

# Kilts & Tartan

## Made Easy

An expert insider's frank views and simple tips

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**Why YOU should wear a kilt,  
& what kind of kilt to get**

**How to source true quality  
& avoid the swindlers**

**Find your own tartans  
& get the best materials**

**Know the outfit for any event  
& understand accessories**

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## Foreword

If you're thinking of wearing your **first kilt** (or already own one, and want to learn more) how daunting it can feel. But don't give up. You'll be **so glad you did**. Few things you ever own will give you **more pleasure** than an authentic kilt, whether for formal wear or fashion.

This short handbook will **help** you make sense of at least the basic questions. I hope to **inform**, and even **entertain**. It's my own views. But it should cover most of what you **need to know**. The work is my personal **free gift** which I hope you'll find helpful.

If you want to look right at an **occasion**, like a wedding or formal dinner, you'll find advice here. Otherwise, never let anyone tell you that you're wearing it wrong. Remember, a kilt is **not a uniform** – it should express your **personality** and be a thing of joy, not an object of duty. It will make you many new **friends and admirers**. There are no rules, only views. It's just a **piece of clothing**. What matters is to wear yours with **pride**.

In this second edition, I have **added** and improved throughout, based on generous early **feedback**. Please do tell me still if you think anything is missing, inadequate, or just plain wrong. I intend this to be a work-in-progress. I have also changed the **title** to reflect the way the document's scope has expanded since first started.

I am unashamedly proud of my **Scottish** ancestry, and this text is written through the eyes of a Scot. But most applies too for the sons and daughters of **Ireland, Wales**, and other Celtic nations... or those who might **wish to be**, even just a little. We're a **friendly** and inclusive folk. I hope you'll join us, wherever you are.

You may now **look forward** to enjoying your kilt!

# Why Wear a Kilt?

You're reading this, so you're at least curious. Why do millions swear by the kilt as their greatest pride and pleasure? As you'll see in the next few sections, there are quite a few **compelling reasons**.

- **Celebrating Celtic Traditions**
- **Dressing for Special Occasions**
- **Staying ahead in Fashion**
- **Creating your own Style**
- **Enjoying extraordinary Comfort**
- **Attracting Women and new friends!**

## Celebrating Celtic Heritage

All of us today are becoming aware of **our heritage**. We love to declare publicly not only who we are and where we're going in life, but also where we've come from – often in the dim and distant past.

For those lucky enough to have **Scots blood** (about 100 million souls worldwide, with just 5m living in Scotland!) there's a lot to be proud of. But our often quiet and industrious invisibility means we also need ways today to show our heritage, publicly. Fortunately this is easy. **Scots culture** is rich in icons and **symbols** that declare our history.

Firstly, of course, there is no better way than to put on that most celebrated and evocative of garments, the **kilt**. In fact, this provides a **double** dose of meaning, due to the distinctive and much-admired **tartan** of which it's usually made. And tartan has its own rich traditions to do with **clan** and family descent.

And we're not finished. A kilt outfit will often include one or more of our many strongly evocative icons like the Scottish **Saltire**, the proud **Lion Rampant**, our historic **clan heraldry**, and the vast and mysti-

So vital to Scots identity are tartan and the kilt, that the English once **banned** their wearing in Scotland (except by the military - respecting a tradition that continues to this day). The Dress Act of **1746 criminalised** such clothing in an effort to repress Scottish national identity after the Jacobite uprisings.

**Repealed** in **1782**, aristocrats soon revived and reinvented the Highland tradition. And in **1822** King **George IV** gave his **seal of approval** on a famous visit to Scotland after his coronation, spinning himself a new persona (on Walter Scott's advice) as Jacobite king. So began the **Royal Stewart** tartan.

cal tradition of **Celtic knotwork** designs. We are privileged to have so many impressive ways to boldly or subtly signify our identity.

As a community we're also blessed by the many events held regularly worldwide to which Scots (and anyone else who enjoys the heritage) can come together. These include annual **Highland Games** at countless locations; **clubs** and societies aplenty; and of course **Burns Night** celebrations around January 25 each year, when we ritually remember our national poet's genius with haggis, whisky, and verse.

But splendid as these occasions are, none of this is really vital. Scottish blood or not, you just know if you're a **Scot at heart!** And if you're a Scot, then one day you'll just know you need to own **your own kilt**. You need to experience what it feels like to be a true Scot. And trust me, when that day comes, you'll never look back!

## Dressing for Special Occasions

A big reason for considering a kilt may be that you've been invited to a Scottish **wedding**, a gala **dinner**, or another event where you know Highland Dress will be expected. There are few weddings in Scotland today without the groom and his ushers, and most male guests, dressed splendidly in their national tradition. At almost any formal event at least a few **kilts** will be seen (and be getting the **admiring glances**, set off splendidly by all boring business uniforms or identikit penguin suits!).

If this is your reason for adding your own kilt to your wardrobe at last, then selecting your kilt is **easy**. You should really be looking no further than a **traditional 8 yard** variety from a **quality kiltmaker**. In some situations a casual 5 yard variety might pass muster. But where proper dress is expected at a formal 'do' the full thing is certainly the best.

But please read on anyway. You may find much of interest in the sections below. If nothing else, it might help you deal with all the interest and **envious enquiries** you'll start to get from the first day you step out in your fabulous new attire.

## Staying ahead in Fashion

Let's be honest. Until a **few decades ago**, our national dress had fallen into rather **staid** repute. For many years a kilt was best known as the **family heirloom** our grandfathers promised to hand down to us. Outside the military, its flame was kept lit mostly by a few diehard traditionalists, often of a certain age. And to them we are **eternally grateful**, or today the skills and traditions might be extinct.

But then an odd thing happened. Kilts became **trendy** again. My own guess is that we have the likes of the **Tartan Army** to thank, the Scottish national football team's celebrated traveling support that leads the world in good-natured conviviality (sadly, a success rarely matched on the field). Kilts became common on the **rugby and soccer** terraces, and on into the bars.

Since then the movement has been **unstoppable**. Today you'll find witheringly with-it young people attired in all manners of kilt, at work and at play.

Celebrities like **Vin Diesel**, **Samuel L Jackson**, and **Robbie Williams** have picked up on 'kilt cool' and fallen over each other to be seen in one. And top designers like **Burberry**, **Vivienne Westwood**, **Mulberry** and **SAS** have all created their own interpretations. **Alexander MacQueen** of course uses the MacQueen tartan.



Sometimes these contemporary kilts are in offbeat materials like **coloured leathers** or **black wool**. Sometimes they are traditional **tartan**, whose thousands of stunning permutations have returned it to the catwalks and glossy fashion spreads in a big way.

So now it's not so much daring to be different, as finding a **newer cooler** way to display this amazing garment.

And before you turn up your nose at the modern 'abomination' (as I've heard it called) of kilts made from materials other than tartan... this is the **older tradition!**

The original garment was simply a length of cloth, wrapped around the body for warmth and comfort. And this could be **any material** at all. It was only in recent centuries that tartan became the orthodox fabric to use.

So it can be amusing to hear the trend setters believing they're breaking the boundaries so radically. Really they're going **back to their roots!**

## Creating your own Style

Is 'Style' not the same as 'Fashion'? Well no, not really. In the world of fashion you're often following someone else's inspiration. But with **style** you're setting out your own. And this is where a kilt really comes into its own!

Consider the **countless thousands** of distinct looks that a kilt can create. Tartans come in an almost **infinite** variety of **colours, shades, and patterns**.

And due to the garment's traditions, these gorgeous fabrics **can be used** with a kilt in contexts where trousers are limited by convention to a far narrower range of expression. In short, a kilt gives us latitude to **bend the rules** in almost any way we like.

And that's before you start to think about what to wear your kilt with. You can create a **complete look** that will **turn heads** for all the right reasons wherever you go.

The permutations are literally endless. A kilt will look great with your favourite **Nike's**, or chunky **walking boots**. So do what you like. You're in no way limited to traditional black brogues.

And it's only at formal occasions that one of the orthodox jacket styles is expected. At any other time a well-worn **T-Shirt** or chunky woollen **sweater** can look fantastic. Or pair it with a waistcoat or **vest**. In some ways the more unexpected the better.

You're limited only by your **imagination**. It's up to you to make your kilt part of your own **personality**.

## Enjoying Extraordinary Comfort

This is the factor that surprises most people the first time they put on a kilt. The feeling of **comfort is astounding**.

This is frankly an almost sensual experience, which women know well but most men never discover. It comes from the **absence of uncomfortable constraint** around one's tenderest parts. We're so used to this slight discomfort being ever-present that we take it for granted. But when it goes, the feeling is real, and really **very nice**.

There's also a feeling of solidity about a kilt that somehow feels extraordinarily **manly**. And it's the sheer **weight** of the garment that makes trousers feel flimsy by comparison. The only comparison might be if you've ever put on a heavy woollen overcoat to replace a lightweight anorak. This weight is unexpected at first, but you quickly get used to it. And the **confidence** it bestows doesn't leave you. It's a totally **masculine experience**.

In truth, part of the great feeling of being a 'Real Man' in a kilt comes straight from the imagination. It's the boyhood fantasies of being an ancient warrior. It's the associations with modern military glory. It's the Braveheart thing. It's the capacity to terrify the wimpish opposition. It's just so starkly macho. No wonder it's such a babe magnet!

But there's another less tangible comfort factor too. Wearing a kilt also just gives you an amazing **sense of presence** wherever you go. This communicates to others as a social confidence, of being at ease with yourself. And this in turn feeds back, leading you to feel this **comfort and confidence** deeply within yourself too. It's hard to describe. Wear one. Feel it.

## Attracting Women and New Friends!

Okay, so now I'm getting to the kilt's great **unspoken secret**. Women absolutely **adore** them! You're not convinced? Find the nearest woman and **ask her**.

Maybe it's the chance to **ogle** a guy's legs. (Yes, they do, you know.) Perhaps it's the **confidence** to stand out from the crowd that marks you down as **alpha**. Or it could also be the **tasteful quality** of a well made kilt that, like any other **well-tailored** garment, subliminally communicates that you've got that **appeal** which women respond to.

But the only **reason** I can see that this isn't more widely recognised is that kilt wearers don't want to let just anyone in on their rather **successful act**. In fact, I frankly can't fathom why more single guys haven't cottoned on to this. Wake up!

But it's totally true. Go out in a **kilt** anywhere in the world to find members of the **fairer sex flocking** to you. As often as not this will come in the form of 'that' question (which I'll discreetly deal with at the end) for which you will of course have a suitably cheeky riposte or three ready. So how many **great openings** do you get like this most days – with women not only coming up to you, but also then opening a conversation with premium grade innuendo? Ask a kilt wearer. You'll be amazed.

It's true the occasional jealous guy without your guts might try the odd weak jibe. You'll quickly learn lots of **fun ways** to put these down. And anyway, ask yourself, which do you **care more** about – what stupid guys think, or **what gorgeous girls think**? And what's more, it's a fabulous **conversation starter** too!

And it's not just a great prop for (let's be honest) chatting up the ladies. The **attractiveness** you'll radiate goes **much wider** than that.

Ask any kilt wearer. You'll find total **strangers talking to you** on the street, telling you their life history, and telling you how great you look. You'll get used to being an **instant celebrity**, with random admirers asking to have their **photograph** taken with you.

You'll also notice people **smiling at you** more. This may partly be because you'll be smiling more yourself. But mostly just because they just get an immediate impression of **liking you**! It's a curious phenomenon, but wonderful to become accustomed to.

A customer wrote to me:

**You're absolutely right about the smiles. I'm becoming known as "The Smiley Bloke in a Kilt" in Armley and I've even stopped being annoyed when people call it a skirt. My favorite comment was from a lady in a solicitor's waiting room on the hottest day of the year... "You look cool" and I'm ashamed to say I replied "I know" :-)**



# Can I Wear a Kilt?

Now we've dealt with whether you should wear a kilt (you should!) let's move on to whether you can. Let me give you a little clue. You can!

- Do I have **Scottish Blood**?
- **Must I be a Scot** to wear a kilt?
- Can I wear a kilt, **At My Size**?
- I'm a **Woman**, what about me?

## Do I have Scottish blood?

The vast majority of Scots by descent **don't know it!** Why? Because we've tended just to get on with our lives **quietly** and successfully wherever we've emigrated. So many of our brethren have sadly **lost track** of our **roots** after a few generations.

So here's one clue. If your name starts with 'Mc' or 'Mac' you almost certainly do; as well as **Scottish**, this could also be **Irish**. But our brother neighbours are so **intermingled** historically this scarcely matters.

