# Flags and emblems of the British Republic 1649-1660

by John Cartledge

**Abstract** In the 20th century, several countries faced the challenge of designing flags which marked a change in their geographical makeup or constitutional status whilst simultaneously conveying a message of continuity with the immediate past. Britain encountered the same problem 300 years earlier, when for a decade it experienced its first (and so far only) period of republican rule, during which three previously separate countries were combined. Flags and emblems had to be devised which would distinguish the new government from the monarchist regimes which it had replaced, and portray the unity of the new state, while remaining immediately identifiable – especially on ships. This presented some technical challenges, because while distinctive symbols devoid of specific royal connotations were already in use for England and Scotland, the same was not true in Ireland - and there was no generally recognised emblem for a head of state other than a crown. This paper examines how these issues were addressed, the solutions which were adopted, and the compromises which had to be made.

If like me you're the kind of vexillologist who's particularly interested in national flags, and you were alive in the second half of the 20th century, you were lucky. At the start of the second world war, there were about 70 functionally independent countries in the world. Today, that number has nearly trebled. All of them have chosen to have flags, so on average there have been two new countries – and therefore two new flags to study - every year. What a feast! And this is quite apart from all those countries like Afghanistan or Congo which seem to adopt a new flag every time they change their government.

Some of these new countries were created by amalgamating old ones. When this happened, there was a choice. A completely new flag could be designed, which made no reference to its predecessors. Or alternatively, the colours and designs of the existing flags could be combined in some way, to demonstrate visually the historical continuity between the previous countries and their successor.

Let me give you just two examples, both from the African continent, although an audience such as this will soon think of others.

The flag adopted by the Union of South Africa in 1928 was based on the former flag of the Netherlands, which had been used in the original Dutch colony of the Cape.

But it also included miniature versions of the British flag and those of the two former Afrikaner republics which had been combined with two other British colonies to form the Union. So the flag was a compact history lesson – on the assumption, of course, which to us seems extraordinary, that it was only the white population which had any history worth representing on it.


Britain +


Orange Free State +


Transvaal =


Union of South Africa

In 1964, Tanganyika and Zanzibar combined to form the united republic of Tanzania. The colours and design of the new flag clearly referenced those of the countries which made up this new nation.


Tanganyika +


Zanzibar =


Tanzania

This kind of challenge to the flag designer did not originate in the 20th century. Similar problems had arisen in what is now Britain three centuries earlier, although national flags as we know them today (which can be used by anyone, and are widely flown on land) did not really come into widespread use until the 19th century.

As early as the 16th century, both English and Scottish ships flew distinguishing flags which identified their country of origin. The designs of these were derived from the badges worn by English and Scottish soldiers in the middle ages, and they were quite unrelated to the emblems found on the personal standards of the two countries' monarchs. They were (and still are) commonly known by reference to their respective patron saints. So the red English cross on a white field is that of St George, while the white Scottish saltire on a blue field is that of St Andrew. The field of the Scottish flag is usually a lighter blue than that used on the modern British flag, of which it forms the background.


English flag (St George)


Scottish flag (St Andrew)

The position in Wales and Ireland was rather more complicated.

After the defeat of the last of its independent princes in 1283, Wales had no central government until 1535 when the country was brought under English administration. It no longer existed as a separate political entity, and therefore it had no distinctive flag. But the ruling dynasty in England in the 1500s, the Tudors, had Welsh ancestry. Various legends had associated the emblem of a red dragon with Cadwaladr, a semi-mythical Welsh prince of the seventh century. So on winning the English throne, the Tudors introduced the dragon as one of the supporters to their royal arms.

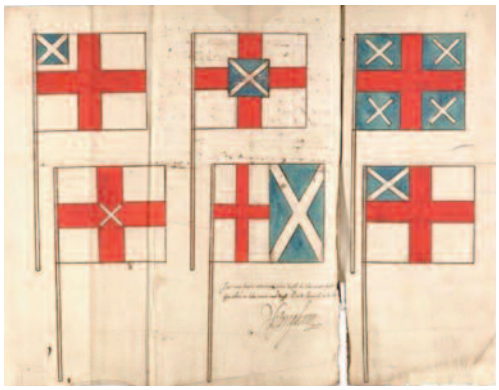
English royal arms
(1509-53, 1558-1603)

16th century Irish coins

Although the English monarchs had claimed "Lordship" over Ireland in the middle ages, their effective control had often been limited. But after a series of uprisings Henry VIII decided to assert his supremacy and was proclaimed King of Ireland in 1541. For most practical purposes, this so-called kingdom was no more than an English colony. Nevertheless, having created an Irish monarchy at least in name, he needed something to symbolise the fact. There is documentary evidence (in a Flemish roll of arms dating from c.1280) of a gold harp on a blue field having been used as an emblem of Ireland in the late thirteenth century, and that was the device adopted. It is found on Irish coins of the 1530s and the 1560s.

