

Britannia's Banners - A Brief Outline of the Development of the Principal British Naval Flags

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The Bayeux Tapestry, portraying the Norman invasion of England in 1066 and the events leading up to it, shows us that, at that time, flags flown in ships were of no particular significance. The important flags were those of the principal personalities in the event, notably that of Duke William himself, the banner presented to him by the Pope as a sign of his blessing upon William's invasion of England.



The Bayeux Tapestry

The tapestry also shows us that there was a great need for a better means of identifying the leader, who in this case had to show his face to his troops to reassure them that he was still alive after a rumour went round that he had been killed.



The Bayeux Tapestry

It was in the Crusades that this need became critical, with kings, nobles and knights of several nationalities fighting together, and now in all encasing armour. Banners with bold, simple and distinctive devices were adopted, playing a major part in the development of what became known as heraldry.



A Crusader

In an era of increasing maritime activity, these banners also became the means of identifying ships. The three gold lions on a red field, adopted by the English king in 1198, became the banner of the king's ships, and the red cross of St George, widely adopted by the Crusaders, became the colours of English ships generally.



Seal Showing the England & Cinque Ports Flags



The Three Lions of England



The Flag of England



Seals Showing Banners on Ships

The next important early English maritime flag was that of the Cinque Ports, a group of five ports in south east England which, in return for certain privileges, undertook to provide the king with ships and men in time of war. It was created in the 13th century and combined the fore parts of the king's lions and the after parts of three ships, in a somewhat unsatisfactory practice known in heraldry as dimidiation.

In the 14th century, when the English king claimed the thrown of France, he followed the improved practice of quartering when combining the French fleurs-de-lis with the three lions, and when the fleurs-de-lis were

reduced to three in 1405, the royal banner thus created lasted for nearly two centuries. For a while the English king did rule more of France than the French king, but Joan of Arc ended that situation.



Flag of the Cinque Ports



Royal Banner of 1405

Towards the end of the 15th century, in what became known as the wars of the roses, there was conflict between the Houses of York and Lancaster, both claimants to the throne, and each supported by the private armies of powerful nobles. In 1485 Lancastrian Henry Tudor prevailed and became Henry VII. He married Elizabeth of York, and combined the Red rose of Lancaster with the White rose of York to create a new royal badge, the Tudor Rose.

Henry VIII Deck Banners

Photographs of Banners supplied to the National Geographic Society, Washington DC



Royal Banner



Tudor Rose



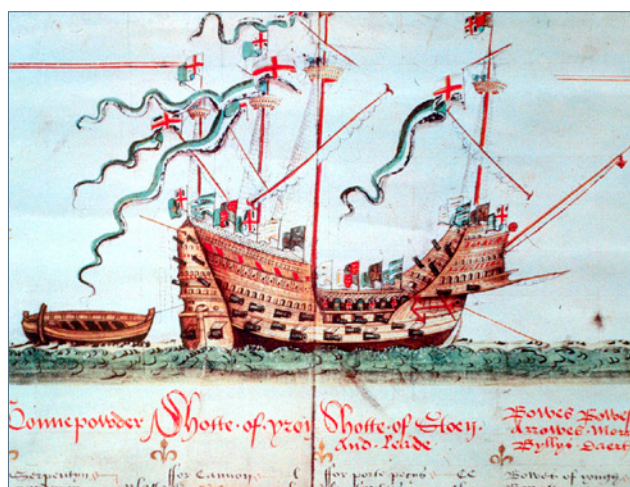
Fleur de Lis



Portcullis

This badge, and other royal badges, principally the portcullis of Henry's mother's family, and a single fleur-de-lis, adorned the deck banners of ships in the King's service in place of the banners of the nobles. Henry had banned their private armies. During this period enormous streamers flew from mastheads, bearing St George's cross and, often, the green and white Tudor royal livery colours.

Henry and his son, Henry VIII, between them built up a strong navy, in which the major new development was the advent of the heavy gun. Gradually, naval tactics evolved, and sea battles began at a much greater distance. There was a need for big, bold simple flags to identify ships at this distance. In 1574, during Elizabeth I's reign, a big, bold, simple, striped flag was introduced, the first naval ensign.



A Tudor Warship

This flag combined the cross of St George, in the canton, with stripes of green and white, the Tudor royal livery colours. Stripes of other colours were also used, and in some flags the St George's cross was placed overall.



A Tudor Ensign

With Elizabeth's death in 1603, James VI of Scotland was invited to become James I of England as well. His banner, combining the English and Scottish arms and the harp for Ireland continued in use in the King's ships, but now only as the Lord High Admiral's flag.

