

The Murray of Tullibardine Tartan – A Re-appraisal

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine some old specimens of the tartan now known as Murray of Tullibardine, why it's associated with the Murrays and to consider what may be the original setting and why it differs from the version seen today.

Early References

In another paper¹ I noted that this is one of a relatively few clan tartans whose design can be dated with certainty to the period of the '45 with at least four portraits of the time and one slightly later all showing the subject wearing this tartan. The painted representations are detailed and the sett quite clear although the colour of some of the finer lines is open to interpretation. The significance of this is discussed in the later. There is no surviving C18th reference to what the tartan was called and it was not until the mid-C19th that written references list this amongst other clan tartans.

The design was shown by James Grantⁱ where his statement *'That tartan called Tullibardine is a red tartan, and was adopted and worn by Charles, first Earl of Dunmore, second son of the first Marquis of Tullibardine.....'* was taken by later writers as evidence that the Tullibardine tartan was in existence by the late 1600s. Grant took his information from the Smithsⁱⁱ who wrote *'We found this very pretty pattern of Tartan in the market, but we can say nothing more anent it, than that the proprietors of the respectable Tartan Warehouse from which we obtained it assured us it is the Tartan used by the Earl of Dunmore. The Smiths called their pattern Murray of Tullibardine and went on to mention '...the present Earl.....'* making it clear that they were not referring to Charles, the 1st Earl.

Early Specimens



Fig 1. Tullibardine Bed Hangings c1800

The tartan is not included in any of the early C19th collections of tartan specimens² but three examples at Blair Castle and a later one from Wilsons of Bannockburn show the development of the design and how it became the *Murray of Tullibardine*.

For a long time the oldest surviving piece was what was thought to a set of tartan hangings on what is known as the *Tullibardine Bed* at Blair Castle (Fig 1). The hangings are made from a single run of hard tartan approximately 28 yards long by 27" wide. The bed is not the original, which was a huge round one that was moved to

¹ The early use of the Murray of Tullibardine Tartan

² The Cockburn Collection 1810 and the Highland Society of London Collection 1816.

Blair c1829 and the hangings are said to be a copy of the older ones on the original bed. The replacement tartan dates to c1800 but what is unknown is whether it was on the bed when it was moved to Blair c1829 or was already owned by the Atholls. The tartan was woven off-set with a broad black herringbone selvedge and an unusual colouration giving an overall red, blue and black appearance that lead to some researchers mistakenly classifying it as a different tartan altogether (Fig 2). However, recent research by the author confirmed that the broad dark stripes together with their flanking dark stripes are in fact dark green and thus the sett conforms to the standard setting. This is confirmed by a later length of material at Blair in which the setting, including the herringbone selvedge, are matched but in much brighter shades. This c1820-40 hard tartan length (Fig 3) is wholly consistent with the quality and colours of the major tartan weavers of the time, Wilsons of Bannockburn.



Fig 2. Bed Hangings with herringbone selvedge mark on the right



Fig 3. c1820-40 copy of the Bed Hangings showing true colours

Having shown that the bed hangings and the later copy follow the standard colouration and setting what can be determined about the way in which the cloth was set to the loom? As the 1820-40 copy matches the hangings I shall deal simply with them as the older. The material is 27" wide and off-set (meaning the pattern is not balanced i.e. repeating evenly from the centre outwards) with a black selvedge mark. It will be recalled that the hangings are a copy of an earlier set and the above details indicate that the original was intended to be joined to make double width plaid. Such off-set designs with selvedge patterns were common in the early C18th and it seems likely that an original plaid was later used as hangings or a bed throw, perhaps during the Proscription era when plaids could not openly worn.

There is however a problem with the c1800 replacement material used for the hangings. It doesn't follow the standard practice of traditional off-set plaids where the pattern finishes in the middle of a pivot on the side to be joined, in this case it should be the narrow black stripe, meaning that the sett will repeat normally until the selvedge mark at the top and bottom of the cloth. Here the design continues through the green pivot, the next red and finally into the blue stripe with the result that when the cloth is joined there is a triple blue stripe that throws out the normal repeat and creates a false pivot (Fig 4). There are a number of potential reasons why the cloth was woven like this:



Fig 4. Bed Hangings showing false pivot at joined selvedge

- It's possible that the original plaid was a different width and the c1800 weavers simply fitted the design to the width that they had available.
- The original plaid/bed hangings were incomplete and so the reconstruction was a best guess.
- The original plaid was also set like this.

Given the selvedge pattern the first possibility seems unlikely. If the original plaid survived it would be a simple matter to amend the count to ensure that the design fitted the width available.

Perhaps then the original plaid was incomplete with the joining selvedge missing and so the weaver had to fit the design as best as they could. Although this is a fairly busy design there is more than a full repeat of the sett which makes the pivot points very obvious and it's inconceivable that a weaver would make such an error unless he was only working from a scrap and had to guess the second pivot. This is a possibility but the inclusion of the selvedge mark means that there must have been a reasonable amount of the original to work with.

Finally, there is the possibility that the original plaid was woven this way too. That would be very unusual but not unique. The original MacDonald of Glenaladale plaid is similarly off-set but for some inexplicable reason not finished on a pivot at the joining selvedge.

