

Special section

Our regular pull-out feature on modelling, customising, painting and making your own figures.

Painting military tartan

Expert painter **Keith Nairn-Munro** returns to give us all some advice on how to paint the dreaded tartan

For the third of my painting articles. I thought I would tackle tartan, the nemesis for so many painters. Often defeated before they start by the apparent complexity of the task, many miss out on painting some of the most glorious regiments ever to serve in the British Army.

Therefore, I am going to show you a simple method

which has the ability to form the basis of numerous kits you may wish to paint and hopefully take some of the mystery out of this style of painting. As collectors of military figures, the greater amount of tartan painting we are likely to do is on the Scottish regiments, so this will be my focus.

I decided to convert Asset's London Scottish Pipe Band to ➔



The completed set of the 1st Battalion of the Seaforth Highlanders Pipe Band



Snare drummer with basic lattice design and red guiding stripe

“I always commence with the feather bonnet as the chin strap and the base of the diced band can be a little tricky”

Band to the 1st Battalion Seaforth Highlanders Pipe Band, late 1800s. This is fairly straightforward as it merely involves grafting different heads onto the drummers.

The first thing really to emphasize before you start this project is, if you want to do a job, the preparation and painting cannot be rushed. It is a project that will take time, but I promise the end result is well worth all the effort.

There are some delicate parts in this set of figures and I would recommend when you order the castings from Asset, also order some additional sets of pipes. This will save the expense of having to send for replacements if they are damaged during the preparation.

Removing the flash lines on this set of figures is quiet time consuming so you will have to be patient. Filing around the pipes is particularly exacting, hence my above recommendation, and be very careful not to hold them too tightly as they easily bend out of alignment.

Make sure you check all the parts fit, i.e, arms into sockets, and make sure the pipes fit into the bag, as now is the time to drill any of the holes out to a bigger size. If you leave this to assembly time, you can cause unnecessary paint damage.

Once you have finished all the filing and have primed the figures and parts, we are ready to start painting. As before, because of the commonality colours in many uniforms, you will be able to utilize the paints you already have if you have painted the figures I used to illustrate previous articles.

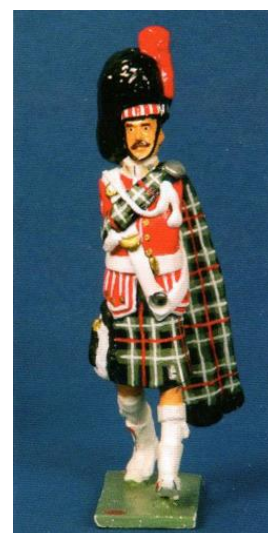
The snare drummers

We are going to start with the snare drummers. Their uniform is a standard highland regiment uniform with a plaid (the piece of tartan slung over the shoulder) and some minor additional decoration.

I always commence with the feather bonnet as the chin



Snare drummer with white base coat stripes on lattice



Finished tartan on the snare drummer

strap and the base of the diced band can be a little tricky. It is also good time to pick out any metal parts in black, for example, the badge on the bonnet, the brooch, collar badges (top coated in silver), buttons and belt buckles (top coated in brass) and sporran (metal parts in silver).

The next facet of the bonnet to be tackled is the diced band on the headgear. Due to the feathers covering most of it, you only see the bottom of the vertical stripes. The band is painted in white prior to inserting the red stripes. The plume is also coloured red.

I am sure some of you will be thinking that only the Black Watch are allowed to wear the red plume. This is true if the soldier was an infantryman, but bands in a number of Highland regiments, whether it was brass or pipe, were allowed to wear a red plume.

Now we can paint on the flesh, eyes and hair

The jacket is painted next using a light red/pink undercoat followed by the top coat in red. Once completed, the belts, decoration on the Inverness skirts (bottom section of the jacket), cords, epaulette, centre stripe and collar surround on jacket can all be detailed in white. The centre of the epaulette is painted in red and don't forget the brass button on the epaulette by the collar.

The sporran is white with black tassels while the metal parts are silver.

The 1st Battalion had collar facings in yellow and as part of the unique uniform decoration of the drummers, the white collar surround had red dots on it.

Painting the tartan

The first thing to recognize when looking at tartans is that a large proportion of the designs are based on a lattice work or crisscross pattern on top of a base colour to which other stripe are added. In the case of the Scottish regiments, the



Completed snare drummer front

majority use the Government sett as the basis of their tartan, which has a dark blue base with a green lattice.

To begin, undercoat all the tartan area with a very dark blue matt acrylic (Humbrol French Blue 25 mixed with a tiny amount of matt black). I then paint two coats over this base, (allowing the first to dry thoroughly), of Anthraquinone Blue but any dark blue will do.