And these names still account for only a minority of Scots. I can't list the rest here. But if you don't know your own name's history, why not google for "[your surname] history"? You might have a nice surprise.

And your surname is only part of the story. Your mother's **maiden name**, your **grandparents'** names, and so on as back as far as you can go, will also often find you a link to Scottish heritage. **Any forebear's** origins are as much a part of your blood as the single male line down which your surname probably came.

Or maybe your family came from elsewhere with another name but **lived in Scotland** in the past. We've always been an open folk. Any connection is enough!

Scots settlers didn't cluster as much as other emigrant groups. There are few 'Scots Towns' like all the Chinatowns, Irish or Italian areas, or French quarters in many large cities. We just went to work – invisibly, cleverly, diligently and very successfully. And we're a resourceful lot. That's why half of all US Presidents have Scottish blood, and so many major industries and organisations today are led by Scots. But lots of us with Celtic ancestry don't even know it!

## Must I be a Scot to wear a kilt?

You don't have to be a cowboy to wear denim jeans. And there is **no reason** or tradition to say that kilts can be worn only by Scots.

You might as well ask if anyone can use **anaesthetics**, play **golf**, or watch **television** (all invented in Scotland); or can anyone sing **Auld Lang Syne** (written in Scotland); or can anyone drink **whisky** (produced in Scotland); or can anyone respect the **US Constitution** (written by Scots, based on Scottish documents); or...

Okay, I digress. The point is that every style of clothing originated somewhere, and good ideas spread. That's how culture works. Today we live in a **global village**, and most of us are free spirits, with the **freedom** to wear what we like.

And anyway, although the kilt's spiritual home lies in Scotland, its heritage now spreads far afield. Throughout the **Celtic fringe** of Europe (i.e. **Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, Brittany**, and even **northern Spain**) similar traditions exist that today are united in a largely shared style of kilt, as well as other aspects of the cultures.

In fact today there are tartans not only for every **Irish county** and common **Welsh surname**, but for almost every **US State**, and for districts in **Holland**; for **airlines** and **hotel chains**; for **army regiments** and **air forces**; even for **cars** and for **Highland Games** in Japan.

Plus some tartans are so ubiquitous that they are considered **universal**, for use by anyone without hesitation. So even if you haven't a family tie to Scotland, there's a tartan, and kilt, for **everyone**.

Once upon a time only families and clans had their own tartans. With one exception: the clergy. This was vital in lending this profession a form of neutrality in the days of warring clans, where to have worn a family plaid would have alienated or even been dangerous.

So **of course you can** wear a kilt, whether or not you've a drop of Scots or Celtic blood. And thousands do. The worst thing that might happen is that someone might ask you why. And if you read on, you'll have **plenty of answers** ready, quite apart from the many you'll find for yourself!

## Can I wear a kilt, At My Size?

One of the kilt's great beauties is that **everyone looks great** in it, whatever their vital statistics. This is in fact far more true than with standard male attire. Somehow the kilt's lines flatter and enhance far more than trouser legs that go all the way up to the posterior.

My own companies have custom-made kilts for a month old infant, and for many men who might require at least two airline seats – and **every shape and size** in between. I can say with confidence that we've seen it all before.

So provided your **measurements** are properly taken, the garment will **look great** whatever the height, girth, or weight of the wearer. So the quick answer here is, **yes!**

## I'm a woman, What about me?

The kilt is traditionally regarded as a **man's garment**. But like trousers, which until quite recently were worn only by males, there is **nothing** today to say it must only be worn by a man.

In fact, as I write, I spoke only yesterday to a lady in England who has just placed an order with my business for **six traditional kilts**, all for herself. Her reason? "**Nothing has the swing of a proper kilt**", she said.

The wearing of kilts by women is common enough that a **minor tradition** has existed since Victorian days to wrap a lady's kilt in the reverse direction. The front **apron fringe** then falls to **left**, in much the same way that a shirt might button differently. This is a matter of **personal choice**, and a good kiltmaker should allow either to be specified when ordering.

Of course, there is also a range of adaptations of the kilt, specially designed for women. These are generically termed **kilted skirts**, and can come in any length from mini-skirt to ankle, and any material from tartans to Harris Tweeds and more. Different types have wide variation in the number and depth of pleats and hence amount of fabric used.

As usual, it comes down to personal choice. What you **like best**, you'll look your best in.



# Which Kilt Style do you want?

Which kilt style you should buy depends mostly on the occasions on which you expect to be wearing it. This section explains why.

- Traditional 8 Yard
- Casual 5 yard
- Fashion & Utility Kilts
- Great Kilt, or Feileadh Mor
- Kilts for Children
- Traditional & Military Trews

## Traditional 8 yard kilt



Let's be clear, this is the proper garment, the real deal. It's really the **only** kilt to choose if you intend to wear it at **formal occasions**, especially if there will be others there who know kilts. All other styles are better suited to more casual or recreational events.

Nothing else is as **impressive** to behold. Even the casual onlooker will instinctively notice something special about the way it hangs, the **graceful** way it moves as you do.

Compared to cheap mass-produced disposable clothing, a good kilt may seem expensive. But pause to consider **why** and you'll see what tremendous **value** it really is.

Making a traditional eight yard kilt is a **highly skilled** operation. This takes many years of training and practice to master. Or to be precise, it's easy to make a kilt badly, but very hard to do well.

The skill lies in a combination of **technical proficiency**, and **aesthetic sensitivity**. A key aspect, for example, involves matching each tartan pattern's **unique sett** to the wearer's individual dimensions. This is essential to create

the crisp and **regular pleating** to the rear, which will both hang and swing with the unique effect that a good kilt must.

You'll see more qualities of a good kilt in the section below on **finding a good kiltmaker**.

But it's not just simply wrapped – a kilt is **engineered** to fit and to function. A proper kilt uses a huge amount of **material**. (8 yards is an average by the way, depending on your body shape; it could be a little less, or nine, or more.)

### Expensive?

Throwaway fashion is the wrong thing to compare your kilt with. It's more like investing in **artisan furniture**.

A properly made kilt can easily last you a **lifetime** – or longer. It never goes out of fashion. Its solidity means you'll work hard to wear it out. Most owners grow to **love their kilts** so much they would never dream of disposing of them.

So look at it more as a cherished **heirloom** you might well pass down to your own children in time.

And enjoy those **savings** on exorbitant hire fees, after just a few outings!

This length of fabric is needed for what are called the **pleats**, which are mostly to the rear. These are what **define** the kilt, making it a totally different garment than a woman's skirt (which is why cheap imitation kilts look so embarrassing).

The pleats are deeply slotted and **crisply pressed folds** in the fabric. For a traditional kilt the pleats will be the **full depth of your fingers**; for a casual one, at least to the second joint.

They are uniquely spaced for each kilt to coincide with, and bring out the **special character** of, a tartan's unique pattern. And it is these pleats that gives the garment its remarkable **swing** as you walk, turn, or dance.

**Nothing looks or feels like** a well made traditional eight yard kilt. If you have never worn one before, you have a **hugely pleasurable experience** to look forward to!

The quantity of material used is **astounding**. Eight yards.

Think how much material eight yards (c. 7.3 metres) is! Stand against a wall and take eight good strides. Do it, now.

Okay, now you see? That's how much top quality, beautiful, expertly woven fabric you'll be wrapping around yourself!

## Pleating Styles

Different **styles of pleating** can give your kilt a very **different look**. You would normally consider this only for a **traditional 8 yard** kilt. But a good kiltmaker should also allow you to pleat a 5 yard casual kilt distinctly if you ask.

Consider for a moment how a **tartan is identified**, and created. A tartan is in fact defined by the **precise sequence** of horizontal and vertical threads by which it is woven. It is this unique combination of threads that results in the thin and thick coloured lines (creating what appear to be intersecting patches). These give each tartan its individual

character. So this coloured thread count is what is uniquely listed when a tartan is officially registered.

Now consider the **vertical lines**. The different styles of pleating refer to which of these are chosen for the points at which the fabric's **pattern is folded** and creased to construct its pleats during the garment's construction. These can be selected to create a variety of **visual effects**.

## Pleating to Sett, and other styles

The great **majority** of kilts are made with what is called pleating 'to sett'. This simply means folding the fabric in a way that replicates and **continues the tartan's natural pattern** all the way around the garment when the folds are lying flat. This is what **most people prefer**.



**Tartan showing the sett, and three arrangements 'to stripe'.**  
Note: the pleats here are loosely folded, not pressed as on a kilt.

Pleating '**to stripe**' involves folding the fabric differently, to emphasise one or other of the vertical lines. Traditionally popular with the **military** and with many **pipe bands**, this creates a striking effect which some kilt wearers prefer. Some feel that the exaggerated vertical lines emphasise the kilt's natural swirl when you move.

You will also now see the possibility of different colour effects, depending on **which vertical stripe** you use to fold the fabric. Some verticals could disappear entirely on the pleats, and others be brought out. A **skilled kiltmaker** will know which choices are

thought to look best for a particular tartan, and will create this with precision. And a **really** good kiltmaker will recommend, but let you decide for yourself. It's your kilt!

A third even rarer method of pleating, 'to horizontal', involves choosing a point in the sett for the folds that creates the illusion of a series of strong horizontal bands across the rear. Only a true **master** of kiltmaking is likely to accomplish this successfully, so do not ask it of a novice. But anyway, it is arguably **rare for a reason**, as many find it less flattering or aesthetically pleasing.

Another technique involves the construction of what are called '**box pleats**', or military pleating. With these, the usual single flat deep fold (a 'knife pleat') is replaced by a double fold, which is basically two knife pleats "back to back". The effect is more **symmetrical** than usual, which alters the kilt's character in a way that some prefer. And it tends to add **depth**, though this may not be ideal for anyone already with a fuller figure. Finally, the garment's **swing** is typically **reduced**, which most of us would feel a pity, but to others may be an advantage.

## Casual 5 yard kilt



The casual kilt is often thought of as a **cut-down** and reduced price version of the real thing. But it is **more than that**.

This garment almost always uses a **shorter** length of fabric than a full traditional eight yard kilt. But you could in fact have an 8-yard length made to a casual cut.

Less material means the pleats will be **less deep**, and the swing will be **less impressive**.

And of course it will give **less warmth**. Depending on when you expect to wear it, this could be considered a good or a bad thing.

There is another important distinction. A casual kilt will usually be cut to the **same waistline as trousers**. This sets it apart from the traditional kilt, which rises a few inches above the hips, adding to the inherent impressiveness of that garment.

Important note: shorter does **not mean short!** A five yard casual kilt is still a **quality** garment. It should not be an excuse for your kiltmaker to **skimp** on material for better profit margins at the cost of you looking a **bit silly**.

Even when reduced to **four yards**, the pleats will be **too shallow** to give much of that all-important swing. Those dreadful 'knock-off' shops and web sites often sell a **three yard 'kilt'** which is really a ladies' skirt. I've even seen a shockingly poor two-yard effort!

Conversely the lower cut makes this one more, well, **casual**. Being less imposing can be a positive, lending it a greater air of **informality**, for contexts where this is desirable.

The look arguably lends itself better to **fashion** wear, where the traditional high-waisted look may feel less appropriate.

It is probably not the first choice for formal occasions. But a casual kilt will be fine for **many situations**, and may indeed be the **best idea** for a number of uses.

For example, in many Scottish restaurants it is common today for the **waiting staff** to don black wool kilts, often paired with black evening shirts. In these circumstances the more casual style, lighter weight, and easier mobility of a casual kilt makes good sense. So likewise many may prefer one for **hiking** or other **leisure activities**.

For those on a budget, it only takes a few traditional **accessories** together with a casual kilt to have the makings of an excellent **outfit** that on many occasions only the seasoned eye will tell apart from the full traditional thing, And, particularly if the garment is not made of tartan, even these are now **optional**.

## Fashion & Utility kilts



Moving yet further from the traditional sphere, the kilt's rapidly rising stock has spawned a real boom in **high fashion** and specialist variants.

These rarely use proper **tartans** in their manufacture. Mostly their creators find new materials to fulfill their function, and whatever they seek to express.

But not all. Designers like **Gaultier** and **Kilt2** have also played with tartan itself, distressing and deforming it to bring out new meanings from the material.

Other kilt designers have played with the form of the garment. **Utilikilts** adds tool pockets for workers. Others replace buckles with quick-release mechanisms for fashionable fast function.

This is not the place for a comprehensive history of these more innovative creations, nor to **arbitrate** what is or isn't a kilt. I'd just like to say that it's **all great** by me. Each new design reaches a wider audience, and takes the kilt onward and upward.



