

## SECTION 7: General Information

### FLAG ETIQUETTE

(a personal representation by Jamie Campbell)

Various Merchant Shipping Acts threaten heinous penalties for misuse of our national flags but custom and practice is changing. Correct flag etiquette was considered an indication of form. Today, it's a bit like gentlemen not wearing brown shoes after 6.00 pm. No-one really minds anymore but it can to a degree enhance pride of ownership and provide an excuse for spending even more time in chandlers. Flags can be fun.

**The Club Burgee** An owner who is a member of more than one club should fly the burgee of the club in whose waters he is cruising at his masthead. A second (or more) club burgee(s) may be flown from the starboard yardarm – if the particular club rules permit. If the yacht is outside the home waters of any of the owner's clubs, then the flag and ensign of his senior club should be flown.

**Flag Officers** A Flag Officer's (usually) swallowtail burgee, together with the appropriate ensign should be flown in preference to any other burgee, in any waters. It is becoming an unofficial tradition in some clubs for past commodores to fly a plain, squared version of their club burgee.

**The Ensign** The Union Flag is a hotchpotch of graphics and carries the weight of empire. Flying it on a boat is technically illegal. Happily, most British yachts wear a red ensign with the union flag in an upper quarter, which looks magnificent and at least saves apologising for flying the union flag upside down. Properly, an ensign should only be flown without a burgee when the owner of the boat is not on board or "in effective control" (recurring flag etiquette jargon, taken to mean in the vicinity of his yacht – rather than on holiday in Spain). A special or defaced ensign may be flown on the authority of an Admiralty warrant; usually available, at a cost, to registered yachts and only via their relevant club. The defaced ensign should only be worn with the burgee of appropriate club at the mast head and again only when the owner is "in effective control".

Ensigns should not be flown on land, although an exception seems to be developing in favour of yacht club premises.

**The House Flag** An owner may fly his house flag from his starboard yardarm or from the port yardarm if the starboard is already in use. House flags are often used on the Broads as racing pennants. A yacht which retires from a race traditionally signalled her retirement by lowering her racing flag. Today raising an ensign is often used to signal retirement. This is an example of practice changing etiquette; an ensign should not be flown with a racing or house flag at the masthead but many modern yachts have either no ability to lower their racing flag or simply no racing flag. Racing flags should properly only be flown at the mast head before, during and immediately after completion of a race.

**A Pilot Jack** may be flown from a staff on the bow (or beneath a bowsprit), whilst registered yachts are at anchor.

**St. George's Flag** is now the preserve of Dunkirk Little Ships. In the heat of an international soccer tournament it is remarkable how many Broads hire craft turn out to have been at Dunkirk.

**Dressed overall** for private occasions – such as an Open regatta day. Yachts dressed overall make a wonderful spectacle and add to the atmosphere of any regatta. At the mast head the correct burgee with the appropriate ensign should be worn; if the yacht has two masts then it may fly a house flag at the mizzen truck. There is no single correct order for code flags used for dressing overall, but it is important to avoid any unintended signal through a particular sequence of flags and desirable to evenly space pendants. The order given here has been approved by the Admiralty and will avoid any confusion:

Bow to masthead: B, Q, U, 2nd Substitute, L, Numeral 8, T, P, Numeral 5, S, Numeral 9, X, Z, 3rd Substitute, R, Numeral 0, C, G, Answering Pendant, D.

Masthead to stern: W, Numeral 4, E, F, Numeral 7, N, Numeral 6, J, O, Numeral 3, H, Numeral 2, Y, M, Numeral 1, K, 1st Substitute, V, I, A.

On a national occasion, it becomes correct to fly an ensign at the masthead. If abroad it would be correct etiquette to fly the host country's ensign at the masthead when dressed overall for their national occasion but with our own ensign on the taffrail. The above should cover just about every occasion that a private owner is likely to meet. Should he be sufficiently privileged to own a schooner and entertain a visiting head of state at one of our national occasions, then it's time to buy a book on flag etiquette.

Some of the older clubs once published their own book of flag signals to be used between members. All gave up in favour of the international code of signals but it's probable that remarkably few of today's yachtsmen would be able to read them.

**Gin Pennant** As one of the offspring of a Second World War naval family, I clearly recall gin pennants. They were a green and white flag flown to indicate that father had opened the booze locker. It has to be said that some gin pennants didn't see much daylight and the last time I flew one, no-one recognised it. There are all manner of flags sold as gin pennants, some tastelessly featuring a *Babycham* glass. The real history took a bit of digging but the flag is an old

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naval code, starboard hand flag. They flew it on the port hand to indicate they were having a party.

***Hoisting and Lowering Times*** All flags should be lowered at sunset (but no later than 2100 whichever is the earlier), except the club burgee which should remain at the masthead for as long as the owner is in effective control. During summer time 0800 (or sunrise, whichever is the later) is the traditional time for hoisting flags and ensigns. Regattas used to fire a signal gun at these times, which usually signalled a scramble amongst those on board. Jack Holt's generation in the 1960s questioned everything, with a preconception that anything old was rubbish. We weren't right of course but there are great chunks of our

yachting heritage overlooked or just plain forgotten. Just as vexillology is part of your yachting inheritance, spare a thought for the humble club button. During the daytime, an owner would wear black 'horn' buttons on his reefer jacket. No badges; just the buttons and certainly a club tie (or tie pin on a black tie). Paid hands would have gilt club buttons on their uniform. A nice piece of etiquette, now largely gone the way of professional watermen. Things were different in the evening, when an owner would don his mess kit, adorned with gilt club buttons. Some clubs produced several pages defining their own mess kit. Nickel-plated club buttons were of course reserved for catering staff.