

An Unnamed late 18th Century Fancy Plaid

Introduction

In 2014 The Scottish Tartans Authority (STA) was contacted by a lady who wanted to know more about a length of tartan that family tradition said dated to the 18th century. The photo of the piece that accompanied the enquiry appeared to show a typical 'fancy' pattern of the type woven by Wilsons of Bannockburn during the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Fig 1). However, beyond an indication that the shades and sett were typical Wilsons' little else could be determined until the piece was examined in detail.



Fig 1. The 'fancy' tartan sent for identification.

A Unique Discovery

What was subsequently loaned to the STA turned out to be a superbly dyed and woven joined plaid of the type woven by Wilsons in the late 18th century and used principally by ladies' as a shawl or screen which were fashionable at the time. However, unlike any of Wilsons' cloth of the period this piece is wider and the weave heavier than other similar Wilsons' designs and may represent a transitional phase as they moved from fancy patterns, some of which were named after people (not clans) or places, to clan and family setts as tartan became fashionable in the period leading up to George IV's visit to Scotland in 1822 and beyond.

The Sett

The pattern has striking similarities with Wilsons' *Ritch*, *Waggrall* and *Hunter* tartans, Old Superfine patterns detailed in their 1819 Key Pattern Book, which they wove c1780-1810 and also an unnamed Old Superfine plaid dated 1775¹.



Unnamed Fancy Plaid



Wilson's' Ritch Tartan c1780



Wilson's' Waggrall Tartan c1780



Wilson's' Hunter Tartan c1780



1775 Unnamed Wilsons' Tartan Plaid

Superfine patterns were often very complex, often having upto 8 colours and 68 colourchanges in a half repeat as in the 1775 pattern. Whilst not as fine, this *Fine Cloth* example is similarly complex and employs 8 colours². The quality of the spinning and dyeing is particularly apparent when the cloth is examined in detail and is most easily appreciated where there is some damage and individual threads can be seen (Fig 2).

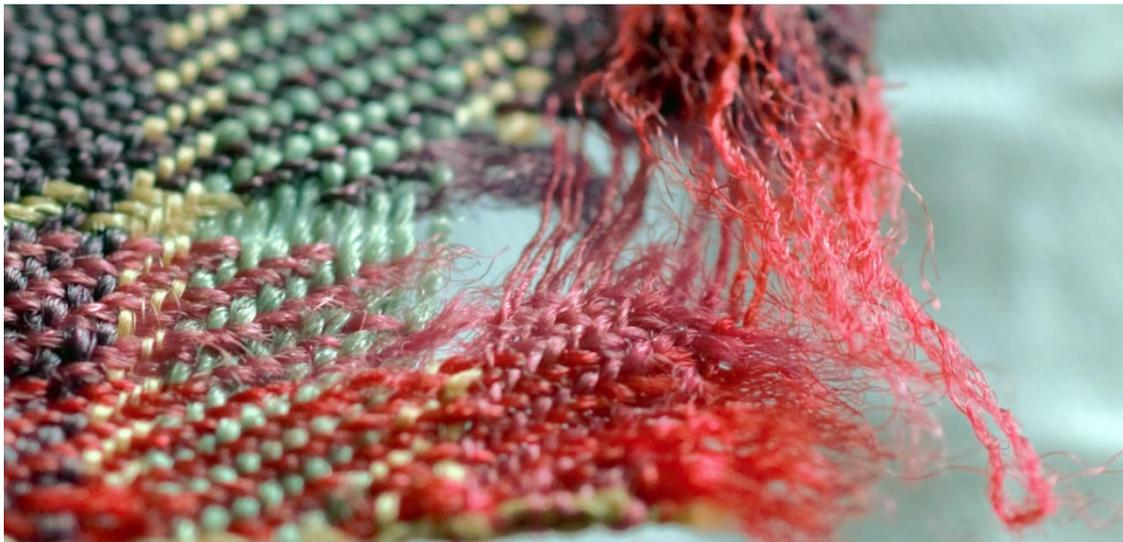


Fig 2. Detail of the yarn individual colours.

¹ Details of the 1775 plaid are discussed in this [paper](#).

² The apparent colour differences between the two are simply the result of photographs being taken by different cameras under different conditions.

The Plaid

The plaid/shawl is 6' 6" long x 22.5" wide, superbly dyed and finely woven at 54 epi with single (unplied) yarn in both warp and weft. The width is marginally narrower but when considered with quality of the material and the colours it is typical of Wilsons' *Fine Cloth*, a number of settings for which were included in their 1819 Key Pattern Book. There is some significant moth or other form of damage in a couple of places which has been patched with a piece taken off the end of one of the lengths making it slightly shorter (Fig 3). Although the shortened section has been turned and sewn in the traditional fashion the quality of the latter sewing is poorer and less dense than the original. This can also be seen in the picture.



Fig 3. Shortened section as a result of patching and showing the difference in sewing quality.

There are three half setts (one and a half repeats) across the single width as shown below with the joining pivot marked 'x'.



Plaids were normally joined with a simple 'whip stitch' although sometimes a more decorative stitch was used. In each case the stitch allowed the joined cloth to be flattened at the seam so that the full effect of the pattern repeat flowed across the whole piece. In this plaid the two lengths were aligned side by side and a basic running stitch used meaning that there was always a seam in the centre of the cloth and the pattern does not repeat exactly (Fig 4).



Fig 4. The centre join with running stitch and associated seam.

Conclusion

This cloth could have been woven by someone other than Wilsons but they were the largest manufacturer by far at that time. Other than the slightly narrower width everything about this piece is consistent with Wilsons of Bannockburn's *Fine Cloth* c1800-20. The sett is similar to a number of their *Old Superfine* setts but those were woven at 19" wide and that width seems to have gone out of fashion before 1800. That date was also the start of a period of change from busy fancy patterns in favour of less complex settings and the increasing adoption of named patterns by clans and families in the early 1800's.

Wilson's *Fine Cloth* was usually 25" wide so this 22.5" width is unusual. It may have been done as a special order but it's more likely that they deliberately reduced the width to allow the pattern to repeat exactly across the width of the cloth. This can therefore be regarded as a transitional piece that bridges the two styles and is likely to date to c1790-1810.

The technical restrictions of looms at the time meant material was woven and sold single in width lengths then joined by the purchaser or perhaps a seamstress. The fact that in this piece the pattern has been aligned across the two section but rudimentarily joined shows that the sewer understood the principal but was not familiar, or could not be bothered, with the traditional joining techniques.

The colours, which are still incredibly vivid and lustrous, also match exactly the range of shades that Wilson's had standardised by c1780 and it may be considered a fine example of their handiwork. At that time it's probable that they had named such an intricate design but we have no idea of what it was and it's unlikely that we will ever know. Once joined the overall effect is completely different to the intensity of the colours when viewed close up and is a wonderful example of the subtleties and complexities of many old tartans.

