



## County flags of Ireland

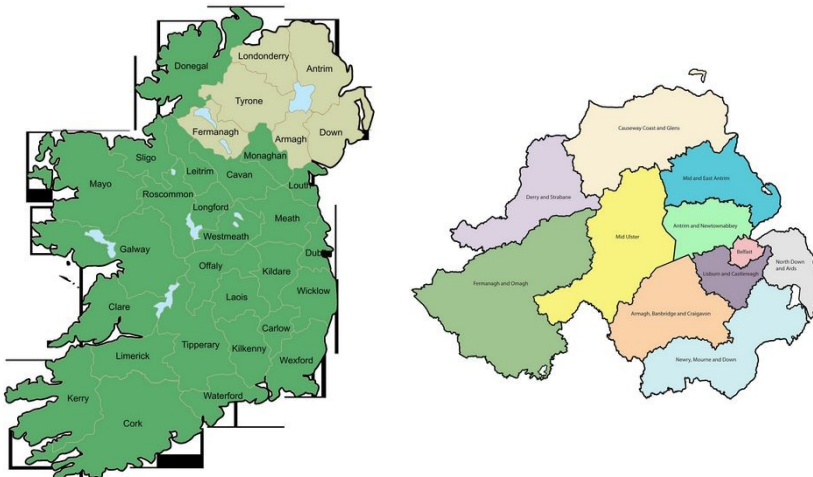
Stan Zamyatin

### Abstract

*Such is the popularity of the sports organised by the Gaelic Sports Association that the colours used by the various county teams have been unofficially representative of the county as a whole. As their acceptance becomes more and more widespread, these colours are now featuring in the coats of arms adopted by Irish county councils and municipalities.*

### Introduction

This paper deals with the traditional 32 counties on the island of Ireland and will therefore be a cross-border study that includes the 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland and the six in Northern Ireland (UK). It should be noted that these 32 counties are not an exact reflection of current administrative areas, especially in the case of Northern Ireland. Since 1 June 2014, the Republic of Ireland has comprised 31 administrative areas; since 1 April 2015 Northern Ireland has had 11. While the Republic's 26 counties have remained more or less intact in terms of borders and administration, the counties in Northern Ireland were abolished and replaced in 1972, the same year that the 'Ulster Banner', the flag that had represented Northern Ireland since 1953, lost its official status to a greater degree.

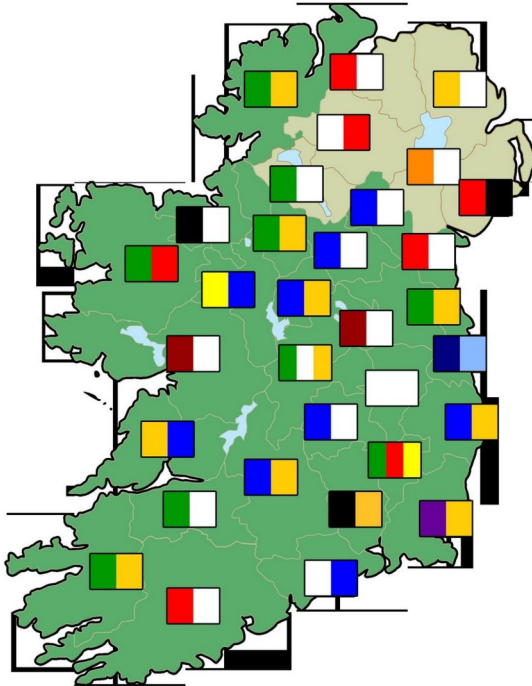


*Left, the 32 traditional Irish counties: 6 are now in Northern Ireland, while the other 26 remain in the Republic of Ireland; right, modern administrative areas within Northern Ireland*

When talking about 'county flags', one must take into account that Ireland actually has no official county flags, but rather official 'county colours' that act as de facto county flags. These flags are not official because firstly there is no single specific design for each county. Secondly, none of the flags have been



officially adopted by the individual county councils and therefore cannot legally represent them. In the six counties that form part of Northern Ireland, the county colours are used only by nationalists and republicans and are generally not supported by loyalists and unionists. Nevertheless, these county colours carry a tremendous amount of significance in terms of identity and recognition.



*Irish county colours*

### **The Gaelic Athletic Association**

Ireland is unique in the world in that the regional 'county flags' originate directly from sports. The sporting organisation responsible for the birth and use of these county flags has been the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). It was founded in 1884 in Thurles, County Tipperary and since then has arguably been the most important social, cultural and political movement on the island.



*Flag of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)*

Today the GAA is Ireland's largest sporting organisation; it 'is part of the Irish consciousness and plays an influential role in Irish society that extends far beyond the basic aim of promoting Gaelic games'. It is no surprise therefore that it has had the greatest contribution in terms of symbolism and identity. Indeed, many Irish flags and emblems either originate from the organisation or have been strongly influenced by it.



The organisation's two major sports are Gaelic football and hurling (camogie for women). Unsurprisingly, they have been and continue to be the most popular spectator sports in Ireland, followed by football (soccer) and rugby. Hurling is an ancient Irish sport that has been played for hundreds of years and even appears in Irish mythology. Gaelic football by contrast is more of a nineteenth-century invention of the GAA.



