

Tartans of the Royal Company of Archers

INTRODUCTION

The Royal Company of Archers was founded in 1676 as a private archery club and received its first Royal Charter in 1704 at which time, or shortly thereafter, the Company adopted its first tartan uniform, a somewhat anachronistic pseudo-courtly slashed coat and breeches in a red based sett. This was superseded in 1789 by a more contemporary cut Government¹ tartan coat and white breeches. That uniform underwent a further change to a full tartan one in time for King George IV's visit to Edinburgh in 1822 where the Archers provided a Bodyguard². The tartan suit was dropped in the mid-Victorian era in favour of a dark green one that is still worn today.

THE ORIGINAL TARTAN

It has been suggested by various writers that the Royal Company of Archers wore either the Ogilvie or Drummond of Strathallan tartans but this seems to be based on a misinterpretation of old portraits, costume and specimens. On the contrary, it is more likely that these two clan tartans were based on the original Archers' tartan. Amongst the Company's Minutes is the following extract *"...on the 15th of June 1713 an 'overture' was brought in for considering 'a proper habite and uniform garb for the Company,' and on the 27th of July Messrs. George Drummond, Robert Freebairn, and Alex. Murray were appointed, 'to get swatches for the Archer garb and to make an estimate of the price, and to receive overtures for that effect. ' By the 9th of October 'the Council having seen and considered a piece of tartan laid before them by Alex.Murray, merchant, they approved the same as being proper to be used for their habit'....."*. The tartan continued in use until 1788.ⁱ

Elsewhere amongst the Company's archives are notes indicating that at some point they referred to this red sett as a Stuart tartan. However, there is no evidence to connect it directly with the Stuarts and the naming may be nothing more than an error due to confusion with an existing sett; or possibly, at some later date, they were attempting to validate the Company's pre-Hanoverian origins. It is this reference that is likely to have been the source of later claims, for which there is no proof, that the Company wore the Prince Charles Edward tartan.



The earliest known representation of the original tartan is in Richard Waitt's c1715 portrait of Sir Archibald Grant of Monymusk (formerly identified as Archibald Burnet of Carlops) (Fig 1) in which the sitter wears an ornate coat and short trews of a red, green and yellow tartan.

Fig 1. Sir Archibald Grant of Monymusk by Richard Waitt c1715.

¹ The Government tartan is more commonly known as the Black Watch tartan.

² Since 1822 the Archers have been the Sovereign's Body Guard in Scotland at all state or ceremonial occasions where the Monarch is present.

What is clearly intended to be the same dress and tartan can be seen in the portrait of James, 5th Earl of Wymess painted c1743-56 which shows that this red tartan was still in use approximately half a century after it was adopted (Fig 2). In the portrait the dress is much more flamboyant, perhaps denoting the rank of the sitter whom at the time was the Archers' Captain General. It has been suggested that this red tartan was only worn until 1746 and the Jacobite defeat at Culloden following which an Act of Parliament *proscribed or banned the making or wearing of Tartan cloths*ⁱⁱ. Actually, the ban applied to tartan *clothes* and not tartan *cloth*. Additionally, with a Royal Charter, the Archers were clearly seen as part of the establishment and like members of the military, they were not subject to, or affected by, the 1746 Act of Proscription. Their continued Royal support is confirmed by a 1746 portrait of the future George III in which he is shown playing in an Archer's uniform that is a miniture version of that worn by Wymess (Fig 3).



Fig 2. James, 5th Earl of Wymess c1743-56.



Fig 3. The Children of Frederick, Prince of Wales by Barthélemy du Pan 1746 (the future George III in an Archer's outfit). Source: The Royal Collection Trust

In none of the portraits is the tartan painted in sufficient detail to allow any proper extraction of the sett and one is simply left with the overall impression of a red based tartan. However, we are extremely fortunate that at least five examples of the coat survive, two of which are thought to be contemporary with the portrait of Alexander Grant of Monymusk (see Fig 4 for an example). There is no information in the original Minutes to indicate from where Alex. Murray obtained the sample that was adopted in 1713, but it is reasonable to assume that a new design was commissioned in order to ensure that it was uniformly acceptable to

members. The Company was principally officered by Lowland Lairds rather than those with Highland connections who would have had a stronger tartan tradition and possibly views on the type of pattern. The tartan can be described as having an overall red and green appearance with lighter coloured fine overstripes; a closer examination reveals the finer stripes to be yellow, white, blue and black.

