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# Beginner's Guide to Scottish Clans: What is a Sept?

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*Jul 20, 2018*



When you think of Scotland, often the first things that come to mind are castles, bagpipes, Irn Bru and perhaps most obviously of all ... tartans. Look closely and you'll start to see tartan patterns everywhere from kilts to dresses, and from handbags to pet accessories.

Yet there is so, so much more to tartans than pretty fabrics! Each unique tartan is associated with a specific clan and it is here that we want to delve into the fascinating history of clans and septs in Scotland. What is a clan? What is a sept? Read on to find out more!

## **The Clans of Scotland**

In Scots terms, a clan represents a family unit. These groups or tribes are loyal to the clan's head, the Chief, and are typically associated with an area of land where the clan lived. Each clan has many members, usually all

sharing the same surname. Some famous examples include Clan McLeod of Lewis or Clan Campbell of Argyll.

Clans date back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and are still legally recognized today. Each clan typically has its own unique tartan (actually often more than one) and a Seal of Arms, **still yielded with pride by many to this day.** Interestingly, the word “clan” derives from the Gaelic word “clann”, which means ‘children’, so clan members can be thought of as children of the chief.

The history of clans in Scotland is very rich – inter-clan unrest was common, leading to a long and colourful history of border disputes, filled with fascinating characters and bloody battles.

Battles were a way in which clans grew; if a chief won his battle and thus expanded his territory, new members would often take the clan name swearing allegiance to their new leader, even if they don’t share the same bloodline. But battles weren’t the only way in which families joined together - clans might grow through marriage thus merging two clans together, or they might join through force as part of a hostile takeover.

There were many strategic reasons why two clans might align themselves together but whatever the way they grew, such continued expansion gave rise to some of the largest clans like the MacDonalds or MacKenzies. [Read more about clans here.](#)



## Definition of a Sept

As clans grew larger and larger, they also grew more powerful, taking more and more families under their wing (whether voluntarily, through marriage or by force!). Many of these families were quite large, so new subdivisions were needed, thus giving rise to Septs.

A sept is a large and powerful family within a clan. Individual members of a Sept may not share the same surname as the clan Chief but were nonetheless a powerful part of the group and in fact, heads of these Septs could sometimes be as powerful as the Chief himself.

Smaller clans often bonded to a parent clan in this way, for protection or other reasons. The septs followed the clan leader and were an extended part of the family, just with different surnames.

In today's day and age, the relationship between septs and clans means that many surnames can be thought of as a subsection of another. So, if your family surname doesn't have a specific tartan associated with it, but you know you hold Scottish ancestry, you may well be entitled to wear the tartan of another clan.



## Some Sept examples

A good example is Clan Gunn, hailing from the lands of Caithness and Sutherland in the far NE of Scotland. In fact, it was a recent client of mine who was a part of a sept of Clan Gunn that sparked the idea for this article!

According to [ScotClans.com](http://ScotClans.com), the following names are considered associated names or septs of Clan Gunn:

- Enrick, Eanrig
- Georgeson, Gaunson, Ganson, Gallie
- Henderson
- Inrig
- Jameson, Jamieson, Jamison, Jaisson, Johnson,
- Korman
- MacCorkill, MacCorkle
- MacHamish, Mackeamish
- Maclan
- Mann, Manson, Manus, Magnus
- Nelson, Neilson
- Robson, Robeson, Robison, Robinson, MacRob
- Sandison, Swanson
- Will, MacWilliam, Williamson, Wilson

Since many of these Septs don't have their own tartan my client could use Gunn's tartan since they are considered part of the wider Gunn clan.

Take a look on [ScotClans.com](http://ScotClans.com) to discover what clan your ancestors might have belonged to.

### **Further Reading**

For those new to the world of clans there is a huge range of history behind the clan movements and mergers which would fill pages and pages on here. If you're interested in finding out more, take a peek at some of the vast selection of books on Scottish clan history.