Irish royal standard (from 1541) (form of harp conjectural)

There was (and still is) no official description of this instrument, other than its colour, and it appears in a variety of forms. It is doubtful whether this emblem was much used on flags. In any event, the symbol was personal to the monarch, and there was no Irish equivalent to the generic English and Scottish flags then coming into use.



Rejected designs for the Union flag (1604)

In 1603, the English ruling queen, Elizabeth I, died without descendants. As a result of inter-marriage between the Tudors and the ruling dynasty in Scotland, the Stuarts, her heir was the reigning Scottish king, James VI, who succeeded to the English throne as James I. This union of the crowns was purely personal, and the two countries remained constitutionally separate. But James's vanity led him to instruct his heralds to design a flag which would represent what he called his Kingdom of Great Britain, although this had no legal existence.

Various combinations of the English and Scottish flags were considered before it was decided to adopt one which superimposed St George's cross on a field formed by St Andrew's saltire. This became the first version of the British union flag, although at the time there was no unified British state. It contained no reference to Ireland, let alone Wales. James ordered that all ships were to fly this from their main topmasts, together with either the English or the Scottish flag (depending on their home country) at their fore topmasts. It does not seem to have been a particularly popular move, especially with Scots who objected to the primacy it gave to the English emblem. There is some evidence to show that an unapproved alternative design, giving primacy to St Andrew, was sometimes used in Scotland in the 17th century, and there are still occasional calls for it to be used there today.

Union flag (1606)

Scottish variant of union flag

In 1634 James's son and heir, Charles I, restricted the use of the union flag to ships of the royal navy. A few years later, civil war broke out in England, primarily over the respective powers of the monarch and parliament. It culminated in 1649 in the trial, conviction and execution of the king for treason against his own subjects. Scotland played a lesser part in the war, and support for the Stuarts remained stronger there, so following his father's demise Charles's elder son, also named Charles, was proclaimed king and duly crowned. But in England events took a different turn.

Badge of the Commonwealth (1649-1654)

On 17 March 1649 an act of parliament declared the "Office of a King" to be "unnecessary, burthensom and dangerous to the liberty, safety and publique interest of the people". The monarchy was abolished, and the country was declared to be a Commonwealth, effectively the seventeenth century equivalent of a republic. The crown (i.e. the individual who wore it) was replaced by a collective presidency, the Council of State. As Ireland had been an adjunct of the English crown, it was automatically deemed to be part of the Commonwealth too. Once the crown had gone, then so

too did the royal arms which were the insignia of its wearer. But some symbol of the state was needed, on official seals, and coins, so a new emblem (or, officially, a "union shield") was devised, representing both England and Ireland.

For England, St George's cross was available as a symbol sufficiently devoid of any specifically royalist connotations to be used for this purpose. But there was no Irish equivalent, so the only available device was the harp from Henry VIII's royal arms. Faute de mieux, this was pressed into service.

But the form of the harp had changed. The forepillar of the instrument was now the upper torso of a well-developed and scantily-clad young woman, with wings which formed the neck at the top of the harp, in a pose somewhat similar to a ship's figure-head. There is no record of exactly what she personifies, or why the form of the harp was modified in this way. She is a figment of the artistic imagination, because (as far as is known) no real harps of this type have ever existed. But Hibernia, or the Maid of Erin, or whoever she is, was certainly in official use from this time. She can be seen on the Irish shield on the map which appears on the Great Seal of the Commonwealth, as well as on coins of the period. And she is still there in the Irish quarter of the British royal standard to this day.

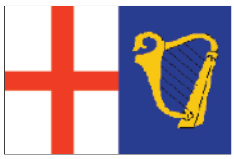
Great Seal of the Commonwealth (1651)

Maiden harp on Great Seal

Coins of the Commonwealth

In the case of the Commonwealth's flags, the evidence is thinner because for the most part vexillological historians are forced to rely on written descriptions. At the restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660 it was ordered that all flags dating from the Commonwealth period were to be destroyed, and it appears that (with a single exception) all of them were. So while it is possible to reconstruct their appearance this cannot be verified by reference to surviving specimens.

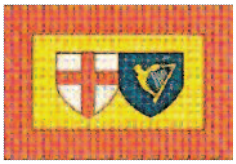
The monarchy having been abolished, the union flag which James I had introduced to symbolize the union of his crowns disappeared. Its place was taken from 1649 onwards by the Commonwealth badge adapted for use as a flag, known as the Commonwealth jack. Because the heraldic references to its Irish component are simply to a gold harp on a blue field, modern artists have exercised some licence in depicting this. The maiden from the Great Seal does not appear to be popular with them, and in one case her place is taken by what might be a fox or even a bear.