GAA sports: left, hurling; right, Gaelic football

The two sports are organised on what is called an 'all-Ireland' basis, meaning that they cover the whole island. Yet this is not unique since other sports are also organised in this way, including rugby, cricket, field hockey, ice hockey, basketball, boxing and many more.



Flags of all-Ireland sports governing bodies: top to bottom, left, Irish Rugby Football Union, Cricket Ireland, Irish Athletic Boxing Association; right, Hockey Ireland; Basketball Ireland; Irish Ice Hockey Association

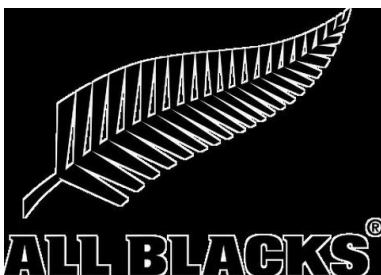
However, what is special about hurling and Gaelic football is how they have provided each county on the island with a set of identities, notably colours.



Local rivalry is of course nothing unique and can be found all around the world. Nevertheless, the way that the GAA has developed these rivalries and provided a medium for symbols to flourish is something very unique indeed. The Irish historian Matthew Potter writes: 'this local "nationalism" is typified by the invention of county flags utilising the local GAA colours, the evolution of "county anthems" sung on match days and the growth of county associations in the Irish diaspora'.<sup>1</sup> The GAA is after all also an international organisation and the Irish diaspora has greatly contributed to spreading and developing the GAA's sports and thus its symbols abroad.

### Sport and national identity

In order to understand the Irish case of county flags, the importance of sport in forming identities needs to be looked at. Today one can find countless studies, papers and books which confirm the close connection between sport and identity, be it local, regional or national. Many have come to realise and recognise how much sport can promote a sense of national identity and project that identity abroad. One only has to look at ice hockey in Canada, football in Brazil and rugby in New Zealand to see how this works. Nothing promotes a sense of shared national identity more than a nation taking part at an international sporting competition.



*National identity expressed through sport: above left, Hockey Canada; above right, Brazilian Football Association; left, New Zealand All Blacks*

### Sport and regional identity

Regional sporting competitions have the same effect as international ones but on a regional level. In Ireland, the GAA has fostered this regional identity by providing a forum for the development of county identities and a medium for county colours and other symbols. Since hurling and Gaelic football were largely unable to offer inter-country competitions to the Irish, they provided them with inter-county instead. As a result, a unique form of regional competition and

<sup>1</sup> M. Potter, "'Geographical loyalty'? Counties, palatinates, boroughs and ridings', *History Ireland*, 20, no. 5 (September-October 2012), pp. 24-7, <http://www.historyireland.com/early-modern-history-1500-1700/geographical-loyalty-counties-palatinates-boroughs-and-ridings/>



identity developed in Ireland. Matthew Potter believed that, 'despite modernisation, globalisation and large-scale immigration, counties continue to command passionate loyalties and on both sides of the border enjoy widespread ceremonial, cultural and sporting significance'.<sup>2</sup>

Many towns and villages across the island fly their county colours at some point in the year. The real enthusiasts leave their flags hanging for the whole year, while others simply put up their flags if their team is playing.

County flags and bunting can be found everywhere adorning private houses, farms, pubs and even schools. The colours are used in many creative ways and include the painting of shoes, cars, buildings and even animals.



*Irish regional identity expressed through sport: top to bottom, left, Mayo, Donegal, Wexford; right, Galway, Dublin, Down*

**Colour similarities**

Unfortunately a number of counties share exactly the same colours and in turn cause some confusion and misrepresentation. In this regard, Ireland has the same problem as Austria, in that some neighbouring counties (or federal states in Austria) have the same design. In Austria, for example, the federal states of Vienna, Salzburg and Vorarlberg all use the same horizontal 'red and white' bicolour, just like Indonesia.



*Similarity in Irish county colours:  
Derry, Cork and Louth*

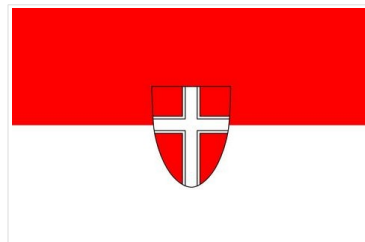
<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



*Similarity in Austrian Land colours:  
Wien, Salzburg and Vorarlberg*

It is only when the arms of the respective states are placed on the flag that one can differentiate between them.

Ireland is no different, and uses the GAA County Club emblems or 'crests'. This can be seen with counties such as Derry, Cork and Louth that all use a vertical bicolour of red and white.



*Similar Irish county colours,  
distinguished by coat of arms:  
top to bottom, Derry, Louth, Cork*

*Similar Austrian Land colours,  
distinguished by coat of arms:  
top to bottom, Wien, Salzburg,  
Vorarlberg*

### County colour origins

The origins of Irish county colours are fascinating yet varied, complex and obscure. However, in its early history, the GAA did not properly document the use of county colours so many origins are therefore debatable.

The lack of documentation means that a degree of scepticism should be exercised. We may never know exactly when and why certain colours were introduced, if there was a reason. Nevertheless, a good knowledge of Irish history, heraldry and vexillology should provide the basis of an 'educated guess' in certain places.



