HISTORY OF THE MAIL FLAGS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM, GERMANY, SPAIN AND THE USA

Dr. Emil Dreyer

The first nation to introduce a particular flag for ships carrying mail was the **United Kingdom:** On 19th November 1694 an Order in Council (Royal Court) provided that «boats imployed in the service of the Generall Post Office be permitted to carry colours to distinguish them from other boats, and that in the said Colours there be represented a man on horseback blowing a Post horne»[1]. An earlier Royal proclamation issued on 12th July 1694 had introduced for «..ships and vessels as shall be employed for Their Majesties' Service by the Principal Officers and Commissioners of Their Majesties' Navy..» a distinctive «..red Jack with the Union Jack in the Canton at the upper corner thereof next the staff, and in the other part of the said Jack shall be described the Seal used in the respective Offices»[2].

The flag of course was meant to be flown at the appropriate time when a packet was required to identify herself to ships of the Royal Navy or non-hostile elements when approaching ports It may also have been flown on departure or arrival to denote the presence of H.M. Mails but the author could not trace any details or orders to this effect. Details of the early use of this flag are obscure, the author has tried to reconstruct the flag [Fig. 1, at left], based on the flag's hand coloured illustration in the various editions of «Maritime Flags of All Nations», published periodically from 1819 to 1853 by J. W. Norie in London. The flag is rarely found on contemporary and 18th century depictions, and at present the writer was able to trace only one of them. [Fig. 1, at right] shows a detail from a larger painting by J. A. van Es, dated 1794, depicting the Harwich Post Office packet «Princess Royal» entering the harbour at Hellevoetsluis (courtesy of the Postmuseum at Gravenhage).

The «postboy» emblem was a well-known symbol already in the 17th century, remaining popular until the late 19th century. The posthorn originally symbolised spreading news or bringing a message, and from the early 16th century on, with the Taxis Post, it became the attribute of Post pure and simple. With development of modern communication and transportation systems during the 19th century the «postboy» was progressively replaced by the posthorn alone as a symbol of the Post. At sea, a flag or pennant distinguished ships carrying mail or belonging to a government's Post Office, so that they could receive preferential dispatch in ports and discount in pilot and harbour charges[3].

The Royal Proclamations of 1702 and 1707 confirmed the use of the red Jack with the «postboy» seal of office, but the King's Regulations of 1731 introduced a slight variation by providing that the seal might be placed in the body or ensign[4]. By Royal Proclamation of 1st of January 1801 the red St. Patrick's cross was added to the Union Flag. The «postboy» emblem is recorded in 19th century flag books and in paintings, both as a badge in a Red Ensign and by itself as a masthead flag. The 1835 edition of Norie's flag book shows a «postboy» in natural colours on a white panel in the fly end of a Red Ensign[5]. The «Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty's Service at Sea» issued in 1806 state that «Packets employed by the post-office, and having Commanders appointed by Commission from the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, shall carry a Red Ensign, a Union Jack and a Pendant»[6]. Government publications have still not standardised the spelling and often speak of a «pendant», however since WW II this type of flag is better referred to as a pennant[7]. The same Regulations of 1806 also declared that the seal should be described «..on the fly of the ensign».

The use of the original British Post Office Red Ensign was discontinued about 1833, Blue Ensigns being introduced instead[8]. In 1993 the National Maritime Museum acquired a set of maritime flags containing a Blue «postboy» Ensign, which by its hand-sewn and hand-painted construction can be dated to the first half of the 19th century [Fig. 2]. Being aware of the author's research, Mrs. Barbara Tomlinson from the NMM notified him of this possibly unique flag, which was a real find[9]. It is the only original Blue «postboy» Ensign ever to have been discovered so far, and it is published here for the first time. The badge in the fly with the mounted postboy, blowing his horn with his steed in rocking horse posture, shows considerably more details than is apparent in the small pictures in contemporary flag books. The flag is currently being treated for conservation at the NMM.

Since about midst of the 19th century white pennants inscribed with the words «ROYAL MAIL» were used too, and since February 1837 a Post steamboat on the English Channel was permitted to use a Blue Ensign[10]. The original text establishing this flag does not specify whether it was a «postboy» ensign according to the design used before, but with blue bunting instead of a red one, or if it was a different, new design. The National Maritime Museum keeps an undated Blue Post Office Ensign, which most probably had been in use during the last century. This ensign has neither a crown nor a badge, just the words «POST OFFICE» in white along the lower part of the flag [Fig. 3]. It is not known whether this flag may be the one introduced in 1837 for the Channel Post steamboats, or if it is another type of Post Office ensign, which may have been introduced later. The flag is still to be correctly classified.

