

An 18th Century Barred Blanket

Introduction

In 2020 the Scottish Tartans Authority acquired a piece of tartan (Plate 1) that was described at auction¹ as an *Arisaid Blanket possibly late '18th century / early 19th century'* that was 'composed of four stitched together panels of red and green tartan on a cream background (240cm x 186cm approx)'. Technically, it is what is known as a Barred Blanket because of the striped selvedge pattern. This four-panel structure is unique amongst surviving examples and is likely to be the result of it having been re-purposed at a later date. The piece is likely to be older than advertised, probably mid-18th century +/- 15 years and is of particular interest because of its similarity to another piece in the Authority's collection.

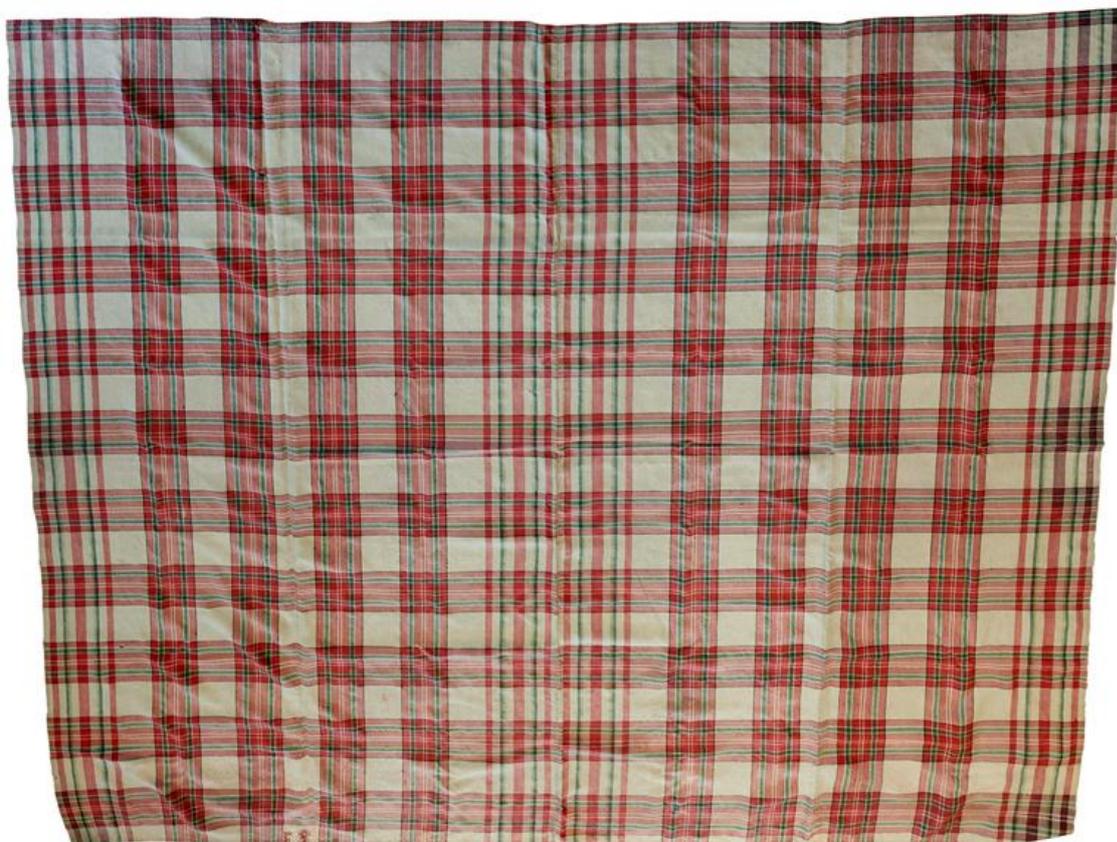


Plate 1. Arisaid Blanket composed of four panels. Photo credit: Lyon & Turnbull

The Cloth

The material is hand-woven from single (unplied) yarns in both warp and weft, naturally dyed and beautifully woven at 56 epi², roughly equivalent to modern medium weight tartan, and 23.5 inches (60 cms) wide. No dye analysis of the colours has been carried out but if it was it is likely that red would be from cochineal, a popular imported dyestuff for 18th century tartans, with an alum or poor-quality tin mordant, either of which would give the pinky shade. The black and the two shades of green will have been produced by combining indigo (blue), grey-black and yellow respectively. Taken together, the quality of the spinning, dyeing and weaving suggest the work of one or more skilled people involved in the production of this beautiful piece.

