

Dunblane

INTRODUCTION

Although the Dunblane tartan is now generally regarded as District sett, details of its origins are confused and appear to have little to do directly with the town of the same name. Claims that it dates to the early 18th Century are unconvincing and based on tenuous research that has been taken as fact by later writers.

ORIGINS OF THE SETT

The Smith Brothers were the first to show the design when they included it (Fig 1) in their 1850 publication¹ where they said of it:



Fig 1. The Smiths' Dunblane plate.

“Our principal reason for giving this specimen is, from the evidence which it affords of the Tartan having been worn by at least some of the nobility of the Lowlands of Scotland.”

When George the Fourth visited Edinburgh in 1822, the Duke of Leeds appeared at the Levee held in Holyrood House, as Viscount Dunblane, dressed in the Highland Costume-the Tartan being the same pattern as that here given, and which has been copied and manufactured for His Grace, from an old portrait at Hornby Castle, Yorkshire, of Peregrine, second Viscount Dunblane, who died in 1729.”

The Smiths rationale for including the design as evidence that tartan was ‘....worn by at least some of the nobility of the Lowlands of Scotland’ was misconstrued. Some Scottish based Lowland Lairds may have worn tartan at times but Viscount Dunblane was not one of them. The title was a titular one and there is no evidence that the any of the first three Viscounts ever visited Scotland.¹

The portrait was probably a social statement painted to promote their standing by identifying them with their Scottish title despite the family being Hanoverian supporters. Irrespective of the reason for the portrait, the Smiths confused their Viscounts – the portrait (Fig 2) is of Thomas Osborne (1713-1789), 3rd Viscount and only son of Peregrine, the 2nd Viscount. It is dated 1726 meaning that Thomas would have been thirteen at the time. Clearly the Smiths knew of the portrait’s existence although whether they actually saw it is unclear but that seems unlikely and their acceptance that the sett worn by the 4th Duke is the same as that worn in the portrait was based on the tartan woven by Wilsons for the 5th Duke of Leeds.

¹ **DUNBLANE**, viscount of, a title in the peerage of Scotland, conferred 3d May 1673, on Sir Thomas Osborne of Kiveton, Yorkshire, lord high treasurer of England, (descended from Sir Edward Osborne, knight, lord mayor of London in 1582), and after the revolution created marquis of Carmarthen (1689) and duke of Leeds (1694), and now possessed by his descendant, George Godolphin Osborne, eighth duke of Leeds (1859). <http://www.electricscotland.com/history/nation/dunblane.htm>



Fig 2. Thomas Osborne, 3rd Viscount Dunblane by Hans Hausing, 1726

The portrait depicts a young man wearing a lace trimmed tartan jacket and trows with a large, apparently double with, plaid draped in stylised Roman toga fashion. Although the clothing is painted with some care the tartan is less so. Elements of the sett in the jacket and trows appear similar and look to be the same sett. The plaid too shows some of the same features although the sett seems to be bigger but this may just have been artistic licence; the artist is not renowned for painting Highland Dress. It was common for artists at the time use theme props and it is not at all certain that the outfit would have been owned by Thomas Osborne. Irrespective of whether the outfit actually existed or whether the tartan was simply taken from a piece in artist's possession the detail of the tartan is not painted sufficiently well to allow an accurate extrapolation of the sett. The portrait was in the possession of the Duke of Leeds' family from commission until it was sold in 2005; the buyer and its current whereabouts are unknown.

There is another version of the portrait which must have been either an uncatalogued duplicate, possibly for a second location, or a later copy. In 1830 an engraving of this version was published in which the sitter was, incorrectly, identified as (Prince) Charles Edward Stuart (Fig. 30). The engraving was taken from a portrait of the prince then in the possession of Mr G. A. Williams, Librarian, Cheltenham, who in turn obtained it from a Mr Yates, Arlington Count, Gloucester. The portrait was purchased by the 5th Earl of Rosebery from Cheltenham Fine Art Gallery in February 1898; he noted that the painting had come from Derbyshire. It is now in the Rosebery collection.



Fig 3. Charles Edward Stuart Engraving by Edward Scruven, 1830. Photo: Royal Collection Trust

The Smiths' comment that the tartan '*....has been copied and manufactured for His Grace*' at the time of the 1822 Levee places the design as one of those revived or invented during the Highland Revival many of which own their existence to the famous weaving firm of Wilsons of Bannockburn and this seems to be one of those. If the 5th Duke did appear at the Levee in *Highland Costume*, then it would probably have been made earlier as there was little notice of the King's Jaunt and so insufficient time to have tartan woven and outfits made from scratch. The Scottish Tartans Authority has a small piece of unnamed Wilsons' material in this design which was probably the source of the Smiths' plate (Fig 4).



Fig 4. Wilsons' sample of Dunblane c.1820. Photo: The Author

Francis George Godolphin D'Arcy D'Arcy-Osborne, Marquess of Carmarthen, became the 6th Viscount Dunblane and 7th Duke of Leeds in 1838. After taking a lease to Mar Forest in 1836 he became an honorary member of the Braemar Highland Society. As part of establishing his Highland credentials, he provided his retainers with a full Highland costume in the Dunblane tartan. This was noted in the press at the time as *a newly-created pattern*.

