

Dunblane

INTRODUCTION

Although the Dunblane tartan is now generally regarded as a *District sett* details of its origins are confused and appear to have little to do directly with the town of the same name. Claims that it dates in its present form to the early 18th Century are unconvincing and are based on tenuous research taken as fact by later writers.

ORIGINS OF THE SETT

The Smith Brothers were the first to show the design when they included it (Fig 1) in their 1850 publication¹ where they said of it:



Fig 1. The Smiths' Dunblane plate.

“Our principal reason for giving this specimen is, from the evidence which it affords of the Tartan having been worn by at least some of the nobility of the Lowlands of Scotland.”

When George the Fourth visited Edinburgh in 1822, the Duke of Leeds appeared at the Levee held in Holyrood House, as Viscount Dunblane, dressed in the Highland Costume—the Tartan being the same pattern as that here given, and which has been copied and manufactured for His Grace, from an old portrait at Hornby Castle, Yorkshire, of Peregrine, second Viscount Dunblane, who died in 1729.”

The Smiths rationale for including the design as evidence that tartan was ‘....worn by at least some of the nobility of the Lowlands of Scotland’ was misconstrued. Some Scottish based Lowland Lairds may have worn tartan at times but Viscount

Dunblane was not one of them. The title was a titular one¹ and there is no evidence that the any of the first three Viscounts ever visited Scotland. The portrait was probably a social statement painted to promote their standing by identifying them with their Scottish title. Irrespective of the reason for the portrait, the Smiths confused their Viscounts – the portrait (Fig 2) is of Thomas Osborne (1713-1789), 3rd Viscount and only son of Peregrine, the 2nd. It is dated 1729 meaning that Thomas would have been thirteen at the time. If the 4th Duke,

¹ **DUNBLANE**, viscount of, a title in the peerage of Scotland, conferred 3d May 1673, on Sir Thomas Osborne of Kiveton, Yorkshire, lord high treasurer of England, (descended from Sir Edward Osborne, knight, lord mayor of London in 1582), and after the revolution created marquis of Carmarthen (1689) and duke of Leeds (1694), and now possessed by his descendant, George Godolphin Osborne, eighth duke of Leeds (1859). <http://www.electricscotland.com/history/nation/dunblane.htm>

grandson of Thomas, appeared at the Levee in *Highland Costume* then that would probably have had to have been made a year or two earlier as there was little notice of the King's Jaunt and so insufficient time to have outfits made from scratch. Clearly the Smiths knew of the portrait's existence, although whether they actually saw it is unclear but that seems unlikely and their acceptance that the sett worn by the 4th Duke is the same as that worn in the portrait was probably based on supposition.

The portrait depicts a young man wearing a lace trimmed tartan jacket and trews with a large, apparently double width, plaid draped in stylised Roman toga fashion. Although the clothing is painted with some care the tartan is less so. Elements of the sett in the jacket and trews appear similar and they look to be the same sett. The plaid too shows some of the same features and although the sett seems to be bigger this may just have been artistic licence; the artist is not renowned for painting Highland Dress. It was common for artists at the time use theme props and it is not at all certain that the outfit would have been owned by Thomas Osborne. Irrespective of whether the outfit actually existed or whether the tartan was simply taken from a piece in artist's possession the detail of the tartan is not painted sufficiently well to allow an accurate extrapolation of the sett.



Fig 2. Thomas Osborne, 3rd Viscount Dunblane.

The Smiths' comment that the tartan '*...has been copied and manufactured for His Grace*' at the time of the 1822 Levee places the design as one of those resurrected or invented during the Highland Revival, many of which own their existence to the famous weaving firm of Wilsons of Bannockburn. This seems to be one of those. The Scottish Tartans Authority has a small piece of unnamed Wilsons' material in this design (Fig 3) that was possibly the source of the Smiths' plate.



Fig 3. Wilsons' sample of Dunblane c1820.

THE SETTING

If we accept that the tartan in the portrait of the 3rd Viscount is insufficiently detailed to allow a meaningful extrapolation then the earliest authentic version of the sett is that in the Wilsons' sample. Comparison between their Dunblane and that given by the Smiths reveals that the blue overstripe of the older setting were light blue but by c1850 they had become dark blue. This was either by design or perhaps it was simply a feature of early printed tartan plates where evidence from other tartans demonstrates that accuracy in matching shade was not sought or considered too important. A collection of plaids sold in 2012² included a Dunblane one that followed the Wilsons' setting but with dark blue guard stripes showing that the change of shade was in commercial production within a few years of the Smiths' publication (Fig 4). How early this change occurred and whether it in fact happened earlier and the Smiths reproduced the then current version is unknown.



