

# An Unnamed 18<sup>th</sup> Century Tartan used as a Foundling Token

## Introduction

Surviving examples of pre-industrial tartans (pre-c.1780) are rare, those that can be traced to an individual or accurately dated are even rarer. The subject of this paper is a piece of tartan that was used as token for a set of twins taken into the Foundling Hospital<sup>1</sup> in 1758.



**Plate 1. Foundling Token number 9693, girl twin of 9692. Born Westminster, 1758.**  
Photo: Corum Archive

'Foundling' is an historic term applied to children, usually babies, who were abandoned by parents then discovered and cared for by others.<sup>2</sup> As the Foundling Museum points out, '*the term 'foundling' is a misnomer in relation to the Foundling Hospital, for although its criteria and process of admission changed over the centuries, mothers were required to hand over their child in person.*'

## Foundling Tokens

Between the 1740s and 1760s, mothers leaving their babies at the Foundling Hospital would also leave a small object as a means of identification. The hope was that they would one day be able to reclaim their child.<sup>3</sup> Tokens came in several different forms, for example: amulets, coins and written tokens; but by far the most common were Textile tokens. The Foundling Museum has almost five thousand textile tokens in its collection. These textiles were usually colourful and distinctively patterned in order to aide identification of a child should the mother be in a position to reclaim them at a later date. As was the practice, the twins associated with the tokens discussed here were renamed. Nothing is known about the family of Philip Room and Ann Raughton who were admitted into the Foundling Hospital on 30<sup>th</sup> August 1758. Like the majority of babies, they were never reclaimed.

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foundling\\_Hospital](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foundling_Hospital) - accessed 15 March 2025.

<sup>2</sup> <https://foundlingmuseum.org.uk/our-story/what-is-a-foundling/> - accessed 23 March 2025.

<sup>3</sup> <https://foundlingmuseum.org.uk/our-art-and-objects/foundling-collections/tokens/> - accessed 23 March 2025

## The Tartan

The threadcount and shades of the two pieces of tartan, one used as a token for each child, shows that they were cut from the same piece of cloth. The cloth is woven at 60 epi<sup>4</sup> using singles<sup>5</sup> in both warp and weft. Each piece is approximately 10 x 5 cms and there is some overlap in the pattern (Plate 2) which it is assumed represents the whole pattern. The design has six colours, including two shades of blue, and although dye analysis has not been conducted, if it was it would likely confirm that the red and blues were from cochineal and indigo respectively. The green would have been achieved from a combination of indigo (blue) and an unidentified yellow, whilst the light purple could have been either a single source of combination dye.



**Plate 2. Alignment of token number 9692 (top) and 9692.** © The Author

The specimens contain enough detail to allow a theoretical reconstruction of the design. It can be described as having a red and blue ground with overstripes of green, mauve, light blue

<sup>4</sup> Ends (threads) per inch (28 end per cm).

<sup>5</sup> Single, unplied, thread.

and white (Plate 3). Based on surviving examples, tartans with a red and blue ground framework were a rarity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



Plate 3. The theoretical reconstruction of the tartan with token 9692 (left) and 9692 positioned in context.  
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## Conclusion

Cloth tokens were a common feature of the process of documenting children given up to the Foundling Hospital in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A wide variety of material was used amongst which were some pieces of tartan such as the two pieces associated with the twins recorded as Nos. 9692 and 9693.

The pattern is atypical of the majority of surviving tartan specimens from the period in having red and blue grounds. However, relatively few specimens survive from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and the pattern structure may well have been more common than the other pieces might suggest.

Whilst tartan is generally thought of as a Scottish textile at the time that the tokens were used, there is evidence of some production elsewhere, particularly after the cultural disruption that resulted from the Jacobite Rising of 1745-46.<sup>6</sup>

Nothing is known about the garment that the material was cut from, nor who owned it or where it came from. Whilst it is tempting to assume that this tartan was woven in the Highlands and later somehow found its way to London, the reality is that it will probably never be known where it was produced.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, John Holker set up a textile manufactory in Paris circa 1750 and included tartan amongst his collection. <http://collections.madparis.fr/sites/default/files/ec39d774-8bd8-4073-9028-f4c9c91847f5.jpg> accessed 23 March 2025