

Everything You Need To Know About Choosing Formal Highland Dress



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Introduction

Highland dress is unlike any other form of formal wear. It brings with it a rich history and a level of artistry in its creation that few other garments can match. It is never bought 'off the shelf' and requires the input of a professional kilt-maker, who'll not only assemble your outfit, but teach you the art of wearing it.

For all these reasons, your Highland dress represents a serious investment. In fact, it's not uncommon for Highland dress to be passed on through several generations of a family. But if you're choosing your Highland dress for the first time, the process can be somewhat overwhelming. What tartan is appropriate? What accessories do you need? What style of jacket should you go for? Is it acceptable to wear normal shoes?

The list goes on. But assembling your Highland wear needn't be a chore. My aim is to not only introduce you to the colourful history of Highland dress, but explain everything you need to know to help your kilt-maker create you an outfit that will last a lifetime.

One important point is that it's not necessary to buy your full Highland dress all at once. Most kilt-makers will have no problem hiring out either individual items, or the full outfit. This can be a great way to try out different tartans and different styles to find out what works best for you. It also means that once you've invested in your kilt, you can start assembling the other pieces over a longer period of time, hiring any missing pieces when appropriate.

Let's dive straight in...

When to wear Highland dress

Many people will reserve their kilts for Burns nights, or similar events, but if you've invested a lot of time and money in your Highland dress, why not make the most of it? Highland dress is perfect for any formal occasion, especially for those of us with more extrovert personalities, as it makes an eye-catching alternative to the familiar coat-and-tails. Remember this rule of thumb: if you can wear a dinner jacket to an occasion, or you're attending a wedding, you can wear your Highland dress.

The only occasion where Highland dress is expressly not considered appropriate is on morning occasions. In Scotland, a tweed variation of the outfit will be worn as morning dress, but this is rarely done anywhere else, so just reserve your Highland dress for afternoon or evening occasions.

The Tartan

Tartan is everywhere nowadays, showing up on everything from baseball caps to trainers to skinny jeans. But within the context of this booklet, we're interested in its role as the most iconic parts of Highland dress (and Scotland itself for that matter).

The exact origins of tartan are lost in time, although it's well-established that the Celts were accomplished at weaving tartan-like fabrics (some of which have been found as far afield as Salzburg, Austria). The earliest tartan to be found in Great Britain dates from the 3rd century AD in Falkirk, near Stirlingshire.

The idea that tartans were created for specific purposes, such as red tartans to hide bloodstains in battle, is purely a modern invention. At that point, tartans were primarily associated with different regions rather than specific clans. They were usually based on the materials available to the area's resident weaver, who would devise several different designs for the inhabitants of the region. As a result, there was little uniformity in the design of tartans until the 16th or 17th century. Most notably, the Highland Independent Companies introduced a standardised tartan in 1725 as a way of differentiating themselves from any particular clan, something that was formalised when they became the Black Watch in 1739 (their tartan remains one of the most famous and popular to this day).

Unfortunately, due to the Scottish clans' support for the Jacobite cause, parliament passed the Dress Act of 1746, making the wearing of Highland dress, including tartan, illegal for anyone except the Highland Regiments. This law was repealed in 1782, but by then the damage was done and Highland dress was no longer a fundamental part of the Scottish national identity. However, a group of Highland aristocrats sought to remedy this and founded the Highland Society of Edinburgh in an attempt to re-popularise full Highland dress.

A major turning point was the visit of King George IV to Scotland in 1822 – the first visit to Scotland by a monarch in 172 years. Sir Walter Scott, chairman of the Celtic Society of Edinburgh, took it upon himself to arrange a lavish pageant, the goal of which was to break Highland dress away from its association with Jacobite rebellion. Despite the King's appearance in a kilt being mercilessly caricatured, the result was a resurgence of the Scottish national identity, along with a widespread interest in Highland dress.

It was around this period that the concept of clan tartans evolved, particularly due to the publication of several highly romanticised books on Scottish heritage, including Sir Walter's own novels. Chief among these was the *Vestiarium Scoticum*, published in 1842 by John Sobieski Stuart and Charles Edward Stuart – two English brothers who claimed descent from Bonnie Prince Charlie. The Sobieski Stuarts (as they came to be known) claimed their book was based on an ancient manuscript laying out the clan tartans of Scottish families. Even at the time, their claims were considered absurd, but their timing was nonetheless perfect.

With the resurgence of interest in Highland dress, further tartan books swiftly followed and clans (including Lowland families who had previously hated the Highlanders!) all proudly claimed tartans for themselves.

But the popularity of tartan only turned into a full-blown craze when Queen Victoria and Prince Albert visited Scotland in 1848 and took up residence in Balmoral. Both Albert and Victoria were enchanted by every aspect of Scottish culture. Albert in particular loved watching the Highland games and upon taking responsibility for the remodelling of Balmoral, made great use of tartan in every aspect of the interior design. The pair even designed their own tartans, the *Victoria* and the *Balmoral* (which is still in use today as an official Royal tartan).

