The Flags of the Mary Rose.

Bruce Nicolls

When Henry VIII came to the throne of England in 1509 he continued the work his father had started in building a large fleet of powerful fighting ships, and this fleet included a fine ship called the MARY ROSE, after Henry's beautiful and spirited sister, of whom he was very fond.

In 1536 the MARY ROSE was extensively rebuilt to enable her to carry more of poweful heavy guns that were now transforming warfare at sea, a transformation that also had a marked effect on maritime flags, as will be described later in this paper.

In July, 1545 England was at war with France (but not, just then, with Spain, I am happy to say). A French invasion fleet was approaching Portsmouth on the south coast of England, and some landings had been made on the Isle of Wight, a few miles off shore. The English fleet put to sea to do battle with the French, and the MARY ROSE was one of the leading ships, with Vice Admiral Sir George Carew embarked. An engraving from a contemporary painting of this event shows the ships of both fleets with deck banners and masthead flags and streamers proudly flying.

As the MARY ROSE closed the enemy fleet she turned to bring her bradside guns to bear, and a few minutes later she sank, with the loss of all but about thirty of her crew, including her Captain and the Admiral. The French historian Du Bellay wrote that 'the MARY ROSE, one of their principal ships, was sunk by our cannon', but according to an English eye-witness account she was top heavy with many extra men onboard, and heeled over as more sail was hoisted. The open gunports dipped below the water, and the ship flooded rapidly and sank. In the engraving of the battle scene just two of her matsheads are shown out of the water, one with the red cross flag of St. George still bravely flying in the wind, while the bodies of some of her crew float in the water nearby.

The salvage experts of the time were confident that the ship would soon be raised, although their efforts were to prove unsuccessful, and a drawing of her was included in a roll completed the following year, which gave details of all the King's Ships, their guns and armament stores. The drawings in this roll, which are in colour, also show the flags which were flown on the ships.

Most of the flags are deck banners, dating from the period when noblemen took their retainers to sea to fight for their King, and placed their armorial banners around the ship. These 'private armies' had been abolished by Henry VII, but the deck banners remained, now bearing the Royal Arms Badges and Livery Colours.

Also remaining from earlier times are the shields or 'pavises' along the side of the ship. As with the deck banners, these had been the shields of the noblemen and knights embarked to fight the battles, and placed round the ship for protection, but now they were purely decorative, and also bore Royal Badges or the Red Cross of St. George.

Foremost among the deck banners are those bearing the Royal Arms, quartering the three lions of England, adopted by Richard I in about

1198, with the three fleur-de-lis of France modern. The number had been reduced to three in about 1400, following the change in France, from the ancient arms with many fleur-de-lis semé, or scattered on the field. The French Royal Arms had been included in the English Royal Banner since 1340 when Edward III claimed the throne of France, and for a short period in the fourteenth century he did rule more of France than the French King. The original Royal Banner of the three lions of England had been widely used at sea, almost as a national flag, but after 1340 its use seems to have restricted to ships in the King's service, whether permanently or temporarily.

The Royal Badges were used to distinguish people and property belonging to the King. They included a single fleur-de-lis, and its English counterpart, the Tudor Rose. This combined the red rose of the House of Lancaster and the white rose of the House of York, two great families which had fought for the throne of England in what later became known as the Hundred Years War. In 1485 Lancastrian Henry Tudor had defeated Yorkist King Richard III to become Henry VII, and then united the two houses by marrying Elizabeth of York, the Yorkist heiress to the throne.

Some banners bears what may have been intended to be a Portcullis, a Royal Badge adopted from the family of Henry VII's mother, Lady Margaret Baeufort. There may also have been a banner bearing Henry VIII's Royal Cypher HR – Henricus Rex. Other banners clearly show the red cross of St. George, also introduced to England by Richard I in the twelfth century, and the green and white Tudor Livery Colours. These had been adopted by Henry VII and were the livery colours of the Princes of Gwynedd in North Wales, from whom Henry was descended.