But for a chance discovery we might be left to ponder the conundrum. A few years ago I examined a number of tartan fragments in the Blair Castle attic amongst which was a C18th fragment 26.5 x 1.75 inches from selvedge to torn edge. The pattern is clearly the Tullibardine with the exception that the usual fine black stripes are green although their narrowness makes them appear black. Interestingly, this piece is also off-set with the joining edge not at the pivot and the frayed edge stopping short of what should be the selvedge mark. Comparison of the full width of the fragment and the bed hangings (Fig 5) shows the striking similarity between the two with the pivots marked at X and the joining edge on the right.

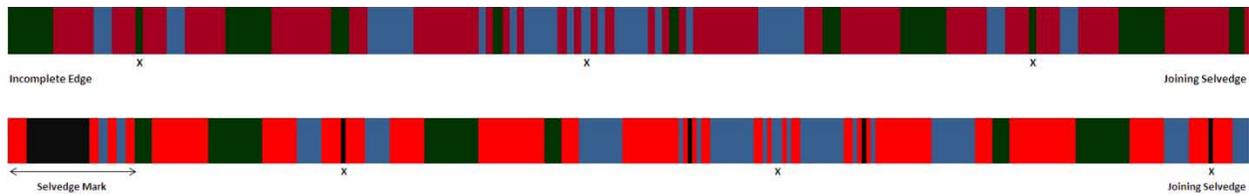


Fig 5. Comparison of the fragment (top) and bed hanging warps

It's unfortunate that the fragment stops short of the selvage leaving us to speculate as to the original width and selvage arrangement. There is no evidence of herringboning at the ragged edge so we have no way of knowing how it was finished or what width the original was. If it was the same width as the hangings then there would have been one additional red bar and that that would not have been herringboned due to its narrow width. Alternatively, the older warp may have had the same selvage arrangement as the hangings in which case the cloth would have been about 33" wide, untypical but unknown for early C18th tartan material.

Naming of the Tartan

So far all the pieces examined and examples in early portraits have been unnamed. It has already been mentioned that the tartan was not included in early collections nor was it listed in Wilsons' 1819 Key Pattern Bookⁱⁱⁱ, however, a recently discovered c1830-40 sample book of Wilsons' tartans³ includes a piece named simply *Tullibardine* (Fig 6). Although speculation, it's reasonable to conclude that Wilsons were asked to copy the tartan from the Tullibardine Bed at some point in the early 1800s and, always looking for genuinely old Highland patterns, they later sold it under that name. The *respectable Tartan Warehouse* mentioned by the Smiths was probably Wilsons'. Presumably they made the connection between the Wilsons' name and the family and added the family name Murray for their 1850 publication.

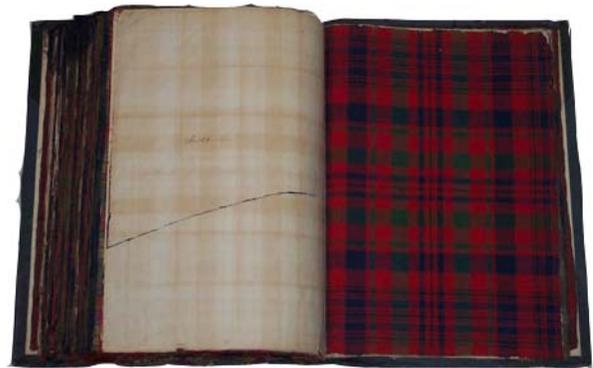


Fig 6. Wilsons' *Tullibardine* tartan in a c1830-40 sample book. Photo credit – Matt Newsome, Scottish Tartans Museum

Conclusions

This paper and the related one on the Early Use of the Tullibardine tartan have shown beyond doubt that the pattern can be dated to c1746 with certainty and that the oldest surviving examples of cloth, and one of the portraits, are connected with the Murrays. A logical explanation has been offered for the naming of the pattern as *Tullibardine* and later *Murray of Tullibardine* although the evidence for its historic use by that branch is circumstantial at best whereas the Blair Castle and Dunmore associations indicate a pattern more likely to be connected with Atholl and/or Highland Perthshire in some way.

³ A Scott-Adie book of Wilsons' specimens examined & photographed by the Scottish Tartans Museum in 2005.

The fragment and bed hangings at Blair appear structurally related. In particular, the way in which they are off-set and the use of the unusual blue shade seem beyond coincidence. Possibly the hangings were an incorrect copy, either by design or omission, or there was more than one original piece with different settings. The 4th Earl of Dunmore's jacket in the c1770 portrait is unlikely to have been made from an off-set length so there were presumably other weavings of the material available in the late C18th.

With the colouring of the fine stripes in the early portraits by no means clear it's possible that the assumed black was in fact blue and that Blair fragment represents the original setting where the simplified red, blue and green setting is visually more pleasing.

We will probably never know the origins of the Tullibardine tartan before c1746. It's logical to assume that if it existed then, then it existed before but for how long is unclear. What is certain is that with so many portraits and old specimens depicting the design it has, with the exception of the simpler red and black Rob Roy type check, the unique position of being the most widely recorded and accurately documented of our original clan era tartans.

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ⁱ **GRANT J.** 1886 *The Tartans of the Clans of Scotland*. W & A.K Johnston, Edinburgh

ⁱⁱ **SMITH W & SMITH A.** 1850 *Authenticated Tartans of the Clans and Families of Scotland*. W & A Smith, Mauchline

ⁱⁱⁱ **MACDONALD, P.** 1996 *The 1819 Key Pattern Book – One Hundred Original Tartans*. Sunprint, Perth