## Great Kilt, or Feileadh Mor



Last, but not least, the Great Kilt (or in Gaelic **Feileadh Mor** – correctly pronounced *feell-a-mawrr*, or the anglicised *fill-a-more*) of course deserves a mention. Today mostly seen at **historical re-enactments** and tourism events, this is where it all **started**.

Putting one of these on that takes time and **perseverance**. It involves a complex sequence of operations, best accomplished by laying out the material on the floor, folding it into pleats in the right positions, then rolling yourself up in it. Finally you tie it with some sort of belt. So it is quite **unrealistic** for daily wear.

A few enterprising retailers are selling Great Kilts to the public. But the truth is, the Great Kilt is really nothing more than a **long piece of cloth!** Remember, that's where it all started – a generous length of material, wrapped about the body for comfort and warmth. If you want to be **truly historic**, that's all you need.

## Kilts for Children



In principle kilts can be made for **weans** (wee ones) of any age. They are extremely popular for **weddings**, where they tend to look almost impossibly **cute**. But they look great in almost all contexts, and in countries like Japan are near mandatory.

So popular is Highland Dress for children (and *with* children, who typically love to great dressed up this way) that **every kilt accessory** is available in a full range of children's sizes. Jackets, sporrans, and even safe plastic sgian dubhs can complete a **full outfit**.

The rate at which youngsters **grow** of course creates an issue. One solution is to opt for one of the cheaper **off-the-shelf** garments rather than make a proper kilt that will only be grown out of soon. Or else a child's kilt can incorporate a **hem** to be let down to provide further years' use.



## Traditional & Military Trews

As you'll have spotted, **trews** are not kilts at all. But they deserve mention as their tradition overlaps. Trews are the **older** garment. And like kilts they were **banned** under the Dress Act of 1746.

**Traditional** trews probably evolved from footed leggings-like hose popular during the Renaissance. Form-fitting, these trews could be full length or knee-breeches, and were cut on the **cross-grain** to put the tartan sett on the diagonal.

**Military trews** are the dress or mess uniform attire of the lowland Scottish regiments (and of the composite Highlanders regiment) in contexts where highland regiments would usually wear Kilts.



Modern trews

are more like trousers, with the fabric cut on the straight grain but without a side seam "the better to cut a dash in the mess". Commonly **high-waisted** with a **fishtail back** and **braces buttons**, they are mostly worn with a short jacket like a Prince Charlie.

Although associated with the lowland regiments, trews are preferred by many civilians too, particularly below the Highland line. They can be **directly substituted** in informal as well as formal outfits. For example, the esteemed Dr. Johnnie of the Little Society is said to favour a pair of trews rather than the kilt, since the Littles were among the Reiver clans who followed Black Johnnie Armstrong. The cavalry trews are more practical than a kilt for **riding on horseback** on a raid across the Border. It makes good sense.

# Choosing Your Tartan or fabric

Kilts don't have to be made of tartan. But most kilts still are. People love the idea of wearing a unique fabric identified with their **family or clan**. Your tartan might also identify the **area** where your ancestors lived. Or today you might wear the tartan of an **organisation** you belong to. Whether you want to wear tartan or **any other material**, this chapter will help you find a **fabric to be proud of**.

- Understanding Tartans
- Finding Your Own Tartans
- Tartan Variants made simple
- Finding Fabrics in your Tartans
- Can I just choose a Colour I Like?
- Other Materials than tartan & wool
- What is the right Weight of Fabric?
- Selecting a Weaving Mill
- What to do if yours is Not in Production
- Obtaining Tartan Swatches

Firstly, let's deal with a couple of **confusions**. One is the distinction between a **tartan** and a **plaid**. There is **no difference**. Arguably a tartan is the pattern, and a plaid is the material. But the words are used **interchangeably**. Americans often talk of plaids, and in Scotland we say tartans. I'm Scottish, and I'm writing this. So there.



A more important distinction is between the 'theoretical' registered tartan, which I'm calling its **pattern**. (One family name can have several of these.) Then there is how each is actually **woven** into (potentially many different) tartan fabrics. Do not confuse these. As you'll see below, they're never quite the same.

For most people, finding your tartans means **first** identifying the patterns that are meaningful to you, **then** the variants these are woven in (if any). Or if you do not care about having your own family tartan, you can skip to the bit about **finding fabrics**.

## Understanding Tartans

**Don't worry!** This is all perfectly **simple**. But before we look for your own tartan for your kilt, it will help to cover a few simple ideas to **make sense** of what you're looking at.

**Nowadays** people or bodies are likely to design a new tartan based on themes. So a firm's tartan can carry their **corporate colours**. A family's might use a set of colours that have resonance and **meaning** for almost any personal or traditional reason.

A tartan (or plaid) is just a **criss-cross** pattern of threads of different colours. Wallace tartan for instance has a '**thread count**' of K2 R16 K16 Y2 K16 R16 (K is black, R is red, and Y is yellow). This means it is woven with 2 units of black thread then 16 of red etc. both horizontally and vertically (the 'warp' and the 'weft'). Every recorded tartan is **uniquely defined** like this, and no two can be the same.



### The Naming Tradition

By post C19 tradition, each tartan is given a **name**, mostly of (extended) **families** but also for other forms of **organisation**. Originally particular tartans were at best a local weaving 'idiom' – each area's habit and taste in colours and patterns.

Romantic enthusiasm by figures like **Queen Victoria** and Sir **Walter Scott** led to the formalisation, or invention, of the tradition. Significantly this began soon after the true clan system of government had been defeated and dissolved.

As each part of Scotland had a dominant clan or family, characteristic patterns were **associated with each name**, sometimes even on the basis of a single garment or portrait.

There is nothing to say a family or body can have only one tartan. Far from it. So for **some names** you may find **multiple tartans**. I do **not** mean the colour **variants** (Modern, Ancient, etc.) which we'll cover fully in the next section. But you might, say, find a '**Fiddes of Edinburgh**', to distinguish one **branch** of your family from another.

Or you could see a range of distinct tartans, each strong in a **particular hue**. So we could have '**Fiddes Red**', '**Fiddes Green**', and so on. These will often have an identical or similar pattern, but using different colours for the threads.

There are a couple of recurring versions of these: **Dress** and **Hunting** tartans. These are distinct variants, based on similar themes but with **different thread counts** (which makes them a different tartan). Hunting tartans tend to have more **greens** or other earth tones. Dress tartans have more



Wallace Blue Dress



Wallace Hunting

white. That's it.

The story goes that **Dress** tartans were born thanks to **Queen Victoria** (a “passionate advocate of all things Scottish”). She wanted to follow her uncle George IV in wearing **Royal Stewart** tartan. Unfortunately she could not. This plaid includes the colour **red**, at the time a signal for prostitution (as in our modern Red Light Districts). So white (for purity) was introduced to replace red, and the **Dress Stewart** tartan was created.

For the more common names, you will even find **variants on variants**. I might one day choose to register a ‘Fiddes Hunting Red’ and a ‘Fiddes Hunting Green’. Who knows?

There are **no rules** about which variants of a tartan you should wear for any particular occasion. Some people find **dress** tartans a good choice for **weddings**, just for their use of white. Others associate **Hunting** tartans with **country** pursuits, if only for their qualities as camouflage. But these names do not carry any formal implication of when they should be worn.

## Finding Your Own Tartans

The fact that traditions that tie unique tartans to single names go back only **centuries** rather than millennia does not mean they're not meaningful. Today this is one of our great symbols of identity through which millions share **kinship** and **community** in a world where such life-affirming bonds are undermined by the nuclearisation of families and by migration. This is of fantastic worth, which cynics ignore to their own loss.

So how do you **find tartans that are appropriate to you**, from the thousands available? First you must know the name or names you are looking for. If you are a Mac-Donald or Leslie, this is easy – there are lots. If your name is more unusual, you may have to go further **up your family tree**.

You can also choose **places** or **organisations** that are meaningful to you. This isn't an exact science. You are ultimately just looking for names you will want

### Is your tartan 'official'?

**Registration** with the Scottish Tartans Authority is not what makes a tartan the official one for a particular family or body. Registration merely records prior use of a unique sett, which in effect publicises a form of claim or copyright.

**Official status** can only be conferred by a clan, company, or other grouping. For clans recognised by the Lord Lyon, or for legally founded organisations, this is quite robust. And a second tier of established family associations also have good claim to call their tartans official.

Other tartans have simply been **recorded** by companies, individuals, or less formal groups. Of these, some are jealously guarded as private property, whilst others are warmly extended to anyone of the name, or anyone who wishes. These are not official in any true sense. But the choice to share them signifies a **recognition of affinity** with all who share distant family roots.

to wear with pride. And don't worry, if you can think of none, there are more possibilities below.

Once you have one or more promising names, your next task is to find out whether there are any tartans recorded for these. At this stage you are just looking for any (to use my own name, for example) 'Fiddes' family tartans.

The best and most fun way is to spend a few evenings on the Web, doing your own research. The benefit to doing your own homework is that you will pick up many more snippets of family history along the way. You'll find this stands you in good stead later, when people start asking all about your kilt.

To do your own research, now you need a good tartan finder, or two. The reason I say two is to do with the distinction above, between the tartans as registered, and the fabrics as woven. These overlap, but are not the same.

Firstly, check out the Scottish Tartans Authority and the Tartan Ferret. Here you will be looking for named tartans (i.e. patterns). But this resource does not list woven materials. We will get to that.



I must declare an interest here, being a Governor of this body. But the STA's status is beyond dispute. It is the principal registry for the tartan industry, supported by all the major weavers. Confusingly a couple of private tartan registers also exist, which list some additional tartans. But neither are nearly as complete nor enjoy the same status of tartan industry recognition.

The STA Tartan Ferret is a free searchable database of every registered tartan pattern. Here, with a little ferreting around, you should with luck find a few patterns that you could choose.

The quick way is to contact a kiltmaker you trust, by phone or email. Reputable firms (see below) will be helpful. They should at least tell you the fabrics available for your family name – ideally not just from one or two mills.

If you are lucky, better retail firms may add a little flavour about your tartan and its history. From the finest firms, this will even be accurate! But be realistic. Few can afford to provide a free service to research your entire family genealogy.

But note that 'you trust' bit again. Sadly some vendors can be misinformed, or may even say anything to sell you what they want. So a little independent investigation is well worthwhile to know if you are being spun a line.

### But my name's not spelled that way!

If you don't find a direct match for your surname, try **variant spellings**. So use *Thomson* instead of *Thompson*, *Tomson* or *Tommassen*.

Name spelling was **formalised** only recently in historical terms. (Shakespeare is said to have spelled his own name at least six different ways.) There is rarely much reason to be too hung up on one spelling.

If that doesn't work, try names from further back in your **family tree**. Each of these is just as much **part of your blood** as the name that has come down one paternal line. If that fails, there are tartans for **regions** and cities, if you know your family's origins.

Also look out for '**septs**'. Clans traditionally gave protection to many other families. In fact, at times whole clans took to using other clans' names for the security it offered, especially around 1745. If your family is listed as one of a clan's septs, you can put on their tartan. So even a distant forebear can yield a **rich vein of heritage** to wear.

## Tartan Variants made simple

Time for a little more **tartan theory**. Before we go looking at actual fabrics, there's something else you need to know. You'll find many tartans described in ways like 'Fiddes Hunting **Modern**', 'Fiddes Hunting **Ancient**', or 'Fiddes Hunting **Weathered**'. So what are these?



MacDonald Modern



MacDonald Ancient



MacDonald Weathered

In fact the ancient, modern, and weathered variants are **not different tartans** at all. A tartan is defined by its pattern, remember. And these are all the same. They are just woven in **different hues of yarn**. Almost any tartan in the world can be woven in these alternative colourways.

The **modern** colours are the default colour scheme: the basis for all other versions. They are relatively **strong, bold, and dark**, making the most use of the vibrancy available from contemporary dyestuffs.

The **ancient** variants are more **earthy** by comparison. In conception, these represent a return to the **older colours of plant dyes**, as distinct from the bolder synthetic dyes which were already becoming common by Victorian times.

The **weathered** colours are intended to reflect what a piece of cloth might look like after many years of use. Imagine a fragment after being **unearthed from the ground** after a few hundred years! That's the idea.

Ancient and weathered are both in fact all **new, made to look old**. It's a matter of **personal preference** if you want the brighter look, or the more subtle.

