

# Tartans of the Royal Company of Archers

## INTRODUCTION

The Royal Company of Archers was founded in 1676 as a private archery club. It received its first Royal Charter in 1704, and in 1713 the Company adopted its first tartan uniform.<sup>i</sup> This was a somewhat anachronistic pseudo-courtly slashed coat and breeches in a red based sett. This was superseded in 1789 by a more contemporary cut Government tartan<sup>1</sup> coat and white breeches. That uniform underwent a further change to a full tartan one in time for King George IV's visit to Edinburgh in 1822 where the Archers provided a Bodyguard.<sup>2</sup> The tartan suit was dropped in the mid-Victorian era in favour of a dark green uniform that is still worn today.

## THE ORIGINAL TARTAN

It has been suggested by various writers that the Royal Company of Archers wore either the Ogilvie or Drummond of Strathallan tartans but this seems to be based on a misinterpretation of old portraits, costume and specimens. On the contrary, it is more likely that these two clan tartans were based on the original Archers' tartan. Amongst the Company's Minutes is the following extract *"...on the 15th of June 1713 an 'overture' was brought in for considering 'a proper habite and uniform garb for the Company,' and on the 27th of July Messrs. George Drummond, Robert Freebairn, and Alex. Murray were appointed, 'to get swatches for the Archer garb and to make an estimate of the price, and to receive overtures for that effect. ' By the 9th of October 'the Council having seen and considered a piece of tartan laid before them by Alex. Murray, merchant, they approved the same as being proper to be used for their habit'....."*. The tartan continued in use until 1788.<sup>ii</sup>

Elsewhere amongst the Company's archives are notes indicating that at some point they referred to this red sett as a Stuart tartan. However, there is no evidence to connect it directly with the Stuarts and the naming may be nothing more than an error due to confusion with an existing sett; or possibly, at some later date, they were attempting to validate the Company's pre-Hanoverian origins. It is this reference that is likely to have been the source of later claims, for which again there is no proof, that the Company wore the Prince Charles Edward tartan.



The earliest known representation of the original tartan is in Richard Waitt's c.1715 portrait of Sir Archibald Grant of Monymusk (formerly identified as Archibald Burnet of Carlops) (Plate 1) in which the sitter wears 'an ornate coat and short trews of a red, green and yellow tartan'.

**Plate 1. Sir Archibald Grant of Monymusk by Richard Waitt c.1715.**

<sup>1</sup> The Government tartan is more commonly known as the Black Watch tartan.

<sup>2</sup> Since 1822 the Archers have been the Sovereign's Body Guard in Scotland at all state or ceremonial occasions where the Monarch is present.

There is another portrait, that of an Unnamed Archer signed by Dutch artist John de Ryck (1640-1702) (Plate 2). The uniform of the Unnamed Sitter includes silver lace which denoted an officer of the Company (Plate 3). However, the assumed c.1700 date is at odds with the 1713 date for the tartan's adoption given in the Company's Minutes. Further research is needed to confirm the artist's attribution.



**Plate 2. Unnamed Archer attributed to John de Ryck, date TBC**



**Plate 3. Officers' lace on a c.1750 coat**  
Photo: The Author

A similar coat that belonged to an Archers' Brigadier General is shown at (Plate 8). An even more ornate coat can be seen in the portrait of James, 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Wemyss painted c.1743-56 (Plate 4). The dress is much more flamboyant, presumably denoting the rank of the sitter whom at the time was the Archers' Captain General (and a known Jacobite supporter), and shows that the red tartan was still in use approximately half a century after it was adopted.



**Plate 4. James, 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Wemyss c.1743-56.**

It has been suggested that this red tartan was only worn until 1746 and the Jacobite defeat at Culloden following which an Act of Parliament *proscribed or banned the wearing of Tartan cloths*.<sup>iii</sup> Whilst, the ban applied to wearing *Highland Clothes*, including *Tartan Great Coats*, in the Highlands, it did not extend to *tartan cloth* per se. Additionally, with a Royal Charter, the Archers were clearly seen as part of the establishment and like members of the military, they were not subject to, or affected by, the 1746 Act of Proscription. Their continued Royal support is confirmed by a 1746 portrait of the future George III in which he is shown playing in an Archer's uniform that is a miniature version of that worn by Wemyss (Plate 5).



