

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF



**F**rom its Scottish heritage to its now ubiquitous presence on the runways of major fashion houses such as Burberry and Alexander McQueen, tartan is a fabric with a rich and fascinating history. Read on to explore the history and popularity of this timeless textile.

Tartan is a popular fabric during autumn and winter in the UK especially. Plus, did you know that 6th April is National Tartan Day? Such is the cultural significance of arguably the most recognised fabric pattern in the world that numerous countries, including Canada, **The** USA, and Argentina, celebrate Scottish heritage on this day

# *A brief history of* **TARTAN**

*Michelle Rowley explores the checkered history of tartan, and shares her top tips for incorporating it into your me-made wardrobe!*



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with tartan adorned parades. So what exactly is tartan, and why is it so celebrated?

Although the exact origin of the word 'tartan' is uncertain, it is thought to have originally referred to a type of material rather than a pattern. Traditionally tartans were woven from wool, but today they can be found in various textiles, with tartan now recognised as the pattern consisting of crisscrossed horizontal and vertical bands in multiple colours. A primary sequence of stripes, also known as the sett, is reversed around pivot points, so it continually repeats and reverses across the width of the fabric. The identical sequence is then interwoven at right angles, creating squares of new colours where they intersect.

Although examples of such weaving have been found in various countries in ancient history, tartan is synonymous with Scotland. Its early use in the Highlands, its spread across Scotland in the 18th century, and use as a form of identification of clan and family in kilt-making led tartan to becoming an important symbol of Scottish identity. Neil Armstrong reportedly took a piece of his clan tartan to the moon in honour of his Scottish links, whilst the late fashion designer Alexander McQueen's connections to the Isle of Skye strongly



influenced his legendary use of tartan on the runway. HRH The Duchess of Cambridge showed respect for Scotland's history and tradition in wearing an Alexander McQueen tartan jacket to visit her old prep school St Andrew's. As the coat derived from Black Watch tartan, the navy and green sett of Scotland's 3rd Battalion, it gave extra significance to her choice. The Duchess has worn a striking tartan coat on all her official royal tours

of Scotland, with her Holland Cooper Heather Tartan coat garnering much attention and admiration in May 2021.

The British Monarchy has had a longstanding relationship with tartan, which has inevitably boosted the pattern's popularity. When King George IV visited Scotland in 1822, as the first reigning monarch to stand on Scottish soil since Charles I in the 1630s, he



*Anyone can register a new tartan*



arrived bedecked in full Highland dress. His extravagant cashmere tartan outfit, made from what is now known as the Royal Stewart sett, marked his kingly status. Such a display bolstered the popularity of tartan in fashionable dress, and, subsequently, his niece Queen Victoria would endorse the national costume in the latter part of the 19th century. Her preference for tartan when visiting Scotland received great coverage from the press, advancing the tartan trend in England and France. Tartan patterned silk dresses, similar to those she wore, became very popular in the mid-19th century. More recently, the royal family, including Her Majesty The Queen herself, have been photographed in kilts and tartan outfits. The most commonly worn tartan by the Royal Household is The Royal Stewart tartan, the official tartan of Queen Elizabeth II. Although this tartan can only be worn officially by those granted permission from the Queen, Royal Stewart has become an extremely

popular and well-recognised tartan globally. Think of the tartan adopted by punks in the 1970s and the tartan used in the iconic designs of fashion designer Vivienne Westwood and you are thinking of Royal Stewart. With the decline of formal traditions and the now far-reaching commercialisation of tartan, variations of this prominent tartan are worn worldwide.

Whilst some tartans date back centuries, new tartans have continuously been designed and added to The Scottish Registry of Tartans. Anyone can register a new tartan, from fashion designers to families and schools, so long as it meets the requirements. It can be fun to search the registry for your family name to see if there is a specific tartan for you. Or to find a favourite as there are only tartan traditions, not laws.

You do not have to be Scottish or royalty to embrace the beauty and versatility

of tartan, highlighted by its continued presence on the runways, high streets and in fabric shops. Yes, it is THE fabric for a kilt, but it is also suitable for making fabulous eye-catching trousers, jackets, dresses, skirts, coats or anything of your choosing! There is a wealth of tartan options available to suit all budgets, from traditional woven Scottish wools to printed fashion tartan on knit fabrics. No matter what your favourite colour is, there will be a tartan that incorporates it into its simple but striking design.

## ABOUT MICHELLE ROWLEY

Michelle is a sewing teacher, writer, maker and passionate reader. Follow her latest dressmaking accomplishments on Instagram [stitchywhitney](#) and [booksatmybedside](#) to see what Michelle is reading next

## MASTERCLASS

# TOP TIPS FOR SEWING WITH TARTAN

Are you feeling inspired to sew with tartan? Great! Don't reach for the scissors just yet! Sewing with tartan requires a little careful consideration to ensure the stripes match at the seamlines. There is no need to give yourself a headache over it, however. Yes, sewing with stripes can be challenging, but it is also very satisfying! Taking your time at the beginning of your project to carefully choose an appropriate pattern and cutting layout will make for a far more enjoyable sewing experience. Here are some guidelines to help you achieve a professional looking garment:

### CHOOSING YOUR PATTERN

- Remember the more pattern pieces, the more pattern matching you will have to consider!
- Steer clear of patterns that state "not suitable for plaids and stripes" on the envelope
- Avoid patterns with princess seams and horizontal darts
- Consider patterns that would showcase the tartan, for example a skirt with a centre seam could be cut on the bias to create a chevron effect.

### PATTERN MATCHING

You'll be scratching your head for hours if you try to stripe match on every seam – it's just not possible! You can't match stripes on a side seam where there's a bust dart or round an armhole seam, for example, so don't worry about it. Instead, focus on matching at key focal points, such as centre seams, the front notch on sleeves and the horizontal stripes on side seams. Have fun with tartan! How about cutting hard to match pieces, such as sleeves and side panels, on the bias, thus avoiding pattern matching whilst creating an eye-catching garment.

### CUTTING YOUR FABRIC

If cutting out on the fold, ensure that your stripes line up through the layers and place pins through both layers at some of the lined-up stripes.

### STITCHING

To stop your beautifully matched-up pieces from shifting whilst sewing, place pins horizontally through both pieces at some of the matched-up stripes, ensuring they match at the seamline. A walking foot can also help to eliminate shifting.