## And variable colours in practice...

For a number of reasons, **one tartan** can be woven in a **range of hues** that can sometimes look surprisingly different. This is **traditional**. So you should not be too upset if items in the 'same' plaid do not exactly match.

Firstly, tartan thread counts never used to be **written down**. Very old patterns are known from **aged remnants** (sometimes called '**artifact**') or else from paintings (called '**portrait**'). So most traditional **tartan colours** are 'best guesses'.

Even once formal recording began, their colours were mostly described with a broad brush, as 'green' or 'red'. Even today tartan colours are usually only **loosely described** (e.g. as 'navy blue' but not as a Pantone). So each weaving mill will choose **different yarns** to weave them.

Next, like wallpaper, each **weaving batch** will differ slightly from the next. As a **natural** product, this is inevitable.

Also, the same pattern, from the same mill, will look different when woven as a heavier 16oz wool than as a 10oz. This is due to the **tighter weave** at lighter weights. This effect is even more marked for **different materials**, such as silks, polyviscose tartans, etc.

Finally, if you're viewing a tartan **online**, remember that **your own** computer monitor is probably not **calibrated** to design studio standards. Plus the web site creator will inevitably have introduced at least a little **colour error** too. Sometimes more than a little.

So if you can get a **swatch** of actual fabric before ordering your kilt, do so. Or trust to fate, and **enjoy the shades** you receive. This is how it was **always done**.



## Finding Fabrics in your tartans

Great. so now you've found one or more **registered tartans**. Next, you need to find which of these are **commercially available** in a suitable material, or could be woven. At any one time, upwards of **500** tartans will be available '**off the shelf**', whilst almost any can be **woven to order** for only a small oncost in as little as a single kilt length.

Here one resource on the web stands **head and shoulders** above the rest. It is the most **complete and comprehensive**, listing **all fabrics** known to be **in production** at all the main tartan (and tweed) weavers, plus thousands more that can be **woven to order**.

It is also, by common consent, the **easiest to use**. And here too I must declare an interest since, as it happens, I designed it myself. This is the **Scotweb Tartan & Fabric Finder**. (See **Resources** at end)

As with the STA's Tartan Ferret, the easiest way to use this is to **search**. Just enter your name, for a list of all **matching surnames** (or companies, etc.).

Clicking on one of these should list all corresponding **unique tartans** (equivalent to the STA's returns).

And clicking on any of these will show a list of all available **fabric variants**, including colour schemes (see above), material choices (wools, silks, etc.), different weights, different weavers, etc.

There are also **Advanced Search** options on the first page, if you prefer to narrow your searching to within any of the above types of category, such as **only 13oz wools**. This makes it **easy** to find the fabric you want amongst the **thousands** of options.

This facility will also let you immediately see the **price** for each fabric **by the metre** (c. 1 yard). You can also go straight to seeing the **price of a kilt** made up in the fabric you have found, with an approximate delivery schedule.

So again, even if you have no intention of buying, our prices are highly competitive, so this will give you a useful **benchmark** against which to assess the deal on offer from your local supplier.

See, **that wasn't so hard**, was it?

Writing this guide I've tried to rise above commercial interest, in a spirit of helping all, for the **benefit of our cultural traditions**.

So let me say now: even if you have no intention of ordering from my company, you are **very welcome** indeed to use this online resource (see back page). This is **totally free to access** for research by anyone.

## Can I just choose a Colour I Like?

**Of course** you can. Having a tartan linked with your **own family** is a nice **option** to have. And it makes for a **great story** when telling people about your kilt.

There are a few private tartans whose registrants have decreed they are only for actual family members. And there are some **copyright** tartans, such as the Burberry check, or most corporate tartans. (And even then, Burberry is closely based on 'Thomson Camel' so there is very often a good substitute.) But other than such exceptions, **anyone can wear any tartan**. And there is no better reason than that you **love the colours!**

And as you now know, the truth is that the **formalisation** of tartans being tied to specific names is a **relatively recent**, mostly 19<sup>th</sup> century, invention. I think it's a **great tradition**, and the sense of **belonging** it brings to millions is the sort of real **social cement** that some may sneer at but we discard at our peril.

But despite that, the **even older tradition** was that different tartans were mostly a **matter of taste**, and of local cultural habits. It happened that these different localities were lived in mostly by particular clans and families, and so the local tartans became associated with them. But there is **no true sense** in which they **owned the patent** on that pattern. So **if you want to wear one, do!**

## Other materials than tartan & wool

Kilts can be made in many **non-tartan** fabrics. But first, note that you can get **tartans in materials** other than the **pure new wool** of which a good kilt is normally made.

I **don't suggest** you do so as an **economy measure**. Frankly the feel of even the best alternative kilting materials is never quite the same. But for those sufferers who are biologically sensitive to wool, there are **hypoallergenic** polyvicose or polycottons, or even silks. These are woven in a wide range of tartan patterns that a good kiltmaker should be able to source for you without difficulty.

If you want a material **other than tartan** for your kilt, the choice is enormous. **Plain colour woollen** kilts are perhaps the next most popular option. These are most common either in **black** for a strikingly modern look, or perhaps **saffron** or another earth colour if you want to follow in the **Irish** tradition. Or you can pretty much name the colour of your choice in plain colours and it can be done.



Or what about combining the two ideas? Today a range of **'black on black'** or **'shadow'** tartans are on sale, which make a subtle and stylish mark. As the name suggests, they replicate a traditional tartan pattern in an all-black garment by combining threads, each of which reflects light distinctly. From some angles the **sett effect** is near-invisible.

**Leather** is also popular. The first firms to offer these were able to demand astronomical prices. And some opportunists still price theirs similarly. But there is little justification. A superb leather kilt of **any colour** should **cost little more** than in a good quality tartan. And by the way, if you are considering a leather kilt, avoid any with a **'fringe'**. They look tawdry. A **clean cut apron edge** is far nicer.

A popular choice, particularly cut as casual kilts for



Canadian Maple Leaf Emblem



Black Leather



Lovat Green Tweed

the fashionable look, are **cotton** materials. These come in many forms, including as **denim** or printed as **camouflage** fabric. Each of these can come in a range of colour-ways so for example if you prefer a lighter blue denim or a darker one, this is just a matter of choice.

And (unless your ‘kiltmaker’ is really just reselling cheaply mass-manufactured factory garments) you should also be able to **specify the colour of thread** used for your kilt should you wish. With a denim kilt this produces some very **attractive finishes**.

The bottom line is that a kilt can be made for you from practically any material of a **suitable weight** for pressing. It can’t be too flimsy, or too heavy, as the pleats would not work at either extreme. But for most materials in the middle, a good kiltmaker should be able to work with **almost any fabric** of your choice. So here’s an idea if you want your kilt to be totally unique. Why not ask to **send your kiltmaker a sample** of your own material?

## What is the right Weight of Fabric?

Tartans in **pure new wool** come in a range of materials from **light weight** to **regimental weight** and it is tartans I shall discuss. (Though similar principles apply to fabrics from **other materials**.) Weavers may give each range an **evocative name**, such as ‘Strome’ or ‘Braeriach’ at Lochcarron. But it’s the **weight that matters**.

Kilts are **most commonly** made either in what are termed “**heavy weight**” fabrics, normally identified as 16oz, or in “**medium weight**” at roughly 13oz.

But a kilt can successfully be made in **lightweight** material as low as 10oz if required, or as heavy as 18oz (‘**regimental weight**’). Both of these in particular involve some **compromises**.

**Regimental Weight** fabric is favoured mostly by the military and by pipe bands. It is **harder wearing** for the heavier duty use their garments have to endure. The thicker fabric **holds its pleats** extremely well and should require pressing less frequently. It is also distinctly **warmer**, which can be a boon in cold climates, but less so in warmer ones.

The **sheer weight** of 18oz material can also be a curse. It is literally a lot to carry around from dawn to dusk. On the other hand, centrifugal force ensures the most **magnificent swing** with every turn, as the pleats’ weight carries them outwards. Note too – tradition dictates that **tartan flashes are never worn** with an 18oz kilt. The regiments who wear these invariably wear diced hose instead. This taboo is so strong that some kiltmakers will **refuse to supply** tartan flashes with a regimental weight kilt.

### What does “16oz” measure?

I’ll bet you don’t know. The **ounce units** commonly used to describe tartan weights measure the imperial weight of a **linear yard** of material, as **actually woven**, at **double width**. So when woven at single width, a 16oz fabric should technically be called 8oz. But that would be confusing!

16oz = 453g ; 1 yard = 91.5cm

You won't normally need to care about the **width** of woven fabrics, unless for example you are making your own kilt. But tartans are almost always woven at either '**double width**' (c. 140cm/55" wide) or else '**single width** (70cm/28").

A traditional kilt uses approximately **8 yards of single width** material — or 4 yards of double. For the latter, a kilt-maker will split the four yards down the middle, and if need be put an invisible seam hidden in the depths of a pleat.

But if **purchasing fabrics**, take care. It is easy to spot a 'bargain' then realise you have only half the amount wanted!

For **sound practical reasons**, most kilt buyers interested primarily in dressing up for formal or more casual occasions are more likely to choose a **medium weight** 13oz fabric, or possibly a **heavy weight** 16oz. Thus these are the most common weights at which tartan fabrics are woven by most of the major weaving mills.

**Medium weight** bestows most of the benefits of a heavier weight, with few of the drawbacks of excess weight and warmth, nor the compromises of a lightweight one. In short, it is an **excellent choice** for most kilt wearers.

A **light weight** fabric would **not normally** be recommended. The main **exception** is if you expect always to be wearing it in an particularly **warm climate** and prefer to stay as cool as possible.

Another good reason for choosing this weight might be if the **tartan** on which you have set your heart is **only available** from the mills at this weight. This can happen, as tartans are also widely woven for **ladies' skirts**, where the lighter fabric is ideal.

The swing will be a little **less impressive**; a light weight kilt will need its pleats **re-pressed** (e.g. by ironing) more regularly; its thinner apron will provide a man with less '**modesty**' when worn without a sporrán; and its **lesser warmth** may be an issue for some. But despite all that, it can be a **good choice for some purchasers**.

## Which weaving mill?

For the more **common tartans** (e.g. a Black Watch, or Royal Stewart) **several mills** may well offer the pattern **from stock** at almost any time, and in a **full range of weights**.

If the **tartan you want** is available in the weight you want, off the shelf, from a **choice of mills**, then you are in luck. You can then **choose by price**, or consider small **colour differences** by ordering a swatch of each to feel and look at.

Bear in mind too when choosing **your kiltmaker** that many firms supply fabrics made by **only one or two** of the main mills. In fact it is exceptional for a company to deal with all the weavers. For **common tartans**, there is no reason this should be a serious problem. But if they try to deceive you into believing a more specialist fabric is not available when you know it to be so, you would be wise to walk away.

At the other end of the spectrum, the sad fact is that **most registered tartans** are rarely if ever actually produced. They **cannot be bought off the shelf** at any time. Many are woven once then never again.

So **do not presume** that just because you have found your favourite tartan you can have a piece of it in your hand next week. But there are **more options**, of which more below.

## What if my tartan is not 'in production'

There are several reasons why your chosen tartan might **not be available** from stock. For one thing, **not all tartans** will be available in **all weights**. If it is a **common pattern**, there is a **good chance** that it will be made in the weight you want by one or other mill. For **rarer patterns**, there will be **fewer choices**.

It might also be a **copyright** tartan, for use exclusively by members of a specific group, such as a company. If this is the case, you will **not be able** to obtain it, even woven to order (below) except with the **permission** of the copyright holder. It would be your task to obtain this.

It might also have **sold out**. Even for the common patterns, weaving a tartan is a significant undertaking for any mill. The weavers plan their **production cycles** around projected demand. But sales are inevitably **erratic**, and a large trade order for example can take all the mills' stocks of a particular pattern at a **moment's notice**. That can then leave a period of **weeks or months** before it will be available again. This is one reason why you should always order as **early as possible** for any important deadline.

There are also a range of **medium-popular** tartans. These drift in and out of production, for example with the **cycles of fashion** in terms of which colours are popular each year. With these tartans, stocks can **stay on the shelf** for a long time, until they are sold out. Then it might be **years** before they are woven again.

And of course there are all the **thousands** of registered tartans which are **never woven** for stock. So what should you do if you want one of these? You really have **three choices**.

The first is simply to **choose another** tartan. But if you have just made up your mind in favour of a pattern you like above all others this will be the **least desirable** option.

A second option is to have one of the major mills weave a **full bale** for you. This will work out a little more **cheaply per yard**, but only because the mill will have a **minimum order** of typically 30-70 yards. This is too much for most domestic purchasers unless you have an extended family you can persuade to buy into the deal. Also, it will take a **few months** to be produced.

