

An Unnamed C18th Plaid from Nethybridge

Introduction

Amongst the records of the Scottish Tartans Society (STS) in the 1970s were details of a tartan entitled *Curtains Found at Nethybridge*. Unfortunately little more than the threadcount was given with no indication of where they were (Nethybridge is a place near Aviemore), who owned them or who had found them etc. I'd always considered it likely that rather than being curtains this piece was actually a plaid or similar length of tartan that had been reused at a later date, perhaps as a result of Proscription¹. This would not be the only instance of such reuse and there are several examples elsewhere of bed hangings, curtains and the like being made from old plaids.

Scarlett included the tartan in his last major work¹ where he gave the thread count and said of the design:

In former times, tartan was used for almost everything made from cloth and it cannot have been rare for an old plaid to be cut up for curtains or similar uses. This was a piece of hard tartan with dull red, dark blue and khaki green. The pattern is similar to the Gow tartan which looks much more like a local design of the Mackintosh type than that shown in the famous portrait of Neil Gow.

From this and the fact that Scarlett lived close to Nethybridge one might assume that he'd actually examined the 'curtains' but subsequent events suggest that that may not have been the case and he may simply used the STS archival material as the basis for his entry.

A Chance Discovery

In 2010 I visited the National Trust for Scotland's (NTS) visitor centre at Culloden for the first time in many years. The Centre now has an excellent interpretive display. In a case of dirks, sporrans and other Jacobite memorabilia I was immediately struck by a red plaid at the back of the case where it was described simply as a *Plaid of Hard Tartan* (Fig 1). Although the plaid was draped in a loose folded arrangement it was possible to see it had a join and at least one herringbone selvedge both of which are classic features of 18th century joined or double plaids.



Fig 1. Plaid at NTS Culloden Centre

Unfortunately at the time it was not possible to gain access to the case in which the plaid is housed and I had to make do with some through-the-glass photographs I'd taken. Working from these and my observations it was clear that item was a hand woven and naturally dyed joined plaid with a herringbone selvedge meaning that it dated between c1730-70.

A check of the setting confirmed that it was the same as that listed in the STS archives as *Curtains from Nethybridge*. The likelihood that this plaid was another 18th century weaving of the same sett was extremely unlikely and it seemed far more probable that this was the 'curtains' on loan to the NTS.

¹ The Act of Proscription or *An Act for the More effectual Disarming of the Highlands* was brought in after the failure of the last Jacobite Rising in an attempt to pacify the Highlands. Amongst other things it banned the wearing of Highland Dress, tartan coats and plaids etc., although not actually tartan itself. .

The Plaid

In correspondence with the Trust I was able to discover that they had purchased the plaid in 2007 but not from where or whom. In the spring of 2011 there was an opportunity to examine the plaid when the case was open and although I was unable to attend the Trust were extremely helpful in measuring and photographing the plaid for me which allowed for a fuller examination of the artefact. The measurements and other information sent via email were at first confusing as they indicated that the plaid was 54.8 inches wide x 51.2 inches in length which dimensions could not possibly have been a plaid for wearing. The arrival of the photographs explained the contradiction.



Fig 2. The plaid laid out.

The photo of the full piece (Fig 2) shows the plaid with the join running down the middle and a herringbone selvedge on both sides. What was immediately apparent was that the top and bottom of the pattern did not match as one would expect in an 18th Century plaid and that the bottom end (in the picture) is roughly turned and sewn at an odd point in the pattern whereas the top end finishes in a neatly turned and sewn hem at the edge of a colour block. Obviously the plaid had been cut along its length at some time and the rough end turned and stitched to prevent it unravelling (Fig 3). Although incomplete there are a number of further deductions that can be made from an examination of the images. The cloth is hand woven from single spun yarn in both the warp and weft with 36 ends per inch in the warp. The yarn was undoubtedly hand dyed using cochineal and indigo for the red and blue respectively plus an unknown yellow and indigo for the green.



Fig 3. The cut of the plaid end showing the rough stitching.

The herringbone selvedge (Fig 4) follows the typical method of 18th Century plaids where a blue band from the sett is extended and then the edge finished in red. In the case of this plaid very little amendment to the sett was required as the blue band and outer red are in their naturally repeating positions with the blue just widened slightly. The herringboning begins about $\frac{2}{3}$ into the blue, runs for 3 bands of 10 threads before the last 4 blue and 22 red ends follow the standard threading. These 3 bands of herringbone are uncharacteristically few compared with many contemporary examples where 5 – 8 bands were more usual.



Fig 4. Herringbone Selvedge detail.

The plaid comprises two lengths of single width cloth each about 27.5 inches wide and woven offset starting at the centre of the blue pivot stripe between the broad green squares and includes one full repeat and on to the next blue which is then partially herringbone as described above. The fact that the pattern did not have to be altered beyond adding a few additional blue threads at the selvedge indicates that the size of the sett was deliberate in order to fit the width of the cloth.

Inclusion of a herringbone selvedge implies that this was almost certainly originally a plaid for wearing rather than domestic use. The thickness of the yarn and density of the weave means that the plaid would probably have been approximately 4 yards in length x 55 inches wide with a herringbone selvedge on the top and bottom.

The Setting

Although the setting of this piece is identical to that recorded by the STS and Scarlett it has a slightly different threadcount as be seen below and in Fig 5.

B/4 R84 B84 R16 W4 R16 G84 R84 B/4 - NTS specimen

B/4 R98 B102 R18 W4 R18 G102 R98 B/4 – STS/Scarlett



Fig 5. Setting for the NTS plaid (top) and the Nethybridge Curtains per Scarlett (below).

Scarlett's count differs in two respects:

- He gives differing proportions for the large areas of red, blue and green whereas in the NTS plaid they are equal.
- With the exception of the fine blue and white stripes all Scarlett's counts are 10-20% larger than those in the NTS plaid.

Describing a tartan visually is always difficult because individuals will often see different aspects of the design as prominent. This design is perhaps easier than some to explain and can be best

described as a red ground on which is centred a blue stripe and surrounded by alternating double blocks of blue and green that pivoted around a white stripe.

The NTS plaid has an approximately 10 inch half sett which, once joined, means that there are 3 full setts across the width plus roughly a quarter sett at each selvedge. Assuming the pattern was balanced along the length of the plaid, which was the common practice, and allowing for a 4 yard plaid then there would have been 12-13 repeats finishing at the edge of the blue block at each end,

Conclusion

There seems little doubt that this piece is the remnant of an 18th Century joined plaid, probably c1730-70.

Whilst the work to establish the source of the NTS purchase continues it seems likely that this and the *Curtains from Nethybridge* given by Scarlett are one and the same which, if true, means that Scarlett probably relied on the work of others and never saw the original or he surely would have noted the cut end and more importantly, have got the threadcount right.

It is impossible to know why the plaid was cut up and reused. Perhaps it was damaged and so the remaining good piece simply reused or it may be that Proscription meant that as it could not be worn then the plaid was recycled. Had this piece been used as curtains for a long period one would expect to see uneven fading across the piece but there is no evidence for this and there remains the intriguing possibility that there are/were other pieces of the plaid in use. Alternatively, the term 'curtains' may have referred to bed hangings, evidence for the use of which is known elsewhere.

If the source of the piece was from the Nethybridge area and if it had been in one family for some time then I'd expect it to have belonged to the likes of the Grants of Rothiemurchus or Shaws or Tordarrach. Hopefully further research will confirm it's origins.

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