

An 18th Century Plaid belonging to the Maclaines of Lochbuie

Introduction

In early 2018 the author was contacted by a member of the Clan Maclaine Society to say that they had recently learnt of a very old specimen of the Maclaine of Lochbuie tartan. Described as a 'woven rug', the piece was said to date back to the late 1700s and to have been handed down through family members and it is now owned by a descendant of one of the Lochbuie chiefs.

The accompanying photograph showed what was obviously a fringed plaid¹ (Plate 1) with a hand-written note by the current owner's father stating that it was a "*Maclaine tartan rug. Made of old hard tartan – probably late 18th century. Brought to Fascaldaie by Mrs Gregorson of Ardtornish, d(aughter) of M. Maclaine of Lochbuy. Grandmother of Colonel Hume Greenfield*".



Plate 1. Overview of the Plaid. Photo credit: J. Greenfield

Through correspondence with the owner additional photographs were obtained to allow for a more detailed study and arrangements were made to examine the plaid.

¹ Plaid (Gaelic *plaid* – a blanket) was a term used to describe the traditional Highland garment worn by men and women.

Construction

The plaid comprises two pieces of cloth 26" wide x 110" long which are joined at the pivot edge and finished with a twisted fringe². The offset pattern contains four full repeats, plus an additional red square, of the simple alternating pattern roughly 19.5" wide plus an elaborate selvedge pattern³ approximately 6.5" wide. The latter not only runs along the selvedge but also along the top and bottom of the piece, a technique termed a 'Total Border' by the author. Both the warp and weft yarns are hand-spun singles (unplied) and naturally dyed, probably in the hank⁴. If analysed the red and blue dyes would probably be shown to be cochineal and indigo respectively.⁵

Fig 1 shows the construction of the plaid diagrammatically; Plate 2 is a section of the plaid showing the four repeats, selvedge pattern and join. Where the border of the selvedge and the ends intersect at the corners a variation of the tartan is produced.

This plaid is one of only three known examples with a *Total Border*. The other two, one of which is a single-width (unjoined) plaid, are in Nova Scotia.⁶ The Maclaine plaid is unique in having the border pattern threaded in herringbone on the selvedge.

