

THE FLAGS OF THE BRITISH SOUTH AFRICA COMPANY 1890-1923

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1) Introduction

The early vexillology of Central Africa is linked with the history of the British South Africa Company, which was responsible for the early colonisation of the area by Europeans. The Company, in the British tradition, carried the «Union Jack» when claiming the African interior and later flew its own flag. This paper reveals that based on some preliminary research done to date, there are a number of discrepancies and unresolved questions relating to just what exactly the design of the Company's flag was. The lack of conclusive evidence highlights the need for further, more intensive research on the subject. This presentation is not meant, therefore, to be an authoritative work on the topic, but rather the beginnings of an investigation into the rich vexillological history of Central Africa.

2) The Chartered Company

The European occupation of Central Africa began in earnest towards the end of the previous century [Fig 1]. The colonial scramble for Africa was then at its height, and on 29 October 1889, Queen Victoria approved a Royal Charter establishing the British South Africa Company (BSAC). This was the brainchild of the British imperialist and financier, Cecil John Rhodes, who was living in the Cape Colony at the time. The Company was more than just a business enterprise. Its Charter gave it the power, inter alia, to make treaties, promulgate laws, prescribe the peace, maintain a police force, acquire new (mining) concessions and provide the infrastructure for a new Colony at Company expense. With these formidable powers and its wide range of interests, the Chartered Company (as it became known), established the foundations of the country that was later to become the state of Zimbabwe. Subsequently in 1900 the North Eastern Rhodesia «Order in Council» came into force which gave the BSA Company unlimited powers in the territory later to become Zambia. The Company also obtained, as shown in [Fig. 2], a grant of Arms².

The significance of the Arms is briefly as follows. The colour of the field is the same as that in the arms of England. The gold discs refer to the gold abounding in Matabeleland, and the ears of wheat refers to the rich agricultural potential of the area. The oxen refer to the beasts of burden employed there and to the abundance of cattle. The fesse wavy refers to the Zambezi, Limpopo and other rivers flowing through the territory administered by the Company. The galleys refer to the shipping which can traverse the rivers. The supporters and the crest indicate the wild animals found in the area. The Lion also forms an allusion to the heraldic emblem of England, and the three galleys are from the arms of the second Duke of Abercorn, the first President of the Company³. Article 19 of the Charter gave the Company the right to fly its own flag, stating: «The Company may hoist and use on its buildings and elsewhere in the territories aforesaid, and on its vessels, such distinctive flags indicating the British Character of the Company as our Secretary of State and the Lords Commissioners of the

Admiralty shall from time to time approve»⁴. However, no detailed description of such a flag was provided.

The granting of the Charter prompted Rhodes to organise the «Pioneer Column», whose aim was to trek into Central Africa and colonise it. The Pioneer Column, consisting of 380 men and 200 South African policemen, left the Cape on 27 June 1890. While Rhodes was making arrangements for the Pioneer Column to leave the question arose as to what flag the Column should fly. In May 1890, Rutherford Harris, Secretary of the Kimberley offices of the Company wrote to the London office with the following recommendation: «As we have had none of the Company's flags forwarded to us, Mr. Rhodes at the request of Col. Pennefather, Mr. Colquhoun, and Mr. Joseph Thompson, has sanctioned the use by these gentlemen of a white flag with the letters BSACo. in the foreground. Immediately on the receipt by us of the Company's flags, some will be forwarded to Col. Pennefather and Mr. Colquhoun»⁵.

