

FLAG DESIGN A FLAG INSTITUTE GUIDE

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illustrated by Jack Verhoeven

The purpose of this booklet is to lay down a few guidelines that might be followed by those on the verge of adopting a new flag for themselves, their society, college, school, local authority, or company, and to help them through the trouble-strewn process of turning their ideas for symbols and colours into everything that a good flag should be.

Flags are one of the best forms of display there are: conspicuous, always on the move, raised above the hurly-burly of the streets and - above all - colourful.

They are worth taking seriously, and like all good displays, worth thinking out in advance.

The Flag Institute, 13 Union Walk, Chester CH1 3LF, England.

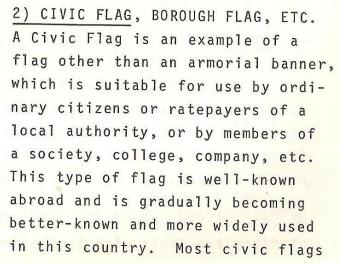
SECTION 1 DIFFERENT SORTS OF FLAGS

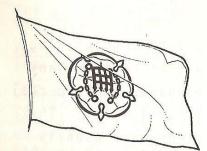
Flags appear to come in all shapes and sizes, but in fact have different shapes and designs according to their functions. The following are a few basic definitions:



1) ARMORIAL BANNER

This is the shield from a coat of arms made up as a flag. They can be any shape, but are most often square. An armorial banner can only be used in the same circumstances as a coat of arms, and by the person, society, company or authority to which the arms were granted. Anyone or any body which has a coat of arms can make an armorial banner from the shield.



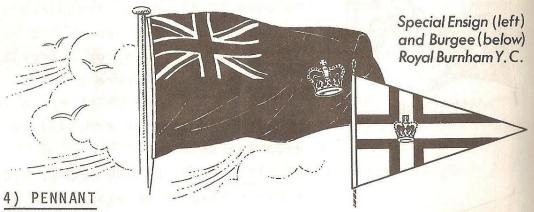


Richmond upon Thames

have backgrounds in the 'livery colours' (see page 4) of the Council's arms, surmounted by a Badge or other local emblem.

3) ENSIGN

Today an Ensign is a flag used at sea or on inland waters as a mark of nationality. The United Kingdom has a special ensign for private vessels, the Red Ensign, but many yacht clubs, which have special warrants, use special designs, consisting of the Red or Blue Ensigns with a badge in the fly.



A Pennant is usually represented as a triangular flag, although not all triangular flags are pennants. Many modern car flags are described as pennants, for no real reason, and strictly a pennant is a naval flag. The flags of yacht clubs (not their ensigns) are usually called burgees, and may be triangular or rectangular.

Some of the more technical terms for flags and parts of flags are dealt with in Section 6 on page 15.

SECTION 2 COLOURS

In a coat of arms the colours of a shield and its charges, and of the accessories, are chosen because they have a particular significance or purpose, not just because they look nice. Our national colours of red, white and blue, are known to everyone, and the same could be true of the 'house' colours of a company or a club, or those of a local authority. The colours used in the flags of such organisations should also have a special significance and not be chosen at random. They should in fact be part of the symbolism of the flag.

The following are some suggestions about the derivation of colours:

For a local authority or other public body with its own coat of arms, the 'livery colours' of the Arms.

For a school:

The colours of the school Badge or Arms - these are often those used for the school tie and/or sporting colours,

For a sporting club: The playing colours would be the obvious choice,

For a commercial company:
The 'house colours' as used in advertising,

For a yacht-club:

If based on a particular port, the livery colours of the town's Arms would be appropriate, or if based on some other institution the colours of that body if any are traditionally used.

In these examples the colours in themselves convey a message of significance to anyone at all familiar with flag-language.

2a LIVERY COLOURS

In heraldry the Livery Colours are usually the first 'colour' and the first 'metal' mentioned in the Herald's description (or blazon) of the coat of arms.

In heraldic language a'colour' is one of the following: Red, Blue, Green, Black and Purple. 'Metal' means gold, representing Yellow, and silver, representing White.

In a coat of arms which has a mantling this is often coloured in the livery colours. Some individuals and corporations have traditional or specially granted livery colours which are not those of their arms.



On the Continent livery colours are three or four fold: this is because they are taken to be <u>all</u> the colours of a coat of arms. For example, the livery colours of Belgium are red, yellow and black, because the national arms consist of a <u>gold</u> lion, with <u>red</u> claws and tongue on a <u>black</u> field. This development has a parallel in British Universities and Colleges, where the students' scarves and sporting colours are striped in all the colours of the institution's arms. Simple livery colours however are twofold, of which one colour in nearly always white or yellow.

