

Portion of an 18th Century Plaid from Glenbuchat

Introduction

In the early 1980s the Scottish Tartans Society was donated a piece of old tartan that according to the owner¹ had obtained from an old woman in Glenbuchat, Aberdeenshire. The story associated with the material was that “*it was the last piece of tartan woven in the Glen since (sic) the ‘45*”. This statement in the accompanying letter doesn’t make sense and unfortunately attempts to clarify it were unsuccessful. The donor was old at the time and the lady from Glenbuchat, whose identity remains a mystery, had died many years earlier. Logically the ‘since’ should be ‘before’ i.e. *it was the last piece woven in the Glen before the (time of the) ‘45 Rising*. This is a typically romanticised story often attached to old pieces of tartan but without any real evidence other than association with the period.

The cloth



Fig 1. Overview showing the sett and full width of the cloth.

The material is a single width offset piece measuring 28” x 48”, hand woven and naturally dyed with a herringbone selvedge that is typical of rural tartan c1730-50 intended for use as a joined plaid (Fig 1).

In the simple sett the red and blue squares are mirrored and balanced around the green. The offset warp is obvious in the full width of the cloth where the blue square is on the potential joining selvedge and the red selvedge is herringboned (Fig 2).

The setting of the warp is interesting as it doesn’t follow the ‘standard practice’ for offset 18th century plaiding where a darker colour, usually blue or black, was used for the herringbone selvedge. Additionally, the herringbone pattern is quite narrow, starting at the 5th red thread and comprising 3 x bands of 6 threads and a final band of 8. Bands of 10 threads were more common. The joining selvedge (Fig 3) comprises a full blue bar and then 2 threads of red i.e. is to the centre of the red pivot on the blue.

Given that the joining selvedge ends at a pivot, which is the correct point to allow the sett to repeat when two piece are joined to make a double width plaid, one must assume that the warping arrangement with the narrow red herringbone selvedge was intentional. As a weaver I would have done it the other way around and placed the join at the blue pivot on the red and had a traditional blue herringbone selvedge.



Fig 2. The herringbone selvedge.

¹ The piece was known as the ‘Brebber Gift’ after the name of the donor, Mr A Brebber, Aberdeenshire.

The shades in the piece are typical of those used in tartan produced rurally in the 18th Century using natural dyes: dark blue, a pinkish red and a mossy green. The dyes would have been respectively: indigo, cochineal and an unknown, probably local, yellow source with an indigo exhaust bath. The very pink shade of the red is the result of not having access to a high quality tin mordant necessary for a good scarlet and having to make do with something like pewter raspings which are mainly lead with only a small proportion of tin which results in a less intense red.

This piece has one other interesting feature that it shares with only a handful of surviving specimens; it's embroidered with the initials of the weaver and/or original owner (Fig 3). In



this case the initials 'IC' has been added in the corner at the joining selvedge after the end has been turned and sewn down with the same red wool yarn as the main tartan being used for both.

The position of the initials together with the lack of any evidence that two pieces were ever joined suggests that although woven so that it could be joined this piece was only ever used as a single width piece and also that the colour/type of the thread of the initial's means that the weaver was the original owner.

Fig 3. IC initials on the joining selvedge.

Although there is no evidence that the tartan of this original piece ever had a clan/family name associated with it the design was subsequently adopted by the Countess of Marr, Chief of the Tribe, as the *Red Mar* in order to have an alternative, red, tartan for use by those associated with the family and their traditional Aberdeenshire territories². As the Red Mar it was recorded in Lyon Court Book - LCB 83 on 22nd June 1992.

A remarkably similar design to this was that taken from an old plaid is associated with the Frasers of Boblainy, Inverness-shire. Comparison of the two (Fig 4) shows the similarity although there is no known connection between them and it the simplicity of the design means that it may have once been widespread.



Fig 4. Comparison of the Glenbuchat (top) and Boblainy tartans.

Conclusion

The original tartan piece is without doubt a portion of C18th offset plaiding. The claim by the previous owner that he obtained it from a woman in Glenbuchat who in turn knew it to be connected with the Glen must be taken at face value and so we may assume that the cloth was woven in the GlenBuchat/Strathdon area c1730-70.

² The writer was consulted at the time and recommended this sett as a suitable alternative with Aberdeenshire connections rather than designing a 'new' tartan.

Due to the position of the initials at the corner of a turned end and the joining selvedge, and the lack of any evidence of joining thread, I conclude that this cloth was probably intended to be used as a single width piece; either as clothing, feileadh beag/kilt, plaid or shawl/screen, or as some form of domestic ware; bed hanging, table cover or the like. I've never seen a plaid intended to be worn that's been initialled so use as for domestic ware seems the most likely scenario in this case. That in turn leaves the conundrum of the setting.

Why, if the intended use was as a single width piece, was the material woven offset with a herringbone selvedge? We will never know the answer but there are a number of possibilities:

- The material was originally joined but converted and reused at a later date. *As the colour and type of the thread used in the initials and the turned edge is the same red yarn of the tartan this possibility seems unlikely.*
- The material was intended to be used single width but to save effort the weaver simply used to existing threading on the loom including the herringbone rather than re-thread a part of the warp. *The fact that the pattern is offset argues against this.*
- The material was woven so that it could be joined but for whatever reason it was used singularly. *This is the most plausible and therefore likely explanation.*

Like so many 18th Century specimens we will never know much more about this piece than the clues that are contained within its structure. Suffice to say that it is a fine example of the old Highland weavers' art form.