The response to this suggestion is not known. However, we do know that the Company's flags had not arrived before the Column set off, and despite Mr. Harris recommendation, the suggested makeshift was not used. Instead a Union Flag of Great Britain was carried. The first flag to be flown in what is now Zimbabwe was thus the «Union Jack». It was raised by Lieutenant E.G. Tyndale-Biscoe at 10am on 13 September 1890 at Fort Salisbury, the day after the Column reached its destination in Mashonaland⁶. To this day a flag pole marks the spot where the Union Flag was first raised - this is on the edge of the Unity Square in what is now the city of Harare, capital of Zimbabwe. The Square is designed in the pattern of a Union Flag which is further symbolic of the historical significance of this event. The actual flag hoisted in 1890 is on display at the National Archives of Zimbabwe. Records do not show when the Company's flags eventually arrived in Mashonaland. What is clear, however, is that following the uprising in Matabeleland the area was annexed by the Company's forces and on 4 November 1893, the BSA Company flag was raised at the tribal capital of the Matabele, Bulawayo. A contemporary drawing of the event [Fig. 3] shows the flag quite clearly. This is one of the earliest records of the flag actually being used.

3) Flags of the BSA Company

a) The Company Flag: The Company flag hoisted at the occupation of Bulawayo, and presumably used elsewhere in the area under Company jurisdiction, was not described in detail in the Charter. The flag referred to [Fig. 4] consisted of a British Union Flag charged in the centre, on a white roundel, with the crest of the Company, namely a yellow lion «guardant passant» supporting with its right forepaw an ivory tusk which was known to the irreverent as the «lion with the tooth-pick»⁷.

b) Company Ensigns: On 11 November 1902, the Company's authority to fly flags was widened by Admiralty Warrant⁸, which made provision for: i) The Union Flag (of Great Britain) with badge for use by the Administrator when embarking in boats or other vessels of the Company; ii) a blue ensign with badge for use by vessels (not being trading vessels) belonging to, or in the service of the Company; and iii) a red ensign

with badge for use by merchant ships and trading vessels of the Company.

The provision for the use of ensigns might appear strange in that the territories under the jurisdiction of the Company had no direct access to the coast, but it should be remembered that the Charter did provide for the Company to claim and occupy land as part of the colonisation of Central Africa. The rationale for the Warrant could also be explained by the possibility of the Company operating vessels on the inland lakes such as Bengweulu, Mweru, Tanganyika or Nyasa in what was then Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) or Nyasaland (now Malawi). This authority did not appear to be internationally recognised because of the land-locked nature of the Rhodesias. This was subsequently set right by a «Declaration recognising the Right to a Flag of States having no Sea-coast» which was internationally agreed to and signed in Barcelona on 20 April, 1921⁹.

c) Flag of the Company Administrator: In terms of the Royal Charter, the Administrator was the Crown's representative in the territories under the control of the Company. As such, the Administrator had a distinctive flag for his personal use. The principle for the design of such a flag was contained in a Circular from Downing Street dated 14 September 1869, which stated: «Governors of all ranks and denominations, administering the Governments of British colonies and dependencies are authorised to fly the Union Jack with the Arms or Badge of the Colony emblazoned in the centre thereof»⁹. Attached to the Circular was an illustration of the British Union Flag showing a laurel wreath surrounding the roundel on which the device of the Colony or dependency was placed. On this basis, therefore, the flag of the Administrator would have the Company crest in the centre of the Union Flag within a green laurel garland

4) Controversies and Queries surrounding the BSA Company's Territories

No formalised description of the BSA Company flags has yet been found. The lack of such a description other than that contained in the Charter, probably accounts for the discrepancies and different versions of these flags which have become evident in the research of this topic. The anomalies for each of the various Company flags are discussed below.

a) The Company Flag: Original examples of the first Company flag, that which has the Company crest in the centre of the British Union Flag as shown in Figure 4, are to be found in a number of museums in Zambia and Zimbabwe. Important differences in the design relate to the question of a red ring being found surrounding the crest in some cases. From the drawing of the hoisting of the Company flag in Bulawayo in 1893¹¹ [Fig. 3], it is not clear whether a red ring is present or not. However, the flag on display at the National Archives in Harare does not have such a ring, nor do the two flags on display at the Natural History Museum in Bulawayo, one of which was the flag last flown at the Magistrate's Court in Bulawayo on 11 September 1923. A Company flag with a ring is to be found on display at the Livingstone Museum in Zambia, and the author has a flag used by the Company as a house flag which also has a ring around the crest.

