

# *Tartans and their History*



Some evidence of colored cloths were seen as far back as the 2nd or 3rd century but the evolution of the tartans and the traditional dress as they are known today did not take place until around the Victorian era. After the battle of Culloden (1747) there was a period when the wearing of tartan was banned except in the army. Even the bagpipes were outlawed. The period of banned tartans lasted until 1782. Many good Scots kept their tradition alive by marking their setts on a piece of wood to preserve them until the day that they could revive their distinctive dress once more. Whatever the history of the early tartan, it has become acceptable worldwide to not only the Irish and Scottish people but to anyone who wishes to claim it as his own. The *Vestiarium Scoticum* along with official Scottish registration and acceptance take the claims of the clans and their “tartans” very seriously. This acceptance has been stretched into all of the new tartans that have been created by modern society.

The predecessor of the knee length garment known now as the kilt, was the long shirt (sometimes yellow) which reached to the knees or

even to ankle length if worn by women. This shirt mainly made of linen, then became the “undergarment” for the belted plaid. See the description below the picture to the right. It is thought that the present day kilt length was derived from the length of the shirt. The size of the plaid was so big that it could be used as a blanket for sleeping but also it had to be slung over the shoulder or out of the way by day. In the picture above are seen stockings, a jacket and separate draped “plaid” which were among some of the accessories that developed later. Many of the pictures show mixed tartans so it would seem that individual choices did not include specific patterns. A “new”, smaller 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.

There was a need to standardize the patterns to conform to regimental recognition so such tartans as the Black Watch began to take on specific colors and patterns. Some families or clans may have adopted their own tartans but this led to classification according to areas where the clan lived. Names were given to the tartans, like MacDonald of the Isles and the names gradually developed into selective patterns like Hunting MacDonald or bright colors, a Dress MacDonald.



A depiction of the plaid and how it was folded for wearing as a piece of clothing

To put on a belted plaid, a rectangular piece of material about 16 feet long and 5 feet wide, the wearer laid the plaid on the ground with his belt beneath it. He then pleated the material over the belt and lay down on to of it with the bottom at knee level. He belted the material around his waist and stood up, leaving the long unpleated tail to fall behind. He then put on his coat, waist-coat and sporran. For normal use the tail was looped on the left shoulder and tucked in, or the whole of it could be used as a cloak.

The English embraced the wearing of the plaid as a fashion statement and the English tailors created new patterns for them. By now it was possible to manufacture fabric which was precise and replicated as a vehicle for mass production. Up to present day, tartan patterns have been “borrowed” by people worldwide and are no longer a preserve of the Scottish or people of the British Isles.

*“If benighted, the Highlander of old would dip his plaid in water and then wrap it round him, the woollen cloth swollen with moisture being supposed to resist the wind, while the exhalations from the body during sleep surrounded him with a warm vapour.”* Unknown source

## Handweaving tartan fabric



Although the weaving of tartan fabric was manufactured using power looms, there still remained many who preferred to weave their own cloth—right up to today. The crest to the left is one for weavers—*weave truth with trust*. This should be inspiration for those who are brave enough to learn how to weave a piece of cloth that is strictly a 50/50 weave as the patterns are arranged in such a way that each thread is woven in on a 45° angle and all of the weft threads are put in a certain order that follows the threading plan. Usually the patterns are drafted with the pattern reflected and repeated as needed (notice that the green is the result of the reflection.) There may be squares within squares but these will follow a 45° line to complete the balanced

squares. Most of the patterns follow this rule but not all. Look at the Anderson pictured here and you will see an asymmetrical patterning which gives the tartan a “busy” look. Compare it with the Abercrombie above for the symmetrical appearance. Notice though, that the Anderson does have squares on a larger scale, then some that are quite small within the larger areas. The

