

Eimear Burke:

So we have an unusual chat today. I've got two guests, which is not my usual thing. One from the U.S. and one from the UK. So I'm going to introduce Kate Collison, who's someplace in the UK and Billy Stewart who is living in the U.S. whom he's been a guest before. And I'm going to ask Kate just to start with you. You are so welcome to this Fireside Chat.

Kate Collison:

Thank you.

Eimear Burke:

Just tell us where you are and what your landscape is like before we get into.

Kate Collison:

I'm in the New Forest, which is a national park on the southern coast of England. It's absolutely beautiful and that's what inspired the story today.

Eimear Burke:

Oh, wonderful. Wonderful.

Billy Stewart:

Hi, I'm in Taos, New Mexico and United States. Whoa. We're falling. I live on the foot of a mountain. It goes up to 14,000 feet with forest all around me and down where I'm at it's called the Rancho de Taos and it was once beautiful ranch land and it's still good farming land for northern New Mexico.

Eimear Burke:

Okay, wonderful. The reason we're here is to discuss the Bard, Ovate and Druid Tartan. So I am going to hand this over to... That has just been launched what in the last two weeks and I'm just interested in hearing the story. So whoever wants to start, feel free. I'm going to leave it to you two.

Kate Collison:

Well it started back in 2020 didn't it, Billy?

Billy Stewart:

Yes, I think so.

Kate Collison:

And you posted something on social media to say that you would love to have a tartan that was fitting for you as a musician, but also with your Druid path and it was on one of the OBOD social media sites. And I have a little business here in the New Forest. I've designed tartans before and we've got five now in the New Forest, all of which I've designed and registered, and I offered my services and overnight Billy and I became friends on social media and that's where it all started. So it's taken a while. It's taken what, its nearly three years now, but that's due to COVID and all sorts of different things. But it is finally here, it's properly registered, and we do have our very own Bards, Ovates and Druids Tartan now.

Eimear Burke:

So over to you Billy.

Billy Stewart:

Okay. So I mentioned when I was on Fireside Chat before I came from the reclaiming tradition of witchcraft here in America. And I think it's all over the, well, it is all over the world now and we like to dress up. I mean one of the things behind all that is that, you know, you've got to change reality a bit when you go into ritual and I feel like we have that same thing in Druidry and that's with robes and stuff, but it never felt right to me because I've always been very shamanic and very tribal in how I presented myself in rituals. So I mean, I like to wear horns and glitter. Hello.

I'm a transgender man and I always wanted to wear kilts, but I felt like a Catholic schoolgirl. When I started wearing kilts all the time after transition and it started to be my go-to for ritual. For one, I can feel somewhat sky clad. For those of you that don't know that terminology, that means basically naked. So I could just wear my kilt with no shirt, I'm covered up. I feel comfortable if I'm outside, somebody finding me. So I started to wear kilts all the time and one of the first things I put on Facebook was saying, "Hey, is anybody else not feel comfortable in the white robes?" I mean that kind of goes back to a few things. For one thing, if I have a coffee, I'm going to spill it on me for sure. But other reasons why, it just didn't feel right. It wasn't my thing.

And I said, "I wear kilts." And then one thing led to another and then my other post and that's when Kate saw it and it was just kind of evolved into that. And we started going back and forth and in reclaiming, and I feel very much like OBOD's, very much the same way I stepped back a little because I wanted it to be the community and we both did. We both stepped back from that process and sent it out to the community so they could choose the colors and go back and forth. I was afraid it was going to become crazy because we're reclaiming it be become nuts when you're trying to make a decision with 500 people and you're a collective. So that's the story so far for me.

Eimear Burke:

Awesome. Tracy has a question. She says, "Do the white robes feel uncomfortable because of the KKK connection?"

Billy Stewart:

Yes, I believe that is part of it, for me. I've been a civil rights activist all my life, and if somebody stumbled upon me in a white robe in the woods here in America, it would just go from anything to an embarrassing to maybe getting beat up. So yeah, that's probably part of it. And it also just feels like, to me, Druidry is dancing crazy in the woods so falling over a white robe would not not be pretty.

