

YACHTING FLAGS OF THE BRITISH ISLES: EMULATING THE NAVY

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A few years ago, the National Maritime Museum of London (NMM), carried out a project to improve the documentation of its collection of flags. It was noticed that yachting flags were somewhat under represented so an active collecting policy was initiated. We put a notice in the yachting press asking yachtsmen if they would like to donate burgees from their clubs. I intend to say something about the flags that we were given, the flags we already held, and the flags used by the oldest and most prestigious yacht clubs. A short paper can only cover a small part of this extensive topic.

Amateur sailing in Great Britain was an eighteenth century innovation. The Cork Water Club, now the Royal Cork Yacht Club, has some claims to be the oldest yacht club in the British Isles, although its history is not a continuous one. It is recorded in 1720 as a mixture of yacht club, coast guard and cruising association with a membership limited to twenty five gentlemen. «Their admiral, who is elected annually, and hoists his flag on his little vessel, leads the van and receives the honour of the flag. The rest of the fleet fall in their proper stations, and keep their line in the same manner as the King's ships»¹. Yachtsmen always showed a tendency to copy naval procedures. The Admiral's flag seems to have been the pre 1801 Union Flag with a yellow Irish harp and a yellow crown in the centre, somewhat resembling the 19th century flag of the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. The oldest British yacht club with a continuous history is the Royal Thames Yacht Club, founded in 1775, and formerly known as the Cumberland Sailing Society. Regattas involving races between working craft such as pilot boats, fishing smacks and naval cutters were already being held at this date, but gentlemen wished to race their own boats in their own races. The Royal Thames still preserve the Duke of Cumberland's trophy and the club's original Chinese silk colours. These include a 22 foot pennant similar to the navy's tricolour or common pennant, a red flag with a white cross overall and a rectangular flag with a blue panel at the hoist and a red cross in the white fly. The club's earliest ensign was similar to a naval white ensign but without the red cross overall, and its burgee was white with a red cross at the hoist. When the club changed its name to the Royal Thames Yacht Club in 1835, a red crown and the letters RTYC were added in the fly. From 1842 the ensign was blue with a red crown and from 1848 a plain blue ensign was worn. The burgee underwent five changes of design between 1823 and 1842 when the present blue burgee with a white cross overall bearing a red crown in the centre was introduced².

During the 19th century yacht clubs proliferated, frequently formed from splinter groups from existing yacht clubs. The most prestigious if not the most senior club, the Royal Yacht Squadron, was started in 1815 as a gentleman's club for yachtsmen interested in sailing in coastal waters. It was based in London but had early links with Cowes, already a sailing centre. It was the first institution to call itself «The Yacht Club», changed to the Royal Yacht Club when the Prince Regent ascended the

throne as George IV and agreed to become the club's patron. The original ensign was plain white with the Union Flag in the canton, identical to that of the Royal Thames Yacht Club. From 1821–29 they used the red ensign. Possibly from a desire to avoid paying tonnage dues as merchant ships in foreign ports, the club applied in 1829 for a warrant to wear the white ensign. 1833 saw another change of name, when the club received the unique right to call itself the Royal Yacht Squadron, for assistance given to the navy in developing more efficient types of small craft. In 1842, the Squadron's Commodore, Lord Yarborough, persuaded the Admiralty to restrict the use of the white ensign to the Royal Navy and the Royal Yacht Squadron alone³.

It should be remembered that before the abolition of the squadronic system in 1864, red and blue ensigns were also used as naval flags. At the time The Royal Thames, Royal St George, Royal Southern, Royal Western, Royal Eastern, Holyhead, Wharnclyff and Gibraltar clubs all used the white ensign with or without badges or the cross of St George. They all abandoned them with the exception of the Royal Western Club of Ireland, which slipped the net owing to an administrative oversight and continued to wear the white ensign until 1858. Since then, the Royal Yacht Squadron is the only yacht club which is permitted to use this ensign⁴. The present day regulations concerning yacht club ensigns state that most yachts should wear the red ensign and the burgee of their club. Certain of the older yacht clubs are granted the privilege of wearing a special ensign, the Royal Yacht Squadron white ensign, the undefaced blue ensign or a blue or red ensign with the badge, emblem or crest of a particular yacht club in the fly. The privilege of wearing these is granted by the Secretary of State for Defence on behalf of H.M. the Queen. The number of privileged clubs is not being expanded. Yachtsmen may not wear special ensigns unless they have a warrant issued to the yacht by the Secretary of State for Defence prior to 1st April 1985 or have a permit issued by the yacht club from 1st April 1985. The ensign must only be worn (with the club burgee) when the owner or user of the yacht is on board or in effective control of the boat⁵.