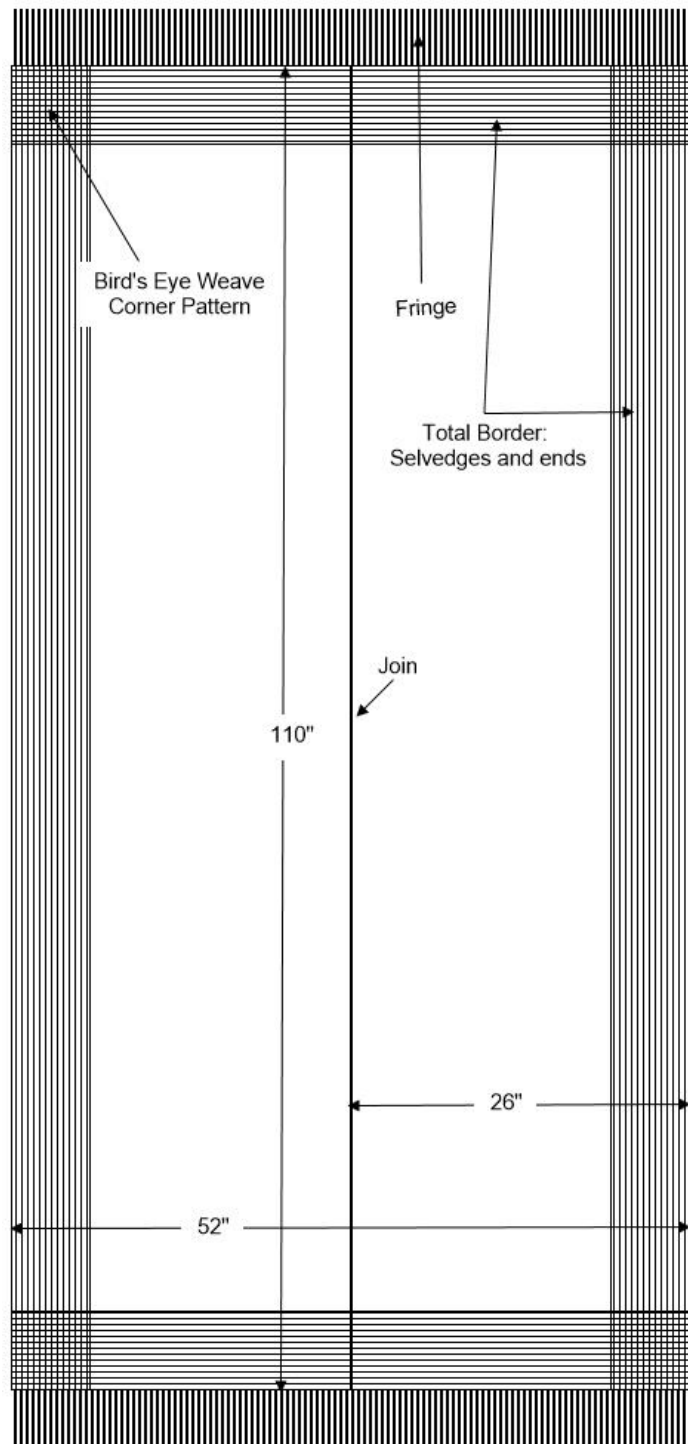


Fig 1: Diagrammatic representation of the Lochbuie plaid showing the 'total border'.

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² See [Joined Plaids - Settings & Construction](#) for an explanation of how a joined plaid was woven.

³ For more about selvedge patterns see the related paper on [Selvedge Techniques](#).

⁴ The cloth is set at 48 epi which suggests that it was probably woven with a 12 dent reed, 4 ends per split.

⁵ Analysis of pre-industrial tartan specimens reveals that these two imported dyes were the principal sources for reds and blues.

⁶ The Nova Scotia plaids are discussed in this paper - [Two old Plaids found in Nova Scotia](#)



Plate 2. Layout of the Plaid showing main body, selvedge pattern and join. © The Author

There are 23 bands of herringboning which finish in the traditional blue band and red stripe arrangement commonly found on the edge of many old plaids. All the bands are 10 ends (threads) wide except for the light green band which is only 8 threads. The result is a change of direction at the start of each band until the blue immediately after the green when each subsequent band and colour change happens on the third thread (Fig 2).



Fig 2. The herringbone arrangement of selvedge. © The Author

A similar technique was used in the corresponding weft sections of the cloth where there are 23 bars of chevron weave⁷ resulting in the corner design being Bird's-Eye weave⁸ (Plate 3).



Plate 3. Intersection of the warp and weft herringbone to give Bird's-Eye pattern in each corner. © The Author

⁷ In Chevron weave the change of direction from a true vee shape \vee whereas in herringbone the vee is a staggered or broken.

⁸ Bird's-Eye, also known as Goose-Eye or Pheasant's-Eye, weave - <https://artlandia.com/wonderland/glossary/BirdsEye.html>

Weaving cloth to make a joined plaid with a *Total Border* required a level of skill that would only have been found amongst a few of the most experienced weavers. Adding the intricacies of setting up the herringbone selvedge pattern and then weaving sections of the weft in chevron in order to give the Bird's-Eye corners shows a remarkable level of sophistication. Regrettably little is known about how weavers were taught or techniques shared in the Highlands of the 18th century. From a technical perspective, once the yarn had been spun there would have been 14 stages needed to produce the finished plaid:

1. Workout the layout of the offset warp, including the selvedge pattern.
2. Calculate the amount of yarn of each colour required.
3. Dye the yarn, dry it and wind it ready for warping.
4. Warp (measure out) the pattern and dress the loom (wind on the threads).
5. Tie in the warp, including re-threading for the herringbone if not previously done.
6. Weave the first band of red (approx. 1 inch) in standard twill weave.
7. Weave the selvedge pattern in the weft in 23 bands of chevron.
8. Return to twill weave and weave the first red square to the pivot followed by 20 full repeats (2.75 yards) of the main tartan.
9. Repeat steps 6-8 in reverse order *ensuring that exactly the same number of pattern repeats are included.*
10. Leave approximately 12 inches of unwoven warp (to make two sets of fringes).
11. Repeat steps 6-9.
12. Remove the cloth from the loom and cut the unwoven section (Step 10) in the middle to leave two lengths of identical cloth.
13. Turn one length 180 degrees and join the two long edges on the non-selvedge pattern side.
14. Plait/twist the fringes and tie off each plait with an over-hand knot.

