

PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF DESIGNING, MAKING AND FLYING FLAGS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a summary of what I have learned from my experience in designing over one hundred flags, making fifty and flying or observing the flying of innumerable flags through the years, including over 30 years in the Royal Navy.

What I have to say is largely a matter of opinion, and I accept that it cannot be applied to all circumstances, but I like to think that there are some fundamental truths forming the basis of my beliefs

DESIGNING FLAGS

In considering the principles of flag design, it is important to remind ourselves of the main purpose of flags - identification. It is interesting to note, in passing, how the means of identification developed throughout the years to there point where the flag as we know it today became firmly established.

In the very early days men lived in small communities and fought in small bands and identification was a not problem,. As communities, and particularly fighting groups, grew in size, some specific means of identification became necessary. The answer was body marking. Ancient peoples used locally available colouring materials to adorn their bodies in readily recognisable patterns. In Britain the early inhabitants used blue dye from the woad plant, here in Australia the Aborigines used light coloured clay,

The next step, as fighting groups grew further in size, was the totem, which developed into the standard consisting of solid or rigid symbols on poles, collectively described as vexilloids, which reached their most elegant in Roman times. Vexilloids were sometimes adorned with pieces of cloth which, fluttering in the breeze, were more eye-catching than the static vexilloid itself. The pieces of cloth developed into flags, the Roman vexillum being the classic example of this development. It is surely significant that the vexillum was use principally by cavalry units where the requirement for ready identification needed to cater for faster movement and greater dispersal in battle.

With the Vikings, perhaps, the flag as we use it today, attached to its staff at one side, came to Britain. For some time flags remained small and without conspicuous distinctiveness, as is shown in the Bayeux Tapestry, the contemporary record of events leading up to the Norman invasion of England in 1066. That these flags were inadequate is also shown, as William of Normandy was obliged to show his face to his troops to dispel a rumour that he had been killed.

Then came the Crusades, and the enormous problem of identifying knights who came from nations and city-states all over Europe, wholly encased in armour. The brilliant solution to this problem was heraldry, the system of identification using bold and simple designs in bright and contrasting colours, which became hereditary. It could be said that heraldry was the invention for which flags had been waiting. Here at last was the way in which flags could be developed to exploit their full and considerable potential.

The basic principle of flag design is the same today as it was 800 years ago - bold and simple designs in bright and contrasting colours. Any flag design which follows the rules of heraldry is well on the way to being a good one. Any design which ignores these rules will be, at best, less than entirely satisfactory, and at worst, a complete failure. Heraldry features exclusively the use of symbols, and as general rule, uses strong primary colours. It requires these colours - red, green, blue, purple and black - to be set against "metals" - gold or silver, yellow or white, or vice versa, to achieve a satisfactory contrast. These rules are set out, and the whole subject of flag design most clearly and comprehensively covered, in the excellent booklet on *Flag Design* produced by The Flag Institute.

To the rules of heraldry, which I regard as inviolate, I add some of my own. I firmly believe that the limits of a flag should be defined by a strong colour to ensure that it stands out clearly against a light sky. This is not to say that there should be a strong colour all around the edge of the flag, it is sufficient for parts of the field to be a strong colour or for the emblem on the flag to reach to the edges, as with the St George's cross, for example.

Taking this a stage further, I generally make the field of my flags a predominantly strong colour. As well as providing satisfactory contrast with the generally light sky, I feel this produces a flag with more body, more character. It shows that it has been designed as a flag, for flying, and that it is not just a case of an artist drawing an emblem on a sheet of white paper and calling it a flag.

Mention of drawing brings me to a farther point. I also believe that, in general, line drawings have no place on flags, blocks of colour should always be used. Digressing for a moment, I would add that, in my view, line drawings may also lack impact as logos. In a recent flag design I blocked in an outline drawing logo, and it was gratifying to see that the company subsequently blocked in the logo on their note paper and literature as well.

MAKING FLAGS

Turning now to flag making, the use of a strong colour field has a bearing on the best method to use. If the field of the flag is a strong colour, say red or blue, and an emblem of white or yellow is sewn on to it, using the applique method, the emblem will show up well in direct light, but will look darker with the light behind it, as it must also pass through the dark field. In a printed flag a light emblem on a dark field shows up equally well against the light, sometimes better, because the contrast is increased due to the dark field looking darker. It is therefore preferable to print such a flag, and if a large number is required, and there is adequate time, then this may be the most economical method as well. However, if only one or a small number of flags is required, printing is a very expensive process, and if the flag is required in a hurry, it may also be too lengthy a process. With sewn flags using the applique method, it is preferable to ensure that the emblem is in a strong colour on a light panel within a strong outer field. The panel may be of any suitable shape, such as a circle, rectangle or diamond, or it may be made an integral part of the design.