Victoria and Albert's enthusiasm was quickly picked up on by savvy entrepreneurs who added tartan-based designs to everything from snuffboxes to jewellery and tableware. It also became a popular part of women's fashion, independent of its Highland origins.

Nowadays, tartan is available on all manner of things (most of which lie outside the scope of this booklet) and there are few restrictions on who can wear which tartans. Even the few conventions that some people hold to – such as that the *Balmoral* tartan may only be worn with the Queen's permission – are not hard-and-fast rules.

Each major clan generally has two tartans: a hunting tartan (based on muted greens, browns and maroons) and a dress tartan (based on brighter colours, such as red, yellow or blue). Furthermore, many tartans can be produced in 'modern', 'weathered', or 'muted' tones, which creates even more variety.

With such a wide range of available options, it's almost impossible not to find a tartan that suits you, so ask your kilt-maker for some options!

The Kilt

Once you've settled on your perfect tartan, it's time to create your kilt!

Kilts are typically produced from three different weights of cloth: 10oz, 13oz, and 16oz. The light 10oz cloth is mostly used for ladies' clothing or for the Italian market. It is far too light to produce the attractive 'swing' that is synonymous with the kilt and is therefore not typically used in formal wear.

On the other hand, the heavy 16oz variety is ideal for keeping you warm if you're patrolling the battlements in an icy wind, but will prove next to impossible to dance in! The 13oz variety is therefore the one that is most commonly used in formal highland dress.

Many people are surprised when they see how much cloth is actually involved in the creation of the kilt. For instance, a kilt for an average-sized gentleman (say, a 32-38" waist) will typically require around eight yards of fabric. This figure increases quite dramatically once you get into larger sizes.

Similarly, many people are horrified when they see their measurements for a kilt, as they assume it's worn like trousers and will therefore be produced in a similar size. A kilt is worn much higher up the body and therefore requires a totally different set of measurements.

A big part of wearing your kilt properly is the belt. All kilts are worn with a broad belt (around 2.5" wide), passed through two belt loops at the back of the kilt. These belts are adjustable, combining Velcro with a buckle and make the whole kilt feel much more comfortable and secure when they are worn properly. The standard material for belts is grained leather, although tooled leather that incorporates different patterns is also an option. There are no hard-and-fast rules, so just choose whatever looks best to you.

The same goes for the belt buckle – although some people opt for clan emblems, it is certainly not compulsory so feel free to experiment.

Ideally, the kilt should be worn with all the plies stacked on top of each other evenly, rather than in a haphazard style and then two fingers width should be allowed between the belt and the top of the sporran.

All too often, people neglect to use a proper kilt pin. This small pin (often in the shape of a sword, although different designs are available) goes through the bottom corner of the kilt's apron (its flat front). What it does is give just enough weight to keep the kilt hanging in the right way and also provide a little extra decoration.

For all these reasons, I recommend you avoid ordering kilts online or buying them 'off the shelf', as it is far too easy to misjudge the size you need without a kilt-maker's expert eye.

The jacket and waistcoat

There are a wide variety of jackets to choose from but the ones I generally recommend are the Prince Charlie or the Argyll.

Of the two, the Prince Charlie is slightly dressier – it's a shorter jacket that doesn't fasten at the front, so the buttons on your waistcoat are on display. The Argyll is a little more subdued by comparison. It's a little longer with a slightly flared skirt referred to as a 'peplum'. Both are perfectly acceptable at any formal occasion, so it really is a question of personal taste.

If you're on the short side, avoid long jackets, as they will tend to make your legs look much shorter than they really are. A shorter jacket that accentuates the leg length is much more flattering.

When it comes to choosing the colour of your jacket, I'd urge you to stick with black. If you opt for a coloured jacket, you will be limited to wearing it at occasions like weddings. It's far safer to opt for the classic black – it goes with any tartan and can be worn absolutely anywhere. Look at it this way; if you've invested lots of money in your Highland dress, you'll naturally want to get the use out of it, so go for something that's appropriate on any occasion!

As far as shirts are concerned, I advise you to choose white ones since they go with anything and are always fashionable. Invest in some good quality ones and you won't regret it.

When it comes to fitting, much the same advice applies as with the kilt: never buy a jacket without trying it on. Furthermore, make sure that you try it on while wearing a shirt (ideally one of the ones you'll be pairing it with). Trying on a jacket while wearing a T-shirt (or anything similar) will make it next to impossible to find one that fits well.

A properly-fitted jacket should fit snugly around the neck; otherwise you will find yourself constantly adjusting it. Many people neglect this when trying on a jacket. Although they check the front and back, they don't realise that the neck is actually the most crucial part of the fitting process.

