

A person is captured in a dynamic pose, likely dancing, wearing a traditional Scottish kilt. The kilt features a bold red and white plaid pattern. They are also wearing red and white argyle socks and black shoes. The background is a bright, slightly blurred indoor setting with a wooden floor and a blue wall.

Crafts

A SWINGING MASTERPIECE | The Traditional Scottish Hand Stitched-Kilt | Orla McCafferty in Scotland

TARTAN

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1 April 2023 –
14 January 2024

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Photograph: V&A Dundee (2023) Tartan Exhibition

In this issue of *Crafts*, are a collection of articles written on the theme of the traditional Scottish hand-stitched kilt.

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Photograph: Cea (2020) Tartan Sheep



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The Traditional Scottish Hand-Stitched Kilt is Endangered!

And just like that we're into 2024! Happy New Year and welcome to this special edition of *Crafts*. As a final year art and design student and an avid reader of *Crafts*, I was delighted to accept the invitation to be guest editor for this new year edition.

In this edition of crafts: *is it important to preserve the traditional Scottish craft of hand-stitching kilts?*

The traditional hand-stitched kilt is at risk of extinction! Just to be clear, this is the hand-stitched kilt and not the kilt in general, because let's face it, the kilt is such an iconic garment that it will probably be around forever! The Heritage of Crafts Association is a registered charity that works in partnership with the government to safeguard, support and promote traditional craft skills and knowledge for the future. In May 2021, they announced that the traditional craft of hand-stitching kilts, had been put on the UK's red list of endangered crafts.



This means that there are currently enough kiltmakers to share the specialised craft of hand-stitching kilts, but that there are serious concerns about the future viability of the craft. According to MacGregor and MacDuff Kiltmakers website, 'MacGregor MacDuff', there is still demand for hand-stitched kilts. They say that the reason for this craft becoming endangered, is quite simply because fewer people are choosing to learn the craft. It is not a financially attractive craft to learn, and workers no longer rely on this type of work to survive. They go on to explain that the appeal of learning this labour-intensive, precision craft has been dwindling for years, especially since machine sewn kilts have emerged. Machine sewn kilts can mimic hand-stitched kilts, and they are more economically competitive as they require less skill and time to make.

Kiltmaker and business owner Amanda Moffet, writes on her 'Kiltmavery' website, that work dynamics play a part in the reduction of skill sharing. Years ago, kiltmakers worked and learned together in workrooms. When the workrooms closed to save money, kiltmakers worked in isolation from home. Their pay changed to piece work and competition for work between kiltmakers became common. They could not afford an apprentice due to their poor pay, nor risk potential future competition from an apprentice.

So, in a nutshell, financial recognition for this unique skilled craft, the introduction of machine sewn kilts and changing work dynamics, have contributed to an aging workforce and a decline in skill sharing. Therefore endangering the traditional Scottish craft of handstitching kilts.



Photograph: Laura McCafferty (1 September 2019) 'Cowal'



Growing up in a small village on the east coast of Scotland, I have been immersed in Scottish culture, fashion and design my entire life. My passion for creating and making led me to study at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design in the city of Dundee. The focus of my work is on textiles and exploring the various ways that they are used within society. Over the past few years, I have developed a passion for learning how textiles and garments are made and how they interact with the body.

As a Highland dancer I have a personal interest in kilts as they are part of the costume for a competitive highland dancer. I have worn both hand-stitched kilts and machine sewn kilts and my personal preference is a hand-stitched kilt. I have never considered the possibility that one day I may not have the option of having a hand-stitched kilt made. This became the catalyst for my research.

To fully appreciate the hand-stitched kilt, I felt I needed to explore its history and how the weaving, construction and wearing of the kilt have changed over time. I was keen to know

EDITOR'S NOTE

if hand-stitched kilts differ from machine sewn kilts, so I chatted to some knowledgeable kiltmakers to find out. I spoke to a master weaver, about the intricacies involved in hand making tartan cloth, and chatted to family and friends about what a hand stitched kilt means to them.

I gained a lot of visual insight, appreciation and understanding of tartan and the weaving process, from Dundee's Design Museum, V&A Tartan Exhibition, and Verdant Works Textile Museum, Dundee.

My journey took me to Dundee, Blairgowrie and Arbroath, where I spoke to some talented and interesting people, and learned the importance of keeping the skill of hand-stitching a kilt alive.

I hope you enjoy reading this edition of Crafts as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Orla/McC.

Orla McCafferty Highland Dancer



Twitter, Facebook, Instagram

Above Photograph: Laura McCafferty (14 December 2023) 'Exhibition'