The new king of Great Britain also decided that he should symbolise the union by combining the national

flags, although the parliaments, and the peoples, remained distinctly separate. He apparently felt that he needed an excuse for doing this, and his Royal Proclamation in 1606 started with the words: "Whereas some difference has arisen between Our subjects of South and North Britain, travelling by sea, about the bearing of their flags..." James instructed his heralds to combine the crosses of St George and St Andrew in a flag which was ordered to be flown by all ships at the main masthead, with their own country's flag at the fore. It was described simply as the "British flag": the first recorded use of the term "Union Flag" was in 1625.



The Lord High Admiral's Flag of James VI & I



The First Union Flag



An English Ship Flying Both Flags

James was now in London, and it was the English heralds who designed the flag, quite naturally placing St George over St Andrew. Equally naturally, the Scottish shipmasters objected to this, and petitioned the King, offering alternative designs, but the King paid no attention. The Scots rarely used the new flag, and on land adopted their own design.

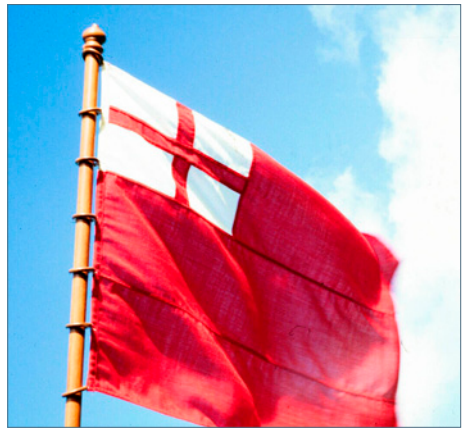


A Scottish Union Flag on Edinburgh Castle

In the early years of the Stuart Kings striped ensigns remained popular, but in 1621 a plain red ensign was introduced. Although the crosses of St George and St Andrew had now been combined in the British flag, St George's cross was still used in the canton of the ensign, probably because the navy was almost entirely English. White and blue ensigns followed in about 1633, and were used to distinguish the three squadrons into which the fleet was now divided. At this stage the white ensign was also a plain flag. Merchant ships began to adopt the red ensign, and this was authorised by Royal Proclamation in 1674.

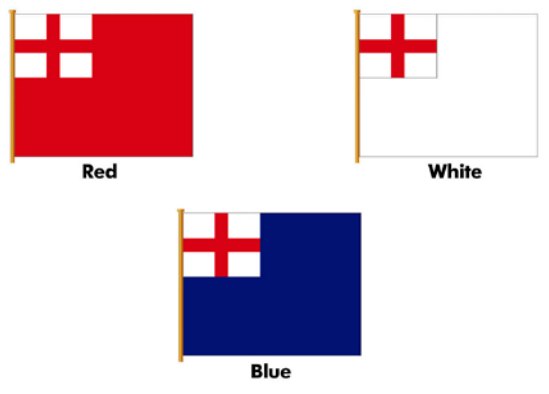


An Early Stuart Ensign



The First Red Ensign

Early Ensigns

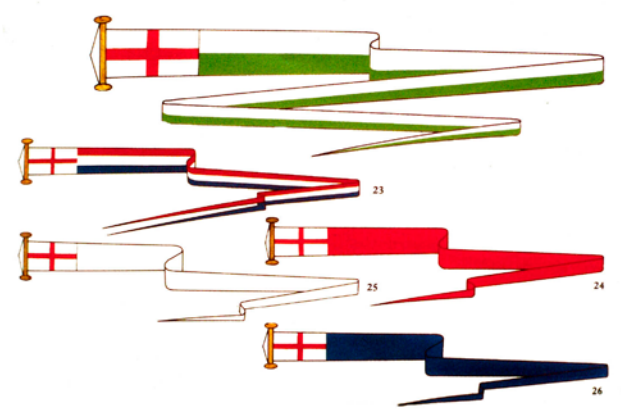


The First Squadronal Ensigns

Admirals of the three squadrons used plain flags of the appropriate colour, the Admiral himself at the main masthead, the Vice Admiral at the fore and the Rear Admiral at the mizzen. At first the order of seniority was red, blue, white, but the red, white, blue sequence was adopted in 1653. Private ships flew pennants of the appropriate colour at their main masthead, or a pennant of red, white and blue if they were on detached duty.



A Dutch Ship and the Admiral of the Blue Squadron



Various Pennants

Late in the 16th century a new flag had been introduced for the use of the Lord High Admiral with a yellow anchor on a red field, a badge which had been in use for some time. After the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 it was more formally used to distinguish the Lord High Admiral when the King was afloat and flying the Royal Standard himself, especially after 1702 when the Royal Standard became the Sovereign's personal banner. For

much of the time from this date the office of Lord High Admiral was vested in the Board of Admiralty until this body was dissolved in 1964 with the unification of the Ministry of Defence, and the Queen became the Lord High Admiral.



