

# History of the Tartan

What is a tartan? Tartan is a woven material, generally of wool, having stripes of different colors and varying in breadth. The arrangement of colors is alike in warp and weft -- that is, in length and width -- and when woven, has the appearance of being a number of squares intersected by stripes which cross each other, this is called a 'sett'. By changing the colors; varying the width; depth; number of stripes, differencing is evolved. Tartan patterns are called "setts" and by this is meant the complete pattern, and a length of tartan is made by repeating the pattern or sett, over and over again.

The history of tartan, while interesting, is also controversial, and from time to time discussion has arisen regarding the antiquity of Clan tartans. Arguments are generally involved and can only be understood by those who have studied the subject in depth.

References to tartan in early literature supply ample proof that tartan was worn many centuries ago. What may be the earliest written reference to tartan is contained in the accounts of the treasurer to King James III, in the year 1471 where mention is made of tartan purchased for the use of the King and Queen of Scotland.

It is improbable that the early tartans were as gaily colored or as tastefully arranged as were the tartans of later years. The skill of the weaver and the availability of plants likely to supply vegetable dyes were the chief factors in determining the colors of a tartan. Colors used would be restricted to the plant dyes found within the various districts. The early tartans would have been similar to a checked, muted material of wool. As chemical dyes became more common, the weavers enlarged their range of colors and introduced more colorful variations to the old patterns. When limited to vegetable dyes, the people of each district were forced by circumstances to use the same colors in their tartans and it is probable that the people of the various districts were recognized by the colors in their tartans.

District tartans, as these early patterns are called, might also have served as the Clan tartan, because the people inhabiting Clan districts were, as a rule, members of the same Clan. However there are many instances whereby many different Clans lived and functioned as member of the district. By adding a stripe of different color or by varying the arrangement of colors it is thought that branches of the Clan evolved their own tartans, yet by the similarity of pattern, they displayed their kinship with the main Clan.

What may be the earliest recorded reference to a Clan tartan appears in a Crown Charter of 1587 to Hector MacLean of Duart, wherein the feu duty payable on the lands of Narraboll, Islay, is stated to be "sixty ells of cloth, of white, black and green colors." These colors correspond to the colors in the tartan we now call MacLean hunting, but it is doubtful if their exact arrangement was the same as that in use at the present time.

Written evidence regarding the use of Clan tartans prior to the Battle of Culloden are not available. It is generally supposed that each Clan had a special pattern of its own which was worn by the clansmen of the Clan as a means of identifications and as a symbol of the Clan kinship.

From this absence of written proof, critics maintain that Clan tartans as we know them today are modern inventions, probably dating from the Battle of Culloden, or around the time of the Jacobite Civil Wars. These critics also aver that while tartan cloth is undoubtedly ancient, it has no Clan meaning and that the clansmen wore the tartan of their fancy and that inside of each Clan the people wore a medley of tartans.....not so! The evidence of the oil paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is sometimes accepted as proof to support the critics' claims. Many genuine oil paintings show figures in Highland dress, but the dress displays different tartans in vests, coats and plaids. It should therefore, be pointed out that the figures depicted are usually gentlemen of importance (many Lowlanders), and it is well known these gentlemen dressed differently from the ordinary clansmen. One such famous painting 'does' show ordinary clansmen. This painting was executed at the command of the Duke of Cumberland

and was painted by the French artist Morier. The scene depicts an encounter between regular troops of the British Army and some Highland clansmen. Jacobite prisoners were taken from the Tower of London, and the 'Tollboth', to pose for this picture. Here again the Highlanders are shown wearing a variety of tartans in coats, vests and kilts, not one pattern being recognizable and all unlike any tartan known today. Too much importance *should not* be placed on this painting. The brutal treatment of the Jacobite prisoners of war, who were often stripped of their clothing, makes it highly improbable that the men were wearing their own clothing. It is unlikely that the captors would have taken the trouble to supply the men with their own Clan tartans. While this painting is interesting as illustrative of Highland dress of the period, and the artist had the reputation of being accurate in copying details, *it should not be accepted as refutable proof that there were no Clan tartans.*

Several writers have given descriptions of tartan which might infer that Clan tartans were worn before the Battle of Culloden, although they do not call them Clan tartans. Puzzling?? *Martin* in his *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, published in 1706, tells us, "...Every Isle differs from each other in their fancy of making Plads, as to the Stripes in Breadth and Colours. This Humour is as different throughout the main land of the Highlands, in-so-far that they who have seen those Places, are able, at the first view of a Man's Plad, to guess the Place of his Residence....." These words would seem to imply that the people of each isle and district wore a common pattern to each, whereby a stranger might identify their Clan district.

After the Jacobite defeat at the Battle of Culloden in 1746 the Government determined to purge the Highlands of all unlawful elements and to destroy the Clan system. Accordingly an Act of Parliament was passed which not only aimed at the complete disarming of the Highland Clans but made the wearing of tartans a penal offense. This section of the act was strictly enforced. In 1782, the ban on tartans was removed, but by this time the Highlander had become accustomed to the dress worn in other parts of the country and showed no great enthusiasm to rush into tartan clothing. Tartan had, in fact, become only a memory. Many of the old weavers had died out and with their passing old patterns were forgotten.

Interested gentlemen and organizations collected the old tartans where ever these could be found, and it is from these early collections that the most reliable information can be found.