The other solution to the problem of a light emblem on a dark field is hand painting, although this will also be an expensive and lengthy process commercially. The answer, of course, is to do it yourself, and for those who are, or might become, interested, I would like to describe briefly the materials and techniques I use.

For flags for outdoor flying I use nylon/wool bunting, as man-made fibres will not absorb the ink without a sophisticated steaming process. Polyester/cotton can also be used, but bunting remains the most suitable material. Eventually, of course, the impregnated natural fibres wear away, but by this time the flag is usually due for replacement because of fraying. For indoor flags and banners I use either bunting or a rayon/cotton artificial silk material, which is also reasonably absorbent, although this is not so crucial for indoor use.

The ink I use is an acrylic screen printing ink, of a consistency very like that of non-drip paint. It is very easy to use, being water washable when wet, but dries quickly and cures in a week or so to become completely colour-fast and long-lasting. I apply it with a brush or roller depending on the area to be covered, and normally use stencils made from self-adhesive vinyl material normally used for covering shelves and domestic working surfaces. For sewing hems and headings, and for applique work, I have an ordinary household electric sewing machine. For sewing in toggles and clips and making eyes in headropes I use waxed polyester whipping twine from a yacht chandler, and I find a sailmaker's palm and needle very useful for the tougher parts of this work.

FLYING FLAGS

Having made a flag, hoisting it for the first time is a source of great pride and pleasure. Regrettably, the way many flags are flown is a source of great irritation to me as a practical vexillographer, especially with my naval background. The two basic faults are slack halyards, and the flag being some way down from the top of the mast. In Britain there is also a strong tendency for ignorant people to fly the Union Jack upside down. To deal with this first, the best answer to the problem, although even this is not absolutely foolproof, is to have a headrope with tail, and this method is used by most British flagmakers. The tail originates from the very early days of halyards in the late 17th century, when they were introduced for use with signal flags. The tail ensured that the flags would not obscure each other when there was not much wind. Regrettably, many flags are made without this simple indication of top and bottom, and this can lead to embarrassing errors, especially in cases where one country's flag is the same as another's upside down.

The traditional British method of attaching flags to halyards by toggle and eye is a simple and satisfactory one. The simplest and neatest method of all is the sheet bend, using an eye and a tail, so attractively illustrated in the IFVA flag. Although it is an extremely simple knot, the sheet bend remains a mystery to most people. Perhaps it is so simple they cannot believe that it will work. Its name is derived from its use in attaching ropes called sheets to the corners of sails for trimming them to the wind.

Both these methods are neat and tidy, cannot jam, and have no moving parts to break or seize up. Another advantage is that they are short in length and allow the flag to be hoisted properly close up.

The Inglefield clip, introduced into the Royal Navy in 1895, was a brilliantly simple invention, and I wonder why it has not been universally adopted. It, too, is extremely simple and reliable. A frequently used attachment is the ring and springhook, which has the disadvantage that with age the spring is likely to break or seize up.

There are other means of attaching flags to halyards, but to conclude on this topic, in my view, there are four criteria for these fittings. They should be simple, and reliable, they should indicate which way up the flag should be, and they should allow it to be hoisted close up to the top of the mast.

Whether or not a flag is hoisted to the top of the mast will also depend on the state of the halyards, and the hoister. Often halyards are allowed to become twisted, and no amount of pulling and heaving will get the flag close up. Another fault is allowing the flag to drop while the halyards are being secured. To avoid this, and the slack halyard syndrome, the hoisting part should be hauled very taut, and secured first with a round turn, then the other part hauled taut more gently and the two parts turned up together.

Continuous halyards should be avoided since it is virtually impossible to get the hoist of the flag taut with these. The flag should be fitted into the halyards, not on to them, so that tautening the halyard also tautens the hoist of the flag. The single halyard technique using a ring or loop round the mast at the bottom of the flag is also unsatisfactory, as in any wind it allows the hoist of the flag to bow out in an unsightly manner. I appreciate that this technique is used for security reasons, but instead I advocate the simple technique of placing the cleat high enough on the mast to be out of reach without using a ladder.

On mast fittings, one way of getting the flag close up is to fit a hollow truck, with the sheave inside it so that the toggle or clip at the top of the flag is at least partly hidden. In the Royal Navy a headstick is used, sewn into the heading of the flag, with the heading rope shortened so that the upper Inglefield clip is a few inches down from the top of the flag. Thus the clip on the halyard also fits below the top of the flag, allowing it to be hoisted right to the top of the mast or staff.

To sum up, I believe firmly in the use of heraldic principles in flag design. It is important to consider the effect of different light conditions on the visibility of the flag, and on its design and method of manufacture. I have described briefly how I make my own flags, and finally, stated my belief that flags, having been designed and made at considerable expense, should be properly fitted and flown, close up and with a taut halyard.