

Barred Blanket initialled CY and dated 1726

Introduction

The collection of The Scottish Tartans Authority (STA) includes a number of specimens of predominately white based tartan material typical of what is often referred to as an arisaid pattern¹. Amongst these is a complete joined specimen initialled CY and dated 1726 (Plate 1). This magnificent piece is the oldest and largest complete example of a joined Highland plaid/blanket known. It was purchased in 1966² from John Telfer Dunbar, collector and author of the seminal work *The History of Highland Dress*³. Unfortunately, Dunbar's records are far from complete and in this instance, he gives no clue as to where he acquired the piece.



Plate 1. Detail of the blanket showing the initials, date and join. Photo: E. F. Williams.

The use of the term 'arisaid' to describe this type of pattern resulted in this piece being used in a display in the manner described by Martin Martinⁱⁱ (Plate 2). However, rather than being intended for use as an arisaid, this piece is an example of a Highland domestic plaid³ of a type often referred to as a 'Barred Blanket' because of the striped selvedge pattern. This is supported by the family tradition that the plaid was woven by CY to commemorate her marriage (to Capt Arbuthnott) and was used on special occasions to decorate the table.

¹ The term refers to the form of over-plaid worn by women until the early 18th century and is discussed further in the companion paper [Musings on the Arisaid and other female dress.](#)

² The blanket was purchased by the Scottish Tartans Society, the predecessor organisation to the STA.

³ From the Gaelic *plaide* meaning a blanket.



Plate 2. The CY blanket arranged as an arisaid. Photo: Scottish Tartans Museum

Who was Christina Young?

There is an apocryphal story that Christina Young (CY) was from Skye, that she married a Royal Naval Captain and that she spun, dyed, wove and made this blanket as a betrothal piece. According to Dunbar, the family tradition surrounding the plaid is that it was woven by CY to commemorate her marriage (to Capt Arbuthnott) and was used on special occasions to decorate the table. In fact, Christina (or correctly, Christian) Young (1685-1740) was the daughter of a Peterhead⁴ merchant. She married Thomas Arbuthnot 4th of Rora, (near Peterhead) c1705. He became Baron Bailie (known the "Auld Bailie") to the last Earl Marischal⁵ sometime after 1712 and held the rank of captain in the Peterhead Guard⁶. Their son, also Thomas Arbuthnot (1727-1773), was a Lieutenant in the Jacobite Army at Culloden in 1746. The 1726 date remains a mystery.

Christian married the Old Bailie, before 1706 when their first child was born (CY was 21 at that date). She had four children, none of which was born in 1726, and whilst it has been impossible to find any reason for the date, it was obviously symbolic and important to her. Whilst Christian was undoubtedly involved with the Jacobite cause through marriage, her birth and upbringing in Peterhead meant that she was not a Highlander and the association of a piece of Highland style tartan with her may seem incongruous. However, tartan is known to have been made outside of the Highlands by the early 18th century and well as being exported and imported into and out of the region.

The Cloth

The plaid is made from two lengths of material each 37 inches (98 cms) wide by 187 inches (475 cms) long, making a total size 15ft 7 inches (4.74m) by 6ft 2 inches (1.87m). Irrespective of what this was used for, the CY plaid is unique amongst surviving 18th century tartan. Notably, 37 inches is an extraordinary width at a time when 26 inches was the common breadth for tartan and was the size generally used for joined plaids. The material is wider than any other surviving specimen of rural Scottish weaving before about 1850, perhaps later. It means that the loom must have had a beam of around 40 inches at least - quite a large loom for a traditional highland house. Technically, that is a challenging width to weave on a pre-Flying Shuttle loom⁷. Approximately 30 yards of material would have been needed to produce the plaid. It appears to have been cut in half at the mid-point, the two pieces aligned and joined with a simple whip-stitch using some of the undyed yarn. This probably accounts for the mis-matched ends with one finishing in the middle of the white and the other, three-quarters of the way into the coloured block. The ecru⁸ yarn was used to secure the turned ends with a simple running stitch (Plate 3).

The majority of the cloth is white (ecru) wool decorated with blocks of a four-coloured check comprising; Black, Red, Orange and Yellow (Plate 4). No dye analysis has been conducted but it is probable that the pinky-red was dyed with cochineal using an alum mordant. That red yarn was also used for the embroidered initials and date. More interesting is the orange (gold) colour which is atypical of the colours found in other surviving specimens from the first half of the 18th century.

⁴ Peterhead is a town on the Aberdeenshire coast and long renown as a centre of Scottish sea fishing.

⁵ In that role he rallied the tenants on the Marischal estate to the standard of James Francis Edward Stuart (the Old Pretender or, James VIII to the Jacobites), staunchly supporting the him in 1715 and later his son, Prince Charles Edward Stuart (the Young Pretender or Bonnie Prince Charlie), during the '45.

⁶ The titular rank of Captain held by the 8 Bailies of Peterhead was presumably the source of the misunderstanding that Thomas Arbuthnott was a Naval Captain.

⁷ Invented by John Kay in 1733.