*"ACT OF PARLIMENT (ENGLISH), passed in 1746 prohibiting the wearing of the Highland Dress.*

#### EVERY HIGHLANDER HAD TO TAKE THIS OATH OR DIE:

HIGHLANDERS OATH AGAINST TARTAN ('The Oath' every Highlander was forced to repeat (take), and swear on the threat of DEATH), 1746.

('Those who refused to take it were treated as rebels.' and killed or arrested.)

*I, \_\_\_\_\_, do swear, as I shall answer to God at the great day of Judgement, I have not, nor shall have in my possession any gun, sword, pistol or arm whatsoever, and never to use tartan plaid, or any part of the Highland Garb; and if I do so may I be cursed in my undertakings, family and property, -- may I be killed in battle as a coward, and lie without burial in a strange land, far from the graves of my forefathers and kindred; may all this come across me if I break my oath."*

This was an especially cruel oath by Highlanders, because most were still Catholic and to 'lie without burial, and blessing, etc'. was a devastating punishment.

Many died because of the 'wearing of the tartan', and 'not giving up their weapons', just as many died in Ireland for the 'wearing of the green'.

In 1822 King George IV visited Edinburgh and the Highland chiefs were persuaded to attend the levies and other functions, all attired in their Clan tartans (a majority did not go). Almost overnight tartan became popular and families, who probably had never before worn tartan, (and hated the Highlanders), became the proud possessors of family tartans.

Tailors and manufacturers alike were seldom at a loss to "find" a clan or family tartan, but the bitter truth is that these so-called ancient tartans 'were invented for the occasion' (and they are being invented again for the occasion). Two gentlemen, known as the Sobieski-Stuart brothers, and who claimed to be grandsons of Prince Charlie, supplied details of tartans to many Clan chiefs and heads of families, claiming to have obtained their information from some sixteenth century manuscripts in their possession. Their failure to produce the manuscripts for examination cast doubts upon their information and when in 1842 they published a book on tartans called the *Vestiarium Scoticum* it was dubbed a forgery.

Many of the tartans in use today have no great authority other than the fact that, their acceptance during the past 100 years -- has given them an 'antiquity' of their own, just for being around so long.

During the second half of the nineteenth century (1800's) many books were published giving descriptions and illustrations of tartans, all the authors claiming that the patterns given were old and genuine. To distinguish between *true and bogus* was becoming more and more difficult. Towards the end of the century many new tartans were invented, but of these it can be said NO claims to ANTIQUITY were ever advanced.

Today the confusion of fifty years ago has been regulated into some semblance of order and patterns are now, more or less, standardized into recognized settings.

Although many old patterns have been preserved these merely show the beauty of the old vegetable dyes and the hard-spun weaving of the eighteenth century. Very few of them are now recognisable as Clan tartans. The greatest number of our tartans today are less than 100 years old; a fairly large number may be dated to the opening years of the nineteenth century, while only a very small number are of more ancient date.

Tartans are described according to the purpose for which they are named:

CLAN TARTANS are patterns for general use by clanspeople. It is not uncommon to find a Clan tartan of recent origin described as "Ancient Clan tartan." The use of the word "ancient" is most misleading, as it is merely an indication that the tartan has been woven in lighter colored shades, as ancient tartans were of lighter vegetable dye shades.

DRESS TARTANS were originally worn by the ladies of the Clan who desired lighter colored patterns. As a rule they had white as the background color and were variations of the Clan pattern. Wearing of dress tartan is now confined to functions and other dress occasions. At one time:

MOURNING TARTANS were worn for the purpose for which they were named. They were generally of black and white. Many are now worn as dress tartans. In recent years there has been a tendency to refer to -

CLAN DRESS TARTANS woven in light weight material as "DRESS" tartan. This causes the confusion and should be avoided. Clans who do not possess a dress tartan usually wear the Clan pattern, in light weight material, as a dress tartan, but this does not justify the description of a Clan tartan as a "Dress" tartan. (Confused yet?).

HUNTING TARTANS are worn for sport and outdoor activities. Brown, black, dark blues, greens and grey are generally the predominant colors. When a Clan possessed a brightly colored tartan it was found

unsuitable for hunting purposes, and hunting setts were devised to make the wearer less conspicuous. The colors are arranged so that concealment in the woods and heather, - the tartan blended with the surroundings.

CHIEF TARTANS are the personal tartans of the Chiefs and should never be worn except by the Chief and, if he allows, his immediate family. His clan members would wear the tartan he directs, which was usually very much like his.

DISTRICT TARTANS are probably the oldest of our tartans from which Clan tartans may have developed. There are a number of District tartans which are, nowadays, worn by the people residing in, or having their place of origin in the district, always provided they are not entitled to wear a Clan tartan. [Update\*\* District tartans are now printed for every district, spot, hill and crevice. City tartans abound. Families who never had tartans, now have them, and the Lord Lyons is permitting this.

Whilst tartan continues to excite the admiration of peoples everywhere, it is impossible to lay down hard and fast rules regarding choice of tartans. In all probability the would-be wearer of tartan will select the "tartan of his fancy." *Although this is frowned upon by authors such as myself*, there is little that can be done if the impolite person decides to wear someone's tartan, short of censure. One caution may be voiced. The Royal tartans are for the use of the Royal family and should not be worn by anyone outside of the Royal family, except by consent. Exception, the Royal Stewart. A tartan made up for the "would be king" that did not come to fruition

Military tartans are for the military use only. Also known as Regimental tartans.