

CHECK

Whether it's used for kilts or catwalks, tartan's distinguished pattern never fails to appeal to the masses. *HANNAH LEMON* discovers why this simple overlay of warp and weft remains a timeless trend

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hether it be pretty pinafore dresses, Burberry check or formal Scottish dinner dress, tartan conjures up vivid images for each of us. My mind pictures something a lot less sophisticated: Laird Archie Macdonald donning a kilt while rescuing the Scottish

castle Glenbogle from disrepute. For those of you staring blankly at the page, I am of course talking about the TV series *Monarch of the Glen*, which first aired in 2001. Far and away one of the BBC's best accomplishments (I think nostalgia may have something to do with my thoughts on this), it follows the story of a London likely lad who has to resurrect the family's country pile from the ravages of an empty bank account. And there is tartan galore. Tartan kilts, tartan dresses, tartan bagpipes, tartan hats and tartan ties.

Scotland is, after all, the home of tartan but the popularity the fabric has generated, from its humble origins as everyday garb in the 1600s to catwalk couture for Vivienne Westwood, Dolce & Gabbana and Chanel among others, is astounding. In fact, the material had such a powerful impact on society that in 1746 parliament banned people from wearing it in an effort to bring Scottish clans under control. By the time the interdiction was halted, tartan had lost its everyday appeal and became a symbol for Scottish national dress – waistcoat, kilt, jacket, fur sporran and white lace jabot included. ►

This page, clockwise from right: Traditional machines at Begg & Co; Paloma Faith at a Vivienne Westwood show, *Photography:* David M Benett; Staffa Creole Green Cashmere Silk Scarf, Begg & Co, £190; A traditional Scottish kilt and sporrans



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► But it's not just bagpipe players who have had a love affair with pretty plaid. When Queen Victoria and Prince Albert bought their country retreat in Balmoral, they kitted out the interiors with reams of the stuff and even created their own personalised versions: Victoria and Balmoral. The latter has stayed as the royal tartan ever since.

While gentry and monarchs have added linear patterns to their wardrobes, so has everyone else. During the punk era of the '70s, tartan was notoriously used as an anti-establishment tool, something that Vivienne Westwood embraced wholeheartedly. The designer's most notable collection, her A/W 1993/1994 Anglomania, recruited models Linda Evangelista, Christy Turlington, Naomi Campbell and Kate Moss to model metres of the fabric, which was even transformed into a red and blue patterned





wedding dress. It was here that Campbell famously toppled over on her ten-inch blue heels while wearing a tartan skirt. It was also here that Westwood debuted her own tartan, the McAndreas, named after her husband.

Westwood's crisscross designs have since picked up a celebrity following: Paloma Faith, Christina Ricci, Georgia May Jagger and Helena Bonham Carter, who picked out a bright red chequered dress to collect her MBE from Her Majesty The Queen. Other fashion designers have also taken up the Scottish mantle. Alexander McQueen often used tartan, made famous through his exquisitely tailored Highland Rape collection, to style the likes of Rihanna, Sarah Jessica Parker, Katherine Jenkins and Kate Middleton. The accessibility of the simple check and its diverse history means that everyone can wear it – whether they're a singer, actress or royal.

One brand that has seen the transformation from highland to high fashion is Begg & Co, which handcrafts scarves, wraps and

throws from the finest cashmere, silk and lambswool angora yarns. Established in 1866, the focal point of the production was originally paisley – a name taken from the Scottish town in which it was based. Hand-loomed by a small team of weavers, the company grew too big for the premises and in 1902 relocated 35 miles south west to the seaside town of Ayr. The company expanded and purchased machinery, adopting new techniques and styles. Its expert craftsmanship is viewed by haute couture houses as an important part of the production process for their high-end garments and many recruit Begg & Co as their specialist traditional tartan manufacturer. Marketing director Ann Ryley is unwilling to divulge which brands these are, but hints at them being some of the biggest labels in European and American fashion.

The small-scale nature of the establishment means that craftsmen and women are trained in age-old techniques – controlling rickety hand looms; pummelling cloth in an old wooden milling machine to release short fibres for a soft handle; using specially grown hand-harvested Italian teasel plant heads, brushed on with a sprinkling of Scottish water, to give cashmere a ripple-effect finish; and inspecting the final product inch by inch. "We still use the ▶



Clockwise from top left: Hand-crafting scarves for Begg & Co; Rochas Pre-Fall 2016; Vivienne Westwood S/S16 Mens; Acne Studios Resort 2016

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► traditional techniques, where they achieve the best results,” Ryley explains. “For instance, our milling machines used for finishing the scarves are 100 years old.” This is coupled with cutting-edge equipment for computerised jacquard weaving machines for more modern designs as well, with prices ranging from £75 for a hat to £1,195 for a throw.

“We do always look to produce tartan,” says Ryley, “but, as well as producing classic tartans, we try to give them a new twist. We offer tartan with a light-weight, wispy quality, which is so fine that there are five miles of yarn in every scarf. Another interpretation was to produce wraps that combine a patchwork of different tartans.” Angela Bell who worked for Pringle before starting her own cashmere knitwear company Queene and Belle, and Michael Drake, who worked at Aquascutum designing its house check, were hired to modernise the produce. Bell developed the patchwork and Drake experimented with finishing by washing the cashmere scarves to give them a casual look.

Revolutionising conventional tartan is a favourite pastime of famous couture designers. Many of the 2015 and '16 collections played with the idea: there was punk styling from Alexander McQueen; a collaboration between Aspinal and Ètre Cécile for a collection of bags with contrasting lines of bright tangerine, vibrant lemon and arctic blue; fuzzy yellow plaid coats from Acne Studios; and Lou Dalton's contemporary casual blazers and wide-leg trousers inspired by the wild Shetland Islands.

With this in mind, tartan is sure to make an appearance at London Fashion Week in a variety of different styles and weaves – perhaps you'll see one or two made by Begg & Co, though you won't know it. Yet, for me, nothing will ever beat Laird Archie Macdonald's dashing green kilt. ■

Begg & Co is also sold at Selfridges, Liberty, Mr Porter, matchesfashion.com, Trunk, Joseph and Fortnum & Mason, beggandcompany.com



For me, nothing will ever beat Archie Macdonald's dashing green kilt

*This page, clockwise from top left: Lou Dalton A/W16; Begg & Co; Scottish tartan; Rochas Pre-Fall 2016-17 Collection; Vivienne Westwood Royal Mail Stamp. Image courtesy of: catwalker/shutterstock
Opposite page: McQ by Alexander McQueen, Pre-A/W16*