

An Abbreviated History of the Kilt

The history of the kilt stretches back to at least the end of the 16th century. Although the kilt is an item of traditional Scottish highland dress, the nationalism of that tradition is relatively recent. It was only with the Romantic Revival of the 19th century that the kilt became irreversibly associated with Highlanders, and was subsequently adopted by Lowlanders and the Scottish Diaspora. Other modern Celts such as the Irish, Cornish, Welsh and Manx, have also adopted tartan kilts in recent times, although to a lesser degree.

The word *kilt* comes from the Scots word *kilt* (fancy that) meaning to tuck up the clothes around the body. The Scots word derives from the Old Norse *kilting*, from Norse settlers who wore a similar, non-tartan pleated garment.



Highland chieftain wearing belted plaid, around 1680

The Great Kilt

The *Breacan an Fhéilidh* or *Féileadh Mòr* was originally a length of thick woolen cloth made up from two loom widths sewn together to give a total width of 54 to 60 inches, and up to 7 yards in length. The great kilt, also known as the belted plaid, was an untailored draped garment made of the cloth gathered up into pleats by hand and secured by a wide belt. The upper half could be worn as a cloak draped over the left shoulder, hung down over the belt and gathered up at the front, or brought up over the shoulders or head for protection against weather. It was worn over a *léine* (a full sleeved garment gathered along the arm length and stopping below the waist) and could also serve as a camping blanket. For battle it was customary to take off the kilt beforehand and set it aside, the Highland charge being made wearing only the *léine* or war shirt.

The Small Kilt

Sometime early in the 18th century the *féileadh beag* or philabeg using a single width of cloth hanging down below the belt came into use and became quite popular throughout the Highlands and northern Lowlands by 1746, though the great kilt also continued in use. The small kilt developed into the modern tartan kilt when the pleats were sewn in to speed the donning of the kilt.

The “Dress Act”

The Jacobite Risings demonstrated the dangers to central government of warrior Highland clans answering only to their chieftains, and as part of a series of measures the government of King George II imposed the "Dress Act" in 1746, outlawing all items of Highland dress including the new kilts (though with an exception for army uniforms) with the intent of suppressing highland culture. The ban remained in effect for 35 years.

Although the kilt was largely forgotten in the Scottish Highlands, during those years it became fashionable for Scottish romantics to wear kilts as a form of protest against the ban. This was an age that romanticized "primitive" peoples, which is what Highlanders were viewed as. Most Lowlanders had viewed Highlanders with fear before 1745, but many identified with them after their power was broken. The kilt, along with other features of Gaelic culture, had become identified with Jacobitism, and now that this had ceased to be a real danger it was viewed with romantic nostalgia.

Once the ban was lifted in 1782, Highland landowners set up Highland Societies with aims including "Improvements" (which others would call the Highland clearances) and promoting "the general use of the ancient Highland dress". The Celtic Society of Edinburgh, chaired by Walter Scott, encouraged lowlanders to join this antiquarian enthusiasm.

The kilt became identified with the whole of Scotland with the pageantry of the visit of King George IV to Scotland in 1822, even though 9 out of 10 Scots lived in the Lowlands. Scott and the Highland societies organized a "gathering of the Gael" and established entirely new Scottish traditions, including Lowlanders wearing the supposed "traditional" garment of the Highlanders. At this time many other traditions such as clan identification by tartan were developed.

After that point the kilt gathered momentum as an emblem of Scottish culture as identified by antiquarians, romantics, and others, who spent much effort praising the "ancient" and natural qualities of the kilt. King George IV had appeared in a spectacular kilt, and his successor Queen Victoria dressed her boys in the kilt, widening its appeal. The kilt became part of the Scottish national identity.



2nd Lieutenant Donald Callander commissioned in The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders (the Tartan we wear) prior to fighting with the British Expeditionary Force in May 1940 at the Battle of Dunkirk. The last time a Highland Battalion fought in the kilt.

Military Use

From 1624 the Independent Companies of Highlanders had worn kilts as government troops, and with their formation into the Black Watch regiment in 1740 their great kilt uniform was standardized with a new dark tartan. Army uniforms were exempt from the ban on wearing kilts in the "Dress Act", and as a means of identification the regiments were given different tartans. These regiments opted for the modern kilts for dress uniforms, and while the great kilt remained as undress uniform this was phased out by the early 19th century.

