

FLAG ETIQUETTE
FOR
THE NEW MILLENNIUM

**A SIMPLE GUIDE TO THE EVERY DAY USE OF FLAGS
IN A MODERN YACHT
(Including its Registration)**

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The Author.

Richard Yeoward was born in 1936. His first sailing was in a pram strapped to the mast so it can truly be said that he was sailing before he could walk. His family were ship owners since the early part of the seventeenth century, sailing out of Whitehaven and then, a little village by “The Lyver Pool”. His grandfather and father saw the family's ships through two world wars, being strict on the etiquette displayed by their masters. As Commodore of the Royal Anglesey Yacht Club, his father insisted that the few moments of remembrance as ensigns were lowered “at the going down of the sun”, was the smallest thank you due to those who made the ultimate sacrifice for the freedom of the seas that we enjoy today.

It was not therefore surprising that, after forty years of membership of the ancient Royal Dee Yacht Club, his son, on becoming Commodore in 1998, agreed to produce this booklet. Richard, as an international sportsman, Patron of The HMS Wren Association, a member of the Royal Institute of Navigation, a Freeman of the City of London and The Guild of Air Pilots and Navigators, as well as an Instructor for and an Advisor to, the Royal Yachting Association, believed that you should put back into life all you had been privileged to have had from it. He insists that, whilst the law is to be obeyed, the use of flags in modern yachts should be kept simple, understandable and enjoyable. It is perhaps the many explanations and asides that add to the interest and set this booklet apart.

It has been published in full by the Cruising Association, quoted from by Macmillan’s Yachtsman’s Handbook, Reed’s Maritime Flags, and British Flags & Emblems by Graham Bartram, Chief Vexillologist of The Flag Institute, it has already become the authority to which many people, including Yachting’s Governing Body and the Ministry of Defence (Navy) turn.

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Foreword

Standard is defined as the “accepted example of something against which others are judged”. It is no surprise that the same word has passed into the English language to describe that most precious of all symbols, our flags. Getting flags right is literally a matter of standards.

I commend this book as a very good guide to maritime manners.

Robin Sjoberg, Sail Cruising Manager,
The Royal Yachting Association. 2000.

Flag Etiquette for The New Millennium.

“The easiest way to a proud vessel is with smart flags and their courteous use.”

Introduction. Too many yachtsmen today have been put off *wearing* their colours and *flying* their flags for fear of “doing something wrong”. It is my hope that this little booklet will give yachtsmen sufficient confidence to enable them to use their flags with pleasure and pride. Its small size clearly indicates how little need be known, certainly as far as everyday use is concerned. Whilst originally written for the young, it is not confined to them.

Registering your yacht. After buying your vessel she must be registered before leaving UK waters. Best to do so straight way! (See **Appendix A**). This will be your introduction to your first and most important flag, **The Ensign**, the flag of your Register, your protection. No other flag may replace this, ever!

“Obscuring the identity of a British ship” is a very serious offence.

Flag Etiquette consists of:-

The written Law. (See above).

The unwritten Law. (Tradition).

Good Manners.

With a little thought, common sense will often guide one away from any action that could cause offence.

Obviously *the breaking of the law* will never be condoned.

NB. Ref the Merchant Shipping Act 1995, The Geneva Conference of The High Seas 1956 and UNCLOS (U.N Convention of the Law of the Sea).

Flags. Flags may be Land Flags or Sea Flags. They differ in shape. There is more wind at sea so longer flags will fly.

Sea Flags consist of:-

Ensigns (explained above). Their use is also governed by National & International law. Traditionally they are measured “by the yard”, rectangular in shape, and usually with a ratio of 2:1. Being the Flag

of the Registry, they belong to The Vessel and not The Owner. The National Maritime Ensign of the British Register is “*The Red Ensign of Her Majesty’s Fleet*”. The wearing of any other flag as an ensign, except “A Privileged Ensign”, (see below), breaks both International and National Law and disgraces the flag being misused.

NB 1. The Union Flag (Union Jack), the Crosses of St. George, St. Andrew, St. Patrick and the Welsh Dragon are normally “Land Flags”. Their use on land is encouraged but they should **not** be flown at sea. It has however become a practice for owners who wish to signal their own nationality to fly these flags from the port spreaders from where the practice would cause the least offence. They should never be larger than the other flags on the same hoist. Their use in this way is not condoned by the author.

