

# *An Early Highland Revival Coat*

## **Introduction**

There is no definitive description of the Highland Revival, nor the exact period it covered. The term defines the re-emergence of Highland culture in the late 18th century. It followed the widespread suppression imposed after the last Jacobite Rising that culminated in the defeat of the Stuart cause at the Battle of Culloden in 1746.

In costume terms the Highland Revival refers to the period c1782-1837 in which, as the name suggests, there was a revival of interest in, and wearing of, Highland Dress following the Act<sup>1</sup> Repealing the Proscription of Highland Dress<sup>2</sup> in 1782. Following the Repeal there was a renewed interest in tartan which by 1800 the design, manufacture and sale of tartans, principally by the famous weaving firm: William Wilson & Son of Bannockburn became a major business. The Revival was led by the Highland chiefs, many of whom were members of the early Celtic Societies and the Highland Society of London. Their aim was to try and preserve the old Highland manners and customs. Unfortunately much had already been lost and a number of 'traditions' were invented to fill the gaps in their knowledge, others were amended to 'fit in' with the prevailing fashion. Although started by the Highland gentry, the use of kilted soldiers in the victories over Napoleon and the later visit of George IV to Edinburgh, served to promote tartan and Highland Dress as national symbols. The writing of Sir Walter Scott ensured that these symbols were widely taken up across Scotland, well beyond the original Intent of the Highland chiefs.

## **A Rare Find**

In 2016 the author discovered a poor quality picture online of a red tartan coat that appeared to be of late 18th century style. Through the photographer contact was established with the American owner of the coat and some better quality photographs obtained. Once cleaned up these allowed for a more accurate dating and the extrapolation of the tartan. The coat and matching waistcoat date to c1780-85 and represent the earliest known surviving example of a Highland Revival coat (Fig 1).



**Fig 1. Highland Revival Coat c1780-85. © The Author**

<sup>1</sup> Repeal of the Act Proscribing the Wearing of Highland Dress 22 George III, Chap. 63, 1782

<sup>2</sup> A discussion of the Dress Act can be found in this [companion paper](#).

The outfit, which included a kilt of a different tartan and later date (c1820), plus some non-tartan items were purchased from a Nottingham based auctioneers<sup>3</sup> in 2008<sup>4</sup>. The outfit and other items were described as *coming from a Scottish Estate* but there was no indication of which estate and subsequent enquiries by the author were unable to identify the source.

## A Tartan Suit

Surviving tartan clothes that pre-date 1800 are rare. This coat and waistcoat date to c1780-85 and is the oldest known Highland Revival outfit. The fact that the lot included a later kilt could be taken as evidence that there was originally a matching kilt, however it's equally possible that the coat was worn with buff breeches which were fashionable at the time. Stylistically the outfit is typical of a late 18<sup>th</sup> Frock Coat. Features include: a pointed turndown collar; 10 covered buttons on a curved front line; squared off tails; 2 square covered button cuffs; rectangular matched pocket flaps; pleated rear vents with 2 covered buttons; linen interior and sleeve linings. The accompanying waistcoat has 9 rows of paired buttons; a stand-up collar; 2 matched pockets and black linen back with 3 ties (Fig 2).



**Fig 2. Highland Revival Waistcoat c1780-85.**  
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**Fig 3. Back showing mismatched pattern.**  
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The suit is beautifully tailored and obviously professionally made with the tartan cut and sewn horizontally in the traditional Highland fashion. However, whilst the tartan is matched on the front panels, it isn't in the sleeves and the pattern in the upper portion of the back is noticeably mismatched. Unusually, the central seam veers off to the right near the collar (Fig 3). This is the only example of mismatching of the tartan at the back of a coat that the author has ever encountered and the reason for it not obvious. There are a number of possible reasons including; that there was insufficient material to match the large pattern, that the maker had not worked with tartan before and had to 'fudge' the pattern, or possibly, that the original owner had some form of deformity.