Eimear Burke:

Okay. And Hannah Simple has this, and I mean this may be for you Kate is, "Why does the tartan have to be registered?"

Kate Collison:

I suppose you could just design a tartan and do nothing with it, but if you want it to be properly registered and with that will come the intellectual property rights for it. And then once it's on the register, when you want to have the material woven and made, that's what the tartan mill will access

what's known as the thread count, which is the order and the colors in the specific order and they access that directly from the tartan registry in order to weave it.

Eimear Burke:

And you know, you were talking, Billy, about putting it out to the community. Who was the community that you raised this with?

Billy Stewart:

I put it on a couple of the sites. When you're a member of the order, we have our own group. So I put it on there, then I put it on the Facebook page I have that is, oh my God, I always forget the name of it. I went through so many, but I think it's OBOD USA. OBOD and Friends USA. I put it on that. So I put it out into the Facebook world. I find that the easiest place to communicate these days.

Kate Collison:

It went on quite a few different sites and yes, so probably hundreds of people had an input into choosing the colors and the design. And then Billy and I, we had a couple of designs, didn't we, and sort of chose the best four or five and put them back out to the community. And yeah, eventually we decided on one.

Eimear Burke:

And of course, so you were consulting OBOD members, but it is not an OBOD Tartan. It is a Bards, Ovates BOD Tartan.

Kate Collison:

Absolutely. Yeah. So in order to have a tartan registered, if you want it registered under your own name, or your own business, you can just go ahead. You don't need anybody's permission for that. But if you want to register it under, for example, in my case, the New Forest, which is a national park or for the order, I don't own any rights to the order or the New Forest, so you have to get written permission. So I contacted Philip Carr-Gomm with our design. Showed him it. We spent a lovely hour on the phone and he was very specific. It wasn't something that I'd thought of before, but he was very adamant that he didn't want the first two words, the order of in the name, he just wanted it as Bards, Ovates and Druids Tartan. And the reason for that is absolutely valid. For a start, he didn't want it to become a uniform for OBOD at all. He didn't want anybody to have to buy it.

But at the same time he said, "If you restrict it to just OBOD rather than any Bard, Ovate, or Druid, you are limiting it." And we wanted it, obviously, to go out to as many people as possible. So for those two very valid and good reasons, we didn't include the order of, so it's just Bards, Ovates, and Druids Tartan is what it's registered as. And he had to write me a permission letter, which I included in the application, signed, and obviously on headed paper.

Eimear Burke:

And there's a question here from Tracy. "Did you use the colors that relate specifically to the level Bards blue, Ovates green?"

Kate Collison:

Absolutely, yes. So the colors, shall I show you the tartan and you can see. So here, I'm sure a lot of people have seen it online, but here it is. This is the very, very first, it still has the tag from Lochcarron. The very first piece of material of the very first roll is right here. So within that, you have the three golden strands of Awen running right through the middle.

Eimear Burke:

Okay. Yeah.

Kate Collison:

You also have the three grade colors, the blue for Bard, the green for Ovate and the white for Druid. You have the five elemental colors, green for earth, white for air, orange for fire, blue for water, and purple for spirit, and you also have the three colors for land, sea, and sky. So obviously, a lot of those overlap so we've narrowed it down to six different colors. So there we are.

Eimear Burke:

That was beautiful. Now, so that's woven in Scotland?

Kate Collison:

Yes. So this is woven in a traditional tartan mill. And I have a roll of 51 meters of it. It's really quite wide. That's how wide it is. A meter and a meter 40 wide. And then this is obviously about 25 centimeters long, just a little bit here. So this is available to buy by the meter, but there's also another version which you are quite keen on, Eimear, aren't you?

Eimear Burke:

Yes. Well, I ordered by mistake because I went online and that was the bit I saw and I thought, "Oh, it's freshly woven." Because I have two tartans, I have wraps of a Campbell and a Buchanan from Howard, my late husband, and that's what I was going to do. I was going to buy two meters of that tartan and make another wrap. And then I saw this and I thought, "Oh, they have a mixture of silk and Marino wool." And I ordered it and I said, "It's already as a wrap." And then I saw the other bit, but I'm happy with my order and the fact that it's going to be woven.