The final option is to have a short piece **woven to order** by a specialist weaver. The **minimum amount** available on this basis will normally be a **single eight yard kilt length**. As old local weavers have closed this service is becoming **harder to find**. But there are still a few companies able to do so, my own amongst them.

The price per yard will be a **little higher** than for material produced in bulk and bought off the shelf, but not always by much. And at least in our own case, the schedule in-

cluding kilt making can still work out at around three months. So for most rarer tartans this is a **surprisingly realistic** option.

## Swatches



You may be **confident** that you know what your tartan (or other fabric) will look like. Or you may be quite **tolerant** of variations, however it should arrive. But if neither of these apply, it may be prudent to **request a swatch** of the **actual material** you intend to use, prior to commissioning the making of a kilt or garment in it.

This lets you verify that the **colour scheme** and **thickness** or **feel** are as you expect. Most importantly, it ensures there are no **unpleasant surprises** close to your big day, if it is for an occasion.

Many kiltmakers will make a **small charge** for this service. This may seem high for a piece of fabric measuring only a **few inches square**. But most will then **deduct that cost** from the price of any subsequent sale of a kilt in that tartan.

Suppliers who offer the service free know well (after many tiring trips to remove a very heavy bale from stock, cut a small piece, then return that heavy bale to storage, and finally to post it out) that many requests are for **dolls' clothes** or pretty **corsages**. The charge is really there to help limit the service to genuine customers.



# Selecting Your Kiltmaker

It doesn't matter if you're choosing a traditional 8 yard kilt, a fashion kilt, or even a cheap 'party kilt'. You still need to find a trustworthy firm to supply it. This means a company with both tailoring and customer service skills – and, sadly, one who won't cheat you (or worst case, leave you in hospital – see below). Here you'll find all you need to know to ensure you're dealing with a decent and honest company, who can produce at least a decent and honest product.

- **Quality Kiltmaking**
- **Finding a Firm you can Trust**
- **Spotting the Fraudsters**
- **High Street or Online?**
- **Ordering your Kilt**

## Quality kiltmaking

Many factors define a **well made kilt**. The quality of the **raw materials** is of course the first thing, and especially the **fabric**.

If you know for a fact that your tartan is coming from one of the **big Scottish mills** (e.g. Lochcarron, Strathmore, or House of Edgar) you will have **no problems**. Likewise if your fabric is being custom woven by a reliable **specialist tartan weaver in Scotland**, such as Glen Affric Weavers whom my own companies use. But if you are unlucky enough to have chanced upon a firm using suppliers without specialist tartan skills (which are mostly, but not all, in Scotland) I suggest you look again. The **material quality is crucial** and this speaks badly of their competence.

A proper kilt should only be made from high quality **worsted** pure new wool. Worsted is a type of wool (originally made in Worstead, England, in the 18th century) made of **long-staple fibres**. These are combed to remove unwanted short fibres, and so that they lie parallel. These are then twisted extra tightly and finely woven to **inhibit creasing**.

All good weavers of kilting tartans will make their fabric with what is called a **kilting selvedge**. This is a special **near-invisible stitching** along the fringe that resembles a **clean cut**. Cheaper tartans made on high speed rapier looms use a tuck-in technique instead. This puts a thicker hem on the last half inch or so which looks less professional.

The next thing to check is probably the **precision of the pleating**, and the expertise with which these are sewn in place. This may not be easy for the novice to assess, which is why cut-price tourist shops in Edinburgh do a roaring trade in badly sewn and haphazardly pressed garments.



Look for **regularity of pattern** and **neatness of finish**, with unobtrusive but **robust stitches** that will stand the test of time.

And the real **test of quality** lies, as ever, in the **detail**. Have the **belt loops** been made near invisible by ensuring their tartan pattern **exactly matches** the pattern beneath onto which they are sewn? Do the **runners** which hold the strap buckles do likewise? Is the **apron double-fringed**, with an extra layer of fabric sewn back-to-back down its edge for extra strength and to ensure it hangs well? Is it **well-lined** (in its upper parts) with a nice strong calico or equivalent that will neither chafe nor wear out? Are the **straps and buckles sturdy** enough to last for years? If you can see **samples** of their work for yourself, these are all things you can **appraise**.

When dealing at a **distance**, you should look for personal **recommendations** from satisfied past customers, to tell you what you cannot see for yourself. My own company sites publish all customer reviews ‘warts and all’ unedited; firms not doing this should at least be willing to forward you authentic references from satisfied customers. But bear in mind that sometimes these are written by **marketeers**. So ask yourself do these have the **ring of authenticity**? Only you can decide.

## Finding a Firm you can Trust

There are a great many **reputable and trustworthy** firms who either make or sell kilts, in fact far too many for me to hope to list here. If you make your choices wisely there are countless sources from which to obtain a kilt and accessories that will make you proud for decades to come.

Sad to say, there are also rather too many companies that are either incompetent, fraudulent, or both. And this regrettably includes a few ‘big names’ – high street firms that trade on a heritage image, or on forgery and copyright abuse, and by spending heavily on dishonest advertising. You need only talk to any reputable member of the trade to hear the same names time and again, spoken with venom. But I’m afraid the laws of libel mean I can’t repeat them here!

So instead, I’ll give you a few tips. Use these as a litmus test, to find out if the firm you’re speaking to has a solid reputation. I’d urge you to take this advice seriously, or you may discover too late that your bargain deal was a second-rate copy of the real thing, that embarrasses you when you appear in public.

## Decide your budget

Now that you know what to look for, you are ready to focus on finding exactly the **kilt you want**. Your next decision largely comes down to **budget**

There are basically **three tiers** of kilt suppliers to consider. Once you’ve decided which tier you wish to buy at, your task is simpler. You just find a **good supplier** at that level.

## Luxury kiltmakers

The luxury kilt purchaser has it lucky, as there are really only **two names** of note at this level, and they are **easy to differentiate**. So if you're in the market for a top-end product and don't mind paying a premium, it shouldn't take you long to make your mind up.

The two brands in question are of course **Kinloch Anderson** and **Manley Richardson**. Both companies' products are of **outstanding quality**, so your decision will be mostly about image and mystique.

**Kinloch Anderson's** reputation is largely founded on its connections with the British **aristocracy**, to whom they are regular suppliers. This gives those who wear its garments a certain cachet amongst **traditionalists**. This is despite (or possibly because of) the presence of **no visible label**. This brand is probably the automatic first choice for a large part of the British establishment.

**Manley Richardson** takes a different approach with more discernable style for more visible kudos. You could say Manley Richardson is like a Bentley or Aston Martin, to Kinloch Anderson's Rolls Royce. They stamp **subtle monograms** onto classy metal work, **emboss** their thick leather straps, use **embroidered linings** and so on. You can even **customize** your kilt such as by specifying **gold or silver** finish to a choice of **modern or traditional** buckles. Still discretely **understated**, the effect is undeniably **stunning** on the right tartan and certainly **stands out** from the crowd. In the end it's your choice that matters when deciding which to wear.

## Quality kiltmakers

Here the market gets a little more crowded, though there are still only a **few names** of which I have enough personal experience to **recommend with confidence**.

It would be disingenuous not to mention my own firms, **ScotwebStore.com** (and the more specialist **Kiltstore.net**) first. We were in fact the **world's first company** to market kilts online (back in 1995, when computers were still steam-powered). Those **years of experience** do matter. And I'm massively proud of the standards we meet both in **product quality** and in the levels of staff training and therefore **customer service** we deliver. We have what I am sure is the **world's widest range** of kilts, together with the **largest tartan finder** on the web. And we're very **price competitive**. So please feel free to call our **toll-free numbers** or **email**, if only for a friendly word of advice.

But I'm glad to say there are also many **other companies** that still strive to **do things properly**. In particular this means sourcing products only from **reputable and authentic** producers. Other names I'd have no hesitation in purchasing from personally include **Lochcarron of Scotland**, **Hector Russell**, **House of Tartan**, and **Saville Row Kilts**. I've also heard good things about **Utilikilts** in the US for those wanting a distinctive work-wear style garment.

There are also many **other local specialists**, too numerous to mention, who will provide you with an excellent service. This includes **small firms** scattered around the world, and **individual kiltmakers**, many of whom will produce an **outstanding garment** for you. You may incur a slight **premium** of course with fewer economies of scale. But this can be

well **worth** it if the quality of work is there. The key thing is to **know in advance** the quality of result you'll get. And now that you know what to look for, that's easy.

But be aware, there are also a fair few **substandard suppliers** around. These include some with **illustrious histories** or using **prominent advertising**. The good ones I know I've named above, so you can reach your own conclusions. Try out some of my **Tips below**, to sort the rough from the smooth!

## Cheap kilts

If you're really **on a budget** then again you have lots of options... but most are not great! The **risks** can range from **humiliation** to **hospitalisation**.

Your best bet is to buy a **used quality kilt**. This will **look far better** and **last far longer** than the rubbish rip-offs described below. A good idea is to look for an **ex-hire kilt** from one of the rental specialists. These will often be sold on before they are showing serious signs of wear and tear. It may take some **hunting around**, but there are bargains to be had. Or try a specialist second-hand clothing emporium. Here in Edinburgh the **charity shops** are always worth a quick look. And there's a wonderful 'pre owned' clothes store called **Armstrongs** which usually has a good choice pre-owned kilts. It's always worth a visit if you're in town.

But if you find a bargain that seems **too good to be true**, it almost certainly **is**. The **price** of a proper kilt is mostly the decent quality **fabric** itself. The rest covers a **skilled** process, even for well made machine-sewed versions let alone a hand-stitched kilt.

So when you see **prices much lower** than the more competitive Quality suppliers above, you can be fairly sure you're being sold **rubbish**. Yes, even when it's called 'top quality'.

Cheap imitation kilts can even be literally **life-threatening!** One 'quality' retailer is known to have sold 'authentic' kilts made of a cheap fibre which **burst into flames**, and **melted onto the skin**, when exposed to a naked flame. (Think cigarette.) You you have **been warned**.

### Why Care?

Authentic producers' latest copyright designs are sent abroad to be replicated, usually badly. This theft is **destroying** our **historic industry**.

It drives good, honest craftspeople out of business, **losing their skills** to future generations. It destroys creativity – why spend weeks designing a beautiful new sporran or buckle, when you know it will be **shoddily copied** within weeks, and sold for less than it costs you to make?

This is fine if you only need a disposable **party kilt**, to wear to a match or stag night. But please **don't consider** turning up as a guest at a **wedding** in one of these. Often these 'kilts' are just **ladies' skirts**, mass-made by **unskilled workers** in cheap labour economies.

They might use **sub-standard 'tartans'** of the **wrong patterns**, or be dyed in **odd shades**. If you've ever visited a market in Asia you'll know that "silk" usually doesn't mean silk, and so here "pure wool" **could be almost anything**.

**Ebay** is another real minefield where the discount **purveyors of rubbish** are just a click away. You may find the odd bargain there, but usually only if it's obviously an **individual** selling a decently made garment that's been grown out of, for example. A long list of **suspiciously great deals** is a warning sign you shouldn't ignore.

## Spotting the Cheats

### Web Site Clues

Do you see **very cheap kilts** or packages (even beside higher priced 'authentic' versions)? Serious kiltmakers don't touch the budget fabrics needed so sell at such low prices.

Are there 'kilt' ranges in **stock sizes** on their site? These are mostly from factories, not kiltmakers. You could even be sent one as 'made to measure'. No man should wear an off the peg kilt. They usually look awful.

Do they also sell cheap **tourist souvenir goods**? This can be a sign of the lower leagues.

Here's a 5-step guide with **tests** you can use. Nothing is all it seems on the surface. Even **images** you see online may be the **originals**. **Assurances** of tartan from a named mill are **no guarantee**. Even **printed labels** of respected brands may be suspect.

So **how** can you tell? The cheats have an **achilles heel**. Their staff are poorly paid, overworked, and hardly trained. They can't give the **expertise** or **service** you expect in this specialist market. So now you can **unmask** them.