**Plate 5. The Children of Frederick, Prince of Wales by Barthélemy du Pan 1746 showing (the future George III in an Archer's outfit).** Source: The Royal Collection Trust

In none of the portraits is the tartan painted in sufficient detail to allow any proper extraction of the sett and one is simply left with the overall impression of a red based tartan. However, it is extremely fortunate that at least five examples of the coat survive, three of which are thought to be contemporary with the portrait of Alexander Grant of Monymusk (see Plate 8 for an example). There is no information in the original Minutes to indicate from where Alex. Murray obtained the sample that was adopted in 1713, but it is reasonable to assume that a new design was commissioned in order to ensure that it was uniformly acceptable to members. The Company was principally officered by Lowland Lairds rather than those with Highland connections who would have had a stronger tartan tradition and possibly views on the type of pattern. The tartan can be described as having an overall red and green appearance with lighter coloured fine overstripes. Closer examination reveals the finer stripes to be yellow, white, blue and black.

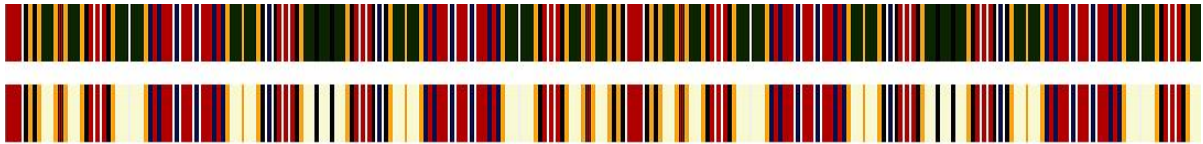
Archers' Hall has two outfits; one is an example of an original coat and includes a pair of tartan breeches.<sup>3</sup> The shades and quality of the material of the coat suggests that it is of an earlier date and are almost certainly part of the original order. Like the coats, the breeches are slashed in a style that is more Elizabethan or Jacobean rather than early Georgian (Plate 6). At first sight the coat and breeches appear to be of different tartans unlike those shown in the

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archers%27\\_Hall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archers%27_Hall)

early portraits (Plates 1, 2 and 4). Those shown appear to have a red and yellow based pattern with finer overstripes on what looks to be a large sett; however, there are similarities in the arrangements of some of the bands and stripes meaning they are more alike than a cursory examination suggests. Research by the author confirmed that in the tartan of the Archers' Hall breeches the white was originally green but presumably produced from a different, now much faded, dye lot and that the two tartans are actually the same as the colour strips demonstrate (Fig 1).



**Plate 6. Archer's Coat and faded Breeches c.1713. © The Author**



**Fig 1. Colour strips comparing the tartan of the Coat and Breeches of the Archers' Hall outfit.**  
© The Author

## THE DIFFERENT SETTINGS

There appears to have been a second batch of uniforms made c.1740-50 which feature a more complex and extended setting of the tartan in which the arrangement of the colours differs. A study of contemporary pieces of this extended setting reveals discrepancies in the individual threadcounts and shades which is indicative of more than one weaver of the cloth. The green in particular is much darker, almost black, in some specimens. Whether these variations were deliberate, the result of different dye-lots, or because of a misinterpretation of the original sett is unclear. Finally, there was an attempt to recreate the uniform, perhaps for a specific event, in the mid-1800s.<sup>4</sup> Once again the original tartan was incorrectly reproduced, this time the sett was simplified (Plates 8-10). The middle coat includes silver brocade which signified an officer's/office holder's rank.



**Plate 8. Archer's Coat c.1713**  
Photo: NMS



**Plate 9. Archer's Coat c.1750**  
© J. Wylie



**Plate 10. Archer's Coat c.1850**  
Photo: NMS

The development/errors in reproducing the sett are apparent in Fig 2 where the underlined sections show the half sett. Although a busy sett, the relatively small size in the original setting (top) is obvious, whereas the extra section added in the c.1750 material, including a new pivot, is shown by the shorter line, marked 'a', in the middle colour strip. By comparison, the setting of the c.1850 copy is wholly defective; it omits the green entirely and the 'small mark'<sup>5</sup> is change from seven to five alternating stripes of black and red (Plate 11).

<sup>4</sup> By the late 1700s the Archers had changed to the Government (Black Watch) tartan which they were still using when this last 'red tartan' coat was made.