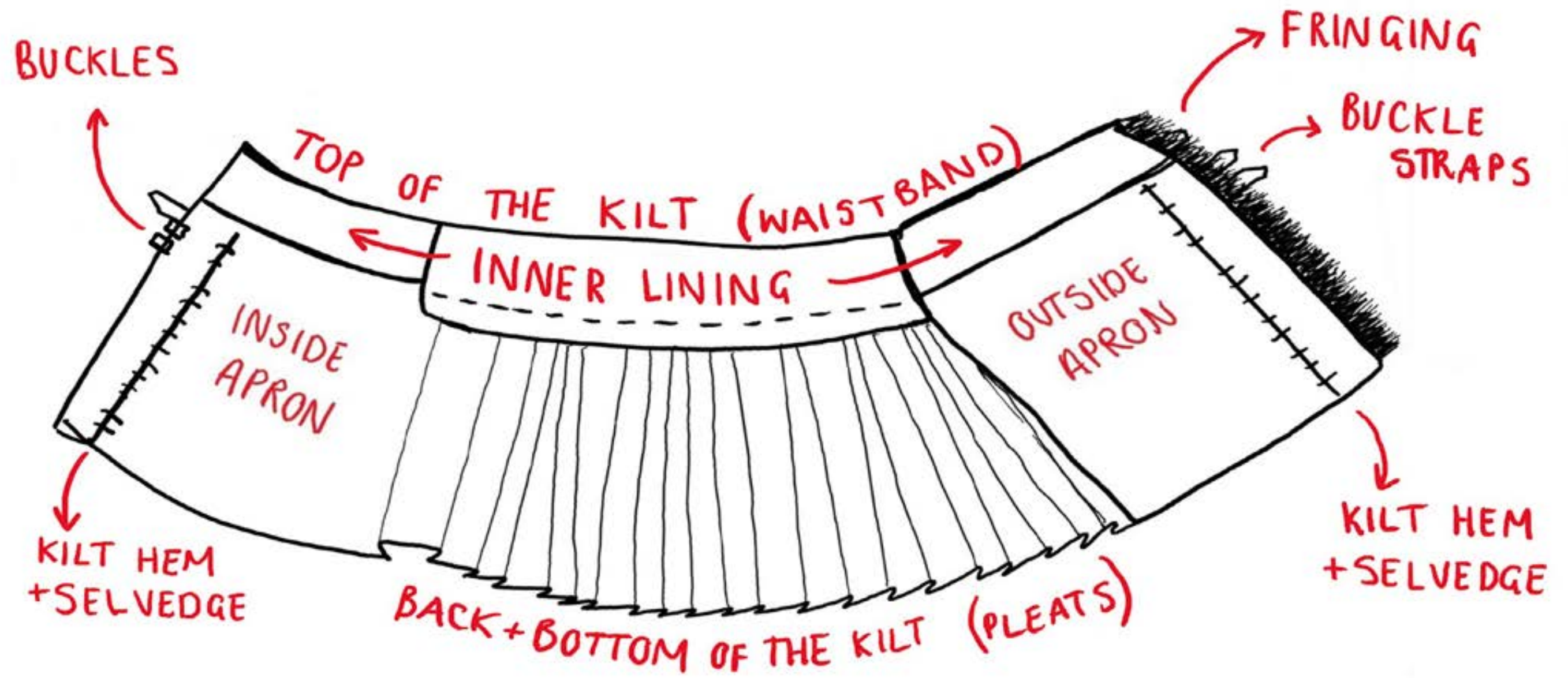
My Tartan Trail Research Journey



250 MILES
TRAVELLING BY CAR
OVER 6 DAYS

- Kilt Workroom,
PERTHSHIRE
- Master Weaver's Studio,
BLAIRGOWRIE
- Pat's Kitchen,
ARBROATH
- DCA,
DUNDEE
- Verdant Works,
DUNDEE
- V&A Museum,
Tartan Exhibition,
DUNDEE
- Gordon Nicolson Kilt
Making Academy and
Hire,
EDINBURGH

An Illustrated Diagram of Scottish Hand-Stitched Kilt Components



Armed to the Kilt

**Traditional kilt making has become an endangered craft.
Is it historically important to preserve this craft?**

From practical necessity to national treasure. Orla McCafferty takes a brief look at the history of the distinctive and iconic traditional Scottish kilt.

Scotland's iconic kilt is steeped in history. Master Kiltmaker Gordon Nicolson writes on his website 'Gordon Nicolson Kiltmakers' that "kilts and tartan have cemented themselves in people's minds as something inherently Scottish, they are a symbol of belonging and identity and a head turning way to dress". He goes on to discuss the history of the kilt, saying that the kilt originated in the Scottish Highlands and that it has been made and worn for centuries, although its style and construction have diversified over time into the kilt that we recognise today.

Author, Rev Matthew Newsome writes in online Scottish Highland Dress archive 'Albanach' that in the late 16th Century, the kilt was known as the big kilt or the feileadh mor, in Gaelic. It was a large rectangular, single length of coloured woollen cloth. The cloth was gathered around the waist and tied with a leather belt through cloth belt loops. It is often referred to now as a plaid. The size of the cloth enabled the top part to be worn in various ways, often like a cloak with a hood. The feileah mor was worn by men and women but it was mostly associated with Highland men.



Photograph: Alen Kesler, Scottish Kilt (2 March 2023)



Photograph: The Celtic Croft (2021) OUTLANDER Great Kilt

**“it's style and construction
have diversified over
time into the kilt that we
recognise today”**

Businessman and author, Dr Nick Fiddes, writes on his online heritage website 'Clan', that the feileah mor was a warm, practical and versatile garment that was used for protection from the Scottish weather. It could also be used as a blanket, a tent or a bag and it was convenient for walking over wet land due to its length. The cloth would be covered in goose fat which helped to repel water. One can only imagine the smell! According to author Graeme Johncock, writing in online blog 'Scotland's Stories', the 'feileah mor' is worn in the 1995 movie Braveheart, by the main character William Wallace, played by actor Mel Gibson. He says that the Scottish costumes worn in this movie were inaccurate for the period the movie was set in, as kilts had not been invented for about another 300 years!



Photograph: St Kilda Kilts (2020) Great Kilt- Feileah Mor - 'The big kilt'

Politically historic UK events that began in 1745, are described by Historian, Chantelle Bryant, who writes in online website ‘HistoryPod’, that the British government banned men and boys in the highlands from wearing kilts. This was an attempt to suppress highland culture and punish Highlanders, for a series of political and religious rebellions from the Scots against the British government, known as the Jacobite rebellion.



Photograph: St Kilda Kilts (2020) - ‘The little kilt’ - Feileadh beag



Photograph: Kinloch Anderson (2023) The Jacobite Rebellion Tartan Created to Honour the Bravery and Sacrifice of Scottish Clans During the Jacobite Uprising

For those found to be wearing a kilt, there were severe consequences including imprisonment and death. When the kilt ban was eventually lifted after 36 years, the kilt became even more popular with Highlanders, although the style changed slightly. The new style of kilt was known as the little kilt or the ‘feileadh beag’, which was essentially the same as the big kilt, but without the upper body cloak.

“Ladies from hell”.



Photograph: New Tangier (12 April 2022) Natural Dye,Dye from surrounding locations, like the dyes Clans would have used

Journalist for website ‘Historic UK’, Ben Johnson, explains that Scottish Highlanders wore different coloured kilts indicating which region they were from. This may originally have been unintentional, and due to the natural dyes that were available in a particular area. The different coloured kilts identified different groups of people known as clans. Clans fought many battles to protect themselves, defend their land, preserve their way of life and protect their independence from oppressors.

Clans stood up for what they believed in and fought with pride, bravery and passion. Kilts were worn by Scottish Regiments during the first World War where they got the nickname “Ladies from hell”. The last time kilts were worn during combat was in 1940 during World War two.



Photograph: Mediadrums images/ Thomas Greenshiel (n.d.) ‘Ladies from hell’

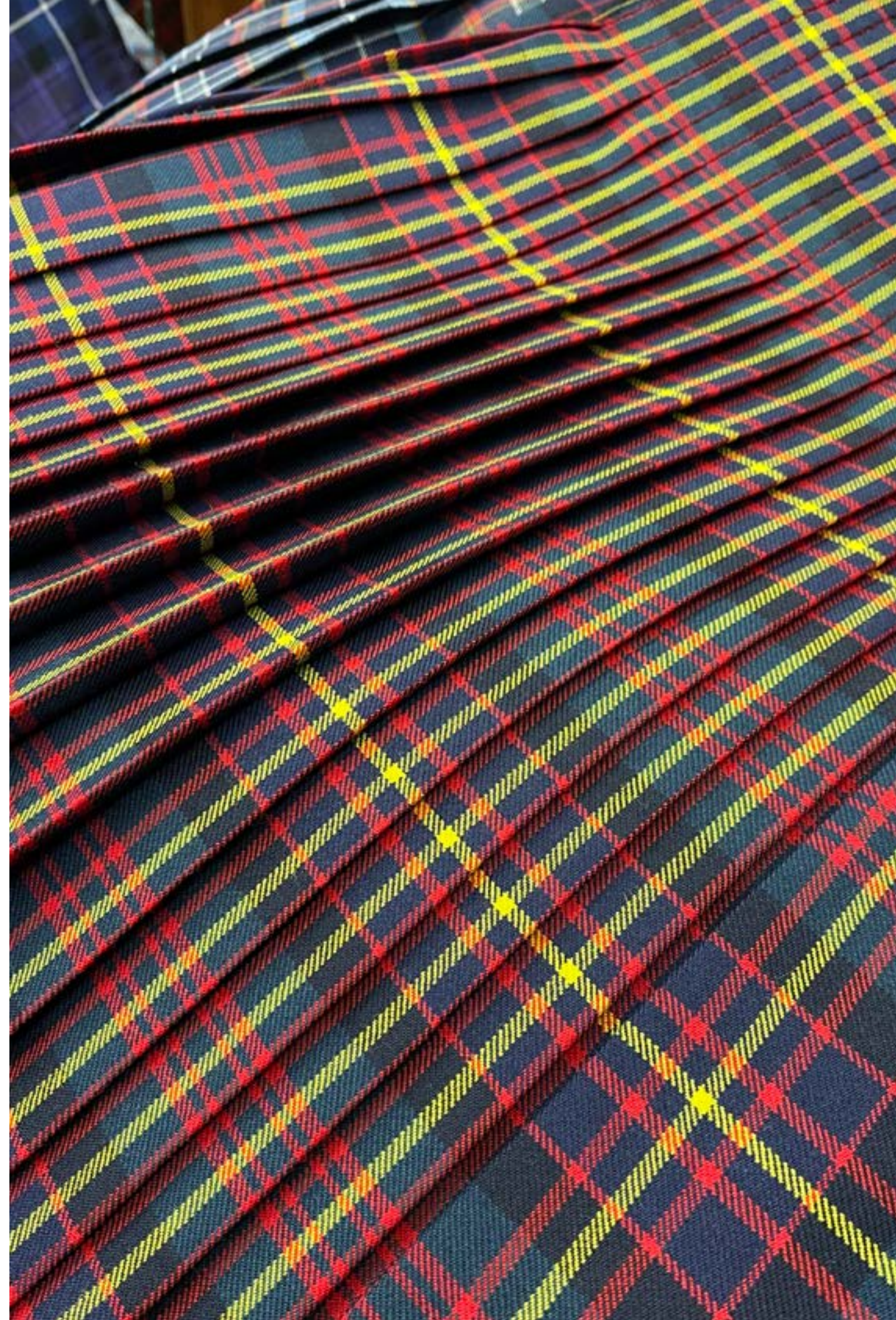
According to author Murray McLean in the online blog, 'Four Nation's History', as different dress options became available, the reasons for wearing a kilt began to change. Although kilts are no longer a daily necessity, they have remained ever present and integrated into today's way of life. They are now mainly worn by men for special occasions such as weddings, christenings and graduations, and special events such as highland games, ceilidhs, festivals and sporting events. They are also worn to Remembrance Days and funerals to honour the dead.

