

The Story of the Heritage MacDougall Tartan

The **Heritage MacDougall** tartan is a replica of the first tartan adopted by the Chiefs of the Clan MacDougall two hundred years ago.

The original tartan was discovered in 2010, hanging as curtains in the Clan Seat of Dunollie House, which lies a mile outside Oban in the West Highlands.

Despite being badly faded after two centuries in the light, the cloth was still strong and in excellent condition – and most importantly, the original colours were still to be found deep inside the folds of the curtain pelmet.

From small details in the weaving and construction of the cloth, it has been possible to recreate the history of the tartan.

A Tartan for a Chief

Tartan or plaid cloth has been worn for hundreds of years, but it wasn't until the end of the 18th century that Clans began to adopt specific patterns.

This followed almost 30 years during which it was forbidden to wear Highland dress in Scotland in the wake of Bonnie Prince Charlie's failed attempt to reinstate the Stewarts on the throne.

The ban or 'Proscription' was lifted in 1782, and thereafter the first Clan tartans appear, rapidly becoming fashionable in what is known as the Highland Revival.

Wm Wilson and Son of Bannockburn had woven tartan for a busy overseas market throughout the ban, and now became the principal producers. It is very probable that they wove the MacDougall tartan.

The old cloth at Dunollie is a 'hard tartan' and very characteristic of Wilson's cloth – and typical of the way all tartan was woven until the mid 19th century. Stiffer and rougher, it was taken straight off the loom without being finished to soften the cloth.

The old MacDougall tartan at Dunollie was woven in around 1790-1800, and was almost certainly a copy of an earlier 18th century plaid.

The sett is almost identical to that recorded by Wilson's in their pattern book, and a note in their archive states says it was copied from a piece "that was over a hundred years old" given to them by MacDougall himself.

The age may be questionable, but there seems little doubt that they copied an older piece.

The Selvedge

A rare survivor of early tartan weaving which is replicated in the old MacDougall tartan is the distinctive herringbone pattern on the selvedge or long edge of the cloth. It can be seen on the MacDougall tartan as a triple chevron pattern.

This should have been long out of use by the time this cloth was woven, and the only plausible explanation is that the 35 yards of MacDougall tartan cloth were woven as an antiquarian project as part of the Highland Revival. This adds to its rarity, as only one other such project is known.

Brilliant Colours

The colours are matched precisely to those preserved in tight folds of the cloth. The original was dyed with cochineal (red) and indigo (blue), both expensive and prestigious imported dyes. The olive green was from native Highland plants. Notice also the pinks, and the brilliance of the turquoise thread.

These have been meticulously matched to modern dyes, and the result is a vibrant red and green tartan of a distinctive West Coast type. This in sharp contrast to the muted colours of so-called 'ancient' clan tartans which are reproduced with their faded colours: the true colours of these early tartans were peacock bright.

A New Tartan in Production

The tartan has been named The Heritage MacDougall, and has been woven for the first time in 200 years by Lochcarron weavers in the Scottish Borders as an exact replica.

A length is being re-hung as curtains at Dunollie, and a limited number of kilts and other items produced from this first historic weaving.

The first men's kilt is worn by the future 32nd Chief, Robin MacDougall of MacDougall, Younger of Dunollie, and the first lady's kilt by his sister Fiona, the Maid of Lorn.

The limited edition tartan is incorporated in a new bonnet for the current Clan Chief, Madam MacDougall of MacDougall, created by Sarah Campbell of Mogwaii Design based on a Highland Revival bonnet in the Dunollie museum collection.

The Heritage MacDougall is also being woven in modern softer cloth, and the full range of tartan goods is being keenly sought out by clansmen worldwide for the sophisticated colours and superb heritage value.