

THE GENESIS OF A COLONIAL FLAG: SOUTHERN RHODESIA, 1890–1937

Michael Faul

The first flag ever of which documentary evidence exists to have been raised in the territory of modern Zimbabwe was the British Union Flag. In July 1890 a Pioneer Column organised by Cecil Rhodes began a march to occupy Mashonaland. When they reached Fort Salisbury (now Harare)¹ on 12 September 1890, they halted at what was to be the centre of the settlement. The following day the Union Flag was raised. Thereafter, on the anniversary of the arrival of the Pioneer Column the British Union Flag was hoisted at the same spot every year until 1978, and always by a member or descendant of a member of the Pioneer Column².

In fact the flag raised was incorrect. The territory was coming under the control of a chartered company, not the British crown. Technically it was wrong to raise the Union Flag. The Company flag should have been hoisted. There was as yet no company flag. The British South Africa Company had received its charter, and its arms, but the flag was not yet ready when the column departed. The first company flag arrived in Fort Salisbury early in 1891, and thenceforward replaced the Union Flag. It is doubtful whether people noticed any great difference. The company flag was the Union Flag with a badge in the centre (see B. Berry, «The flags of the B.S.A.C. 1890–1923» in this Proceedings). This flag was used by the company thereafter, even after the country was annexed to Britain³, and examples were preserved in museums. Again there was a mistake. The warrant establishing the flag stated clearly that the flag was for the use of the «Administrator when embarked in boats or other vessels of the Company». It was not intended for the flag to be used on land at all. Of course, as the territories controlled by the company were entirely inland, with no navigable rivers, and not even a fair-sized lake, the chances of the Administrator ever being afloat (other than in the alcoholic sense) were at best limited. The badge was placed on a white circle, in the usual fashion of such flags. There was no wreath around the circle, and this would have an effect on a later flag.

In 1893 war broke out between the company and the Matabele. Bulawayo, the Matabele capital, was occupied on 4 November 1893. The company flag was hoisted in a tree over the royal residence of King Lobengula⁴. The whole of modern Zimbabwe was under company rule, and the company flag flew over all official buildings. At about the same time as the establishment of the Union Flag with the badge, two other flags were created. They were the British Blue and Red Ensigns, bearing the same badge in the fly⁵. As usual, on the Red Ensign the badge appeared on a circle which was omitted on the blue. In addition, when the badge appeared on the Blue Ensign, the lettering was in yellow rather than in black. The territory administered by the company was entirely inland, so neither of these ensigns was ever used, as the company had no ships. It is doubtful if they were ever made, but they do appear on flag charts then and later.

Under company rule, there was a regular influx of

white settlers to the country, by then named Rhodesia, after its founder. In 1910 the country divided into Southern Rhodesia, which remained under the company, and Northern Rhodesia, which became a British Protectorate. The majority of the white newcomers settled in Southern Rhodesia. By 1920, with the war over, the white population of Southern Rhodesia was strong enough to challenge the company, as there was no popular representation in the government of the country. Under this pressure, a referendum was held in 1922. Two options were given, to unite the territory with South Africa as a fifth province or for it to be annexed to Britain as a self-governing crown colony. The deciding factor was the rise of Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa. Most Rhodesian whites feared that, should they unite with the south, their prized British heritage might be submerged in a future Afrikaner republic⁶. A majority of the whites voted for self-government.

On Saturday, 29 September 1923, the company flag was lowered over the Administrator's office in Salisbury⁷. On Monday, 1st October, the British Union Flag was raised on the same flagpole, symbolising the change of administration⁸. Both flags were preserved in the Queen Victoria Memorial Museum in Salisbury. Since independence as Zimbabwe, matters of heraldry and vexillology are entrusted to the Mutare Museum, so it is likely that the flags are now preserved there. One would expect the flag of the colony to have been raised on this occasion. It could not have been. As there had been no company flag in 1890, so there was no colonial flag in 1923. The Southern Rhodesia coat-of-arms [Fig. 1] was granted by Royal Warrant on 11 August 1924, so no flag could have borne the arms prior to that date. The Zimbabwe bird above the shield's helmet was a representation of a stone carving found in the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, the centre of a major African culture which existed from the 12th century. The motto «Sit Nomine Digna» meant «May She (Rhodesia) be Worthy of the Name (Rhodes)». On 28 March 1925, the Governor told the Colonial Office: «My ministers inform me that they desire that the shield only should be used as a badge on flags»⁹.