1. **email** them with **any question**. You're looking for whether you get a **proper answer within a working day** or so. Good companies employ good customer service staff.
2. **phone** them (during their country's office hours) again with **any question**. Do they **pick up promptly**? Does the person who answers sound **trained**, or like casual labour on minimum wage? And finally **who hangs up**, them or you?
3. find out if they sell cut-price **non-wool kilts**. If they sell cheaper mixes (unless as hypoallergenic) end it there. There's a risk **this is what you'll get**, whatever you pay for.
4. try them on a **tricky question**. Again, it doesn't really matter what. Just make sure it's something a **trained salesperson** ought to know. If they seem not even to **understand the question** and run for a Manager, you can start to worry.
5. ask for help **identifying your tartan**. By now you can predict a good answer. If your name is popular, they should be willing to **explain** all your options in **as much depth** as you need – including different weights, shades, and versions of your tartan. If your name is so unusual no tartan exists, they should be able to recommend **relevant alternatives**, for example based on links to **clans and septs**, or on the **geographical ori-**

**gins** of your family. If they go **straight** to suggesting a universal tartan they have in stock, enough said.

It's with great **regret** that I've had to devote so much space here to describing the **dark underbelly** of this business. But **take heart**. Now you're fully aware of what to look for, you can go out with confidence and **get yourself something great!**

## High Street or Online?

I'm mostly focussed on companies with at least some **Internet presence**. Why? At least 99% of the world's people will have no physical kilt retailer within easy reach. And in any case, all the **same lessons** apply to dealing with **High Street** outlets.

And, perhaps surprisingly, this is no real problem. If you use a **reputable** firm, and follow your kiltmaker's measuring advice carefully, kiltmaking conducted **online** (or by phone) should be **trouble-free** and **easy**.

If you are lucky enough to have a high street kilt supplier nearby, there's obviously an **advantage** to dealing with your kiltmaker **face to face**. Depending on your location this may be a little more **expensive**, as bricks and mortar retailers have more **staff and overheads** to pay for. But the benefits of eye to eye contact may make this **worth it**.

If there's only **one local outlet** in your area, you may be tempted to give them your business out of local **loyalty**. In principle I'd absolutely support this. It's important to help your local economy, and personal contact is a wonderful bonus.

But this is a lifelong purchase for you, so do **ask questions**. Make sure they know their stuff. I've seen some shocking work by well-meaning but less experienced kiltmakers. The enthusiasm is great, but you don't want to pay to be their tailor's dummy! **Read** this full booklet, and do **comparison shopping** online, to be sure their **prices** are fair and their kiltmaking **skills** adequate.

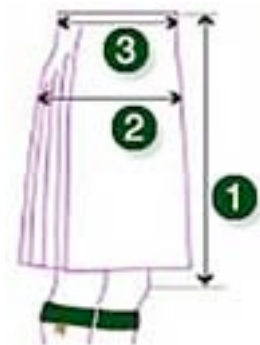
## Ordering your kilt

**You're ready to order!** Congratulations. Before you do so, **read further below** to make sure you have everything for the **complete outfit** or look you want to achieve. But for now, let's get down to **brass tacks**.

It's important to allow yourself plenty of time before any important **deadline**. Depending on **your kilt-maker**, and on whether your tartan must be woven, your kilt could take from a **few weeks** to a **few months** to produce. It's best to leave a good **safety margin**, in case the fabric you want suddenly sells out at its mill, which does happen.

When you're ready to **measure** for your kilt, your kiltmaker will specify how they want this done. But there are usually **three** measurements needed. Ask **someone else** to take these for you. Never measure yourself, as you'll **flex** while doing so.

The first measurement is the **length** of your kilt – a straight line often taken from your navel (though the kilt will usually start a couple of inches higher) down to where you want the bottom edge (or selvedge). This is partly personal taste. The bottom hem of your kilt can fall anywhere from the middle of your knee cap to an inch or so above the knee. **A third of the way down the knee cap** is about ideal. Certainly do not cover the knee entirely. That looks a little daft.



Next is your **hip measurement**. This is taken quite loosely around the broadest circumference of your rump.

Finally is your **waist**. For a **traditional kilt** this is **not the same** as your trouser waist. But a **casual kilt** is **the same** as trousers. This measurement (for an 8 yarder) is taken above your hips and below your rib cage, roughly at the navel. It is best taken over a shirt and reasonably **snugly**, as this is what holds your kilt up! But do not **constrict your breathing** by pulling too tight. You should be able to get your hand down the front

Finally, once you've taken all these measurements, start all over and **take them again!** You can't be too careful, and it's surprising how often a simple check reveals a simple mistake. This is a life purchase, so it's worth getting right.

### How Fast?

My own firm's **record** for a complete kilt outfit was an order placed on **Wednesday** and delivered to **England** by **Friday**. It was worn in the US the next day!

This was **made to measure** from scratch, using tartan from a mill in the North of Scotland. But believe me, you **do not** want to pay for the favours and **surcharges** needed to make it possible.

A good kiltmaker may also ask your **height**. This is just to ‘sanity check’ your measurements against what they would expect from experience.

To avoid error or any later dispute, it is wise to send measurements **in writing**. Do so by a web form or email, and not by phone. And make sure you receive **your own copy** by return.

If your supplier queries the measurements you give, and asks you to **measure again**, do so, from scratch. No kiltmaker can afford to accept a return, just because you have measured yourself wrongly. A custom-made garment is **hard to resell**.

On the other hand, a quality firm will do its utmost to **remedy all problems**, whatever the source. And of course, if you give the right dimensions and **kiltmaker makes an error**, you have every right to a refund or **replacement** if the mistake cannot be rectified.

So you’re **ready to order** your kilt! Now you just have to wait.

Isn’t anticipation a **lovely feeling**?

## Adjustments

A kilt is basically a **made-to-measure** garment. But if you lose or put on **weight** there is limited scope to make corrections.

A kilt’s **straps** (ideally two on the waist and one on the hip) usually have about five **holes**, with the centre one or so placed to fit ‘correctly’. If you expect to change weight, you can ask for this to be at one **extreme**.

You can also request **extension straps** with seven holes, as often fitted for the hire industry. But these look ungainly, and can cause the apron or pleats to hang wrongly.

The straps can also be **repositioned** with a little expert tailoring. But only within strict limits, or else the pleats or apron will no longer be **correctly aligned**.

# Outfits for Occasions

What you will wear with your kilt depends strongly on where you'll be wearing it. For **casual** wear, it's mostly about personal **style**, so I'll just give a few ideas. But for more **formal** events most people observe an established set of **conventions**.

- **Formal (or Evening) Outfits**
- **Semi-Formal Outfits**
- **Daywear Outfits**
- **Casual & Fashion Outfits**

You're ready to buy your kilt. But wait. Now you want to **think about** what you'll wear with it. For one thing, most kilt retailers will **discount a full outfit** bought together.

**Each of the outfits** described below is **based around the style of jacket or top**. You then complete it with further garments or **accessories**, in styles **chosen to suit** the main piece. These are often **themed** (e.g. each embellished with your clan crest, or perhaps with a thistle emblem). But they can equally be diverse and individual, as you prefer.

If you're not clear **what all the other bits are**, we cover them in the following chapter.

## Formal (or Evening) Outfits

The classic formal Highland Dress outfit is called the **Prince Charlie**. The Prince Charlie Outfit is ideal for black or white tie events where ordinary men wear a **tuxedo or morning suit**.

It is also appropriate to formal occasions like **weddings**, where guests might otherwise dress in a plain business suit. In short, it's what you wear when you want to make your **best impression**.

A good quality **Prince Charlie jacket** is an impressive garment. It is usually simply set off by a simple black **bow tie** and wing collar **white shirt**.

The jacket should have neatly shaped **lapels**, normally set off in a quality satin fabric. It has a dazzling array of bright **buttons** on the cuffs, front, vest, and braided epaulettes.





A Prince Charlie jacket should be made in fairly heavy pure wool fabric called '**barathea**' – a worsted material with a subtly textured twill hopsack weave. **Black** is most usual, though green, purple, blue, or other traditional colours are acceptable too. Ask your vendor for advice if you are uncertain.

**Check** that your supplier's jackets really are all **100% pure wool barathea**; if not, make a hasty exit. Quality retailers would only sell pure wool. And cheap fabrics may not just be less well cut, but ask questions of the retailer's **quality standards** and even integrity.

The weight of wool used should be at least **13oz**. This gives a good **solid feel** to the garment, and helps it to keep its shape. **Heavier weights** are sometimes also available but can be very **warm**. And for **hot climates** you might seek out a **10oz** alternative.

The Prince Charlie is almost always worn together with a **matching vest** (or waistcoat) so these are generally sold together as one item. (When pricing competing suppliers, make sure you are comparing **like with like**.) Due to the way this vest is cut, a belt and **buckle** are **not usually worn** with this outfit. The buckle can cause the waistcoat to **ride up**, and would be hidden anyway.

At the upper extreme of formality, there are also the **Sherrifmuir** and **Mon-trose** doublets. These distinctively traditional jackets are normally worn only in **special circumstances** such as at military dinners or by toastmasters. They are frankly **too stuffy** for everyday formal wear.

Being a dramatic formal outfit, the **accessories** chosen to complete a Prince Charlie outfit should be **similarly grand**. In particular, a **full-dress sporran** is normally chosen as it will splendidly enhance the Prince Charlie's impressiveness. And the same applies to other accessories (see below) as there is generally scope for more **luxurious display** than with less formal outfits.

The ultimate footwear for this outfit would be a pair of hand-made **Glenfinnans**, as in the picture above. But more usually **ghillie brogue shoes** are worn. This traditional style has **no tongue**, and **extra long laces** with **tassles** that are wrapped twice around the calves before being tied at the front. This completes the outfit with **excellence**.

## Semi-formal outfits

A semi-formal kilt outfit is ideal for business or for social **occasions at which a business suit** is otherwise worn. There are some daytime events at which it is fine. But mostly semi-formal Scottish dress suits **less formal evening** occasions. Much of the effect depends on your **accessories**, of which more below.

The standard jacket for a semi-formal outfit is the **Argyll** (sometimes spelled Argyle). Hence the semi-formal package is often called an Argyll Outfit. The Argyll is still an impressive jacket, with **bright buttons** on its pockets and cuffs. But it will have fewer

than the Prince Charlie, and its lapels should be made from the same barathea as the rest of the jacket.

There are **two other jackets** that fit into the same category as the Argyll: the Braemar and the Crail. These are essentially much the same jacket, but with **different styles of cuff** for subtly greater or lesser formality.

The **Braemar** will have a fancier Prince Charlie style cuff, with an array of buttons, whilst the **Crail** is plainer and ideal for those who prefer less ostentation.

The Argyll style jackets should ideally also **worn with a vest** (or waistcoat). But this is more a matter of taste, warmth, and how formal you want it to be. So a retailer will usually offer this as an **optional add-on** with an Argyll, rather than included as with the Prince Charlie.

How you **accessorise** your semi-formal kilt outfit will make a huge difference to its look. You may want to consider buying a **few items of the same type** in different styles. This is a great value way to give yourself **several outfits** for little more than the **price of one!**

Principally this means having at least **two sporrans**, perhaps a plainer one for regular use plus a semi-dress one smarter events. (You would not usually wear a full dress sporran with this outfit.) Add a few **additional accessories** in different styles and you'll have an **instant wardrobe** ideal for almost any occasion.

Footwear will depend on the occasion. But for more formal events you should certainly be looking to obtain a pair of **ghillie brogues**. For more casual events ordinary **business or walking shoes** may be okay.



## Daywear outfits

For most **daytime** events, particularly when outdoors, you would wear a Lovat or dark **tweed jacket** instead of the Argyll, with or without matching vest, and horn buttons. This more country gentleman look is extremely classy, speaking of **refined tastes**, and is chosen by many Highland Dress experts even in place of the Prince Charlie for more **formal occasions**.

The **tweed** can be in a range of colours, with the subdued 'lovat' greens, blues, and purples being particularly favoured. This would probably be worn with a **white plain collar shirt** and **plain coloured neck tie** of wool or tweed wool, in a subdued shade.

With this outfit the choice of accessories is typically plainer. The **sporrán** would be of the **daywear** variety (see below) with far less ornamentation (though a good one can still be a spectacular piece). And here, a good pair of **stout shoes** is really the ideal footwear



## Casual & Fashion outfits



For truly **casual** occasions, your scope for invention and **self-expression** grows even more. In fact, you can largely make up your own ideas here, particularly if you are aiming for a real **fashion look**.

Then the sky is the limit and it's really just down to your **personal style** in finding new ways to wear your favourite kilt.

But if you're wanting a casual look that still evokes your **Celtic heritage**, there are a few special items you will probably want in your wardrobe. If your aim is to attract members of the opposite sex, you'll find few better ways to do so!

Chief amongst these will be one or more **jacobite shirts**, which come in a wide range of materials and colours. This **romantic loose-cut design** uses a leather or cord tie at the neck as a closure, which is often best tied in a simple loop knot.