Flying from the fighting tops are streamers with St. George's cross at the hoist and the livery colours in the fly. At the foremasthead is a great flag combining the Royal Banner and St. George's cross, known as the Council Banner. This was belived to have been the Lord High Admiral's standard, and was also used, hoisted in the shrouds, to call Admirals and Captains to the Flagship for Councils of War. The main masthead is not shown in the drawing, while St. George's cross flies from the other two.

The drawing in the roll, by a man called Anthony, was the only direct evidence that existed as to the appearance of the MARY ROSE until 1982, when the remains of her hull were recovered from the sea bed, together with many of her guns, much of her stores, the skeleton of most of her crew and many of their personal possesions. The wreck and the artifacts, but not the skeletons, were put on display in Portsmouth, and I proposed to the organisers that replicas of the flags would add colour and extra interest to the exibition. This was agreed, so I began to study the Antony Roll drawing and other evidence regarding Tudor flags more closely.

It seemed strange that in the Anthony Roll the deck banners were shown as long flags, mostly with two charges impaled, while all the other evidence available indicates that deck banners of this period were about square, with only one charge. This can be seen in the painting of Henry VIII's departure for the meeting with King Francis I of France at what became known as the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520. Contemporary drawings by one Thomas Pettyt of English ships at Calais in about 1545 also show nearly square deck banners, as does the engraving of the scene of the sinking of the MARY ROSE. In the Anthony Roll itself, the drawings of the smaller ships show nearly square deck banners.

The only flag of the time which did incorporate two charges impaled was the Council Banner with the Royal Arms and St. George's Cross, and there is some doubt over the portrayal of this flag at the foremasthead as remaining records suggest that this flag was only flown at the mainmasthead by the Lord High Admiral.

The evidence suggested, therefore, that the Antony Roll artist did not observe the flags correctly, and this evidence was strongly supported when study of the recovered hull of the MARY ROSE revealed that he had not observed the arrangement of the guns correctly. He had indicate three heavy gun decks when there were in fact only two. As Mr. Antony was an artilleryman this was a surprising error, and seemed to confirm that the deck banners were also incorrectly portrayed. Not only were there errors in the flags themselves, but most of the flagpoles were shown as being mounted on the high central beam supporting the anti-boarding net, whereas they should have been shown at the slides of the ship.

I believe that the artist did see nearly square deck banners on each side of the ship, each bearing one charge, but in his ingorance he misinterpreted what he saw and belived them to be long flags mounted amidships and bearing two charges. In this belief he was encouraged by having seen a Council Banner at a masthead, this clearly being such a flag.

The result of my research was a set of eight square flag designs for the Mary Rose Exibition in Portsmouth, which consisted of four Royal Badges: the Tudor Rose, Fleur-de-lis, Portcullis and another not shown on the Anthony Roll, the Prince of Wales' Feather, the St. George's Cross, the Tudor Livery Colours, and two flags shown in the engraving of the battle scene being flown by the French ships, the white cross on a blue field, and the white and blue stripes. A further set of five flags, consisting of the Royal Badges mentioned previously and the Royal Banner, was later supplied to the National Geographic Society in Washington DC for their Mary Rose Exhibition which opened in August last year.

Rather sadly, from a vexillographer's point of view, the development of the heavy naval gun eventually brought about the end of the colourful array of deck banners. As has been described, their original presence as the armorial banners of embarked noblemen had already changed to the mostly decorative purpose os displaying Royal Badges and Livery Colours and the National Flag. As the use of the heavy gun at long range increased, and close quarters fighting with archers and pinkmen decreased, so the need for flags for recognition purposes changed, and large simple flags were required at conspicious positions in the ship, Masthead flags grew in size, but the only place clear enough of spars, sails and rigging for a really large flag was at the stern.

