilst a detailed study of the fabric is not possible currently, an examination of the mounted plaid and the sale photographs reveals that the material was woven at approximately 96 epi⁹ which is exceptionally fine for that period. The expansive pattern was woven offset¹⁰ and comprises one full repeat plus an unusual striped selvedge mark.

This type of striped selvedge mark, which contains an obvious threading error, is the only known example of a technique that appears to be a variation of the 'barred' style¹¹. A further threading error can be seen towards the right hand side of the material in the picture.



Fig 5. Selvedge mark on the Bonhams' plaid. Photo credit: Bonhams.

Notwithstanding the threading errors, the number and quality of the colours in this tartan, there are seven including two shades of red and blue, taken together with the quality of the spinning and weaving marks this out as a superior example of mid-18th century tartan weaving. Red in particular was an expensive colour and the shades here indicate the use of imported cochineal and, in the case of the darker (scarlet) shade, a tin mordant which was not generally available in the Highlands; this suggests that some or all of the yarn was dyed elsewhere. It's also possible that the cloth itself was woven outside the Highlands, perhaps around Edinburgh, where the Royal Company of Archers sourced their [original tartan](#) in 1713 and Sir John Hynde-Cotton acquired his 'Highland Suit' in 1744, both of which were similarly complex designs. However, little is known about the tartan weaving trade in the Lowlands before the '45 and in particular whether they followed the traditional Highland offset weaving technique including the use of selvedge marks and patterns.

Another Plaid

In August 2014 the writer was contacted by the Scottish Society of New Zealand seeking comment on, and identification of, a large piece of tartan that had been in their possession for at least 100 years. It is mounted in a glass and timber case on which is carved "Worn by Alexander Symmers at the Battle of Culloden 1746" (Fig 6).

⁹ Ends Per Inch is a measurement of density and denotes the number of warp threads in an inch of cloth.

¹⁰ Offset weaving techniques are discussed in the paper on [Joined Plaids](#).

¹¹ Selvedge techniques are discussed in this [companion paper](#).



Fig 6. New Zealand plaid mounted in its own display case.
Photo courtesy of Ross Fraser, Chieftain, Scottish Society of New Zealand.

The Society's 1907 AGM recorded - *Presentations: During the year the following presentations were made to the Society:- Mr R L McDearmid – Piece of Royal Stewart Tartan from the bed on which Prince Charlie slept on the night preceding the Battle of Culloden.* Unfortunately there is no record of where McDearmid obtained the tartan.

Although predominately red, it was immediately obvious that it was not 'Royal Stewart' tartan and that the 1907 AGM entry was erroneous. Nor is there any record of an Alexander Symmers in the Muster Roll of the Prince's army.

The New Zealand plaid is approximately 76 x 40 inches and is made from two single width lengths¹² of offset cloth woven at 76 epi, joined at the selvedge pivot with the ends turned and sewn in the traditional manner (Fig 7).



Fig 7. Detail showing detail of the central join and turned ends.
Photo courtesy of Ross Fraser, Chieftain, Scottish Society of New Zealand.

¹² The original cloth was therefore approximately 20 inches wide.

A section of the selvedge is damaged and the end of one section has been shortened by a few inches, probably the result of the damaged or a section being deliberately removed. A different colour thread which was used to sew the re-turned end is clear on the right of the picture.



The busy pattern comprises eight colours including three shades of red, two blues, a yellow and a green. Whilst most of the yarn is a fine worsted wool the white threads are silk (Fig 8) which is a technique unknown in Culloden era tartan. It is first known to have been employed by the weaving firm William Wilson & Son of Bannockburn in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The width, quality and colours of the cloth are consistent with Wilsons' *Old Superfine* cloth which they produced c1770-1800. It's highly likely that this is a previously unknown example of their fancy patterns that were popular during the early Highland Revival era before the advent of clan tartans in the early 1800s. An example of such a design is discussed [here](#). These fancy plaids were made from two lengths of material sewn together with the ends turned and fashionable as ladies' screens (shawls).

Fig 8. Yarn detail showing the wool and silk threads.
Photo courtesy of Ross Fraser, Chieftain, Scottish Society of New Zealand.

Variations on a theme

The similarity of the 'curtain' sett with that of the plaid in New Zealand is immediately obvious and is too close to be a coincidence (Fig 9). The comparable story about the New Zealand plaid's connections to the Culloden House bed reinforces this view.



Fig 9. Comparison of Culloden Curtain (top) and the NZ Plaid.
Photo © The Author

Comparison of the two shows that the New Zealand plaid (Fig 10 - top strip) is more complex with eight colours whereas the Bonhams' piece (middle) has fewer, seven, but a more expansive pattern. The pivots of each sett are marked 'x'. The bottom strip is the count from Scarlett's book where the variation in the count and the inclusion of blue for the original green at 'A' confirms that he was working from older records and not the actual piece.