Exceptions:- The Union Flag is reserved “to the Sovereign’s own Ships”. It is also used within a Pilot or Merchant Jack. The St. George's Cross is the flag of an Admiral thus precluding its use by others.

NB 2. No English, Scottish, Welsh nor European Register exists at present !!

Special Ensigns:- Certain “*Privileged Clubs*” have a “*Warrant*”, issued now by the Ministry of Defence, to use an Ensign of special design. ALL the laws applying to the National Ensign apply to these Special Ensigns plus additional conditions, some of the State and some of the Club. It follows that a Special Ensign may never be worn without its “Club Burgee”. (21 clubs share the same ensign!)

NB 1. About 80 warranted Clubs in UK today share 55 ensigns. White 1, Blue 21, Blue with badge 45 (5 share), Red with badge 12 (2 share), RAF 1.

NB 2. A Special Ensign should not be worn if it may cause confusion. The Use of “The Red Duster” is never wrong for a British Registered Ship.

Burgee:- Triangular in shape denoting the Club Membership of the owner/skipper of the vessel. Its use is controlled by the Club. This should normally be his senior (oldest) club if he is a member of more than one. He may however, out of courtesy, choose another one at a Club Regatta or special occasion of a more junior club, provided he is not a Flag Officer of the senior one. (but see Members Flags, below.)

NB 1. Only one Burgee at a time is permitted . (But see Members Flags.)

NB 2. A Burgee MUST match any Special Ensign worn.

NB 3. A Burgee belongs to the club. It is therefore NOT equivalent to a naval *Commissioning Pennant* and is NOT left up at night but lowered at “Colours”.

Broad Pennants:- Are “Swallow Tailed” in shape. They denote a “Flag Officer”. Their use is similar to the Club Burgee except that it is the only flag that remains flying in harbour at night. (For the reasons for this see “When to wear Colours” below.)

NB 1. It is considered very impolite not to “salute” (“doff your hat to”) any Sovereign or their representative, or your own Flag Officers. (See saluting)

NB 2. ALL warships are considered representatives of their sovereign or state. If in convoy only the senior is saluted.

NB 3. Flag Officers are content that this be only the first meeting of the day.

Admiral’s & Past Flag Officer’s Flags:- These are similar to their “Broad Pennants” but rectangular in shape. Their rules of use are the same as The Club Burgee.

NB. These Flags are usually the same as Members Flags. (It is their position that defines them. (See Position of your flags below.)

Pilot or Merchant Jacks:- May be used on a “jack staff” at the bow of a vessel within harbour or at anchor. They are Union flags surrounded by a white border, though vessels connected with merchant shipping houses traditionally use their own “House Flags”.

Racing Pennants:- A rectangular flag that replaces the Club Burgee whilst a vessel is subject to the Racing Rules. Sadly now not often used, so a vessel racing is more difficult to recognise and steer clear of. They denote the owner of the vessel.

NB. Colours (Ensigns, Burgees etc.) are never worn whilst racing.

House & Members Flags:- Through antiquity, some of the former, have attached to them their own traditions and importance. They should be rectangular but some are not. They are The Flag of the owner or senior yachtsman on board. Members Flags are usually rectangular versions of their Burgees. (like Past Flag Officer's Flags.)

NB 1. Masthead means Past Flag Officer. Port Spreader indicates membership of a club under whose Burgee the vessel is not being sailed.

NB 2. Lloyds Register sadly stopped recording House Flags in 1979. Great care needs to be taken that any new flag does not infringe an existing design.

Courtesy Flags:- Are a signal (see positioning of flags). "I acknowledge your sovereignty of these waters & claim protection from the Geneva Conference of The High Seas". For most countries, unlike the UK, it will be a small replica of their National Maritime Flag. They *should* be lowered at the same time as your own Colours but here common-sense dictates.

EG. A Flag Officer who felt that offence might be taken if his Courtesy Flag was lowered whilst his Broad Pennant remained, would not be wrong to leave it flying.

NB 1. A small replica of another club's Burgee may be flown at your signal station as a *courtesy* to it on any special occasion of that club.