There is still another Post Office flag in the collections of the National Maritime Museum to be correctly classified. It is a Blue Ensign with a too short Union canton, defaced with a royal crown above the letters «GPO» all in yellow. The crown has a Victorian shape[11], which was introduced in 1838, so perhaps it may have been used some time between 1838 and 1884. The flag's fabric, the wrong dimensions of the Union canton and the type of lettering suggest that this flag may have been manufactured during the late 19th century On the other hand, considering that the letters «GPO» had been used since the 1930s until late after WW II as an abbreviation of «Government's Post Office», and considering that the shape of the crown on the flag looks very much alike the «St. Edward's» crown introduced by Queen Elizabeth II in 1952, the author cannot exclude that this ensign might be of recent manufacture. A close look to it and to the records as well as a thorough textile analysis will be needed to help adjudicate this flag either to the 19th or to the 20th century.

97

By an Admiralty Letter of 26th April 1884 a defaced Blue Ensign for use of government owned Royal Mail vessels was introduced[12]. The blue badge on this new Post Office ensign showed the figure of Father Time with his scythe in white, but winged and grasping a yellow streak of lightning [Fig. 4]. The same day a white pennant with a red crown and red lettering was established to distinguish mail carrying ships not belonging to H M. Government and carrying mail under a formal contract with the British, Dominion or Colonial Post Office [Fig. 5 on top]. After the death of Queen Victoria an Admiralty Letter of 19th June 1902 altered the design of the pennant, introducing the «King's crown» pattern on it and adding a red posthorn to the pennant [Fig. 5, centre]. The Blue Ensign defaced with the Office's badge remained unchanged. In 1934 an Air Mail version was introduced, being a blue pennant with the white lettering «Royal Air Mail»[13] [Fig. 5, bottom]. The flag could sometimes be seen painted on the fuselage of civil aircraft, its use was discontinued some years after WW II.

After the war all these mail flags seem to have slowly disappeared. None of the post-war editions of the Admiralty's «Flags of All Nations» (1955 and 1989) contain any British Post Office flag. Gresham Carr still mentions the 1884 mail ensign and the pennant in his 1953 edition of «Flags of the World»[14], with exactly the same text as Wheeler-Holohan[15] had used for his edition of the same book in 1939. When Barraclough[16] took over the Frederick Warne series of «Flags of the World» in 1965, he just took over the same Wheeler and Carr text regarding the Post Office ensign, too. Finally, Barraclough's second edition of 1969 does no longer mention any British Post Office flag

Post Office ships of the Kingdom of Hanover used a distinctive mail flag from around the middle of the last century on until the Kingdom was absorbed into the North German Confederation in 1867[17]: A white flag with the Hanover Union flag with the horse in the canton and dark red upper and lower borders is preserved in the Bomann-Museum in Celle. The flag shows a yellow posthorn below the yellow royal crown within a green wreath, which at the bottom is hold together by a blue band Since 6tr July 1863 until late 1867 ships under contract with the Post Office of Prussia flew a distinctive flag at the rear, together with a jack at the stern. The Post ensign was like the black and white war ensign but with the addition of a golden posthorn on the lower hoist, while the jack was a simple square white flag with the golden posthorn [8]. Three months after the North German Confederation had been established on 4th of July 1867, the Postal Service of the Confederation adopted a flag for use on snips and buildings, and a jack to be used exclusively on ships according to the flag regulations of 1st October 1867 [Fig 6, nos. 1 and 2].