Archers' Hall³ has two outfits, one is an example of an original coat and includes a pair of tartan breeches. The shades and quality of the material of the coat suggests that it is of an earlier date and the coat is almost certainly part of the original order. Like the coats, the breeches are slashed in a style that is more Elizabethan or Jacobean rather than early Georgian (Fig 4). At first sight the coat and breeches appear to be of different tartans unlike those shown in the early portraits (Figs 1-3). Those shown appeared to have a red and white based sett with finer overstripes on what looks to be a large sett; however, there are similarities in the arrangements of some of the bands and stripes meaning they are more alike than a cursory examination suggests. Subsequent research by the author confirmed that in the tartan of the breeches the white was originally green but presumably produced from a different, now much faded, dye lot and that the two tartans are actually the same as the colour strips below demonstrate (Fig 5).



Fig 4. Archer's Coat and faded Breeches c1713.
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Fig 5. Colour strips comparing the tartan of the Coat and Breeches of the Archers' Hall outfit.
© The Author

THE DIFFERENT SETTINGS

There appears to have been a second batch of uniforms made, possibly in the 1750s, which feature a more complex and extended setting of the tartan in which the arrangement of the colours differs across the sett. A study of contemporary pieces of this extended setting reveals discrepancies in the individual threadcounts and shades which suggests more than one weaver and/or locations produced the cloth. The green in particular is much darker, almost black, in some specimens. Whether these variations were deliberate or the result of a misinterpretation of the original sett is unclear. Finally, there was an attempt to recreate the uniform, perhaps for a specific event, in the mid-1800s⁴. Once again the original tartan was incorrectly reproduced, this time the sett was simplified. See (Figs 6-8). The middle coat includes silver brocade which signified an officer's/office holder's rank.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archers%27_Hall

⁴ By the late 1700s the Archers had changed to the Government (Black Watch) tartan which they were still using when this last 'red tartan' coat was made.



Fig 6. Archer's Coat c1713
Photo Credit: NMS



Fig 7. Archer's Coat c1750
© The Author



Fig 8. Archer's Coat (copy) c1850
Photo Credit: NMS

The development/errors in reproducing the sett are apparent in Fig 9 where the underlined sections show the half sett. Although a busy sett, the relatively small size in the original setting (top) is obvious, whereas the extra section added in the c1750 material, including a new pivot, is shown by the shorter line, marked 'a', in the middle colour strip.

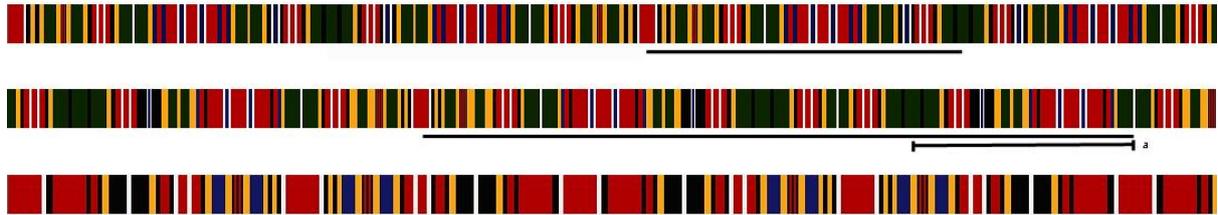


Fig 9. Comparison of the original (top), c1750 version (middle) and Victorian copy (bottom). © The Author

By comparison, the setting of the c1850 copy is wholly defective; it omits the green entirely and the 'small mark'⁵ is change from seven to five alternating strips of black and red (Fig 10).