NB 2. It is also appropriate to fly a courtesy flag when visiting British Overseas Territories (i.e. Gibraltar), and Crown Dependencies (i.e. The Isle of Man).

NB 3 It follows that the custom of flying a second regional courtesy flag is incongruous. If it is done great offence would be taken if the regional flag is flown superior to the national flag. Best to avoid other country's squabbles.

The position of your Flags. Lets keep it simple. For example on a single masted sloop the seniority is:-

- 1/ The stern is for Ensigns. (In modern yachts the *Taff Rail*) **NB 1.**
- 2/ The Masthead for Burgees. (& their substitutes) **NB 2.**
- 3/ The Starboard Spreaders Keep clear for Signals. **NB 4.**
- 4/ The Port spreaders for "vanity flags" (All else except Jacks etc.)

NB 1. A ketch or yawl, finding the boom fouled whilst sailing, should choose the next nearest position. The head of the mizzen mast is usually preferable to the peak or leech of the mizzen sail due to the difficulty of saluting. It is lazy to leave it there when sailing finishes. Beware! The Burgee should always be higher than the Ensign!

NB 2. It is not acceptable to use the starboard spreaders for Burgees because you cannot fly another flag superior to it. You must not insult a foreign country by flying any flag on the same halyard above their National Flag!!

This is easily achieved if remembered when you plan your masthead.

NB 3. You may fly more than one flag on the same *hoist*. Careful of the seniority, especially on the port spreaders. (Usually Royal before non Royal then by age). Flags on the same halyard should be of the same size.

NB 4. If you fly other flags here, then who, at a distance, will recognise you are signalling? (see Signalling)

When to wear Colours:- The Colours of a vessel should be worn, whilst at sea, at all times (unless racing). When at anchor or in harbour they should be worn as follows:-

Between November 1st and February 14th, from 0900 hr to Sunset.
For the rest of the year from 0800 hr to 2100 hr. All local time.

Courtesy requires that the timing is taken as per the list below. To rush to strike your Ensign before a naval vessel or the Flag Officer of a Royal Club nearby, would be very impolite:-

Firstly from a vessel of The Royal Navy or a Naval Shore establishment.

Failing that, from the senior Royal Yacht Club at your port.

Failing that, from the Senior Flag Officer present. *

Failing all of the above, from the ship's clock.

* How is the Flag Officer recognised? Here is the reason that Broad Pennants are the only flags flown at night (unless at sea) and always at the masthead. There is often no wind in the early morning to show their shape, so all other flags are removed and the masthead gives the broad pennant its best chance to fly and its shape to be seen.

NB 1. Sunrise & Sunset always override the times above e.g. at the latitude of Liverpool it will be between about August 5th and May 13th.

NB 2. Flags left up are soon faded, tatty & disgrace you. No Sir! Pepys was not “penny pinching”. He was trying to keep the Royal Navy Smart!

NB 3. All vessels striking Colours together “At the going down of the sun” can be a very moving moment. A moment to remember those who gave their all in the service of The Flag so we may enjoy the freedom of the sea that we do today.

NB 4. These rules apply to ALL Ensigns, (Including The Red!)

Dressing Ship. There are two ways of dressing ship.

1. With Masthead Flags done when under way.
2. Over all (Rainbow Fashion) only when not under way.

Dressing with Masthead Flags the flags flown are:-

The Ensign + Ensigns of the same size repeated at each mast head + your Burgee alongside the ensign at the mainmast. (**But see NB 4**)

For Foreign Festivals, one masthead ensign is replaced by the relevant national maritime flag. (The mainmast on single masted vessels. The second mast if more than one.)

Dressing Over All the flags flown are:-

Flags as above adding dressing lines as prescribed below:-

Vessels should dress ship on:-

6th Feb. Accession Day. 21st Apr. The Queen's Birthday.

2nd Jun. Coronation Day. Commonwealth Day.

The Queen's Official Birthday (usually the 2nd Sat. June).

10th Jun. The Duke of Edinburgh's Birthday.

All Club Regattas and as directed by a Flag Officer

NB 1. Plus others of less importance subject to change. (See the Internet)

NB 2. Vessels only dress ship when in or near a harbour or anchorage.