After 1871 the **German Empire** kept these flags for its «Reichspost». An Order of 8th November 1892 changed the Post Office flag with effect as of first of April 1893 [9]. This new design was to be used as a jack as well, as far as the ship was carrying mail [Fig. 6, no. 3]. After the Great War, the Weimar constitution of 8th November 1919 provided for a new national flag, but omitted a special flag for the Post Office. Therefore, postal authorities had the old posthorn emblem cut out from imperial mail ensigns and sewn them onto the new republican tricolour. Since early 1920 an unofficial white posthorn was sometimes used, instead of the yellow one. On 11th April 1921 a new Post Office flag was established, showing the posthorn on the broad central stripe of the German tricolour, which had a width to length ratio of 2:3 [Fig 6, no. 4] The red stripe was to be one fifth broader than each contiguous stripe. Ships had to fly it at the top, whereas the national flag had to be hoisted at the rear This new mail flag was used as a jack too for ships carrying mail, and until 9th November 1927 it was flown on buildings and cars of the Post Office as well[20]. On 31st March 1933 the mail flag was changed again [Fig. 6, no. 5][21], but then shortly after the flag was abolished on 19th September 1935. Immediately it proved disadvantageous for German Post Office ships not to show any sign of distinction, therefore a mail pennant was introduced again on 14th March 1936 [Fig. 6, no. 6]. After WW II a special ensign for ships belonging to the German Post Office was introduced on 7th June 1950, with the same width ratio of the stripes as the Weimar Post Office flag of 1921, but a width to length ratio of the flag of 3:5 [Fig. 6, no. 8]. On 5th December 1951 a signal flag for privately owned ships carrying mail was established [Fig. 6, no. 9]. The official German flag book of 1956[22] shows a gold metallic, dark shade of yellow. This colour of course, specifically used in printed media, could not be reproduced on textile flags, so German manufacturers, lacking colour specification, made the flag of a medium to dark yellow bunting

The communist German state established an ensign and a pennant for ships carrying mail on 27th September 1955. The law came into effect on 27th October 1955 The ensign had three equally wide stripes, the lower one being of a very dark yellow colour, visibly darker than the West German analogue. The posthorn emblem on this service flag of the «Deutsche Post» was practically identical to the one used by the «Bundespost» The flag had to be flown from the signal mast of any ship while carrying mail. As use of this flag was slowly superseded by the use of the «Y» flag from the international code of signals, the Post Office flag lost its significance and was abolished on first of May 1973[23].

Dantzig was separated from the Reich in February 1920, its constitution as a Free Town provided the use of a distinctive national flag. The Dantzig flag law of 18th March 1922, published on 10th April that same year[24], introduced a distinctive flag for its Post Office buildings and vessels [Fig. 6, no. 7] In case the ship carrying mail was not owned by the government, the Post Office flag was to be flown aside the civil ensign at the main This flag was in use until Dantzig fell into Nazi hands the 1st of September in 1939.

King Charles III of **Spain** granted by Royal Order of 26tr January 1777 a distinctive ensign to the ships of his Royal Sea Mail[25]. It differed from the naval ensign of the time by having the royal arms flanked on one side by a green olive branch and on the other side by a green laurel branch in the centre of a white flag [Fig 7, on top]. At the intersection of the branches below the royal

arms a ribbon of the Order of Charles III, which is a tri-band of light-blue, white, and light-blue, held the branches together. On the first of January 1786 the ribbon and branches of the mail emblem were transferred to the newly created bicolour naval ensign of 1785, to denote ships of the Royal Mail[26] [Fig. 7, 2nd row, left]. Contemporary documents lack illustrations of the first two Royal Sea Mail ensigns, so the author has tried to reconstruct their design according to the original text. Upon outbreak of the war with France in 1802, and until 1827, the flag was not in use, mail being carried by warships flying the Spanish war ensign. A Royal Order of January 1847 compelled privately owned ships to carry mail and to hoist the war pennant while having mail on board. Because of the very few ships at the time under contract with the Post Office to carry mail this measure was estimated necessary to match the increasing mail volume. A new mail ensign to be flown at the rear of ships under contract with the Post Office was introduced by the Navy flag regulation of 13th March 1867[27]. This new flag was like the Navy ensign, but had the blue letters «C» to the hoist and «M» to the fly (for «Correo Marítimo») and in between them the oval Navy coat-of-arms, which thus came to be in the centre of the flag [Fig. 7, 2nd row, right]. A Royal Decree of 5th March 1913 established a blue pennant with a white vertical band and white letters «C» and «M» exclusively for private ships carrying mail, but having no contract with the Post Office [Fig. 7, 3rd row, left], this pennant remained in use until outbreak of the Civil War in 1936. It is interesting to note, that such ships were ordered to fly this pennant at the rear instead of the civil ensign and that no other flag whatsoever should be flown on the ship. Monarchy was replaced by a republic in 1931 and on 27th April 1931 a new national tricolour flag, a new state coat-of-arms, and a set of distinctive flags and ensigns were introduced. From 1931 until 1939 the Spanish Post Office ensign was a tricolour war ensign of red, yellow and purple («morado») with the black letters «C» and «M» at each side of the republican coat-of-arms [Fig. 7, 3rd row, right]. After victory of the fascist forces, the new government introduced again a Post ensign in summer of 1939. This ensign had the national coat-of-arms in the centre of the yellow stripe and huge black letters «C» and «M» at each side of the arms [Fig. 7, bottom row, left]. The flag regulation of 12th October 1945 established the present mail flag[28]: [Fig. 7, bottom row, right] is an author's photograph of the present ensign of the Spanish Sea Mail, taken off the Canary Islands in 1992.