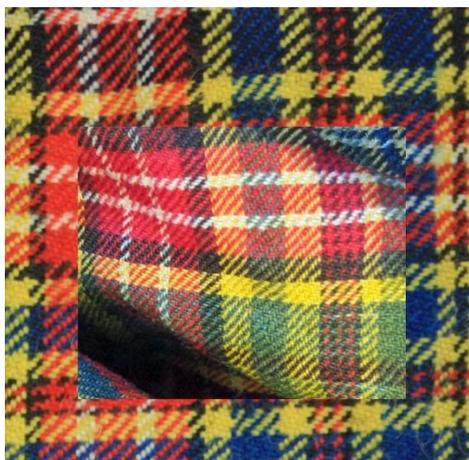


Fig 10. Comparison of the Small Mark in the 1713/1750 and 1850 setts. © The Author

⁵ Small Mark was a term used by the weaving firm Wilsons of Bannockburn, possibly by others too, to describe a band of similar sized alternating stripes. They would give the total count, for example 16 instead of B4 K4 B4 K4 and the instruction would be understood by the warper and weaver.

THE ARCHERS', OGILVIE, AND DRUMMOND OF STRATHALLAN TARTANS

Mention was made at the beginning of this paper of the claim by some that the Archers wore either the Drummond of Strathallan or Ogilvie tartans. In the colour strips that follow the similarities between the Archers' settings, the Drummond of Strathallan and Ogilvie are obvious (Fig 11).

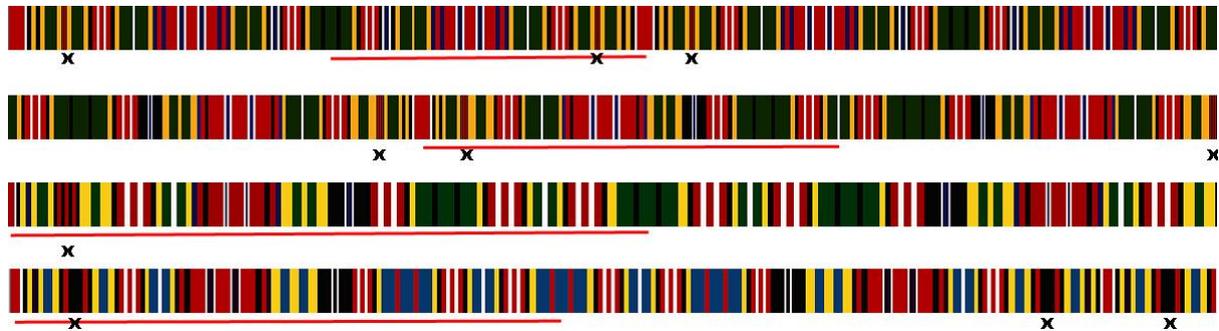


Fig 11. Colour strips comparing, from the top and second, the Archers' 1713 and 1750 settings, the Drummond of Strathallan and Ogilvie tartans. © The Author

The increasing complexity of the setts can be appreciated by the red line under each strip which shows the half sett. Additionally, the points marked 'x' show the 'small marks', these in turn illustrate how the sett size of each pattern differed. Simplest by far is the original setting of the Archers' tartan where the pattern is much more balanced with the smaller sett. As discussed earlier, the c1750 setting includes an extra green section; the Drummond tartan adds a third large green section making the pattern even larger. The Ogilvie is essentially the same sett as the Drummond but with the green replaced by blue and some of the overstripes differing in proportion and colour. In the latter the small mark becomes a black stripe with red guards.

What then could have given rise to the claim that the Archers wore the Drummond of Strathallan tartan or Ogilvie? There seem to be two factors that may have led to the claim.

Both the Ogilvie and Drummond tartans can be dated to the early 1800s⁶ with certainty but claims of earlier use, in common with most other clan tartans, remains unproven. There is evidence that the Drummond version is slightly older⁷ and its similarity to the Archers' sett may partially explain claims that the Drummond/Ogilvie was used by the Archers for their original tartan. (Fig 12). Secondly, there is the fact that at least two of the early members of the Royal Company were named Drummond. It is unclear whether they were related, either to each other, or to the Strathallan branch but it is possible that a later Strathallan Drummond asked for a piece of the old (pre-1788) Archers' tartan to be copied as 'his' tartan. Either the weaver made an error for, or was commissioned to make a variation of, the original design.

