

Visit of King George IV

The result of this visit on Scotland, was not, nor can it be left out of tartan history. What we see today at clan tents, Scottish Highland Games (U.S.A.), the explosion of tartan. The stories we hear true or false can be traced back to this event. Traced to an English King.

George IV came to Scotland in 1822. You must remember no reigning monarch had visited Scotland in about 150 years. The ministers of George's government prompted this visit to keep him out of their intrigue.

The ministers said the visit would make him more popular and keep Scottish minds off rebellious thinking.

Sir Walter Scott who knew George was chosen to stage this grandiose event. Scott had authored a book called "Waverly". In this book the romantic image of the Highlanders was born. Some of the images we take as gospel were born in "Waverly". So we have a king needing an image uplift and an author with a grand romantic novel.

About this same time many Celtic societies were born. Scott was chairman of one of these, The Celtic Society of Edinburgh.

After the Repeal of the Ban on Tartan, such societies were formed in England and Scotland. In most cases they were joined by "Highland Aristocrats" promoting their or the Waverly idea of Highland Dress. They also promoted highland culture with members attending meetings wearing "their garb of old Gaul."

Scott saw the need to invent a pageant in which ancient Scotland was born again. The king would be presented as a son of old Scotland, therefore winning the Scots hearts and minds and take their minds off radical reform.

George IV in 1822 placed an order for about 1,400 pounds of "The Old Highland Garb." The tartan outfit was to be of a bright red tartan*, also include were silver and gold mounted pistols, sword, dirk and many gold chains.

Scott formed a committee to oversee this grand event. His principal assistant was Major General David Stewart of Garth. Scott also took advice on staging this theatrical event from the young actor – manager – William Henry Murray, whose talent with stage costumes was used to revive the ancient dress.

*This bright red tartan today is called Royal Stewart

Many people had great concerns about the do's and don'ts of procedure and etiquette as it concerned the king and his royal party.

Always willing to fill the need, Scott printed a shilling booklet. This booklet gave one and all a detailed outline of events and very detailed advice of etiquette and dress. It also included a dress code for Highland chiefs and peers of Scotland. Everyone was reminded that the king was going to be kilted and had set a condition to attend the grand ball. “No gentleman is to be allowed in unless properly dressed in the old Highland garb of proper clan tartan.”

Now you had chiefs, peers and gentlemen of note asking what clan tartan? “So thickens the plot” Enter William Wilson and Son’s who gladly supplied Highlander and Lowlander with a proper tartan. So Wilson number X became the old and ancient Clan X Tartan. Wilson’s added 40 looms to meet the demand. Edinburgh kilt makers never had it so good.

The king’s ship had arrived on the 14th of August 1822, but due to heavy rains in Edinburgh the king did not make his official appearance until the 15th. Dressed in a naval uniform he was greeted by all the important personage. A procession followed with the king in his carriage and a mass of lowland regiments plus highland clan regiments with massed pipe bands escorted the king the 3 miles to Edinburgh. When they arrived at a medieval gate, the king received the keys to the city.

Most of the pageantry was theatrical based on the Waverly dream. Attracting much attention and talk, were the outfits or the “Old Highland Garb”.

Saturday, the 17th, the king was in residence at Holyrood to meet and greet the peers or other notables of Scotland. The king was attired in the bright red tartan outfit he had ordered. There was one small problem, the king’s kilt was a bit short for modesty, so he wore pink tights under it to cover what needed to be covered.

At the grand ball on the 23rd, the king appeared in a field marshall’s uniform rather than the wee kilt all had anticipated.

On the 27th, the king attended a production of Sir Walter Scott’s “Rob Roy”. On Thursday, the 29th, George left Edinburgh joining his ship for the return to England.

From the 15th of the month until the 29th, many gala events of mostly theatrical nature took place. But all during the grandis event a seed was being planted, the seed of clan tartan, clan association, clan history, real and imagined. This seed grew to what we have today, clan tartan, highland games and a tartan for everything.