

Churches and Tartans

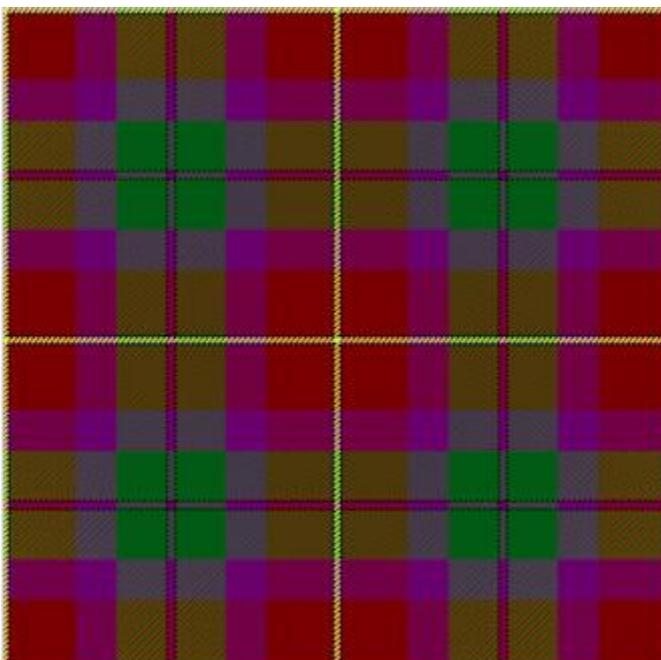
Churches are not the first institution that you think of when the subject of tartan comes up and yet as the article below shows there is an ancient association between tartan and churches of many faiths.

The article was written in 2010 by author, local historian and expert on tartans, Billy Scobie. Billy has been a member of the Scottish Tartans Authority (the "STA") for many years and has written a number of articles on the subject including one about Robert Burns and Tartan which can be found on the web-site of Alexandria Burns Club – www.robertburns.org.uk

Like any true expert Billy doesn't just write about the subject, he practices it as well. He designs tartans and we can see two of his tartans with a local connection below.

Rev Ian Miller was the minister of Bonhill Parish Church from 1975 until his retirement in 2012. During these years he became perhaps the best known and respected figure in the Vale, championing many causes, in particular the fight to save the services at the Vale of Leven General Hospital. On his retirement from the ministry it was fitting that he should receive many presents from the congregation and friends, including the honour of becoming a Freeman of West Dumbartonshire.

He also received an even more unique gift than that – Billy Scobie designed a tartan especially for Ian – The Reverend Ian Miller Tartan. This was a wonderful and appropriate gift and Ian has had the tartan woven and made into a kilt which he has been proudly wearing to the many Burns Suppers he has attended this January and which will no doubt see service in at a variety of functions in the years to come.



The Rev. Ian Miller Tartan

This tartan was designed by Willie Scobie to commemorate the ministry of the Reverend Ian Miller in Bonhill Parish in the Vale of Leven (1975-2012).

This unique design is based on features of the Lennox tartan, which was worn by the Bonhill Pipe Band, and the MacLeod tartan, which was worn by the Kilbarchan Pipe Band.

The Ian Miller tartan is the latest in a long line of tartans with an ecclesiastical connection as Billy explains in this article.

Tartans and Faith

From its very earliest beginning, Christianity spread quickly throughout the Roman Empire. Agricola's first Caledonian campaign commenced in 79 A.D., and for a time (142 A.D. to circa 165 A.D.) the Antonine Wall, which stretched from the Firth of Clyde to the Firth of Forth, represented the northern frontier of the Roman province of Britannia. It is probable, therefore, that Scotland's first word of the Christian faith came via soldiers or officials of the empire, or by Mediterranean merchants. The empire became officially Christian during the 4th century A.D., under the Emperor Constantine. We know that tartan was around in Scotland as early as the 3rd century A.D., because of the discovery of the so-called "Falkirk Tartan". A piece of cloth woven in a simple check of white and black wool was found in a bottle with Roman coins dated to around 260 A.D., near to the Antonine Wall.