### Analysis of origins

In the GAA's early years, counties were represented by their respective county club champions. Thus if the champions changed every year, then so did the county colours. In 1913 the GAA tried to standardise somewhat and asked every county to register their county colours. A full return has not yet been found in the GAA archives but other sources suggest that not all counties complied. That said, several counties had decided before 1913 to stick to the same colours and adopted their 'county colours' based on 'club colours'. Yet the origins of county colours do not lie simply in GAA clubs. Many colours have their own fascinating origins tied to Irish history, culture, politics, tradition and nature. The best way to analyse these flags is to look at the alleged (1) *club origins* of the colours and then examine the assumed (2) *origins beyond* these clubs. Since not all counties have the same documented history, there will be certain gaps in the study.

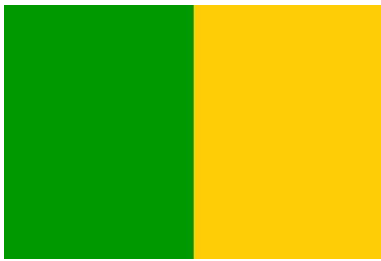
### Club origins

The research uncovered alleged club origins of county colours for only 17 counties. They are listed below with some descriptions:

County	GAA Club	Year	Explanation
Antrim	Seagan An Diomais	c.1910	County Champions + closure + purchase
Armagh	Crossmaglen Rangers	c.1926	County Champions (white/black swap 1926)
Carlow	Graigucullen + Milford	c.1910	County Champions
Clare	Tulla	?	First club in County
Cork	Total Abstinence Hall	1919	Theft + closure + borrowing
Fermanagh	Teemore	?	County Champions
Galway	UCG (now NUIG)	c.1933	County Champions
Kerry	Tralee Mitchels	1903	County Champions
Kildare	Clane	1903	County Champions
Kilkenny	Thomas Larkin	c.1893	Purchase + closure
Leitrim	Sean O'Heslins	c.1913	County Champions
Limerick	Lucan Sarsfields	?	Honouring a hero
Mayo	Carnacon (Towerhill)	c. 1887	Important ownership
Offaly	Tullamore	1920's	County Champions*
Sligo	Tubbercurry	c.1925	County Champions
Tipperary	Boherlahan Dualla	1925	County Champions
Wicklow	Roundwood (An Tochar)	1933	County Champions



Origin of Irish county colours in a local team:  
Sean O'Heslin's GAA Club, Co. Leitrim, badge (left) and shirt (right)



*Origin of Irish county colours in a local team:  
Co. Leitrim GAA (left), badge (right)*

### **Carlow**

There is no explanation of the Carlow colours. One source says that the colours were adopted in 1910, another 1933. It seems certain though that the colours green, red and yellow originate from two different clubs – Graiguecullen (green and red) and Milford (yellow). In 1913 Carlow registered their colours as 'green and red', as these were the colours of Graiguecullen GAA Club, the club champions since 1908. The club was however expelled from County Carlow in 1926 after an incident during the final against Milford GAA Club, locally remembered as the 'Battle of Rathoe'. Consequently Graiguecullen moved to County Laois, only a couple metres away, while Milford was crowned county champion. The club would win only another Championship, in 1933, the year Carlow GAA insisted that Milford's yellow was added to the green and red county colours. It is possible, however, that this happened originally in 1926, because a register from 1931 describes the Carlow colours as 'red, green and yellow hoop'.

### **Offaly**

Tullamore GAA Club originally played in red and green but changed to green, white and gold in 1917 in honour of the 1916 Easter Rising. During and after the uprising a number of tricolours were used that had a stripe in yellow (gold) instead of orange. In the early 1920s the Tullamore club allowed County Offaly to play in their colours while they in turn switched to blue and white, the same colours used today.<sup>3</sup> A less credible source states that Offaly won a competition and as a result was given the right to play in these colours.

Note on the use of yellow (gold), the Irish government's official National Flag guide mentions that: 'down to modern times yellow has occasionally been used instead of orange, but by this substitution the fundamental symbolism is destroyed'. Although today the use of yellow (gold) on flags is a rarity, after 1916 it was frequent, despite what the government states. The first documented use of a tricolour (horizontal) with a yellow stripe is from an 1883 watercolour presented to Charles Stewart Parnell.<sup>4</sup> If one observes the symbols and imagery used by Irish people at this time, one will notice that many are in

<sup>3</sup> Records of Offaly GAA, Fonds OHS46, Offaly History website, <https://www.offalyarchives.com/index.php/records-of-offaly-gaa> [accessed 2 September 2022].

<sup>4</sup> G.A. Hayes-McCoy, *A History of Irish Flags from Earliest Times* (Dublin: Academy Press, 1979), p. 196.





green and yellow (gold) colours. Despite what many people would like to believe, the replacement of orange with yellow (gold), has less to do with Catholicism and the Vatican colours and more with the golden harp and sunburst symbol used and promoted by the Irish nationalists, the Fenians. Therefore it is more down to a combination of ignorance and preference for yellow (gold) coloured Irish symbols, rather than some overt hatred for Protestantism. The debate between orange and yellow in Ireland has not differed greatly from the debate between orange and red in the Netherlands. Interestingly, both countries officially defined their flags in 1937: Ireland via Article 7 of the Constitution; the Netherlands via Royal Decree.