Kate Collison:

Good. So yeah, so what I was talking about is the sort of, I mean, this is eco-friendly in itself because it's made in a 17th century tartan mill. It's pure wool, but this is even more eco-friendly. This is dyed with plant dyes and hand dyed, hand woven, and my friend, Neil, makes these, he's very talented. He makes them to order. So this is a scarf, same design, slightly paler I'd say, but that's due to the plant dyes. But when you register a tartan, you don't have to register the exact color, so you can just register as mid-green or dark blue or something like that. So the exact shade of color is quite variable. They're quite happy with that. And when I first started doing a plant dye, I contacted them and asked specifically, because you couldn't get the depth of color with the natural dyes. And they said, "absolutely fine, no problem, no problem at all."

Eimear Burke:

Oh, wonderful. No, I have a weathered Buchanan tartan, and I can recognize a weathered Buchanan, but there's always variations in the tones depending on which company makes it, et cetera. So that's lovely. Gabriela wants to know, is it itchy?

Kate Collison:

Not at all. Not at all. It is pure wool. However, the wool is really soft. And in fact, this wool, the one in the plant died version, this comes from the Falkland Islands, and there's a really good reason why it comes from the Falkland Islands. Obviously, wool is available pretty much throughout the world, but if you imagine the Falkland Islands, they're in the middle of the Atlantic. They're battered by wind and rain so the sheep are just washed by rain continuously. And because of the wind, they haven't got any scrubby bushes and things like that in the fields for the sheep to just get tangled in. So when they're shorn, the fleece isn't full of bits of twig and when it's carded, so combed out, you don't get that pulling of the wool so it stays very fresh, very clean, and it's just the softest wool in the world and that's why we've chosen it to use in the scarves, and the wraps, and the blankets, and it's not itchy at all, I promise you.

Eimear Burke:

Brilliant. Yeah. Tymie, who's in Finland says, "Tartans are part of the culture and rather devastating history of Scotland and its clans. They were originally created i.e., according to colors included in the coat of arms of each family clan. Here's the link." She gives a link. What do you know about tartan?

Kate Collison:

To be honest, not a huge amount. I'm not from Scotland, I'm from Southern England. However, what attracts me to tartan is that it can connect you to... Especially if you've got a design that you've designed yourself with really good reasoning behind all the colors and the design, it can connect you to your own landscape. And that's exactly what I've done for the New Forest Tartan. The colors are directly taken from the trees and the bushes and the landscape in the national park, and it's where my roots are. It's where I belong. I'm part of that community. And so I think pretty much everything's got some sort of checkered history, but the New Forest Tartan is only about six years old. It's fresh and I'm very proud to wear it and to own it.

Eimear Burke:

And Celine asks, "Which plant dyes did you use in this particular tartan?"

Kate Collison:

My weaver spent six weeks different combinations blending them, trying different ones, and there's quite a complicated recipe of different plants for each color.

Eimear Burke:

Hopefully, that satisfies your answer. And she actually says she likes the idea of a tartan much better than wearing a white robe. I wear a white robe in the UK, but here I don't wear white robes here in Ireland and I have nothing against white robes just that. So Liz says, "Do you have a guide for designing a landscape tartan or did you just go by feel?"

Kate Collison:

I went by feel. I knew nothing about tartan. When I designed the New Forest Tartan, which is this one, that was registered in 2017, that was my first one. There's five colors in here. And I actually started off by painting strips of paper in the different colors that I'd chosen and literally weaving them together to see what they'd look like. I very quickly realized obviously that when you weave paper together, you don't get the blend of colors where the two colors overlap. So I then managed to find, you can find it online of tartan design program. It's ever so easy to use. You choose your colors and you choose what order you want them and you whizz the bar up and down for the width and it just pins up in front of you and there's an infinite number of different, obviously, designs and colors you can do and it's quite addictive.