Organisations such as Cadets, Boys Brigade and pipe bands also follow the tradition of wearing kilts, which are usually all made from the same 'team' tartan. Although kilts are mainly worn by males as occasion wear, they are also worn by females in pipe bands, for highland dancing and in some schools they are part of the uniform. As a 21st birthday present for a Scottish boy, it is traditional for parents to give the gift of a new or passed down kilt, as this is when they have stopped growing and the kilt should last them a lifetime.



Photograph: Cambridge News (14 November 2021) Memorial Day Parade

Senior editor for website 'Military Times', Sarah Sicard explains that during the 18th century, the feileadh beag was adopted as the uniform for the Scottish Highland Regiments of the British Army. Each regiment was assigned a different tartan so that they were easily identifiable. In typical army style, the kilt became a standardised design that was eventually replicated for every kilt. The loose folds of cloth began to be sewn into pleats and the length would sit on the middle of the knee.

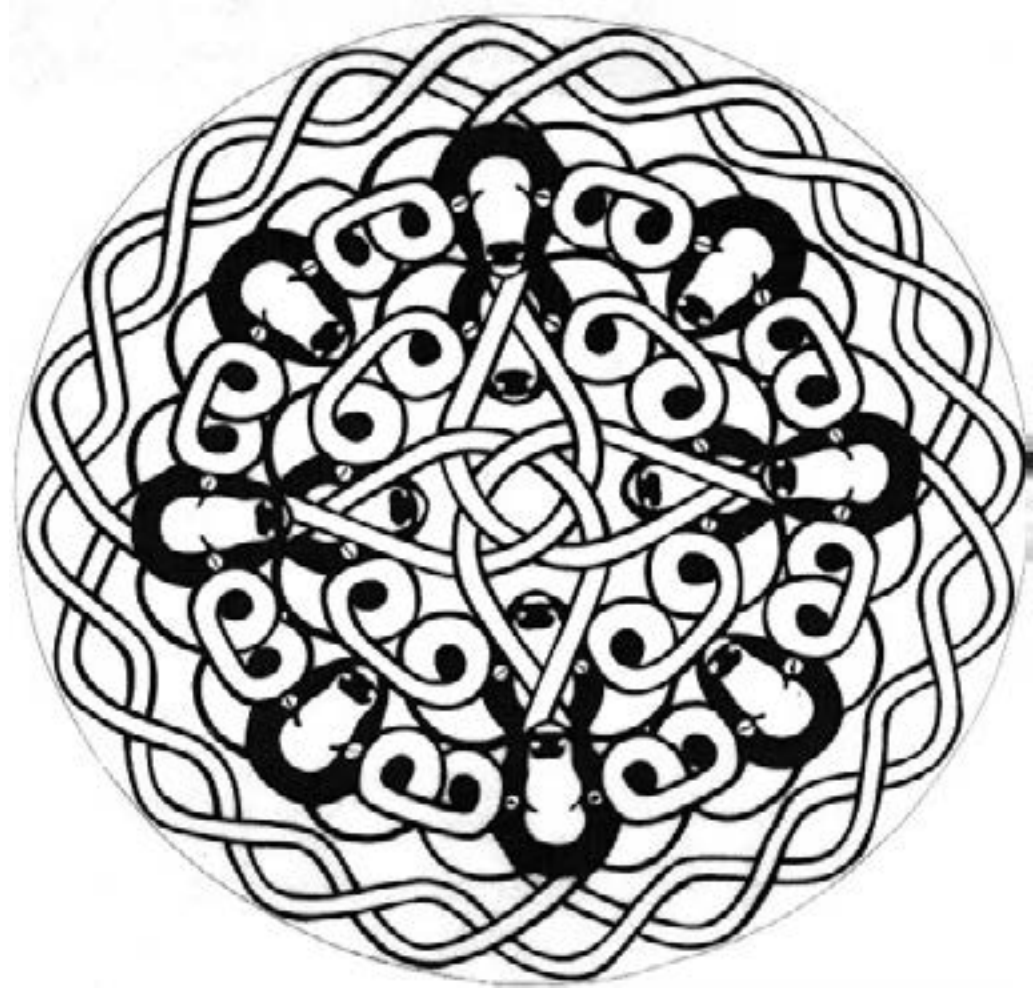


Photograph: The Scotland Kilt Company(2020) Army Kilt

The historical importance of preserving the handstitched kilt.

Even though kilts have changed in style and functionality over the years, they remain a popular, well recognised, iconic symbol associated with Scotland. They display an important visual narrative signifying identity, patriotism, community cohesion, cultural values and traditions. They provide a tangible link to the past and are worn with pride to celebrate and preserve the history and heritage of ancestors. Hopefully kilts will continue to be a valued, timeless, connection to the past for generations to come.

Photograph: Orla McCafferty (13 October 2023) Back of the Kilt



‘The Pen’



‘The Circle of Rams’

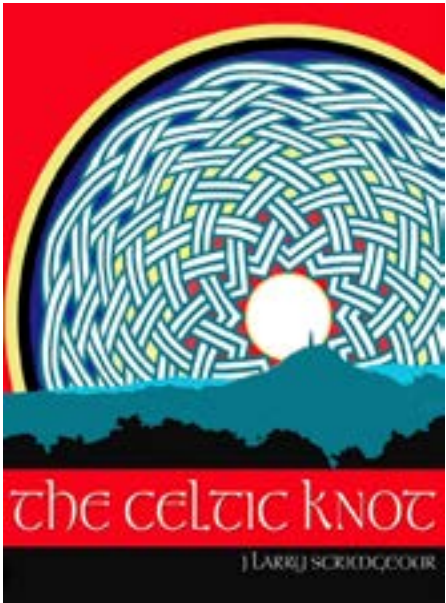
Artwork on pages 16 and 17 By Dr Larry Scrimgeour (my grandad).