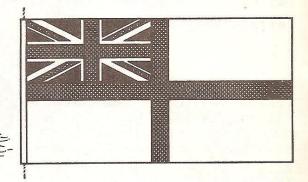
2b 'RULE OF TINCTURE'

This heraldic rule says that a 'colour' must not be laid next to a 'colour' or a 'metal' next to a 'metal'. This is a good rule because it prevents Arms, and even more importantly, flags, from being hard to distinguish visually. There are two extremes to avoid: having two dark colours next to each other, e.g. blue and green, black and blue, red and purple, etc., and having two light colours adjacent, e.g. yellow and white. In modern times a new colour has crept into flag design, and which is scarcely known in heraldry; this is light blue, or 'azure blue' as in the RAF Ensign. Heraldic colours do not have specified shades, leaving this to the artist's or depicter's discretion, but blue is nearly always a strong intermediate blue. Heraldry also makes little use of other special shades, such as pink, orange, or crimson, although these can be effectively used in flags. azure blue. RAF Ensign

Pale colours, such as the light blue mentioned above are particualarly unsuited for the background, or field,

of a flag, since they do not offer sufficient contrast to whatever charge they may be bearing, and show up poorly in a strong light. In general the background of flags should be in colours with some significance, not plain colours chosen at random, and if they are the problem of visual effectiveness will often solve itself. Light or pale colours are also unsuitable for the edging of a flag or for the fly end, due to their tendency to 'disappear' against the bright light of the sky. This would be especially important at sea where a flag with a white, pale yellow, pale blue or pale green background or edging would not be very distinctive. This is illustrated in the history of our own Royal Naval Ensign, which began life as a plain white flag with a small red cross in the corner:

Naval Ensign, 17th C. (White Squadron) and below, present day



In the course of time the cross was extended to cover the whole field, so that the white background would contrast more effectively with the red arms of the cross.

SECTION 3 CHARGES

The objects placed on a flag need to be simple, distinctive, meaningful, easy to see, especially when the flag is moving in the wind, memorable, large and well-placed. Flags should not, if at all possible, be charged with words, letters, numbers, or mottoes, nor with shields, or whole coats of arms.

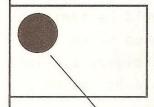
Simple: because they cost less to make and can thus be made in quantity. The function of a flag, as opposed to that of an armorial banner or standard, is enhanced by its being used in many places or by many people simultaneously. Hence the flag needs to be cheap and easy to make.

Easy to 'read': A flag is a medium of communication. In conveying a message the medium must interfere as little as possible. Whilst a flag can and should be admired for its aesthetic value, its communication value is diminished if an ordinary person with ordinary eyesight cannot make out what the symbols and colours are on a flag at the top of a flagstaff.

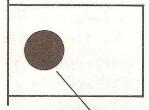
Distinctive: Because if the symbols of one flag are too much like those of another it will not be easy to 'read'. This is another reason why coats of arms do not make good charges on a flag, except for large flags carried on the ground. When designing a flag the designer should try to hit upon a design which shouts out immediately to the observer that it is yours and yours alone.

Memorable: One of the functions of flags is to remain as part of the visual vocabulary of an observant person, so that they will be easily recognised again, perhaps in an emergency. The ceremony of Trooping the Colour was originally intended to show the regimental flags to the common soldier so that he would recognise them in battle. Whilst the need for memorability is perhaps not quite so urgent today, a flag becomes useless if doomed to a life of perpetual unrecognition Large: Small emblems are hard to make out on a flag at the top of a flagstaff. Far too many flags are designed on the drawing board without thought for what they will look like in the actual bunting, and hence have far too much small detail.

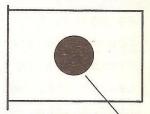
Well-placed: The three best places for an emblem on a flag are:-







in the hoist

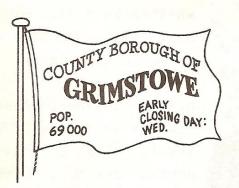


in the centre

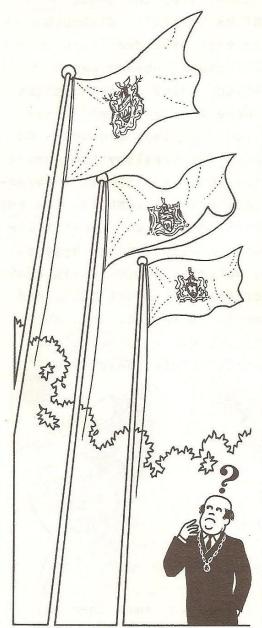
The fly-half of a flag is a very bad place, because that is the part which moves most when the flag is flying, and thus the part which is most likely to be obscured. It is also the part which wears out soonest. (See also notes on ('honour-scale', page 12).

