

Traditional selvedge decoration on tartan cloth

Many readers will no doubt be familiar with the term selvedge (British English) or selvage (generally US English), although not all those will know where to find it on a kilt or piece cloth, and far less will be familiar with what it actually is, how and why it exists and the variations historically used in tartan.

What is a Selvedge?

The terms selvage and selvedge are a corruption of "self-edge", and have been in use since the 16th century.

Literally, it is a self-edge and is the term for the woven in edges of a piece of cloth that prevents the fabric from unravelling. Selvages form the extreme lateral edges of the fabric and are formed during the weaving process. It has been described as a form of over locking and is a result of the weaving process where the weft (cross-ways) threads pass around the edge of the warp (length-ways) threads so binding them in (Fig 1).

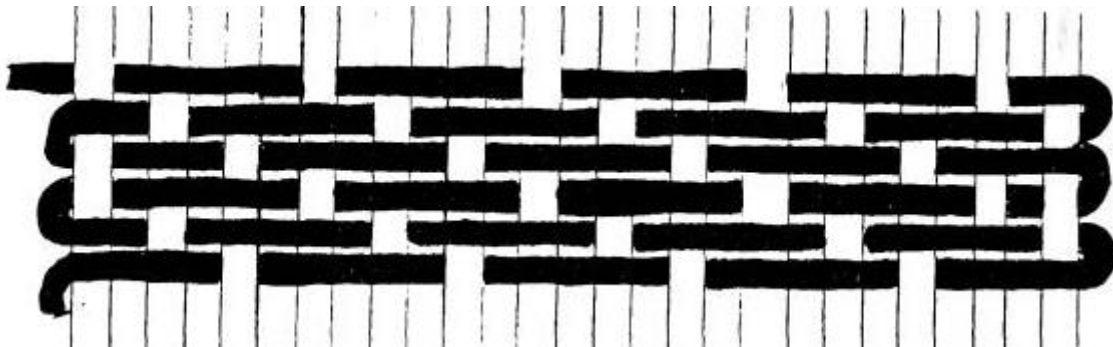


Fig 1. Representation of twill weave selvedge.

Selvedge types in Tartan

A number of selvedge types were used historically in tartan weaving but many of the techniques disappeared as mass production took over and the use of cloth changed. Today a lot of commercially produced tartan is woven with what is known as a *Tucked Edge*¹ which whilst functional, bulks out the edge when used on heavier cloth and makes it look ungainly. This is in part due to the fact that the ends of the folded back yarn are often visible and at times misaligned on one side of the cloth. Kilt makers seem not to notice and often use the cloth inside out (Fig 2).

A plain weave² selvedge, where the last few threads on either side are woven in plain weave, is another option sometimes used for modern non-kilting cloth.

¹ As opposed to a traditional selvedge which is manufactured with a continuous thread going back and forward on a hand-loom or an old type mechanical loom. (Dobcross or Hattersley). A "Tuck in Selvage" is manufactured on a fast-loom which places one thread at a time into the fabric. This is purposely left approximately 1.5cms long at both sides of the woven fabric before being cut and then returned to the body of the fabric with a mechanical hook system giving a very similar and tidy robust edge as per the traditional version.

² The terms *plain weave* and *plain twill selvedge* are distinct and not interchangeable. The former refers to a weaving structure in which each thread passes alternately over one, under one thread, whereas the latter is the author's term to refer to the practice in tartan weaving of repeating the sett in twill weave through the selvedge to the edge of the cloth.



Fig 2. Turned edge on a modern kilt with the line of the turned in threads visible. © The Author.

In traditional tartan weaving the selvedge is generally of a plain 2/2 twill weave that is the same thickness as the rest of the cloth. In old specimens the tartan either repeated to the edge of the cloth or some form of selvedge mark or border pattern was included, depending on how the cloth was intended to be used. Many pre-1800 rural plaids for example, featured a herringbone selvedge. A selvedge mark or border pattern is a form of decorated selvedge and was only used for plaids, domestic blankets and, in the early C19th, a selvedge mark was sometimes added to military kilt cloth. Material for general clothing was always woven in undecorated twill with the pattern repeating from the centre to both edges and finishing with a plaid twill selvedge (Fig 3).



Fig 3. An early C19th example of a balanced weave with the sett repeating evenly from the centre to each selvedge. © The Author.