In spring 1925 there was correspondence between the Rhodesian High Commission in London and the organisers of the British Empire Exhibition, who wanted to show a Southern Rhodesian flag. The High Commission contacted the Under-Secretary of State at the Colonial Office in London and asked to be informed «what kind of ensign I am in liberty to provide»¹⁰. The reply from the Colonial Office noted that in «following the course adopted by other colonies last year, it is thought that the Blue Ensign with the Arms (or Flag Badge) of Southern Rhodesia in the fly might be used for this purpose». It then added that the Governor had «recently reported that his Government had approved of the shield only» as the flag-badge. This was a reference to Chancellor's letter of 28 March. There is a pencilled note on this letter which reads: «Shield and motto only, not supporters». Clearly the officials had not read the letter properly. The High Commission replied on 6 May to the exhibition organisers that no flag was available, but enclosed a lithographed copy of the Arms and added: «I understand ...that the Government of

Southern Rhodesia has approved of the shield only (without supporters) with presumably the motto . of the Colony's Coat-of-Arms being used as a flag-badge». This was not what the Governor wrote, nor what the Colonial Office told the High Commission. The motto had not been mentioned except in the pencilled note, which thus became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Exhibition organisers answered that they had the «Ensign of Southern Rhodesia of a suitable size»¹¹. This caused some mystification in the High Commission, as the hand-written notations indicate that the staff there had never seen the flag. «You might be interested to see this flag» reads one of them. The next, in puzzled reply, asks «Yes. How did they get the badge?» They asked the Exhibition organisers: «The High Commissioner would be greatly obliged if this flag could be sent to him for examination as he was not previously aware of the fact that such a flag had been made». They also asked the name of the maker. The organisers replied, that the design had «a pick-axe, two roses and a dragon» and named a manufacturer, Messrs Adam Lane and Neave Ltd., «from whom I suggest you procure an example». The roses and a dragon are obvious misreadings of the thistles and lion. From the correspondence it is clear that the High Commission staff had no idea that there was a flag of the Colony. The Colonial Office had to tell them of the Governor's letter about the shield only being used, and then they still made a mistake by including the motto. These were not confused vexillologists, trying in vain to make out the pattern of a new flag of a hitherto unheard-of revolutionary movement from a glimpse on the television news. They were diplomatic representatives of a British colony in the capital of the mother country, and they were confused about their own colony's flag, and did not even know certainly whether such a flag existed. It may be hard to believe, but it is so.

In March 1928 the Rhodesian High Commission wrote to the Colonial Office in Salisbury asking what was the flag of Southern Rhodesia, and adding that they used «the Blue and Red ensigns with the Arms of the Colony in a circle» in the office and at some exhibitions. A reply a month later stated that «the Union Jack is the flag of Southern Rhodesia», and that the use of the Union Jack, or of the Red and Blue Ensigns with the flag-badge «would not be in order for the purposes mentioned in your letter»¹².

There was in existence a governor's flag. This was the Union Flag with the shield of the arms on a white circle in the centre [Fig. 2]. Unique among British colonies, this white circle was not surrounded by the usual wreath¹³. The special status of Southern Rhodesia as a self-governing colony would not alone explain this situation, as other colonies, then and later, which had a similar level of self-government, used flags for the governor with the wreath. The only parallel (and an inexact one at that) is British North Borneo. There too the central badge omitted the wreath. The badge in North Borneo was however not the territory's arms, but the flag badge used on the red and blue ensigns. It seems that the wreath was omitted because of the omission of a wreath on the flag of the British South Africa Company. The same situation had existed in North Borneo, the rule of a chartered company preceding

colonial rule. Even then a difference existed. North Borneo was not a self-governing colony as was Southern Rhodesia.

Throughout 1933 and 1934 there was correspondence between London and Salisbury. At one point the colony's flag was described as the Union Jack with the colony's badge in the centre. A letter from Salisbury to the High Commission stated that the Union Jack with the badge was for use only at sea, and that Colonial Office Regulations give the Union Jack as the flag of Southern Rhodesia. It was not clear that these regulations applied to Southern Rhodesia, and authority was wanted to adopt it as the colony's flag. The letter was referred to the Dominions Office (under which, rather than the Colonial Office, Southern Rhodesia came). A reply was sent on 26 November 1934. It stated that the Union Jack was the appropriate flag for use in any part of His Majesty's dominions. It went on to point out that the Union Flag with the badge in the centre was for the Governor when on board ship, and that the usual practice was «to adopt either the Blue Ensign or the Red Ensign with the badge». The procedure would be by legislation in Southern Rhodesia¹⁴.

