



FLAG ETIQUETTE A FORGOTTEN CUSTOM



Many yachtsmen today consider “Flag Etiquette” to be a form of snobbery only observed by Members of elite Yacht Clubs like the Royal Yacht Squadron and their ilk and of no real importance to normal yachtsmen in this modern era and may be disregarded.

Others however, consider that it is a tradition worth maintaining and thus are interested in following the rules. For the benefit of the latter group, here a few guidance points in the fine art of Flag Etiquette which should help in maintaining the tradition and to instil some pride and pleasure in the observance thereof. They have been gathered from various sources including the RYA, Macmillan Reeds nautical publications, Flags of the World website and one on my favourite old reference books - The Yachtsman’s Week-end Book by John Irving and Douglas Senior.

Flags commonly worn by a British yacht comprises an ensign, a burgee, a house flag and (if racing) a racing flag.

Flags are “worn” by a yacht and “flown” by the owner and comprise her suit of flags or “colours”.

The ensign is the principal flag on board, for British yachts it is the Red Ensign and is worn at the most senior position which is as close to the stern of the vessel as possible. The national ensign should be kept clean and in good repair.



A “privileged ensign” may be flown if the holder of a warrant to fly one is on board in which case the corresponding burgee must also be flown.



The Cruising Association



Royal Victoria Yacht Club



White Ensign

Privileged ensigns are usually blue and may be defaced or “emblazoned” with a heraldic device. They are granted to certain Clubs by the Secretary of State for Defence on behalf of H. M. The Queen. Red Ensigns are less common – examples likely to be seen around the Solent include the Royal Victoria Yacht Club and the Royal Lymington Yacht Club. White ensigns may only be flown by Members of the Royal Yacht Squadron. The privileged ensign may only be worn when the owner is on board or in the vicinity and the warrant must also be carried on board.



The burgee is flown at the next senior position which is the main masthead. Only one burgee may be flown on the yacht which must match the privileged ensign. It is now common practice to fly the burgee at the starboard spreaders; however, you must be aware that you may not fly any flag above your burgee at the same halyard.

Note: if the burgee is flown at the starboard spreaders and you are entering the territorial waters of another country, you have a dilemma. The starboard spreaders are used for signalling purposes so this is where both the country's national courtesy flag and the Q flag should be flown. You may not fly any other flag above a national courtesy flag on the same halyard. If your masthead is cluttered with a VHF aerial, wind indicator, trilight and other modern gadgets, the best way round this is to rig a second signal halyard at the starboard spreaders and avoid the conflict.



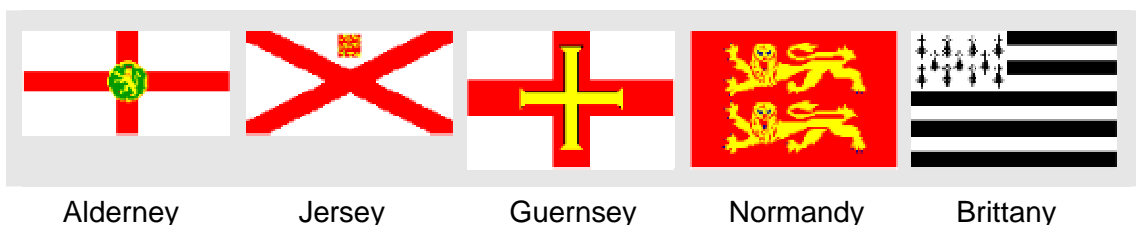
This picture shows a traditional yacht correctly wearing her colours of a blue ensign and corresponding burgee plus the French courtesy flag

Courtesy flags are normally the maritime flag of the country which in most cases will be that same as the National Flag (e.g. France, USA, Netherlands) others may be the National Flag defaced with a device (e.g. Italy, Finland, Morocco) and others may be a totally different flag (e.g. UK, Australia, New Zealand). If you are planning to visit a foreign country, find out the correct maritime flag from some of the sources shown at the end of this article.

House flags are flown at the port spreaders and serve to indicate membership of associations such as the RYA, a society, or membership of another club. Several house flags may be flown on the same halyard in which case they should be flown in order of seniority.

Flags such as St. George's Cross (for England), St. Andrew's Cross (for Scotland), and the Welsh Dragon etc. are land flags and must not be flown at sea as they may be confused for signals. E.g., St. Andrew's Cross could be mistaken for code flag M which means "my vessel is stopped and making no way" – St. Patrick's Cross could be misinterpreted as code flag V meaning "I require assistance" and St. George's Flag is the flag of an Admiral.

When visiting the Channel Islands, Normandy or Brittany it is a nice gesture to fly the local regional flag in the superior position on the starboard spreaders and will be appreciated by the inhabitants of those places. Note however, that when flying the Brittany or Normandy flags, these must be positioned below the French flag.