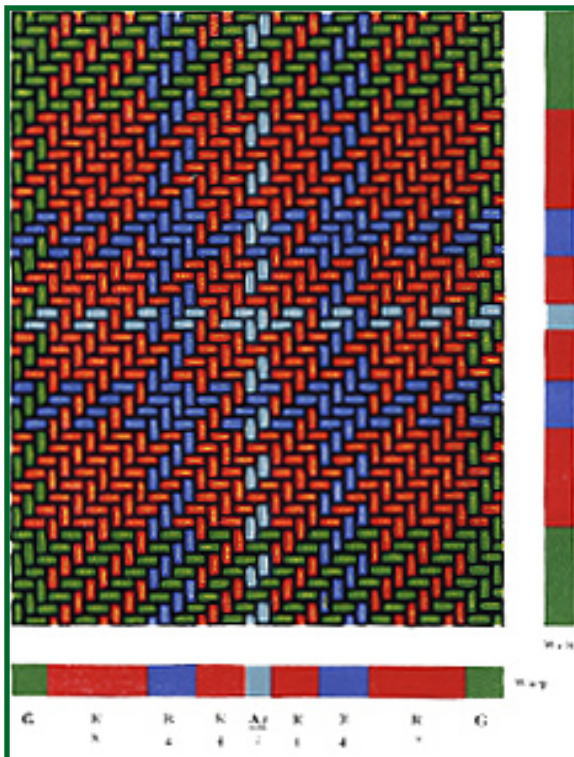
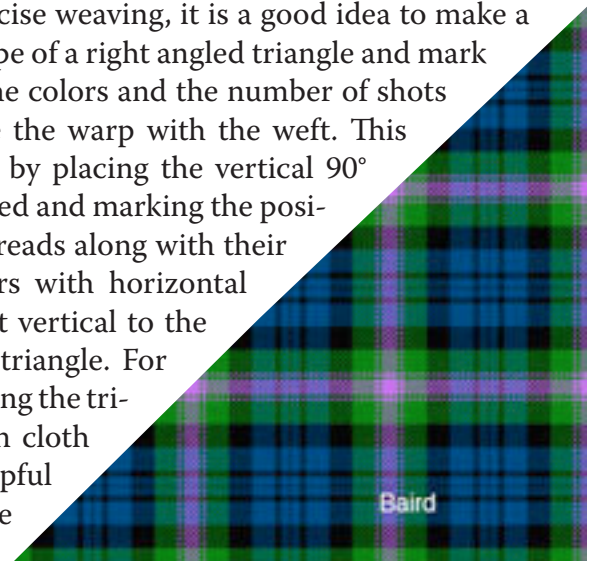
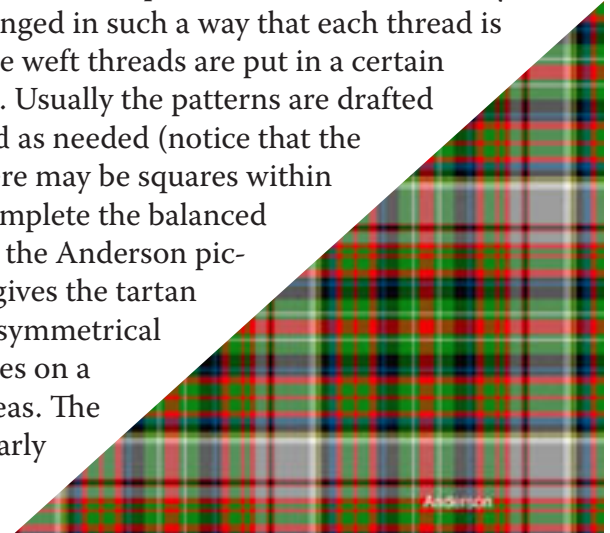
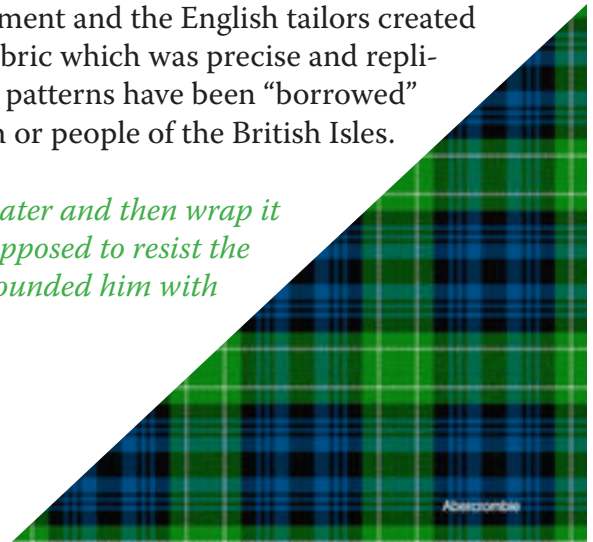


diagram shows clearly how each color in the warp is repeated in equal amounts in the weft. The 45° angle is evident as the weaving progresses from bottom to top.