We have two yacht club ensigns in the museum's collections, that of the Royal Harwich will be described later. The Royal St George, Kingstown, now Dun Laoghaire, Eire, was founded in 1838 and was one of the yacht clubs prevented from using the white ensign after 1842. Our example is a defaced red ensign with a design of crown in the fly which dates it from 1901–52 [Fig. 1]. Prior to 1894, the red ensign had a plain fly and the crown in the centre of the Union Flag.

Another respect in which yacht clubs copied the navy, is in the system of ranks and the flags of the club officers. The Royal Thames and the Royal Yacht Squadron have admirals and admirals' flags but this is largely an honorary rank. Most Yacht Clubs are run by a commodore with perhaps a vice commodore and a rear commodore. The flags are based on the Royal Naval commodore's broad pennant with a system of balls in the canton similar to that used by the navy after 1864. The NMM collections include a painted silk broad pennant of a vice commodore of Cambridge University Cruising Club [Fig. 2]. That of a rear commodore would

have had two balls in the canton. The design is a modified version of the University arms with one lion instead of four and no bible in the centre of the cross. The museum also holds two different examples of commodore's flags of the Exe Yacht Club, established in 1889. The first burgee being a rather obvious pun on its name. The club house was at Exmouth, and members would have sailed on the broad estuary of the river Exe. The pennant was divided vertically red and white with a white saltire next to the hoist. From 1894 the letter X on the burgee was replaced with a gold tower with three turrets, as on the town arms of Exeter. After 1900, this in turn was replaced with a white burgee bearing a black cross with red fimbriation, the tower in the centre. It does not survive until the present day as the club was dissolved during the First World War.

Burgees are the primary form of identification of the majority of sailing clubs. As there is little risk of confusion with naval flags, clubs are free to choose their own designs. The Civil Service Sailing Club, founded in 1959, has an amusing example, showing a blue anchor fouled with red tape [Fig. 3]. Red tape was originally used to bundle up official documents and is a metaphor for bureaucracy. At the end of the last century, many yacht clubs were started with Corinthian in the title, implying that they were founded for amateur sailors, at a time when many yacht owners employed paid crews. The Royal Corinthian Yacht Club started in 1872 and chose an original burgee showing a yellow winged horse on a blue field, intended to represent Pegasus, the winged horse of Corinth. The Temple Yacht club having decided to adopt a very similar flag six months later, the Royal Corinthian decided to change their design to a laurel wreath in reference to the Isthmian games held in Corinth in ancient times⁶.

Owner's distinguishing flags are another type of yacht flag comparatively free of official regulation. In their early days, the Cumberland fleet had their own system of identifying racing yachts. Every yacht flew a similar pennant, each with a different number of balls in the fly. Keys was printed, perhaps for the use of spectators, indicating that the same yachts flew the same pennant in different races. The club also retains a surviving example of a slightly different design to that shown in the printed keys. The 19th century saw racing yachts identified by the distinguishing flags of their owners. «The Laws and Regulations of the Royal Thames Yacht Club» gives written descriptions of owner's distinguishing flags but does not include pictures. «Lloyd's Register of Yachts» printed a coloured table of owner's flags from 1887 but prior to the Second World War, referred to them as the distinguishing flags of yachts. Indeed few owners could afford more than one boat. One exception, the Earl of Dunraven, in the year 1891-92 had two yachts, Alwida and Valkyrie, both flying a rectangular yellow flag with a blue triangle at the hoist. Lloyd's have dropped the tables in recent years and before 1887, these flag designs have to be identified from contemporary paintings. Many of N.M. Condy's pictures for example, show Lord Alfred Paget's yachts and his flag with its red Maltese cross and blue border. We would be interested in acquiring surviving examples for the museum's collections. We only have one such flag at present, that of George V's racing cutter

Britannia, originally built in 1893 for Edward, Prince of Wales [Fig. 4]. The flag is by no means unique, as the Royal Thames Yacht Club and the Royal Yacht Squadron both preserve examples.