¹ Lyon & Turnbull Scottish Sale, 12 August 2020. <https://www.the-saleroom.com/en-gb/auction-catalogues/lyon-and-turnbull/catalogue-id-srly10285/lot-1894a617-a0fa-4eff-8137-abff00d21564>

² Ends per inch i.e. the density of the material.

Construction

The piece comprises four warp sections of single-width cloth (23.5 inches) wide, the overall dimensions being 94 x 73 inches (240 x 186 cms). One edge of each piece includes a barred selvedge pattern typical of the style found on other white based 18th century blankets. When originally constructed the piece comprised two sections of material, joined on the white selvedge and twice as long and half the width of the current structure i.e. 47 x 73 inches (120 x 186 cms). Each end finished in the middle of a white square and the ends were then turned and sewn down. A photographic reconstruction is shown in Plate 2.



Plate 2. Realignment to show the original construction of two sections of single-width cloth. © The Author

At some later date, the joined piece was cut in half through the centre dyed blocks of colour and the sections rearranged. As a result, the rearranged piece finished at different places in the pattern, the original white block at one end and the coloured block at the other. The sewing thread on each differs, the original using white wool from the weaving, the rearranged end was secured with cotton thread. (Plate 3).



Plate 3. Comparison of the original and later turned ends. © The Author

Not only are there differences in the rearranged ends, the original and secondary joins also differ, the former being whip-stitched with wool, the latter with cotton thread (Plate 4).



Plate 4. Different methods of sewing used for the original and later joins. © The Author

The initials 'E S' are embroidered at one end of two of the panels with the same red wool used throughout the piece; standard practice in contemporary pieces. However, in this example the positioning of the 'S' partially overlapping onto the panel with the 'E' is amateurish and not in keeping with the quality of the cloth as a whole. This overlap means that the work must have been done after the two pieces had been joined. Both letters were embroidered so close to what were the raw ends before being finished (turned & sewn) to prevent fraying. As a result, part of each letter was folded onto the underside (Plate 5).

Initials were usually added to pieces of significance, for example; dowery or commemorative heirlooms. Unfortunately, neither the origins of the blanket, nor the identity of ES are known and there are too many possible combinations of first and second names to make any reasonable deduction about the original owner of the piece.



Plate 5. The initials E S embroidered on either side of a join with 'S' overlapping onto previous panel and forming part of the turned edge. Photo © The Author

The Sett

Judging by surviving examples, white based patterns were common in the 18th century, and probably earlier but there are no known pre-1700 examples. These designs are often referred to as 'arisaid tartans' based on the claim that they were used for women's clothing in the 17th and early 18th centuries³. However, the evidence for this claim is questionable. The proportions and weight of many of the surviving specimens mean that they are far more likely to have been used for domestic ware such as bed covers, bed curtains etc. A number of specimens of this basic design survive. It was also included in Wilsons of Bannockburn's 1819 Key Pattern Book under the name *Blanket Pattern* which supports the idea that these were for domestic, not personal, use (Fig 1).

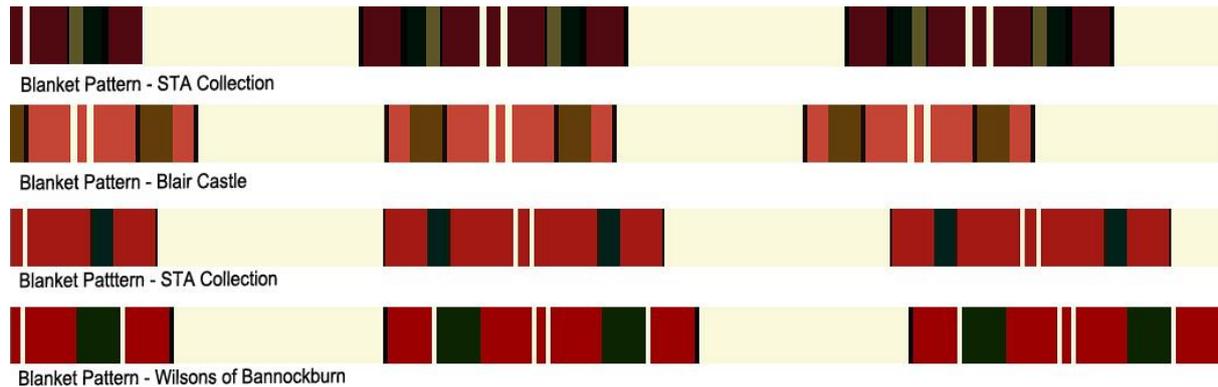


Figure 1. A comparison of three mid-18th century Blanket Patterns with Wilson of Bannockburn's setting.