The Seaforth Highlander's kilt layout varies slightly from the standard Government sett in so far as the centre stripe of the kilt is blue and this can make the placing of the two green vertical stripes either side of it rather exacting.

I have, therefore, painted in a red line stretching from the centre of the belt buckle down to the base of the kilt to act as a marker to ensure the green stripes are correctly spaced and remain equidistant for the length of the kilt. Once you have done this you can paint in the rest of the vertical green stripes, ensuring continuity of spacing. On completion, the cross stripes that will form the lattice can be added.



Completed snare drummer back



Jacket detail on the Seaforth piper

For the Government tartan, I have found and Humbrol Dark Green number 30 to be an ideal shade for the base lattice, as it negates the need for complex mixing. However, the paint is quite thick so make sure you dilute it down thinly, particularly in the initial stages of marking out the lattice.

Where the stripes cross on the sett, a lighter green needs to be inserted and to achieve this, add white to the Humbrol dark green number 30. Make it slightly lighter than you desire, as when you put the over stripes and varnish on the kilt, the green will darken down a couple of shades.

Now we can add the individual pattern. In the case of the Seaforths, there are white vertical and horizontal lines on the green lattice and alternate red lines on the blue part of the kilt. This is where the marker red lines comes in useful as it gives the starting point for the red stripes.

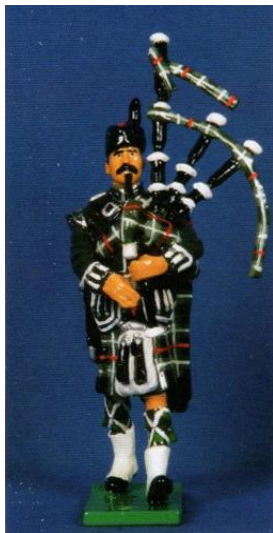
You will see how this all works by looking at the various stages I have illustrated in the photographs.

The same procedure applies when painting ant tartan. Break it down into its constituent parts, establish the base colour and lattice colour and build it from there. Remember, as we did before with multi-layered uniforms, that if the tartan is complex, practice the design on paper with coloured pencils prior to picking up a paintbrush.

Painting socks

Painting socks on a Highland figure can be quite fractious, because if you do not get the first part of the design correct, the rest will not be symmetrical. It does not matter which regiment you are painting, the same principal follows. In the case of the Seaforths, the socks will have pink stripes with red diamonds.

After painting the socks and the spats white, mix up a very light dilute pink. Starting at the front, paint a small inverted V-the bottom of the V ending approximately where the sock is turned down. Continue doing this all the way round the top of the sock. Have a good look at



Completed Seaforth piper front



Completed Seaforth Highland Back

references before start and it will give you a guide to the spacing.

Now just extend the lines on the Vs downwards, maintaining the same angle until they cross. Once you are happy with the pattern, you can over paint with a deeper shade of pink. Where the lines cross, it will form a natural diamond shape and this area is painted in red, as are the gaiters.

The boots can now be painted and bases undercoated in light green. I have stayed with the same paint combination that I used in previous articles to top coat the bases, which you may recall was Vallejo Deep Green 970 with white.

To ensure I do not waste paint, I tend to top coat all the bases together using a ten drop deep green to two drop white mix. This also ensures a universal colour as top coating in ones and twos can cause shading variations. You can, of course, make up a base colour of your choice. Once this is done, you can varnish the figure.

Arms and drums

As with figures in previous articles, I have painted the arms separately. You will see from the pictures the white cuff decoration with the yellow facing colour, brass buttons, white gloves and the white tufts with the red inserts at the top of the arm. Drummers of this period had white stripes down the front and back of each arm with red dots mirroring the collar decoration.

When choosing the colours for the drums, you have a number of options, I decided on the combination of yellow and red as these were the colours shown in one of the references I used. The drumsticks I have painted using Humbrol 63 Sand lightened with white.

Prior to attaching the arms and the drums, first recheck the locating holes are big enough for the purpose. Always do a dry a run to check the angle you want the drums and how this will affect the positioning of the arms.



Tenor drummer showing leopard skin detail



The Drum Major finished

Once you are happy, attach the drums first and when the superglue gel has dried, attach the left arm. Again, to reduce the risk of getting glue on your fingers and inadvertently causing paint damage, let the glue dry and then attach the right arm. Once this has been completed, you can varnish the arms and the drums.