The Lord High Admiral's Flag



HMV Britannia Flying the Lord High Admiral's Flag

The Union Flag had been in use for nearly thirty years when, in 1634, a new Royal Proclamation confined its use to the King's ships, and instructed merchant ships to revert to flying just their own country's flag. This was partly because they were masquerading as warships and evading harbour and pilotage dues, but also because foreign ships were failing to salute British warships in the "English" channel on the excuse that they were indistinguishable from merchant ships. In fact, it was because James II had allowed the navy to become weak, and it no longer commanded respect.



The First Union Flag

At about the same time it became the practice in warships to fly a smaller version of the Union Flag at the small mast on the bowsprit instead of a large flag at the

main masthead. At that time the word 'jack' was used as a diminutive, and this smaller flag was described as: "the King's Jack" or "His Majesty's Jack". The name 'jack' became associated with a small flag in the bows of a ship, and the term "Union Jack", which came into use later, became the name by which the Union Flag was and is generally known.



A Jack on a Jack Staff



Another Example of a Jack

When Queen Anne came to the throne in 1702, use of the royal standard as an Admiral's flag ceased, although, probably by omission, it remained in use as the signal for calling a council of flag officers for nearly another century. Also in that year, a very wide red cross was added to the plain white ensign to distinguish it from the white ensign recently introduced in the French navy. At the same time, a red cross was added to the hitherto plain white Admirals' flag.



The 1702 White Ensign



The 1702 White Admiral's Flag

In 1707 an Act of Union combined the English and Scottish parliaments, and the Union flag replaced St George's cross in the cantons of the ensigns. The width of the large red cross in the white ensign was reduced to provide more room for the Union flag.



The 1707 Red Ensign

After this change the principal naval flags remained the same until 1801, when the red diagonal St Patrick's cross was added to the Union flag following the abolition of the Irish Parliament and the imposition of direct rule from London.



The 1801 Union Flag

At about this time it became the practice for warships to hoist the Union Jack as the signal for a pilot. Merchant ships began to follow this practice and, as they were forbidden by Royal Proclamation from flying the Union Jack, the Admiralty became concerned. Following discussions with the shipping industry, and with a Captain Marryat, who had introduced a 'Code of Signals for the Merchant Service' in 1817, a new 'Signal Jack' was introduced in 1823 as the signal for a pilot. This was a Union Jack with a white border, one fifth of the breadth of the Union Jack, which was strictly for use only as the signal for a pilot, and certain other signals, and a fine of up to £20 was later introduced for improper use of this flag.



The Pilot or Civil Jack

Despite these strict instructions, and encouraged by ambiguous wording in the flag regulations of subsequent Merchant Shipping Acts, the Signal Jack was widely adopted by merchant ships as a 'jack' in the bows of the ship. Now, it is no longer used as the signal for a pilot, and has been authorised for use as the civil jack.

In 1864 the Admiralty decided that the system of squadron colours was outdated, inconvenient and expensive, and that it had become a 'matter of importance' to distinguish warships from merchant ships, and also desirable to distinguish merchant ships in public service. They therefore allocated the red ensign, already used by merchant ships, to their exclusive use, the white ensign to the Royal Navy, and the blue ensign to ships in public service, usually with their badge in the fly.



The Merchant or Civil Ensign

Exceptionally, the Royal Yacht Squadron was permitted the privilege of continuing to use the white ensign, and some other yacht clubs were granted the right to display the blue ensign, or the red ensign with a badge in the fly. The blue ensign was also authorised for use by Royal Naval Reserve officers in command of merchant ships which also met certain other conditions. It should be noted that the blue ensign is not the ensign of the Royal Naval Reserve as such, as is stated in many flag books. RNR ships are ships of the Royal Navy, and wear the white ensign.



The White Ensign on HMS Victory



The Blue Ensign of the MoD Police

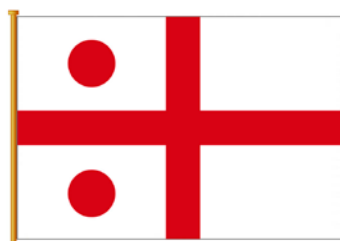
With the reduction to the the white ensign alone for the Royal Navy, the white Admiral's flag, now with St George's cross throughout, became the one Admiral's flag. Towards the end of the century the change from sail to steam brought the two masted battleship, and it was no longer possible to use the masts to distinguish the three ranks of Admiral. These two developments brought into being the present Admirals' flags. For centuries, vice and rear admirals afloat in small boats had been distinguished by the addition of one or two balls to their flags, and this practice was adopted for ships.



The Admiral's Flag



The Old Small Boats Rear Admiral's Flag



The Flag of a Rear Admiral

Finally, as a footnote, or should it be a headnote, the mast-head pennant, once the main distinguishing flag for a warship, has become a barely visible little strip of material with a minute St George's cross, flown continuously while the ship is in commission. The only occasion on which a pennant worthy of comparison with the splendid Tudor streamer is flown is when a ship pays off, as I am doing now.