*Origins of the Offaly colours: left, flags of the 1916 Easter Rising; right, badge of Tullamore GAA, 1917*



*Origins of the Offaly colours: top to bottom, left, flag of Tullamore GAA, 1917, Irish sunburst flag, Offaly GAA colours; right, Irish harp flag, Papal flag*

### Cork

Originally Cork played in blue and yellow. In 1919, during the Irish War of Independence, British soldiers raided the headquarters of the GAA Cork County board and stole the team's jerseys. This happened a short while before Cork was to play Tipperary in the Munster Championships. As the team had nothing to wear, they borrowed the red and white jerseys of Father O'Leary's Temperance Association team which was newly defunct after its incorporation

into St Finbarr's GAA club. After Cork went on a winning streak, the jerseys were considered lucky and were officially adopted in 1922, albeit in a lighter shade of red. Interestingly, the arms of Cork City feature two red towers and a ship with white sails on white waves, meaning that the livery colours of Cork City can be 'red and white'.

### Further/other origins

A number of county colours have interesting alleged origins that are worth investigation. The table below provides a quick overview:

County	Origins	Explanation
Antrim	Textile colours	Traditional saffron-dyed linen
Donegal	Landscape colours	Green mountains and golden beaches
Galway	Sailboat colours	Traditional maroon sails of a Galway Hooker, a local fishing boat
Mayo	Tree colours	Green foliage and red berries of a yew
Tyrone	Livery colours	Red Hand of O'Neill
Dublin	Livery colours (part)	Dublin arms (navy replaced white 1974)

### Antrim origins

It seems that Antrim took its colours from the Seagan An Diomais GAA Club in 1910, the year the club won the County Championship and then unexpectedly closed. Not much more is currently known and further research is needed.

The colours 'saffron and white' are most likely taken from traditional saffron-dyed linen. This Irish tradition goes back to at least the twelfth century and was a symbol of status and kingship.<sup>5</sup>

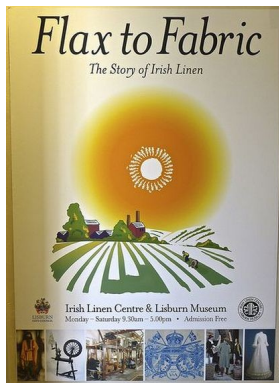
The town of Lisburn in southern Antrim is considered the birthplace of Ireland's linen industry. The industry was established in 1698 by Huguenot refugees who had just fled from France. By the early 1900s, Northern Ireland was a world leader in the production of linen. These origins can be compared to Lithuania, which was also famous for linen production and whose flag was based on the most commonly used three colours in traditional Lithuanian textiles.<sup>6</sup>



*Origin of the Antrim colours: left, traditional saffron-dyed linen; right, Antrim GAA colours*

<sup>5</sup> Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum, 'The Story of Irish Linen: Flax to Fabric', <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/exhibit/dAJSPGdTeZMGlg> [accessed 26 June 2017].

<sup>6</sup> I. Zdanavičiūtė, V. Milašius, J. Katunskis, 'The Peculiarities of the Ornamentation of Lithuanian Traditional Woven Textiles', *Fibres and Textiles in Eastern Europe*, 14, no. 2 (April-June 2006), [http://www.fibtex.lodz.pl/56\\_12\\_37.pdf](http://www.fibtex.lodz.pl/56_12_37.pdf)

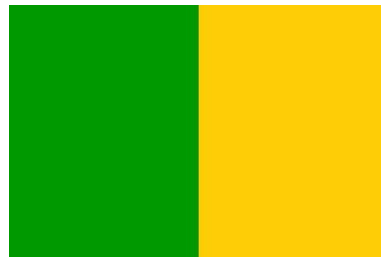


*Origin of the Antrim colours: left, Lisburn Linen Museum; right, flag of Lithuania and traditional textile patterns*

### Donegal origins

The county colours 'green and gold' derive most likely from Donegal's lush green mountains and golden sandy beaches. There is no documentation to show when the colours were adopted but many people including the Donegal GAA County board accept this theory.

Although a later association is possible, the study of vexillology shows that many national and regional flags have historically been inspired by landscapes. This connection between landscapes and flags has been coined by the author as 'flagscapes'. A worthy comparison in this case is the flag of the Bahamas, which is based on the golden sandy beaches of the islands and the surrounding blue Atlantic Ocean.