Celtic Knot Iconographer

‘The Pen’ of Black Faced Rams and cover of his Publication ‘The Celtic Knot’.

‘**The Pen**’ - symbolises the prisoners from his drawing workshop at HM Perth Prison, some are behind bars and some are free.

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A link to more illustrations



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From Sheep to Tartan Cloth, ‘The Whole 8 Yards’

Orla McCafferty weaves her way through the gradual transformation of the tartan making process, from wool to cloth. A visit to V&A Dundee, and a catch up with Master Weaver Ashleigh Slater.

I was keen to learn all about the tartan cloth that is used for making kilts, and where better to start than the Tartan Exhibition at Dundee’s Design Museum, V&A.



Photograph: Pipe For Scotland (2023) Tartan Exhibition Opening Ceremony



Photograph: V&A Dundee Shop (2023) Kengo Kuma Sketch

The striking pink accent in the tartan, is to symbolise the love that Italian designer Elsa Schiaparelli had for Scotland. Erin also reported that The V&A Tartan will be incorporated into staff uniforms and that “it is the V&A tartan for life, although the pink check may change colour in time to keep it fresh”.

I spent an enjoyable morning exploring the exhibits and gaining valuable visual inspiration. Amongst the interesting exhibits which were on loan to the exhibition, were a kilt belonging to comedian Billy Connolly, and the oldest known surviving piece of tartan cloth in the world, circa 1500 AD. I was intrigued by the history and making of tartan cloth and the seemingly endless variations of designs and colours that can be

To commemorate this landmark exhibition, Scottish weaving company Kinloch Anderson were commissioned to design The V&A Dundee Tartan. According to ‘V&A Dundee Facebook Page’, Erin Thompson, V&A Dundee’s head of retail, said that staff at V&A Dundee and Kinloch Anderson worked together to design The V&A Tartan. Inspiration for this tartan was taken from architect Kengo Kuma’s original concept pencil sketches for V&A Dundee.



Photograph: V&A Dundee Shop (2023) V&A Dundee Tartan

incorporated within it. It is a fearless textile that has vast, meaningful, adventurous and creative scope. It is worn by everyone from punk rockers to royalty. I was so captivated by the colours and the weaving methods that I was curious to find out where they had originated, and how they had progressed over time, so I conducted some research to find out.

**“it is the
V&A tartan
for life..”**

The Wool Preparation Process



Photograph: Shutterstock (2023) Carding by Hand

Preparing Wool for Yarn

The process of making tartan cloth begins with wool. Master kiltmaker, Paul Henry, on his website ‘paulhenrykilts.com’ explains that Scottish sheep have been bred and used in the production of tartan for centuries. Their wool has natural thermal and water-resistant properties which make it ideal for kilt making. It is also recyclable, renewable and environmentally friendly. According to website ‘Wilderness Scotland’, all the amazing qualities of wool cannot be artificially reproduced. The Scottish Government Agricultural Census 2022 states on website ‘The Scottish Government’, that there are currently around 7 million sheep in Scotland. Historian Melissa Snell writes in online premier reference site ‘Thoughtco’ that before electric shears were invented, sheep fleece was originally cut using large scissor like shears, it was then washed and laid out to dry and beaten with sticks to remove any foreign matter. The wool was then carded, this process uses two brushes brushed together, to help remove impurities from the wool. This was a physically demanding job which was mostly carried out by women. It was a crucial process as it transformed raw wool into useable fibres. It untangled the wool and aligned its fibres in preparation for spinning. Advances in carding mean that it can now be carried out by a machine, which creates wool with a smooth and consistent texture.

Spinning Yarn

When it comes to yarn spinning, author, Heather McCloy, explains in online shop ‘Woollen Wytch’ that in the early 1800’s a common ancient craft method of spinning wool was by using a drop spindle. This is a piece of wood with a hook at one end and a weight at the other. A bundle of wool is hooked onto a spindle which is suspended and spun. The wool is pulled at various tensions and twisted into yarn. Drop spinning was a skilled and time-consuming manual process, traditionally carried out by women, and it usually resulted in high quality yarn. Assistant Curator, Irene Mackay, from the Department of Scottish History and Archaeology explains on ‘National Museums Scotland’ website that spinning was a vital task in rural areas of pre-industrial Scotland. The drop spindle became less popular because of the advent of the spinning wheel, which had a ‘flyer’ and a ‘bobbin’ which twisted the wool as the wheel spun. It was a more favourable method than the drop spindle as it was faster and produced more consistent widths of yarn. Yarn spinning then progressed to mechanised spinning where automated spinning twists the fibres into yarn. This produces uniform, good quality yarn at a faster rate allowing increased production.



Photograph: Hello Hydrangea (7 March 2021) Drop Spindle

Colour Dying Yarn

Author, John Burnet writes about the process of dying wool in the journal ‘Folk Life’. He explains that woollen yarn was originally dyed using natural resources such as berries, moss, bark, roots and insects. The yarn was immersed in a simmering hot water dye bath where the colour was absorbed into the yarn. Different colours could be created depending on the mixture of ingredients and the length of time the yarn was soaked. Achieving continuity of colour was difficult and depended partly on location, weather, season and the supply of ingredients. The coloured dye was then dried and a mordant such as urine was used to ‘fix’ the colour. Thankfully this practice is no longer used! Senior Conservation Scientist, Eric Hagan describes in the journal ‘Heritage Science’ how synthetic dye was discovered by accident in 1856 by an English chemist, who at the time was trying to find a treatment for malaria – not midges unfortunately! The popular dye was purple and called mauvine. Scientists were soon able to produce a wide array of colourfast dyes, that could be reproduced and would not require a mordant. Modern machine dying techniques allow large quantities of wool to be dyed precise colours that can be easily replicated. The wool is submerged into dye vats which create an even colour distribution.



Photograph: Pinterest (2021) Bold Woollen Tartan Sheep

Meeting Master Weaver, Ashleigh Slater



Photograph: Tartan Caledonia (2 March 2022) Portable Handloom

I contacted master weaver Ashleigh Slater and initially met him at Dundee Contemporary Arts where we chatted about... you guessed it, Weaving!

Ashleigh is an independent traditional hand weaver, who mainly works on commissioned and bespoke pieces of woven tartan cloth. He is a dedicated and highly specialised craftsman who takes great pride in his work. He is passionate about preserving the traditional craft of handweaving, as he believes it is important to preserve traditional heritage skills. Ashleigh teaches and shares his craft by taking his portable loom to local community and school groups, where he gives talks and demonstrations about all things weaving.

He also gives people the opportunity to have 'hands on' loom experience, which he feels is vital to learning. One of his recent projects was to weave a tartan called 'Eternal Ericht', designed by pupils from Blairgowrie High School. The design and colours of the tartan represent the necessity of a local bridge crossing over the River Ericht. Not only is the bridge an important community link, but the water running below it was once diverted to waterwheels that powered local weaving mills.