Meanwhile, in November 1934 the High Commission bought some small Union Jacks, having green pennants below with «Southern Rhodesia» in white letters, to be used as car flags at a royal wedding. One such flag-pennant set is preserved in the Zimbabwe National Archives. In February 1935, the High Commission received a letter from the Department of Internal Affairs, Salisbury (formerly the Colonial Secretary), which included the words. «...it has been decided not to take any further steps in the matter of an official flag for this Colony»¹⁵. The correspondence makes it appear that the British Empire Exhibition incident had been forgotten, as had the Governor's letter of March 1925. There was confusion as to the flag to be used, hence the makeshift expedient of a Union Jack and pennant. Nor was there any indication that the correspondents knew of the existence of a Southern Rhodesian flag. The letters of the High Commission have a tone of mild bewilderment. That from the Dominions Office sounds puzzled, as if the writer wondered why the question had been asked, when the answer was obvious. What made matters worse was the lack of definition of the powers of the Southern Rhodesia Parliament. Although a Crown Colony with internal self-government, after 1931 it came under the Dominions Office, not the Colonial Office. So where South Africa had adopted a flag by Act of Parliament, this was not possible for Southern Rhodesia, because adoption of a flag was an act related to foreign affairs. Southern Rhodesia's foreign affairs were controlled from London. This dichotomy of being neither one thing nor the other would be a major factor leading to U.D.I. in 1965.

The forthcoming coronation of King Edward VIII brought matters to a head. R. C. Tredgold, Minister of Justice, wrote to Huggins, the Prime Minister, on 18 November 1936¹⁶. He stated that the two methods to obtain a flag were by Act of Parliament or Royal Proclamation. There was some question whether the Southern Rhodesia Parliament had the power to adopt a flag. Tredgold suggested that the question be referred to the Imperial authorities, but added that he thought it would be quite

in order for the Government of Southern Rhodesia to send the blue ensign with the arms of the Colony inset as a present to another government as representing the flag of the Colony. He added: «It seems that unless we are prepared to alter the position by Royal Proclamation, we are left with the Governor's flag and the Union Flag for local use, since it is unlikely, for the present at any rate, that we should have any use for a maritime flag». Thus Tredgold recognised the limitations on the powers of the Southern Rhodesia Government in respect of the flag. The remark about the maritime flag was because he had earlier referred to regulations dealing with maritime flags as used in the colonies. Ten days later Huggins wrote to the Rhodesian High Commission in London. He stated that every year there were applications for the Rhodesian flag, so the Government needed some sort of flag to present to those asking. He added «we are very anxious not to get away from the Union Jack», and «I do not want any flag-controversy here». The latter was a reference to the South African flag controversy, which still rankled.

On 12 December 1936, O'Keefe, of the High Commission in London wrote to Sir Henry Batterbee of the Dominions Office, stating that there was need for a flag of Southern Rhodesia, for use at the coronation, as Rhodesian troops would participate¹⁷. He enclosed copies of the letters of Tredgold and Huggins. He wrote: «I can only hope the matter is as simple as it appears from his (Tredgold's) opinion, and it strikes me that it would be if we decided upon a Red Ensign with the Colony's Coat of Arms, without supporters, in the appropriate place, because from all appearances it will be some time before we become a maritime nation». While the final phrase appears to be frivolous, it may not have been. As the Red Ensign was a maritime flag, its adoption by a land-locked country would not create confusion, as it would never be seen at sea. It is also possible that O'Keefe meant the Blue Ensign and the reference to the Red Ensign was a mistake. The reply was singularly unhelpful, and less than accurate. It stated that «the matter of a separate flag on land in a self-governing colony is a matter to be governed by local law or usage». This did not help O'Keefe at all in his quest for a flag. Nor was it correct. Australia and South Africa had adopted flags as dominions. Southern Rhodesia, while coming under the Dominions Office, did not have the same status, and could not adopt a flag under its own authority.