Many Scottish units wore kilts in combat during WWI. In particular, the ferocious tactics of the Royal Highland Regiment led to their acquiring the nickname "Ladies from Hell" from the German troops that faced them in the trenches. The kilt was last worn in action at the start of WWII. Irish troops have no tradition of wearing the kilt in battle, though pipers in Irish regiments of the British Army have traditionally worn a mustard-colored saffron kilt.

Fabric

The typical kilt as seen at modern Highland games events are made of twill-woven worsted wool. The twill weave used for kilts is a 2-2 type, meaning that each weft thread passes over-and-under two warp threads at a time. The result is a distinctive diagonal weave pattern in the fabric which is referred to as the twill line. This kind of twill when woven according to a given color pattern, or *sett*, is called **tartan**. In contrast, the Irish kilt traditionally was made from solid color cloth, with saffron or green being the most widely used colors.

Kilting fabric weights are given in ounces per yard. They run from the very heavy regimental worsted of approximately 18–21 oz. down to a light-worsted of about 10–11 oz. The most common weights for kilts are 13 oz. and 16 oz. A kilt for a typical adult uses about 6–8 yards of single-width (about 26–30 inches) or about 3–4 yards of

double-width (about 54–60 inches) tartan fabric. Double width fabric is woven so that the pattern exactly matches on the selvage (uncut edge). Kilts are usually made without a hem, since it would make the garment too bulky and cause it to hang incorrectly. The exact amount of fabric needed depends upon several factors, including the size of the sett, the number of pleats put into the garment, and the size of the person.

Setts (Tartan Patterns)

One of the most distinctive features of the authentic Scottish kilt is the tartan pattern, or *sett*, they exhibit. Many of these patterns have come to be associated with Scottish clans or families, but there are also tartans for districts, counties, countries, corporations, States and Provinces, schools and universities, individuals, commemorative, and simple generic patterns that anybody can wear. Setts are always arranged horizontally and vertically, never on the diagonal. They are specified by their thread count, which is the sequence of colors and their units of width.

Setts are further characterized by their size which is the number of inches (or centimetres) in one full repeat. The size of a given sett depends not only on the number of threads in the repeat, but also on the weight of the fabric. This is so because the heavier is the fabric weight, the thicker the threads will be and thus the same number of threads of a heavier weight fabric will occupy more space when woven.

The colors given in the thread count are specified as in heraldry, although tartan patterns are not heraldic. The exact shade which is used is a matter of artistic freedom and will vary from one fabric mill to another as well as from one dye lot to another within the same mill. Tartans are commercially woven in four standard color variations that describe the overall tone. "Ancient" or "Old" colors are characterized by a slightly faded look intended to resemble the vegetable dyes that were once used. Ancient greens and blues are lighter in shade, while reds appear orange. "Modern" colors are bright and show off modern alkaline dyeing methods. The colors are bright red, dark hunter green, and usually navy blue. "Weathered" or "Reproduction" colors simulate the look of older cloth weathered by the elements. Greens turn to light brown, blues become gray, and reds are a deeper wine color. The last color variation is "Muted" which tends to earth tones. The greens are olive, blues are slate blue, and red are an even deeper wine color. This means that of the nearly 5,000 registered tartans available there are four possible color variations for each, resulting in nearly 20,000 tartans.

Setts are registered with the Scottish Tartans Authority which maintains a collection of fabric samples characterized by name and thread count. In all, there are approximately 5000 registered tartans. Although many tartans being added every year, most of the registered patterns available today were created in the 19th century by commercial weavers who had a large variety of colors to work with. The rise of Highland romanticism and the growing Anglicization of Scottish culture by the Victorians at the time led to registering tartans with clan names. Before then, most of these patterns had little or no connection to any clan. There is therefore nothing symbolic about the colors, and nothing about the patterns is a reflection on the status of the wearer.



Pleating

A kilt can be pleated with either box or knife pleats. A knife pleat is a simple fold, while the box pleat is bulkier, consisting of two knife pleats back-to-back. Knife pleats are the most common in modern civilian kilts.

Pleats can be arranged relative to the pattern in two ways. In pleating to the stripe (left), a vertical stripe is selected and the fabric will be folded so that this stripe runs down the center of each pleat. The result is that horizontal bands appear along the back and sides of the kilt, which will look different from the front than it does from the back. It is often called military pleating because this is the style adopted by most military regiments. It is also widely used by pipe bands. In pleating to the sett (right) the fabric is folded in such a way that the pattern of the sett is repeated all around the kilt. This is done by taking up one full sett in each pleat, or two full setts if they are too small. This causes the kilt to look much the same both front and back.