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Civic Flags of the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom is not a country rich in civic flags, and this reflects the general prevailing ignorance about the possibilities and significance of flags in our country. In the civic field we lag behind such flag-rich countries as the Netherlands and Germany, possibly because of the unusual system of local government in Britain, in which the local authorities have little real independence but many heavy administrative responsibilities, and possibly also because of the lack of guidance and leadership from the heraldic authorities.

These have busied themselves in the last few years in making sure that all local authorities possess splendid and elaborate coats of arms. In Britain all except the minor local councils are able to secure complete achievements of arms, including supporters, motto, helmet, and crest. Some examples are shown in figs. XI/1-6. At this point I must make clear a point which our own College of Heralds also insists upon. This is that the Arms granted by them to local authorities are granted to the Council only and not to the citizens of the city or county. This means in effect that the Arms are used mainly by the administrative officers of the Council, and are usually painted on all the corporation's buildings and equipment, although they can, by special licence, be used on souvenirs. To fill the gap caused by this ruling the Heralds have instituted the "Civic Badge," an accompaniment to the Arms which shares some of their features, but is not officially a coat of arms. Some examples are shown in figs. XI/7-9. The Badge can be used, also by licence, by any citizen, or group of citizens. It may also be used as a subsidiary emblem by the Council. The illustration in fig. XI/10 shows how the Badge can be used in a newspaper advertisement. In

Chester the badge is used by a number of local societies, including the football club and the sailing club. However the place of the badge as a subsidiary emblem for the use of the administration is rapidly being taken by such motifs as are shown in figs. XI/11-14. Most of these are designed, not by heralds, but by public relations officers, planners, or artists. Some are used, as in the case of the Counties of Cheshire and Wiltshire, despite the existence of Badges provided by the Heralds. Of the 186 cities and counties of England and Wales less than 30 have these Heraldic Badges.

To turn now to flag-usage, I wish to put before you information which was collected on behalf of the Heraldry Society Flag Section during the distribution of its handbook Civic Arms and Flags. This handbook on flag practice and regulations was accompanied by a questionnaire which went to all the major local authorities of England and Wales (Scotland was omitted from the circulation of the handbook on account of its heraldic independence). The questionnaire contained a simple series of questions about the type of flag employed by the Council, how and when it was used, etc.

The question about the "type" of flag was included because we already knew that some councils used armorial banners, i.e. flags with the shield of arms occupying the whole surface, and others used plain flags of a single colour containing a representation of the entire coat of arms (the entire achievement, as mentioned above). Those using a heraldic banner were those which had at some time come under the influence of the College of Heralds, and those using the plain-flag-with-arms were those which had used their own initiative, with disastrous results from our point of view. These poverty-stricken designs reflect the general depression into which English armory fell in the nineteenth century and from which it is only now slowly emerging.

138 replies were received from local authorities, and their flag-usage as reported falls into the following categories:—

Plain-flag-with-Arms	47
Armorial Banner	49
Other	13
None	29
	<u>138</u>

Of the Plain-flag-with-Arms, most were pale blue flags of rectangular shape. This colour is chosen, not so much by the Councils as by the flag-manufacturers, as being a meaningless but inoffensive background. Some are red, e.g. Grimsby and Northampton, one is dark blue (Devon), and one green (Dorset). Some are triangular ("pennants" as they are known in the trade), e.g. Bath, Merton. We had expected that a large number would contain the names of the local authorities, but in fact only two (Derby and Merton) did so.

The Armorial Banners fall into two categories, those in square shape and those oblong. The square shape is the one favoured by the College of Arms, and can be seen in the illustration of the flag of Blackpool (fig. XI/15). The oblong shape is, as can be seen in the flag of Redbridge (fig. XI/16) often unsuited to a coat of arms designed for a shield. This can also be seen in the flag of

Cornwall County Council, where the inescutcheon, originally shield-shaped, has become an elongated rectangle.

The 13 "Other Designs" are the ones which are most interesting, since they alone include examples of a breakthrough to the type of civic flag our Institute is anxious to promote.

Of these six employ the civic badges of the type described above, of which five are on plain fields, blue or white, and one, that of Chester, is on the livery colours of the Arms, blue and red. This last is due entirely to the efforts of our Institute. One Council (North Yorkshire) flies only the flag of England; one has only a heraldic standard of a type now long obsolete (Bradford, see fig. XI/17). A flag like this is obviously only for decorative use indoors, and only one copy exists: other Councils which also use flags of a more practical type also possess such heraldic standard (Manchester, Hertford). The flags of Sheffield, Newport, and Darlington form another small category, that of the whole arms on a field of more than one colour. The colours of Sheffield are blue over green (not incidentally the livery colours of the Arms); of Darlington white over blue with the Arms on a yellow square in the centre, and of Newport black with a gold border (see fig. XI/18). The remaining flag, that of Bootle, described as the "centennial flag," is vertically white and blue (see fig. XI/19).

Some local authorities have more than one flag. The most outstanding example is the Greater London Council, which flies a banner of Arms over its headquarters, and a white flag with the shield of Arms on other buildings. Kingston upon Hull has flags of red and blue, each containing the shield of Arms. These are flown on different ceremonial occasions. In Salisbury the Armorial Banner is flown from the Town Hall, and a pale blue triangular flag containing the whole Arms is flown from the Mayor's car (a very common use for civic flags in our country). In Plymouth on the other hand the Armorial Banner is flown from the Mayor's car, whilst a red flag with the shield is flown on buildings.