Together with your jacobite shirt, or even paired with a t-shirt or other informal top, consider getting yourself a Chieftain or Swordsman waistcoat or potain.

Available in a range of leathers, tweeds, or barathea wools, in a wide choice of colours, these **historically styled garments** are **exceptionally masculine**. In fact the sleeveless arms were originally to allow for greater mobility whilst fighting!

If your budget will stretch, consider having **more than one** vest to suit your mood at different events. At the very least, most men will want at least one vest like this in their wardrobe. It's an easy way to create a **totally different outfit** for your kilt, alongside more formal accessories.

A casual outfit involving a jacobite shirt and/or historic potain style vest would normally be worn only with a plain **day-wear sporrán**, as the fancier sporrán styles would seem incongruous. But notice the **historically inspired pouch sporrans** that are now available. These will complement this outfit wonderfully.

For footwear, plain **chunky walking shoes** or even boots will look great with this package. But for a fashion look, even a pair of well worn running shoes can work fantastically. At the upper end (f your budget stretches) one producer is hand-making historic **Culloden** shoes, which will look superb with such an outfit.



# Kilt Outfit Accessories

As you'll have noticed, a full kilt outfit includes quite a few pieces other than the kilt itself. Most have some historical meaning, apart from just looking great. So don't worry if you're a little confused about what these all are, and how to wear them. This section should sort you out!.

- Are they all **Necessary** and must they **Match**?
- The **Sporran**
- The **Sgian Dubh**
- The **Kilt Pin**
- **Belts & Buckles**
- **Flashes**
- **Ghillie Brogues**
- **Kilt Hose**
- **Fly Plaid & Brooch**
- **Hats & Caps**

It would take a book the size of an encyclopedia to go into the **full history** and meaning of each accessory. For that I can only suggest you trawl the Internet for the myths and stories behind each. Here I can only touch on their **origins**, tell you how they are **worn**, and suggest a few **tips** to look out for.

## Are they all **Necessary** and must they **Match**?

No. You certainly **do not need** all the extras. A kilt can look **fantastic with a t-shirt** and trainers. On the other hand, if you're wanting to **fit in** at a formal **social event**, you'll **want most** of them. The ones that are strictly **optional** are the **fly plaid**, and a hat or **cap**. Both of these are a matter of **personal choice**.

As for **matching**, the answer is **both yes, and no**. The key thing is that all pieces of an outfit should be of about the **same degree of formality**. So a Prince Charlie jacket goes with a full dress sporran, whilst a jacobite shirt would only be paired with a daywear sporran. It just looks silly otherwise. But if you follow that **one simple rule** (formal with formal, casual with casual, etc.) you **won't go far wrong**.

Also on matching, the one **big no-no** would be to **mix tartans** in the same outfit. It's not so important if you have a Buchanan Modern kilt and Buchanan Modern plaid from different mills that look slightly different – that's just a wardrobe. But pairing a blue kilt with a red plaid (or even just **different tartans** of the same hue) should be avoided at all costs. It's not just convention. It **looks dreadful**.

Many kilt wearers do also prefer their outfit to **'hang together'** in its **decorative symbolism**. For example the sporran, sgian dubh, and kilt pin might each be adorned with a **similar motif**, such as your clan crest, or a stag or thistle emblem, etc. But it is just as acceptable to make up an outfit from an **eclectic selection** of pieces that appeal to you individually on their own merits. So this is a matter of your **own taste**.

## The Sporran

**After the kilt** itself and the **jacket** or top that goes with it, the **sporran is the next most important** piece in any highland dress outfit. Apart from your choice of tartan, this is where you get to really **express your individual style**.

And a sporran really is **functional**, as you'll find the first time you go out in a kilt. Why? Well, a kilt has no pockets! The sporran serves as your **purse or bag** (which is in fact where its name comes from, in Gaelic). It will hold your keys, coins, and other odds and sods you'll need with you. Oh, and it also act as a **cod-piece**, to protect your modesty!

A good supplier should provide at least a basic **chain or strap free** of charge with any sporran you purchase, sized for you. Check this before ordering. You might also like to upgrade to a **fancier chain**, of which there are several styles available on the market, in **celtic or other themes**. These can be paired with almost any outfit.

When driving, dancing, playing golf, or doing anything where the sporran's **movement** might hurt, the chain can be **turned** around the waist to hang casually on the **hip**.

And again, a quick word of **warning**. A good sporran will be expertly made in quality materials to last a lifetime. But read the section above about **cheap forgeries**. Authentic sporran makers have suffered hugely from this villainy. It would be a pity to spoil your elegant new outfit with a shoddy copy that falls apart in months. So beware.

There are **hundreds of sporrans** to choose from. And many kilt enthusiasts **own a few**, as it lets you **change the look** of your outfit in an instant. They fall into **three main groups**, as we've already touched on. Let's look at each in turn.

# Dress Sporrans

A dress sporran is distinctly **elaborate** or **plush** in its design. It can come in a wide variety of shapes and styles.

Each is distinguished from its less formal counterparts by a **body dressed in fur** (or some other lush material) topped by a highly **ornate cantle** (the upper flap which closes it). This is often brilliantly executed metal work. It will almost always include **three tassels** (straight, or criss-crossed) on the front for decoration, finished in fur and metal to complement the main piece.



The United States does not permit the import of **sealskin**. So sporrans shipped from the UK into the US will always have an equine or bovine **substitute** instead.

To Scottish eyes, where seals are one of the **least endangered** species known to man, this is not always easy to understand – and from a nation where **hunting** seems almost a national religion. But then, seals do look quite cute with very **big eyes**. I guess.

Within these general rules, the variety of styles is enormous. Furs can range from simple **sealskin** to thick rabbit, fox, musquash, or even more **extraordinary examples**. Materials like crocodile skin or highly decorated leather are also possible.

A good dress sporran's **cantle** will most often be **pewter**, or **silver** for more luxurious designs. And decoration is diverse. Common design themes include **celtic knotwork**, **clan crests** (usually available for all the main Scottish clans) **thistles**, the **Lion Rampant**, **stags**, **Masonic** symbols for the brotherhood, **shamrocks** for the Irish, or **dragons** for the Welsh. But there are few hard and fast rules, and it all comes down to taste.

Being considered **formal**, a dress sporran is mostly worn with a **Prince Charlie outfit**. But some individuals do choose to match this most impressive article with less formal outfits. And I have even seen them used to **stunning effect** when worn incongruously as a **fashion** item, perhaps set off by a well worn t-shirt.

## Semi-Dress Sporrans

A semi-dress sporran typically has a plainer **leather flap** on its upper part. But it retains a **fur body**, usually in this case of simple **sealskin** (again except for the US, see above.)

Its flap will normally be **decorated** using **tooled stamping, studs, or badges**. These use similar design themes as for the dress sporran. And again, **three tassels** should complement the item's style.

The overall effect, as its name suggests, is less formal than a full dress sporran, but more so than a daywear version. In short, it is the **most versatile**. If you are only going to get one sporran, this is the range to look at.

There are, again, **hundreds of designs** to choose from, and any good retailer should offer you a choice of at least a few dozen of each. This is important as within this general category there is quite a range of designs, from fairly fancy to quite plain.

You should choose one (or more) to suit your personality and **tastes**, but also to suit the **occasions** at which you expect to be wearing your kilt. Again, the more **elaborate** styles are more suited to fairly **formal** occasions, whilst a **plainer** sporran is ideal for **daytime** events when you don't want to look too dressed up.



## Daywear Sporrans

A daywear sporran is **relatively plain** all over. It almost always uses ordinary **leather** both for the **main body and flap**.

But 'plain' is relative. You again have **many choices**. These can range from simple **plain leather** through to quite **elaborately tooled and studded** examples. Many of these use the same **design themes** as above. And the **tassles** will in this case be leather too.

Also in this category you may today find a few more surprising choices. Your kilt supplier might well offer a **Jacobite pouch sporran**, to go with your casual **Jacobite outfit** and swordsman or chieftain vest. Or you can now buy (or have made) sporrans in denim, camouflage, or other fabrics, to match a casual kilt of the **same material**.





## Pipers' Sporrans

The name says it all. These **excessively furry** or hairy and **somewhat oversized** fellows are generally only worn by **pipers** or members of the **military**. If you don't know that you're **expected** to wear it, then it's **probably wrong** for your outfit.

The only exception might be for a **high fashion** look, as part of a very personal casual outfit. Here its very incongruity could be turned to advantage.



## Ladies' Sporran Bags

A quick mention should go to this relatively recent innovation: the use of sporrans by women as a **handbag**. This can be done with **any sporran**, as it just requires your own shoulder strap or chain in place of the normal man's waist strap. It's a **simple but stunning** idea, which has been catching on fast amongst women in the know.

## The Sgian Dubh

A Sgian Dubh (pronounced *ski-un doo*) is a small (c. 6" / 15cm) **sheathed knife**. It is worn **tucked into the hose** (on the right side for right handers) with only the **handle showing**.

From a good supplier the blade will be of **hardened steel** and so can be **sharpened**. But its only regular use today is to **cut the Haggis** at Burns Suppers. Oh, and it's useful for **peeling oranges**.

The **handle** of your sgian dubh may well be **decorated**, as this is the part that shows publicly. This could be **black wood** (or imitation wood) or made of real or artificial **stag horn**. It might have further ornamentation on its **end**.

The handle might well also be



decorated with **crests**, or **thistle** emblems or other symbols (as described above for dress sporrans) emblazoned on one side. These would of course be the **outward side** when worn.

It is quite common too for this to include one or more **jewels**. It is possibly ideal if the colour of these is chosen to **complement** a colour from the **tartan** of your kilt.

The sgian dubh is part of **all proper outfits**, if only for this knife's historical resonance. **Tradition** says that these blades were once **hidden** in a pocket under the armpit. But it became customary to position the implement **more openly** in the hose as a courtesy and **sign of friendship**.

The name comes from the Gaelic for **black (dubh) dagger (sgian)**. The blackness refers not only to the hard jet **black bog oak** from which handles were often made, but also to way it was **concealed** (i.e. 'black' as in blackmail or black market).

In these days of heightened concern about **security**, you may wish to be **discreet** about where you wear this as part of your costume. It would certainly be unwise when going through **airport checkpoints**. And other public spaces might similarly take exception. However, realistically most **sensible** people fortunately still recognise that its intention is entirely **ceremonial**, you will generally find few problems.

A plastic **dummy sgian dubh** is available for children's outfits or other uses.

## The Kilt Pin

The story goes that **Queen Victoria** (yes, her again) once had to use her hat pin **modestly** to secure the kilt of a soldier during her inspection on a **blustery day** – literally a private on parade! Since then it has been **traditional** for a kilt pin to be worn with the kilt.

In theory the pin is there to keep the kilt's apron from **flapping**, though this is rarely really necessary. It does lend a little **weight** to help the apron **hang well**.

Your kilt pin should be worn on the **right hand side** of the front apron, about **4 inches up** from the hem and **2 inches in** from the fringe. Note that it must be pinned through the **front apron only**, to prevent tearing caused by stresses between the different layers. This also slightly helps to preserve your modesty when you sit.

The style of your kilt pin is entirely a matter of your **personal choice**. There is a huge variety available. These range from a simple **pewter sword**, to elaborate ones using **silver and real jewels**.

The range of **icons and symbols** once again generally



match ones found on sgian dubhs, sporrans, and buckles etc. Many people like these to **complement** each other, but this is optional.

## Belts & Buckles

Neither of these is strictly needed as your kilt should stay up without it. But a belt and buckle is a traditional part of **semi-formal outfits** like the Argyll, and is optional with **casual outfits** too. However, it is normally **omitted with the Prince Charlie**, as it tends not to sit well with the style of waistcoat or vest for that jacket, and would in any case be invisible beneath it.



The buckle presents yet another opportunity for **self-expression**. You can wear a unique design or one chosen to coordinate with the theme of other pieces in your outfit. A buckle might be **silver** coloured or **brass** (perhaps depending on the shades in your kilt) and come in a variety of shapes.

A similar range of **emblems or motifs** are available as for sporrans, sgian dubhs, or kilt pins. These include thistles, clan crests, or Celtic designs for example, as well as shamrocks or dragons for Irish and Welsh outfits.

The **belt** itself can be **plain** or **patterned** (such as by elaborate tooling in **Celtic knot-work** for example) and usually comes in brown or black **leather**. A recent innovation has been the introduction of **velcro** fastenings as a means of adjusting the belt's length, which makes a fiddly process far simpler... particularly useful should you ever wish to let it out a little at the end of an especially fine meal!

