

## An Unnamed Plaid at Dunollie House

In July 2010 I examined a number of tartan artefacts at Dunollie House, Oban<sup>1</sup>, including two pairs of old tartan curtains, each with a tartan valance. Both pairs were made of 'Hard Tartan'<sup>2</sup> and showed considerable light damage in the form of fading in the areas that had been exposed to the sun. This and the fact that they were not well lit meant that they were initially thought to be made from the same MacDougall tartan but a closer examination revealed the pair on the ground floor were made from a much finer and older material in a different tartan (Plate 1).



Plate 1. Old tartan curtains with MacDougall valance.

An examination revealed these curtains to have been made from a joined plaid c1730<sup>3</sup> that had been cut in half lengthways and one half was used for each curtain. The material is very fine and hard which has helped to preserve it for so long although there are several areas of wear and tear damage apparent in addition to fading caused by sunlight.

The huge 22" sett is in a previously unknown pre-clan tartan with a single width of the cloth being approximately 27" wide comprising one repeat plus selvedge pattern (Fig 1)

An appreciation of the size of the sett can be gained by comparing it against to the table on the right in (Plate 2). The material was woven as an offset or unbalanced warp in order that two pieces could be joined at the offset selvedge (Plate 3) to make a traditional double width plaid approximately 54" wide with the pattern repeating across the width.



Fig 1. Setting for the full warp with the joining pivot on the left and herringbone section marked on the right.

<sup>1</sup> Dunollie is the Seat of the Chief of the MacDougalls.

<sup>2</sup> Tartan woven with a worsted yarn that was left unfinished i.e. not washed, shrunk or fulled.

<sup>3</sup> Accurate dating of early tartan is always difficult, but this plaid is certainly from the first half of the C18th and is typical of specimens from the first quarter hence an approximate c1730 date.



Plate 2. Curtain opened to show the size of the sett



Plate 3. Centre join on the green pivot of the original plaid.

The selvedge that was intended as the outer edge was finished with a herringbone motif typical of plaids of the first half C18th. The braiding on one side of the curtains is early C19th and indicates that the plaid was probably recycled c1800-30 as part of the Highland Revival. When reused, the outer edge was turned and bound which protected the original colours. The herringboning and the fading effect of over 100 years' exposure to direct light can be seen (Plate 4).



Plate 4. Herringbone selvedge and original shades.

Although not yet analysed, the original dyestuffs were almost certainly imported cochineal and indigo for the reds and blue respectively plus indigo and an unknown yellow source (probably a local dye) for the green which is now much faded and appears a yellowish-brown.

The two curtains are 9' x 54" and the bottoms retain the turn ends of the original plaid which means that it was almost certainly simply cut in half and that the original was an 18' (6 yard) double plaid. The fineness of the weave means that that amount would not have been too heavy to wear and it could certainly have been used as a belted plaid.

Mention has been made of the fact that sett pre-dates clan tartans. However, it has strong similarities with some other old patterns from the Appin/Lorn. These are discussed in a [companion paper](#).

The historical importance of this plaid in the story of tartan cannot be emphasised too strongly. In over 30 years of research I've never seen anything of this quality. It is the largest example of early hard tartan thought to survive and the only early C18th full plaid, albeit cut in half, known. It is irreplaceable and historically invaluable. Cochineal was an expensive dyestuff and a plaid of this quality in both weave and colour would have been the preserve of the well off. Many C18th portraits of Highland nobility show the sitter wearing predominantly red tartans indicating their wealth and social status. We cannot be certain to whom it belonged but it could conceivably be the *madder red plaid* mentioned in the valuation of the Chief's effects on his death in 1737.

The plaid is an important link in our understanding of tartan as a rural art form before the popularisation and commercialisation that took place in the early 1800s. It is also a fine example of the pre-1800 traditional tartan weaving techniques that are no longer practiced by the commercial tartan industry.

The Trust that controls Dunollie House has removed the original for preservation and a copy has been produced to replicate the curtains (Plate 6). The design itself has been named the *Dunollie Tartan* and protected<sup>4</sup> in order that the Trust can control it with the aim of raising funds to support the development and interpretation of Dunollie House as the MacDougall clan and heritage centre. Details are available from the:

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Plate 6. Bolt of the reconstructed Dunollie Tartan

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<sup>4</sup> The pattern is Registered with the Intellectual Property Office and protected by Design Registration No.4017925.