NB 3. There is no official order for dressing flags but the following has come into use and is recommended. Symmetry looks smart:-

From Bow to Stern E,Q,p3,G,p8,Z,p4,W,p6,P,p1,I,Code,T,Y,B,X,1st

sub, H, 3rd sub,D,F, 2nd sub,U,A,O,

M,R,p2,J,p0,N,p9,K,p7,V,P5,L,C,S.

In a single masted vessel the divide at the masthead would be between 3rd sub & D. In a twin masted vessel Y to O should be between the masts.

NB 4. This order would normally be made up for you by any reputable flag maker. It is important that the size of flag fits your vessel and they are spaced correctly to fill the dressing lines. (See NB 9)

NB 5. Flag Officers fly only their Broad Pennants at the mainmast. For a foreign festival a Flag Officer replaces his courtesy Flag at the starboard spreaders, if present, with the appropriate foreign ensign. (Size as masthead)

NB 6. At Local & Club Regattas the Burgee only is flown at the Mainmast.

NB 7. Owners may wish to dress ship for any special private occasion and to follow the example of local vessels when away from their home port.

NB 8. St. George's Day, St. Patrick's Day and St. David's are celebrated within the relevant parts of the United Kingdom only.

NB 9. On small yachts the spinnaker & main halyards can serve for dressing.

NB 10 Your Ensign always denotes your Registry. It is never replaced

Mourning:-

For **National Mourning** The Ensign and any Jack are "Halfmasted" until the next time for striking Colours only.

For **Private Mourning** within The Club, The Club Burgee is "Halfmasted" as well.

NB 1 It is important to remember that a flag is always hoisted "close up" (fully up) on raising and lowering before & after being placed at halfmast.

NB 2 Except on the death of the Sovereign, flags are not halfmasted again until the day of the funeral when they are raised immediately after the burial.

Saluting:- ("doffing your cap") is carried out by "dipping" the Ensign only, to a position 1/3 of the way up the ensign staff. There it remains until the saluted vessel dips in acknowledgement. (Or, Heaven forbid, passes out of sight without seeing you!)

Salutes by canon (or suitable sound) may be fired on special occasions as follows:-

A Royal Salute is 21 guns. Commodore 11. Vice 9. Rear 7 guns.

Signalling:- Is still important (& can be fun):- The DSC alert & distress call are over in moments & then you need to be free to work. Will the rescue services know the casualty is you? Will a chance passerby know you are in trouble? The orange smoke & red flares are finished quickly too but a flag keeps flying so:-

Anchor Ball + flag (Circle + rectangle) A striking visible signal when made from the starboard spreader. “SOS”.

Flag N above C has the same meaning. “Distress”. These stay visible & leave you free to work!

Flag Q. “The quarantine flag”. “My ship is healthy. I require free pratique”.

Flag O. “I have a man overboard”

Flag Y. “I am dragging my anchor”

Flag P. The Blue Peter. “Come out of the pub, we are off”.

(Perhaps a new Weather Report,? Local information about a Tidal Gate?)

Flag V. “I require assistance.” (I am not in legal "distress")

Flag W. “I require a doctor”.

Flag U. “You are running into danger”

Or simply **Flag U above V.** “I wish you a pleasant voyage”.

NB. An upside down ensign is **NOT** one of the **15 legal distress signals** & what a silly place to signal from? You could shout by the time anyone notices. There is normally a flag there & it is far too low for a signal.

Fly Signals from your starboard spreaders & they will be noticed!

(You too can notice others!)

Your Signal Station is no place for Burgees nor worse, “Fantasy flags”.

Size of Flags:- Take the greatest care with the size and condition of all Flags. There is nothing more insulting than to wear a faded or tattered Ensign or Courtesy Flag nor one so large that it hangs in the water and cannot be dipped. To fly a flag that is too small to be seen is hardly polite! A light racing yacht and a heavy beamy cruiser of the same

L.O.A. may not look “well dressed” with flags of identical size. A guide for an ensign used to be an inch per foot but in modern yachts this is often found to be a little on the small side.