Photograph: Scottish Register of Tartans (20 July 2021) Eternal 'Ericht' Tartan



Photograph: Trip Advisor(2021) Blairgowrie Bridge Over the River Ericht

Ashleigh is well known for his Blairgowrie Berries and Cherries Tartan, designed by himself and inspired by the abundance of richly coloured fruit grown in Perthshire. He explained that designing, weaving and registering tartan can be a complex process, therefore he helps clients with design ideas, completes bespoke weaving orders and helps clients to register tartan. All new tartans must be registered with The Scottish Register of Tartans, which has a growing database of over 7000 tartans.

Click or Scan to view it!



[Tartan Registry](#)

Ashleigh spoke about the progression of weaving technology from wooden hand looms to mechanised power looms. He said that originally hand looms were mostly operated by women, and that they would 'set up' the loom by arranging the warp (vertical) yarn, and then pass a threaded 'shuttle' through to create the weft (horizontal) yarn. This would create the distinctive interlaced criss-cross pattern of tartan. Ashleigh explained that it takes time, skill and knowledge to set up a loom for a specific tartan pattern and that there are no set boundaries for the number of colours that can be used for a tartan. Although the standard number of colours used is between two and six. Tartan is now mostly woven on large machine powered looms capable of producing a larger size and volume of cloth in shorter time. This creates greater availability and affordability. Ashleigh explained that the advent of mechanised looms in the early 1800's caused a backlash from skilled weavers and textile workers. The weavers were opposed to the new machinery and the employment of unskilled labourers to operate the looms, as it affected their livelihood and undermined their skill.

To become skilled artisans the weavers had spent years learning and perfecting their craft. They objected to the increased use of new machinery, the loss of their jobs and the reduction in their wages. Some desperate weavers protested by breaking into mills and destroying the new machines, they also set some factories on fire. These weavers called themselves Luddites after a young weaving apprentice, Ned Ludd, who is rumoured to have been the first to break a machine. The Luddite's unrest gradually stopped when the authorities began shooting the perpetrators and made their crimes punishable by death. Although these rebellious outbursts were confined to English weaving mills, Ashleigh explained that the objection to machines and unskilled workers was echoed throughout the Scottish weaving mills. He also explained that original Scottish weavers were illiterate, they therefore depended on their memory or copying to measure yarn and the sequence of rows and colours required for the cloth. This inevitably involved some human error and created variations instead of replications in tartan.



Photograph: Tartan Caledonia (2014) Blairgowrie Berries and Cherries

A Visit to Master Weaver, Ashleigh Slater's Studio

Ashleigh invited me to his studio in Blairgowrie to see his looms in action. His studio is within a creative community hub called 'nest', which connects people through crafts and aims to improve wellbeing.



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (2 October 2023) Ashleighs Studio Shelves of Yarn

Ashleigh's studio sits on the banks of the River Ercht. It has two large windows and is a lovely bright space, filled with floor to ceiling yarn and textile related books. There are two traditional wooden hand looms and a yarn spinner. One of the looms was threaded for a current project and the other was available for demonstrating and practicing.

When I arrived, Ashleigh talked me through the complex process of measuring yarn and showed me how to set up the loom and start the initial weaving steps. While giving me a demonstration, he explained that the calculating involved in setting up a loom and the maintenance of the looms are the most difficult parts of the hand loom weaving craft. He also explained that he enjoys hand weaving as he is in control of the process, and he can therefore ensure that his "experience and attention to detail will produce a piece of tartan to be proud of".

“Experience and attention to detail will produce a piece of tartan to be proud of”

Next it was my turn, I sat at the loom and used a 'shuttle' to pass a weft yarn between the warp strands while alternating the foot pedals to separate the warp yarn. I also pulled the 'reed' towards me to align and compact the yarn. I repeated this process for a while and gained an appreciation for the precision, skill and time that it takes to weave a few rows of cloth by hand, never mind the 8 whole yards of cloth that are used to make a kilt!



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (2 October 2023) NEST



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (2 October 2023) Setting up the Big Hand Loom

Waulking the Cloth

According to author Craig Cockburn, writing online in Scotland’s first internet guide ‘Silicon Glen’, waulking is the final stage in the long, laborious process of producing homespun woollen cloth. It is an essential process, that consists of about 7 stages, to make the weave of the cloth more compact. This process increases the thickness of the cloth and enhances its thermal and weatherproofing qualities. It takes a mixture of heat, water and movement to make the cloth shrink.



Photograph: Shepherd’s Dream (2017) Echo of the Waylking Song

“ women used this time to socialise and sing ‘waulking songs’.”



Photograph: Am Baile (2023) Waulking the Cloth

Originally the cloth would have been put in warm water and once it was removed, a group of female workers would have moved it rhythmically by hand or foot. The woman used this time to socialise and sing ‘waulking songs’. The tempo and length of the song would vary depending on the stage of waulking. No song would ever be repeated as this would bring the worker’s bad luck.

“ No song would ever be repeated as this would bring the worker’s bad luck.”

Fàsaidh fochann ann na e hò hao oho
corc 's eòrna na hi ri riri ò etc

'S binn guth cuthaig ann na e hò hao oho
'S binn guth smeòraich na hi ri riri ò etc

'S binn guth a' bhuachail' na e hò hao oho
cuallach bhò ann na hi ri riri ò etc

'S binn guth na banchaig na e hò hao oho
's meanbhchrodh òg leath' na hi ri riri ò etc

Chì mi 'm bàta na e hò hao oho
Falbh gu siùbhlach na hi ri riri ò etc

'S i dol timchaell na e hò hao oho
Rubh' an Dùnain na hi ri riri ò etc



[Listen to the waulking song here!](#)

Photograph: Omniglot (2008) Ceud soiridh soiridh bhuam



Photograph: Song of the Isles (2012) Women Waulking the Cloth, Eriskay, 1899

The importance of preserving traditional yarn preparation and the craft of hand loom weaving.

The process of handweaving tartan cloth was borne out of necessity. It was a vital process that kept Highlanders warm and protected them from the usually harsh Scottish weather. Hard working women played a prominent and vital role in the development of this precision craft. Each of the fascinating steps in the tartan making process were discovered, created and perfected without machines. It was a way of life that was controlled by humans and nature. It allowed control of the cloth, and required attention to detail, dedication and patience.

Every step in the process can now be carried out by machines which makes it easier, quicker and cheaper. Handloom weavers were the largest single group of skilled craft workers in Scotland in the first half of the 19th century according to University of Edinburgh on website Artisans in Scotland’. Visitor Services Manager, Ana Sanchez-de la Vega, says on website ‘Scottish Banner’, that “hand woven textiles were the lifeblood of many communities” and that by keeping the craft alive it gives people a valuable window into the past.

National Trust for Scotland explain on their website ‘National Trust for Scotland’, that “traditional Scottish heritage skills such as handloom weaving are now more valuable than ever as their scarcity increases”. By having talented artisans like Ashleigh passing on the skill and knowledge required for this historic craft, it helps to continue the tradition and culture that our ancestors created, and preserve the craft of handloom weaving tartan.

Hand-Stitched Kilt v Machine Sewn Kilt. What's the difference?

Orla McCafferty chats to experienced artisan kiltmakers and takes a closer look at the construction of the kilt.