Dating such pieces is not an exact science. Based on surviving examples, weaving tartan with an offset warp had gone out of fashion by 1800. There were a few later examples of this type of cloth woven to order from the likes of Wilsons of Bannockburn, usually to copy an older specimen but the traditional rural tradition appears to have died out by then. The hand-spun yarn, dyeing and weaving techniques of this plaid are consistent with the type of cloth woven in the Highlands in the second half of the 18th century. A date c1760-1800 is not unreasonable for the production of this piece.

The Tartan

The setting of this tartan can be described as having alternating red and blue blocks of equal size, each decorated with a different colour but similar size pivot comprising five stripes of three colours. The pivot on the blue square is white guarded by black enclosed by a light green stripe; the pivot on the red square is light green guard by pink enclosed by dark green. The selvedge pattern is made up of just red, blue and green and would have run along one side of the cloth. (Figs 3 and 4).



Fig 3: Colour strip showing the alternating check and decorated pivots. © The Author



Fig 4: Colour strip showing the sett and selvedge arrangement. © The Author

Whilst there are some overall similarities between this and the Clan Maclaine of Lochbuie tartan (Fig 5) this is likely to be nothing more than coincidence and a reminder that red was a popular colour in older tartans because of its status as an indicator of rank and relative wealth.



Fig 5: Comparison of the tartan from the plaid and the Clan Maclaine tartan. © The Author

First known from its inclusion in a collection of 1810⁹, an earlier, unspecified date have been made for the origin of the usual clan tartanⁱ. It is noteworthy that there is no Lochbuie or MacLean of Duart specimen in the Highland Society of London's original collection of 1816-20 which suggests that the chiefs had not yet ratified their 'clan tartan'. It's also not unreasonable to conclude that the tartan of the plaid was not a widely known pattern in southern Mull or the chief of the Maclaines would, in all likelihood, have selected it for his clan tartan.

Origins of the Plaid

According to family tradition, the plaid was acquired through the marriage of Mary Maclaine (1798-1880), daughter of Murdoch, 19th Chief of the Maclaines of Lochbuie, to John (the Sheriff) Gregorson of Ardtornish in 1820. Their daughter Margaret (1826-1908) moved to Fasadale¹⁰ (Ardrishaig, Argyll) after the death of her husband Hume Greenfield in 1864, to live with her 1st cousin the Rev Angus Maclaine¹¹. The plaid was subsequently handed down through the family, Mary was the g.g.grandmother of the present owner.

There is no family history to link the plaid with the Gregorsons of Ardtornish¹² and therefore, if the Mull origin and the approximate date for the plaid is correct then it is likely to have belonged to the family before Mary (b.1798) owned it.

The similarity in style with the 'total border' plaid in Nova Scotia offers the intriguing possibility that the two represent a long-forgotten style and/or one that had a regional basis. The joined plaid in Nova Scotia belongs to a family whose origins are from Morar in the north-west Highlands, an area not far from either Lochbuie or Ardtornish in relative geographical terms (Fig 6).