Pipers

The pipers for this regiment differ from the normal regimental uniform, as their tunic is in a dark green and they wear a Glengarry. Due to the uniform being so dark, I always outline all the metal details in black, plus the collar outline, the belts and buckles, sporran, epaulette, dirk, feather and the bottom section of the Glengarry, as this familiarises you with the geography of the figure. All the metal features will be painted in silver.

As always, we begin at the top and work down. The top section of the Glengarry is navy blue with a pompom in red, whilst the bottom and feather can be top coated in black. Once this is done, the face, eyes, hands and hair can be painted.

For the jacket, I used Vallejo Dark Green 896 with the decoration on the skirts being white. The tartan is exactly the same as described for the Snare drummers.

The pipes are done in black and white and although I have painted the bag in tartan, it is quite fiddly, so if you want to paint it just in dark blue, that is quite acceptable.

Piper's socks

You can do the socks for the pipers in exactly the same way as for the snare drummers. I used the same dark green as for the jacket and did the diamonds and gaiters in Vallejo Intermediate Green 891. Be aware, however, that when you paint in the diamonds, they are much more horizontal in design than on the drummers' socks and the remaining white areas will be coloured in dark green. Once



Officer A&S Highlanders showing metal and black parts of the uniform undercoated



Vertical stripes on the kilt



The lattice on kilt completed and highlighted



Officer of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders showing plaid



Officer of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders completed front

you have done this, you can paint in the thin white lines that are an additional design feature of the socks.

Arms and attachment of pipes

The arms are fairly straightforward for painting, however, when you undercoat the shoulder decoration in black prior to a silver top coat, leave one shoulder in primer. This will allow you to have a reference to the pattern decoration as it is easier to see than when it is black. The cuff decoration is in white with silver buttons.

Check the fit on all parts, particularly the pipes into the bag. The left arm can now be attached and, once dry, the pipes can be attached to the bag. Use the glue sparingly when doing this as the painting on the bag can be easily spoilt. In addition, be careful how you grip the figure when carrying out this procedure as you can easily bend the chanter. Once the glue is dry, you can attach the right arm.

Tenor and base drummers

The leopard skin on the above was done using Vallejo Dark Flesh 927 as the base coat and Humbrol 62 to initially place the pattern followed by an over paint of Burnt Sienna.

Attaching the arms of the tenor drummers is the same sequence as the snare drummers, however, with the base drum I would recommend you definitely attach the drum first.

When you attach the base drum, before the glue sets, hold both arms in place with your left hand so if need be, you can adjust the angle of the drum. The reason for this is that the arms, when against the drum, area a very tight fit and if you do not have the drum at the correct angle, the arms will not locate properly.

I have shown you one way of painting tartan as it is the method I find most simple to use, but do not be afraid to develop your own style.



Officer of the Gordon Highlanders showing the tartan detail

Drum major

This figure is very similar to the snare drummers, except the uniform decorations are gold instead of white. The sash which rests across the front of the jacket and the badge on the right-hand sleeve are also gold.

I am sure you will already have gleaned that as well as painting the pipe band, I have painted, in parallel, an Officer of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. I did this for two reasons—firstly, I wanted to show the lattice framework of the tartan on the kilt in a bigger scale and secondly, to illustrate a different tartan. This tartan is the same as worn by the Black Watch and this figure will also act as a template for any officer in a Highland regiment.

Finally, I have illustrated an Officer of the Gordon Highlanders again, just to show you a different tartan. He is actually a representation of a real person who served in the regiment in the 1860s and was called Major Forbes McBean.

He, along with a number of other illustrations of Highland regimental uniforms, can be seen in an Osprey Publication called *Queen Victoria's Highlanders*. I have also listed some other reference books which I believe will be of help to you as you continue your painting journey.

I hope that once you have read this article, you will undertake this project, as the Seaforth's are the most magnificent pipe band. Certainly, I know Anne and Colin Randall at Asset will give you all the help they can with regards to advice, and as long as you are patient and realise the band will not be completed in two minutes, you will have many hours of fun.

I have shown you one way of painting tartan, as it is the method I find most simple to use, but do not be afraid to



Officer of the Gordon Highlanders with his ornate sporran

develop your own style. As with anything, people have their own opinions on painting this subject, but make sure, if you seek advice, you are not intimidated by their views and expectations, and ultimately put off from having a go.

Always remember, painting is for YOUR enjoyment and if you are happy with your efforts, that is all that matters! So good luck and enjoy creating an iconic Scottish regimental pipe band.

Reference books:

Uniforms of the British Army by W.Y Carman
Black Watch Osprey Men at Arms Series
Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Men at Arms Series
The Thin Red Line by DSV & BK Fosten
British Infantry Uniforms since 1600 Michael Barhorp