On 9 January 1937, a lengthy telegram was sent from the High Commission in London to the Prime Minister in Salisbury: «If there is to be no legislation on the matter, only courses appear to be (1) to begin using proposed new flag for such purposes as desired, without calling special attention to the innovation or (2) publish a Gazette notice indicating what may be decided as to use of such flag, making clear that official land flag Governor of Colony remains Union Jack stop Dominions Office would be disposed to favour use of blue ensign with badge of S.R. emblazoned on fly stop. Am I authorised to proceed to obtain new flag accordingly? In view of Coronation matter is urgent.» The first suggestion was effectively to side-step regulations and hope that the flag would become accepted by usage. The second was an attempt to meet the limitations on

the Southern Rhodesia Government's powers, while still providing for a flag for the colony. Huggins wrote a reply dated 13 January: «Dominions Office suggestion No 1 appeals to me; that is to say we will have a flag which can be presented to countries, schools etc; it can also be used by the High Commissioner, visiting sports teams etc., and other countries; it would not necessarily be used here at all, except as bunting or in combination with the Union Jack.» He went on to approve the blue rather than the red ensign as the basis of the flag, but then criticised the coat of arms, «I must say when one comes to look at the shield apart from the rest of the Coat-of-Arms, it is singularly unattractive compared with say Canada. It seems to be all pick! However it is too late to consider that.»

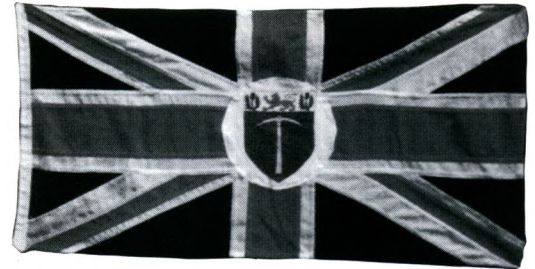
Five months later, B. F. Wright, the High Commissioner, wrote to Colonel Methuen (the former co-ordinator of the Southern Rhodesia Defence Force) to inform him that the flag of Southern Rhodesia was available from a London manufacturer. He continued: «I should mention, however, that the Official Flag of Southern Rhodesia is still the Union Jack, and the new flag has only been adopted for use outside the Colony. As you will readily realise, the Union Jack gave us no distinction from the Mother Country or the Colonial Empire, but the new Flag which is the Blue Ensign with the badge of the Colony's Coat-of-Arms emblazoned on the fly, does give us our own identity, which is valuable for publicity purposes on this side (Britain), but I feel it right to point out that I believe it to be the official intention that the new Flag, as above depicted, shall not come into general use in the Colony.»¹⁸ The idea that it should not be in general use within the colony is borne out by a letter from Mr C. Chikaura of the National Archives to Mr W. R. Haresign of Bulawayo in 1979, where it is stated that the Blue Ensign with the Southern Rhodesia shield is the Southern Rhodesian flag outside the Colony, and for vessels (other than trading vessels) in the service of the Government of the Colony from 1 October 1924 to 1953. He also states that the Red Ensign with the Colony's badge was used by merchant vessels belonging to the colony's government from 1 October 1923 to April 1964 and (unofficially) during the Royal Visit of 1947¹⁹.

Thus, after all the trouble, enquiries and disagreements, lasting over eleven years, the flag of the Colony of Southern Rhodesia was finally established [Fig. 3]. It should be noted that, despite the reservations as to its use expressed by both Huggins and Wright, there was increasing use of the new flag in the Colony, until it became accepted usage, without any further legislation. It was used as Huggins suggested, by sports teams and the High Commissions of the Colony in various countries, but it also flew over the Southern Rhodesia Parliament, and was used by individuals too, though not by the Rhodesian Armed Forces. It remained the flag of the Colony until 8 April 1964, when it was replaced by the plumbago-blue ensign. During the period of the Federation, it remained in use, even though it was seldom seen, the Federal Flag having taken precedence.

