

# Reconstructing the MacDonald of Borrodale Tartan

## Introduction

There are a number of tartan fragments that date to the period of the 1745 Jacobite Rising (the '45) and the end of the clan system. All too often little or nothing is known about these precious pieces of fabric beyond the fact that they belonged to some collector or were found in a bog, castle, shop, jumble sale etc. Some of these pieces are large enough to allow their whole design to be confirmed, others can only be guessed at. It is rare indeed that one has more than one fragment from the same web and even rarer that there is a good historical audit trail. The MacDonald of Borrodale tartan is possibly unique in having both elements that combine to allow an accurate reconstruction of a tartan intimately associated with Prince Charles Edward Stuart's (PCE) escape following the Battle of Culloden and the collapse of the '45 Rising. Three pieces of the original plaid are known to exist, those from: [Stonyhurst](#) (SH); the [National Museum of Scotland](#) (NMS) and the [West Highland Museum](#) (WHM).

## The Prince's Kilt?

In 1984 whilst working at the Scottish Tartans Society I was contacted by an 'Old Boy' concerning a fragment of tartan in the possession of Stonyhurst College in Lancashire. The specimen was apparently old and said to have been part of a kilt worn Prince Charles Edward Stuart during the period of the '45. Stonyhurst is a Jesuit School that owns a number of artefacts associated with the '45 having acquired them from Henry Benedict, Cardinal, Duke of York, Prince Charles' brother and successor. Following painstaking research the Stonyhurst Old Boy, Tom Massey-Lynch, confirmed the tartan's link with the Prince. Shortly after the defeat at Culloden he stayed with the MacDonalds of Borrodale, a Clanranald cadet family. On taking his leave from the family, Borrodale's wife, Catriona MacGregor, gave the Prince *'a suit of new Highland clothes the better to disguise him and make him pass for one of the country'*<sup>1</sup>. The Prince was taken via Benbecula to Scalpay<sup>2</sup> where his party arrived soaked after several hours in an open boat during a gale. The party stayed with a Robert Campbell, tenant of Scalpay with whom the Prince left/exchanged his plaid.

During 1984 I had an opportunity to examine the Stonyhurst specimen (Fig 1). At the time it was mounted on a piece of card, framed under glass hanging in a south facing window, and therefore in direct sunlight. In the frame was a hand-written note saying:-

*'This piece of cloth is part of a kilt left by Prince Charlie in the House of Campbell, Island Glass, 30 April 1746.*

*Robert Hemsley, Tarber(?) House got it from a descendent of the Campbells and sent it to Walter Armstrong of Tarff house, Kirkcousan who gave it to J S Maitland, 19 April 1887.*

*In landing on the Island, Prince Charlie got wet – his kilt was not dry in the morning when he wished to start, so he left his own behind and took one of the Campbell's kilts.*

*The story was told to me by W Armstrong of Kirkcousan, Glasgow April 1887. J S Maitland H M Inspector of Factories.'*

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor H & A. 1938 *1745 and After*. London.

<sup>2</sup> Scalpay, also known as Island Glass (Eilean Glas), is a small island situated off the east coast of Harris.

