

An Unnamed 18th Century Blanket Pattern at Blair Castle

The archives at Blair Castle, Perthshire include a number of tartan fragments amongst which is a large piece of fine, predominately white and red, hand-woven material typical of what is often referred to as an arisaid tartan in the belief that they were worn by women as a form of over-plaid¹. However, this piece is a classic domestic plaid, often referred to as *barred blankets*, dating to the first half of the C18th.

It's possible that the Blair plaid was damaged at some time as it has been cut up and sewn into a different shape with a fringe added, most probably during the Victorian era, but it's still possible to determine the detail of the original which was made from a length off-set cloth 21¹/₂" wide that was joined and finished with turned ends. Plate 1 shows the simple arisaid type sett together with the decorated barred selvedge. It's impossible to establish how long the plaid was as it has been cut in half widthways and one of the pieces then added to the remaining joined section to make a piece roughly 65" square. Material from the excess piece was then used to patch some holes and tears in the square and a fringe was added to one side. Fig 2 shows the detail of the barring and turned end.



Plate 1. One side of the plaid showing the sett and barred border. © The Author

¹ The subject is discussed further in my paper on Traditional Selvedge Techniques.



Plate 2. Detail of barred selvedge and turned end. © The Author

The Sett

The setting is typical of C18th blanket patterns in which a large white ground is balanced by a coloured square composed principally of red and green, the latter of which is a very dull olive in this plaid. Here, the original pattern was off-set giving two full repeats plus the barred selvedge pattern across the width of the material which, when joined, gave a plaid with five repeat plus border each side (Fig 2).

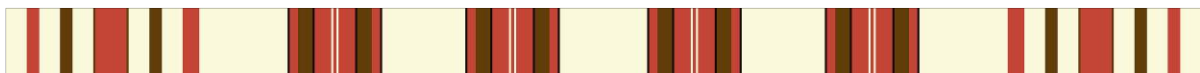


Fig 2. Colour strip showing the setting arrangement of the original joined plaid.

The basic sett is similar to a number of other surviving C18th blanket patterns but what is particularly striking about this sett is its similarity with Wilsons of Bannockburn's *Blanket Sett* given in their 1819 Key Pattern Book. Wilsons instructions for their sett noted it has *4 half Setts with a border* which is exactly what is in the Blair piece and although they wove with a slightly different count the resemblance between the two setts is obvious (Fig 3). What we will probably never know is whether the Wilsons were aware of the Blair piece and used as a basis for their *Blanket Sett* or whether they copied a similar old pattern. There is a piece in the Highland folk Museum that matches their setting but without being able to examine it I cannot say whether it's Wilsons' cloth or an older C18th rural piece. If the former then the Blair specimen might still have been their source; if the latter then we have a further example of what might have been a generic blanket pattern setting.



Fig 3. A comparison of the Blair and Wilsons' blanket pattern settings showing the sett and border.

Conclusion

The piece at Blair Castle is without doubt a reused C18th blanket pattern plaid. Accurate dating is difficult because of the fact that as they were not intended to be worn such domestic plaids were not banned by the Act of Proscription as so could have been produced after the '45. Having said that, the structure of the material, its fineness and subtle natural dyes all suggest that the piece belongs to the first half of the C18th.

Such pieces were probably widely used in homes for coverings, bed throws and the like and not as clothing. Unfortunately no record exists at Blair to explain which they family owed this piece but it is entirely possible that it was something that was locally produced and purchased or given as a gift.

Whist the sett is similar to a number of other contemporary blanket patterns and also very close to Wilsons' record for their Blanket Sett and could have been their source. Very little research has been undertaken into these blanket patterns and a detailed study may help explain these patterns' role in C18th Highland society.

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