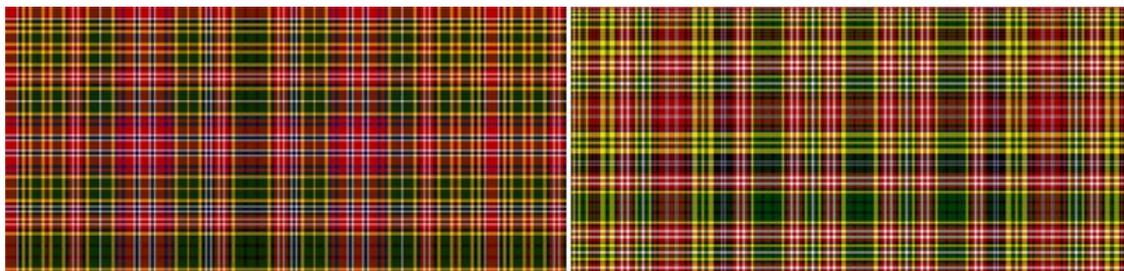


Fig 12. Comparison of the Archers' and Drummond Tartans. © The Author

⁶ Specimens of both, labelled 'Ogilvie' and 'Drummond' respectively, are included in the Cockburn Collection of 1810-15.

⁷ There is a letter to Wilsons dated 1794 that includes a swatch of the Drummond but does not name it. And a letter of 1798 ordered 30 yards of Drummond tartan but does not include a sample to confirm the sett.

ADOPTION OF THE GOVERNMENT TARTAN

In 1789, shortly after the Repeal of the ban on wearing Highland Dressⁱⁱⁱ the Archers adopted a new uniform that comprised a Government tartan coat, white (buff) breeches and waist coat; as shown in Raeburn's famous portrait of Dr. Nathaniel Spens, and the less well known one of George Douglas, 16th Earl of Morton (Fig 13). The coat with its swept cutaway front, filigree button holes and shoulder epaulettes is of a style common in military coats of the late C18th. An example survives (Fig 14)⁸ which confirms that in common with most tartan of the time the cloth was produced by the famous weaving firm Wm. Wilson & Son of Bannockburn. This remained the uniform of the Company for 30-40 years but in the build up to the visit of George IV to Scotland in 1822 a new Regency era outfit was adopted (Fig 15).



Fig 13. The 16th Earl of Morton c1790



Fig 14. Archer's coat c1790.
© The Author



Fig 15. Regency Era Suit c1822.
© The Author

The Government tartan was retained but the Archers returned to a full tartan suit an example of which is the second previously unknown outfit mentioned earlier and which can also be seen in Archers' Hall. Stylistically this outfit is a mix of the old and new. The coat has slashed sleeves, braiding and a cut that seems to hark back to the original Archers' coats of some 100 years earlier but was worn with tartan trousers cut in the contemporary Regency style. This third tartan uniform remained in use until c1860-70 when the current dark green Tunic and matching trousers were adopted, at which time the Archers ceased to use any form of tartan in their uniform. Details of the current uniform are [here](#).

CONCLUSION

Over the years the Archers have worn two different tartans as part of their uniform. Originally their uniform was a red and green tartan coat and breeches. That tartan, adopted in 1713, was probably a new design for the Company and it remained in use until the mid-late 1700s, albeit with a slightly amended sett, after which it completely fell out of use. From

⁸ The coat was in the possession of the Scottish Tartans Society until the late 1980s when it disappeared following a series of reorganisations and the final demise of the Society. The coat's current whereabouts is unknown.

the late C18th they wore the standard Government or Black Watch tartan; initially just as a coat but later as a suit of matching coat and trousers adopted for George IV's 1822 visit.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, the original tartan appears to have been used as the basis for the Drummond of Strathallan/Ogilvie tartans that appeared at the end of the 18th century (in the case of the Drummond) and the beginning of the 19th century for the Ogilvie. Both were probably designed by Wilsons of Bannockburn.

I'm indebted to Willie Scobie for assisting in some of the background research into the early history of the Archers.

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ⁱ The Scottish Antiquary, or, Northern Notes and Queries 1899, *Royal Company of Archers – The First Tartan Uniform* Vol VIII, No. 51. Edinburgh University Press.

ⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Company_of_Archers accessed 31 March 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Repeal of the Act Prescribing the Wearing of Highland Dress 22 George III, Cap. 63, 1782.