During the last half of the 19th century various patterns of mail flags had been in use on privately owned **United States** ships under contract with the Post Office to carry mail[29]. These were usually white flags with black or with red letters «U S MAIL», later blue flags with the white lettering «U S.M.», or white flags with the same lettering in red were used too by noncontract vessels. Dr. Whitney Smith of the Flag Research Center has sent the writer a drawing of yet another mail flag, which presumably had been used too during the last century, and which is white with the words «U. S. MAIL» in light blue and with light blue upper and lower borders. On 28th December 1892 a red pennant, or bur-

gee, with blue upper and lower borders and with the white lettering «UNITED STATES MAIL.» and with a blue state eagle with shield in the upper hoist corner was established for American steamships under contract to carry mail [Fig. 8]. An order of 3rd March 1893 reduced the dimensions of the pennant. The pennant, which had to be flown at the mizzen, was abolished in 1928. A special flag for the Postmaster General was introduced probably in June 1921 and officially hoisted for the first time on 5th June 1923. The Postmaster General was a cabinet member and so he had the right to a rank flag as head of a federal government department This blue rank flag with a white star in each corner shows in the centre of the flag the department seal [Fig. 9, top row, left], which had been used with only minor variations since 1837, and which depicts the well known «postboy» emblem (in the U.S.A this emblem is called «Franklin's Post-Rider»[30]). On 13th March 1957 the U.S. Post Office introduced more flags: A blue and white Post Office departmental flag for use on buildings [Fig. 9, bottom row, left] and a set of rank flags for officials of the Post Office in analogy to other departmental rank flags already in use. [Fig. 9, top row, centre] shows the flag of the Deputy Postmaster General (white with department seal and blue stars), while [Fig. 9, top row, right] shows the flag of the Assistant Postmaster General (white with department seal and red stars). The postal reorganisation of 1970 abolished the set of postmaster flags, and on 12th August 1970 a new dark blue departmental flag showing the new U.S. Mail logo in colour was established [Fig. 9, bottom row, right]. A very few may know, that from early 1931 until just after WW II an unofficial air mail flag used to be flown at airports handling mail[31]. This white flag with thin blue-white-red stripes along the upper and lower borders showed in the centre a golden winged globe with the letters «US AIR MAIL» thereon.

Due to lack of space, the history of other mail ensigns (those of Norway, Sweden, of Austria-Hungary, Italy, Japan or China, just to name a few) will be dealt with in a future article.

- Artwork, unless otherwise stated, by the author.

Notes

[1] The author wishes to express his gratitude to Mr P. B. Martin, Community Affairs Officer, The Post Office, London, for kindly providing the original text Moreover, Mr Martin provided copious data on the history of British mail ensigns as well

[2] W. G. Perrin, «British Flags» (Their early history, and their development at sea; with an account of the origin of the flag as a national device). Cambridge, at the University Press, 1922, p 126.

[3] Dr. J. H. Schuilenga, «Mailflags», in, «Recueil des discours banistiques à l'occasion du Premier Congrès International de l'étude scientifique des drapeaux, le 4e et 5e Septembre 1965 à Muiderberg, Pays-Bas», Stichting voor Banistiek en Heraldiek, Muiderberg, 1966, pp 66–74

[4] W. G. Perrin, op cit. p 126–127

[5] J. W. Norie, «Norie's Collection of Maritime Flags, of all Nations, with an Index», Plates descriptive of the Maritime Flags of all Nations, a new edition, considerably improved, printed for, and published by J. W. Norie & Co, London, 1835, plate II

[6] J. W. Norie, op. cit., page viii under chapter IV («Colours of ships and vessels not of the Royal Navy»), art. 3.

