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BRITISH NAVAL ENSIGNS.

BY W. G. PERRIN.

ALTHOUGH the custom of flying a flag betokening the nationality of the ship upon a flagstaff placed at the stern is of considerable antiquity, as shown by its frequent appearance in representations of ships in old seals, it does not seem to have become universal earlier than the beginning of the 17th century. Among the miscellanea collected by Pepys is a note referring to the reign of King Henry VIII.:—"Ships were then neither Flags, Ancients nor Jacks, only Streamers or Pendants upon their tops with square banners on the hulk as may be seen in those most excellent pictures." The "most excellent pictures" appear to have been those of Anthony Anthony, but the statement is further confirmed by a reference to the well-known picture of the embarkation of Henry at Dover in 1520.

In the reign of Queen Elizabeth the stern flag staff was probably fairly common, although Pine's reproductions of the contemporary tapestries, formerly in the House of Lords, representing the destruction of the Spanish Armada, show many ships and especially four masted ships without this fitting. In the "Naval Miscellany," Vol. I. (N.R.S. XX.), we have reproduced from the MS. of Sir William Slingsby, coloured diagrams of the flag ships which took part in the Expedition to Cadiz in 1596. Here again we have no representation of any stern flag staff, but we have what is probably the earliest representation of distinction flags of different colours for the different squadrons of a fleet. These flags, which were probably not flown by the private ships, are four in number :—

1. Red, white and blue in seven horizontal stripes.
2. White and blue in eight stripes, with red cross drawn quite through the flag.
3. White and green in eight stripes, with St. George's flag in canton.
4. White.

From the Pipe Accounts (Oppenheim Admin. of R.N., p. 183) we learn that four simpler flags were contemplated, viz., crimson, blue, white, and orange tawny. Why the more complicated flags were chosen does not appear.

It remains then to seek for the origin of the red, white and blue ensigns at some later date. This date is probably 1625, when an expedition was sent against Cadiz under Lord Wimbledon. On this occasion the fleet was divided into three squadrons distinguished by red, white and blue colours, which were ordered to be worn by the private ships as well as the flag ships. It is not clear from the wording of the order whether the flags were to be flown at the top-mastheads with the pendants or whether they were to be flown at the stern, but it seems probable that they were proper national ensigns and not merely plain coloured flags, for Mr. Corbett points out (N.R.S. XX., p. 29) that "from a serious quarrel that took place amongst the junior flag officers we know that the vice-admiral of the first or admiral's squadron then flew a red flag with a little white and St.

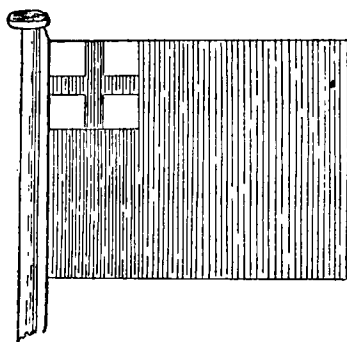


FIG. 1.

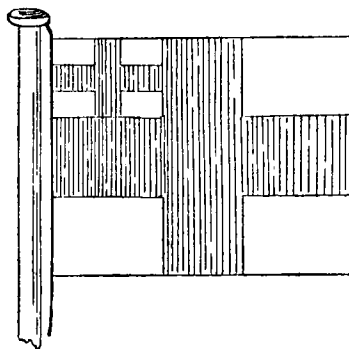


FIG. 2.

"George's Cross therein." This is clearly the red ensign as flown until 1707 (Fig. 1), though it is not certain that the blue and white flags also had the St. George in a canton.

Two years later the French captured a great many of our ensigns from the ill-managed expedition for the relief of Rochelle, and Sir John Laughton (R.U.S.I. Journal, Vol. 23, p. 123), draws attention to the fact that these flags are described by Malherbe. It is interesting to see what the poet has to say. He is describing in a letter to his cousin in December of that year the ceremonies connected with the deposit of the captured flags in Notre Dame, and describes the flags in the following words :— "Les drapeaux ont tous au bout d'en haut and au coin qui est vers le bois un morceau de taffetas blanc d'environ trois pieds en carré. En ce taffetas blanc il y a une croix rouge qui touche à toutes les quatre faces de carré." Unfortunately he does not state the ground colour of the flags, but presumably they were

of the three colours, for there was a good selection of them (44 in number), and we know (again from the encyclopædic Pepys) that the fleet was divided into red, blue and white squadrons, with two subsidiary ones distinguished by the St. George's and St. Andrew's flags.

During the Commonwealth the order of precedence, hitherto red, blue, white, was changed to red, white, blue, probably because, the Union with Scotland being dissolved, the colours of the national flag were now red and white only.

Towards the end of the 17th century, the Union occasionally replaced the St. George in the Red Ensign. We have evidence of this in a picture in the Board Room at the Admiralty, signed by Van de Velde and dated 1688. It represents a fleet at sea, and shows both forms of the red ensign, as also does a picture at Hampton Court by an unknown painter representing the landing of William of Orange. The use of this Union form is very obscure. We meet with it among the flags given in "The Present State of the Universe," published in 1701, where it is called the Bugee Flag. It was also flown in the form of a Jack, and is referred to by Pepys as "now familiarly used abroad," about 1687.

In 1702 we have what, in the light of later events, proved an important change in the White Ensign. I refer to the introduction of the St. George's Cross in the Fly. The first signs of a change appear in February, 1702, in an order from the Lord High Admiral to the Navy Board, regulating among other things the flags to be worn by the flagships fitting out at Chatham and Portsmouth. Here, curiously enough, the three flag officers of the White Squadron are directed to fly, not the customary white flag, but the Union Flag as their flag of command, while the ensigns were to have "the usual Cross in the Canton, with "this distinction, that a third part of the said ensignes for himself and the Flaggs and private ships of his Squadron are to be "white in the middle of the Flye and the rest redd and this to "be in the whole length of the Ensigne." In other words, the fly was to be red, white, red in three equal horizontal stripes.