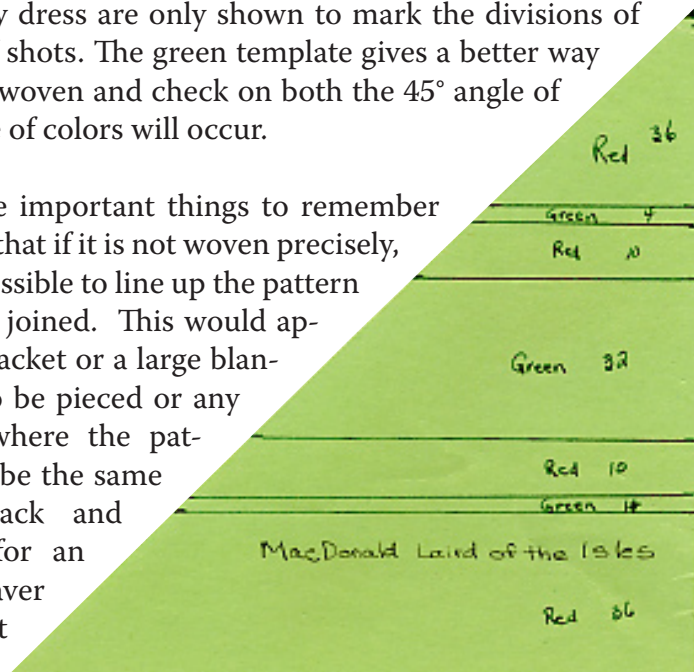
To achieve this precise weaving, it is a good idea to make a template in the shape of a right angled triangle and mark the placement of the colors and the number of shots needed to equalize the warp with the weft. This can be done easily by placing the vertical 90° angle against the reed and marking the position of the warp threads along with their colors and numbers with horizontal lines from the right vertical to the hypotenuse of the triangle. For greater ease in placing the triangle on the woven cloth it is sometimes helpful to lightly mark the color spaces along





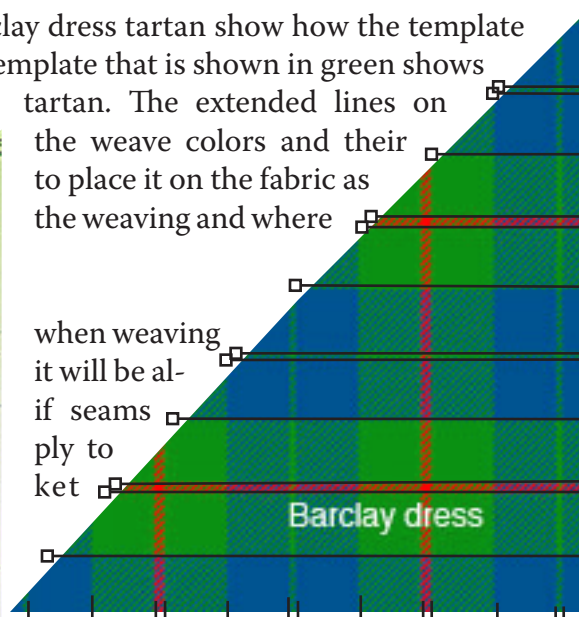
the bottom of the triangle as well. The marks added to the Barclay dress tartan show how the template can be sectioned off to aid in the accuracy of the weaving. The template that is shown in green shows one that has been made for the MacDonald Laird of the Isles. The extended lines on the Barclay dress are only shown to mark the divisions of number of shots. The green template gives a better way it is being woven and check on both the 45° angle of the change of colors will occur.

One of the important things to remember a tartan is that if it is not woven precisely, most impossible to line up the pattern have to be joined. This would ap-making a jacket or a large blan-that has to be pieced or any garment where the pat-tern must be the same in the back and front or for an If the weaver warp, it so that it width of the fabric will give a little lengthwise when off tension and therefore become exactly the same size as the warp sections.



tartan. The extended lines on the weave colors and their to place it on the fabric as the weaving and where

when weaving it will be al- if seams ply to ket



opening down the front of a garment. tends to put excessive tension on the may be necessary to put in the weft is slightly higher than the warp the color being used so that

*Measure each color change using the template as the weaving progresses to insure perfect balance. **Sett** is color and number of threads—**set** is the slewing order.*

