

Portion of an 18th Century Plaid

Amongst the old fragments owned by the Scottish Tartans Authority is a piece of loosely woven naturally dyed tartan that is classic of early-mid 18th century plaids (Fig 1). The sample is amongst a number that once belong to the historian John Telfer Dunbar; most, if not all of which, he seems to have acquired from Alexander Carmichael the renowned



Fig 1. Original fragment.

Scottish folk-lore collector. Carmichael in turn collected most of his specimens from the western Highlands and Islands. Nothing else is known about the origins of this particular piece.

However, the extensive use of a deep red, obtained from expensive imported cochineal, would seem to imply otherwise. The other dyes were indigo for the blue, again an imported dyestuff, and a blue (indigo) and yellow (probably a native plant dye) combined for the green. There is no evidence of fading in the sample so this portion of the original appears not to have had a great deal of outdoor use before being damaged or cut up to leave just this small sample. The construction and shades of the piece are wholly consistent with it having been rurally woven sometime between c1730-60.

The fragment is approximately 10 x 12" taken from the middle of the original piece and with no finished edge we are left to speculate as to the width and type of selvedge it would have had. As mentioned, the cloth is of quite a loose weave compared to many other pieces of the period. The material is woven from hand spun 'singles' (non-plyed yarn) at about 30 epi which suggests more of a homespun type material rather than finer cloth made from a plyed yarn associated with a higher ranking individual.

The overall sett of the piece, which is aligned per the warp, is not immediately apparent. The centre red square enclosed by narrow green and blue lines on the broader red ground looks to be one pivot but it's not until one looks closely at the left hand edge of the cloth that two fine green threads can be seen outside the fine blue stripe. This incomplete green stripe therefore mirrors the one immediately adjoining the next blue stripe and thus, we can determine that the second pivot is the narrower red in the bottom left of the image. There is therefore *just* enough of the fragment to allow a full reconstruction of the sett (Fig 2).

It is frustrating to historians but with such a small piece of the original material surviving it's impossible to know what size and how the original was used; whether it was an everyday belted plaid, use for best or was some type of domestic plaid used as bed hangings or the like. The fact that the fragment is not faded argues against it having been part of an everyday plaid unless not much used for some reason. Beyond that we are left to guess whether it was a single width or joined piece and whether it had a herringbone or plain selvedge or even a decorated selvedge pattern. Had that been known then we would have had a good idea of how it was used.

Clearly the specimen pre-dates clan tartans and there is nothing in the structure of the cloth or the sett that gives any clue as to where it was made. As Carmichael collected the majority of his specimens from the west coast and islands it's reasonable to conjecture that this piece was similarly collected there although it is entirely possible that it came from some other part

of the Highlands. Although the pattern doesn't match any existing tartan the sett has similarities with a number of existing designs; for example, Robertson, and also an old plaid from Rothiemurchas near Aviemore, but that may be no more than coincidence.

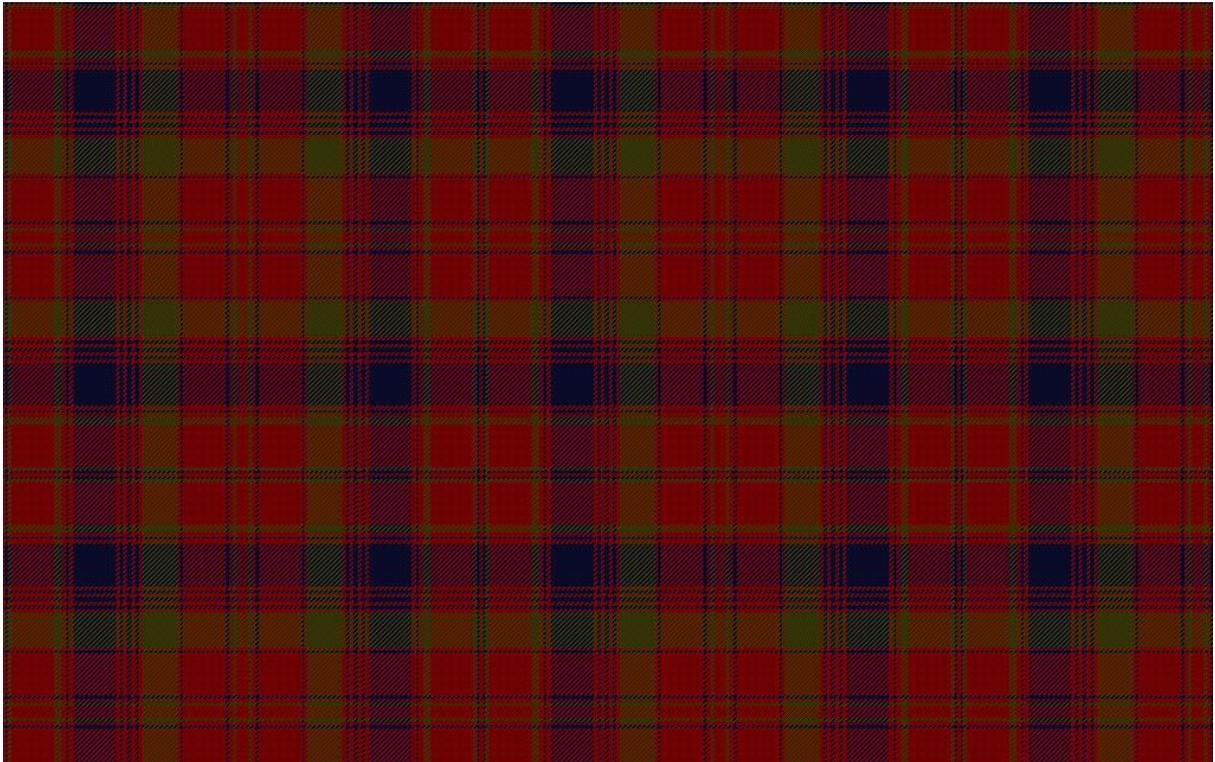


Fig 2. Reconstruction of the original sett.

Considering the pattern, sett size and quality of the material my gut feeling is that this would have been a joined plaid, probably with a blue herringbone selvedge. The amount and quality of red indicates an expensive piece of cloth so it's likely that it was produced for a special event and/or a reasonably wealthy individual.

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