[7] William Crampton, «Flag Institute Dictionary of Terminoloy and Technology» in «FlagFax, a Flagmaster Supplement», The Flagmaster, No 066/67, Series E, No. 3, Chester, 1989/90, ISSN 0142-1271.

[8] Timothy Wilson, «Flags at Sea», National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, HMSO, London, 1986, ISBN 0-11-290389-4, p 42

9   The author is very much indebted to Mrs. Barbara Tomlinson, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, for her valuable assistance.
10   Copy of original notice kindly provided by Mr. P. B. Martin of the Post Office, London.
11   Charles Hasler, «The Royal Arms, ist graphic and decorative development», Jupiter Books Ltd., London, 1980, ISBN 0-904041-20-4.
12   «Drawings of the flags in use at the present time by various nations», Admiralty, By Authority, London, printed for HMSO by Darling & Son, London, August 1889, p.XX.
13   W. Crampton, op. cit.
14   H. Gresham Carr, «Flags of the World», Frederick Warne & Co. Ltd., London and New York, 1953, p.44.
15   V. Wheeler-Holohan, «Flags of the World, past and present, their story and associations», Frederick Warne and Co., Ltd., London and New York, 1939, p.47.
16   E. M. C. Barraclough, «Flags of the World», Frederick Warne & Co. Ltd., London and New York, 1965, p.60-61.
17   Dr. Günter Mattern & Dr. Ottfried Neubecker, «Beitrag zur Geschichte der Fahnen und Flaggen deutscher Länder», III. Teil; Küstenländer, 2. Die Flächenstaaten, in: «Jahrbuch 1980/81», Doppel-Band 18 und 19 der neuen Heraldischen Mitteilungen, Heraldischer Verein «Zum Kleeblatt» von 1888 zu Hannover e.V., p.95–96.
18   Johann F. Meuss, «Die Preussische Flagge», in: «Meereskunde, Sammlung volktümslicher Vorträge», 10. Jahrgang, 10. Heft, Ernst S. Mittler und Sohn, Berlin, 1916, p.33-34.
19   Franz Reinecke, «Deutsches Flaggenhandbuch», Hannover und Leipzig, Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1900, p.92.
20   Meyer 17, «Die deutschen Postflaggen», in: «Archiv für Deutsche Postgeschichte», herausgegeben von der Gesellschaft für Deutsche Postgeschichte E.V., Frankfurt a. M., 1. Heft, 1960, pp.32–39.
21   Hellmuth Hecker & Günter Hoog, «Deutsche Flaggen», Institut für Internationale Angelegenheiten der Universität Hamburg, Werkhefte / 32, Hamburg, 1978, ISSN 0341-3241, p.62.