But no, I ended up with this. And each of these colors for the New Forest Tartan has meaning. So you've got the two different greens, one for the broadleaf trees, one for the pines, and the yews. You've got the purple for the heather, the white for the silver birch, and then the kind of fiery orange red color for the red deer and the bracken that we get in the forest as well. So lots of meaning here. You go out into the New Forest, you can see, thank you, you can see these colors. And then a couple of years after that, I did one for each season.

Eimear Burke:

Oh.

Kate Collison:

So there's actually five registered New Forest Tartans. This one you've just seen is called just New Forest Tartan. And then you have New Forest Winter. So these are all the wintery colors that you get. And the reason I wanted this one specifically, it looks like it's black and white, but there's grays and browns in there.

Eimear Burke:

Wow.

Kate Collison:

This can be made from natural sheep colors. So no dyes necessary in this one.

Eimear Burke:

Wow. Even the gray.

Kate Collison:

The white. Yep.

Eimear Burke:

Even the gray. Wow.

Kate Collison:

See you've got white, cream, gray, brown and black in the New Forest Winter.

Eimear Burke:

And those sheep, so that wool is for those various sheep, where do they come from? Are they in England or are they in the UK?

Kate Collison:

Well, this one is woven in the Scottish tartan mill. So this will be Scottish wool. Yeah.

Eimear Burke:

Wow. It's all concrete. Brilliant.

Kate Collison:

But there's a hand dyed version of all of these as well. So he doesn't use any dyes at all. Just natural, natural wool colors in the winter now.

Eimear Burke:

Right.

Kate Collison:

And then you've got the spring one as well. So that's all pale yellows and pale purples for the bluebells and the snowdrops and primroses and fresh greens for the spring colors. The summer one, so you've got the yellows in there for the summer sun, the two blues, one for the sky, one for kingfisher blue, we get the most beautiful kingfishers, the flash iridescent turquoise, so that colors in there. Green as well. And then this sort of grayish color just here, this is for The Solent, which is a stretch of water between Hampshire where the New Forest is, and the Isle of Wight and the coast. Twenty-six miles of coastline are in the national park so part of The Solent needed to be included as well. And then very vivid, we have the autumn.

Eimear Burke:

Oh, yes.

Kate Collison:

Which is, obviously, autumnal colors and you go out into the New Forest in the autumn and it's just like this. It's absolutely beautiful.

Eimear Burke:

Wow.

Kate Collison:

So yeah, we've got five New Forest Tartans, all the colors with deep meaning directly connected to the landscape and that's where the colors come from.

Eimear Burke:

Just before I forget it, what's your website that people are really interested?

Kate Collison:

[www.newforesttartan.co.uk](http://www.newforesttartan.co.uk)

Eimear Burke:

So or type, should I say. [newforesttartan.co.uk](http://www.newforesttartan.co.uk) Great. So Peter really liking them and just somebody who was asking about the itchy bit. So wait a second. "I've been wanting a Bardic robe and I'm allergic to wool." Tracy, my robes are not wool, but did you say there's one woven silk? So one of the tartans, it's silk and wool?

Kate Collison:

Wool. Yeah. So one of the options for the plant dyed hand woven one is silk. So you can have a silk one or alpaca as well.

Billy Stewart:

I think that's the itchy. I can address the itchy with wearing kilts because I wear kilts a lot. I can't wear a wool hat. I mean, I have a beautiful tam that's a traditional Irish, I mean Scottish older type tam. And I get away with that most of the time, but she did some work on that to make it softer wool when she made it for me. But I'm fine in wool kilts. Something about the way it's done and it's woven so tightly. Where hats, things like that, if it's a lot of wool in it, it itches me like crazy, but something with the tartan. And when you get a kilt made, you can also get a lining right around your back and all that where it would be if you do have a problem with it. So that's my input on somebody who wears a lot of kilts and have dealt with itchy.

Eimear Burke:

And I'm just saying I can't wear one around my neck, but I can wear my tartan wraps. So I think you're right, the tightness of the weave, there's less bits stick out, I can't wear angora I can't have any, what's the other stuff, hairy stuff that's gone from my head? Mohair, anything like that that has fibers that stick out, they drive me crazy. So that fine tight weave works really well. So you're getting lots of comments about the colors and the blends. They're just absolutely beautiful. Just two questions, one for you, Billy. Are you wearing one of your kilts today?