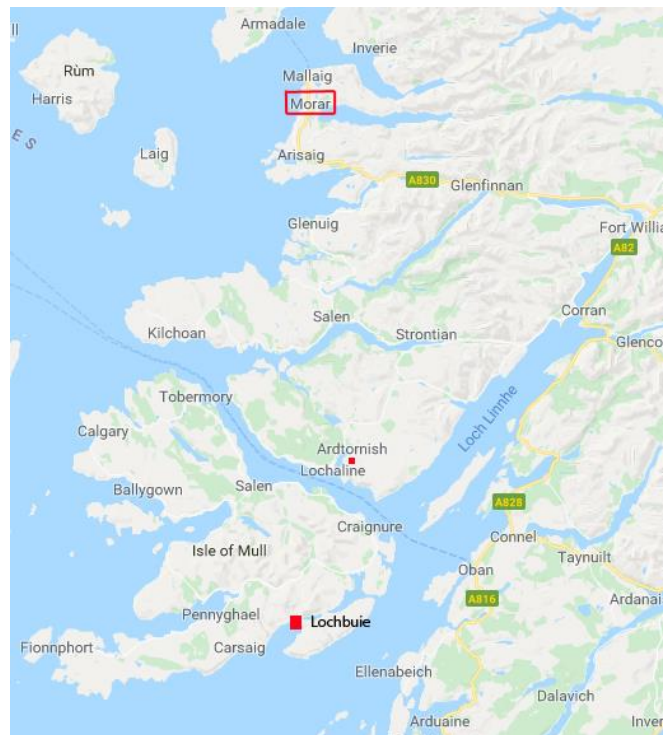


Fig 6: The relative locations of Lochbuie, Ardtornish and Morar. Source: Google Maps

⁹ The Cockburn Collection, Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

¹⁰ Fasadale was built by Rev Maclaine in 1865.

¹¹ Angus (1800-1877) was a Maclaine of Scallastle on Mull, illegitimate Lochbuie descendants. His mother was a sister of John Gregorson of Ardtornish.

¹² The Gregorsons of Ardtornish descend from the Macgregors of Corriearklet, Perthshire and were related through marriage to Rob Roy Macgregor.

In 2018 the tartan was endorsed as a Maclaine tartan by the chief and was registered with the Scottish Register as Maclaine of Lochbuie Auld Sett¹³. Its use is restricted and enquiries about it should be addressed to the Clan Society¹⁴.

Use of the Plaid

Whilst the weaving and joining technique used to make the plaid are the same as those used to make a Belted Plaid¹⁵ the dimensions of the plaid and the twisted fringes indicate a different use. The 'total border' pattern with its intricate corners was designed to be seen, this is best achieved by lying the plaid flat or hanging it; for example, as a bed cover or bed hangings. It's possible that this plaid was part of Mary Maclaine's marriage dowry, something from her old family that she brought to her new one.

Conclusion

The spinning, dyeing, weaving and construction techniques used to produce the plaid are wholly consistent with those of the rural Highlands in the second half of the 18th century. Mary Maclaine was born in 1798 so while it may have belonged to her it was almost certainly not made by her. It probably dates to the latter half of the 18th century, (c1760-1800). The inclusion of a 'total border' with Bird's-Eye weave corners marks this out as the work of an experienced weaver. Such plaids are exceptional and extremely rare, so much so that this is the only known example in Scotland. It represents the zenith of traditional tartan weaving skills, is unique and because of that, of national cultural importance. Little is known about weaving in the 18th century Highlands beyond the fact that most townships would have had at least one weaver and that there were male and female weavers. This plaid would almost certainly have had to have been commissioned from a master weaver.

Like the majority of old tartan specimens, it is impossible to prove their origin beyond a broad geographical source and date. Family tradition says that the plaid came from Mull with Mary on her marriage in 1820 but it might equally could have been made locally around Loch Aline and acquired through the family's association with Ardtornish. It will probably never be known for certain but it has been associated with the Maclaines for nearly 200 years and the balance of probability supports the family tradition. It is therefore perfectly logical for the tartan now to be regarded as belonging to the clan and to be accepted by the chief as the oldest of the tartans associated with the name.

In 2018 the tartan was registered as Maclaine of Lochbuie Auld Sett.¹⁶

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ⁱ STEWART D.W. 1893 *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*. Geo. P. Johnston., Edinburgh

¹³ <https://www.tartanregister.gov.uk/tartanDetails.aspx?ref=12067>

¹⁴ <https://www.maclaine.org/>

¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belted_plaid

¹⁶ <https://www.tartanregister.gov.uk/tartanDetails?ref=12067>