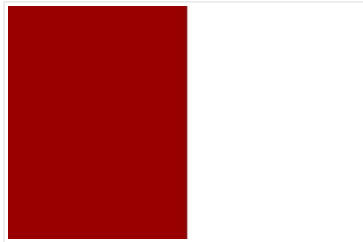
*Origin of the Donegal colours: left, green mountains and golden beaches; right, Donegal GAA colours*



*Origin of the Donegal colours: left, Donegal GAA badge; right, the Bahamas flagscape*

### Galway origins

The county colours, 'maroon and white', are most likely taken from the Galway Hooker, a traditional fishing boat in the Galway Bay region, which has traditionally used sails in what can be described as a maroon, rusty-red or brown-red colour. The Galway Hooker is a common symbol that appears on the arms of Galway City Council, Galway County Council, Galway GAA emblems and many more. These origins can be compared to Qatar whose maroon-coloured flag reflects the traditional dye used in the region.<sup>7</sup>



*Origin of the Galway colours: left, the red sails of a Galway Hooker; right, Galway colours*



*Origin of the Galway colours: left, Galway GAA badge; right, Qatari traditional dyed fabric*

### Mayo origins

The 'green and red' are taken from Carnacon GAA Club, but it is not clear when Mayo began playing in those colours. The earliest mention of the colours dates from 1887, when the *Connaught Telegraph* reported: 'On Sunday, 23rd inst., the above teams met in a field in the Towerhill Demesne. The ground was very tastefully marked out, the Green above the Red – the Towerhill motto, waving gracefully all round, the same badge worn by the guards, with strong wire enclosing the whole area.'<sup>8</sup>

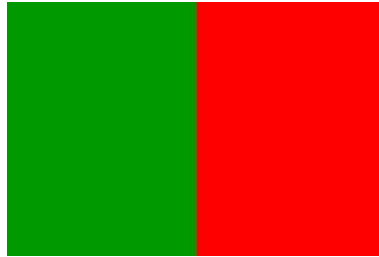
Colonel Maurice Blake was a patron of Carnacon, and the local matches were played at Towerhill, his personal estate.

One source states that the colours were combined intentionally in order to symbolise Catholics and Protestants (green and red) in a similar manner to the Irish tricolour. Another source states that the colour combination and order was based on the poem 'Green above the Red' by the famous Protestant Irish

<sup>7</sup> 'The Qatari Flag: A Symbol of Pride and Dignity', Qatar Foundation, 10 December 2015, <https://www.qf.org.qa/media-center/the-qatari-flag-a-symbol-of-pride-and-dignity> [accessed 2 September 2022].

<sup>8</sup> *Connaught Telegraph*, 26 December 1887.

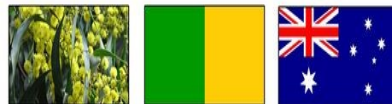
nationalist poet Thomas Davis. Green for the Irish, needless to say, and red for the British.



*Origin of the Mayo colours: left, foliage and fruit of a yew tree (*Taxus baccata*); right, Mayo colours (*Mhaigh Eo* means 'Plain of the yew trees')*

However, it is highly possible that the colours 'green and red' derive from the green foliage and red berries of the yew tree (*Taxus baccata*). The name Mayo comes from the Irish *Mhaigh Eo*, meaning 'plain of the yew trees', an association highlighted on the arms of Mayo County Council and Mayo GAA.

Historically, the yew is an incredibly sacred tree that has enjoyed high status in Ireland since pre-Christian times. For this reason, it is easy to see why this revered tree would be the basis for the Mayo colours. These origins can be compared to the sporting and national colours of Australia whose 'green and gold' are based on Australia's national flower, the golden wattle (*Acacia pycnantha*).<sup>9</sup>



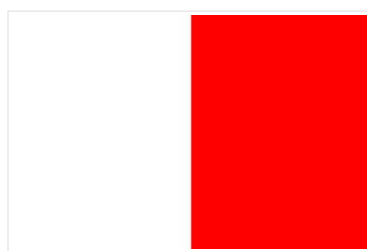
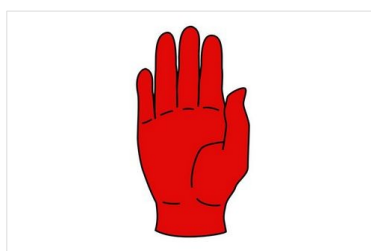
*Origin of the Mayo colours: left, Mayo GAA badge; right, Australian sporting teams use the green and gold of the wattle*

### **Tyrone origins**

The county colours, 'white and red', are mostly likely taken from the 'Red Hand of O'Neill', a symbol adopted by the O'Neill family. The town of Dungannon in the east of the county was the family's historical base and acted as a capital of Ulster for a long time.

In fact, the name Tyrone comes from the Irish *Tír Eoghain*, meaning 'Land of Eoghan' and refers to King Eógán Mac Néill.

<sup>9</sup> 'Floral Emblems of Australia: Golden Wattle', Australian National Botanic Gardens website, <http://www.anbg.gov.au/emblems/aust.emblem.html> [accessed 24 June 2017].