Our ambition is to persuade every local authority to adopt two flags: one the armorial banner, and the other a civic flag for the use of the citizens, which would combine the livery colours with the Heraldic Badge or other local emblem. However our work has received a setback in that a major review of local government areas is now under way, and most councils are now on the verge of extinction. Nevertheless many will be resurrected in the new system, and we see this as an opportunity for a new start in our work of advancing the use of acceptable civic flags, and incidentally of bringing the United Kingdom into the vexillological common market of Europe.

- 1 Example of Civic coats of Arms: Liverpool.
- 2 Example of Civic coats of Arms: Manchester.
- 3 Example of Civic coats of Arms: Peterborough.
- 4 Example of Civic coats of Arms: Cambridgeshire.
- 5 Example of Civic coats of Arms: Cornwall.
- 6 Example of Civic coats of Arms: Northumberland.
- 7 Civic Badge: Greater London.
- 8 Civic Badge: Manchester.
- 9 Civic Badge: Chester.
- 10 Use of the Badge in a newspaper advertisement.
- 11-14 "Motif" civic emblem.
- 15 Blackpool.
- 16 Redbridge.
- 17 Bradford Heraldic Standard.
- 18 Newport.
- 19 Bootle.
- 20 City of Westminster.
- 21 Salisbury, Mayor's Flag.



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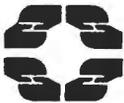
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London Borough
of Camden

11

London Borough of Haringey
Social Services



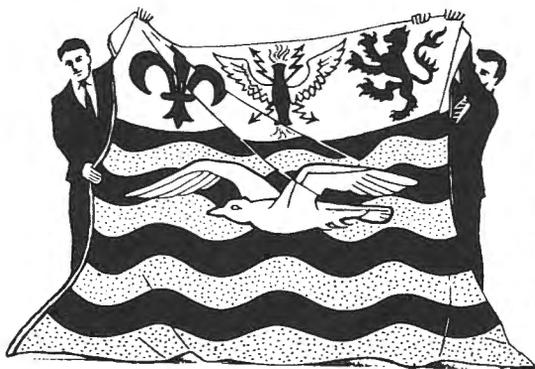
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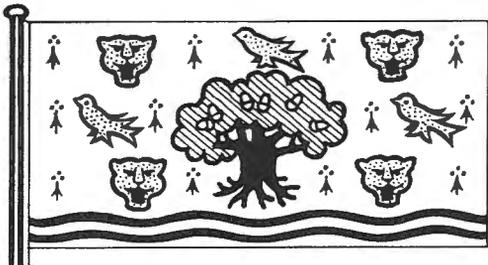
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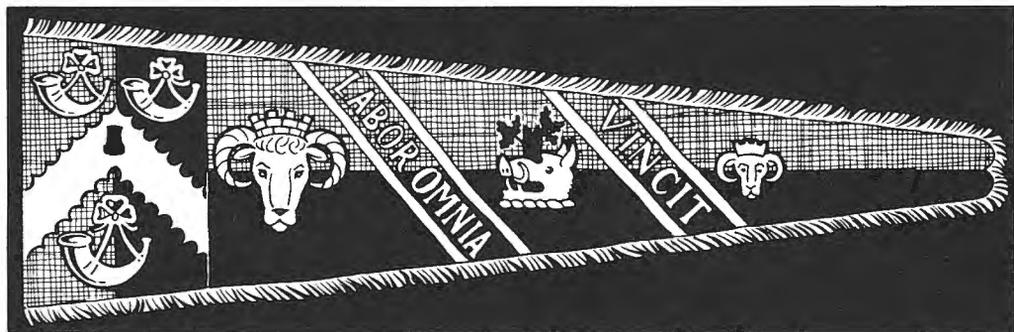
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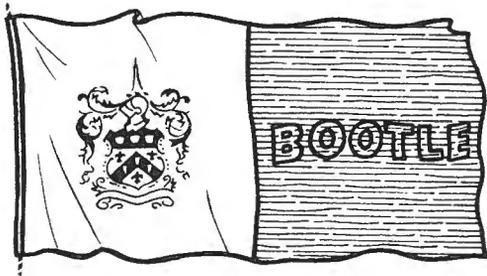
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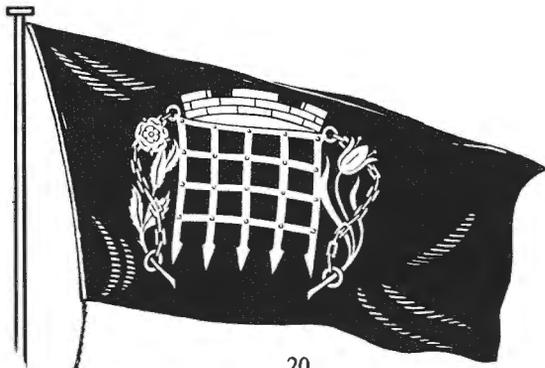
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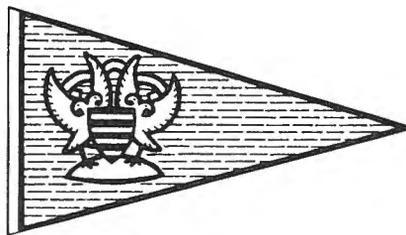
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