Ensigns are hoisted in harbour when colours are "made" – normally at 08:00 or at 09:00 between 1 November and 14 February or as soon after that time as people come aboard. The Ensign is lowered at sunset or at 21:00 local time if earlier or before that time if the crew is leaving the yacht.

At sea and under way, ensigns may be worn between sunrise and sunset when there is sufficient light to distinguish the flag. It must be worn when meeting other vessels, when entering or leaving foreign harbours by day or by night, or when approaching forts, signal stations or Coastguard stations.

If racing, the ensign should be hauled down and replaced by the racing flag after the five-minute signal and hoisted on finishing or when retiring from the race.

Yachts should salute all Royal Yachts and all warships of any nationality. A salute is made by dipping the ensign to a position two-thirds the way down the halyard from the close-up position. The vessel saluted responds by dipping her ensign then re-hoisting it. The saluting yacht then re-hoists her ensign. It is also customary for a Flag Officer to be saluted by a yacht flying the burgee of that club – once per day is usually sufficient!

The Union Flag often called the Union Jack should never be displayed from a yacht. It is the proper flag for any UK Citizen to fly on shore but with the exception of its use as a Jack in the Royal Navy, it is not a sea flag.

The Pilot Jack may be flown by those who wish to “show the flag” on a British registered yacht. It consists of the Union Flag surrounded by a white rectangular border and is used as follows:-

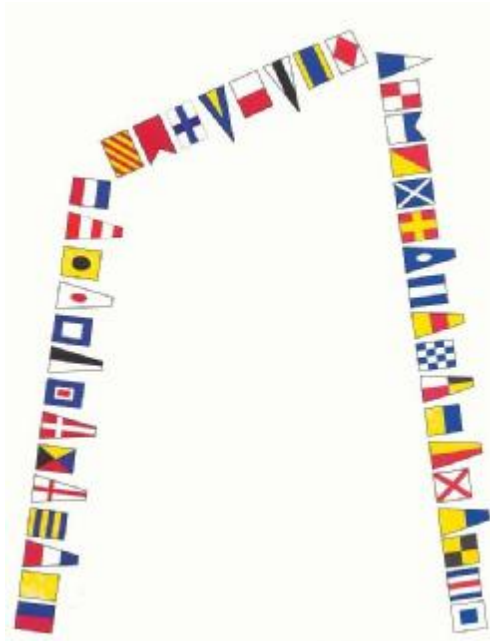


- as a stem-head jack in the bows
- an additional dressing-ship flag to be hung on a weighted line from the bowsprit
- as a signal for a pilot when hoisted at the fore

It must not be worn underway unless the yacht is dressed “over-all”. In harbour, it is hoisted and hauled down with the colours. It is never dipped in salute but may be half-masted together with the ensign on occasions of national mourning.

Yachts may “Dress Overall” in the UK on the following dates or on other special occasions such as Trafalgar Day, Navy Days, or in the presence of a Royal Standard or Flag of the Head of State or a foreign Sovereign.

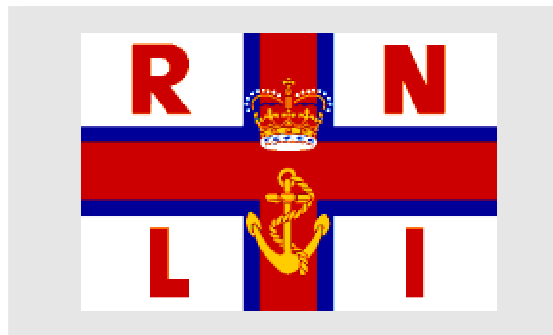
6th February	Accession Day
2nd Monday in March	Commonwealth Day
21st April	HM the Queen’s Actual Birthday
Saturday in June (ICW DCI's)	HM the Queen’s Official Birthday
2nd June	Coronation Day
10th June	The Duke of Edinburgh's Birthday



The order of the full set of 40 flags (from stem to stern) is as follows:

E, Q, p3, G, p8, Z, p4, W, p6, P, p1, 1Code, 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.

And finally.....here is a flag you should all recognise:



Give them your support by making a contribution to their funds – you never know when you might need their help and may be very relieved one day to see this flag.

You can buy one to fly as a house flag and lots of other useful items from their online shop at their website at: <http://www.rnlishop.org.uk/shop/webstore/home.asp>

Further information on this fascinating subject is available from:-

- Flags of the World website at: <http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/>
- RYA publication *Flag Etiquette & Visual Signal* Ref C4/01
- *Flag Etiquette for the New Millennium* by Richard Yeowood
- *British Flags and Emblems* by Graham Bartram
- Macmillan Reeds publication *Yachtsman's Handbook for sail and power*