

De Vexillis

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What is De Vexillus about?

The title of this work is Latin and roughly translates to "all about flags". It has been my aim to find out as much as I could about flags and how they have been used throughout the centuries. There are many books that have been written about the history of individual flags and to condense all that information into anything less than full scale book would be virtually impossible. I have therefore left out the vast majority of the information I have found about the history of individual flags and concentrated on the topics in the index.

I wanted to find something useful to do one summer and I came up with the idea of doing some research about how flags have been used in different times and places. I hope that you find this interesting.

Susan Parnaby

Introduction

The study of flags is known as vexillogy. It is a name derived from the Roman military standard or Vexillis. This is a relatively modern field of study having only been developed since World War Two. That is not to say that flags did not affect people lives but just that they were not an academic subject.

The aim behind this piece of writing is to show what flags have expressed to people past and present and so give a better idea of what they can be used for within the church environment.

What is a flag?

This might sound a relatively simple question but on further scrutiny it has proved harder to define. We all know that a flag is usually a piece of fabric that has a design on it that is held on one side and left free on the other. The New Encyclopædia Britannica describes a flag as ‘a piece of cloth, bunting, or similar material displaying the insignia of a community, an armed force, an office or an individual’. Microsoft Encarta 96 describes flags as “light pieces of cloth, usually rectangular in shape, but varying in size, colour and design and intended for use as an emblem or as a kind of signalling device. Flags are most commonly displayed hanging free from a staff, pole, or rope, to which they are attached along one edge.”

The actual word flag comes from the old Saxon or Germanic word meaning to fly or to float in the wind. A flag is something that must be free to be agitated by the wind. It can be defined as a piece of pliable material which is fastened to a staff or mast along one of its edges leaving the rest to fly or flap in the breeze.

Other names for flags

It appears that the word flag came into use in the 16th century and soon became the general name for the many types of flag that previously existed under a number of names. There were and are a number of other terms used for flags like oriflamme or gonfalon which cover more specific types of flags.

Banderole

This is a long and narrow flag with a cleft end that flew from the masthead of ships or was carried in battle. This term was also used to refer to the small ornamental streamer attached to the lance of a knight.

Banner

This is a piece of stout taffeta or other cloth attached by one side to the upper part of a long pole or staff. It was used as the standard of an emperor, king, lord or knight and it was under (or after) this that he and his men marched to war. It became the rallying point in battle.

Banners were square or oblong and were borne in action before royal and noble warriors down the rank of knight banneret. They bore the personal or family device.

In heraldry a banner is a square flag displaying the arms of the person in whose honour it is borne and varies in size from six foot square for an emperor to three foot square for a knight. Examples of these ornate heraldic banners can still be found adorning Westminster Abbey.

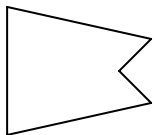
A banner can also be described as an ensign or flag bearing some device, borne in a procession, religious, civic or political for purposes of symbolism or display.

A banner hangs from a crosspiece. Strictly speaking, if there are two poles supporting the material then it is not a banner because a banner is a type of flag and a flag must be free to flap in the wind.

Religious banners of patron saints were often carried into battle and served as banners in both senses.

Burgee

This is a small tapered flag or pennant often swallow tailed i.e.



They are used by yachts as distinguishing flags, for example to show which yacht club they are a member of.

Colours

This is a symbol of membership of a party, club, college team etc. Regimental or Queen's colours are the decorative banners that are held in high esteem and paraded on ceremonial occasions by members of the armed forces.

Ensign

This is a badge, sign or mark and comes from the same Latin root as the word insignia. It refers to any sign or flag that distinguishes a nation or a regiment although in practise it is the national flag of ships. It has a dual function in that it shows the nationality and function of a ship. For example, merchant ships registered in Britain fly the Red Ensign also known as the Red Duster while the White Ensign Is flown by ships of the Royal Navy. The Blue Ensign is the Royal Naval Reserve flag.

Fanion

These were small flags used by survey stations in the nineteenth century.

Gonfalon

This was a banner or ensign frequently composed of or ending in several tails or streamers suspended from a cross bar instead of being directly fastened to the pole. They were used by various Italian republics or in ecclesiastical processions.

Guidon

This is derived from the French meaning "to guide men". They were similar to the standard but rounded in the fly or with two swallow tails, both rounded. Guidons were borne by leaders in battle who were of no more than knightly rank so not entitled to display a banner.