So was born the naval ensign of today. In the English Navy the first recorded use of such an ensing was in about 1574, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. In common with the deck banner its origin lay with the army shore, but in the case of the ensign only the idea and the name were taken onoboard ship. It was a large flag, now slightly longer than square, with proportions of about 4:5. Its design was simple, with the red cross of St. George and bold stripes of the Tudor livery colours of green and white or other livery colours of blue and white, red and white, or red, white and blue. Queen Elizabeth was said to prefer the simple and highly symbolic cross of St. George to the more ornate Royal Banner, and encouraged its use. It was the flag of her people and their patron saint, and Elizabeth was an astute ruler, who knew the power of a popular symbol.

Most ensigns featured the St. George's cross in the canton and horizontal stripes, but in some the cross was placed overall, and some had diagonal stripes. As in army esigns or colours, naval ones combined the national flag with a design distinguishing a particular unit; a ship, or the ships of a particular owner. In those days relatively few ships were owned by the King, or Queen in this case; most were taken into war service as and when required.

These bold and brightly coloured striped ensigns distinguished England's ships for about fifty years, for the rest of the Tudor period, and through into the reign of the first Stuart King of England, James I. In 1621 the Red Ensign was introduced, and gradually superseded them, followed by the White and Blue Ensigns in about 1633. These were required to distinguish different squadroms within the fleet, a need arising from the development of naval tactics. The Red Ensign also remained the flag for use by merchat vessels.

With the change to the Union Flag in 1707 these Ensigns remained in such use until 1864, when an Order in Council introduced the present allocation: the Red Ensign for merchat ships and other vessels with British owners, the White for ships of the Royal Navy, and the Blue, broadly, for ships other than warships in government service.

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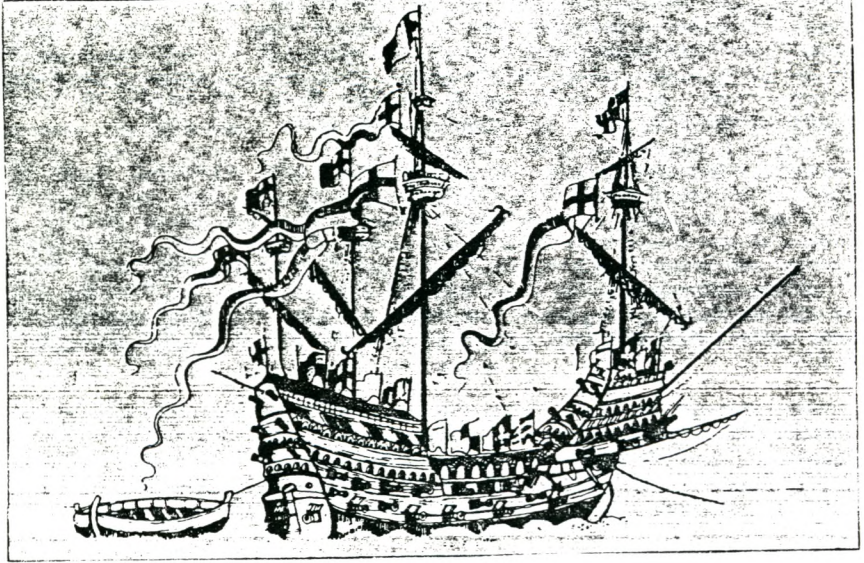
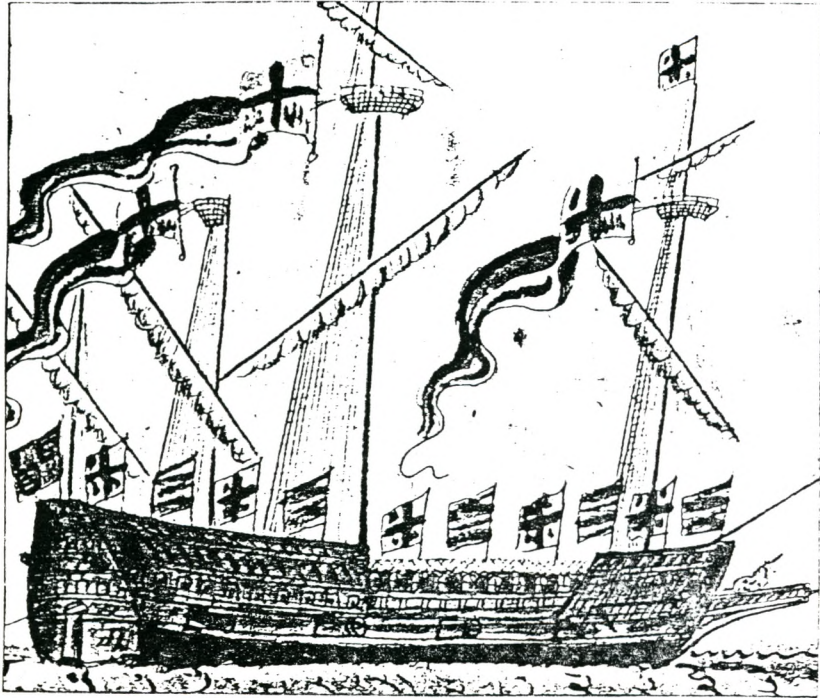THE MARY ROSE