Meaningful: Any and every emblem placed on a flag should have been carefully chosen for its significance

and should not be there just to fill up the space. The symbols on a flag need not be heraldic, although the most successful ones often are: provided it is not too complicated almost any natural object can be used as a basis for a flag-emblem. Many modern designs favour stylised motifs, and these too can be effective. No words, letters, numbers: because flags are not a medium of written communication. Like heraldry they are a complete alternative to written messages. Their information is conveyed by means of colours and symbols. The reason for this is a practical one: colours and symbols are easier to make out when a flag is flying in the breeze or a shield is jerking on its wearer's arm. But in addition, symbols can express succinctly abstract ideas and ideals to which it is much easier to relate. harder it would be to identify oneself with or relate oneself to a shield or flag which merely conveyed a written message:-



Symbols convey more in a few effective lines than any amount of writing, and the use of words or letters is



a confession of failure on the part of the designer, that he has not been able to find those few effective lines.

No shields or achievements
of Arms: There is only one
effective way of making a
coat of arms into a flag,
and that is the Armorial Banner. The uses and occasions
for an armorial banner are
strictly limited however.
It does not get round the
problem to put the whole coat
of arms on meaningless plain
background, because the Arms,
whether on a flag or not
must follow the same heraldic
rules as the banner.

However the most important reasons why coats of arms should not be used as flagemblems are to do with the points enumerated above: they are not simple, not easy

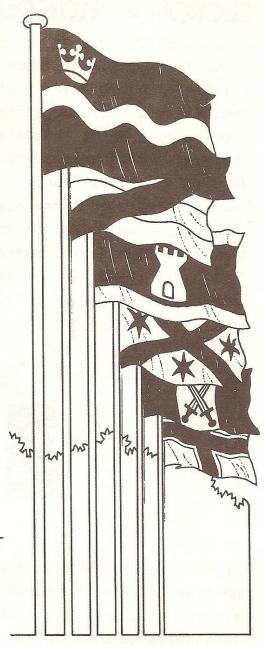
to 'read', not distinctive, and not memorable.

They are often not large either - mere dots in the centre of flags up in the sky over a town hall.

Although every coat of arms is dear and unique to its owner, to an outsider a reference book may be necessary if he has to distinguish between a set of flags charged with rather similar-looking coats of arms: (left)

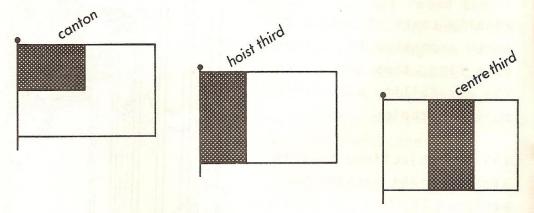
Finally coats of arms are often expensive to reproduce on a flag, thus curtailing the possibility of using multiple copies.

All the objectives in this section might perhaps be achieved if flags were designed with an eye to their use in practice, rather than their appearance as sketched on the back of an envelope.



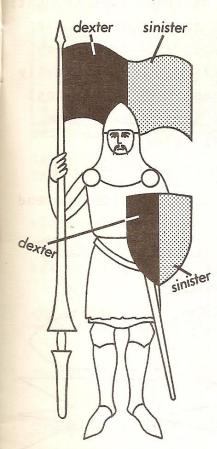
SECTION 4 HONOUR-SCALE

As on a shield a flag has areas where charges and divisions have a higher status than in others. The two chiefly honourable areas of a shield are the top (the 'chief') and the centre (the 'honour-point'), and the 'dexter' side of the shield is also more honourable than the 'sinister' (see also page13). In a flag a corresponding rule applies. Honourableness increases as you go nearer the top edge and nearer the flagstaff. The flagstaff side (or 'hoist') is the equivalent of the 'dexter' side of a shield. Therefore the most honourable area is the top corner of the hoist, known as the 'canton', followed by the hoist third of the flag, and then the centre third:



This is another reason why it is inadvisable to place emblems in other positions. If a flag is charged with two emblems, the one in the less honourable position is assumed to be inferior in status.