Interestingly, early sources make no mention of a ring and where the device is shown in early Admiralty Books¹² no red ring is found, nor is there one in a photograph of the flag (on which the date 1891 is written) found in Time-Life's series entitled «The British Empire»¹³ [Fig. 5]. The Rhodesia Government booklet¹⁴ illustrating all the flags flown in the country does, however, show the Company flag featuring the red ring. Why some flags have the ring and others not remains a mystery and is obviously an area for more detailed research. Another interesting point is that in the drawing showing the occupation of Bulawayo, the lion is shown facing in the wrong direction. A possible explanation for this could be that the Company Crest may have simply been sewn onto both sides of a «Union Jack», with the reverse side portraying the lion facing away from the hoist.

b) Company Ensigns: Ensigns were primarily intended for use as maritime flags, and although the Company's possessions never included a coastline, it was empowered in terms of its Charter to own or charter ships. In all probability these ensigns (if used at all), were therefore used on land. Since none of these Company ensigns have been found in any museums in Central Africa, or elsewhere, and no record exists of their actual usage, it is doubtful whether they were in fact used at all. An illustration of the blue BSA Company ensign is found on a British flag chart reproduced in Dr. Whitney Smith's book, «Flags Through the Ages and Across the World»¹⁵. This illustration shows the yellow lion crest under which are the letters B.S.A.C. in gold in the fly of a British Blue ensign. The crest is imprinted directly on the flag with no roundel. In a German cigarette card flag series from the late 1920s¹⁶, however, the BSA Company red ensign is depicted with the crest and black letters, in the centre of a white roundel in the fly. The question to be asked, therefore, is whether the Company actually ever made use of the ensign version of the flag. A further issue is whether the Company crest emblazoned on the fly of such ensigns was superimposed on a white roundel [Fig 6]. A simple explanation could be that the roundel was only used in the case of the red ensign and not with the blue and that the use of the roundel would then determine whether the acronym of the Company was in gold or black letters.

c) Flag of the BSA Company Administrator: There is no record of the Administrator's flag actually being used, nor are there any of these flags on display in the local museums, so the question arises as to whether this flag was ever in use as intended. Once again this issue should be further investigated.

5) The End of Company Administration

The end of Company administration came following a referendum which had been held in Southern Rhodesia in 1922 to determine whether the European settlers wished to join the Union of South Africa or become a self-governing Colony with Responsible Government. The majority was in favour of self-government and consequently the administration of the BSA Company came to an end with the granting by the British Government of Responsible Government to Southern Rhodesia on 13 September 1923, while in April 1924 Northern Rhodesia became a British Protectorate. The formal transfer of government from the BSA Company to the

newly elected Legislative Assembly in Southern Rhodesia took place at midday on 1 October 1923 when Sir John Chancellor was sworn in as the new Governor. At sunset the previous evening a retreat was sounded at the police depot and the Company flag was lowered for the last time by RSM Douglas, Sergeant Hughes-Halls and Sergeant Harmer of the British South Africa Police. The following day the British Union Flag was raised in its place¹⁷.

Despite being relieved of its political obligations, the Company continued to manage a wide range of agricultural, mining and commercial interests in both Southern and Northern Rhodesia until it amalgamated with the Anglo-American Corporation in 1965. Between 1923 and 1965 the Company continued to fly as a house flag at its offices in London and in the Rhodesias, the Company flag comprising the Union Flag with the crest in the centre. Whether the house flag had the red ring or not is open to speculation, but the flag in the possession of the author does have the ring and came from the Company's office in Salisbury. The Company flag seems to have been used by the new Governor of Southern Rhodesia until as late as 1931¹⁸. Whether or not it was the Administrator's flag which was used in this instance is also not clear.

