

A Rare Jacobite Tartan Coat

Introduction

Surviving examples of Jacobite tartan clothing are extremely rare and less than a dozen extant pieces are known. Not only is all such costume over 250 years old but it has to have survived the Act of Proscription which was introduced in Aug 1747 following the last Jacobite Rising. The Act¹ banned the wearing of Highland clothes but not, as is often claimed, tartan itself.

"That, from and after the first day of August, one thousand seven hundred and forty seven, no Man or Boy, within that Part of Great Britain called Scotland, other than such as should be employed as Officers and Soldiers in his Majesty's Forces, should, on any Pretence whatsoever, wear or put on the Clothes, commonly called Highland Clothes; (that is to fay,) The Plaid, Philebeg or Little Kilt, Trowse, Shoulder belts, or any Part whatsoever of what peculiarly belongs to the Highland Garb, **and that no Tartan, or Party-coloured Plaid or Stuff, should be, used for Great Coats or for Upper Coats,....**" (my emphasis)

18th century clothing was expensive and to keep a piece that was forbidden to be worn could only have been accomplished by an individual or family that had sufficient wealth that they could afford to lay the item aside. Most male tartan clothing would have been over-dyed and used as a plain (non-tartan) garment, other pieces would have been cut up and reused in some way not banned by the Act. A number of the surviving fragments have stories attached to them that associate them with clothing² worn by Prince Charles Edward and/or at Culloden³. The fragment loaned to the East Lothian Museum is a good example (Fig 1). It belongs to a family from North Berwick but the Museum did not know how or when the family acquired it.



Fig 1. Part of Coat & Wig of Prince Charles. Photo: East Lothian Museums Service

¹ The Act of Proscription: *An act for the more effectual disarming the highlands in Scotland; and for the more effectual securing the peace of the said highlands; and for restraining the use of the highland dress.*

² The pieces are generally claimed to be from a coat, trows, plaid or kilt.

³ Many of these alleged mid-18th century specimens can be shown to be of a later date, often c1800-30 and the height of the Highland Revival period.

A Remarkable Discovery

In researching a reference to an alleged Jacobite era tartan coat the author was able to trace the artefact and arrange to examine it. Initially sceptical that such a piece had survived, and expecting to find a Highland Revival era coat, the reality was quite different. It was immediately obvious that the coat was indeed mid-18th century, and remarkably, was obviously the original garment from which the framed piece in North Berwick had been cut (Fig 2).



Fig 2. Front and rear views of the 18th century tartan coat. © The Author

The Coat

The style of the coat is typical of mid-18th century Highland coats, both tartan and plain, depicted in portraits of the period. This one has a rounded neckline with no collar, ten cloth covered buttons (probably wooden) closing the front and two large hip pockets with button flaps, each having two real (the outer), and two false button holes. There are no pocket buttons and no evidence on the inside that any were ever attached. However, there are what appear to be the remains of two linen decorative buttons below the false button holes on the left-hand side and it's probable that they were original matched on the right pocket too. Like other coats of the time, this one has three rear vents, one in the centre and one on each side.

In common with other 18th century tartan coats, the material is cut square and as opposed to the later fashion of making them with cloth cut on the bias. The matching of the pattern at the pockets and at the rear seam is evidence of the coat having been professionally made. The reinforcing stitching at the top of the rear vent is an intricate detail (Fig 3). Stylistically the coat, especially the length, means that it was probably intended to be worn with trows and for equestrian wear.



Fig 3. Re-enforcing stitch at the top of the rear vent. © The Author

The coat also appears to have been altered at some point; in particular, the sleeve openings and the bottom sections of the front panels look to have been shortened and poorly laid before being re-sewn (Fig 4).

A large section of the rear of the left sleeve had been removed at some time. Whilst this irrevocably damaged the garment, it does mean that the construction of the coat can be confirmed as having three layers; the tartan, a plain rough wool stiffening, and a fine wool red inner lining (Fig 5). The owner thought that the damage occurred in the 1950s when the coat was loaned for an exhibition but the writing accompanying the framed portion is stylistically older, suggesting that the section was removed at some point in the 19th century. This missing sleeve section is much larger than the framed



Fig 4. Sleeve openings showing possible alterations. © The Author



Fig 5. Damaged sleeve section showing the three layers of material. © The Author

specimen. It is likely that the section removed from the coat was divided into several pieces, possibly for relatives or associates with traditional Jacobite sympathies. Unfortunately this was a common practice during the Highland Revival era when Jacobite relics were regarded with a reverence traditionally reserved for religious relics.