Billy Stewart:

I am not because it's really cold out and I have to go work and it's in a warehouse. So I mean it's not pretty in 20 degree weather in a warehouse. Hiking, yes, I'll hike through snow in a kilt.

Eimear Burke:

Yes.

Billy Stewart:

I can show you a couple of my kilts.

Eimear Burke:

Do.

Billy Stewart:



Hang on.

Eimear Burke:

So while you're doing that, there's a question I think, do you have links for the Scottish tartan weaving company and your friend who's doing the weaving, that's all to be found on your website, isn't that correct?

Kate Collison:

Yes. I mean, I don't have links as such. I just ask Lochcarron to weave it for me and they weave it.

Eimear Burke:

So it's all through your website then?

Kate Collison:

Yes. Yeah, there's a lot of information on there.

Eimear Burke:

Okay. So I've already put it up in the chat to all of them is the newforesttartan.co.uk is where you get that.

Kate Collison:

Mm-hmm.

Eimear Burke:

Great. Now Freddie, it says Freddie, who's Scottish. "I would definitely recommend people learn the history of tartans, especially tartans of the types originating in Scotland." Yeah. So...

Billy Stewart:

Yeah, that's pretty important to me. I get most of mine through USA Kilts in America and that's only because they order everything from Scotland and they make them here and they're so into the traditional and they'll have a writeup on the story behind it and the whole bit.

Kate Collison:

There's a huge amount of information you can find about the tartans because when you register a tartan, you have to explain every single color. You can't just put in some random design and it'll be accepted. You have to have real meaning behind it and a real reason why you want it as well. However, there are a lot, our own Bard, Ovates and Druids Tartan is number 13,478 of the tartans here. I'm going to cover that bit up, but this is-

Eimear Burke:

What's the number again?

Kate Collison:

Here's our certificate. The bit I'm covering up is what they call the thread count. So that's like the recipe for the tartan. It's the name of the color, the order of the color, the width of the color, and it's like the secret recipe of the tartan and that's what Billy and I worked so hard on. But this is our certificate from the Scottish Tartan Authority and it's number 13,478. So there's a lot of tartans already registered, but a lot of them are just aren't in use anymore because when you register a tartan, you put on two restrictions. So the first one you can say, as the designer, you can say who is allowed to wear your tartan. Now, some people design the tartans just for a wedding, for example, so it would only be the bride and groom's family who would be legally allowed to wear the tartan.

However, for our Bards, Ovates and Druids Tartan, we've said anybody can wear it, which is good. And then the second restriction you can put on is who is allowed to have it woven. So when I phone up an order, a roll of material from the weaver, they check it's me because it's only Billy and I who are allowed to have this woven and there's a really good reason for that. Is one, we worked incredibly hard and we've invested quite a lot of money in this, it costs to register a tartan. The roll of material costs thousands of pounds to have made. And with popular tartans before, people have just gone and had them made in some awful sweat shop in the Middle East somewhere and the quality's been hideous, and the eco credentials have been awful, and it's made of nylon or plastic or something just utterly hideous. And obviously, Billy and I, neither of us wanted that at all. We wanted it properly traditionally done sustainably. So there we go.

So although there are sort of thirteen and a half thousand tartans registered, unless Billy and I include in our wills who we're going to pass that right to it will die out as a tartan. Nobody will be allowed to weave it. And there's, obviously, hundreds and hundreds of Tartans where the designers passed over and you can't weave it anymore.

Eimear Burke:

Wow.

Kate Collison:

It's very, very highly looked after. They take things very, very seriously in Scotland.

Eimear Burke:

It's a really interesting, this thing about tartan, there's a pejorative term tartanism, that thing of inventing traditions. And Ferdie had said, Ferdie, I'm going to ask you to come in here just to clarify something you said you definitely recommend people learn the history of tartan, especially tartans of the types originating in Scotland. And then you say, "Please don't skip the uncomfortable bits." Now, I don't know if you're referring to the uncomfortable bits about the history of tartan or the uncomfortable bits about wearing a kilt, I'm not sure what's uncomfortable about it, but maybe you could add something. You could clarify that a little bit. While you're waiting for you, Ferdie, just Tracy asks where did I get my non-wool robe? Most members of the order have cotton, they make them themselves. Cotton or silk.

