

A late 18th Century Plaid of an Unknown Tartan by Wilsons of Bannockburn

Introduction

In August 2008 Bonhams' *Scottish Sale* included [Lot 775](#) which comprised three tartan pieces; a Coat and two plaids, that were 'Of Jacobite interest'. The Jacobite association was based on the label attached to one of the plaids¹; the other plaid discussed in this paper and the Coat appear to have been added to make up the Lot but are in fact of a later period, c1780 and c1820 respectively².

A Joined Plaid

In researching the principal piece of the Lot I was able to track down the owner of the second plaid who was kind enough to allow me the opportunity to examine it. The piece turned out to be a finely woven joined plaid of a previously unknown tartan made from two 19 inch single-width lengths of material joined at the selvedge to give a finished plaid of approximately 38 x 80 inches (Fig 1).



Fig 1. Joined plaid of an unknown tartan. © The Author

The Cloth

By today's standards 19 inch cloth would be considered unusual and would have very little commercial use but this width was the typical of the late 18th century cloth woven by the famous tartan manufacturers Wm. Wilson & Son of Bannockburn. This piece which was woven at about 76 ends per inch and is wholly consistent with Wilsons' *Old Superfine cloth* that they produced from c1770-1800. As was the standard practice with joined plaids the cloth was off-sett on the loom to allow the pattern to repeat when joined. There are three

¹ The so-called Bed Hangings from Culloden are discussed in a separate paper – here.1

² The inability by professional auction houses to identify and date tartan and Highland Dress accurately is a common problem and this often leads to pieces incorrectly being classified as Jacobite, often associated with Prince Charles Edward and/or Culloden.

half setts across the warp meaning that either edge could have been joined and the pattern would have repeated correctly. Here the material is joined at the blue pivot (Fig 2).



Fig 2. The 19 inch width of the cloth running from the blue join for 3 half setts. © The Author

An unusual tartan

The sett has notable similarities to the Aberdeen tartan, another one of Wilsons' late 18th century *Old Superfine* patterns. Comparison of the two patterns shows the Unnamed pattern (top colour strip) to be simpler than the Aberdeen and is formed from a portion of the more complex sett (Fig 3). The half sett of each is shown by the black arrows, the red extension arrow shows the full Aberdeen half sett.

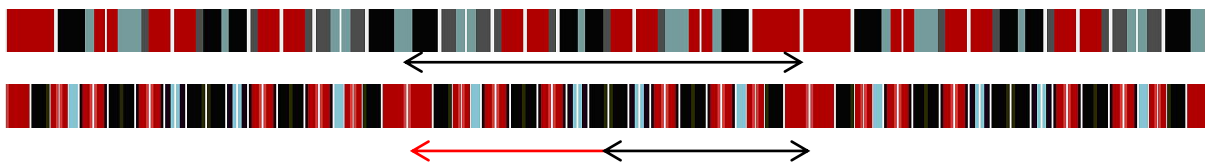


Fig 3. Comparison of the Unnamed pattern and Wilsons' Aberdeen tartan.

In addition to being a less complex pattern the Unnamed tartan contains fewer colours than the Aberdeen and also includes some used less commonly by Wilsons including grey for Shade Green in the former and possibly the only known example of their *Light Apron Blue*. The table below shows the differences between the two patterns and detail of the shades used in the Unnamed pattern (Fig 4).

Aberdeen	Unnamed
Scarlett	Scarlett
Rose	-
Black	Black
Purple	-
Light Blue	Light Apron Blue
Shade Green	Grey
White	White



Fig 4. Detail of the colours used in the Unnamed tartan. © The Author

Evidence for changes in a particular design are found in Wilsons' records: John Wilson's 1775 Account Book includes orders for *New Perth Tartan* suggesting that there was an original or *Old Perth*. In their [1819 Key Pattern Book](#) Wilsons included counts for Old Bruce, New Bruce and, Gallowater Old and New Setts. The lack of any know documentary evidence means that it is impossible to know whether this tartan was an earlier or simplified version of Wilsons' *Aberdeen* or was a similar design that had a completely different name.

Conclusion

This plaid fine and unique example of a Wilsons' *Old Superfine plaid* dates to c1770-1800. Like a number of their patterns the name of this tartan is unknown but must have been either a variant of their Aberdeen sett or a similar type pattern that they wove under a completely different name. Hopefully further research will resolve this question.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Norman Milne from Livingston, owner of the plaid, for allowing me the opportunity to examine it in detail.

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