

Tartan For Me!

TARTAN COLOUR

First time buyers are often misled by the term "ancient" as applied to tartan, assuming that it somehow designates an older, more authentic, version of the tartan. To the contrary, "Ancient" is actually more "modern" than "Modern". "Ancient" does not refer to the age of a tartan but rather to the shades of colour used in the weaving. A tartan designed today can be woven as the "Ancient Mac X" if the weaver selects shades to try to imitate the colours of natural dyes used before 1860. It is not correct to refer to these as "vegetable" dyes since some were made of animal matter or minerals.

Tartan is woven in four shades. (1) The brighter and darker "modern" hues made possible by new dyes after 1855 and (2) the softer "ancient" or "old" colours which show the pattern better and became popular in the 1950 's and '60 's. (3) The shades known as "muted" or "weathered" and (4) the "reproduction" colours in imitation of tartan long exposed to sun and rain. For simple visual identification, the red is an orange colour when called "ancient"; blues and greens are woven as gray and brown in the "reproduction".

The key to tartan identification is in the pattern. A single pattern can be woven in large or small scale in any of the four colour possibilities. These eight variations will visually appear to be very different but are all correct representations of the same tartan. It is the pattern, not the width of the sett nor the shade of colour which identifies the tartan. The so-called "Ancient Smith" and "Modern Smith" tartans are the same, simply different colour versions of the pattern.

There are a small number of tartans which research has found to be older than the pattern usually worn by the clan or family. Here the term "old" is used. The "Old Stewart" is truly more ancient than other "Stewart" tartans and is properly the "Clan Stewart" pattern. To avoid confusion, standardization of tartan terminology is important. Persons giving advice on tartan should use the system suggested by the late John R. Dalgety, Member of the Guild of Tartan Scholars, in his article "Failte do Bhreacan" ("Welcome to Tartan"), *Highlander*, 21.2, pp.42-47.

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