Racing flags were rectangular flags, flown to indicate that a yacht was taking part in a race. The practice has now fallen out of use by larger vessels owing to the amount of instrumentation carried at the mastheads. The R.Y.A. dropped this prescription from the International Yacht Racing Rules and now leaves it to the discretion of local clubs to include it in their sailing directions⁷. Early 19th century yacht clubs were contemporary with a period of rapid growth of merchant signal codes, prior to the eventual dominance of the International Code. In 1852 «Hunt's Yachting Magazine» said that signal codes in favour with yachtsmen included Demster, Eborall, Wilmot, Buffham, Marryat, Walker, Watson, Squires, Rhodes, Lynch, Phillips, Raper and Jennings⁸. The most popular was the «Universal Yacht Signals» of Henry Ackers as this involved only one addition to the flags of Marryat's Code. The Royal Yacht Squadron as it later became, started issuing its own codes from 1815, the first being partly based on Popham's Naval Code of 1812. Their next attempt involved two flags, two pennants and an ensign, the flags to be roped all round and hoisted four different ways up. This was not very practical⁹. In 1823 they produced a new code, with ten new flags, a system admired by D.L. Woods as the number represented by each flag was evident from the elements in the design¹⁰. Similar self evident systems were used by the Royal Northern Yacht Club, The Royal Western Yacht Club and the Royal Irish Yacht Club. The Royal Yacht Squadron finally abandoned their own code in 1896 when they went over to using the International Code.

The preservation of yachting flags because they are regarded as of historic value, has scarcely begun. It is apparent that many flags have been preserved because of an association with Polar exploration. Fox was a steam yacht sent out on a privately financed expedition to ascertain the fate of Sir John Franklin's missing Arctic Expedition. To quote the commander Captain F.L. McClintock: «Being desirous to obtain for my vessel the privileges formerly enjoyed as a yacht, my wishes were very promptly gratified; in the first instance by the Royal Harwich Yacht Club of which my officers and myself were enrolled as members»¹¹. The ship was presented with an ensign [Fig. 5] and pennant by the commodore and these flags are now preserved in the NMM collections. They were for a long time the property of the Royal London Yacht Club which had shared a common commodore with the Royal Harwich. The latter still owns a silk burgee worn by the sledge Marco Polo under Commander Albert Markham when he reached the highest recorded latitude in 1876. Scott's ships also registered as yachts to avoid the provision of the merchant shipping act. He was a member of the Royal Harwich Yacht Club and so Discovery left England in 1903 wearing the blue ensign¹². By the time of his last expedition in 1910 Scott had been elected a temporary member of the Royal Yacht Squadron, and Terra Nova wore a white ensign presented by the club.

To end on a more frivolous note. During a late 19th century fashion for jewellery with sporting motifs,

yachting flags made an appearance in enamel and precious metals. Flags used could include the signal flags of a yacht's identification code or the owners distinguishing flag. A recent enquiry concerned a silver box enamelled with the owner's flag of the wooden cutter *Lilith* launched in 1894. An evocative memento of the era of paid crews, «big boats» and an era of late Victorian opulence.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to express her thanks to Major Robin Rising, Secretary, Royal Yacht Squadron and Captain A.R. Ward, Archivist of the Royal Thames Yacht Club, for all their kind help and assistance.

Notes

- ¹ Douglas Phillips-Birt: «The History of Yachting», London, 1974, p.21.
- ² Douglas Phillips-Birt: «The Cumberland Fleet: Two Hundred Years of Yachting 1775-1975», London, 1974, p.97.
- ³ Ian Dear: «The Royal Yacht Squadron 1815-1985», London, 1984, p.52.
- ⁴ Paymaster Lieut-Commander E. C. Talbot-Booth: «Ensigns and Burgees of Yacht Clubs of the British Empire», London, 1938, pp.9-10.
- ⁵ R.Y.A. and Commander R. L. Hewitt: «Flags and Visual Signals», Woking, 1985, pp.12-13.
- ⁶ The Royal Corinthian Yacht Club, «One Hundred Years of Amateur Yachting», [R. C. Yacht Club, Burnham on Crouch, 1972, p.3.
- ⁷ Gordon Fairley, «Minute by Minute, the Story of the Royal Yachting Association 1875-1982», Woking: Royal Yachting Association, 1983, p.189.
- ⁸ Frank Hussey, «Royal Harwich: A Short History of the Royal Harwich Yacht Club», Ipswich, 1982, p.45.
- ⁹ Commander H. P. Mead, «Flag Signalling For Yachts», in: «Mariner's Mirror», 18 October 1932, p.375.
- ¹⁰ D. L. Woods, «The Evolution of Visual Signals on Land and Sea», Ohio State University, 1976, p.309.
- ¹¹ Sir F. Leopold McClintock RN, «The Voyage of the «Fox» in the Arctic Seas in Search of Franklin and his Companions», London, 1881, p.7.
- ¹² Roland Huntsford, «Scott and Amundsen», London, 1979, p.147.