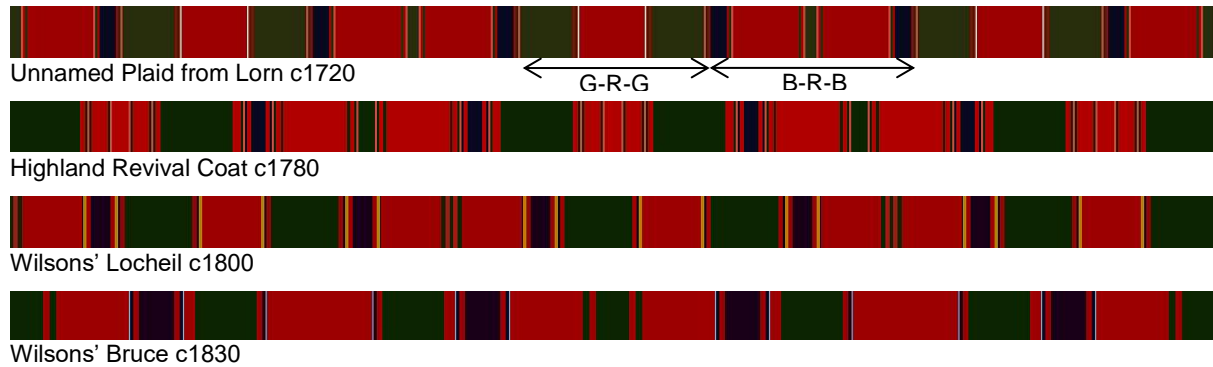
## The Tartan

Before the introduction of aniline dyes in the mid-1850s red was the most expensive colour to produce with natural dyes. The inclusion of a large amount of red, particularly scarlet, in 18<sup>th</sup> century tartans was an indication of the original owner's wealth. Whilst the sett of this

<sup>3</sup> [www.mellorsandkirk.com](http://www.mellorsandkirk.com)

<sup>4</sup> The outfit is now in a private collection in the USA.

suit is of a previously unknown tartan, the quality of the material and colours are consistent with the type of cloth and patterns woven by Wilsons of Bannockburn. The large sett and use of rose (pink) as a highlight shade is similar to a number of their early designs, all of which seem to have a basis in traditional plaid settings such as the early 18<sup>th</sup> century one from Lorn<sup>5</sup> (Fig 3).



**Fig 3. Comparison of an early tartan from Lorn, the Highland Revival coat and two Wilsons' patterns.**

These types of patterns all share a common structure that can be described as alternating red grounds, one, usually smaller, enclosed by green bars (G-R-G), the other by blue bars (B-R-B). In every case there is a triple green stripe centred on the red between the blue bars, the other red field is then 'decorated' with fine over-stripes of various colours. The coat's tartan has an unusual arrangement of four evenly spaced stripes on the second red ground (Fig. 4).



**Fig 4. The tartan of the Highland Revival suit. © The Author**

<sup>5</sup> [An early 18<sup>th</sup> century plaid at Dunollie.](#)

## Conclusion

This rare outfit offers a unique insight to early Highland Revival clothing dating as it does to the period immediately following the founding of the Highland Society of London in 1778 and within a year or two of the subsequent Repeal of Proscription in 1782. At that time tartan had not yet become the pan-Scottish emblem that it achieved under Sir Walter Scott's management of George IV's visit to Edinburgh in 1822.

Whilst we may never know the identity of the 'Scottish Estate' that was the source of this outfit it is reasonable to speculate that it belonged to someone prominent amongst the Highland gentry of the time and quite possibly amongst the founding members of the Highland Society of London.

The design and colours are consistent with those produced by Wilsons of Bannockburn in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. They were the principal tartan weavers of the day and the use of rose as a highlight shade of red against scarlet is typical of many their early designs. Considering all the circumstantial evidence there is little doubt the tartan was woven by Wilsons and was possibly designed as a commission from the original owner.



Fig 5. Detail of the coat collar. © The Author