*Origin of the Tyrone colours: top to bottom, left, Red Hand of O'Neill, O'Neill seal above the Tyrone GAA badge, Polish national colours and arms; right, Tyrone livery colours; textiles for the 400th anniversary of O'Neill's death, 2016*

## Dublin

Dublin County Board Minutes report a meeting in Dublin on 15 April 1913, which decided that light blue and white colours would be adopted and registered.<sup>10</sup> No explanation was given but we can assume that they are the livery colours of the Dublin city coat of arms – three white castles on a blue field (Azure, three towers argent). At the start of the 1974 Championships, it was decided that light blue did not contrast well with white on black and white TV and as a result white was replaced with navy. The idea came from Paula Lee, then secretary of the GAA Dublin County Board.<sup>11</sup>

## Use of county colours

The main colours on a coat of arms have been used traditionally as livery colours to produce flags. Livery colours are quite common in Europe and at least 16 countries have national flags that are essentially livery colours. These include France, Andorra, Spain, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, San Marino, Vatican City, Malta and Monaco. In Germany and Austria, many regional arms have produced

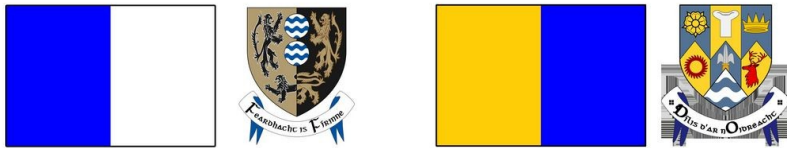
<sup>10</sup> Dublin County Board Minute Books (Senior) 1896-1980, GAA/DUB/01, Croke Park Museum, <https://crokepark.ie/getattachment/44530f06-6d2e-4ed8-960d-c2f86fd55432/Dublin-County-Board-Minute-Books,-1896-1980.aspx> [accessed 24 June 2017].

<sup>11</sup> Ryan Nugent, 'How Paula came up with city's famous blue and navy shirt', *Irish Herald*, 14 September 2015, <http://www.herald.ie/news/how-paula-came-up-with-citys-famous-blue-and-navy-shirt-31523238.html> [accessed 22 June 2017].

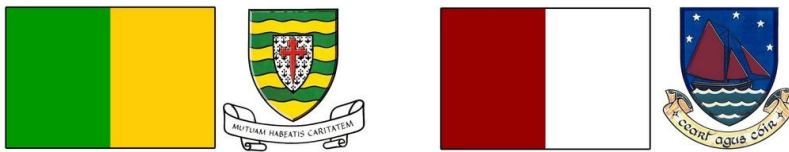
essentially 'county colours' called *Landesfarben* or, in Switzerland, *Standesfarben*. This European tradition of livery colours has manifested itself in a rather different way in Ireland. Most county colours have been incorporated in various ways into the arms of their respective counties.

### County colours on Irish county arms

The majority of county arms were granted after the adoption of county colours. Due to the important role played by the GAA across the country, the arms of 21 county councils have intentionally incorporated the county colours. In many cases the incorporation of the colours is obvious, while in others it is more subtle. Still, the colours often carry several meanings, like the arms of Cavan, whose wavy blue and white lines also represent the many hills and lakes in what is commonly known as 'Lakeland County'. Interestingly, Louth is the only county without a legitimate excuse for not using its county colours.



Left, Cavan (1979); right, Clare (1985)



Left, Donegal (1974); right, Galway (1993)



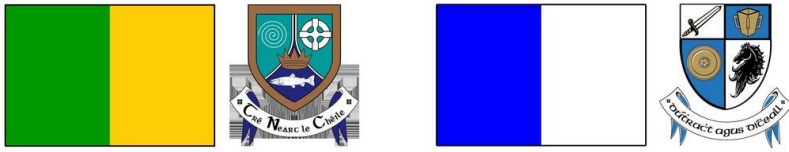
Left, Kerry (1984); right, Laois (1998)



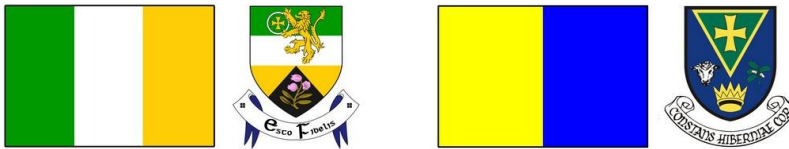
Left, Leitrim (1981); right, Limerick (1976)



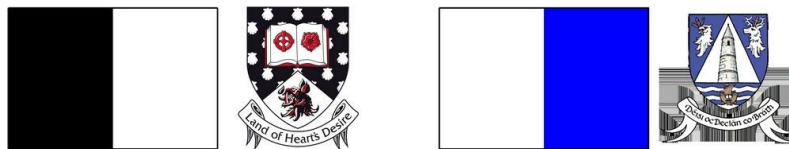
Left, Longford (1988); right, Mayo (1981)



Left, Meath (1988); right, Monaghan (1984)



Left, Offaly (1983); right, Roscommon (1961)



Left, Sligo (1983); right, Waterford (1987)



Left, Westmeath (1968); right, Wexford (1988)

### County colours on Irish municipal arms

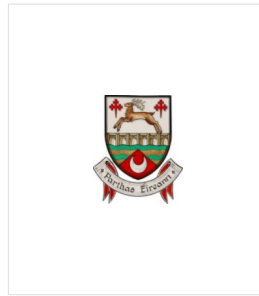
County colours have also been incorporated into municipal arms.

A prime example is County Donegal, where the county colours of gold and green have been intentionally used in the arms of towns including Ballyshannon (1980), Letterkenny (1982), Bundorna (1983) and Buncrana (1989).