Queen Victoria mentioned it in her Journal when on Saturday 5th October 1850 when the *Duchess (of Leeds) soon followed, with Fanny, the 2 Miss Foxes & M^{rs} Ross, on ponies. Her appearance was somewhat curious, as she is very stout & was very oddly dressed, with a long Dunblane Tartan skirt, a jacket, & a riding hat!*ⁱⁱ

THE SETTING

If it is accepted that the tartan in the portrait of the 3rd Viscount is insufficiently detailed to allow a meaningful extrapolation then the earliest authentic version of the sett is that shown in the Wilsons' sample. Comparison between their Dunblane and that given by the Smiths reveals that the blue overstripe on the older (Wilson's) setting was light blue but by 1850 that had become dark blue. This was either by design, or perhaps it was simply a feature of early printed tartan plates as evidence from other tartans demonstrates that accuracy in matching

shade was not sought or not considered important. A collection of plaids sold in 2012 included a Dunblane one that followed the Wilsons' setting but with dark blue guard stripes showing that the change of shade was in commercial production within a few years of the Smiths' publication (Fig 5). How early this change occurred and whether it in fact happened earlier and the Smiths reproduced the then current version is unknown.



Fig 5. Dunblane plaid c.1860-80. Photo: Bonhams

The Smiths' work did not include threadcounts and it was not until 1950 that details of the setting were published. In D. C. Stewart's *Setts of the Scottish Tartans*.ⁱⁱⁱ Stewart's counts were basic proportional records rather than historically accurate ones. In this case he took his setting from the Smiths' plate and was presumably unaware of the Wilsons' specimen as his proportions differ from those of the original (Fig 6).

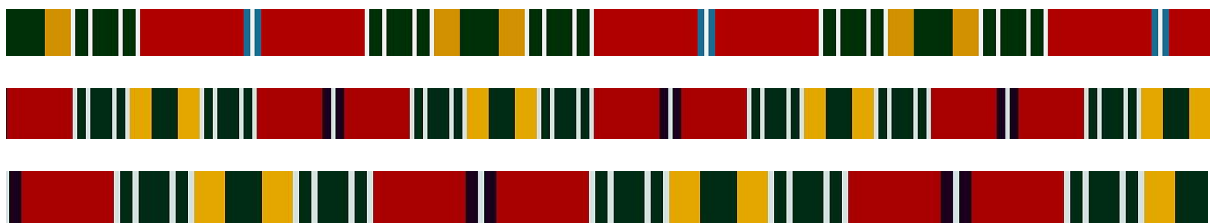


Fig 6. Comparison of settings of the Wilsons', Merino plaid and Stewart's setting of the Dunblane tartan.

Comparison of the settings reveals that the Smiths'/Stewart version has proportionally less red than green, and more yellow, than in the older/original setting. The inclusion of Blue for Wilsons' Light Blue has already been mentioned but the effect is pronounced when the two are view together.

Whilst it is known that Wilsons wove this tartan, we have no idea what they called it, nor if it was widely sold or was a 'special' for Viscount Dunblane around the time of the Levee as stated by the Smith brothers. If we accept that assertion then we may assume that Wilsons either extracted an approximate setting from the portrait or that they designed a new tartan but perhaps using a description of the tartan in the portrait. Having been in the Duke of Leeds family since it was painted, the original portrait was sold in the early 2010s and its current owner/location is unknown. Further study is therefore not possible at present.

USE AS A DISTRICT TARTAN

The association of this as a District Tartan can be traced to W & A. K. Johnston who wrote of it that *The tartan is probably a district one, just as that of the Campbells of Cawdor is called the "Argyll District Tartan"*.^{iv} This supposition is not supported by any evidence.

Stewart noted of the design that 'It seems to have been revived in 1822, doubtless on occasion of the visit of George IV to Scotland in anticipation of which there must have been much hunting round for old tartans to wear.' thus implying that it was an old sett, a comment undoubtedly based on the Smiths' linking it to the 1729 portrait. In 1992 the authors of District Tartans^v conflated Stewarts' comment and their own regarding the town of Dunblane into evidence for this tartan having been an old District sett for that area of Perthshire, a claim for which there is absolutely no proof.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the Dunblane tartan is an early 19th Century sett that was woven by Wilsons of Bannockburn and that evidence supports its use by the 4th Viscount Dunblane at the time of George IV's visit to Scotland in 1822. We also know that the shade of the blue overstripe was changed, but whether deliberately or in error is unclear, in 1850. It may also be assumed that the sett was copied or inspired by the tartan worn in the portrait of Thomas Osborne, 3rd Viscount Dunblane painted in 1729. It is to be hoped that the original portrait will not remain in private hands and unavailable for study and that at a future date it will be possible to examine it to confirm the details of the tartan in the outfit.

All the early evidence supports the use of this tartan as a family design and there is nothing to substantiate its wider attribution as a District tartan until the Johnstons' early 1900s work which subsequent authors, notably Teall and Smith, have repeated without question. However, irrespectively of its origins, the design is now widely sold as a District, as opposed to a family, tartan and there is no reason why it should not be enjoyed by anyone irrespectively of their name or origins.

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ⁱ SMITH W. & SMITH A. 1850 *Authenticated Tartans of the Clans and Families of Scotland*. W & A Smith, Mauchline

ⁱⁱ **Queen Victoria's Journals** -

<http://www.queenvictoriasjournals.org/search/displayItemFromId.do?FormatType=fulltextimgsrc&QueryType=articles&ResultsID=3382473442705&filterSequence=0&PageNumber=2&ItemID=qvj06510&volumeType=PSBEA>
Accessed 5 August 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ STEWART D.C. 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Oliver & Boyd., Edinburgh. Revised Edition Shephard-Walwyn., London 1977

^{iv} SCARLETT J.D. 1990 *TARTAN: The Highland Textile*. Shephard-Walwyn, London

^v TEALL of Teallach D.G. and SMITH P.D. 1992 *District Tartans*. Shephard-Walwyn., London