

# History of the Kilt in Scotland

The tartan kilt has long been the most recognizable cultural tradition of the Highland Scots. Therefore, it surprises most people that many of the most recognizable features and traditions associated with the wearing of the kilt have, in fact, been developed in the nineteenth century, not by Scottish Highlanders, but by the Nobles of England and Scotland.

There is much evidence that many of the more recognizable tartans seen today are in fact creations of Scottish and English tailors during the reign of Queen Victoria. Despite this, it has generally been accepted that the basic concepts of the tartan and the wearing of the kilt do indeed have their origin in the history of the early Scottish and Irish clans, or families. It has been demonstrated that certain clans did aspire to a certain uniformity of design for their garments as early as the tenth and eleventh centuries.



The kilt, or philabeg to use its older Gaelic name, that has now become the standard dress for all "Highlanders", has its origin in an older garment called the belted plaid. The Gaelic word for tartan is breacan, meaning partially colored or speckled, and every tartan today features a multicolored arrangement of stripes and checks. These patterns, or sett's, are used to identify the clan, family, or regiment with which the wearer is associated. Although the kilt is the most recognizable of the tartans, it also manifests itself in the form of trews (trousers), shawls, and skirts.

It is generally recognized that the first tartans were the result of individual weavers own designs, then were slowly adopted to identify individual districts, then finally clans and families. The first recognizable effort to enforce uniformity throughout an entire clan was in 1618, when Sir Robert Gordon of Gordonstoun,

wrote to Murry of Pulrossie requesting that he bring the plaids worn by his men into "harmony with that of his other septs."

After 1688, and the fall of the Stuart clan, and subsequent rise in the spread of Jacobism, the English government felt the need to take a more active interest in the Highland affairs. In 1707, The Act of Union took place, and succeeded in temporarily uniting the political factions and clans that were universally opposed to the Act. The tartan came into its own as a symbol of active nationalism and was seen by the ruling classes to be garb of extremism. It is also believed that this act of parliament succeeded in uniting, to some extent, the Scottish Highlands and Lowlands, as the wearing of the tartan spread from the Highlands to the Lowlands, previously not known for their wearing of the tartan.

After the rising of 1715, the Government found the need to enforce stricter policing of the Scottish Highlands and Lowlands. A number of independent companies were formed to curtail the lawlessness that had developed. One of the features that distinguished their recruits were the large number of highland gentlemen that enlisted and chose to serve in the private ranks. Many an English officer was surprised to see these Scottish privates attended by personal servants who carried their food, clothing, and weapons. From the time they were first raised, these independent regiments became known as the Black Watch, in reference to the darkly colored tartans they were known to wear.

One of the more famous tales of these Highland companies is told of the curiosity of King George, who had never seen a Highland soldier. Three handsome privates were chosen and dispatched to London to be presented to the King. The King was so impressed with the skill with which they wielded their broad swords and lochaber axes that he presented them each with a guinea. Nothing could be more insulting to a Highland gentleman, but they could not refuse the gift. Instead they accepted the gift, and as they left, flipped it smugly to the porter as they passed the palace gates.

In 1740, these independent companies became a formal regiment, and the need arose to adopt a formal tartan. This became a problem, for what tartan could they choose, without insulting certain clans, or seeming to favor others? In the end, an entirely new tartan was developed and has ever since been known as the Black Watch Tartan. It was the first documented tartan to be known by an official name and possesses the authenticity of a full pedigree. From this tartan has been derived all of the Highland regimental tartan designs and many of the hunting setts worn by other clans.

During the eighteenth century, the wearing of the belted plaid began to be exchanged for that of the kilt. The belted plaid, being a one-piece six-foot tall cloth, belted about the waist with the remainder being worn up about the shoulder, was proving to be somewhat inconvenient to wear. A "new", little kilt design became popular, and it consisted of a plaid which had the traditional pleats permanently sewn in place, and separated the lower from the upper half, allowing the upper section to be removed when it became convenient.



By 1746, the Government, weary of being called to quell Highland uprising, enacted a law making it illegal for Highlanders to own or possess arms. A year later, the Dress Act restricted the wearing of Highland clothes. Any form of plaid, philbeag, belted plaid, trews, shoulder belt, or little kilt were not to be worn in public. Punishment for a first offence was a six-month imprisonment; a second offence earned the wearer a seven-year exile to an oversea work farm. Even the Bagpipes were outlawed, being considered an instrument of war. Only those individuals in the army were permitted to wear the plaid, and as a result, it is told that many Highlanders enlisted simply to be allowed to wear their more comfortable traditional dress.

By the time the Dress Act was repealed in 1783, the fabric of Celtic life had been forever altered. The Dress Act had succeeded in altering Highland Society to the extent that many of the old traditions and customs had been lost forever. In spite of the many efforts to revive the traditions, wearing the plaid had become seen as only a nationalistic statement, and was no longer considered a way of life for Highlanders.

The plaid now became more of a fashion experiment for the elite of English society. With the advent of the industrial revolution, the precise manufacturing and replication made possible by machinery, allowed the mass reproduction of the plaid.