

An Unnamed 18th Century Jacobite Era Plaid Carlisle Museum

Introduction

In 1990 the author was contacted by [Tullie House Museum](#), Carlisle concerning an old piece of tartan that they had discovered under the cover of an old arm chair that was being renovated. Shortly afterwards I was able to examine the artefact, form an opinion about its possible origins and make a reconstruction of the sett. The recent opportunity to re-examine the specimen, which is an unusual example of a joined plaid, together with some new information about its origins resulted in a reappraisal of the tartan (Fig 1).



Fig 1. Portion of a joined plaid in Carlisle Museum. © The Author

A Jacobite Tartan?

An intriguing story surrounds the chair which was donated to the museum in 1909 by the Graham family of Thornyflats, Kirkclinton¹. According to family tradition the chair and tartan are associated with the stay of Charles Edward Stuart at the Graham residence in 1745. Carlisle was under siege by the Jacobite forces and during his stay at Thornyflats the Prince would not retire to bed as he awaited news of Carlisle's surrender and is said to have slept in the chair using a tartan plaid as a blanket. On hearing the news that Carlisle garrison had surrendered on the 15th November 1745 he gifted the tartan to the Graham family.

Claims that an old piece of tartan was associated with Prince Charles Edward in some way are quite common but examination of the actual specimen often reveals it to be of a later date. That is not the case with the Carlisle piece which is wholly consistent with tartan of the period and is supported by the family tradition. There were several prominent Catholic families in Cumbria that supported the Stuart cause and it's highly likely that the Prince would have stayed with one or more during his time in the area. Kirkclinton is close to Brampton, Charles Edward Stuart's HQ during the siege of Carlisle, and it is feasible that the Prince visited the Grahams at Thornyflats. He is known to have given gifts to supporters, including a number of tartan pieces, and this plaid may well have been such a gift.

¹ The family subsequently acquired Ellerton Grange, a property south of Carlisle, which is where the chair was housed before being donated to the museum.

The Cloth

The surviving cloth is approximately 35" x 60" at the widest and is made from three pieces of material sewn together at the selvedge. The original cloth was 20" wide, a width which, whilst narrow by modern standards, is not uncommon in specimens of the first half of the 18th century. However, what is exceptional is the joining of three widths to make a length that must originally have been 60" wide. It is the only known example of multi-joined tartan. In the section taken at the widest point across the fragment the joins are highlighted by the yellow bars (Fig 2). The position of the bars confirms that the material was woven as a balanced cloth² with four repeats across the warp.



Fig 2. Widest section of the surviving cloth showing the joins of three lengths of cloth. © The Author

There were three sewing styles used to join single width cloth for plaids in the 18th century³. In this case the simplest, a running stitch, was used. That technique results in a raised seam and an interruption in the repeat of the pattern across the width of the cloth (Fig 3).



Fig 3. The interrupted pattern repeat at the selvedge join compared with normal pivot © The Author

² Balanced cloth is a term that describes the way the warp of a symmetrical tartan is laid out and how the pattern will look once woven. The pattern starts in the centre of a pivot in the middle of the cloth and repeats in order to the edge of the cloth to finish at the same point in the pattern on both selvedges. The alternative is an offset or unbalanced warp. Most tartans are symmetrical.

³ The techniques for joining plaids are discussed [here](#).

The material is made from hand spun, naturally dyed yarn woven at 52 epi⁴ and is slightly warp-faced⁵ which makes the pattern appear stronger, almost striped, in the warp. In common with many early 18th century specimens the yarn is singles (non-plyed) in both warp and weft. Whilst finely spun and woven the irregularity of the threadcount for the individual colour blocks in the weft is inconsistent with the warp where great care was taken to ensure uniformity of the setting. The reason for this difference is difficult to understand; perhaps the warping and weaving was done by two different people and the former was more numerate; or perhaps this simply shows that the overall pattern was more important than the precisely matched warp and weft we commonly expect today.

The Tartan

Viewing conditions were far from ideal when the fragment was examined in 1990 and it was necessary to rely on a small wet film photograph when attempting to reconstruct the pattern (Fig 4). This restriction made identification of the colours problematic, particularly the dull colour next to the black which appeared to be a light brown similar to the traditional ginger shade known as *crotal* used in Harris Tweed. The original reconstruction followed that apparent colour-way and the resulting pattern was subsequently adopted by a Canadian family named Colville as a personal family tartan (Fig 5).



Fig 4. Original 1990 photograph showing brown.
Photo credit: Tullie House Museum



Fig 5. Recreated pattern adopted as a Colville Tartan . © The Author

Having had an opportunity to examine the original fragment in greater detail it is clear that the brown is in fact a dull mossy green and that whilst it was originally thought that the pattern comprised seven colours there are in fact eight:

Red
Light Red (Pink)
Black
Green
Light Blue
Light Purple (Lavender)
Yellow
White

⁴ Ends Per Inch – the measurement of the material's density in the warp.

⁵ The density of the warp is tighter than the weft.

All the colours would have been produced using natural dyes; however, without expert analysis we cannot be sure of what they were although the reds and light blue were almost certainly dyed using cochineal and indigo respectively. The individual colours are clearly identifiable when viewed at a frayed edge of the cloth (Fig 6).



Fig 6. Frayed portion of the cloth showing the individual colours. © The Author.

Conclusion

Claims that old pieces were in some way associated with Prince Charles Edward are quite common and frequently difficult to verify. The Graham family tradition and the fact that the Prince's forces were besieging Carlisle in 1745 provide circumstantial evidence to support at the very least a strong Jacobite connection for this specimen whether or not the Prince actually slept under the plaid.

The material is wholly consistent with tartan of the early to mid-18th century whilst the fineness of the weaving and dyeing indicates a high quality cloth, not something intended for general outdoor wear. Whilst the use of eight colours is extremely unusual in any tartan it is not unknown in some other patterns of the time. More unusual is the joining of three lengths to make a piece of wide cloth. How widespread this practice was is unclear as this is the only known example and as such the specimen is unique amongst surviving specimens of old tartan.

18th century tartan had no particular clan or family connection and it is probable that the original owner bought what was undoubtedly a high quality and expensive piece in part to demonstrate their social status. Whilst the Prince or another member of the besieging army may well have been the source of the plaid it is equally possible that the family had purchased the material⁶ to reflect their support for the Jacobite cause and that the material had previously had some domestic use such as a bed cover or bed hangings.

⁶ By the mid-18th century tartan was being woven around Edinburgh and is known to have been supplied to some English Jacobite supporters.

The reappraisal of the design means that the original setting considered here (Fig 7) and the erroneous reconstruction adopted by the Colville family should now be regarded as separate tartans and that this one remains an *Unnamed 18th Century Tartan found near Carlisle*.



Fig 7. Revised reconstruction of the sett with eight colours. © The Author

Acknowledge:

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