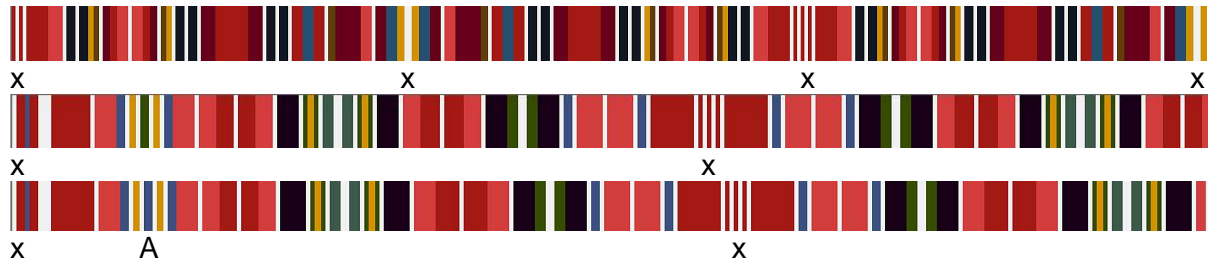


Fig 10. Comparison of the various setting of the Bed Hangings – pivots marked 'x'.

It has already been mentioned that the material of the Bonhams' plaid is offset comprising one full repeat plus a selvedge mark; the New Zealand plaid material was also offset with one and a half repeats plus a portion of the next repeat that runs to the selvedge.

Conclusions

The existence of the Culloden Bed Hangings has been known about by tartan researchers for at least 50 years and by some for probably a lot longer. Comparing the various colour strips it's clear that both the STS and Scarlett were working with second hand data and not the original material and so their counts can be disregarded for the purposes of this paper. What remains is the setting of the two plaids in which the similarity of the designs and their claimed association with the Culloden House bed cannot be coincidental.

One plaid is said to have come from the Moy Hall Collection, however no inventory of the collection is known to survive, nor when it was formed or by whom. Alexander Mackintosh, 27th chief, had a collection of Wilsons' samples bound in 1875 which he "*believed to be the only authentic tartans*", notwithstanding the fact that several of the patterns were designed by Wilsons between 1800-40. It seems probable that the chief also collected other items and that these may have included the Bonhams' plaid. Prince Charles Edward stayed at Moy Hall in Feb 1746 and is said to have left a plaid with Lady MacKintosh. That plaid, which is discussed [in a separate paper](#), is of a completely different tartan to the one under discussion here. However, it may be that aspects of the story; the Prince, Culloden etc., were conflated at some point with the story of the one sold by Bonhams¹³.

Irrespective of its exact origins and ownership, the construction of the Bonhams' plaid is consistent with it being mid-18th century and thus the connection to Culloden House and the Prince's bed plausible. But what of the New Zealand plaid?

Wm. Wilsons were the main tartan weavers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. By the 1780s they were weaving standard patterns including a range of military tartans and fancy patterns often named after towns and districts but were also weaving special commissions which may have been the case here. The differences between the settings of the two plaids will have been the result of an error in transcribing the original design or as a deliberate variation. Wilsons were consummate tartan weavers and if they had access to the original cloth they would have made an accurate copy if required. A deliberate variation is therefore the most likely explanation for the differences. Wilsons are known for their marketing acumen and they would design or rename existing tartans with popular names to maximise

¹³ The so-called Culloden Plaid was divided amongst the Prince's adherents and all that remains is a piece approx. 26" x 4" which in the 1980s was still at Moy Hall but which has subsequently disappeared.

sales; a connection with the Prince would have been too good an opportunity to miss. It would have been entirely in keeping with their practice to have taken the original design and 'improved' it as a *fancy pattern* adding more shades and some silk to liven up the design. The revision and further development of a particular design was not uncommon during the Highland Revival era, a time when tartan was increasing in popularity, and so it may have been in the case of the Bed Hangings.

Based on the evidence the plaid in New Zealand is a late 18th century variation on the original Culloden Hangings (Fig 11). Whether it's a Wilsons' or some other weaver's fancy or an error in transcribing a complex design is unclear but hopefully further research may resolve this question.



Fig 11. Overview of the original Hangings. Photo credit: Bonhams.

Both plaids are unique in their own right and the only known examples of their particular setting. They represent a style of bold and vibrant design that was popular at a time when high quality natural dyes were expensive and owning cloth woven with them denoted a person of rank. They are also two of the relatively few surviving complete 18th century plaids and as such care should be taken in their preservation for future generations.

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ⁱ SCARLETT J.S. 1990 *TARTAN The Highland Textile*. Shephard-Walwyn., London