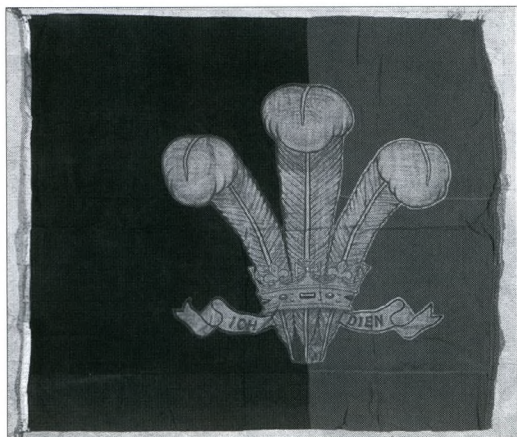
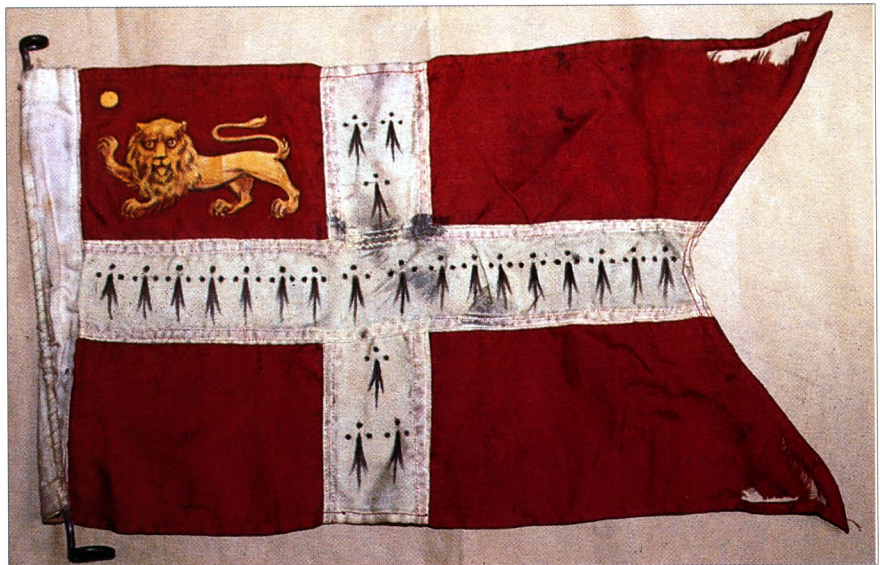
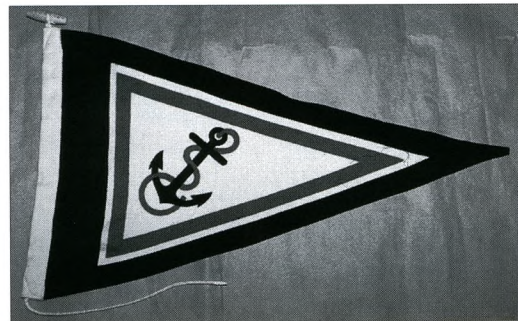


Fig. 4
Distinguishing flag of George V's cutter *Britannia* with his personal badge on a blue and red flag. (NMM, C8493)



right 1st: Fig. 1
Red Ensign of the Royal St George Yacht Club, Kingstown, 1901-52, with yellow royal crown with white fur. (NMM), AAA0781)

right 2nd: Fig. 2
Broad pennant, Vice Commodore, Cambridge University Cruising Club. (NMM)

right 3rd: Fig. 3
Civil Service Sailing Club burgee, 1959. A blue anchor fouled with red tape within a red frame on white, on a blue ground. (NMM)

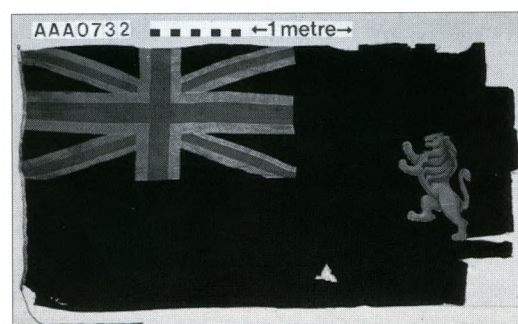


Fig. 5
Blue Ensign of the Royal Harwich Yacht Club, defaced with a golden lion, 1857 (NMM, AAA0732)