

SCOTTISH TARTANS MUSEUM

FACT SHEET

WHAT IS TARTAN?

Tartan refers to a pattern of interlocking stripes, running in both the warp and weft of the cloth (horizontal and vertical), or any representation of such a woven design in other media. Typically one thinks of "clan tartans" -- tartan designs that represent certain Scottish clans and families. This was not the case in the past. The earliest known tartan in Scotland can be dated to the third or fourth century AD. In other parts of the world, tartan cloth has been found dating to as early as 3000 BC. Virtually everywhere there was woven cloth, people created tartan designs. Yet only in Scotland has tartan been given such cultural significance. Why?

Originally tartan designs had no names and no symbolic meaning. All tartan was hand woven and usually supplied locally. While it may have been true that certain designs were more common in some areas than others, no regulated "clan tartan" system ever existed. Tartan in general, however, came to be extremely common in Scottish Highland culture. By the seventeenth century, tartan clothing was recognized far and wide as characteristic of Highland dress. Tartan was so identified with the Highland Gael that after the Battle of Culloden in 1746, the British government, in the Act of Proscription, forbade the wearing of tartan in the Highlands in an attempt to suppress the rebellious Scottish culture.

By the end of the eighteenth century, large-scale commercial weavers had taken up the production of tartan. The most notable of these is the firm of William Wilson & Sons of Bannockburn. This firm was begun sometime around 1765 and became quite successful, being the sole supplier of tartan cloth to the Highland Regiments. Because they were producing cloth in such large quantities, they developed standard colors and patterns early on. At first they assigned numbers to identify the patterns, but soon began to give them names. These not only included names of Highland clans, but also town names, and sometimes just fanciful names. These were usually not meant to imply any restrictive association. They were used simply to identify one tartan pattern from another (and perhaps even to increase cloth sales – after all, *the Caledonia tartan* sounds much more appealing than *tartan #42*). In Wilsons' Key Pattern Book of 1819, some 250 tartans are included, about 100 of which were given names.

In the early nineteenth century, the idea began to gel that the names of the tartans represented real connections to the clans. Scots expatriates who grew up outside of the Highland line began to get interested in preserving Highland culture. In 1815 the Highland Society of London wrote to the clan chiefs asking them to submit samples of their clan tartans. Many chiefs had no idea what "their clan tartan" was supposed to be and so either wrote to tartan suppliers such as Wilsons, or asked the older men of their clan if they recalled any particular tartan being worn.

In 1822 King George IV visited Edinburgh in a veritable "tartan fest" partly organized by Sir Walter Scott. All the clan chiefs were asked to come out to greet the King in their proper clan tartan. Since many did not have a clan tartan no doubt new tartans were created, or old ones renamed, for the occasion. From this point on the idea was firmly established that in order to even *be* a proper tartan, it had to be a named tartan. The development of tartan lore over the course of the nineteenth century is complex and beyond the scope of this brief introduction. But with the blessing of the clan chiefs by the end of the nineteenth century the custom was firmly established that tartan was representative of clan.

While clan tartans are the most well known, tartans can in fact represent many different things. Some tartans represent families, towns, districts, corporations, occupations, individuals, events -- you name it! What makes a tartan "official" is not age or antiquity, but whether it has the approval of the governing body of what that tartan represents. If a clan chief, or a state legislature, or the CEO of a company says this is the official tartan, it is so, whether the tartan is brand-new or two hundred years old.

Despite this, there are no rules governing what tartan you may wear. However, since tartans today have meaning, when you wear a tartan you identify yourself with what the tartan represents. Most select a tartan that identifies with some aspect of their heritage. If there is a tartan for your surname, that would be an obvious choice. But there is nothing wrong with wearing a tartan for another branch of your family. Ultimately, the choice of what tartan to wear is personal. Whatever you choose, you should know your tartan and your reasons for wearing it. Always be prepared to answer the question, "What's your tartan?"



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