I happened to get my one in Glastonbury in a shop and I have one that was made for me but you don't have to have wool. Most people don't have wool. And so Gabrielle has velvet silk. She made it herself. Yeah. So Ferdie, what do you mean he's not coming on? He just says, "Kilts are very comfortable and very comfy." Yes. Anyway.

Billy Stewart:

Well, I'll show off some of mine real quick then.

Eimear Burke:

Okay, thank you.

Billy Stewart:

All right. So this is a Stewart Hunter's Ancient and it was made by, and they're great craft people. Look at the buckles, they're great with the Celtic knots on them. And so this, according to the website, and I had to pay extra for this particular tartan. This is a great, you can get this through them too, that's a great kilt pin.

Eimear Burke:

Oh wow. Yeah.

Billy Stewart:

Isn't that awesome. It's a wolf. This one, they said that a piece of this was found in a bog. Now due to not my lack of studying this stuff like crazy because I had, but just my lack of school, I didn't go to school, it's all on our other site. But supposedly, they found a piece of this tartan in a bog.

Eimear Burke:

Okay.

Billy Stewart:

Now it would've been before tartans were assigned to clans. That was a later thing. It was all whoever was weaving them in different areas. So that would've been the area, but it would've been the area where the Stewart clan was so that's why it was connected to the Stewarts. And then this one here, and this is great because this is also from those guys and this is from a mill in Scotland, but it's not wool. And this is what I can wear a lot in the summer. It has Velcro. I could just Velcro it on and go. And this is a regular Stewart Hunter.

Eimear Burke:

Oh, okay.

Billy Stewart:

Just the one that you're going to see all the time with people. Again, pretty cool, I just collect all this stuff. This was actually made by a guy up in Colorado, the kilt pin, the dragon.

Eimear Burke:

Okay. Very nice.

Billy Stewart:

Yeah, handmade. It was nice. So yeah, there you go. That's a couple of mine.

Eimear Burke:

Yeah. And thank you. And Ferdie, it says, "But the history of tartan is inextricably linked with deliberate attacks on Scots and Gaelic traditional ways of life." I mean including prescription dress laws, disarming acts, the Statues of Iona that I do know there were times when the English banned, the wearing of tartan by Scot's people, am I right Ferdie? So a lot of pain attached to that too. And I know there are Irish tartans as well, provincial ones, old ones. And I remember being in Scotland, in a tartan shop, where Harold was getting his kilts. And the man showed me a huge big book of swatches of they had designed tartans and registered them for each of the counties of Ireland so that they could wear them at Gaelic football and hurling matches. The only thing is they didn't correspond to the county colors so it never took off.

Billy Stewart:

No.

Eimear Burke:

So it's really interesting when you say Kate, that you had to explain the rationale for each thread, each color. Somehow they never went and asked Irish people about the county colors and what they might put in so it never worked.

Billy Stewart:

No.

Kate Collison:

They would've had to have had some explanation though. Maybe they had a different explanation for it. But if they're naming it after a county, they would've had to have got permission from some head of some county, something, the county council or something to register it. I mean maybe a hundred years ago you didn't have to do that, but that is what you need to do now.

Eimear Burke:

Well this is modern times and it's really interesting. I live in Kilkenny and the colors for Kilkenny, this is for the Gaelic football. The GAA is black and amber and the Kilkenny kilt was something like green and blue. It just hadn't made no sense at all. So obviously, many people are really wedded to their county colors. But I don't know how that was. Ferdie is coming back to, "There's also a long history of Scottish culture being sold off as a commodity, as history in the highland clearances and the co-opting of Scottish tartan and its reinvention by Victorian aristocracy." It's quite loaded. The history around tartan and yeah.