To the untrained eye, kilts can all look the same, however, Dr Nick Fiddes author of online heritage business 'Clan', explains that kilts can be entirely hand-stitched or they can be machine sewn. He expands on this by saying that machine sewn kilts are faster, easier and cheaper to make than hand-stitched kilts, and that there is a positive sales market for both types of kilt. He goes on to say that the quality of any kilt depends on how it is made. The Scottish Kilt Makers Association (KMAS) has quality standards for traditional hand-stitched kilts. Kilts made to KMAS standards can display the KMAS trademark label which is a sign that ensures high quality craftsmanship.

Glasgow based Master Kiltmakers MacGregor and MacDuff explain on their website 'MacGregor MacDuff', that a hand-stitched kilt lasts a lifetime, and that this particular type of kiltmaking is a highly skilled speciality craft. It uses centuries old, time-honoured techniques to create unique, durable kilts. They go on to say that the necessary skills and knowledge required to make this type of kilt, have been passed down through generations for hundreds of years, and that it takes years of practice and dedication to learn and perfect. Kiltmaker Ernest Wright details this further on his website 'Ernest Wright Ltd', saying that "when hand sewing a kilt you must be aware of how cloth plays on human form, as it is precision work, every stitch must be considered to reflect the curves and shapes of the body". He explains that "the kilt should hang without weight, letting the wearer walk and dance with freedom, allowing the kilt to swing and swirl, spraying colour with each movement".

Kiltmaker, Gordon Nicholson, makes both types of kilt and says on website 'Gordon Nicholson Kiltmakers', that anyone is welcome to wear a kilt as it is a celebration of Scottish heritage. Although it is his opinion that "a kilt isn't a kilt unless it is handmade".

I visited two kiltmakers that I knew who showed me their work and talked about various aspects of the kilt making process. Out of curiosity I also contacted a kiltmaker in Edinburgh from a company that popped up every time I entered 'hand-stitched kilt' into a search engine.

“a kilt isn't a kilt unless it is handmade”.



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (13 October 2023) Kilt Being Handmade



A Visit to Independent Kiltmaker Pat, in Arbroath



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (4 October 2023) Highland dancer's kilt, pleated to the check

Sitting at her kitchen table, which is where most of her work is done, Pat explained that she is happy to make any type of kilt, either hand-stitched or machine sewn. Pat was working on 2 kilts when I visited, one was a turquoise tartan for a highland dancer which was pleated to the check. The dancer had outgrown her current kilt and needed a replacement quickly, she had therefore chosen to have a machine sewn kilt. This would be made in less time than a hand-stitched kilt and it would also cost less.

Pat is my 'go to' for any alterations required for my various highland dancing outfits and she is always willing to help. She is a seamstress and a kiltmaker. She explains that seamstresses and kilt makers can stitch and mend, but that only kilt makers have a specialised working knowledge of tartan cloth. She says that kiltmakers "understand the way tartan behaves". They follow traditional techniques that have been passed down through generations which enable them to turn 8 yards of cloth, into a perfectly fitted kilt, entirely by hand. I usually bring her a kilt needing the hem let down or the buckles moved but this visit was different, I was here to ask her about her work.



Photographs: Orla McCafferty (4 October 2023) The Angels Share of Whiskey tartan kilt, pleated to the stripe on the orange colour and the brown colour, looking like two different kilts



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (4 October 2023) The Angels Share of Whiskey Tartan Showing Double Fringe

The other kilt that Pat was working on was with a tartan called The Angels Share of Whiskey Tartan. It was for an older gentleman that had specifically requested that the orange colour be more prominent and on the outer part of the pleat, rather than the brown. He also requested his kilt be pleated to the stripe and hand-stitched. Pat commented that **"you get a better swing with a handsewn kilt."** She also explained that because this kilt would be pleated to the stripe on the mainly orange colour, that it would look like a completely different kilt than if it was pleated to the mainly brown colour.

It would be made without a hem as there was no need to allow length for growth. It would therefore be finished on the selvage edge. "You don't hem an adults' kilt, so the measurements must be perfect so that it sits on the middle of the knee". The selvage edge of the cloth is the edge that is pre-finished in the mill to prevent the cloth unravelling. Finishing on the selvage edge also makes the overall weight of the kilt lighter. Talking about how long kilts take to complete, Pat commented that she takes up to 2-3 weeks for a machined kilt and 4-6 weeks for a hand-stitched kilt, although she once made a kilt for her daughter in a day!

"kiltmakers understand the way tartan behaves"

“the twill must be facing the right direction and the fabric must be on the right side”.



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (4 October 2023) Twill (disgonal lines in the cloth) going from left down to right

Pat begins the kilt making process by taking 3 measurements, waist, hips and length. She takes the measurements herself to ensure accuracy, and she likes to see the customers body shape. She then inspects the cloth for any imperfections and says that “the twill must be facing the right direction and the fabric must be on the right side”. The customer is asked if they would prefer the pleats arranged to the stripe or to the check. Sometimes the pleats can vary in internal depth depending on the sett (size of square design) of the tartan. Through a series of calculations that I didn’t quite understand, Pat explained how to measure the size and shape of the internal and external kilt aprons and the number of pleats required, which can be up to 32! Asking Pat if there are any differences between hand stitched and machine sewn kilts she replied, “the stitching and the fit

are the most obvious differences”. A machined kilt can have visible or invisible stiches depending on where it is sewn. Whereas with a hand stitched kilt the stitches are not necessarily seen, but you can often see the needle marks. She explained that sewing machine stitches are small and uniform and can often unravel. These kilts are generally made from a set number of pleats and don’t sit or hang as well as handmade kilts. In comparison hand stitches are more secure and unique with about 8 to 10 stitches every inch. Pat said that “sewing by hand is a lot quieter and more relaxing” and she enjoys that, but she also likes using her sewing machine. Pat is sadly not passing her skill on to anyone. She feels that people are interested in other things nowadays, although she says that she is happy to show anyone what she does, but no one has ever asked.

Referring to the decline in learning the craft of hand-stitched kilt making, kiltmaker Amanda Moffet, says on website ‘Scotclans’, that “once things become invisible, its gone unless someone passes the knowledge on.” Kiltmakers McGregor and MacDuff build on this by expressing on website ‘McGregor McDuff’ that “losing the ability to hand craft kilts the same way as they were made hundreds of years ago would be a **cultural disaster**.” While Lewis Henderson, kiltmaker, from Stirling is quoted on website ‘House of Henderson’, saying that

“to ensure the art of traditional kiltmaking flourishes we as an industry must continue to support, nurture and develop the ongoing skill base as an artform and piece of craftsmanship”. There are now various kiltmakers and businesses that will teach traditional hand-stitched kilt making, although it often comes at a price. Scottish school children can also learn a kiltmaking qualification through the Scottish Qualifications Authority in certain parts of Scotland.



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (4 October 2023) Angels Share of Whiskey Steeking Stitched

A Visit to Independent Family Business, Piob Mhor.

My next stop was in Blairgowrie, where I visited a family highland outfitters and kilt hire business.

Photograph: Orla McCafferty (22 December 2023) Piob Mhor Tartan and Velvet Rails



Piob Mhor is a traditional shop in a lovely old listed building. I have been a customer here for a long time and purchased several kilts over the years. Each of them have been perfect for me. The shop previously made and sold bagpipes, which is why it is called Piob Mhor, which is Gaelic for ‘big pipe’. Piob Mhor oozes tradition and character, from the old door chime as you enter the shop, to the tartan carpet and rows and rows of kilts and the unmistakable smell of tartan cloth. There are highland accessories displayed in old wooden glass cabinets and real stag’s heads hung on the wall, it is a truly charming and unique shop. When I visited there were 4 generations of the same family working, ranging from age 13 to 92! I was invited into the workroom which was a happy hive of activity with 6 or 7 staff popping in and out all doing various jobs.