Commonwealth jack (from 1649) (form of harp conjectural)

This jack may not have come into general use immediately, because there are surviving instructions to the navy which show that initially, at least, practice at sea was different. In February 1649 the Council of State ordered "that the ships at sea in service of the State shall onely beare the red Crosse in a white flag" (i.e. St George). This instruction may not have been popular with the senior naval officers because the following month the Council ordered "that the Flagg that is to be borne by the Admiral, Vice-Admiral, and Rere-Admiral be that now presented, viz., the Armes of England and Ireland in two severall Escotcheons in a Red Flagg, within a compartment."

The meaning of the term compartment in this context is obscure, but images on paintings such as that of the Battle of Scheveningen (1653) in the National Maritime Museum, London, suggest that it may have been a yellow panel. Slightly different re-creations of this admirals' flag, usually described as the command flag, can therefore be found.



Commonwealth command flag (1649)

The sole surviving example of an actual flag from this period was rediscovered long afterwards in a locker in a naval dockyard, and is now in the National Maritime Museum in London. It may have been an attempt to create a flag conforming to what the Order in Council intended that admirals should fly.

However, there are some obvious oddities about it. The shields are upside down, the head on the harp is on the right, and it is strung more like a lyre. There is no compartment, but there is a wreath instead, combining fronds of palm and laurel. The head on the harp is clearly not human, and appears more like a parrot, though it may be a fish. One theory about this flag is that it was made for an admiral, and the wreath was introduced to distinguish him from more junior officers. Another is simply that it was a trial effort, which was found to be incorrect, so it was put away and forgotten. Scientific examination reveals that it does not appear to have been actually flown at sea.

Commonwealth command flag?

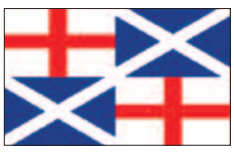
The Battle of Leghorn (14 March 1653) by Reinier Nooms

This contemporary painting shows a naval battle between the Dutch and English fleets in the Mediterranean in 1653. It is by a Dutch artist, and the tricoloured Dutch flag is much more in evidence, but two of the ships can be seen to be flying St George's cross at their main topmasts and the Commonwealth jack (impaling St George's with the harp) above their bowsprits. The wreck on the right appears to be an English vessel as well, as St George's cross is still bravely fluttering just above the waves.

These are modern drawings (by James C Bender) of two English naval ships of this period. Each flies the Commonwealth jack on a jackstaff in the bow, and the larger vessel has the command flag at her main topmast. They have the English flag on their fore and mizzen masts, and the ensign at the stern identifies the squadron to which they belonged.

Naval ships of the 1650s

The Commonwealth jack came to be augmented in due course by what is commonly referred to as the Commonwealth ensign. This quartered St George with St Andrew, giving primacy to George. It excludes reference to Ireland, and the inclusion of the Scottish saltire puts the likely date of its introduction in 1654 or later. Although Charles II had fled abroad (to the Netherlands) after his efforts to recover the English crown ended in defeat in 1651, Scotland was still a separate country. The Scottish political leaders were offered the choice of remaining under English military rule or of joining the Commonwealth. They chose the latter, and in April 1654 the Scottish monarchy and parliament were abolished and Scottish members were elected to the parliament at Westminster for the first time – though they soon discovered that the English army had no intention of going home.



Commonwealth ensign (1654?)

Badge of the Commonwealth (1654-60)

As a result, Britain first came into being as a single political entity (if only temporarily) under republican government more than half a century before the 1707 Act of Union created the United Kingdom. The 1654 Ordinance of Union specifically provided "That the Arms of Scotland, viz. a Cross, commonly called Saint Andrews Cross, be received into, and born from henceforth in the Arms of this Commonwealth, as a Badge of this Union." The Irish shield was retained in the badge, but now in a subordinate position.

In the meantime, there had been a significant constitutional development in England. From its inception, the Commonwealth had suffered from an uneasy relationship between parliament and the army, jockeying with each other for control of the government. The solution that was ultimately found was to recreate the position of a personal head of state, termed the Lord Protector, and to award this to a dominant personality who was both a senior parliamentarian and a leading military commander. So in December 1653 Oliver Cromwell was installed in this office.