Closer examination of a plain selvedge sett shows the pattern continuing in standard 2/2 twill weave to the edge of the material (Fig 4) in which piece the diagonal warp running top left to bottom right is clearly visible. This basic twill selvedge is the standard way in which cloth was woven from the post-Proscription period and continued to be until the modern fast (Tuck Edge) looms were introduced in the late 20th century.



Fig 4. C18th specimen with a basic twill weave selvedge. © The Author.

Mention has already been made of the use of herringbone selvedges. These are often found on old plaids, although not all old plaids were woven with a herringbone selvedge. Examples show that it was used on both plain and decorated selvedges well before the mid-C18th. The effect of a herringbone is to make that section slightly thicker and looser so it probably had a dual function, principally of being decorative but also of allowing the fabric to move or flow more effectively which might have been an added advantage in a belted plaid. Herringboning was generally one to three inches wide with about two inches being most common width. The individual bands were generally 8-10 threads with 4 to 8 bands in most herringbone selvedges. Fig 5. shows a portion of a 18th Century plaid sett that finishes with a herringbone selvedge.



Fig 5. A C18th repeating sett with herringbone selvedge. © The Author.

Selvedge Marks and Selvedge Patterns

In addition to a plain or herringbone selvedge the traditional Highland weavers also had the choice of including either a selvedge mark or pattern both of which were used on plaid settings up until the Proscription period. Both techniques appear to have been purely decorative and can be found in early C18th specimens and, what appears to be a selvedge mark can be seen in some early portraits. They would certainly have been easier to paint than selvedge patterns which do not feature in early portraits. So what's the difference and how were they used?

Selvedge Marks are a form of decoration where the pattern is off-set and the sett repeats from the middle of a pivot on one selvedge towards the second where a broad band of colour is added. Sometimes the band was one of the colours in the tartan, usually blue or black, or in red, blue and green setts a black band was sometimes added. The band either ran to the edge of the cloth or, there was a fine, usually red, stripe right at the edge as in this example. It is an example of a fine c1800 Murray of Tullibardine plaid that includes a broad black selvedge mark with the herringboning running through and into the red (Fig 6). This plaid was a copy of a much older one which it is assumed would also have had the selvedge mark.



Fig 6. c1800 plaid with a black herringbone selvedge mark. © The Author.

Selvedge marks seem to have been a decorative feature of double plaids that were intended to be worn i.e. the *feileadh mor* or *belted plaid*. The single-width cloth was typically 26-28" wide. Where a feileadh beag was made for a cut down plaid or simply for a single piece of plaid material the selvedge mark was sometimes a feature too; the best example of which is the feileadh beag worn by the elder of the MacDonald Boys in Mosman's c1750 portrait.

With the ban on the wearing of Highland Clothes during the Proscription era (1746-82), selvedge marks would probably have died out but for the fact that they, like other aspects of traditional dress, continued in cloth and clothes used by the military. It's logical to assume that at least some of the early military plaids woven in the Highlands would have had selvedge marks and, if not already standard, this feature was probably adopted uniformly once larger

runs were being ordered from the Lowland weavers. Early 19th century threadcounts for military cloth included specifications for selvedge marks on plaids for the 42nd, 78th, 79th, 92nd and 93rd regiments³. This practice continued until about 1810-15 when the belted plaid was dropped in favour of the kilt for all uses. The fact that plaid material was sometimes used for kilts during the early 1800s is evident from the Officers' weight cloth used in a c1810-20 kilt with a broad black herringbone selvedge mark (Fig 7).



Fig 7. Black herringbone selvedge mark on a c1820 78th Regiment kilt. © The Author.

Selvedge Patterns are a more elaborate form of selvedge decoration on a warp that is again off-set but where towards the second selvedge the last section is an arrangement of striped bands composed of some or all the colours in the main sett. Selvedge patterns are commonly, if not exclusively, found on domestic plaids, that is, those designed for use in doors as bed covers, hanging etc., rather than those intended to be worn. A majority of the surviving examples are white based blanket patterns that are often mistakenly called arisaid tartans in the belief that they were worn as an Earasaid⁴. Evidence for these blanket patterns being used in this way is highly dubious and based solely on Martin Martin's comment at the end of the 17th century⁵. These white based plaids show no evidence of having been worn and many would have been quite impractical as clothing. They were generally 40-52" wide when joined and often featured a number of stripes in different widths at their edges leading to them being referred to as *barred blankets*.