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (13 October 2023) Kilt Making Workroom at Piobmhor



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (13 October 2023) The Readymade Kilt

I was shown some of the kilts that were being worked on, including new kilts, alterations and repairs. One kilt belonged to a gentleman who had bought a readymade kilt off the rack, while he was drunk in Edinburgh. The kilt was poorly made it didn’t fit him, so he was hoping it could be altered to fit. Another gentleman had brought in a kilt that was of great sentimental value to him, it had moth holes in the apron, and he wondered if it could be mended, which to my surprise it could! There was an old military kilt being altered at the waist and a brand-new RAF Tartan kilt with basting stitches to hold the pleats in place. These are temporary stitches that would be removed before wearing the kilt. There were also a few highland dancers kilts in for alterations. The talent and calm but organised chaos of the workroom was special, everyone helping but having their ‘own’ jobs, and without a word instinctively knowing when and how to assist each other.

Photograph: Orla McCafferty (13 October 2023) The Readymade Kilt Stitching



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (13 October 2023) Hand Sewn Shaping Perfections Old Military Kilt with Plain Waistband



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (13 October 2023) Body Shaping on the Mannequin

Dianne is part of the family, she is vastly experienced in every aspect of highland wear making. She told me that Piob Mhor makes, sells and hires only hand stitched kilts **“because they are better”**. She explained that “there is better shaping with hand stitched kilts.” She demonstrated this by putting a kilt on a mannequin and showing me how well it fitted and followed the curve of the back. The back of the kilt did not hang down lower than the front apron, which shows that the kilt fits well. Due to all the pleats at the back of a kilt, it can become quite heavy and not fit securely. To combat this, Piob Mhor kiltmakers ‘cut away’ the excess weight from the inner side, upper part of the pleats. This makes the kilt lighter and a better fit while also retaining the ability to have the kilt waist altered in the future if necessary, unlike a machine sewn kilt.



Photograph: Orla McCafferty(13 October 2023)Machine Made Kilt Without Cutting Away or Stabilizing Steeking



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (13 October 2023) Cutting Away and Stabilizing Steeking



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (13 October 2023) Measuring Knife Pleat Depth with Dianne

Commenting on stitching, Dianne said that the thread she uses is stronger than machine thread and that all pleats are ‘steeked’. This is a running stitch along the inside at the base of the sewn part of the pleat. By steeking the pleats and individually knotting them it

stabilizes the pleats and makes the stitching more secure. Asked about the difference between hand stitched and machine sewn kilts, Dianne replied “the main differences are in the fit and the quality”. Which are exactly what I have had with every kilt I have had made at Piob Mhor.

“the main differences are in the fit and the quality”.



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (13 October 2023) Box and Kilt Pleats Comparison

Words of Experience from Kirsty Kinner, Master Kiltmaker from Gordon Nicholson Kiltmakers

“Handmade can take up to 16 hours to sew and includes the makers blood, sweat and sometimes tears, skill perfectionism, pride and love of their art!”

The importance of preserving the handstitched kilt

The long hours of training and the level of precision and expertise that it takes to produce a meticulously hand-stitched kilt are remarkable. Using centuries old techniques to produce a well-made and well-stitched, durable, custom fit kilt requires skill, patience and a deep understanding of the craft. There are no machines required and each kilt has a personal touch. The quality of craftsmanship and the fit of a custom-made, hand-stitched kilt are superior to machine sewn kilts. Author Renee Fortune describes the resurgence of made to order garments as an “awakening” in the 21st century with consumers making a “radical shift towards the age old axiom, ‘quality over quantity’”. Kiltmaker Amanda Moffet says on website ‘Kiltmakery’, that “If we lose this hand craft, it takes away the specialness from this item of clothing.” She also explains that “we need to educate the consumer about the value and quality of a hand stitched kilt as well as the industry.” The handstitched kilt is a unique piece of clothing, a masterpiece and an investment for life.

With machines becoming second nature in the kilt making industry, master kiltmaker Gordon Nicholson states on his website ‘Gordon Nicholson Kiltmakers’, that they offer “the finest handmade kilts” and that they are “on a mission to reenergise a craft endangered by machine made copies...”. He says that they are achieving this, partly by training a new generation of independent young kilt makers to work in the old style. Kirsty Kinner is a master kilt maker from Gordon Nicholson Kiltmakers Kiltmaking Academy, she explained in her email to me that hand-made (HM) kilts use the whole 8 yards of cloth whereas machine made (MM) use a standard number of pleats then trim off any excess. HM apply steeking to the bottom of the pleats internally, whereas MM either don’t apply steeking or do it in the wrong place and it is therefore ineffective at holding the pleats together. The internal construction stabilization and canvas that covers the upper inner side of the kilt is tailor tacked in HM and either not present or glued on in MM. HM allows for easy alteration whereas MM can make this impossible. Kirsty states that HM “can take up to 16 hours to sew and includes the makers blood, sweat and sometimes tears, skill perfectionism, pride and love of their art!”





Photograph: Orla McCafferty(13 October 2023) A traditional kilt making toolkit - thimble, a stitch unpick, pins, strong waxed silk thread.



Photograph: Orla McCafferty(13 October 2023) Cotton thread, needle, tape measure, cutting shears



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (3 December 2023) Piping at a Christmas Wedding

Beth age 18
Beth does not own her own kilt, the kilt she wears is on loan from Boys Brigade. It is a hand stitched kilt and although it was not custom made for Beth it is has been worn by many members of the Boys Brigade and stood the test of time for durability, she finds it very warm and comfortable. Beth wears her kilt while performing the bagpipes, most recently at a Christmas celebration but also at burns suppers, birthdays, weddings, elderly people’s homes and Remembrance parades. Beth has previously worn her father’s kilt and she is hoping that it is passed down to her. Beth says that “Wearing a kilt is great for me as I love being Scottish. I know that other people wear kilts, but it makes me so proud when I wear one. I also love the colours and patterns on the kilt I wear but I especially like my dad’s kilt”.



Photograph: Orla McCafferty (1 September 2019) World Championships 2019

Cara, age 18
Cara’s parents purchased her hand stitched kilt when she was a highland dancer. She has only ever worn a handstitched kilt and enjoys the comfort, fit and swing of it. Although she no longer practices this style of dancing, Cara enjoyed wearing her kilt and has kept it as a reminder of the success she had while competing in it. While wearing her kilt to dance in China at a dancing showcase, she received lots of interest and compliments on her tartan pattern. Cara says that “wearing a kilt to me has a lot of importance and meaning, its unique amongst the modern world of dance costumes, something that stands out but also goes back to history and



Photograph: Scrimgeour (1951) Highland Dancing as a Young Boy

Grandad Larry age 78
My grandad has worn a handmade kilt since he was 3 or 4 years old. His very first kilt was made by a local lady for a family celebration, he then wore second hand kilts during his growing years when he was a highland dancer and a scout. When he started wearing kilts there were only hand stitched kilts available. He currently has 3 custom made kilts, the oldest is over 60 years old “and in remarkably good shape”. He has worn a kilt with pride on many occasions such as when he was a Queens Scout in 1962 at the St. Georges Day Parade and “Nowadays mostly but not exclusively, on a formal basis”. He wears a kilt “because I love all things Scottish and there is nothing more Scottish than a kilt. It has always been part of my psyche and has been worn at every special occasion in my life and in the lives of family and friends”. Larry continues “I am proud of my Scottish ancestry and wear the kilt to emphasise this in a colourful, visual way.