ENLARGED WIEW OF DECK BANNERS
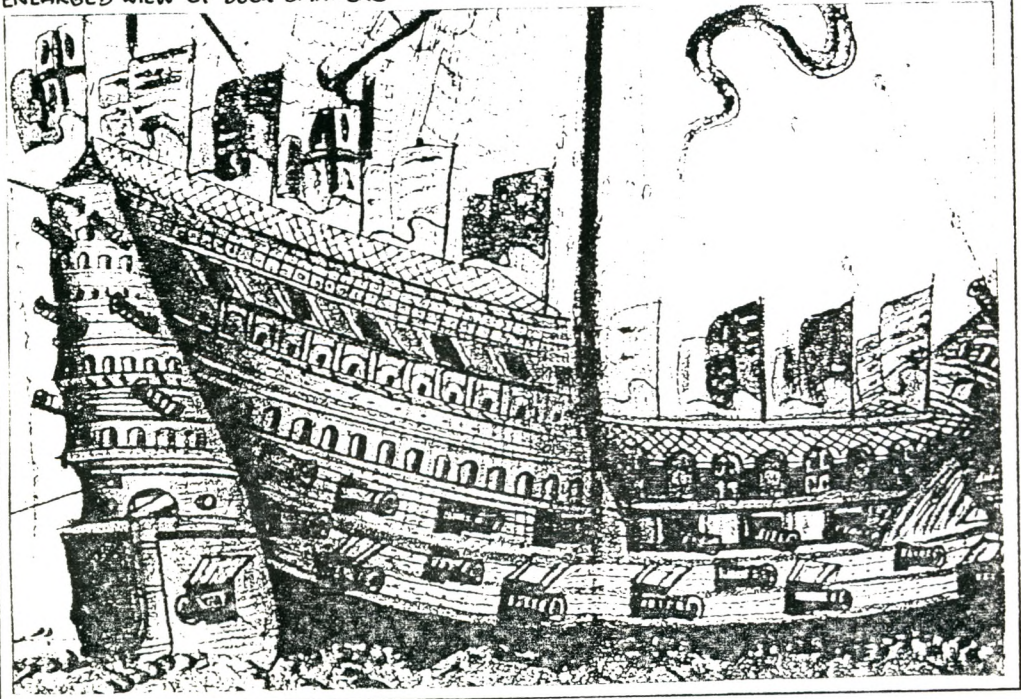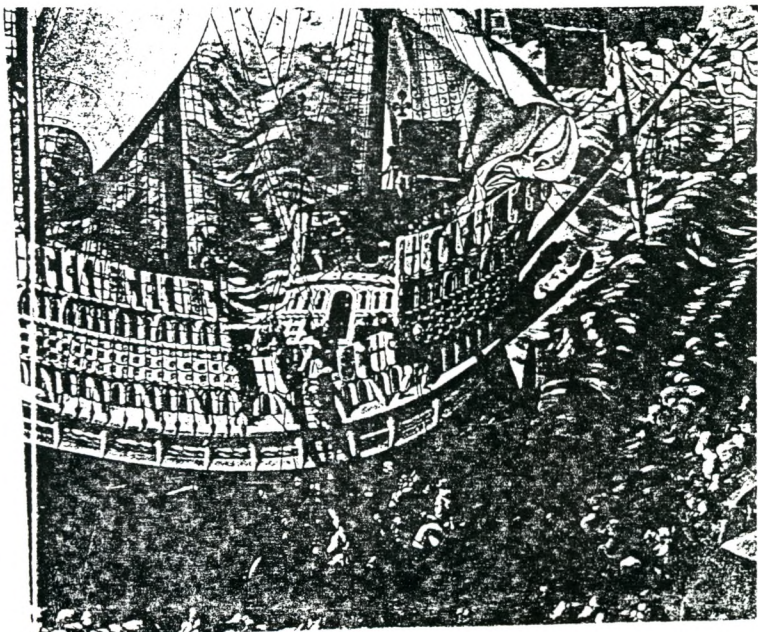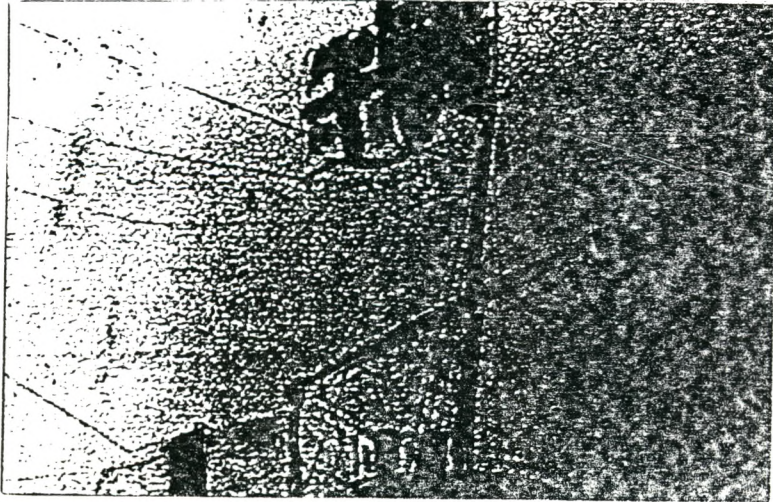
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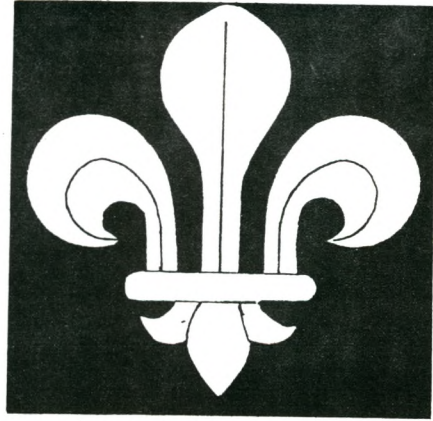