Fig 4. Dunblane plaid c1860-80. Photo: Bonhams

The Smiths' work did not include threadcounts and it was not until 1950 that details of the setting were publishedⁱⁱ. Stewart's counts were basic proportional rather than historically accurate ones. In this case he took his from the Smiths' plate and was presumably unaware of the Wilsons' specimen or the later plaid as his proportions differ from those (Fig 5).

² Of the nine plaids, one was mid-late 18th century, the other eight were soft Merino wool c1860-80. Bonhams - [Lot 547](#).

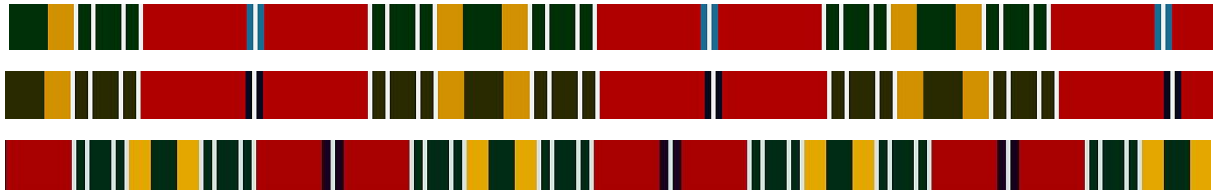


Fig 5. Comparison of settings of the Wilsons', merino plaid and Stewart's setting of the Dunblane tartan.

Comparison of the settings reveals that the Smiths'/Stewart version has proportionally less red than green and more yellow than in the older/original setting. The inclusion of Blue for Wilsons' Light Blue has already been mentioned but the effect is pronounced when the two are view together.

Whilst we know that Wilsons wove this tartan we have no idea what they called it nor if it was widely sold or was a 'special' for Viscount Dunblane around the time of the Levee as stated by the Smith brothers. If we accept that assertion then we may assume that Wilsons either extracted an approximate setting from the portrait or that they designed a new tartan but perhaps using a description of the tartan in the portrait. Having been in the family since it was painted, the original portrait was sold recently and its current owner/location is unfortunately unknown and further study is therefore not possible at present.

USE AS A DISTRICT TARTAN

The association of this as a District Tartan can be traced to W & A. K. Johnston who wrote of it that *"The tartan is probably a district one, just as that of the Campbells of Cawdor is called the "Argyll District Tartan".*ⁱⁱⁱ This supposition is not supported by any evidence.

Stewart noted of the design that *'It seems to have been revived in 1822, doubtless on occasion of the visit of George IV to Scotland in anticipation of which there must have been much hunting round for old tartans to wear.'* thus implying that it was an old sett, a comment undoubtedly based on the Smiths' linking it to the 1729 portrait. In 1992 the authors of District Tartans^{iv} conflated Stewarts' comment and their own regarding the town of Dunblane into evidence for this tartan having been an old District sett for that area of Perthshire, a claim for which there is absolutely no proof.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the Dunblane tartan is an early 19th Century sett that was woven by Wilsons of Bannockburn and that evidence supports its use by the 4th Viscount Dunblane at the time of George IV's visit to Scotland in 1822. We also know that the shade of the blue overstripe was changed, but whether deliberately or in error is unclear, in 1850. It may also be assumed that the sett was copied or inspired by the tartan worn in the portrait of Thomas Osborne, 3rd Viscount Dunblane painted in 1729. It is to be hoped that the original portrait will not remain in private hands and unavailable for study and that at a future date it will be possible to examine it to confirm the details of the tartan in the outfit.

All the early evidence supports the use of this tartan as a family design and there is nothing to substantiate its wider attribution as a District tartan until the Johnstons' early 1900s work which subsequent authors, notably Teall and Smith, have repeated without question.

However, irrespectively of its origins, the design is now widely sold as a District, as opposed to a family, tartan and there is no reason why it should not be enjoyed by anyone irrespectively of their name or origins.

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

ⁱⁱ **STEWART D.C.** 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Oliver & Boyd., Edinburgh. Revised Edition Shepheard-Walwyn., London 1977

ⁱⁱⁱ **JOHNSTON W & JOHNSTON A.K.** *The Scottish Tartans*. W & A.K. Johnston Ltd., Edinburgh

^{iv} **TEALL of Teallach D.G. and SMITH P.D.** 1992 *District Tartans*. Shepheard-Walwyn., London