22   «Wappen und Flaggen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Bundesländer», herausgegeben vom Bundesministerium des Innern, Carl Heymanns Verlag KG, Köln, 1956, plate I.
23   Jiří Tenora, «Služební Vlajka Nemecké Pošty a Služebni Plameny NDR», in: «vexilologie», No. 61, Vexilologického Klub, Prague, May 1986, pp.1233-1236.
24   Gesetzblatt für die Freie Stadt Danzig, Nr. 18, Danzig, den 10. April 1922; Flaggenordnung, Artikel I., Absatz 3) Die Postflagge. The text reads «Sie entspricht der Staats- und Handelsflagge, zeigt indessen ausserdem an der rechten unteren Ecke ein gelbes Posthorn».
25   «Ordenanza de los Correos Marítimos», 16.1.1777, Tratado IV, Título I, Artículo 5, National Library, Madrid, sign. 1/51942.
26   Dr. Emil Dreyer, «Das Spanische Flaggenwesen zur See seit 1785», in: «Vexilla Helvetica», Jahrbuch der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Fahnen- und Flaggenkunde, 20. Jahrgang, Band VI, 1988, pp.30–35.
27   «Instrucción sobre Insignias y Banderas, Honores y Saludos», que debe sustituir al tratado 4º de las Ordenanzas Generales de 1793, Madrid, 13 de marzo de 1867.
28   «Reglamento de Banderas, Insignias y Distintivos», Boletín Oficial del Estado de 12 de Octubre de 1945. (The text of this flag reglementation was published the same year in a profusely illustrated separate flag book. The mail ensign is on plate VII, fig. 11.)
29   The author is very much indebted to Mrs. Paula E. Rabkin, Research Associate of Postal History at the United States Postal Service, Washington, for her kind assistance in providing pictorial material and valuable information on the history of the U.S. Post Office flags.
30   George Henry Preble, «History of the Flag of the United States of America», A. Williams and Company, Boston, 1880, p.697.
31   The author wishes to express his gratitude to Dr. Whitney Smith of the Flag Research Center, Winchester, USA, for attracting his attention towards this little known flag and for providing further data on the American Post Office flags.
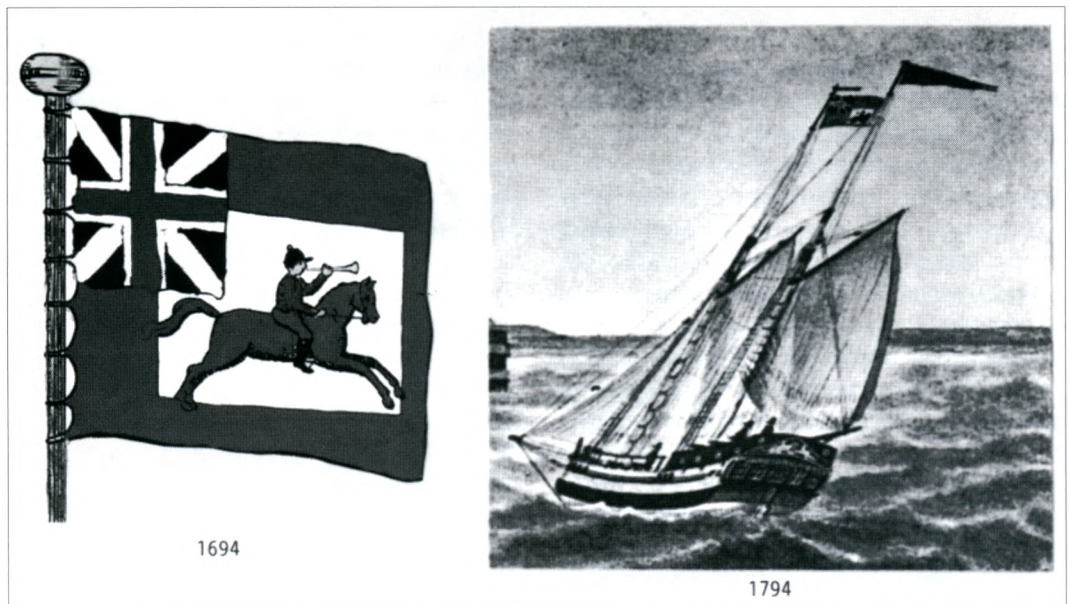
Fig. 1
Author's reconstruction of the «postman» Red Ensign of 1694.
To the right is a detail of the watercolour by van Es of 1794, depicting a British packet-boat flying the official mail ensign of the time.
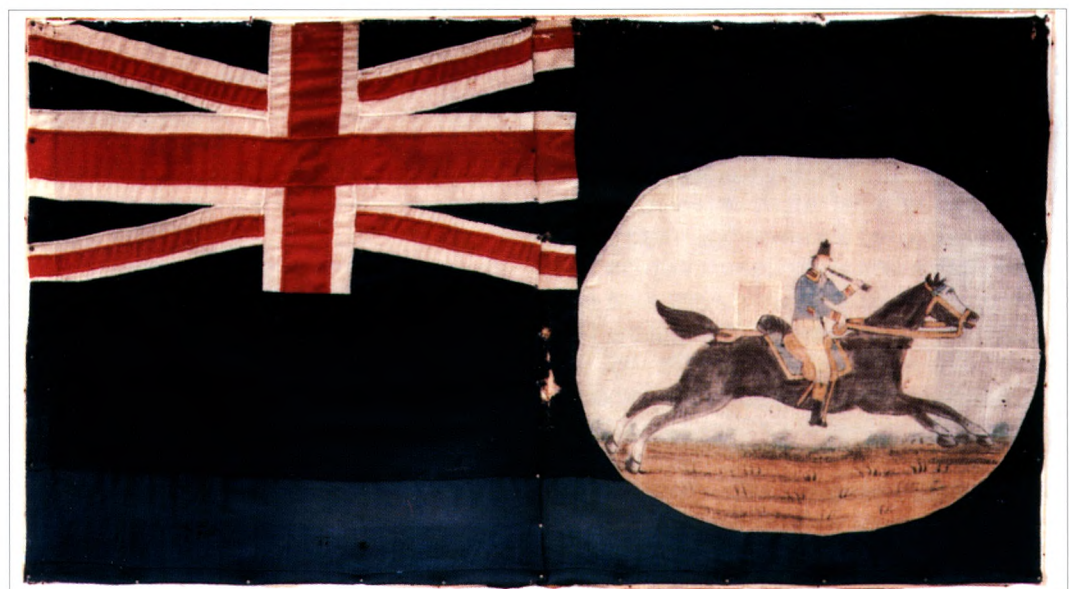
1694

