

The Jacobite Tartan

Introduction

Whilst there are a number of surviving early-mid 18th century specimens of tartans that have a Jacobite connection¹, plus others of the period that 'could' have been connected. Only two are named *Jacobite*, one, using called *The Jacobite Tartan*, is woven commercially and claimed to be an early 18th century design. The claim is tenuous as discussed later. The other, named *Jacobite, Old*, is supported by early specimens albeit that they are not as old as has been assumed in the past.

A Jacobite Symbol?

The first reference to *The Jacobite Tartan* was in the Smith Brothers' 1850 publicationⁱ where that say of it that:

Whenever members have been engaged in conspiracies, whether for the purpose of obtaining their own rights, or invading the rights of others, secret words, signs, and emblems whereby they could recognise each other have been adopted; and previous to the rising of '15, the Tartan pattern here given was worn as one of the emblems of the Jacobites. We had it from a lady of rank, who has still in her possession a silk scarf of it which was manufactured in 1712 for a lady who was a most zealous Jacobite, and whose eldest son followed "Prince Charlie" in '15. The uniform tradition which has accompanied this scarf, has always represented it as "The Jacobite Tartan" (Plate 1).



Plate 1. Smiths' plate of The Jacobite Tartan.

Apart from the glaringly obvious error of referring to *Prince Charlie in '15*,² the Smiths appear to have conflated reports of ladies in Edinburgh wearing tartan as a sign of their anti-Union sympathies, with Jacobitism. In fact, opposition to the 1707 Act of Union was not restricted to Jacobites.

The authors did not name the 'lady of rank' said to have owned the silk scarf making their claim impossible to verify. Nor was it explained how she was connected to the zealous Jacobite lady a century earlier. It is unclear how the Smiths' correspondent could date the scarf to 1712 with any degree of accuracy and it could easily have been more recent, perhaps a Highland Revival piece.³

No other old example of this tartan is known and the silk scarf, or possibly a sash, has not been seen since the Smiths copied it. It is noteworthy that the pattern was not included in Stewart's *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*ⁱⁱ

¹ These are often associated with a particular family or individual, or in some cases, portraiture of the period.

² Prince Charles Edward Louis John Casimir Silvester Severino Maria Stuart was born in 1720 and is best known for his involvement in the 1745 Rising. It was his father, James Francis Edward Stuart, who led the 1715 Rising.

³ In costume terms the Highland Revival refers to the period c1782-1837 in which, as the name suggests, there was a revival of interest in, and wearing of, Highland Dress following the Act Repealing the Proscription of Highland Dress in 1782.

The Sett

Assuming that the Smiths' rendition of the design is broadly correct, the inclusion of orange is unusual for the period attributed to it. The earliest known specimen dates to Clans Originauxⁱⁱⁱ, a bound collection of commercial samples from 1880. In that sample the orange is rendered as yellow (Plate 2), and in the specimen included in the Highland Society of London's Collection (1906-34) the shade is a light brown (Plate 3). Whilst orange or yellow are the more commonly seen colours, the brown is aesthetically more pleasing as it dulls down an otherwise somewhat gaudy design.

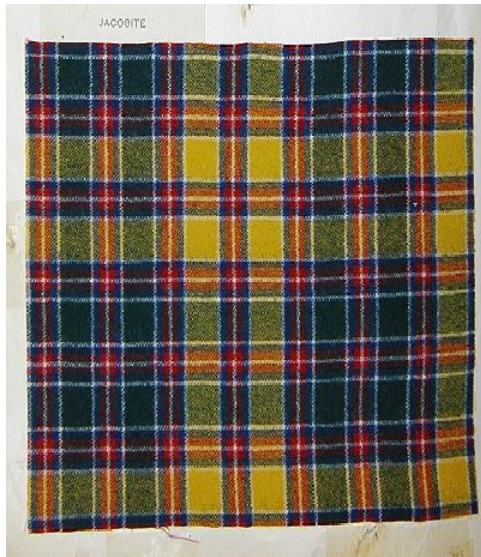


Plate 2. Clans Originaux, 1880
Photo: The Scottish Tartans Authority



Plate 3. Highland Society of London 1906-34
Photo: © The Author

The inclusion of the same white-red-blue-white stripe combination on each pivot and to separate the ground colours, those areas themselves relatively small, makes the pattern appear crowded and busy. Such mirror patterns⁴ were popular in the early 19th century but much less so in the mid-18th century and it is very unlikely to have been used as this W & A K Johnston postcard imagined. (Plate 4).

An alternative design?

There are 19th century hard tartan specimens of pattern named *Jacobite, Old* in various museum collections (Plate 5). Nothing is known of its origins but the quality and colouring may point to it being one of the weaving firm Wilsons of Bannockburn's designs.

The setting and colour combinations of this pattern are more in keeping with those of the mid-18th century; however, the use of two shades of yellow is a feature more often seen with some of Wilsons' patterns from the turn of the 19th century. The labels attached to the specimens are all later and therefore, the name may also be a later attribution.

⁴ A mirror pattern is one in which the two alternating ground motifs are the same size and arrangement but in different colours.



Plate 4. The Jacobite Tartan, W & A K Johnston postcard, 1906



Plate 5. A specimen of the so-called *Jacobite, Old* tartan c.1800-50. Photo © The Author

Of the two designs, the *Jacobite, Old* is a far better tartan in terms of pattern structure and colouring than the *Jacobite Tartan*. The former did not appear in any books and probably for that reason was not woven during the height of the Victorian tartan craze in the late 19th century. Conversely, the *Jacobite Tartan* has been in continuous production since the 1880's. The inclusion of a specimen in the Highland Society of London's collection is curious and all the other specimens are clan tartans submitted by the relevant chief or clan society. Further research into the Society's records may reveal when and by whom it was submitted.

Notwithstanding the doubtful history of the design, the story of the *Jacobite Tartan* being a secret symbol made it a logical choice for Wendy Wood, the famous Scottish patriot, to adopt as a symbolic badge. She has a piece of the tartan sealed in plastic, a novel idea at the time, and a pin attached so that she could wear it proudly (Plate 6).



Plate 6. A piece of Jacobite Tartan made into a badge for the Scottish patriot, Wendy Wood. © The Author

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

ⁱⁱ **STEWART D. W.** 1893

ⁱⁱⁱ **J. Claude Fres. & Cie.** 1880 *Clans Originaux*. Paris