



Scottish Culture and History



The Sporrán — Definitely Scottish

A Sporrán is a pouch (the word is simply the Scottish Gaelic for 'purse').

Cultures worldwide are associated with unique clothing design. Scotland is best known for Highland dress and an essential set piece of any male kilt-wearer's outfit is the sporrán. A survival of the medieval purse, the sporrán is the Highlander's pocket they do not have.

The sporrán, or *sporan* in Gaelic, has come a long way from a doeskin bag containing ammunition or daily rations. Nowadays, they are made from PVC leather, faux fur and even buttons and carry everything from car keys to condoms. But despite modern enhancements, sporrans have retained their basic design.

As early as the 12th century, Highland warriors were described as being "bare-legged, with shaggy cloaks and a scrip [small bag] hanging *ex humeris*". But function was a feature over fashion in medieval life. As such, sporrans were worn on a tight belt around the waist. Only when the sporrán became largely ornamental did it descend to its present position — and for obvious reasons.

Nonetheless, the sporrán is important in historical fashion terms. Trends and fashion in mainland Europe, and later in North America, influenced dress in Scotland — both through tourists visiting Scotland and Scots travelling abroad. Clothing styles changed and new fabrics were introduced.

Early sporrans were made from leather or skin alone (deerskin and calfskin proved popular) and were gathered at the top by basic drawstrings or by thongs with small tassels.



A brass and steel, pistol-firing sporrán, believed to be one-of-a-kind, is on display at the National Museum in Edinburgh
Picture: © The Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland

From the late 17th century and early 18th century, sporrans were generally fitted with clasps. Made of brass or occasionally silver; the metal work of some existing clasps from this period are seen as works of art. The goat-hair variety, *sporrán molach* (hairy sporrán), was introduced by the military in the 18th century, and was likened to the "costume fever" of the age. Such sporrans often had flap-tops and large tassels with a shaving-brush appearance. A variety of furs and hair such as fox and horse were also used. Some sporrans were even made from sealskin and the head of a badger.

While various original sporrans from the 14th century and onwards are on display at Scottish museums, the history and evolution of the sporrán can also be seen in early British military paintings and portraits of Highland soldiers. Some of these sporrans were elaborately decorated with studs or had distinctive clasps and locks.

Sporrans have intrigued writers too. It is said that poet and novelist Sir Walter Scott was inspired by an 18th century sporrán he saw on display at a Scottish mu-

seum. The sporran – now featured at the National Museum in Edinburgh, had a clasp of brass and steel with four concealed pistols. The contraption was meant to be discharged in a reckless attempt to open the locked purse, thus injuring the intruder. Scott incorporated this device into his story *Rob Roy* where Roy himself declared, "I advise no man to attempt opening this sporran till he has my secret." Now a decorative part of Highland dress, it was originally an everyday practical item. Made of leather or fur, it usually has more or less elaborate silver or other ornamentation, especially on the clasp or hanger. It is worn on a chain or belt around the waist, allowing the sporran to lie below the waist of the person wearing a kilt.

Since the traditional kilt does not have pockets, the sporran serves as a wallet and container for any other necessary personal items (such as a hip-flask). It is essentially a survival of the common European medieval belt-pouch, superseded elsewhere as clothing came to have pockets, but continuing in the Scottish Highlands because of the lack of these accessories in traditional dress.



A Day Sporran

The sporran also protects a person's decency. This was originally because the ancient 'great plaid' (Gaelic breacan an fhèilidh), formed of a long draped cloth, had a gap at the front, and in more modern times because the kilt is traditionally worn without undergarments. Historically, the sporran was used to carry a day's rations. Some believe it served as armour for a vulnerable area of the body.

"**Day Sporrans**" are usually simple brown or black leather pouches with little adornment. These "day" sporrans often have three leather tassels and some Celtic knots embossed in the leather. Traditionalists prefer brown or buff-coloured sporrans, belts, and shoes for day wear.

In between the Day Sporran and the Dress Sporran is the "**Semi — Dress Sporran**". This tends to be more elaborate in design than the Day Sporran but not so spectacular as the full Dress Sporran. Like its full dress cousin, it often has a silver or chrome cantle and a fur-covered face but usually of shorter fur than the full dress variety.



Dress Sporran in Fox

The Semi—Dress Sporran is usually worn on less formal occasions than the Full—Dress Sporran.

"**Dress Sporrans**" are larger than the day variety, and are more ornate. Victorian examples were often ostentatious, and very different from the simple leather pouch of the 17th or 18th centuries. Dress Sporrans usually have chrome or silver cantles trimming the top of the pouch and a fur-covered face with fur or hair tassels. The cantle may contain intricate filigree or etchings of Celtic knots. The top of the cantle may have a set stone, jewel, or emblems such as Saint Andrew, a thistle, Clan, or Masonic symbols.

As the name implies, a dress sporran is usually worn with more formal outfits like a Prince Charlie or Sherrifmuir jacket. They are very multi-purpose and may be worn at more formal functions and parties.



A Military or Pipe Band Sporran

"**Military Sporrans**" may be worn with regimental attire. Whilst popular in the Victorian era for wear on formal occasions, today, the Horse Hair Sporran is generally reserved for the military and pipers in Pipe Bands who will often wear these most flamboyant sporrans with the long horsehair swishing from side to side as the piper marches.

Although there is no hard and fast rule for the civilian wearing of a Sporran, for comfort, the Sporran is best worn such that its top falls about four fingers' width below the bottom of the belt. In this position it is neither too high nor too low. Experiment a little to find just the "right" place for you.



A Semi-Dress Sporran



The Sherrifmuir Jacket with full Highland dress



Prince Charlie Jacket