

A portion of joined plaiding at Glamis Castle - Prince Charles Edward tartan

Introduction

Glamis Castle in Angus has long had on display a large portion of Prince Charles Edward tartan. It is said to have been connected with, or presented by, either the Old Pretender, James VIII, or his son, Prince Charles Edward Stuart. This paper examines the specimen and explores its place in the history of this iconic tartan.

Prince Charles Edward and the Royal Stewart tartans

The Prince Charles Edward Stuart (PCE) tartan is essentially a more compact version of the more commonly seen Royal Stewart¹, the principal difference being that the PCE has a much reduced red ground. In most cases the large red area in the PCE tartan is roughly twice the width of the individual light blue bars that border it, unlike the Royal Stewart where the red is usually six or more times the size of the blue bars. The visual effect is striking and at first sight the tartans appear quite different (Fig 1). Scarlett's suggestion that the Royal Stewart was a plaid setting of the PCE tartan is interesting but he offers no evidence to support the theory¹.



Fig 1. Comparison of the Prince Charles Edward (top) and Royal Stewart tartans. © The Author.

Which version of the tartan is older has long been the subject of debate and conjecture but it is clear from the records of the weaving firm Wm. Wilson & Son of Bannockburn² that both tartans were being woven by them c1800. The records show that their Pattern No.73 (top colour strip) was also sold as *Prince Charles Edward's*, a name that perhaps reflected a tradition at the time that the pattern was in some way connected with the Prince. Unfortunately Wilsons give no indication as to why they named it such.

Origins of the Prince Charles Edward Tartan

Writing of the origins of the PCE tartan, Scarlett says that it has *many reputed associations with the Prince and The '45'*. The problem with a great many of the 'reputed associations' is that most date from the late 18th century or later. This includes the majority of earlier surviving specimens, many of which can be dated c1790-1850 and Wilsons of Bannockburn. The West Highland Museum in Fort William has a pair of PCE tartan trews that are said to have been worn by the Prince (Fig 2). This attribution is erroneous, as discussed later, and due to the trews being displayed alongside other items associated with the Prince but only one of which, a silk waistcoat, has a proven provenance and likely to have been worn by Charles Edward

¹ The spelling *Stuart* and *Stewart* have been used interchangeably for hundreds of years. In the case of the Prince Charles Edward tartan the French version (*Stuart*) is always used, presumably in recognition of the way that the Prince's name was spelt.

² Wilsons of Bannockburn were founded c1760 and for the next 60 years were the principal supplier of tartan in Scotland and abroad. The fact that so much of their correspondence survives means that there is a unique record of their role in the growth of new tartans.

Stuart. The style of the trews and quality of the material is consistent with the Highland Revival era (c1780-1840) and the cloth is most likely to be Wilsons' rather than mid-18th century.



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Fig 2. Trews - Prince Charles Edward tartan, West Highland Museum.

The oldest surviving specimen?

The specimen of PCE tartan on display at Glamis Castle (Fig 3) is demonstrably of mid-18th century origin; is the oldest specimen of this tartan known to the author; and is possibly the original specimen on which Wilsons based their pattern.



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Fig 3. Fragment of Prince Charles Edward tartan, Glamis Castle.

The fragment is approximately 64½" x 17" and made up of three sections of material joined at the selvedge; two complete pieces, each 26½" wide, and one incomplete section 10½" wide. Assuming that this piece comprised three lengths of tartan, then the joined cloth would have been 79½" (6½') wide by an unknown length. The thread used to join each piece with a running stitch³ (Fig 4) is the same and the three joins therefore contemporary, meaning that the material is unlikely to have been intended as a plaid for wearing because of the width.



Fig 4. Running stitch join.

One of the longer sides is bound along most of its length with decorated woven braid (Fig 5). Dating the binding is difficult but the stitching used to attach it is similar to that used to join the sections of tartan and it's therefore possible that the joining of the tartan lengths and the binding are contemporary.