Left, Ballyshannon; right, Letterkenny





Left, Bundorna; right, Buncrana

### Other uses of county colours

The use of county colours amongst companies and organisations has become increasingly evident. Some examples include the Tipperary colours on the label of Cooleeneyfarm cheese, the flag of Carlow on the advertising of Ballon Free Range Eggs, and the Mayo colours on a banner used by the trade union SIPTU during a protest.



Other uses of county colours:  
above left, Tipperary; above right,  
Mayo; left, Carlow

### County council flag research

The 31 local authorities in the Republic of Ireland provide another area for the documentation and study of county flags.

As part of the research, all these authorities were visited, called or emailed, singly or in combination.

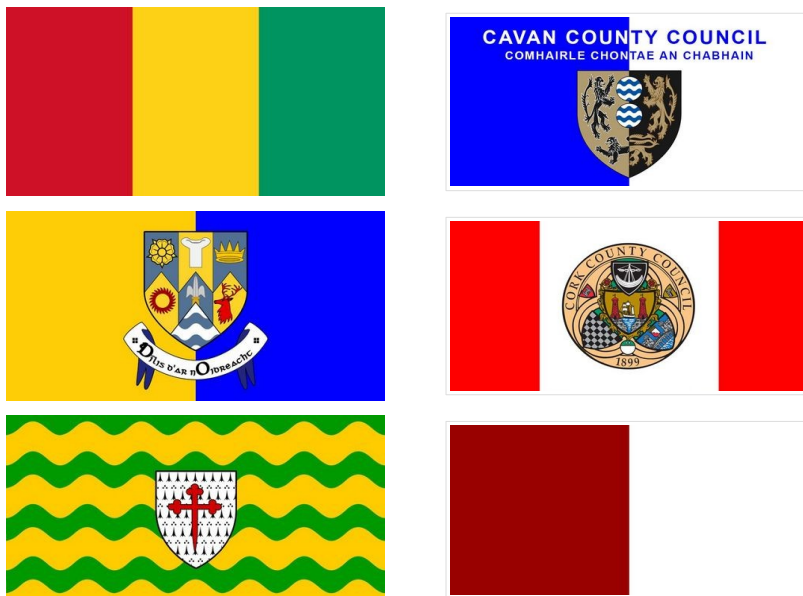
Photographs of council flags were collected from every authority. For presentation purposes, vector images were created from the photographs specifically for this paper.

Note that only 25 councils are listed below as the only ones with corresponding county colours. In other words, Dublin is the only county not listed below:



County council	Description
Carlow	County colours
Cavan	County colours + text + arms
Clare	County colours + arms
Cork	County colours (Canadian Pale) + seal
Donegal	Heraldic banner
Galway	County colours
Kerry	County colours + arms
Kildare	Heraldic banner
Kilkenny	County colours + text + arms (County + City)
Laois	Background colour + arms
Leitrim	Background colour + arms
Limerick	Background colour + logo
Longford	County colours + arms
Louth	County colours + arms
Mayo	County colours + arms
Meath	Background colour + arms
Monaghan	Background colour + arms
Offaly	County colours
Roscommon	Background colour + logo (small arms in bottom corner)
Sligo	County colours + arms
Tipperary	County colours
Waterford	County colours
Westmeath	Background colour + arms
Wexford	County colours + arms
Wicklow	Heraldic banner

All the flags listed above are usually displayed inside the council chamber alongside the Irish tricolour and, in most cases, an EU flag. They are usually also used for launches and as backdrops for official photographs. Sometimes they are flown outside the County Hall but this varies according to the council.



County council flags: top to bottom, left, Carlow, Clare, Donegal; right, Cavan, Cork, Galway



County council flags: top to bottom, left, Kerry, Kilkenny, Leitrim; right, Kildare, Laois, Limerick



County council flags: top to bottom, left, Louth, Meath, Offaly; right, Mayo, Monaghan, Roscommon

### Conclusion of council flag research

The study has shown that the use of council flags is complex and varied. Every county council seems to decide when and what flag to use. The individual councils would be better advised to adopt a proper flag protocol that would standardise the design and use of their flags. It is recommended that under no circumstances should a logo be used on a white sheet as is the case of Limerick and Roscommon. A county council is not a company and a flag is not a newspaper. Therefore a council should use a flag that can officially represent the county through the county colours and simple graphic symbols derived from the official county arms.

### Colour research

Interestingly, certain counties use specific descriptions for their colours. Different shades of yellow, for example, carry different names. Kerry, Meath, Leitrim, Donegal, Longford, Wexford and Wicklow describe it as gold; Antrim and Clare as saffron; Roscommon as primrose; and Carlow as simply yellow.

