



## Using and extending the flag collection at Royal Museums Greenwich

**Barbara Tomlinson**

May I extend good wishes to delegates and welcome you to Greenwich. I hope you enjoy your visit. Royal Museums Greenwich holds a collection of 1084 mainly maritime flags, which are shortly to be transferred to new storage at our newly rebuilt, much improved, store at Kidbrooke. Inevitably there are only a few examples on display at the moment. The problem with flags is that they are potentially fragile, potentially very large (particularly the early ones) and all of them are subject to damage by light. Online access to the collection is currently quite good; there have been opportunities as well as problems in publicising and accessing the flag collection in recent years. I will say something about the flags currently on display, recent displays, acquisitions and research. We do not have a dedicated exhibition space for flags and they are selected for display if they fit in with a specific topic.

Currently on display in *Nelson Navy Nation* on the top floor is our most recently acquired flag, a British Union Flag (post-1801 pattern) belonging to HMS *Minotaur* and believed to have been flown as a battle flag at Trafalgar.



*Union Flag worn by HMS Minotaur  
at Trafalgar, 1805*



*Stephen Hilton, former owner  
of the Minotaur's flag*

It belonged to Master's Mate Stephen Hilton. He retired with the rank of Lieutenant, went on half-pay in 1817 and finally retired as Commander in 1839, dying aged 85 in 1872. His brother Robert was also present at Trafalgar serving as surgeon's mate in *Swiftsure*.



The flag is made of hand-sewn wool bunting. The diagonals of the saltire do not meet up in a straight line across the flag. This is a characteristic of early 19th century Union Flags seen on other examples and in contemporary sketches. There are fabric losses at the fly end. The linen hoist attached when it arrived was a machine-sewn replacement, probably added in the 1930s. Prior to display the flag was removed from its old support, very gently washed and given a new support. This work was carried out by Annabel Wylie and Poppy Singer.

Accompanying it was a very nice early hand-sewn Austrian ensign of the design in use 1786-1869. This was formerly believed to be a Spanish ensign captured from *Neptuno*. Its connection with the Hiltons is something of a mystery. Repairs to the fly indicate that it had been used.



*Austrian ensign, dated 1786-1869,  
also formerly in Hilton's possession*

AAA0567 is an actual Spanish ensign captured with their warship *San Ildefonso*, 74 guns, by the *Defence* at Trafalgar. It was hung in the crossing of St Paul's Cathedral during Nelson's funeral service on 9 January 1806 and was presented to Greenwich Hospital for display in the Royal Naval Museum, formerly at the Royal Naval College at Greenwich, by the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's in 1907. It passed to the National Maritime Museum with much of the rest of that collection in 1936. Too big to display except on a floor, it's a massive nine by fourteen metres. A very similar ensign, worn by the *San Juan Nepomuceno* during the battle of Trafalgar, is in the Museo de Ejército, Madrid.



*Ensign worn by the Spanish  
warship San Ildefonso, captured  
at Trafalgar, 1805*



*Ensign of the San Ildefonso  
decorating St Paul's Cathedral  
during the funeral ceremony of  
Viscount Nelson, 1806*



Both Trafalgar flags were presented to the church of St Mary the Virgin, Selling, Kent by the Hilton family during the 1930s. The sequence of events leading to its acquisition by the National Maritime Museum is as follows. Staff became aware of another Trafalgar flag from *Spartiate* in private hands in 2009 and this shortly afterwards appeared in the salerooms. However the Museum was outbid by an American collector. He appears also or even primarily to have been interested in our fragment of *Chesapeake's* ensign, which we were not legally permitted to sell. This flag came to us from the Royal United Service Institute Museum by transfer in 1963. It had been purchased and presented to them by William Waldorf Astor in London in 1908, having formerly been part of a private museum in a pub called the 'Edinburgh Castle' owned by a Mr T.G. Middlebrook. It had a previous provenance taking it back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, but so far the names and addresses have failed to check out. More research is needed here.



*Fragment of the ensign of the  
USS Chesapeake, captured in action  
by HMS Shannon, 1813*

When the Museum failed to acquire the *Spartiate* flag, my colleague Amy Miller opened lengthy but ultimately successful negotiations with Selling Church who currently had the flags in storage with a flag conservator, the work needed to return them to display having stalled. Their sale to the Museum had to be approved at a senior level by the diocese of Canterbury, with the payment going to establish a local charitable trust. The museum also agreed to supply the church with two replica flags. From everybody's point of view, it was a desirable arrangement but there was disquiet at the time about the sale of historic material from churches, in particular a funerary helm, so the process was quite protracted. The Union Flag is a manageable size and fits into the gallery which was being planned at this time.