The Tartan

This three colour pattern is an example of the development of a basic check into a simple tartan by the addition of a third colour, in this case a narrower stripe separating the two balanced ground colours. Although the colours appear to be red, yellow and blue, the latter two were originally white and green; the white has yellowed with age, whereas in the green, which was produced by combining yellow and blue, the yellow element of the dye has faded to leave the blue. A similar result is seen many mediaeval tapestries where the grass and trees are often blue. Dye analysis of these shades would almost certainly show that the red was dyed with cochineal, the white is an unbleached or ecru yarn, and that the green is a combination of indigo for the base blue and an unidentified yellow dyestuff. The original shades are still visible on the area of cloth protected by the pocket flap (Fig 6), whilst Fig 7 shows the reconstructed sett.



Fig 6. Under the pocket flap showing the difference in fading. © The Author

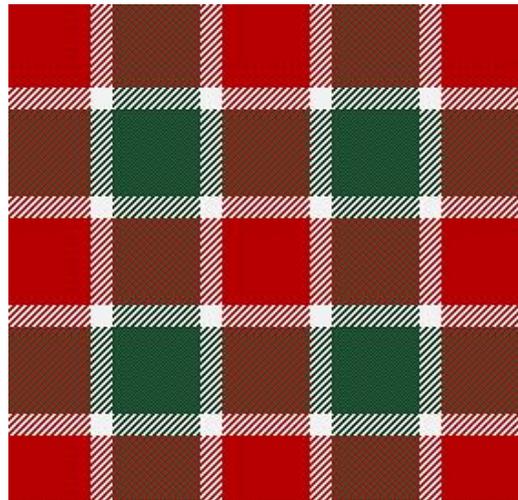


Fig 7. The reconstructed tartan. © The Author

The simplicity of the tartan, which was previously unknown to scholars, made it ideal for use in clothing as the pattern would have been easy to match resulting in less waste. A coat such as this would have needed less cloth than an equivalent one made from a busy tartan.

This simple pattern is similar to a number of tartans that appear in mid-18th century portraits, and whilst it was owned by a Carnegie, it cannot be regarded as a Carnegie tartan. Nor, is it linked to any particular family or area. The cloth is likely to have been woven, and the coat made, somewhere in the Lowlands and the pattern was probably selected in part because of the large amount of red used. Red was a sign of wealth across Europe until the mid-19th century when the introduction of chemical dyes made it cheaper and more widely available.

Conclusion

The style of this coat is consistent with its claimed mid-18th century date and, notwithstanding the damage to the sleeve and some apparent minor alterations, it is in remarkable condition which is testament to the fact that it has been preserved and handed down through the family for over 250 years.

Whilst family tradition has it that the coat was worn by Prince Charles Edward during his wanderings in the Highlands after Culloden there are a number of inconsistencies in the story, not least of which is the coat's size. Whilst a 28" chest would not have been unusual for a man of the time, other garments known to have been worn by the Prince show that he was more robust with a chest nearer 36". Such a high quality coat would have also

identified the wearer as someone of rank, and probably a Jacobite supporter, so it is unlikely that the Prince would have worn such a coat for very long and it seems unlikely that he would have carried it all the way to exile in France. We don't know what size James, Lord Boysack was so the coat could possibly have belonged to him or some other member of the local Carnegie family which would account for it having long been in their possession. The idea that the Prince gave Boysack four separate keepsakes seems unlikely; giving him a ring on the other hand is much more credible and that could easily have been returned to the family after Boysack's death on the Continent. No such ring survives amongst the family's possessions but it's the type of artefact that could easily have been sold in the intervening years. We will probably never know who originally owned the coat but it is reasonable to construe that it wasn't Charles Edward Stuart and that the story of it belonging to the Prince was conflated with the gift of the ring to Lord Boysack.

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