Use this table as a rough guide only (Feet & inches):-

LOA Ft.	Ensign	Burgee & Courtesy	House	Jacks	Signals
21 - 26	¾ yd	12”	12 x 8	21 x 14	11 x 7
27 - 34	1 yd	15”	15 x 10	27 x 18	15 x 10
35 - 42	1 ¼ yd	18”	18 x 12	30 x 20	18 x 12
43 - 50	1 ½ yd	24”	24 x 15	40 x 27	21 x 14
51- 60	1 ¾ yd	30”	30 x 20	48 x 32	30 x 20

Terms:-

The Hoist is the part nearest the halyard. The Fly means the opposite.

The Cantons. A Flag may also be divided into four. The Upper & Lower Inner Canton and The Upper & Lower Outer Canton.

Dressing Lines are the lines on which your code flags are arranged when dressing overall. (As these are not used whilst sailing, a small yacht will often use her own halyards to hoist these lines.)

NB. On a multi-spreader sloop, consider the higher spreaders. The upper of three are probably too small and the lowest too low, but flags on the centre ones may look just fine. These higher spreaders will stand a slightly larger flag. Remember Flags, especially signals, are to be seen!

An Example of The Flags of a Privileged Yacht Club

(The ancient Royal Dee Yacht Club, founded 1815)

“The Club Flag shall be The Blue Ensign of The Sovereign’s Fleet with a Crown over a Wolf’s Head erased, lower half gules, thereon agreeably to the Admiralty Warrant.”

Prior to 1847 the Burgee was “White with a red anchor”

To mark the occasion of The Queen’s Golden Jubilee in 2002, the Admiralty authorised “the regularisation” of the Ensign: “That the Wolf’s tongue be red”



The Ensign (1847).



Burgee (1847)



Commodore



Vice-Commodore



Rear-Commodore



Honorary Commodore



Past Commodore or Club member *

* Past Commodore only when flown at the mainmast head.

NB. Unlikely to be seen as a “Members Flag” due to the antiquity of this club.

Treat your flags with great respect, they set “the standard” but don’t take it all too seriously. We sail our yachts for pleasure. Flags should add to it.

“Dress your ship with pride. It is her heritage and her right.”

RPY January 2012.

An example of the conditions for wearing a “Privileged club’s” Colours.

1. An original, current “Permit to Fly” is on board the yacht. Permits will be issued by the Club under the authority of its Warrant only where:-

a/ The Application Form has been completed and forwarded to the Honorary Secretary along with the prescribed fee.

b/ The vessel is a British Registered yacht. (See Registration)

c/ Her registered length is at least that prescribed by The Club. (Min 7m).

d/ The owners must be British Subjects and current members of the Yacht Club. (But see NB 1 & 2.)

e/ The vessel is not a houseboat nor used for any commercial purpose whatsoever. (But see NB 3.)

f/ Her name does not incorporate a name, product or trademark used for business purposes.

2. The following conditions are complied with:-

a/ At least one of the owners named in the Permit is on board the yacht or in effective control. (See NB 4.)

b/ The Club Burgee shall be flown from the Main masthead at all times other than:-

i. In harbour or anchored, at night. (When only broad pennants are flown.)

ii. When racing. (From the preparatory signal to finishing or retiring.)

iii. The traditions of courtesy require another Burgee to be flown. (see NB 5)

NB 1. Under certain circumstances this does not preclude the owner being a limited company.

NB 2. Under certain circumstances the Flag Officers of the club may authorise the issue of a permit where a part owner is not a member. (But see 2. above.)

NB 3. The Flag Officers may not disqualify a yacht that is occasionally let out on charter but in such a case permission must be given in writing & the current permit returned to the Club during the charter.

NB 4. Effective control means close enough to see that the obligations attached to the Ensign are carried out. e.g.. Times for raising or striking The Colours are observed. The crew has been instructed in the saluting of Naval vessels and Flag Officers etc.. A Club is unlikely to consider that a vessel left unattended satisfied these conditions nor if the designated owner had left the vicinity of the anchorage or marina.

NB 5. Tradition requires good manners and common sense. It would be permissible to fly the Burgee of another club to which the owner is also a member whilst he was a Flag Officer of that Club or on its special occasions or regatta days whilst in its immediate vicinity. (The Burgee **MUST ALWAYS** match the ensign being worn.)

Chronology.