An earlier Union Flag was purchased in 2006. It had formerly been on loan, and the Museum had long wanted to acquire it, but after it was given a high valuation the owner put it up for sale. However it was not granted an export license and eventually the Museum purchased it. It is a British Union Flag (pre-1801 pattern) used as the command flag of Richard, Earl Howe (1726-99) as Admiral of the Fleet. It was flown on his flagship *Queen Charlotte* at the battle of the Glorious First of June 1794. It is basically a naval union jack, with a very good provenance from Lieutenant William Burgh, who wrote an account of the battle, and it has its own flag bag. It has been useful to compare the construction of this flag with others believed to be of a similar date. Naval flags were made smaller during the early nineteenth century and this one is inconveniently large. Also, although it features in an exuberant oil painting by



Philippe-Jacques de Louthembourg, this is not a battle that is widely known to the general public.



*Union Flag worn by Lord Howe's flagship HMS Queen Charlotte at the battle of the Glorious First of June, 1794*



*Painting of the battle by Philippe-Jacques de Louthembourg (1740-1812), showing the Union Flag flying at the Queen Charlotte's mainmast head.  
RMG Collections*

The current plan of the galleries covers trade contacts in particular geographical areas. Currently on show in *Traders*, which covers the Indian Ocean and Far East, is this Imperial Chinese military flag acquired by Robert John Le Mesurier McClure (1807-73) during the capture of Canton in December 1857. The city of Canton was attacked by a combined British and French force. McClure led one of three divisions of the British naval brigade.

The flag is constructed from blue silk sateen with a central horizontal seam. The seams are hand-stitched. The flag depicts a winged tiger holding flames, the





surrounding border also pictures the flame motif. It is painted on both sides in gold with details applied in black ink. The eyes are painted in white and luminous green. The hoist strip is formed from a blue plain woven, cotton fabric with six ties along the outer edge.



*Imperial Chinese flag, the flag of the  
Lieutenant of the Vanguard Brigade,  
captured at Canton, 1857*

May Bo Ching, Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou made a research visit organised by my colleague Amy Miller to examine our Chinese collection and was able to add considerably to our knowledge of these flags.

The flag was used by the Lieutenant of the Vanguard Brigade. According to *Da Qing Huidian Tu (Illustrated Collected Statutes of the Great Qing)*, the design (winged tiger in this case) should be gold painted. But it seems that there is no particular rule regarding the colour of the flag and we have another one on a white background.

This very similar flag was presented to Greenwich Hospital by Queen Victoria in 1859. It was also taken during the capture of Canton by Captain Charles Fellowes (1823-86).

The flag is made of white satin-woven silk, with a cotton pole sleeve with ties, and is hand sewn. The design shows a winged tiger made of applied gold foil, the details painted in black. The animal has green eyes and is holding lightning flashes. The border is decorated with tongues of flame.



*A second Chinese flag,  
also captured at Canton*

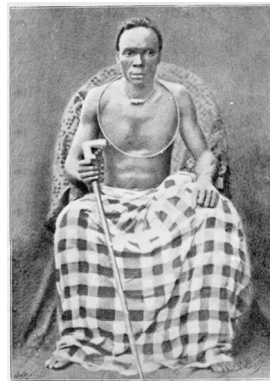
These flags are part of a larger collection of Chinese flags dating from the First Opium War of 1839-42. May Bo Ching's findings are now online and supersede any earlier conclusions.