1794

Fig. 2
Unidentified Post Office Blue Ensign, probably 1833.
This ensign was acquired by the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, in 1993. The flag dates from the early 19th century, and was introduced for vessels of the Post Office probably in 1833 or a few years later. (By courtesy of the NMM, sign. D6951.)

Fig. 3
Original Post Office Blue Ensign, probably 1837.
(By courtesy of the NMM, sign. AAA0759)
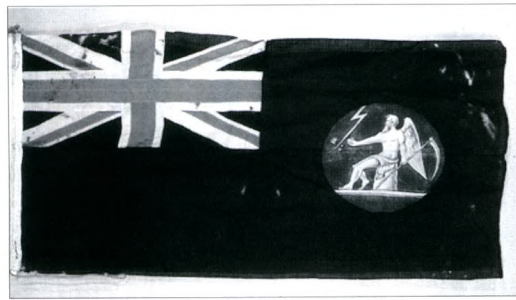

Fig. 4
Original Post Office Blue Ensign, 1884 pattern
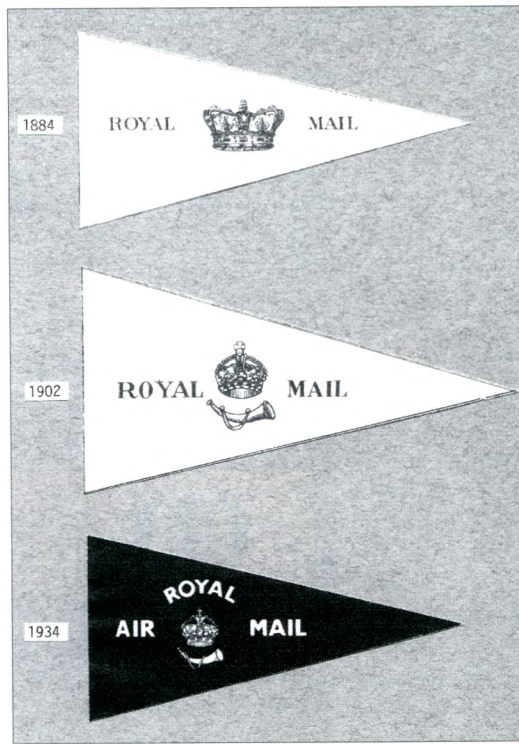(By courtesy of the NMM, sign. AAA0754)

Fig. 5
Pennants of the Royal Mail.
1884 pattern on top (image from
«Drawings», Admiralty,1889), 1902 pattern
in the centre (image from «Drawings»,
1907). At the bottom, the 1934 Royal Air
Mail pennant (image from «Flaggenbuch»,
Berlin, 1939).

1. Bundespostflagge 1867—1871
   Reichspostflagge 1871—1892

2. Postgösch 1867—1892

3. Reichspostflagge 1893—1918

4. Reichspostflagge 1921—1933

5. Reichspostflagge 1933—1935

6. Schiffspostflagge 1936—1945

7. Postflagge der Freien Stadt Danzig

8. Bundespostflagge seit 1950

9. Postsignalflagge für Seeschiffe seit 1951

Fig. 6
German Post Office flags, 1867-present
(Colour plate by courtesy of «Archiv für
Deutsche Postgeschichte», Frankfurt,1960.)

Fig. 7
Ensigns of the Spanish Sea Mail, 1777-present

below: Fig. 8
United States Mail pennant, 1892
(Original picture from Order No. 166 of
December 28, 1892, Office of the
Postmaster General, Washington, D.C.)

Fig. 9
Flags of the U.S. Post Office, 1957-present
(Artwork of the images on the top row and
on bottom left by the author, photograph
at bottom right by courtesy of the United
States Postal Service.)