There is one particular occasion where you could even forgo the jacket altogether: the ceilidh, or general evening of dancing. On high-energy occasions like this, a jacket, waistcoat and shirt is likely to prove very uncomfortable very quickly, so as an alternative, you can opt for a Ghillie shirt instead, possibly paired with a Jacobean waistcoat. This type of lace-up shirt is perfect for dancing, as it is light, loose-fitting and doesn't need to be paired with a tie. It's not uncommon for men to attend these events in their full Highland dress, but change into a Ghillie shirt for the actual dancing. This is a great option at occasions like weddings, which combine dancing with a meal.

The type of waistcoat you should choose depends entirely on the nature of the formal occasion you'll be attending. On evening occasions, a three-button waistcoat is generally worn, paired with a bow-tie, whilst at weddings, a five-button waistcoat is paired with a coloured ruche and a winged-collar shirt. As a rule, use five-button waistcoats with a ruche, as three-button waistcoats that fasten much lower down will leave a ruche flapping about, which will just look messy.

In terms of colour, there's only one rule: make sure it matches your jacket! Once again, black is always a safe and stylish option.

Why not have several waistcoats for different occasions, just to make your Highland dress that extra bit more versatile? As I said before, there's no substitute for a professional eye when it comes to fitting, so don't be afraid to ask if you're unsure of anything or need some suggestions.

The accessories

Now you've got the fundamental elements of your Highland dress in place, it's time to consider the different accessories that really complete the look...

The Ghillie brogues

Ghillie brogues are the special shoes that accompany Highland dress.

These are not the same as the regular brogues you commonly find in high-street shops (which tend to resemble regular shoes with small holes drilled in them). Scottish brogues have no tongue and actually wrap the leather over your hose, making them extremely comfortable to wear.

It's essential that you wear proper Highland hose (which typically comes in ecru or off-white) when you are trying on your brogues. It will be impossible to get a proper feel for how comfortable they'll be if you try them on while wearing regular socks, as the brogues are laced over the top of the hose. If you are unsure how to tie brogues, your kilt-maker will be able to show you.

Another thing to consider when purchasing your brogues and hose is the flashes: the garters that hang down from the hose. It's a good idea to mention them when your kilt-maker is preparing your kilt, as they will often be able to make you a pair from the same cloth your kilt came from.

If you are going to be doing a lot of dancing, then one fun option for your brogues is steel toe caps, which make a characteristic 'clacking' sound as you move.

The sporran

Contrary to popular belief, the sporran has never been designed to weigh down the front flap or apron of the kilt, as the kilt's double-flap design makes this unnecessary. Nor is it designed to weigh the kilt down when the wearer is sitting with their legs apart, as the kilt is designed to do this on its own. Instead it traditionally serves as an alternative to pockets, as these are never featured on kilts.

There are a wide variety of styles available, ranging from simple day sporrans, to the elaborate designs worn by pipers... There are even sporrans made from the pelt of an animal that incorporate the head as a flap! But as we're considering formal wear here, the only appropriate option is the more ornate dress sporran.

The sporran is usually worn at the front of the kilt, although it is conventionally pushed to the left while dancing.

The plaid and brooch

The finishing touch for your formal Highland dress is the plaid and brooch. The plaid, worn at occasions such as weddings, is the square of cloth draped over the left shoulder, folded to a point and then fastened where the breast pocket would usually be with a brooch, typically in the shape of a shield. Brooches typically incorporate a coloured stone, the colour of which is totally up to you. I'd advise you to either choose one that matches your tartan or go for a black one to match your jacket.

As we said at the beginning, it is perfectly possible for you to hire out these items once you've purchased your kilt and jacket in order to spread the cost of your Highland dress and experiment with different styles until you find what's perfect for you. Any good kilt-maker will have a selection these items available for hire, so just ask what's available!

Legal concerns

You're probably surprised to see this chapter heading in a booklet on Highland dress, but there are a few legalities you need to be aware of when purchasing your accessories.

Due to the ban on sealskin, sporrans are generally made from bovine products in the UK. People who have tried to import sealskin sporrans from abroad have run into trouble with customs. If you are going to import a sporran, do as much research as you possibly can to avoid situations like that. In fact, I'd advise you to forget about importing your sporran and instead order one from your kilt-maker, as they will be able to help you choose one that will go perfectly with the rest of your outfit. Although newer sporrans are not quite as silky to the touch as sealskin ones, there are plenty of superb ones being made. If you choose a good one, you won't be disappointed.

The issue of sgian dubhs (the small knives that traditionally accompany Highland dress) is slightly more complex, as these are considered offensive weapons. Although it is still legal to sell them (although obviously not to minors), hiring them out is no longer an option. Most kilt-makers will have wooden or plastic replicas available for hire if you aren't quite ready to make the purchase, but you certainly wouldn't want to address the haggis at a Burns Night with one of those!

Conclusion

I hope this write-up has provided you with a nice introduction to both the rich history of Highland dress and helped you take your first steps towards assembling your own outfit.

In closing, let me just reiterate that there is no substitute for the knowledge and experience of an expert kilt-maker. Let them know exactly what you want your outfit for and they will be able to provide you with a garment that will look stunning, last a lifetime and then be passed on to future generations.

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