If dating of the braid-work is uncertain, the cloth is less problematic; the tartan was hand-woven with hand spun naturally dyed singles (non-plyed yarn) typical of the sort used in the early to mid-18th century.



Fig 5. Detail of the braid binding.

The red shade in particular is interesting; it was almost certainly produced using cochineal, an imported dyestuff, and fixed with an alum, or possibly a poor quality tin, mordant resulting in a pinkish hue as opposed to the scarlet shade more usually associated with the tartan. Similarly, the light blue would have been dyed using the imported dyestuff indigo. The other colours would probably have been produced using a mixture of local and imported dyes; a full dye analysis would be required to confirm the precise dyes and mordents used.

The Setting

Judging by surviving specimens of other tartans of the period, a 26" width was fairly standard for mid-18th century tartan. This cloth was woven as a balance warp⁴ with three full setts finishing

³ The different styles of stitch used to join plaids is discussed in the companion paper on [Joined Plaids – Settings & Construction](#).

⁴ A balanced warp is one where the pattern repeats left and right from the centre in the same order to finish at the same point on each selvedge.

on the white pivot at the selvages (Fig 6) meaning that the pattern would repeat correctly across the whole width of the joined cloth.



Fig 6. Setting of the full width of the warp. © The Author

The Original Use of the Glamis Specimen

Whilst we will probably never know for certain what size the piece at Glamis was, or how it was used, it is possible to make an educated guess based on other 18th century specimens. Mention has already been made of the $79\frac{1}{2}$ " width of the joined cloth and the fact that it would have been unsuitable for a *breacan an fheileadh* (belted plaid); this fact, together with the braid along one edge suggests some other use. The most logical explanation for such a piece is that it was used as bed hangings; such curtains were a feature of wealthy households where they added warmth and decoration. A few examples of such bed hangings survive, such as those at Blair Castle (Fig. 7). Interestingly, these hangings incorporate a braid finish on the front of the canopy which may show how the braiding on the Glamis piece was used.



Fig 7. Traditional Bed Hangings, Blair Castle.

Conclusion

The structure of the cloth, dye shades and method of joining the sections of the Glamis specimen are consistent with the tartan being mid-18th century in origin. It is one of only two known specimens of the period that comprise three sections of joined cloth, the other being a section of plaiding preserved in the Carlisle Museum which is discussed [here](#). There are similarities in the two designs but these may just be coincidental and there is simply no way of knowing whether these are significant without a more detailed analysis of the two original specimens. Neither is it possible to know with any certainty how the cloth was used originally but, given the likely width of the joined cloth and the braid along one edge, it is reasonable to speculate that it was used for bed hangings of some type.

Prince Charles Edward never visited Glamis Castle, so the association of the cloth with him is unlikely and the name is more likely to be a later attribution, possibly by Wilsons, in an attempt to cash in the Jacobite popularity during the Highland Revival era (c.1780-1840). The Prince's father, James Stuart, the Old Pretender, did visit Glamis so it is possible that he was in some way connected with the tartan. Perhaps he slept in a bed that used the cloth as curtains? The lack of detail records for the Glamis cloth, and the fact that it is often difficult to date early-mid 18th century tartan with certainty means that this fragment could date to any point c1700-50.

Irrespective of the exact date of the cloth it is, in the writer's opinion, the oldest surviving specimen of the Prince Charles Edward tartan and possibly the original specimen which Wilsons may have subsequently copied for their Pattern Book. Unless information arises to the contrary then it is reasonable to assume that the cloth was purchased by one of the former Earls of Strathmore with the intention of having bed hangings made. There is absolutely no evidence to support this piece ever having been worn as a Plaid.

Wilson's records for the Prince Charles Edward tartan given in their 1819 Key Pattern Book show remarkable uniformity with the proportions of the Glamis specimen and are essentially the same as those we see today. Thus, the tartan is one of the very few that has been woven unchanged since at least the mid-18th century.

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ⁱ SCARLETT J.S. 1990 *TARTAN The Highland Textile*. Shephard-Walwyn., London

ⁱⁱ Ibid