Billy Stewart:

Myself, as an American, starting to wear them, really goes back to my deep ties in my pagan practices. As a kid, I was always looking for God under a rock, and as I grew older, of course, I found paganism and witchcraft originally American witchcraft and then into Druidry eight years ago. And for me, I just can't explain it. The first time I heard bagpipes at a renaissance fair and we were really, really displaced. Different DNA things come back and it's always different, but it's anywhere from 40 to 60%. And my family's been here for a while and the rest is something else over there in the British aisle. I'm Welsh, I'm English, and I'm Irish and I can't explain. It was before I knew anything. When I heard the bagpipes at a renaissance fair, I never heard this stuff. I was this little punk kid living on the streets of Los Angeles.

I was a mess when I was in my very early twenties and I'm working at renaissance fair and then I see the tartans and it woke something up in me that I can't explain. And being in early paganism in America, I started doing this stuff in the early eighties and we appropriated every God there was out there. But when I started working with Gods of my ancestors, it was like, at least this is my experience, everybody in OBOD has a different experience. I had this direct feeling come through me. I suddenly believed in the gods and it's the gods of that land that my ancestors came from. And the same thing when I put on a kilt, especially after I transitioned, when I put on a kilt, I ordered one in the mail and when it came and I put it on, I just can't explain what it felt like.

It is deep, it's ancestral, it's somewhere deep in my bones, in my DNA, and it's really different for me. It's quite spiritual. I don't go to a bunch of Celtic festivals. I do play Irish music or Celtic music, but man, so I just want to put that out there that at least for myself, it just went deep.

Eimear Burke:

Yeah. And I think Ferdie, it's coming back "in the same way I'd fight tooth and nail against folkism in Druidry. There shouldn't be folkism in tartans either, but knowledge and respect go a long way". And it seems we're having a respectful conversation about all of this and what it means. And Morgana says, "Billy, that's so much of how I feel when I wear my family tartan." Yeah, I'm just saying.

Kate Collison:

I have done a little bit of research on trying to find the earliest tartan I could. And I've got a few books on tartans. One's a very good one called Tartan and Tweed. And in there it says that the earliest one ever found, now we're talking about actual tartan material found rather than just written records, was in the 16th century. And all it said was it was in the mountains of Eastern Europe. So to me, when you talk about a tartan and a design and a pattern having meanings and the colors, in my head, I imagine that you had these people, these villages nestled in amongst the mountains, there's absolutely beautiful alpine, and they, obviously, weaved their own material using the plants that were available to them. So each value would, obviously, have its own microclimate and that's how the colors got connected to a certain village. That village had a lot of those plants nearby so therefore, their tartan was dyed with those local plants.

And over time the design, you could recognize what village or what family people were from because of the design of their tartan and, to me, it's connecting to your family, to your roots, to your ancestry, to where you are from, to the land. And like Billy said, it goes deep. It really does. So I get what people are saying about the history of the tartan, but it goes further than that, it goes deeper than that, it goes back much, much further than that, for me anyway. So there we are. Yeah.

Eimear Burke:

And Ferdie, "Vernacular tartans really are an expression of the landscape they're from the wool and the plant dyes." Absolutely. I'm just fascinated with the dyes that you're using in the New Forest like the one I ordered. And just hearing the story, I mean your winter tartan, that it's just so good. I find there's something so magical about that that it's so simple. It's there around you and it's about, here it is, the landscape is providing this. And I mean you're talking about array of colors with undyed sheep wool, and it just shows how important the black sheep of any family is.

Kate Collison:

Absolutely right. Yeah. There it is. Running through.

Eimear Burke:

And that thing about your tartan or the colors are an expression of your landscape.

Kate Collison:

And it's about honoring that landscape too. I don't think I've used that word yet, but you don't have to go around shouting about honoring your landscape. It's just a feeling that you get when you wear the tartan. You know it. And especially with the New Forest Tartan, I've been doing this about sort of six years now and you do see it around and about and you don't have to say anything. You just know. You just know that that person feels it too. They've got those roots, they've got that connection. Because we're very lucky in the New Forest. We've got this way of life called commoning where there's certain rights that you can have if you live in certain properties. You don't have to own them, you can rent them, and it applies to land as well. And that's the right to turn out stock. So you might have heard of the New Forest pony, it's on the red brief list, but you wouldn't know that living here because there's about 4,000 New Forest ponies roaming free. Roaming free through the towns and villages as well as in the open forest.