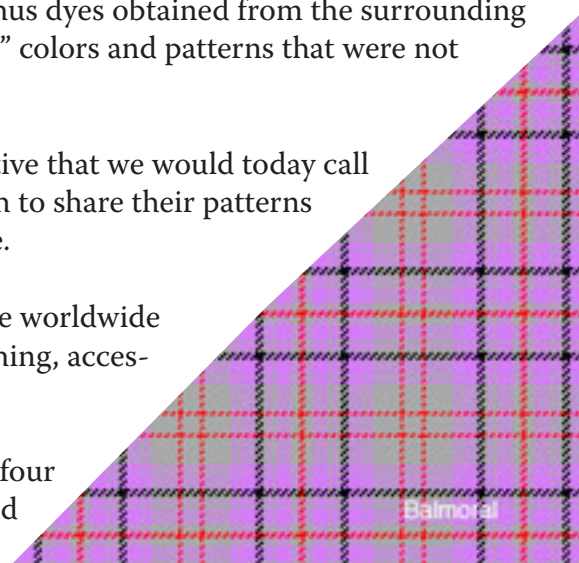
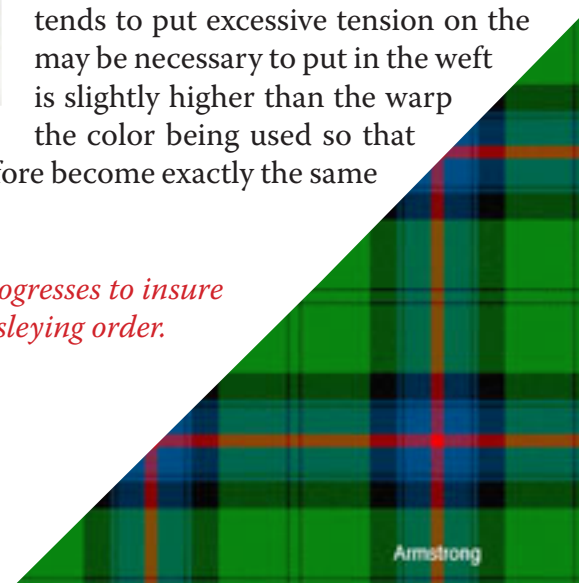
## Scottish District Checks

A cousin to the tartan pattern is the Scottish District Check. Originally the tartans were the “property” of the Highlanders but as time passed, the Lowlanders claimed some of the patterning. An evolution brought about the need for estate uniforms which took the form of distinctive patterns and colors. The colors tended to be colors of nature and thus dyes obtained from the surrounding sources supplied by nature. These took the form of “camouflage” colors and patterns that were not as bold.

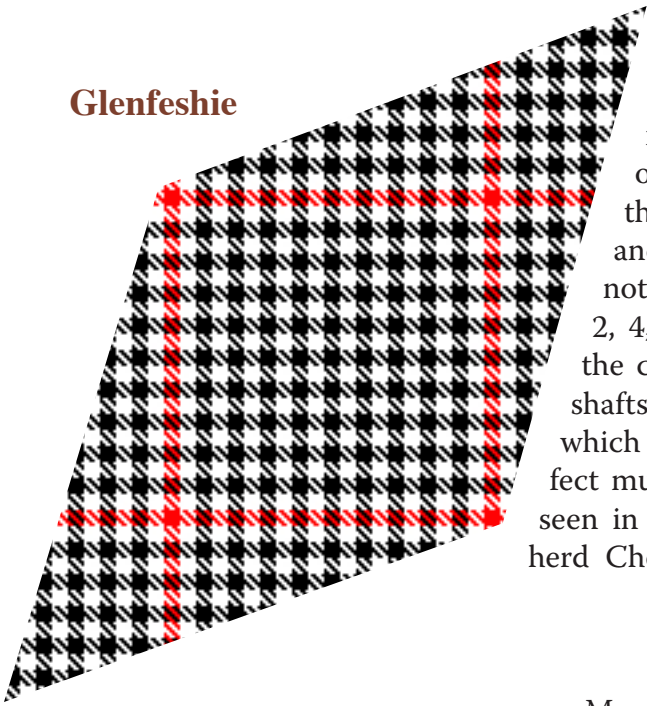
The landowners were very protective of their checks, so protective that we would today call them “copyright”. Up to this day there are some who do not wish to share their patterns with outsiders and this right should be honored if at all possible.

Today the Scottish District Checks have been adopted by people worldwide and they are known by generic names and found in use for clothing, accessories and anything that can be adapted to the patterns.