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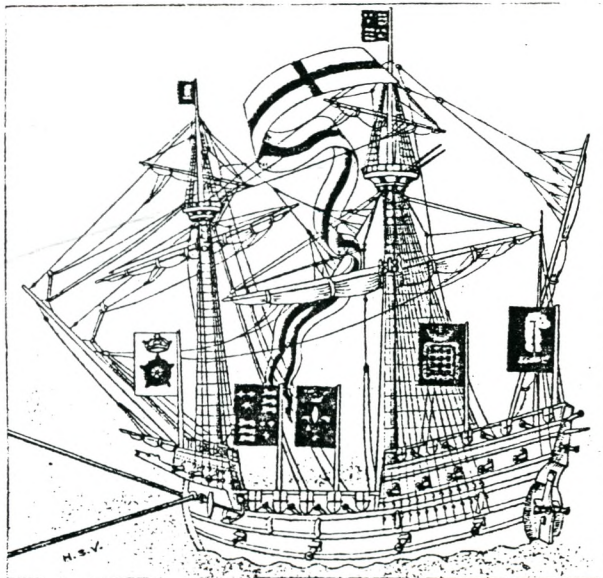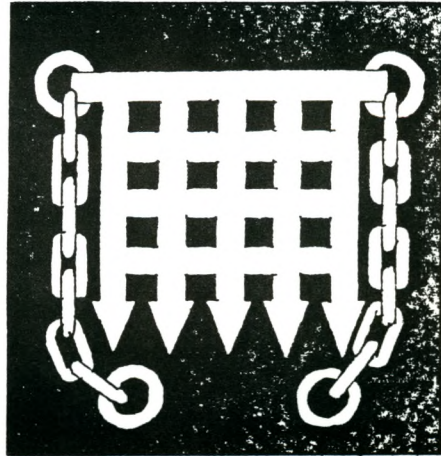
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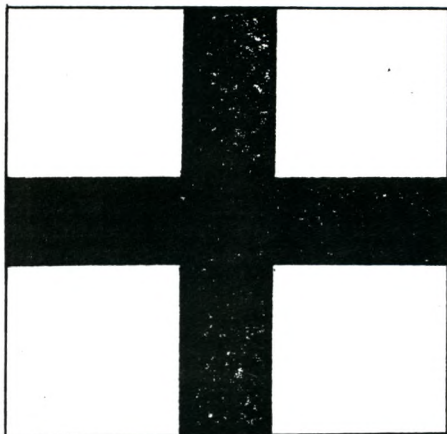
COUNCIL BANNER ON MARY ROSE

