

An early MacDuff Kilt

In 1975 the Scottish Tartans Society¹ purchased an early Box-pleated kilt in MacDuff tartan. The kilt is said to be c1790² and is amongst the earliest examples of a sewn kilt. Unlike the majority of surviving kilts of the period, it is not made from Wilsons of Bannockburn Superfine or Fine cloth that was the popular choice at the time.

The kilt

The kilt was made using the full width of the cloth. It was described by kilt historian Bob *selvedge. No WB. Whip stitched around, to pleats sewn down on inside*' (Plate 1). WB was shorthand for waistband. The reference to '*pleats to nothing*' refers to the fact that no attempt was made to pleat to a particular stripe or band as was the usual practice at the time. There are four horn buttons (two on the front apron and two on the pleats), probably *for braces*. At the top corner of the front apron there is the remnant of a tie used to fasten the kilt (Plate 2) and a corresponding remnant on the first pleat of the inner apron. The tie at the top corner of the inner apron is intact (Plate 3) but there is no evidence of where it fastened on the inside of the outer apron.



Plate. 1 Rear view of an early 19th century MacDuff Kilt showing two of the buttons for braces.
Photo credit: Matthew Newsome

¹ The kilt is now in the collection of the successor organisation, The Scottish Tartans Authority.

² The dating by kilt historian Bob Martin was based on the simplicity of the construction and informal pleating of the pattern.



Plate 2. Remnant of the outer apron tie. © The Author



Plate 3. The inner apron tie. © The Author

The Cloth

The material is 25 inches wide, hand-woven at 46 epi with singles (unplied) naturally dyed yarn in both the warp and weft. There is considerable variation in the threadcount of individual stripes in the weft which is indicative of the weaving having been done by eye rather than counting the individual colours between each change. No dye analysis has been conducted but, if tested, it is probable that the dyes would be shown to be those typically used in early 19th century tartan: cochineal and indigo for the red and blue respectively; indigo and an unknown black-grey source for the black; and indigo with an unknown yellow

dyestuff for the green. Different shades of green were used for the warp (lighter) and weft (darker); this is consistent with a different dye-lots (Plate 4). Given that there are no similar differences with the other colours, the most likely explanation for this is a miscalculation of the amount of green required.



Plate. 4 Detail showing the difference in the warp (light) and weft (dark) green yarn shades.
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The Sett

The MacDuff pattern can be described as the Royal Stewart tartan with the yellow and white stripes removed (Fig 1).



Fig. 1 Comparison of the Royal Stewart and MacDuff settings.

A specimen of Wilsons of Bannockburn's MacDuff tartan was included in the Cockburn Collection (1810-15) and was also amongst the designs submitted³ to the Highland Society of London at some point between 1816-22 for their collection of clan tartans (Plate 5). The shades of the latter are similar to the kilt discussed here. The pattern obviously quickly found favour as it is included in Wilsons of Bannockburn's 1819 Key Pattern Book (KPB). Unlike some of their Key Patterns, Wilsons didn't comment about the origin of the design which lends weight to it being one of their own. Wilsons' 1819 KPB included four settings for the MacDuff tartan, one of which was for 6 half setts for the 24 Reed at 25 inches wide. The material of this kilt similarly has 6 half setts across the same width but with some variations in the threadcount from those in the KPB⁴.



Plate 5. MacDuff specimen c1816-22 in the Highland Society of London Collection. © The Author

³ Presumably by James Duff, 4th Earl of Fife who succeeded to the title in 1811.

⁴ Examination of contemporary specimens of Wilsons' cloth show that many of their tartans were woven in a variety of sizes and proportions that differed from the settings given in the 1819 KPB.

Conclusion

Dating early kilts, like early pieces of tartan, is an imprecise science. That this is an early kilt is undeniable but whether it is c1790 is less certain. Martin's assessment was based on examining other early kilts, most of which were military and more formal in their pleating. They are not necessarily authoritative when considering early civilian kilts and this one could equally be from the first quarter of the 19th century. Support for this is found in the construction of another more recently discovered old kilt⁵.

Whilst the width and number of half setts matches one of those in the 1819 KPB, the actual threadcount is slightly different. The KPB counts were exactly that, Wilsons' Key Patterns; it did not include all the setting of individual tartans woven by them and does not preclude the setting and material of this kilt being theirs too. Similarities of the shades in the kilt and the Highland Society of London collection's specimen, and the fact that the design appears to have been one of Wilsons, offers the possibility that the kilt is made from their cloth.

Unfortunately, there are no details of where this kilt came from, whether it was made for a MacDuff or simply for someone that liked the pattern. On the balance of probabilities, the kilt is probably c1800-20 and made from Wilsons' cloth.

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⁵ Discussed in this paper - http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/An_early_C19th_kilt_made_from_an_old_plaid.pdf