1606 Cross of St. George & Saltire of St Andrew combined in “The British Flag”.

1627 Fleet divided into Red, Blue & White squadrons. Ensigns retained the English or Scottish flag in canton.

1634 The use of The Union Flag is restricted “to The King’s Ships”.

1660 The Monarchy restored. The 1634 restriction confirmed by the Lord High Admiral. This remains in force to this day.

1702 The White ensign defaced with a red cross to avoid confusion with the French in the smoke of battle.

1707 Union with Scotland. The Union Flag placed in the canton of all three Ensigns. The birth of the modern ensign.

1800 Union with Ireland. The Union Flag is redesigned to take its present form. (Proclamation 1801.) From now on it becomes possible to fly it “upside down”.

1805 Nelson as Vice Admiral of White Squadron decreed that all the ships would fight under it. NB. The National Ensign is the Red and purists might say that its use today by The Royal Navy is merely “dormant”.

1864 The squadronal system ceased. All RN vessels started using the White Ensign. Other government vessels the Blue and civil vessels the Red.

1894 Effort made to stamp out illegal use of unwarranted ensigns.

1902 The terms “Union Flag” or “Union Jack” were both declared correct.

1908 The Government (Lord Howe) confirmed that The National Flag, The Union Jack, may be flown on land by *any* of His Majesty’s subjects.

1927 General Yacht Club Warrants withdrawn. Royal Dee & Royal Windermere left off Naval List in error!

1952 “Privileged Ensign List” closed. (In practice not completely.)

1985 General yacht club warrants re-issued. Royal Dee & Royal Windermere were missing off list due to the error of 1927.

1992 The Royal Yachting Association granted an ensign warrant (defaced Red). Uniquely “an Official Use” Ensign.

Royal Windermere's omission from list corrected. Ensign shared with Royal St. George. (Defaced Red.) The original warrant was "by 1893".

1997 Royal Dee's omission from the list corrected.

2001 The bicentenary of the Union Flag in its present form.

2002 Royal Dee's Wolf's tongue changes to red to mark HMQ's Golden Jubilee

2007 The Tercentenary of the modern Ensign.

(Based on information from "The Colours of The Fleet" by Captain Malcolm Farrow RN.)

Appendix A

The Registration of a British Yacht.

Must I Register my yacht to wear The Red Ensign? No. It is not compulsory to Register a British yacht whilst it remains in British waters. Virtually every other sovereignty does require their vessels to be registered wherever they are, so it is far better to register your yacht now and gain the protection of The British Registry from the start. (See Ensigns page 3) NB Dover to the French border is only 10nm!

The rules regarding registration are long & complicated depending whether you choose the Part 1 or Part 111 Register of The UK or The Isle of Man, The Isle of Guernsey or The Isle of Jersey. All are Part of The British Registry entitling you to the protection of The Red Ensign. There are minor differences only. For example The Part 1 Manx Registry is still for Life and The State of Jersey register for 10 years and still produce a nice hard backed book instead of a laminated sheet.

All the details can be easily found on the Internet and The Royal Yachting Association provides guidance. Here we will simply cover the simplest form:-

The Part III (Small Ships Registry or SSR) of The UK.

How do I register my new yacht on this SSR? Obtain a form from:- The Register of Shipping & Seaman. PO Box 420, Cardiff CF24 5XR. Tel: 02920448800. (Check the Internet for updates)

This Registration is valid all round the world provided the vessel is not being used for commercial purposes. (Some states consider chartering Commercial). It is available to:- Any vessel of 24m or less that is not a fishing vessel (nor a submersible) nor owned by a company. ALL owners must be British Citizens “Ordinarily Resident in the UK”. (Others may be eligible. Contact The Registry). **NB.** Ordinarily Resident usually means if you are a UK Resident for tax purposes.

SSR Registration is cheap (£10 as of now) **and simple**. It is renewable every 5 years but ceases immediately on sale or any change of registered details.

NB. You may not use SSR if you need to register a marine mortgage.

So now you own a “British Flagged Vessel” and are protected by The Geneva Convention of The High Seas 1956 from other countries forcing their regulations on you. You must carry your original Registration Documents with you and **Wear The Flag of your Registry** & obviously **fully comply with its regulations.**

So back to “Flag Etiquette” page 3.