⁸ Ecru is a pale, creamy-white colour. The name comes from the French *écru*, meaning "unbleached".

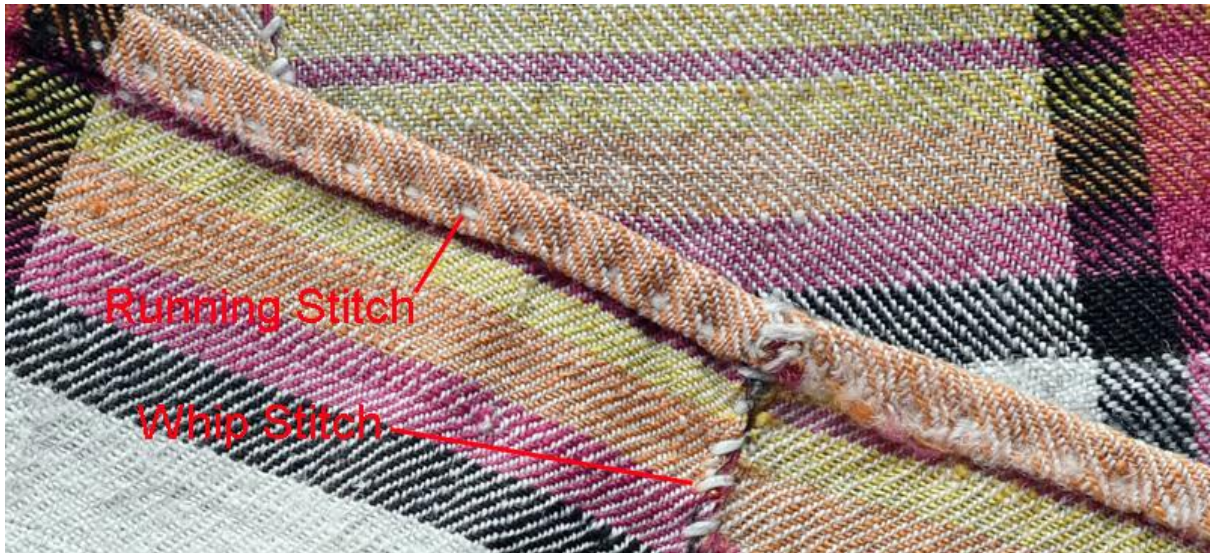


Plate 3. Running and Whip stitching using the ecru yarn. Photo: E. F. Williams.



Plate 3. Detail showing the four dyed colours and natural (ecru) ground. Photo: E. F. Williams.

There is a shade discrepancy in the red and orange colours in some sections of the weft which shows that the dyer/weaver miscalculated the requirement and had to dye a second batch (Plate 5). It is unusual to find examples of secondary dye-lots amongst surviving early specimens of tartan and provides evidence of difficulty in calculating the right amount of individual colours and the challenge of matching previous shades.

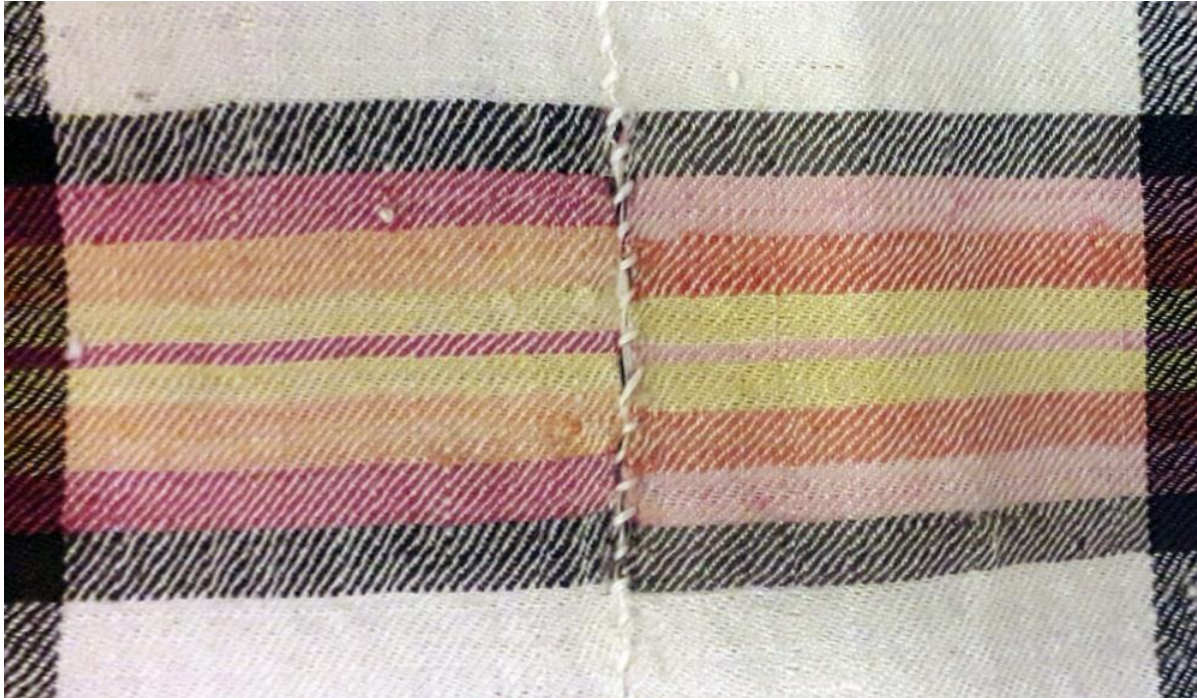


Plate 5. Detail showing the difference in the red and orange dye-lots. Photo: E. F. Williams.

