

Crieff with Drab

Introduction

In Scarlett's 1990 *Tartan The Highland Textile*ⁱ he included a count taken from a length of single width material given to him in 1987 by an unidentified member of the Inverness Field Club.¹ The plaid was labelled 'Grandmother's or Great-Grandmother's Wedding Plaid'. Scarlett commented that "...and having pin holes that suggested that it had been used as a wrap, it was certainly never a plaid....". He went on to describe a four-yard length of plaiding which is the only known example of this tartan (Plate 1).



Plate 1. Detail of a length of plaiding said to be from a Wedding Plaid. Photo credit: JD Scarlett

The Sett

The author recently had an opportunity to examine the material, which is now in the collection of the Highland Folk Museum,² and was able to confirm the details of the material which is consistent with Wilsons' *Old Superfine* cloth c.1780-1800. As Scarlett identified, the pattern itself is almost identical to the *Crieff Tartan* included in their 1819 Key Pattern Book³ but for a light brown⁴ band in place of the usual purple in the Crieff sett.ⁱⁱ The similarity of the two designs is clear from the colour strips below (Fig 1).

¹ Scarlett's local History Society.

² The Highland Folk Museum, Kingussie Rd, Newtonmore PH20 1AY <https://www.highlifehighland.com/highlandfolkmuseum/>

³ The 1819 Key Pattern Book was an in-house collection of Wilsons' more popular designs. Research by the author suggests that the book was in fact a collation of Wilsons' Pattern Books 1 and 2, the former being their pre-1800 Old Superfine setts.

⁴ Wilsons called this light, biscuit, brown shade 'Drab'.



Fig 1. Comparison of the Crieff and unidentified plaiding. © The Author

Wilson's' 1819 weaving note for their Crieff tartan states that: *'To make this Sett 19 inches wide: In the first place, put on two full half Setts, then, go into the third half sett till the large scarlet mark of 140 threads is finished after putting on which close with the following selvedge mark.'*

This piece of unnamed plaiding is also 19 inches wide and follows the Wilsons' layout of having *two full half setts, then into the third half sett till the large scarlet mark of 146 threads, following by the selvedge mark* (Plate 2). The colour difference with Scarlett's image (Plate 1) is due entirely to the lighting conditions available at the time the piece was examined.



Plate 3. Offset plaiding with selvedge mark. Photo: Courtesy of the Highland Folk Museum.

A comparison of the 1819 count for Crieff (top) and that of the unnamed plaiding show just how similar the designs are.

R	S	G	S	G	S	P	S	G	S	G	S	R + Selvedge	P	S	P	S
2	12	8	4	170	4	42	4	8	140	8	12	2	8	4	76	16
R	S	G	S	G	S	D	S	G	S	G	S	R + Selvedge	D	S	D	S
2	12	8	4	180	4	32	4	8	146	8	12	2	6	6	58	4

In his 1987 article Scarlett stated that the wide Drab band at the selvedge “is threaded in chevron, two 15-thread bands innermost, and two 14-thread each”ⁱⁱⁱ. That is incorrect. The broad band begins after 2 threads of twill threading followed by 4x14 threads of herringbone; the last band includes 4 red threads making the last herringbone 18 threads in total (Plate 3).



Plate 3. Selvedge mark detail. Photo: Courtesy of the Highland Folk Museum.

A Wilsons’ Named Pattern?

Wilson’s would often take a popular design and produce variations on it by changing one or more colours. These they would then name, either as a new design; for example, Black Watch to MacNab, or they would difference the original name; Logan, Dark Logan, Light Logan etc. An example of a simple change or variation on a theme is found in two of the 1819 counts for the MacLean (of Duart) tartan. Both are simply named MacLean; in each the blue pivot is replaced by grey and drab respectively (Fig 2).



Fig 5. Comparison of Wilsons’ settings for Maclean tartan showing the different colour pivot. © The Author²

In addition to their named patterns Wilsons wove at least 232 Numbered patterns and probably many more of which we know little or nothing. Some of their numbered patterns were subsequently named, usually to cash in on the popularity of notable people or events; No 43 or Caledonia, No.112 or Wellington and No.232 or Regent being examples. A great many of

these Numbered or Fancy patterns had small setts meaning that the material had a variety of potential uses. Based on surviving examples and records they appear to have favoured names for the larger setting type of patterns and these can often be aligned to traditional Highland patterns on which they produced variations. In this case the basic design follows the traditional style where roughly equal sized red and green grounds are separated by a blue band (drab in this specimen), the band and the ground colours are often 'decorated' with fine stripes. Patterns of this group include; MacQuarrie, Crieff, MacDougall, MacGillivray and New Bruce which was later named both Grant and Drummond.

Conclusion

It has been shown that the size, quality and selvedge technique used in this length of plaiding is consistent with Wilsons' *Old Superfine* cloth. During their long existence Wilsons produced hundreds of designs. Numerous specimens, letters and other correspondence survive that give researchers a good insight to their patterns but we are unlikely ever to have a full record of all their designs but it is the writer's opinion that this tartan is one such pattern.

In considering the origins of this piece Scarlett appears to have let his interest in locally available natural dyes overwhelm his usual academic rigour. He went into the realms of pure speculation, referencing the fact (according to him) that the native Crowberry gives a very good purple but that if overheated then then it turns a dull drab shade. He then put forward the theory that a country weaver had produced the cloth using a spoilt purple dye lot, an idea for which there is absolutely no supporting evidence. Having noted the similarity to Wilsons' Crieff tartan one might have expected him to mention the fact that the other colours closely matched what Wilsons were using at the time. These included a large volume of expensive and well dyed red (from cochineal) which argues against the inclusion of a spoilt purple dye lot. This, combined with fact that the width, quality and selvedge mark matched the techniques used in their Old Superfine cloth led the writer to conclude that this is in fact a piece of Wilsons' tartan.

Working on that assumption and with an understanding of Wilsons' naming practices there are a number of potential names by which this may have been identified by them. These can be summarised as Named or Numbered patterns. The likelihood that this was a named, as opposed to a numbered pattern, has been discussed and based on Wilsons' naming practice it is reasonable to assume that they might have called this *Crieff with Drab*.

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ⁱ SCARLETT J.S. 1990 *TARTAN The Highland Textile*. Shephard-Walwyn., London

ⁱⁱ SCARLETT J.S. 1987 *The Scottish American*. Jul-Aug Edition

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*.