6) Conclusion

The flag commonly associated with the BSA Company is the Union Jack being charged in the centre with the crest of the Company. Provision was also made for the Company to fly ensigns and there was also possibly a separate flag for the Company Administrator. However, the lack of a precise description of the design of the Company's flag has resulted in a number of versions of these flags being found. Due to the nature of the Company, it is unlikely that the ensign versions were ever used and the use of the Administrator's flag is also doubtful. More perplexing are the variations within each of the versions, particularly the red ring around the crest on the Company flag and the incorporation of the roundel or otherwise on the ensigns. Unfortunately no conclusive answers to these issues can be given at present and further research is required on the design and usage of the flags used by the Company when it was the administrative authority for the Rhodesias at the turn of the century.

Notes

- ¹ The Charter was printed in Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers, 1914-1916, XLV, Cd. 7645, pp 37-41.
- ² Baxter, R.W., «Flags and Arms of Rhodesia», unpublished mimeo, undated, National Archives of Rhodesia, Salisbury, and Encyclopaedia Rhodesia. College Press, Salisbury, 1970.
- ³ Illustration and description of the BSA Company Arms provided by the National Archives of Zimbabwe. See also Pama, C., «Lions and Virgins», Human and Rosseau, Cape Town, 1965, p.112 and Fig. 115.
- ⁴ Baxter, op. cit., p. 4.
- ⁵ *ibid.*, p. 6.
- ⁶ Ransford, O., «Rhodesian Tapestry – A History in Needlework», Books of Rhodesia, Bulawayo, 1971.
- ⁷ Baxter, op. cit., p. 4.
- ⁸ Secretary of State for Colonies to the High Commissioner for South Africa, 27 April 1904.
- ⁹ Great Britain, Treaty Series, No. 29, (1923), Cmd. 1994.
- ¹⁰ Correspondence in Cape Archives depot: GH 5/23, dated 14 September 1869.
- ¹¹ This drawing by an artist whose surname was Taylor is depicted on a 3d stamp issued in Rhodesia in 1968 to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the occupation of Matabeleland and was also used on the dustcover of a book about the Company called «Charter Royal», by Robert Cary, Timmins, Cape Town, 1970.
- ¹² «Flags, Badges and Arms of the British Dominions beyond the Seas», Part I – Flags and Badges, H.M.S.O., London, 1910, Plate 17.
- ¹³ «The British Empire» (Vol. 4), Time-Life International, (Nederland) B.V., 1973, p.1352.
- ¹⁴ Ministry of Information, Immigration and Tourism, «Flags of Rhodesia», Government Printer, Salisbury, undated.
- ¹⁵ Smith, W., «Flags Through the Ages and Across the World», McGraw-Hill, Maidenhead, 1975, p.186.
- ¹⁶ «Wer nennt die Länder – kennt die Fahnen?» Massary Zigarettenfabrik, Berlin, (c.1928), p.53. The same flag is also depicted in a South African cigarette card album namely the «Glider Flag Album», Universal Tobacco Co., Cape Town, 1954, p.53. It is interesting that both show the BSA Company despite being published after the end of Company administration.
- ¹⁷ Gibbs, P., «The Right of the Line – The History of the BSAP», (Vol. 2, 1903-1939), Kingstons, 1974, Salisbury, p.165.
- ¹⁸ Information supplied by Richard Allport, Oudeschip, Netherlands.

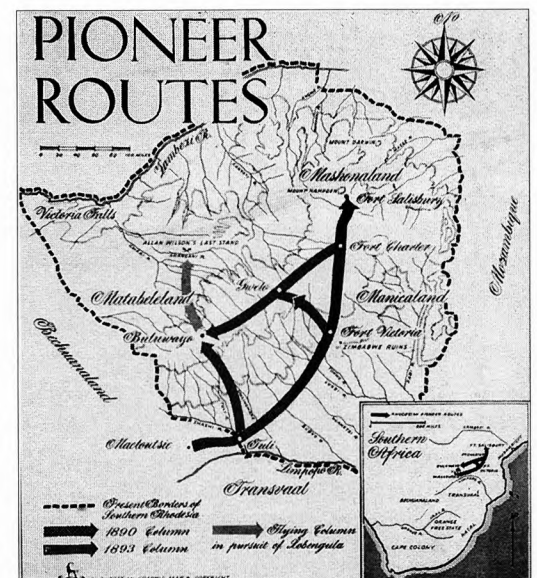


Fig. 1
Pioneer routes into Southern Rhodesia (nowadays Zimbabwe).