Scotland's first *recorded* Christian evangelist was Saint Ninian, who, from his base in Whithorn, Galloway, led Gospel missions to the Southern Picts in the late 4th and early 5th centuries A.D. A tartan commemorating Saint Ninian was commissioned by the Roman Catholic Church. The sett, which was designed by Matt Newsome, Director of the Scottish Tartans Museum in North Carolina, made its first official appearance on the 16th of September 2010, Saint Ninian's Day, when Pope Benedict XVI visited Scotland. Indeed, on the occasion, the Holy Father, himself, wore a scarf of the tartan draped around his shoulders.

That tartan was worn by the clergy of mediaeval Scotland is almost beyond doubt. The following reference may verify this –

1549: "The clergy wear only round birettas and shall always take off their caps in churches, especially in choirs and in time of divine service and not dress, as for example, in top-boots and double-breasted or oddly-cut coats, or of forbidden colours, as yellow, green and such kinds of parti-colour." (Provincial Council of Prelates and Clergy: Edinburgh)

That there was an instruction prohibiting such garb suggests that it was, in fact, being worn, and "parti-colour" was often an expression which referred to tartan.

We also have clearer evidence that the Presbyterian leaders of Scotland's Reformed Kirk frowned on the wearing of tartan by its ministers –

1575: "We think... unseemly... all using of plaids in the Kirk by readers and ministers." (General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, recorded at the Tolbooth of Edinburgh).

By 1780 it would appear that Scotland's Roman Catholic community had no such reservation, because the records for that year of the Catholic college of Scalán in Glenlivet mention the purchase of a quantity of tartan.

There is no conclusive indication that clergymen would have worn any special sett which was specific to their calling, rather it may well have been that they would have availed themselves of whatever was being woven locally, or whatever they could afford to purchase, according to taste.

It is not until the first half of the nineteenth century that we find the big tartan manufacturer, William Wilson & Sons of Bannockburn, producing a sett which they called "Priest". The tartan researcher and collector, James Logan, took up this theme and called his version

“Clergy”. The Smiths, in their publication, “Authenticated Tartans...”, (referring to their own rendering of the sett) tell us that –

“Down till a very recent period, this pattern was generally used by the clergy in the Highlands for their week-day habiliments; and even now [1850] the secular mantle or plaid of the priesthood in the north is not infrequently made of this or similar kinds of stuff.”

So, whether the sett had historically been used by members of the clergy, or whether priests and ministers adopted it in Victorian times, is up for discussion, but apparently in the Highlands the tartan became known as “Breacan nan Cleirach” – Tartan of the Clergy.

In modern times various Christian denominations have had their own tartans designed.

According to the records of the Scottish Tartans Authority, the “Episcopal Clergy” sett was designed by Rev. John B. Pahls in 1966 –

“...to honour the clergy of the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Episcopal Church in the United States of America and to commemorate the bicentenary of the death of the Right Reverend Samuel Seabury, first American Bishop.”

It is interesting to recall that in the Forty-Five Rebellion all of the Jacobite combatants wore tartan, and a large percentage of the Highlanders who fought for Prince Charles Edward were adherents of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

In 1983, to commemorate the centenary of the Perth Citadel Corps., Jack Dalgety designed the “Salvation Army Dress” tartan. The primary colours were used symbolically. Red representing the Blood of Christ, blue standing for the Heavenly Father, and yellow expressing the Holy Spirit. The Salvation Army also has its own hunting tartan.

The House of Edgar designed a tartan for the Baptist Union of Scotland in 2001, and the same firm’s designer, Claire Hunter, created a Methodist Church tartan in 2005.

Apart from these various denominations having their own unique setts, a number of individual churches have also acquired their own tartans –

Saint Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh, adopted an elegant grey tartan in 1995. A year later Lochcarron of Scotland designed the “Glasgow Cathedral 2000” sett. In 2006 Jamie Scarlett created a tartan for Saint Andrew’s Inverness Cathedral.

In the year 563 A.D. Saint Columba, an Irish prince, sailed with twelve companions to the island of Iona. Here they established the famous abbey and from this centre Columba evangelised the Picts of the north. More than just a missionary, Columba proved to be a kingmaker and a statesman who had a profound influence in the creation of a unified Scotland. On the 1400 anniversary of the saint’s death Peter MacDonald, S.T.A. Head of Research, designed the “Saint Columba” tartan for St. Columba’s Church in Mull. The sett expressed “all the natural colours of Iona”.