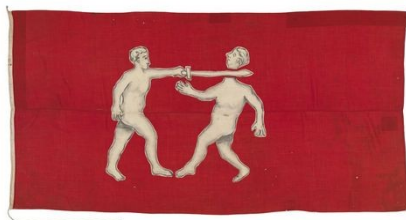
Also currently undergoing academic research are our African flags. Many relate to Itsekri chief Nana Olomu (1852-1916), who is a major local hero in Nigeria, specifically the Niger delta. Heloise Finch-Boyer has an online blog suggesting these flags were manufactured in Britain and finished locally and she shows how they were used on canoes. These examples were acquired as military trophies by the British, with some confusion between the expedition against Nana in 1894 and the later expedition against Benin in 1897. One achieved local notoriety as 'The flag of Benin'. Heloise shows a contemporary sketch of a similar design indicating with absolute certainty that it is Itsekri and nothing to do with Benin. Julia Binter of Wolfson College is including them in her thesis *The Cultural Worlds of the African Palm Oil Trade*. We also acquired this Fante flag with the Michael Graham-Stewart Slavery Collection in 2012. This flag is definitely locally made in Ghana. As they are comparatively small and robust, some of these flags were previously displayed in the Atlantic Worlds gallery.



*Flag of Itsekri chief Nana Olomu, captured in 1894*



*Nana Olomu (1852-1916), whose territory lay in the Niger delta, in modern Nigeria*



*Second Itsekri flag, also captured in 1894; once misattributed to Benin*



*Fante flag, from Ghana*

Our recent exhibition commemorating the centenary of the battle of Jutland included an Imperial German naval ensign (1903-21) presented in 1963. It is associated with SMS *Moltke*. It seems likely it was taken as a souvenir during the time the ship was interned at Scapa Flow following the German surrender, but before her scuttling. The second flag displayed was a British naval ensign. It was used as a battle ensign by HMS *Chester* 1915 at the battle of Jutland, 31 May 1916. It is made of wool bunting and is machine sewn. A rope and two Inglefield clips are attached and there are brass grommets in the hoist.



Royal Naval vessels wore two White Ensigns in action in case one was shot away. As the German Imperial ensign was also white, a Union Flag was also flown in battle from 11 January 1916 to avoid confusion with enemy ships.



*Ensign of the German battlecruiser SMS Moltke, probably acquired after its scuttling at Scapa Flow in 1919*

*Battle Ensign flown at the battle of Jutland, 31 May 1916, by the light cruiser HMS Chester*

The new exhibition gallery has provided generous space and light control and has good potential for the display of flags. During *Royal River*, the exhibition which accompanied the London Olympics, it was possible to display a fairly substantial (386cm × 769.6cm) Royal Standard with the label and arms of the Prince of Wales. It is made of silk, machine sewn and painted on the right side. It was flown on the Royal Yacht *Victoria and Albert*, 1899. The Prince of Wales in question would have been the future King George V, who became heir to the throne following the death of Queen Victoria in 1901.



*Standard of Prince George, Prince of Wales (later King George V), from the Royal Yacht, Victoria and Albert*

*Death in the Ice*, the current display, includes a sledge flag embroidered with Sir John Barrow's motto 'HOPE ON HOPE EVER', made by Lady Jane Franklin for Lieutenant Bedford Clapperton Tryvillion Pim (1826-86). It was flown from HM sledge 'John Barrow' commanded by Pim when he made contact with the crew of *Investigator* on 6 April 1853.

The flag is made of dark blue ribbed silk with an anchor and motto appliquéd in yellow felt— the details are picked out in gold-coloured silk. It has been framed.

Commanded by Robert McClure, *Investigator* was beset in the ice north of Banks Island, having entered the Northwest Passage from the Pacific. After three winters in the Arctic her crew were starving and suffering from scurvy. The arrival of Pim heralded their eventual rescue. He had been sent in charge of a sledge party from HMS *Resolute* following the recovery of a message from the trapped McClure. This was the first meeting of expeditions entering the Northwest Passage from opposite ends. Both vessels had been sent to the Arctic to search for the missing ships of Sir John Franklin's expedition: *Investigator* in company with Collinson's *Enterprise* (although the two ships had



become separated); *Resolute* as part of a larger squadron under the overall command of Captain Sir Edward Belcher.

The flag is illustrated in the table of sledge flags shown in *Further Papers relative to the recent arctic expeditions in search of Sir John Franklin and the crews of HMS Erebus and Terror* (London, 1855) p. 954. The flag is also shown on the map opposite p. 680, this time in use by the sledge 'Murchison', also commanded by Pim. This photograph shows the older Pim. The design of this flag is used extensively in the associated souvenirs of the exhibition.



