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Safeguarding the Essence of Scotland's Cultural Heritage

The kilt is one of the most commanding, romantic, and spectacular symbols of Scotland. It is a much-loved and recognisable national treasure.

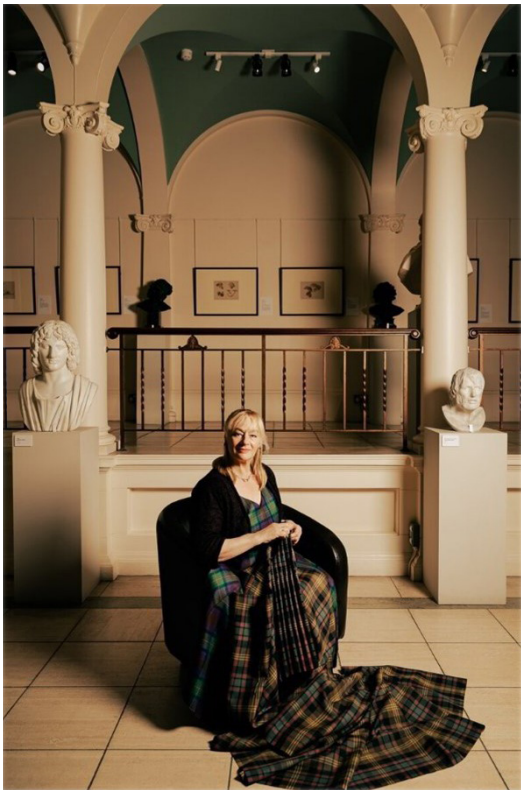
Perth, Scotland, is the first UK UNESCO Creative City of Crafts and Folk Art and the home to the College of Master Kilt Tailors (CMKT). The CMKT has produced pioneering work in safeguarding this endangered craft through its online training programme, "Bespoke Tailoring of the Kilt: Its Variations and Restorations" and is playing its distinctive role. Examples include extensive programme content and high-quality training. These are achieved by using technological advances that capture the nuances of the craft and ensure lifelong learning, as well as by offering immersive experiences, digitization and simulation to carry ancient wisdom into the digital age.

The CMKT respects the rhythms of tradition while embracing the dynamism of change, enabling this vital heritage craft to be accessible to the worldwide family and future generations who cherish their Scottish heritage. The training and assessment cater to all student learning abilities and locations, with a focus on bringing professionalism to the craft and endowing it with a protected, credible mark to demonstrate and enhance the kilt tailor's mastery. The programme upholds the perpetuity of the craft of kilt tailoring, along with the reputation of traditional Master Kilt Tailors and their professionalism. This, in turn, sustains quality standards, ensuring that the Master Kilt Tailor earns a sustainable livelihood and contributes to the craft economy and related tourism. The CMKT plays its part in reducing the environmental carbon footprint of the heritage costume and contributing to the circular economy by future-proofing all bespoke creations, in addition to the skilful restoration and renovation of both cherished and discarded kilts so they can once again become wearable and wonderful family heirlooms.

Historically, the master tailors of the Highland Regiments applied their tailoring knowledge and skills to create kilts fit for the purposes of combat and ceremony. Today, the kilts of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, made by a Scottish manufacturer, are machine-stitched and use fusible adhesive tape and canvas—processes that are far removed from history and tradition.

Most bespoke tailors view their craft with three aims of Art: to beautify, to elevate, and to ennoble. Bespoke tailoring of the kilt is unique and requires a different mindset compared to more widely known tailoring methods, which typically involve cutting and stitching cloth together to create the shape and fit. The kilt uses an uncut length of cloth up to 10 metres long, and through folding, tailoring, stitching, steaming, and pressing, it creates a three-dimensional garment to fit the individual shape. This garment is future-proofed and magical to the eye due to the visual effect of the tartan pattern and the kilt's motion when proudly worn.

Whilst the British commercial market has remarkably ensured the maintenance of the handcrafting of the kilt, it has, understandably, had to reduce production costs and forego much of the Highland Regimental Tailor's craftsmanship, knowledge, and techniques, to the point of extinction.



The decline of this heritage craft has been attributed to the following suggested underlying causes:

- Apprentice demotivation and lack of certification of craftsmanship.
- Decline in the transfer of generational knowledge and skills.
- Lack of government incentives to support craft production and entrepreneurship.
- Limited or no financing for start-up craft businesses.
- Regression of the workforce, with significantly reduced interest in acquiring skills due to the perceived reduced ability to make a livelihood.
- Remuneration for many kilt "makers" has been considered as "pin money" or minimum wage, leading to a reduction in material costs and production time.
- Widespread accessibility of low-cost, mass-manufactured products.

Scotland could learn from Japan and Europe who have focused on safeguarding their rich craft heritage by concentrating on the "Living Human Treasures" programme within the framework of UNESCO's Guidelines for the Establishment of National "Living Human Treasures" Systems.

Passing on an intangible heritage craft is not an easy achievement, especially when many aspiring kilt tailors, who treasure their heritage, are descendants from the Scottish diaspora spread across the world. The CMKT is a growing international family of diverse people of all ages and life experiences. They are bonded by their love for such a heartfelt craft and their pride in their Celtic heritage. They have the enthusiasm and belief that they can play their part in acquiring the knowledge and skills to safeguard this endangered intangible heritage craft.

"A true tradition is not the witness of a remote past; it is a living force that enlivens and nourishes the present. Far from a mere repetition of what has gone before, a tradition is an on-going reality. It can be considered as family property, a heritage one receives on the condition that it be allowed to fructify before its transmission to future generations." (Igor Stravinsky, Poetics of Music, Paris 1952).

Marion FOSTER
(Founder of the College of Master Kilt Tailors)