In 1739 a company of Scots Presbyterians from Jura, Skye and Inveraray sailed for America. They settled in Sandford, North Carolina, where in 1758 they founded the Barbecue Presbyterian Church. For their 250th centenary, the congregation had a special tartan woven. It is said to have been based on the Flora MacDonald tartan, because the famous Jacobite heroine worshipped in this church while visiting her half-sister.

Tartan is uniquely associated with Scotland, and throughout almost all of its recorded history Scotland has embraced Christianity. It is therefore natural that there are so many tartans

belonging to Christian churches and denominations. There have long been, and there remain, however, various other faith communities settled in Scotland. Judaism has been described as the “cradle of Christianity”. There were never any anti-Jewish laws in Scotland – and little or no persecution of Jews here – but Jewish refugees fleeing anti-Semitism in England most probably came to Scotland in mediaeval times. Scotland’s first synagogue was founded in 1794 and twenty families formed the country’s first Jewish community in Edinburgh in 1816. Scotland’s Jews have two tartans. In 2008 Brian Wilton, Director of the Scottish Tartans Authority, at the request of Rabbi Mendel Jacobs of Glasgow, designed the Jewish (Kosher) tartan. Again, the colours are profoundly symbolic. The gold represents the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant. The silver represents the Scroll of the Law. The red represents Kiddush wine. The blue and white are taken from the national flags of both Israel and Scotland.

The first relationship between Scots and Sikhs may well have come about within the context of British Imperial India. For example, in 1855 the British authorities decided to raise a military police force to serve in the Lower Provinces of Bengal. Accordingly Captain Thomas Rattray recruited a body of Sikh soldiers from the Punjab. The unit became the 3rd Battalion Sikh Regiment (Rattray’s Sikhs), which is still in existence at the present time, and the regimental pipers wear the “Rattray” tartan.

The last Sikh ruler of the “Sikh Raj” was Maharaja Duleep Singh who spent much of his youth in Perthshire. The first Sikh community to settle in Scotland seems to have done so in Glasgow in the 1920s. In 1999 Mr. A.J. Singh commissioned Kinloch Anderson Ltd. to design the “Sikh” tartan to celebrate the 50th anniversary of his own family’s arrival in Scotland, but for all Sikhs to wear.

“The first Tibetan Buddhist Centre in the West”, the Samye Ling Monastery, was established in Scotland’s Eskdalemuir in 1967. Forty years after the Centre’s foundation the monks adopted not one, but two, tartans of their own. Tibetan Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche personally designed a tasteful red tartan for the robes of his monks – the “Samye Sangha”. Akong Rinpoche designed another, more colourful, sett – the “Samye” – the hues of which symbolise the five elements in harmony – earth, air, fire, water and space.

It is surely heartening that those of other faiths, traditions and cultures have felt so positively about their historical experience of Scotland and the Scots that they have chosen to celebrate the relationship by adopting that most Scottish of symbols – tartan.

Willie Scobie 2010

Jamestown Parish Church Tartan

Ian Miller’s Tartan was in fact the second one which Billy had designed with a local church connection – he also designed a Jamestown Parish Church Tartan a few years ago. He did this unsolicited but out of a sense of gratitude to that Church with which his family had had a long connection - his grandfather had been an elder at Jamestown for many years from 1930 onwards, and Billy had attended it when younger.

The Jamestown Parish Church Tartan was registered with the Scottish Tartans Authority in February 2009. The entry on the register reads:

“In the Vale of Leven, just to the south of Loch Lomond, Jamestown Parish Church was built in 1869 to accommodate the the growing workforce of the community's then-flourishing textile industry - specifically the Levenbank Works. Since 1691 the badge of the Church of

Scotland has been an image of the Burning Bush superimposed on the Saltire of Saint Andrew. In this tartan, the white stripe on blue represents the Saltire. The red and gold stripes symbolise the flames, and the green the leaves, of the Burning Bush. The purple is an expression of the spiritual or ecclesiastic.”



So far it has not be woven and worn, but it is on the Register, an official tartan ready for use.