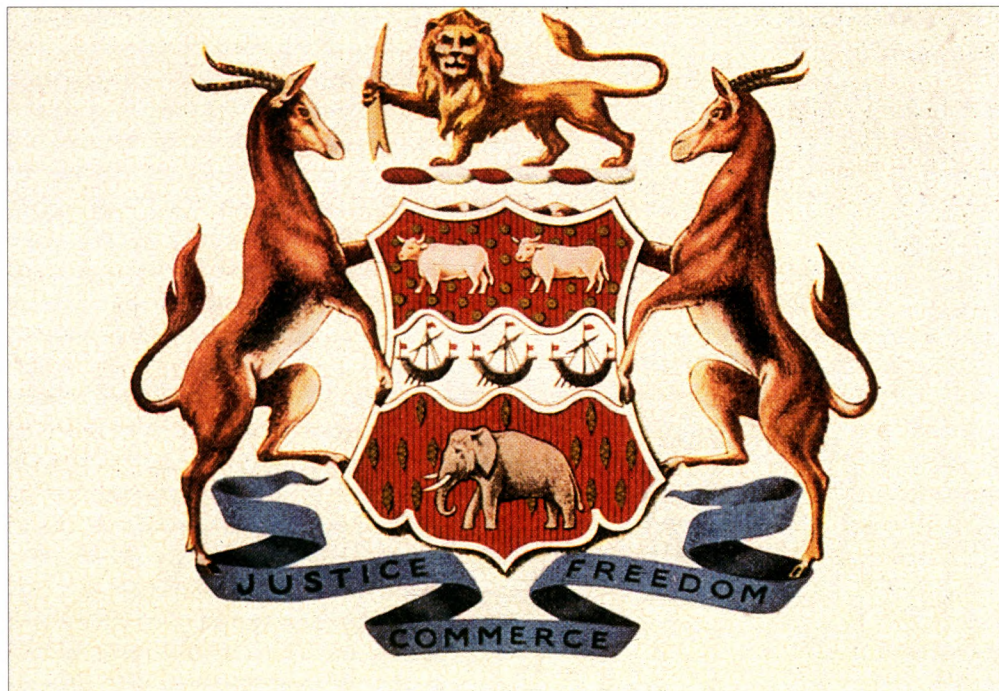


Fig. 2
Arms of the British South Africa Company.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4
Flag of the British South Africa Company.



Fig. 5
Photograph of the BSAC flag, 1891.

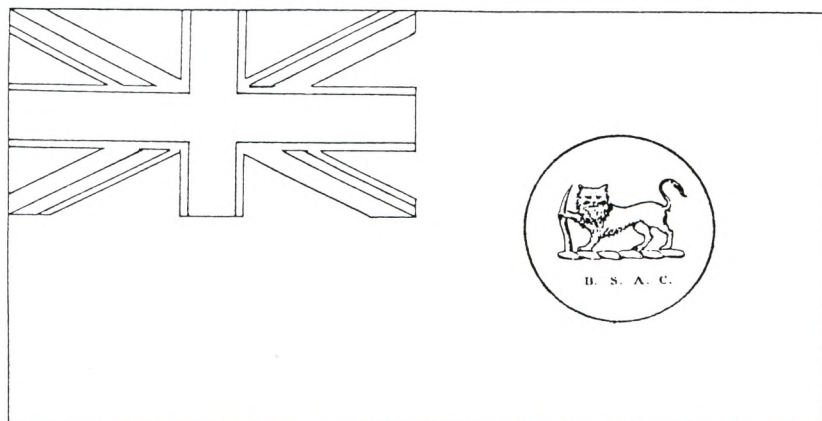


Fig. 6
BSA Company Ensign with roundel.