4a 'DEXTER/SINISTER' 'RIGHT/LEFT'

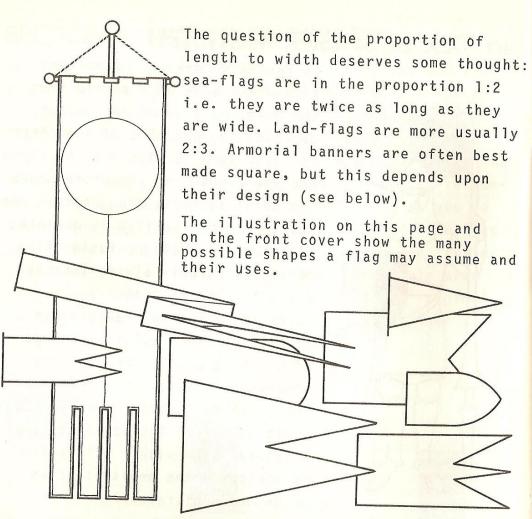


In heraldry 'dexter' means the right-hand side of a shield from the point of view of the person carrying it, not that of the observer. The same is also true of flags, and the right-hand therefore means the hoist side-the side nearest the staff-however the flag is depicted on paper. To avoid confusion flag depictions nearly always include a staff or hoist rope.

It is important to bear this in mind if birds or animals form part of the flag design. Because the right-hand side is more honourable the beast must face the hoist, just as it must face the dexter side of a shield. Otherwise - with a few exceptions - the beast is shown as being in disfavour!

SECTION 5 SHAPES

The shapes of flags largely depend upon their functions and their uses. Flags flown at sea are usually longer than those flown on land, because winds are stronger and can spread them out better. Long vertical flags are suitable for display where there is not much wind at all.



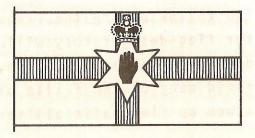
5a DESIGN OF ARMORIAL BANNERS

The shape of an armorial banner should depend chiefly upon the design. Some designs fit best into a square field (or even a vertical oblong, as was common in the Middle Ages) and others into a horizontal oblong. But this oblong should never be more than 2:3 in proportion

of width to length. The following illustration should make this clear:

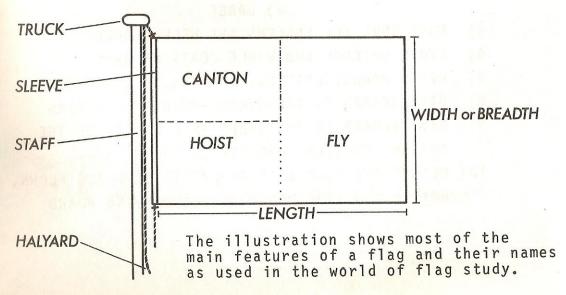


ARMORIAL BANNER
This design, with its many
horizontal lines has been
elongated to a ludicrous
degree, and would be much
better on a square flag.



ARMORIAL BANNER
This design, with mixed horizontal and vertical lines has been successfully accommodated into an oblong flag for general use, but would be even better in 2:3.

SECTION 6 TECHNICAL TERMS



SECTION 7 SUMMARY

The following are the Flag Institute's Golden Rules for flag-design: they will not guarantee you a successful do-it-yourself flag-design, but they will help you to avoid many of the futile mistakes that can be seen stuck up flagstaffs all too frequently today:

- 1) MAKE THE COLOURS MEANINGFUL
- 2) MAKE THE COLOURS EASY TO DISTINGUISH AND CONTRASTING.
- 3) MAKE THE CHARGES MEANINGFUL
- 4) MAKE THE CHARGES a) SIMPLE
 - b) EASY TO 'READ'
 - c) DISTINCTIVE
 - d) MEMORABLE
 - e) LARGE
- 5) MAKE SURE THE EMBLEMS ARE WELL-PLACED
- 6) AVOID SHIELDS AND WHOLE COATS OF ARMS
- 7) AVOID WORDS, LETTERS, NUMBERS, AND MOTTOES
- 8) HAVE REGARD TO THE HONOUR-POINTS OF A FLAG
- 9) HAVE REGARD TO THE SHAPE IN RELATION TO THE DESIGN/FUNCTION, AND USE OF THE FLAG
- 10) DESIGN THE FLAG WITH AN EYE TO IT BEING FLOWN, NOT TO ITS APPEARANCE ON THE DRAWING BOARD.

TAKING IT FURTHER

The above rules are intended partly to avoid the often heavy expenses which those who would fly flags might be faced with. Advice about manufacture, and addresses of manufacturers in this country and abroad, may be obtained from the Flag Institute.

The Flag Institute, which is a non-profit, independent institution for promoting greater understanding and use of flags, is also able to provide further advice and information on all aspects of flag design, etiquette, history, functions, and use, as well as on schemes for decorations involving the use of flags.

The Flag Institute
13 Union Walk, Chester CH1 3LF, England