In May this order was countermanded by the Lords High Admiral :—

"Whereas I did some time since direct in what manner the "Flaggs and Ensignes should be made for such ships as should "be appointed to be of the Squadron of the Admiral of the White, "and whereas upon consulting with the Flag Officers of the "Fleet it is thought more advisable that the said Flaggs and

"Ensignes should be rather made White with a large St. George's Cross, according to the sample herewith sent you, I do therefore hereby desire and direct you to cause all such of the said Flaggs and Ensignes as have already been made by your Orders to be altered, and that such as are still to be made be conformable to what is before directed."

We have in this order the origin of the present Admiral's flag of command and of an ensign of the design shown in the second diagram.

The reason for the change does not appear, but in default of any better explanation, we may suppose that as the prospect of war with France and Spain was imminent it was felt necessary to differentiate plainly the English white ensign from the French ensign, at that date a simple white flag. It should, however, be noted that in 1782 Howe, in order to avoid any mistake between the two ensigns, laid down in his Fighting Instructions, that "In action, all the ships in the fleet are to wear red ensigns." Similarly Nelson fought the Battle of the Nile under the White Ensign, because that was the most unlike the French tricolour, although he was then Rear-Admiral of the Blue. Anyhow, the change gave the flag contractor some trouble. Perhaps the breadth of the cross offended his artistic tastes, for he had several flags returned to be re-made with the cross its full width, "one-third of the flag at the head."

But this new form did not entirely supersede the old white ensign with plain fly, and both forms continued to be made even after the St. George had been displaced by the Union, and certainly as late as 1717, though the plain fly ensign had dropped out by 1744. Why the two forms should exist side by side it is somewhat difficult to understand, but the orders for stores and surveys of stocks show that it was so. The form with the cross in the fly appears to have been issued only to ships serving out of home waters.

In 1707, on the occasion of the Legislative Union with Scotland, the appearance of all the ensigns was changed by the substitution of the Union for the St. George in the canton. This was done, so far as the Royal Navy was concerned, by an Order of Queen Anne in Council dated 21st July, 1707. It is interesting to note that this Order in Council ignores the white and blue ensigns, simply establishing as Naval flags the Royal Standard, the Union, and "the Ensign directed by Her Majesty since the said Union of the Two Kingdoms" (*i.e.*, the Red Ensign), and the coloured "draughts" prepared by the

Heralds attached to the order show only these three. But no doubt the inferior ensigns were intended to be implicitly sanctioned in the superior, since the Lord High Admiral, in conveying the order to the Navy Board, instructed that body "to cause the several Ships and Vessels of the Royal Navy aforesaid to be with all possible dispatch furnished with Colours accordingly, and for the speedier and cheaper doing the same . . . to order St. George's cross to be taken out of all the ensigns, and a Union Jack Flagg put into them in the Roome thereof or to alter the said Colours in such other manner as you shall judge best for the Service." It was found that the Jacks in store were not of the same shape as the St. George canton, so finally all the ensigns were returned to the contractor "to be made Union."

Except for the slight alteration caused by the insertion of the Irish Saltire in the Union in 1801, the ensigns had now reached their final design as we know them to-day. We reach the final change in their use in 1864 when the three naval ensigns were parted among the three services, Naval, Civil and Mercantile, by Order in Council. The reason for this change is given in the Memorial to Council :—"The Flag Officers of the Fleet, whether Admirals, Vice-Admirals or Rear-Admirals, are classed in Squadrons of the Red, White and Blue, and are (with the exception of the Admiral of the Fleet) authorised to fly their Flags of the colour of the Squadron to which they belong, this regulation necessitating the adoption of ensigns and pendants of a corresponding colour in every ship and vessel employed under their orders, each vessel is therefore supplied with three sets of colours, and the frequent alterations that have to be made when the Fleet is distributed as at present, under the orders of many Flag Officers, is attended with much inconvenience from the uncertainty and expense which the system entails.

"The increased number and size of merchant steamships render it a matter of importance to distinguish on all occasions men-of-war and private ships by a distinctive flag; the latter vessels bearing at present the same Red Ensign as Your Majesty's Ships when employed under an Admiral of the Red Squadron. It also appears to us to be desirable to grant (under such conditions as we may from time to time impose) the use of a distinguishing flag to such ships of the Merchant Service as may be employed in the public service, whose Commanding Officer (with a given portion of the crew) may belong to the Royal Naval Reserve. We therefore most humbly submit that Your Majesty

“may be pleased by Your Order in Council to prescribe the dis-
“continuance of the division of Flag Officers into the Red, White
“and Blue Squadrons, and to order and direct that the White
“Ensign with its broad and narrow pendant be henceforward
“established and recognised as the colours of the Royal Naval
“Service, reserving the use of the Red and Blue colours for such
“special occasions as may appear to us or to officers in command
“of Fleets and Squadrons to require their adoption.”

Thus the principal ensign was abandoned to the Mercantile Marine, with which Service it had been shared in common for 200 years. The second was taken for the Navy and the third assigned to the Civil Departments of the Navy and of the State, and to the Naval Reserves with a reservation for “special occasions,” such as perhaps might arise in the event of war with any nation having an ensign resembling our present White Ensign. The great battles of 1st June, 1794, Nile, and Trafalgar, had shown that the divisional ensign was not necessary, and the force of circumstances had marked out the white form as that most convenient for retention.