## Flashes

Flashes are brightly **coloured strips** of wool or cotton that hang from the folds in your kilt hose. They are in effect a **decorative garter**, that help to **hold the hose (socks) up**.

Bring the **hose turnover down** to cover half the double loop of the flash with only the **bottom half showing**, to the **outside of the leg**.

Flashes are often **plain-coloured**, of a shade best selected to reflect a main colour in your kilt. However some firms (including my own) will often include **tartan ones** made from the same material as your kilt at no extra charge if ordered at the same time as the kilt itself. Note though that tartan flashes are **never worn with an 18oz weight kilt**, by regimental tradition, so would not be made.



This can add a definite touch of **sophistication** to an outfit. But some people may still **prefer their flashes plain**.

## Ghillie Brogues

A **ghillie** is the Scottish name for a **gamekeeper**, or in a hunter's or fisherman's helper. And the brogue that takes his name is a sort of **shoe without a tongue** and with decorative **lacing up the instep**. This is the traditional shoe to wear with a more formal highland dress outfit.

Always **shiny**, ghillie brogues come in various **quality levels** like any shoe, which can have leather or composite soles. Their leather is typically **highly decorated**, and they can feature **metal heels** for a loud tap when dancing.

The other distinctive feature of ghillie brogues are their **long laces** that **cross back and forth** as they are wrapped up the leg.



To **tie the laces**, start by crossing the two laces as usual and pull tight. Twist the laces three times. Then pull tight again to produce a vertical thong about one inch long. Pass

the laces round behind your ankle, and tie at the front with the remaining lace and toggle left to dangle.

When worn **over kilt hose**, you may wish to allow an **extra half size**, to allow for the typical extra thickness of these socks.

## Kilt Hose



**Traditionally** kilt hose (i.e. socks) would generally have been **blue** or **green** to tone with the kilt. And for many a sophisticated kilt wearer, coloured hose still look best, typically in a '**lovat**' (muted) shade.

They could also be '**diced**', which means chequered in shades to complement the wearer's tartan. To this day these are worn by the **military** and **pipe bands**. So diced 'fashioned' (i.e. custom made) hose are still available, though at a price.

Recently however **white** or off-white hose have become common. This is mostly due to their popularity with the **kilt hire trade** (where providing only one colour reduces costs). Cream or white hose can still offend some traditionalists. But it is possibly time to accept that white is **now orthodox**.

Kilt hose are made in a wide **range of qualities**. So if you expect to wear them more than a few times you should assess their solidity. At the **bottom end** are the brands made for the kilt-hire trade that are literally designed to be **throw-away**, as they cannot be re-hired. Some unscrupulous firms **retail** these to customers, for a few extra pennies on their margins. But you'd have no such problem from a quality supplier.

At the **upper end** you can obtain authentically **hand-knitted aran hose** (pictured above) in a wide range of colours. The **impressive thickness** and sheer **durability** of these hose can make them worth every penny of their higher price.

And in the middle are the many brands, designed for **general wear**. These can be wool, wool-rich, merino wool, or of course lesser **materials**. They can be **patterned**, ribbed, or plain. They can be two-toned, herringbone-topped, or any of a huge range of **colours**. They can be **embroidered** with motifs like thistles, masonic emblems or dragons – or not.

Even mass-produced kilt hose are generally **thicker** than normal socks. So it is wise to allow an extra **half size** when choosing brogues or shoes to wear with them.

When putting on kilt hose, they should be pulled to about **2-3 finger widths beneath the knee cap**.

## Fly Plaid & Brooch

The traditional fly plaid is an **optional add-on** to an outfit. It would normally only be brought out for particularly **formal** functions. But when worn, one undeniably adds **grandeur** and **elegance**.

Despite its humble origins (derived from a **blanket**) the fly plaid has become an item which speaks of **formality**. Pipe bands aside, it perhaps looks best with a **Prince Charlie**, if not a yet grander Doublet. However, given its humble origins, who should complain when others wear theirs with less formal outfits? It has always, after all, been there to **shelter from the rain**.

A few kilt wearers choose to wear a plaid tartan that is **different from their kilt**. Whilst perhaps true to ancient origins, this is a horrible **mistake**. It's not just a case of convention, or of history. To the modern eye they just clash. So if wearing a fly plaid, use the **same tartan** as your kilt.

In reality the fly plaid is little more than an additional **length of fabric**, possibly with fringing along its edges. Historically it is derived from the obsolete **top of a great kilt** thrown over the shoulder, or even a **blanket** used for shelter from the weather. So it should ideally be well **over a yard square**.

It is secured by the pinning of a large **plaid brooch**, just above the heart. One corner may have **tailored pleats**; if not it can just be folded neatly. If pleated it is this corner you'd **pin to your shoulder** at the front. The plaid is anchored **under the epaulette** on the left shoulder of a formal jacket (now you know what those pieces are for!). The rest is left to **hang freely** to the rear.

Perhaps the **best thing** about the fly plaid is the opportunity it affords to wear yet **another piece of jewellery**, and one that is **singularly impressive**. Measuring **several inches** across, a plaid brooch can come in many styles. But it will almost always be **ornate**, often including several jewels.



## Hats & Caps

A Glengarry or a Balmoral cap is another **optional add-on**. Whether you wish to wear one is down to personal taste. Mostly these are worn by **pipers** and other specialist contexts. But they are also **popular** with many individuals.

The **Balmoral** is the classic **Scotch Bonnet** (or 'bunnet') a **floppy beret** with woollen **pompom** ball on top and a **bow** at the back. It used to be almost always **blue**, the darkest navy shades indicating wealth, and the less well-to-do wearing increasingly paler blues. But nowadays **black** is perhaps even more common.



A **Glengarry** is a boat-shaped **peakless cap** more like a U.S. military cap. It can be folded flat. Made of thickly woven wool, with a 'toorie' or bobble on top, it has two untied **ribbons** hanging behind. It too is available in blue or black, or in **tartans**.

The glengarry can be worn by anyone with less formal casual dress. **Before World War II** it was generally worn on a **steep slant**, with its right side even touching the ear, and the **cap badge** high on the other side. But **now** it is usually worn **level**.

Balmorals and Glengarries are made both **plain** or with a **diced headband** (the red and white checker board pattern around the bonnet). Both have a patch to one side to attach your clan crest or emblem badge (e.g. Lion Rampant or Thistle).

Finally, the **large feather bonnet** (sometimes wrongly called a bearskin) is made of ostrich feathers and is worn mainly by **Pipers** or **Drum Majors**. It would not be worn for other occasions.



The glengarry was reputedly invented by **Alasdair Ranaldson MacDonell** of Glengarry who was pictured by Raeburn wearing it.

Or another story places its origins on the banks of the River Garry, where **trend-setting youths** of the day hit on a vogue for wetting their Balmorals, pulling the fabric tight to set their cap in a stylish peak at the front. (How cool is that?)

It was popularised by **Scottish regiments**, who differed in their colours and in the diced band around above the brim. By the late 19th century it was worn by **all British soldiers**, and it was amended to become the **Service Cap** of the British Army in World War II.

# Wearing & Caring for your kilt

When your **kilt arrives**, you may find one or more **white threads** holding the pleats together. This is called a **basting stitch** and it is only there to keep the pleats neatly in place during transit. You should **remove** it before the kilt is worn, which should be easy, but do it **with care**.



Next, with **apologies** to those for whom my next statement may seem blindingly **obvious**, but at least one billionaire celebrity owner of Virgin Atlantic Airways (whom I won't shame further by naming) would not have got himself in such a pickle had he read this before posing for the media pack. A kilt's **pleats are worn to the rear!** The flat apron is the front.

Now, how to wear your kilt: you really should be able to work the rest out for yourself. **Put it on. Go.** That's it.

**Storage** of your kilt should be simple. I believe **hanging** to be the best solution for most. A good kilt will include at least a couple of hanging loops, which should work fine if you have the space to accommodate the expanded shape a kilt will adopt when hung from them. My own firm produces our own special **extra-wide hanger** with extra clips that our tests found to be ideal for more constrained wardrobes. Another kiltmaker may have other suggestions.

If you avoid spills, a kilt can easily go a **year or two** without needing to be cleaned. Hang it, air it, and **spruce it up** with a stiff brush. That's all it should take.

When required, cleaning of a wool kilt is best undertaken by **dry-cleaning**, although in theory a cool wash followed by pressing should do no harm. But please do check that your dry cleaner is using only **authorised substances**. I know of customers who have had kilts ruined by non-approved solvents leaching dyes from the leather straps. If necessary, ask them to do a **test before proceeding**.

Oh, alright then, I'll finally get around to **THAT question**. What should you wear **beneath** your kilt? The answer is simple – whatever you like. It's true many guys really love to go '**commando**'. But there's **no rule** that says you have to, and others think that's just silly. The one important thing is to have a **riposte** ready for when the inevitable question comes...

The one proviso is if you're Scottish Country **Dancing** and expect to be twirling a lot, or if you're out and about on a **windy day**, please be considerate of other people. You may be wonderful, but not everyone wants to **see that much of you**. The same applies to **sitting down**, getting up, and hovering on the **edge of a chair**. Just take care.

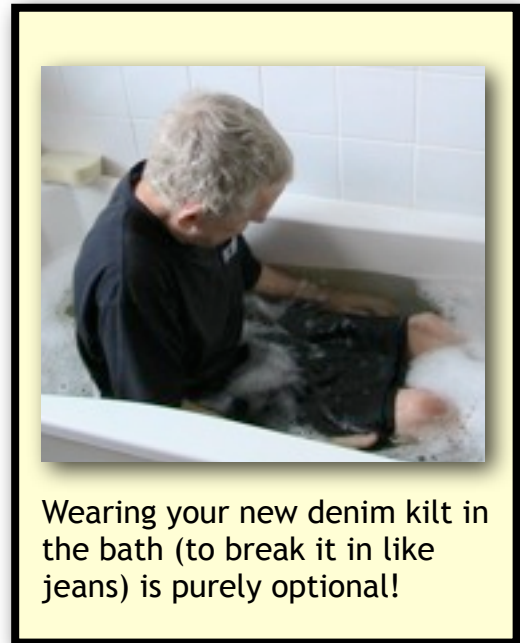


A **denim kilt**, incidentally, can be treated in much the same way as denim jeans. When your garment first arrives it will be stiff and smart. If you want the **worn-in look**, rough it up a bit, with repeat washing to soften the fabric and age the colour. A friend with one advises to “**wash the denim** until the stitching returns to the colour you started with – at that point it’s safe to wear with a white or cream shirt. I’ve not taken the temperature above 40°C but there is no shrinkage whatsoever.” If you dare you can even **bash it about** abrasively for that stone-washed or distressed look. It’s **now yours** to fashion as you like.

And by the way, like everything in this text, the above advice is a purely **personal view** shared by this **humble** and **penniless** author. It is **not official advice** on behalf of my company. So please don’t sue **Scotweb** if it all goes horribly wrong!

In any event, your kilt will occasionally benefit from **re-pressing**, whatever material it is made of. This is no more difficult than running a **wool-hot iron** across its inner and outer pleats. Lighter fabrics will require this more often than heavier ones, but a nice crisp finish will keep your kilt looking brand new for many years.

**Congratulations.** You have passed the instructional theory course for **Kilt Owing 101**. It is now time for your **practical experience**. Enjoy!



# Resources and references

Scottish Tartans Authority – [www.tartansauthority.com](http://www.tartansauthority.com)  
Scotweb Tartan & Fabric Finder – [www.scotwebstore.com/materialfinder.html](http://www.scotwebstore.com/materialfinder.html)  
Kilt Store – [www.kiltstore.net](http://www.kiltstore.net) (my firm)  
Lochcarron – [www.lohcarron.com](http://www.lohcarron.com)  
House of Tartan – [www.houseoftartan.co.uk](http://www.houseoftartan.co.uk)  
Balmoral Kilts & Highland Dress – [www.balmoralkilts.com](http://www.balmoralkilts.com)  
Hector Russell – [www.hector-russell.com](http://www.hector-russell.com)  
Manley Richardson – [www.manleyrichardson.com](http://www.manleyrichardson.com)  
Kinloch Anderson – [www.kinlochanderson.com](http://www.kinlochanderson.com)  
Kilt2 – [www.kilt2.com](http://www.kilt2.com)  
Utilikilts – [www.utilikilts.com](http://www.utilikilts.com)  
Armstrongs Vintage Emporium – Tel +44 131 220 5557

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