What is unusual about this piece is the use of two shades of green where it is normal to have just one. Only one other example of this 'double green' is known.⁴ Given the similarity in the quality, overall pattern, border arrangement and shades, there is the tantalising prospect that both were produced by the same weaver or from the same area, something that is extremely rare amongst surviving specimens.

There are two distinct elements to these 'blanket pattern' designs; the main or repeating pattern, and the barred border pattern. The main pattern can be described as an alternating white and red grounds; the former being plain, the latter decorated with finer stripes, usually of green, black and a double white line bordering the pivot. The ratio of the white and red blocks in these patterns is generally around 50/50 as it the case in this specimen. Not only is the sett of this blanket similar to a number of other contemporary specimens, as well as Wilsons' setting, but the barred border or selvedge pattern (see Plate 6) seems to have been a common structure too. In this and a number of other specimens it is made up of five bars; three red stripes plus a green stripe between the centre and outer red stripe. In some the whole of the border is herringboned; here, the green stripe is woven using both shades whereas it's normally just one shade. In some examples the centre red is broader and sometimes enclosed by guards (Plate 6 middle specimen).

Wilson's 1819 threadcount for their *Blanket Sett* was for *4 half Setts with a border* which is the same layout as this piece and all the similar surviving examples of this type of setting. This standardisation of setting in specimens from different parts of the country, and over time, is not seen amongst surviving examples of what might be called 'true tartans'; that is those fully dyed examples which show a much greater variation in the pattern. Almost nothing is known about how traditional patterns and weaving techniques were taught and passed on but this

³ http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Musings_on_the_arisaid_and_other_female_dress.pdf

⁴ The piece is a section of a joined plaid (blanket) that was collected by the folklorist Alexander Carmichael, probably in the Western Isles, in the late 1800s. It is now in the collection of the Scottish Tartans Authority.

style of blanket pattern shows evidence of some form of shared practice, or perhaps a centre of weaving that specialised in producing them.



Plate 6. Three pieces showing the sett and the five-barred selvedge pattern. Photo © The Author

Conclusion

The offset warp of the material used to make this piece is consistent with a rural weaving technique that died out in the late 18th century. The practice was continued by Wilsons of Bannockburn into the first quarter of the 19th century under the name *Blanket Sett* but this is not an example of their cloth.

Dating pieces such as this blanket is difficult, there are two examples dated 1726 and 1777 respectively that show that this style of white based pattern was probably woven in the Highlands for much of the 18th century. How much older the practice was cannot be determined with any degree of confidence but given the quality of the cloth and the dyeing it is not unreasonable to date it to the mid-18th century, plus or minus 15 years (c1735-65).

Originally this was narrower and longer with just two warp lengths joined and initialled, probably at the same time. Whether it was used as a woman's plaid in the way described⁵ by Burt¹ is unknown but the initials made this unlikely. Whilst its original use is unknown, what is certain is that it was subsequently re-purposed by being cut in half lengthways and the two lengths joined to make a piece roughly square. This rearranged piece would have been more suited for use as a bed or table covering.

The quality, of the material and embroidery point to the weaver and the person who joined and embroidered the piece being different people. Who the initials ES represented will probably

⁵ The Plaid is the Undress of the Ladies; and to a Genteel Woman, who adjusts it with a good air, is a becoming Veil. It is made of Silk or fine Worsted, chequered with various lively colours, two Breadths wide, and three yards in length.

never be known, nor exactly when and where the material was woven or the blanket made. Nonetheless, it is a fine example of a traditional Highland blanket and the fact that it was re-purposed at a later date makes it unique amongst surviving examples.



Plate 7. Single width of cloth showing the four half setts and border arrangement. Photo © The Author

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ⁱ **Burt, E.** Letters from the North of Scotland. S. Burt. London 1754