Notes

- ¹ Johnson, Frank, D.S.O., «Great Days – The Autobiography of an Empire Pioneer», G. Bell and Sons Ltd., London, 1940, pp.134–164.
- ² Official Programme of the Flag-Raising 1978 and author's observation of ceremony 1974-1978.
- ³ Letter from C. Chikaura of National Archives of Zimbabwe to W.R. Haresign dated 29 August 1979. Further quoted as «Chikaura». Notes on the Flag of the B.S.A.C.. Chikaura is in error in one respect. He states that the B.S.A.C. flag was used «in and out of Southern Rhodesia as territory's flag 1890 to 1 October 1923». While it was the flag of the governing company, and was the most widely seen flag between those dates, it was never the territorial flag.
- ⁴ Rhodesian postage stamp issued 4 November 1968 to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Matabele War.
- ⁵ Chikaura, op. cit., he notes that the Red Ensign was for use by «merchant ships and trading vessels» of the Company 1890 – 1 October 1923, and that the Blue Ensign was for use by «vessels (not being trading vessels) belonging to, or in service of the Company, from 11 November 1922 to 1 October 1923».
- ⁶ Bromberger C., «The Referendum Campaign in Southern Rhodesia, 1922», Unpublished M. A. Thesis, Cape Town University, 1954, passim.
- ⁷ «Flags, High Commissioner, London S881169/4651, Southern Rhodesia, Design and Manufacture, 1925-1937». File of 7 December 1923, in National Archives of Zimbabwe. Further quoted as «Archives».
- ⁸ Ibid., inscription provided for the flag which replaced the company flag. N.B.: This describes it as the «Flag of the Colony of Southern Rhodesia».

- ⁹ Ibid., 28 March 1925, J. R. Chancellor (Governor) to Colonial Office.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 24 April 1925, R.H.C. London to Under-Secretary of State, Colonial Office.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 7 May 1925, Furse to R.H.C. London.
- ¹² Ibid., 5 April 1928, Colonial Secretary, Salisbury to R.H.C. London.
- ¹³ Chikaura, op. cit., Chikaura records this flag in use from 1 October 1924 to 30 July 1951. There is no specific mention of the white circle. «Flags of the World» by H. Gresham Carr, published by Warne, London, 1953, p.57, states that the white circle was omitted. «Flaggenbuch», Berlin, 1939, p.XV of the Great Britain section, shows the flag with circle and states that it was used without the wreath.
- ¹⁴ Archives, op. cit., 26 November 1934, C.W. Dixon of the Dominions Office to Wright of R.H.C. London.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 23 February 1935, Department of Internal Affairs, Salisbury to R.H.C. London.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 18 November 1936, R. C. Tredgold (Minister of Justice) to Huggins (Prime Minister).
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 12 December 1936, O'Keefe to Sir Henry Batterbee, Dominions Office.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 18 June 1937, B.F. Wright of R.H.C. London to Colonel J.A. Kethuen, Umtali.
- ¹⁹ Chikaura, op. cit., Notes on Southern Rhodesian Blue and Red Ensigns. His dating is curious. He states that the Blue Ensign was no longer used after 1953 (presumably from Federation), yet it remained the flag of Southern Rhodesia, even though seldom seen. But he gives the Red Ensign a life up to the adoption of the plumbago blue flag in 1964, covering the entire period of the Federation, and despite the fact that there were never any merchant vessels in the service of the Southern Rhodesia Government.



left: Fig. 1
Arms of Rhodesia.

right: Fig. 2
Flag of the governor of Southern Rhodesia.

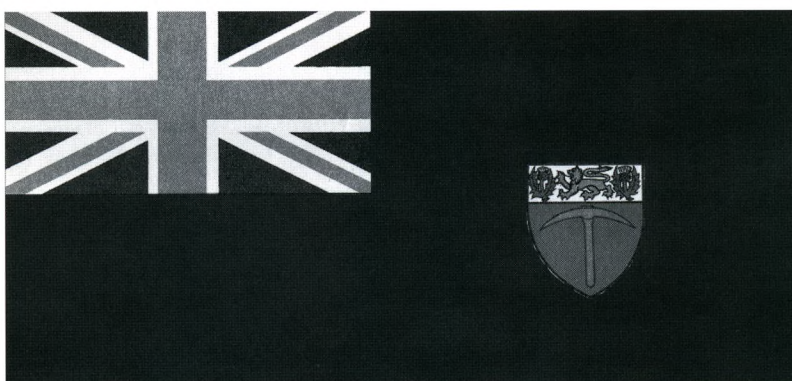


Fig. 3
The colonial flag (Blue Ensign) of Southern Rhodesia, approved by the colonial government in 1937, but in use as early as 1925.