*Sledge flag flown by Lieutenant Bedford Pim, of HMS Resolute, 1853*



*Lieutenant Bedford Pim (1826-86) in later life*

In 2018 the Museum plans to open an exploration wing with four new galleries. The polar gallery in particular will include some of our sledge flags, probably on rotation. Almost certainly, it will include the sledge flag of Robert Falcon Scott which we purchased in 1999 when the Scott family put it on sale. A similar sledge flag which Scott used during the *Discovery* expedition of 1901-4 hangs in Exeter Cathedral. This is another example of the same design including the Scott family crest, which Robert Falcon Scott took to the South Pole in 17 January 1912 and was recovered from the tent in which he died in March of the same year. Also on a provisional display list for the Pacific gallery is an example of the house flag of London Missionary Society. This was acquired with a large collection of material from the society in 2013, including another addition to our flags of the world – the 1971 flag of Papua New Guinea. We have other New Guinea material to go with it, and I like the story of how it was designed by a local schoolgirl, so I think it has educational potential.



*Sledge flag of Captain Robert Falcon Scott, 1912*



*Flag of the London Missionary Society*





*National flag of Papua New Guinea*

Following the end of the Soviet Union, and the prospect that in future someone will be asking, 'What have we got on the Cold War?', in the late 1990s we acquired a Soviet merchant and naval ensign, improving an existing collection of Russian flags dating from the Crimean War onwards.



*Soviet naval ensign*

In 2007, we were offered and accepted the flag of one of the three divisions of the bodyguard of the Khalifa, Muhammad Ahmad Abdullah al-Taashi. It was captured at Omdurman by Commander Colin Keppel on 2 September 1898. A rectangular flag of watered silk taffeta, originally a pale green colour, appliquéd with four crescent moons and an Arabic inscription which appears to read: 'On a beautiful night'. The flag is made of two widths of silk fabric with an over-sewn horizontal central seam. It is hand sewn throughout. The design is in yellow watered silk, the outlines edged in a twisted green and yellow silk embroidery thread. The fly end is finished with a heavy fringe of silk with a woven gimp heading of silk and metal thread. The flag is attached to a leather-covered pole, finished at the top with a horse tail, a gilt copper ball embossed with flowers and calligraphy, above an elaborate pierced finial decorated with a six-pointed star. The finial has been badly bent – possibly during the action. The flag is single sided and unlined. The pole is on the right side. This is another flag which requires the attention of an external researcher.

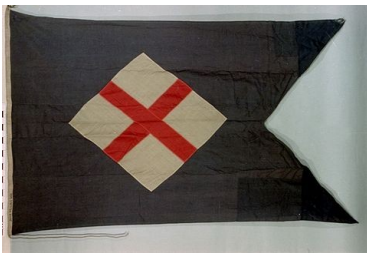


*Standard of the Khalifa's bodyguard,  
captured at the battle of Omdurman,  
1898*

The bulk of the collection consists of commercial house flags from various shipping lines, mostly acquired in the form of two large collections. One was amassed by Charles Meredyth Pope, mostly in the 1950s, and donated by his widow in 1967. For many years we had on loan a second collection acquired by Daniel Bolt (1873-1946), Borough Surveyor of the London Borough of Poplar. His



father Daniel Roberts Bolt had been a master in the merchant service and the younger Daniel retained an interest in seafaring, collecting house flags and the logs of vessels that visited Poplar. The collection was donated to the borough and later came under the Borough of Tower Hamlets. The borough did not have the space to display them and loaned the collection to the museum where it remained for 35 years. This collection, covering shipping lines, many active in the nineteenth century, consists of wool bunting flags, mostly in fairly good condition, rather larger than the Pope examples. It was decided to return or acquire all but the most valuable items on long term loan to the museum. This policy covered all collections, not just flags.



*House flag of John Willis & Son,  
London*

This might mean having to purchase them, as in the case of the Glorious First of June flag, but there were obvious drawbacks in having to store and conserve items that were the property of others and having to consult them about loans out, display and publication. In 2003 Tower Hamlets agreed to transfer the collection to the museum on the grounds that it did not fall within the remit of their collecting policy. As with the Church of England, various rather misjudged sales have led to a tightening up of disposal procedures in local museums and this may have influenced their decision. Research into the history of the various British shipping lines represented in the two collections reveals a sort of death of the dinosaurs in the 1970s, so most of these flags are no longer manufactured as the companies are no longer trading. However additions to this part of the collections are likely to be discriminating in future.