The cloth is woven with single-spun yarn, the cloth has a warp density of 26 epi meaning that the warp alone (962 ends) required approximately 6 miles of yarn. The weft is less dense at only 24 epi, meaning some 5.3 miles of yarn were required. In total, approximately 11.3 miles of an even quality yarn were required, a not inconsiderable task that a competent spinner something in the region of two weeks to complete. Factoring in the weaving and finishing (joining and turning the ends, not fulling which was not done to this cloth) then the whole process probably took at least a month assuming a minimum 50-60-hour week.

The Sett

The main setting is typical of 18th century Highland blanket patterns in which a large white ground is juxtaposed with a coloured square composed principally of red and other colours, usually green but in this plaid orange and yellow. The proportion of undyed (Ecrú) to dyed colours is also much larger in the CY plaid (Fig 1).



Fig 1. Colour stripes comparison of a typical Blanket Pattern and the CY sett. © The Author

Highland blanket patterns typically have a striped/barréd border pattern which is often herringboned. Here, the pattern was off-set giving two full repeats across the width of the material plus a barréd selvedge pattern which, when joined, gave a piece with four repeats plus a barréd border pattern each side (Fig 2).

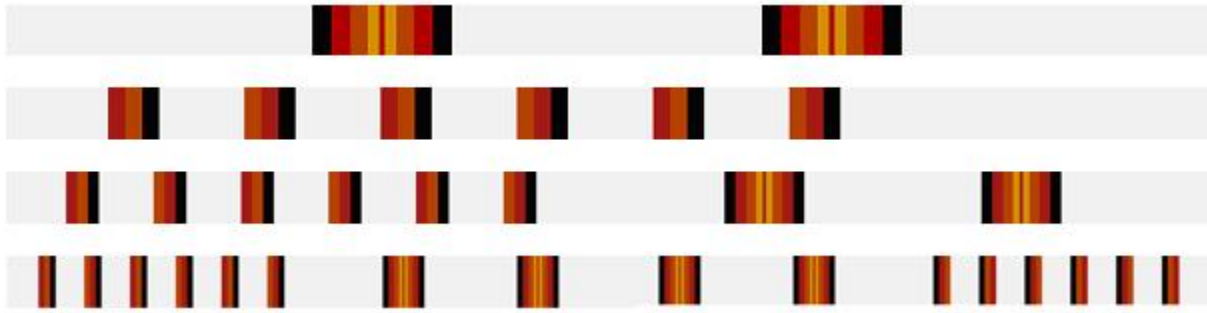


Fig 2. Colour stripes showing the basic setting, the Barred Border, a single and joined width. © The Author

Compared with other surviving blanket pattern specimens, the 8-inch selvedge pattern is unusually wide. It comprises 6 bars which alternate in the sequence Black-Red-Orange: Black-Orange-Red and the whole width, bars and white ground, is herringboned in uneven bands. The Black and Orange bars are 10 ends, the Red 12 ends and the White 48 ends except for the final White which is 20 ends. The width of the individual white herringbones varies between 10 to 32 (Plate 6).



Plate 6. Barred selvedge pattern with irregular sized herringboning. Photo: E. F. Williams.

Conclusion

The family tradition that the plaid was spun, dyed and woven by Christian to commemorate her marriage to Capt Arbuthnot is at odds with the 1726 date which was some 20 years later. Given the unique size of the web (Plate 7), length of time it must have taken to spin, dye and weave so perhaps the date represented the date of completion or acquisition. Both Christian and her husband were from Peterhead in Aberdeenshire which is not a Highland area and does not fit what is known about the origins of these type of pieces.

One can never be certain but the size of the piece, and weave structure make it very unlikely that this plaid was ever intended for wearing. There is very little wear on the plaid and no evidence of staining to the ecru areas suggesting that it was not used as clothing. It's also quite a heavy piece that's relatively soft compared with much of the hard tartan of the period so it would have soaked up the rain and become saturated very quickly. These observations support the tradition of the family's use as a household item rather than it having been a garment.

These white based blankets appear to have been popular throughout the Highlands in the 18th century. However, this is the only known example of such an early piece in a non-Highland town and is an area that requires much more research.



Plate 7. Overview (approx. quarter) of the blanket showing the main pattern and barred selvedge.
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ⁱ **DUNBAR J. T.** 1962 *The History of Highland Dress*. Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh

ⁱⁱ **Martin, M.** 1703 *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*. London (Second edition 1716)