Photograph: Karen Laird (4 July 2023) Winning the Restricted Age Championship in Canada

Jack age 19
Jack owns his own hand stitched kilt, which was gifted to him by his mum. He wears it for highland dancing competitions and displays. Jack is passionate about the history and heritage of the hand stitched kilt and is “honoured and proud to display my Scottish roots and national heritage by wearing my kilt”



Photograph: Catalan Separarists (14 October 2023) ‘Chain of Freedom’

Uncle Ron age 76
Uncle Ron cannot remember a time when he did not wear a kilt. He currently has 5 hand stitched kilts and reserves 2 of these for hiking, football matches and demonstrations. The other 3 are worn to special occasions such as weddings or funerals when he wears a kilt out of respect for his friends who are Scottish patriots. Ron states “I think there can be no doubt that tartan and the kilt are in our bone marrow, no advertising campaign could ever generate the interest and commitment we have to the kilt and tartans. For me ... I feel a strong sense of pride and culture, as well as the many people I am in organisations with, I feel such an affinity to it”.

*JUST WHY DO PEOPLE PREFER TO WEAR HAND STITCHED KILTS?
I SPOKE TO SOME FRIENDS AND FAMILY TO FIND OUT WHY THEY
WEAR A HAND STITCHED KILT AND WHAT IT MEANS TO THEM.*



Photograph: Boys Brigade (2015) Part of the Pipe Band

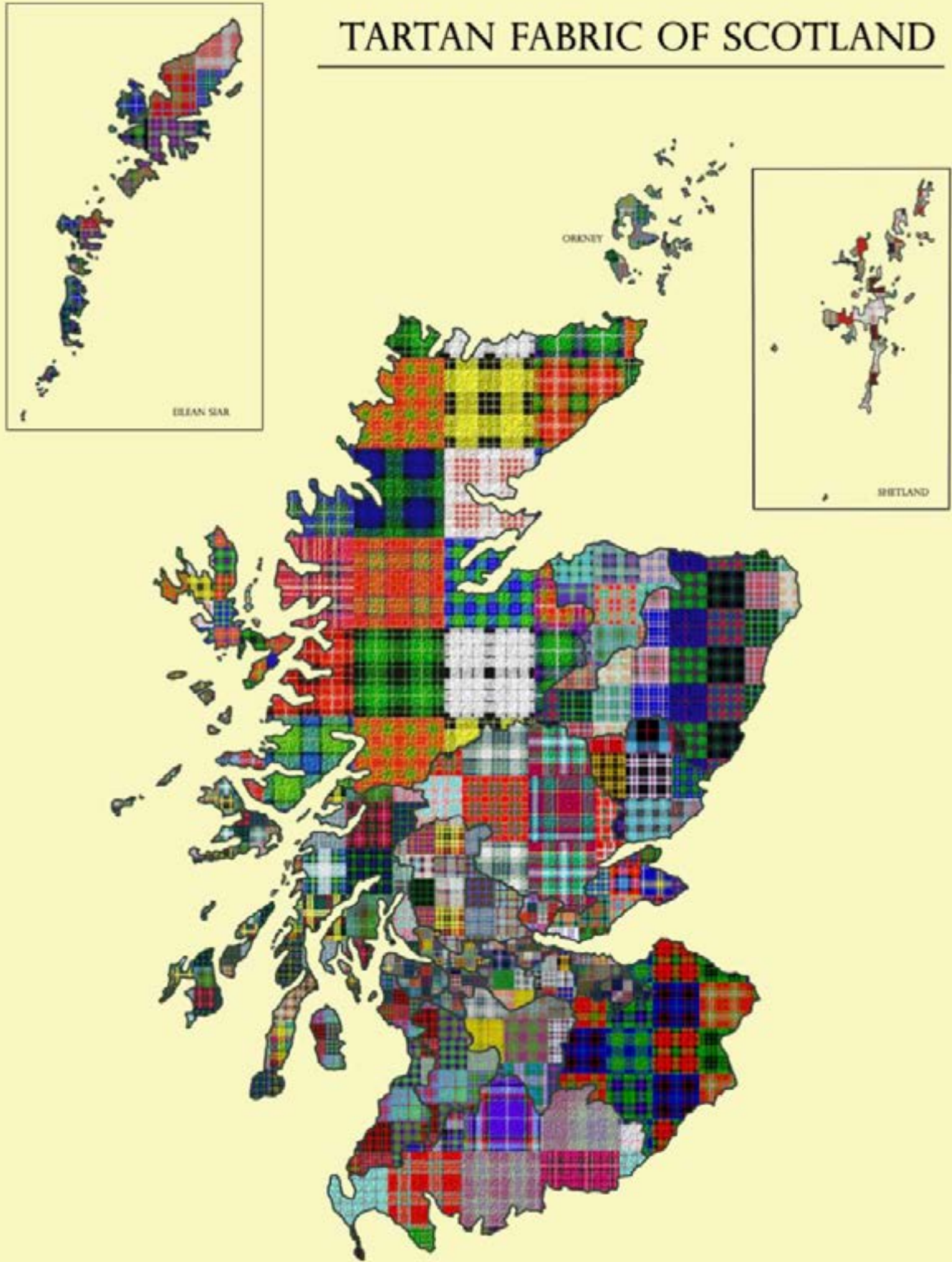
Fraser age 20
Fraser had previously been loaned a kilt when he was in Boys Brigade to compete in the pipe band. He has recently inherited his late grandfather’s kilt, which his grandfather had inherited from his father, Frasers great-grandfather. Although Fraser is reluctant to wear a kilt, he is grateful to have his grandfathers, as it holds great sentimental value to him as a family heirloom and something physical that he can remember his grandfather with.

Photograph in Background: Lochcarron(2023) Scrimgeour Ancient Tartan Fabric Swatch



Journalist, Tim Wonder writes in the online publishing platform, 'Medium', that traditional **clothing is an important aspect of cultural heritage, which may be deeply intertwined with emotions and feelings that can reflect the history, identity, values and sense of connection to a community.** The sentimental and emotional values are further discussed in Clare Hunters book 'Threads of Life', she describes how some textiles are treasured for their sense of connection to a person, a place, a moment in time. The author explains that **they are sensory and emotional triggers too precious to throw away, they hold tangible family links and are passed on to the next generation as material evidence of where and who we have come from.**

TARTAN FABRIC OF SCOTLAND



Photograph: Natalie Dowling (2017) Tartan Fabric of Scotland

The Tartans of the Places that my Kilt Research Journey Took me to



Scotland Forever Tartan
My journey took place in Scotland
Lochcarron of Scotland (2023) Scotland Forever Tartan



Perthshire Muted New Tartan
Blairgowrie, in Perthshire
Kinloch Anderson (1993) Perthshire Tartan



Angus Ancient Tartan
Arbroath, in Angus
Lochcarron of Scotland (2023) Angus Ancient Tartan



Dundee Old Ancient Tartan
Dundee, in Tayside
Lochcarron of Scotland (2023) Dundee Old Tartan



Edinburgh Lightweight Tartan
Edinburgh
Lochcarron of Scotland (2023) Edinburgh Tartan

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