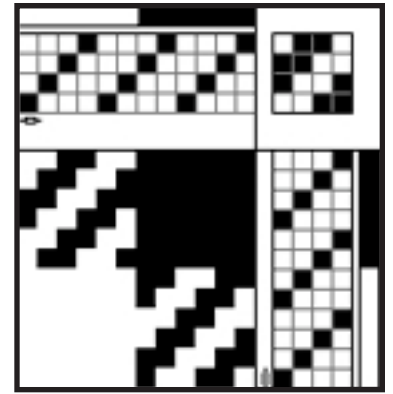
The basic weaving premise is that a straight draw of mainly four shafts, although there are some with as many as eight shafts and varied threadings but all are governed by the color combina-



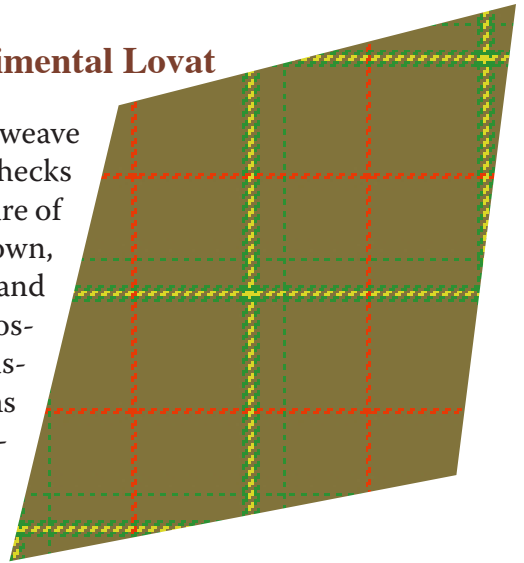
### Glenfeshie



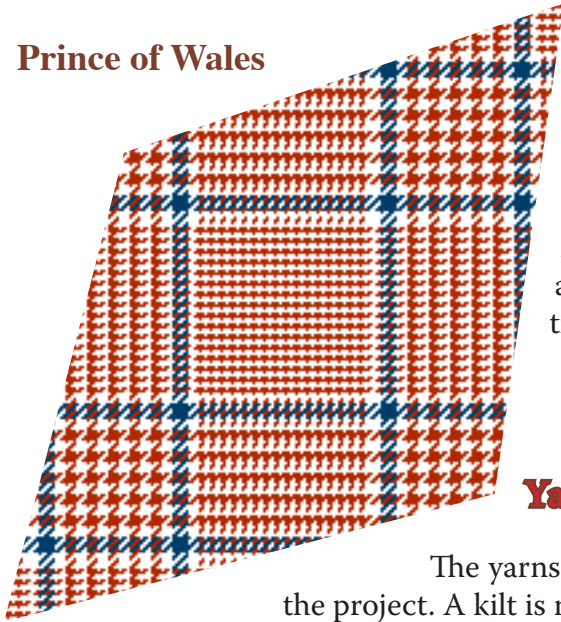
tions that give the checked appearance. There are usually two color blends for each pattern—a solid area, a mixed colored area resulting in most case with a dark and a light for contrast. The beauty of all of the Scottish patterns is that they rely heavily on the color and weave effect. To do this, note that the color changes are 2, 4, 6 groups of threads so that the colors are changed usually on shafts one and three (five and seven) which produces the contrasting effect much more predominately than seen in the tartans. Study the Shepherd Check to the right to see how the color effect changes.



### Royal Scots Regimental Lovat



### Prince of Wales



Many of the yarns used to weave the Scottish District Checks have been spun in a mixture of two colors—olive and brown, black and yellow, red and brown and others. It is impossible to show these mixes using the computer renditions available but an approximation has been done here.

### Yarns for Weaving the Scottish Fabrics

The yarns used for weaving the Scottish fabrics vary according to the use of the project. A kilt is manufactured today using a hard twist wool of 24/2 or finer weight and set at 24 ends per inch or closer. If a blanket weight is needed, a much heavier weight wool will be used and set accordingly. Many of the tartans have been woven in silk so the sets will vary according to the size of silk used. The handweaver is advised by a Scottish supplier to use fine wool (24/2) and set it at 24 ends per inch. When washed and finished, this gives a softer fabric than machine manufactured but one that is suited to individual handweaver uses. It is essential that the yarns in a given project be of equal size to produce a true 50/50 weave in either a tartan or a district check.

### To Make a Kilt

The tartan cloth should be pleated into the same pattern as the tartan sett so varied amounts of fabric are needed to make a kilt depending on the size of the pattern repeat. The bulk is then cut out and the cut out area is lined with a plain cotton or linen. The fabric is usually woven so that the selvage is the edge to take place of a hem. The fabric width will then be the length from waist to hem. The front of the kilt is plain with no pleats but a small fringe is made down the front side of the garment. Details can be observed by looking at a ready-made kilt.