An example of such a blanket is at Fig 8 where the barred arrangement is clearly visible. The basic sett is similar to a number of surviving domestic plaids known throughout the Highlands which suggests that there was a form of default setting for such patterns. A slight variation of this one continued to be woven by Wilsons of Bannockburn, including the 'border' until the 1820s at least. The Scottish Tartans Authority has details of at least ten such settings from the 18th and early 19th centuries.

³ Wilsons of Bannockburn's 1819 Key Pattern Book.

⁴ Earasaid (often Arisaid or Arasaid), a square of cloth, often tartan, worn as a form of mantle by Highland women.

⁵ "...called Arisad, is a white plaide, having a few small stripes of black, blew and red".



Fig 8. A typical selvage pattern on an early C18th barred blanket. © The Author.

Undoubtedly the best example of a white based plaid is that woven by Christina Young, initialled CY and dated 1726. The complete plaid survives which, with a 36" warp, is unusually wide for tartan of that era and the finished 72" blanket has a rare double bar selvedge pattern that is also herringboned over the full 8" width (Fig 9). Christina was from Aberdeen, not an area traditionally associated with tartan weaving, is said to have woven this for her wedding so perhaps it was a form of dowry. It is likely to have been used as a bed cover or surround.



Fig 9. Christina Young blanket showing the double barred selvedge pattern. © The Author.

But for the chance discovery of two plaids in Nova Scotia it might have been assumed that these selvedge patterns were restricted to white (arisaid) type domestic blankets. Full details of these plaids are [here](#) but for the purposes of this paper this important point is that both, one single width and one a joined plaid, are all tartan (as opposed to a white arisaid sett) and are surrounded by a complete border of a different sett (Fig 10).



Fig 10. An example of a plaid with a Total Border. Picture courtesy of Archie MacLellan, Antigonish.

The two plaids were the only known examples⁶ to show this technique, which the author has termed a *Total Border*. It's an extraordinarily difficult feature to weave and can be regarded as the zenith of the tartan weaver's art in which a completely different pattern appears in each of the corners where the warp and weft borders meet. The dimensions of the joined plaid, together with tasselled ends, means that it was not made to be worn and was probably intended for domestic use in the same way as the blanket pattern plaids.

Conclusions

Decorated selvedges are a feature of many surviving examples of old tartan. They were a technique use on plaiding, that is, cloth intended to be joined as double width plaids/blankets and were never used on cloth intended for tailoring into coats, dress etc.

The simplest of the selvedge techniques was a herringbone threading of the last 2-3 inches, generally in a dark colour, that was part of the normal repeat of the sett. Herringboning was also often used in combination with selvedge marks and patterns.

Selvedge marks were a broad band of colour that ran the length of one side of the cloth and once joined, the finished plaid would have the *mark* at the top and bottom of the cloth. Selvedge marks seem to have been a feature of plaids intended for wear, whereas selvedge patterns appear to have been confined to domestic plaids not intended to be worn. Most surviving examples of the latter are predominately so-called arisaid tartans although at least three full tartan examples survive. These appear to have been the exception rather than the rule and their complex construction marks them out as the work of a mater weaver.

⁶ In 2018 the author had an opportunity to examine a MacLaine plaid that also includes a *Total Border*. Details [here](#).

The ban on the wearing of Highland Dress heralded a change in the use of tartan and with it the need for decorated selvages. Whilst the plaid continued to be worn by the military, selvedge marks were still employed. Such plaiding was sometimes used for kilts; however, the technique had disappeared entirely by about 1820. The weaving of arisaid type blanket patterns died out in the Highlands in the late 1700s and along with them their related selvedge patterns. Wilsons of Bannockburn continued to weave a *Blanket Sett* that included a *Border* (selvedge pattern) into the early 19th century⁷.

Today these traditional selvedge techniques are generally unknown on commercial cloth and so the reader is unlikely to see modern examples. That is not to say that the technique cannot be produced but it is restricted to hand-weavers and those commercial firms still using the older style looms⁸. – see Fig 11.



Fig 11. Modern kilt with herringbone selvedge. © The Author.

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⁷ In the late 20th century their notes for the 'Border' were mistakenly taken as referring to a *Border Tartan* which was subsequently woven as a separate design and sold under that name.

⁸ The weaving process of a modern 'fast loom' makes it impossible to include herringbone selvedge or a selvedge pattern on the cloth.