ROYAL BANNER

FLEUR DE LIS

TUDOR ROSE

PORTCULLIS

Royal Cypher
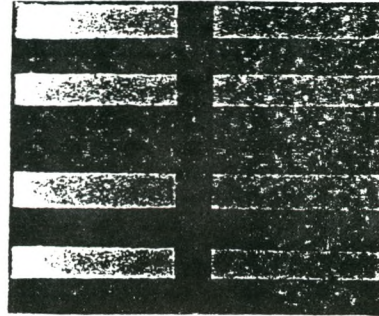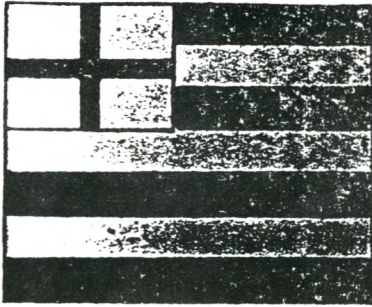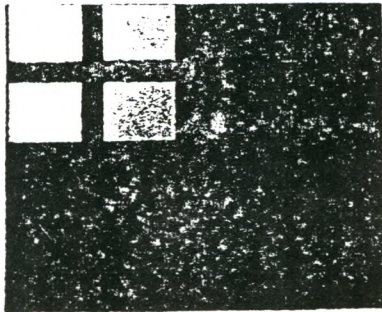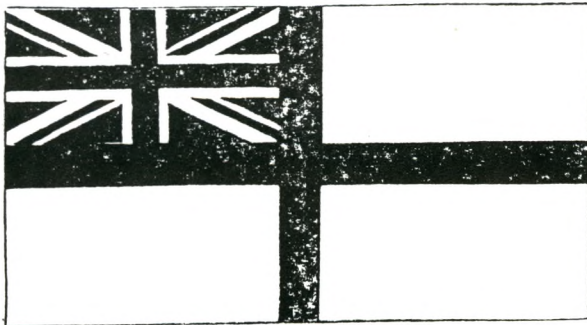

St George

Livery Colours

Prince of Wales

Elizabethan Ensign Cross in Canton

Elizabethan Ensign Cross Overall

Early Red/Blue Ensign

Present White Ensign