A head of state required an official coat of arms, and in designing these care was taken to make appropriate reference to the composition of the newly unified country. On the shield there are the emblems of England, Scotland and Ireland, superimposed with a smaller shield which bears the Cromwell family arms – a white lion rampant on a black field. But of equal interest are the animals which support it. The lion of England wears a princely crown, as it does again in the crest at the top, where it is standing on a third one for good measure – images taken directly from the now disused English royal arms. Cromwell specifically rejected an offer of kingship, but the crown was the commonly recognised emblem of political authority or state power. There was (and is) no generally accepted alternative non-regal symbol of a head of state. The Scottish unicorn which had supported the Stuarts' royal arms was too closely associated with the recently-evicted ruling dynasty, so since the Lord Protector had Welsh ancestry the Tudor precedent was revived and the red dragon of Wales reinstated as the other supporter.

English royal arms (1603-49,1660-89, 1702-07)

Lord Protector's arms (1654-59)

Lord Protector's standard (1654-59)

The Lord Protector also had a personal banner or "standard" derived from his coat of arms.

It is noteworthy that for the duration of the Protectorate, the state and the head of state had separate coats of arms, signifying that the two were not one and the same. This distinction was lost (at least heraldically) with the restoration of the monarchy. It remains so today, because the British government has no emblem of its own.

Confusingly, a number of sources contain images of what is also described as Cromwell's banner. This is divided vertically between red and blue, and shows the English and Scottish arms on shields in front of an ermine cloak or canopy below a crown and above the motto Pax quaeritur bello ("peace is sought through war"). The initials O P stand for Oliver Protector. This illustration is taken from an engraving in John Prestwich's work Respublica, which appeared in 1787. Prestwich terms it "The great Banner of the States, called the Union" and lists it amongst various devices displayed at Oliver's funeral. Whether it was specifically created for that occasion, or had any other use, is an open question.

Great banner of the States (1658)

"A flag of the Commonwealth"

Prestwich also describes a device involving the English and Irish shields, a wreath and the motto Floreat Res Publica ("may the Commonwealth flourish"), which he simply lists as "A Flag of the Commonwealth". His description appears to coincide with the obverse of various regimental colours used by parliamentary troops in Ireland. It has some affinity of design with the flag found at the dockyard although in this instance the field was blue and the wreath consists solely of laurel fronds.

The Commonwealth ensign may not have seen much use at sea. By an Order in Council of 18 May 1658 the Protector's personal "standard" became the "Standard for the Generall of his Highnesse ffleete". At the same time the Commonwealth jack was supplanted by a new Protectorate jack showing "the Armes of England and Scotland united according to the ancient forme, with the addition of the Harpe…" The "ancient form" in question was the 1606 union flag, notwithstanding the specifically regal associations it had previously possessed, to which the Irish harp was now added on a shield at the centre.

Protectorate jack (1658-59)

Commonwealth jack (1659-60) (?)

The Protectorate jack was not destined to remain in use for long, because only four months later Oliver died in office. The Council of State awarded the role of Protector to his eldest surviving son, but when the resumption of factional squabbling between parliament and the army drove Richard Cromwell to resign in May 1659, the Protectorate came to an end.

One source (Perrin) states that the Commonwealth jack was briefly reinstated, though another (Wilson) queries this. In any event, a year later a military coup d'etat brought the Stuarts back, to both England and Scotland, and Britain's brief experience of republican rule was over. All the Commonwealth's flags and symbols were abolished and the previous royalist emblems (including the union flag) were reinstated – except that the maiden now became a fairly permanent feature in British depictions of the Irish harp.

Here the story ends, for the time being. But it may be worth mentioning as an endnote that there is some gossip in contemporary British republican chatrooms about the possible vexillological consequences of a second abolition of the monarchy. The general consensus is that the union flag is now sufficiently established as a generic emblem of Britain as a country, rather than as the identifier of a particular system of government, for its continued use to be acceptable. Whether it could survive a possible dissolution of the union following the referendum on Scottish independence which will be held next year is, however, a different question.

**Recommended sources for further reading**

Hayes-McCoy, Gerard : *A history of Irish flags from earliest times*, Academy Press, Dublin (1979)

O'Brogain, Seamus : *The Wolfhound guide to the Irish harp emblem*, Wolfhound Press, Dublin (1998)

Perrin, William Gordon : *British Flags: Their early history, and their development at sea; with an account of the origin of the flag as a national device*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1922)

Prestwich, John : *Respublica, a Display of the Honors, Ceremonies and Ensigns of the Common-Wealth, under the Protectorship of Oliver Cromwell*, J Nichols, London (1787)

Wilson, Timothy: *Flags at sea : a guide to the flags flown at sea by British and some foreign ships, from the 16th century to the present day*, illustrated from the collection of the National Maritime Museum, HMSO, London (1986).

**Author's biography**

John Cartledge has lived and worked in or near London all his life. As a student, he attended the same college in Cambridge as Oliver Cromwell - though not at the same time. Previously a geography teacher, he is now a safety policy adviser in the rail industry. He has been a member of the Flag Institute in Britain since the 1980s. In this picture, he is the figure on the right.