And the way of commoning is very much attached to the seasons and the cycles of life. And the forest is managed by humans, but also by the ponies. They're known as the architects of the forest here. So they will eat the young shoots of the invasive plants and they're very much part of the ecosystem here. It'll be a very, very different place if we didn't have the ponies and the commoning way of life. Because even the word forest, we know that word now as a wooded landscape, but actually, when it was called the New Forest, it was back in 1079, and the word forest means hunting ground so it was the new hunting ground for the King. We interchange forest and woodland now. But the New Forest is made up of so many different types of ecosystems. Obviously, you've got the woodlands, but you've also got the heathland, and the coastline, and the bogs, and the moors and they're internationally important so it really is connected to that landscape.

It's the history and the heritage and the commoning way of life. You've got the Verderers and the Agisters. Agisters Court goes back to the 13th century. It's the oldest court in the world and it's right down the road and I work eight miles from here and it's in the same town as I work. The oldest court in the world. And they oversee the management of the forest and the stock and we have cows, and pigs, and donkeys, and all sorts of things. Sheep turned out onto the open forest. And if you go for a walk, you will literally walk past the ponies and donkeys as you're just walking around. And it's that connection to not just the landscape, but that way of life as well. And it's so important to me, so important. It's where I was brought up and it's the commoning way of life means you have to be connected with the cycles of life.

You have to be connected to how the forest works. The time of year when you do certain things. The stallions turned out for six weeks in the spring. And so you go around and there's stallions that have been through a vetting program. They're the best stallions you can get purebred, New Forest stallions and it's a matter of huge pride if you own one of those stallions and you get the permission to turn it out onto the forest, that's lifetimes, generations of breeding to get the stallion good enough. And that way of that pride and that tradition and connection to the land and to the national park runs deep. It really does. And if you see somebody else walking along and they've got a cap or a something made of this, you just know. You don't have to shout about it. You don't have to say, I love the New Forest. You just know and it's a lovely, it's an incredible feeling.

Eimear Burke:

Wow. So Ben Stinson says that Peter Owen Jones did a wonderful documentary on commoning. It was a beautiful insight into such a vivid living connection. So are you saying that the ponies aren't there all the time or the stallions are kept and then they are only them, the good ones or the pure ones or whatever are let out to cover the mares?

Kate Collison:

So up to 30 years ago, we had about a hundred stallions running on the forest all year. And obviously, there were a lot of foals. The quality of those foals was in decline. They were becoming very common. The forest was being overgrazed and it was a recipe for disaster so they changed it. They took the stallions off. And now, I think, last year there were 20 stallions. That's all for six weeks. That's it. So they're busy boys. When they go out, they're really quite busy. And the quality of the foals. You know, 20, 30 years ago you could buy a New Forest foal for five pounds and it was desperate and they were being sold for meat and it was utterly, utterly hideous. And it's completely turned tail now. And now for a decent little New Forest pony foal, you now are looking four figures, which is phenomenal turnaround because they are on the rare breeds list but we don't want the forest overrun.

We don't want what we call poor quality stock. We want the highest quality. And these little ponies, they're making waves on the international stage. They can do the eventing and they can do everything else. The long distance stuff. They can do everything else that these great big thoroughbreds can do and they're super important.

Eimear Burke:

Wow.

Billy Stewart:

I did not know this about the connection with horses and New Forest. Thank you.

Kate Collison:

Very welcome.

Billy Stewart:

Beautiful.

Eimear Burke:

And Bernard says, "We often forget, most of us are common people. The New Forest has a very special atmosphere." That's lovely. Sean Clancy says, "You're starting to make me want to relocate. I don't think it's got to do with the stallions. I think it's got to do what your description of..."

Kate Collison:

They are a sight to be seen. They really are.

Eimear Burke:

Yes. It's just beautiful. Absolutely. Yeah.