

A Joined Plaid dated 1748

Introduction

In October 2016, the Scottish Tartans Authority (STA) was loaned a joined plaid initialled 'MW' '1748'. The material is finely spun and expertly woven in six colours incorporating nine shades, including four graduated shades of red, technically a very accomplished feat. It is one of less than ten known initialled and/or dated 18th century specimens and one of only two such pieces that is pre-dated 1750. The piece (Fig 1) is particularly interesting because the date is within the first year of the Act of Proscription which banned the wearing of Highland Dress.

Throughout this paper, the term plaid¹ is used to describe this artefact; however, it is not suggested that this was a male belted plaid. The size, quality, lack of wear and the fact that it is initialled and dated are indicative of its use as a decorative piece, for example, as a bed cover.



Fig 1. Joined plaid initialled and dated. © The Author

Unlike the majority of such pieces, in this case we know to whom the initials refer: 'MW' stood for Marjory Wishart, the gggg.grandmother of the current owner. The family tradition is that the plaid was '*made by Marjory Wishart in 1748*' which has been assumed to mean that she wove the material that year, but this may not be the case.

The Original Owner

From family records we know that Marjory Wishart was born in Banchory, Aberdeenshire in 1724, married a Peter McCombie in 1748 and died in Aberdeen in 1792. It is not known where the couple married or subsequently lived but given Marjory's place of birth and death it is reasonable to assume that it was in Aberdeenshire somewhere. It is also reasonable to conclude that 1748 refers to the date of her marriage. Marjory Wishart would have been 24 at the time of her marriage and the assumed date she made the plaid. It's impossible to

¹ From the Gaelic 'plaide' meaning a blanket.

know for certain but the likelihood of someone so relatively young having reached the level of expertise to dye and weave such a piece is questionable. It is much more likely that the family tradition that Marjory 'made it' should be understood as meaning that she produced the finished piece by joining two lengths of material, finishing the ends and embroidering her initials and date. This was possibly as a form of trousseau or dowry piece. The family have another plaid, also said to have belonged to Marjory Wishart, that plaid has been dated to c1780-1800.²

Deconstructing the plaid

The joined plaid measures 100 x 54 inches comprising two pieces of 27-inch-wide cloth joined selvedge to selvedge using a whip stitch and the rough (non-selvedge) ends turned and sewn down to prevent fraying. Woven at approximately 76 epi, the cloth has a balanced sett³ with 4 half repeats across the of the warp giving 8 half setts (4 full repeats) across the width of the joined material. The yarn is single spun in both warp and weft and naturally dyed (Fig 2).



Fig 2. Detail of the warp and weft singles yarn. © The Author

The quality of the naturally dyeing is indicative of the yarn having been professionally dyed, almost certainly in the Lowlands rather than in the rural Highlands. Although no dye analysis has been conducted, the red shades in particular are consistent with having been dyed with cochineal, an imported dyestuff much prized for the range and quality of red it gave. Similarly, the blue and green are likely to have been dyed with indigo, plus an unknown yellow dye in the case of the latter. An appreciation of the range and quality of the dyeing can be gained from this section, particular the four shades of red – bottom right (Fig 3). The inclusion of four shades of red is very unusual and is the only known case of such gradation of colour in an apparent mid-18th century specimen. The quality of the spinning, dyeing and weaving means that this would have been expensive cloth in the 18th century, especially in the mid-18th century when such a piece would have been the preserve of the gentry.

² [An Unnamed late C18th Wilsons Fancy Plaid](#)

³ A balanced sett is one where the pattern (sett) repeats out from the centre of the warp to finish at the same point in the design on each selvedge.



Fig 3. Detail of the 9 colours and shades in the plaid. © The Author

The linen yarn used to join the two pieces and for embroidering the date and initials differs from that used turn the ends of the plaid (Fig 4). The presence of the joining thread in seam in the rolled ends confirms that the two halves were first joined and ends turned and sewn down afterwards. This turning was done with a paler thread that more closely matched the tartan shades and which was probably intended to be unobtrusive.



Fig 4. Overview of the join, initials turned end showing the different thread used. © The Author

The Sett

The prominent feature of this tartan is its complexity and is one of relatively few old designs that include eight or nine colours and shades. This feature is found in the odd surviving early-mid 18th rural plaid but the majority of such patterns are late 18th century designs by the famous tartan weavers William Wilson & Son of Bannockburn. Their c1780-90 Birral tartan, with which this design has similarities, was one such fancy pattern (Fig 4).

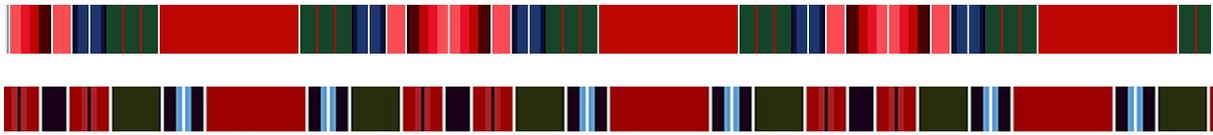


Fig 4. Comparison of the 1748 Plaid (top) and Birral tartans. © The Author

The growth of Wilsons in the latter part of the century was characterised by the introduction of standardised dye shades and a number of fancy patterns. The various shades of red in this piece are typical of their stock shades introduced c1780. The full range of colours, shades and probable dyestuffs in the plaid are:

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Dark Red - cochineal | Black - unknown (possible indigo top dye) |
| Scarlet - cochineal | Dark Blue - indigo |
| Rose - cochineal | Blue - indigo |
| Pink - cochineal | Green - indigo + an unknown yellow |
| | White - natural (unbleached) |

Conclusion

There are a number of other initialled and dated 18th century plaids with which this one can be compared, these range from 1726 to 1796. The majority were woven in the Highlands but only one pre-dates 1750⁴ and the demise of the clan system.

Notwithstanding the 1748 date, it is possible, perhaps probable, that this plaid was made at a later date and the date is retrospective to commemorate her marriage. In the absence of any scientific dating of the cloth or dyes it is impossible to be completely certain but the balance of available evidence, such as the dye quality, strongly points to this cloth having been made in the last quarter of the 18th century but before 1792, the date of Marjory Wishart's death. Whilst the quality of the cloth and dyeing is consistent with that woven by Wilsons of Bannockburn at the time, the width of the material is atypical although not unique amongst their surviving specimens.

The quality of the workmanship and in particular the dyeing, is unlike any other surviving specimen of mid-18th century tartan. Such a piece would have been extremely expensive and cloth of this quality would almost certainly have been the preserve of the gentry. There is no such known family connection with Marjory or her husband. In appearance and construction terms this material and design is similar to the cloth and fancy patterns produced by Wilsons of Bannockburn in the latter part of the 18th century c1780-1800 and that is a much more likely date for the piece which was obviously little used judging by the lack of fading and relatively good condition.

© Peter Eslea MacDonald May 2017

⁴ The 1726 Christina Young Barred Blanket which is typical of 18th century blanket patterns but quite different in design terms to the plaid under discussion here.