<sup>5</sup> Small Mark was a term used by the weaving firm Wilsons of Bannockburn, possibly by others too, to describe a band of similar sized alternating stripes. They would give the total count, for example 16 instead of B4 K4 B4 K4 and the instruction would be understood by the warper and weaver.

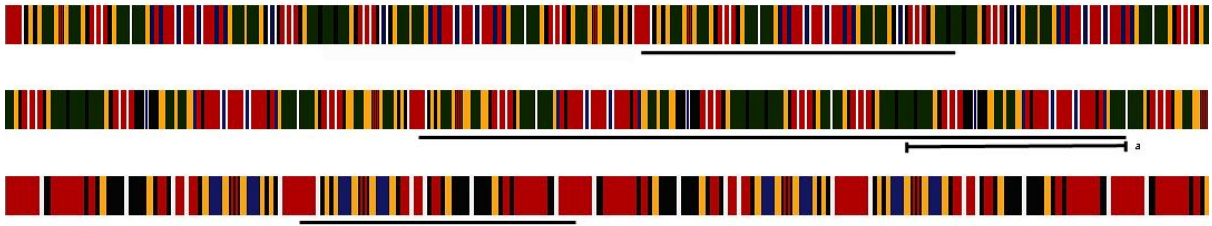


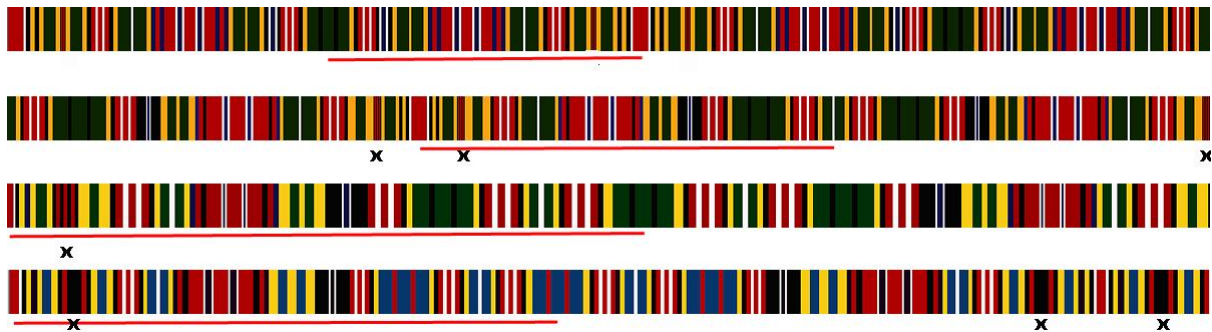
Fig 2. Comparison of an original coat (top), c.1750 (middle) one and Victorian copy (bottom). © The Author



Plate 11. Comparison of the Small Mark in the 1750 (top) and 1850 setts. © The Author

### THE ARCHERS', OGILVIE, AND DRUMMOND OF STRATHALLAN TARTANS

Mention was made at the beginning of this paper of the claim by some that the Archers wore either the Drummond of Strathallan or Ogilvie tartans. In the colour stripes that follow the similarities between the Archers' settings, the Drummond of Strathallan and Ogilvie are obvious (Fig 3).



**Fig 3. Colour strips comparing, from the top and second, the Archers' 1713 and 1750 settings, the Drummond of Strathallan (third) and Ogilvie (forth) tartans.** © The Author

The increasing complexity of the setts can be appreciated by the red line under each strip which shows the half sett. Additionally, the points marked 'x' show the 'small marks', these in turn illustrate how the sett size of each pattern differed. Simplest by far is the original setting of the Archers' tartan where the pattern is much more balanced with the smaller sett and no 'small marks'. As discussed earlier, the c.1750 setting includes an extra green section and the inclusion of the 'small marks'; the Drummond tartan adds a third large green section making the pattern even larger. The Ogilvie is essentially the same sett as the Drummond but with the green replaced by blue and some of the overstripes differ in proportion and colour. In the latter the small mark becomes a black stripe with red guards.

What then could have given rise to the claim that the Archers wore the Drummond of Strathallan tartan or Ogilvie? There seem to be two factors that may have led to the claim.