### Colour frequency

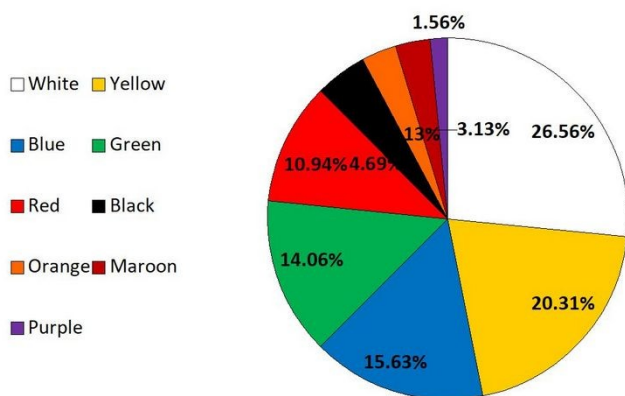
As part of this paper, a study was conducted amongst the 32 county colours to determine the frequency of colour use. The table below shows the results:

Colour	Number	Percentage
White	17	53.125
Yellow	13	40.625
Blue	10	31.25
Green	9	28.125
Red	7	21.875
Black	3	9.375
Orange	2	6.25
Maroon	2	6.25
Purple	1	3.125

Note that Kilkenny describes one of its colours as 'amber', which in theory lies between yellow and orange.

In practice, however, Kilkenny flags and jerseys are a lot more orange than yellow. For this reason the county was placed alongside Armagh in the orange category.

A pie chart below provides better graphics:



County flags: colour frequency

Amongst the national flags of the world, tricolours are the most common, while the most common colour is red, followed by white and then blue.

Amongst county flags in Ireland, bicolours are the most common, with white as the most common colour, followed by yellow and then blue.

White shorts were standard for GAA teams for a long time and as a result white was included in many of the county colours.



Place	Most used type	Most used colour (1)	Most used colour (2)	Most used colour (3)
National flags (world)	Tricolour	Red	White	Blue
County flags (Ireland)	Bicolour	White	Yellow	Blue

### Colour groups

To best understand the use of colours by the various counties, it is useful to sort them into groups. The list below provides some information:

Colour combination	Counties	Total
Blue and yellow	Tipperary, Clare, Wicklow, Longford, Roscommon	5
Green and yellow	Donegal, Leitrim, Meath, Kerry	4
Red and white	Cork, Louth, Tyrone, Derry	4
Blue and white	Cavan, Laois, Monaghan, Waterford	4
Maroon and white	Galway, Westmeath	2

Note that although the colours of Tyrone are 'white and red' and the colours of Cork are 'red and white' they have been placed in the same group. The same method applies to other cases.

### Conclusion

Irish sports and flags have a lot in common and both share the same contradictory nature of being unique as well as normal. The Irish historian Paul Rouse very eloquently described the history and place of Irish sport in his recent book *Sport & Ireland: A History*:

History has shaped modern Irish sport in ways that are many and complex. There are aspects of Ireland's sporting history that are uniquely Irish and are defined by the peculiarities of a small island on the edge of Europe, where life was lived in the shadow cast by the power and prestige of its nearest neighbour. What is equally apparent, however, is that the Irish sporting world is unique only in parts; there is much of the history of Irish sport that is a shared history with that of other societies, near and far.<sup>12</sup>

While the Irish should be somewhat ashamed and embarrassed that they still have not adopted official county flags, they should also be happy and proud that their county colours have become engrained in their local identities to a degree that many boasting official flags could only dream of.

It is one thing for a region to have an official flag, but another for it to be recognised, identified with and loved. Though each Irish county varies in terms of its recognition of and identification with its colours, the social connections that exist are strong enough to be recognised, studied and most of all appreciated.

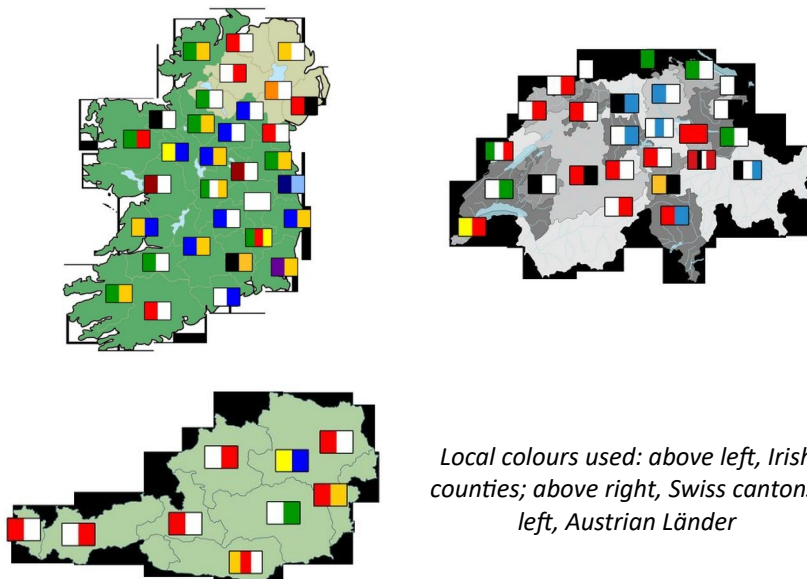
<sup>12</sup> P. Rouse, *Sport and Ireland: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 1.



*'Mayo colours' used by sports fans: top to bottom, left, Bangladesh, Maldives, County Mayo; right, Burkina Faso, Portugal, Morocco*

The research has shown the part played by sport, flags and colours in establishing and fostering identities.

At first glance, Ireland might seem strange in its use of regional flags, but upon inspection, it becomes clear that this small island on the edge of Europe belongs to the wider world of flags.



*Local colours used: above left, Irish counties; above right, Swiss cantons; left, Austrian Länder*



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