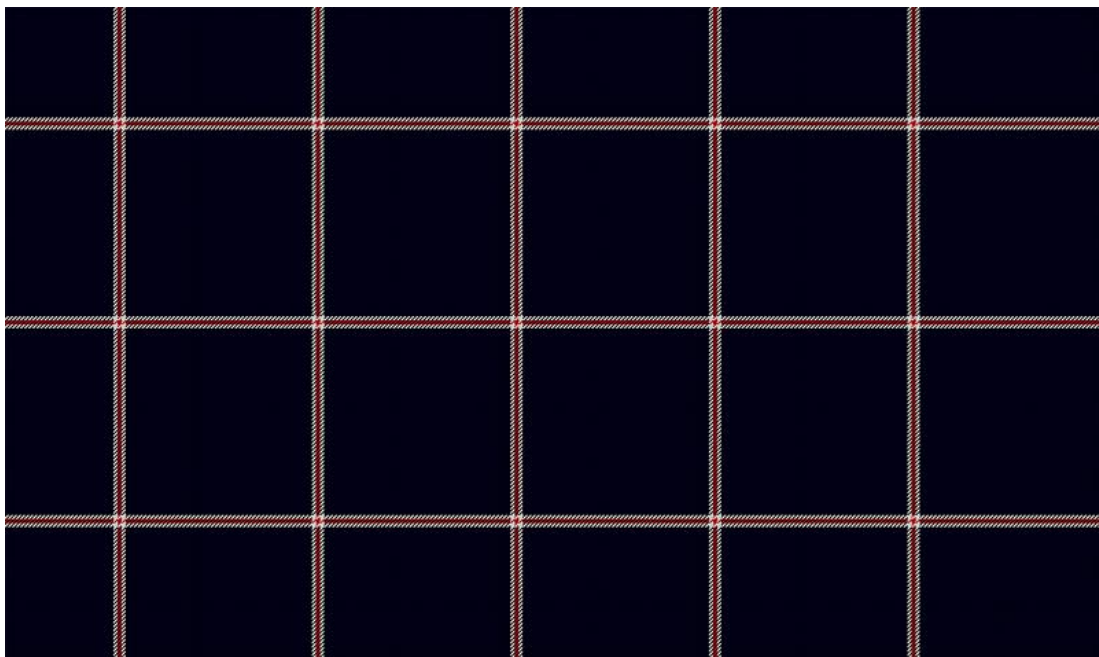


**Fig 1. Stonyhurst fragment of the plaid given to PCE by Lady Borrodale. © The Author**

Maitland wrote the story down over 140 years after the date Prince Charles Edward is supposed to have worn the material; there was therefore plenty of time for a story of romantic attachment to have grown up around it. One cannot say for certain whether the cloth was actually used by the Prince. There are numerous tartan relics to which are attached similar stories and some of these pieces certainly could not have been worn by him at the time and place stated. It is said by various authorities that the Prince never wore the 'kilt' as such during his time in Scotland, preferring trews and plaid. That does not necessarily invalidate this particular story; it is generally accepted that he did use several plaids, and the belted-plaid is sometimes referred to as the 'great-kilt'. Thus, in some instances the words 'kilt' and 'plaid' may be taken as synonymous.

### **Reconstructing the tartan**

Examination of the SH specimen revealed that the sample was consistent with a pre-1800 date and more likely 1700-50. The tartan was very dark; so much so that it was difficult to distinguish easily between the blue and black. The sample was also too small to be completely certain that it was possible to determine the full repeat of the pattern; however, based on the information available I produced a tentative reconstruction – shown in Fig 2.



**Fig 2. Reconstruction of the Stonyhurst specimen. © The Author**

## A Chance Discovery

The following year (1985) during a visit to the West Highland Museum in Fort William I was struck by the similarity of a small specimen on display to which was attached a similar inscription as that of the Stonyhurst relic (Fig 3).



What was immediately apparent from the WHM specimen was that the light overstrips were yellow not white. It was also obvious that the cloth is plain weave<sup>3</sup> and probably linsey-woolsey<sup>4</sup>. Dye analysis<sup>5</sup> of the SH specimen later confirmed that the white was in fact a faded yellow<sup>6</sup>. Further examination of both fragments by the writer under better lighting revealed the presence of three ground colours: black, blue, and green rather than the two originally identified. Confirmation of these and the original use of yellow rather than white allowed a revised reconstruction of the tartan (Fig 4).

**Fig 3. West Highland Museum fragment of the plaid given to PCE by Lady Borrodale. © The Author**



**Fig 4. Revised reconstruction to show the original setting (lightened to show the pattern). © The Author**

<sup>3</sup> In Plain weave the threads run alternately 1 over, 1 under. It is commonly used in sacking etc., but was less common in tartan where a 2/2 twill was the more typical cloth structure.

<sup>4</sup> Linsey-woolsey tartan generally has linen warp and woollen weft threads. It was a technique found in some old pieces from the west coast and Western Isles. This type of cloth continued to be woven in the islands long after it went out of fashion on the mainland but finally when out of use for tartan in the early-mid 1800s.

<sup>5</sup> Details of the full Dye Analysis are in this [paper](#).

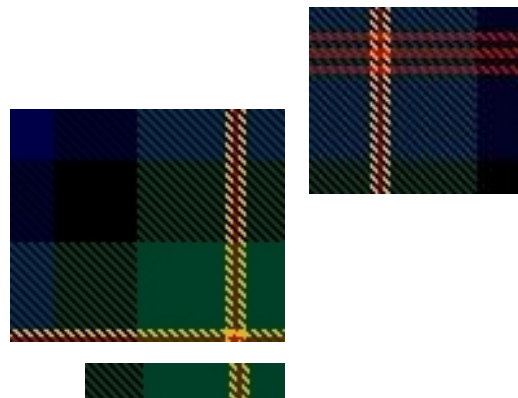
<sup>6</sup> The sample was subsequently moved to a position out of direct sunlight and more suitable to its preservation.

This reconstruction was subsequently shown to be correct when a third, very small, fragment purchased by the NMS was examined. This provided confirmation of the portion of the pattern that had previously been projected based on the most logical structure (Fig 5).



**Fig 5. National Museum of Scotland fragment of the plaid given to PCE by Lady Borrodale.**  
Photo credit EF Williams

A reconstruction of the three original fragments are shown relative to each other in Fig 6.



**Fig 6. Reconstruction to show the relationship of the original fragments . © The Author**

## Conclusion

The three samples are quite clearly cut from the same piece of material. Taken as a whole, the cloth's structure and colours are consistent with its claimed antiquity which is similar to several other West Highland specimens of known 18<sup>th</sup> century origin. The relatively small size of the specimens and the fact that they are not contiguous means that there is the possibility that the original sett differed to the reconstruction. In particular, the red stripes are the logical pivots but the specimens are too small to be absolutely certain; however, the current reconstruction is the most practical and wholly consistent with similar designs of the period.

The size of the sett and use of such a wide band of yellow leads the writer to suspect that the material was originally intended as a plaid or belted plaid as opposed to a 'little-kilt'. Whilst it's impossible to know in what form the Prince actually wore this piece of tartan, the story surrounding it fits into his known wandering after Culloden and its attribution has far greater credibility than the majority of specimens associated with him.