Both the Ogilvie and Drummond tartans can be dated to the early 1800s with certainty but claims of earlier use, in common with most other clan tartans, remains unproven.<sup>6</sup> There is evidence that the Drummond version is slightly older<sup>7</sup> and its similarity to the Archers' sett may partially explain claims that the Drummond/Ogilvie was used by the Archers for their original tartan. (Plate 12). Secondly, there is the fact that at least two of the early members of the Royal Company were named Drummond. It is unclear whether they were related, either to each other, or to the Strathallan branch, but it is possible that a later Strathallan Drummond asked for a piece of the old (pre-1789) Archers' tartan to be copied as 'his' tartan. Either the weaver made an error for, or was commissioned to make a variation of, the original design.



**Plate 12. Comparison of the Archers' and Drummond Tartans.** © The Author

## ADOPTION OF THE GOVERNMENT TARTAN

In 1789, shortly after the Repeal of the ban on wearing Highland Dress<sup>iv</sup> the Archers adopted a new uniform that comprised a Government tartan coat, white (buff) breeches and waist coat; as shown in Raeburn's famous portrait of Dr Nathaniel Spens, and the less well known one of

<sup>6</sup> Specimens of both, labelled 'Ogilvie' and 'Drummond' respectively, are included in the Cockburn Collection of 1820-25.

<sup>7</sup> There is a letter to Wilsons dated 1794 that includes a swatch of the Drummond but does not name it. And a letter of 1798 ordered 30 yards of Drummond tartan but does not include a sample to confirm the sett.

George Douglas, 16<sup>th</sup> Earl of Morton (Plate 13). The coat with its swept cutaway front, filigree button holes and shoulder epaulettes of a style common in military coats of the late C18th. An example survives (Plate 14) which confirms that in common with most tartan of the time the cloth was produced by the famous weaving firm Wm. Wilson & Son of Bannockburn.<sup>8</sup> This remained the uniform of the Company for 30-40 years but in the build up to the visit of George IV to Scotland in 1822 a new Regency era outfit was adopted. The Government tartan was retained but c.1821 the Archers returned to a full tartan suit, an example of which can also be seen in Archers' Hall. (Plate 15).



**Plate 13. The 16<sup>th</sup> Earl of Morton c.1790**



**Plate 14. Archer's coat c.1789.**  
Photo: Adam Fraser, Courtesy NMS



**Fig 15. Regency Era Suit c.1822.** © The Author

Stylistically the 1820s outfit is a mix of the old and new. The coat has slashed sleeves, braiding and a cut that seems to hark back to the original Archers' coats of some 100 years earlier but was worn with tartan trousers cut in the contemporary Regency style. This third tartan uniform remained in use until c.1860-70 when the current dark green Tunic and matching trousers were adopted, at which time the Archers ceased to use any form of tartan in their uniform.<sup>9</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Over the years the Archers have worn two different tartans as part of their uniform. Originally their uniform was a red and green tartan coat and breeches. That tartan, adopted in 1713, was probably a new design for the Company and it remained in use until the latter quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, albeit with a slightly amended sett, after which it completely fell out of use. From 1789 they wore the standard Government or Black Watch tartan; initially just as a coat but later as a suit of matching coat and trousers adopted before George IV's 1822 visit.

<sup>8</sup> The coat was in the possession of the Scottish Tartans Society until the late 1980s when it disappeared following a series of reorganisations and the final demise of the Society. The coat's current whereabouts is unknown.

<sup>9</sup> Details of the current uniform are here - [http://yeomenoftheguard.com/company\\_of\\_archers.htm](http://yeomenoftheguard.com/company_of_archers.htm)

For reasons that are not entirely clear, the original tartan appears to have been used as the basis for the Drummond of Strathallan/Ogilvie tartans that appeared at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (in the case of the Drummond) and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century for the Ogilvie. Both were probably designed by Wilsons of Bannockburn.

I'm indebted to Willie Scobie for assisting in some of the background research into the early history of the Archers.

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<sup>i</sup> The Scottish Antiquary, or, Northern Notes and Queries 1889, *Royal Company of Archers – The First Tartan Uniform*, Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal\\_Company\\_of\\_Archers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Company_of_Archers) accessed 31 March 2012.

<sup>iv</sup> Repeal of the Act Prescribing the Wearing of Highland Dress 22 George III, Cap. 63, 1782.