

Strathearn

Introduction

Although considered a District Tartan today, the origins of this unusually vibrant design, which has military and Royal links, is unclear. It fell out of favour in the late 19th century and remained virtually unknown until the 1980s when it revived for use by the Comrie Pipe Band (Fig 1).



Fig 1. Comrie Pipe Band wearing Strathearn (Muted Colours). Photo: fife.50megs.com

The title *Earl of Strathearn* dates to 1357 Robert Stewart, High Steward of Scotland, was created Earl of Strathearn. Passed down through the years until 1799 when Queen Victoria's father was created Duke of Kent and Strathearn. These Dukedoms became extinct on his death in 1820. Finally, Prince Arthur William Patrick Albert, 3rd son of Queen Victoria was created Duke of Connaught and Strathearn in 1874. He died in 1942 and was succeeded by his grandson who died the following year 1943 since when Strathearn as a title has been extinct.¹

Early Records

All the evidence points this being a design by the famous weaving firm Wm. Wilson & Son of Bannockburn. In a letter of 1821, the Edinburgh based firm Gloag, Cochran & Co., wrote to Wilsons enquiring about the existence of a Strathearn tartan which they were seeking "for a member of the Royal Family". Whilst they did not name the Royal, and given that the Earl of Strathearn died the previous year, it's possible that they were acting for the Duke of York who was Commander In Chief of the Army. The National Museums of Scotland is said to hold an early specimen of the tartan but its so far attempts to obtain further details have proved fruitless.

The Strathearn tartan first appeared in the Smiths' 1850 work¹ where, in connection with Duke of Kent², they said of it that "*While HRH was Commandant of the First Royals, a piece of old tartan was sent to Messrs Wilson of Bannockburn called 'Strathearn tartan', with orders for clothing of a similar pattern to be made for the gallant corps. Accordingly, this regiment was for a time dressed in this tartan.*" Despite the Smiths' claim, the Royal Scots (the Gallant Corps) never officially wore the Strathearn tartan; however, it has been suggested that they may have worn it as a cloak

¹ [The official website of The British Monarchy](#)

² HRH The Duke of Kent and Earl of Strathearn was the Colonel In Chief of the Royal Scots 1801-20.

lining at some point. Support for this military connection is found in Wilsons' records of the specimens that they sent to Logan but which, in this case,³ was not included in his 1831 publicationⁱⁱ. The Smiths obtained most of their specimens from Wilsons and so may have been relying on the firm's records of some 30 years earlier. These records prove that Wilsons were weaving the Strathearn before 1820, their Pattern Book No.3 of that date includes three counts for this tartan, including one for the 600 Reed which points to it being one of their late 18th/early 19th century patterns. The Smiths' quote Wilsons' view "*that the tartan is one of the Old District Tartans*". Whether this statement can be taken as evidence that the design is pre-Wilsons, or is simply a reflection of the fact that by the Smiths' time the firm was being run by the third Wilson generation and thus, that the corporate memory was incomplete some 70 years on. There are other examples amongst their records that support this.

What may at first appear to be a complex design is, in reality, a simple mirror pattern comprising two ground blocks with a smaller central band (green) on each and a series of fine overstripes. This is immediately obvious when the pattern is viewed in grey shades (Fig 2)

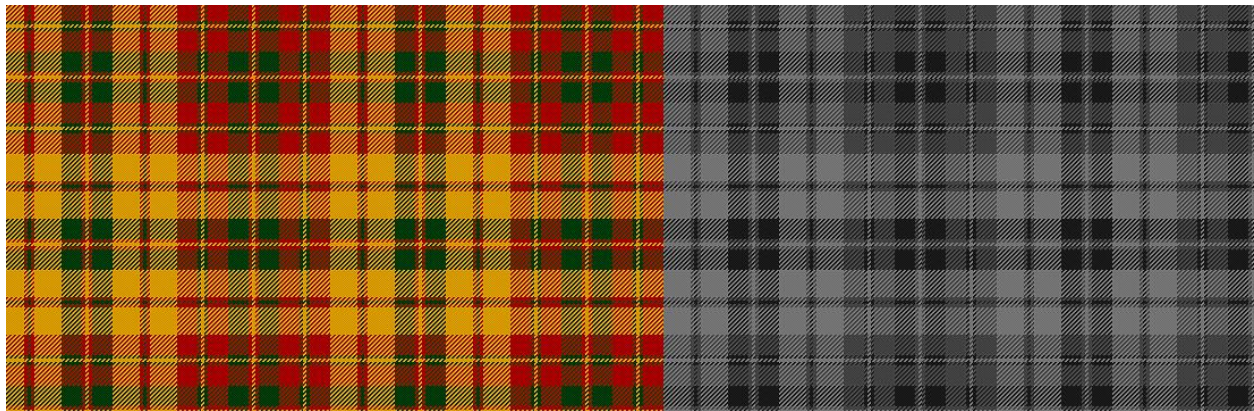


Fig 2. The Strathearn Tartan and grey scale comparison to show sett. © The Author

A District Tartan

Irrespective of the design's origins, by the early 1900s it was regarded as a 'District Tartan' by Johnstons,ⁱⁱⁱ and later by Teall & Smith,^{iv} who said of it that it "is said to have been worn by the father of Queen Victoria, H.R.H. Edward, Duke of Kent". The latter comment is uncorroborated elsewhere and was presumably 'assumed' by the authors having conflated the fact that the Duke was Hon Col of the Royal Scots who in turn were said to have worn the tartan. With the conferring of the title Earl of Strathearn on Prince William following his marriage, the tartan's Royal connection was re-established and popularised by Kate, Duchess of Strathearn (Fig 3).

Conclusion

Claims that this is an old District tartan are unfounded and based on the available evidence it is most likely that this is one of Wilsons' 'fancy patterns' that dates to c.1800-20. Ongoing research will hopefully confirm the Royal Scot connection and also identify the NMS sample which is reported to be of Wilsons' cloth.

³ Wilsons' comment *Earl of Strathearn. Tartan as worn by the Royals by order of the Duke of Kent.*



Fig 3. Catherine, Countess of Strathearn during a visit to Dumfries House on 5 April 2013
Source: Getty Images

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

ⁱⁱ **LOGAN J.** 1831 *The Scottish Gael*. Smith, Eldar & Co., London

ⁱⁱⁱ **JOHNSTON W. & JOHNSTON A. K.** 1906 *The Scottish Tartans*. W. & A. K. Johnston Ltd., Edinburgh

^{iv} **TEALL of Teallach D.G. and SMITH P.D.** 1992 *District Tartans*. Shepherd-Walwyn., London