Guidons came to be borne by dragoon regiments of cavalry. The regimental colours of cavalry are guidons which are 41 inches long and 27 inches deep with a slit in the fly (the part furthest from the pole or staff) and the corners rounded off.

In the United States guidons are borne in some processions as markers.

Jack

This is a small flag indicating nationality, flown by a ship usually at the bow or bowsprit.

Labarum

This was the military standard adopted by Constantine the Great (306-337 AD). It was the Roman military standard of the late empire modified by the addition of Christian symbols, hence it was a symbolical standard or banner. Later it came to refer to a military streamer or banner or a church banner or ensign.

Oriflamme

This was the sacred banner of St Denis. This was handed to the early kings of France as they went to war by the Abbot of St Denis. It was the great and holy war standard of France. It was made of red or orange red silk, had 2 or 3 points and was attached to a lance. These days the word is more often heard used in relation to something that looks like the flag known as an oriflamme.

Pennant

This is a long narrow flag. Pennants are used for signalling other ships using the international marine signalling code. They are also awarded for victory in games or contests. The armed forces use pennants so that vehicles or ships carrying high ranking officers can be recognised.

Pennon

This is a long narrow flag or streamer which is triangular and pointed or swallow tailed and usually attached to a lance or helmet. They had a practical purpose in that they reduced the possibility of accidents rather like a red flag or rag attached to a pole that extends beyond the end of a vehicle. It was formerly borne as a distinction by a knight under the rank of banneret and sometimes had some kind of mark or colour to help in recognition. They denoted rank and served to strike terror into the enemy.

Pennoncel

This is a small pennon borne on a helmet or lance.

Standard

This is a flag, sculptured figure or other conspicuous object raised on a pole to indicate the rallying point of an army (or fleet) or one of its component portions (e.g. company or regiment).

It is also the distinctive ensign of a king, great noble or commander or of a nation or a city. One well known example is the Royal Standard.

It has also been defined as a long tapering flag notched and rounded at the end bearing heraldic symbols and fixed in the ground.

Standards were the largest type of flag and from their size were intended to be stationary. It marked the position of an individual before a battle, during a siege, throughout a ceremony, or at a tournament. For the monarch it represented the palace, saluting base, tent, or ship where they were actually present. They were originally long and tapering towards the fly, ending in two points.

Streamer

This refers to a flag that waves or streams in the air. It especially refers to a long narrow pointed flag or pennon. It can also refer to a ribbon or plume or the like that streams or flows in the wind.

A streamer was a long tapering flag from 20 to 60 yards (18 to 55 metres) long and about 8 yards (7 metres) broad at the hoist, ending in two points. Its size and shape meant that almost its only use was at sea. In the 15th century it was flown from a pole rising from above the fighting top, and later from the yard arm or topmast. It eventually came to distinguish the warship from the merchantman and, more specifically, the warship in commission from the warship laid up in harbour.

Vane

This was a piece of bunting fixed to a wooden frame which turned on a spindle at the masthead of a ship to show the direction of the wind.

History of flags

The earliest evidence for flags as we know them comes from China. The founder of the Chou dynasty in China (circa 1122 BC) had a white flag carried before him. It is also known that a minor prince was punished for failing to lower his standard in front of a superior. Chinese flags had devices like a red bird, a white tiger or a blue dragon. They were carried on chariots and planted on walls of captured cities. The royal flag was associated with the ruler himself and it was a crime even to touch the flagbearer. The fall of the flag meant defeat. The king would rarely expose his flag and his person together so the flag was normally entrusted to a general.

Flags were also important in ancient India. They were carried on elephants and chariots. The flag was the first object of attack in battle and its fall would mean confusion, if not defeat. Indian flags were triangular in shape and scarlet or green in colour, with a figure embroidered in gold and gold fringe.

If flags like those in China or India had common origin with the standards used by the Assyrians, (such standards were sculptures on a pole rather than the flag we call a standard nowadays) then they might have developed from the streamers on top of the pole. Indian flagstaffs were surmounted by a figure similar to that displayed on the flag itself. There were other insignia used besides the flag such as yaks tail and the state umbrella.

People had long been represented by animals and other designs. The early inhabitants of North and South America used simple standards, for example, poles fledge with feathers. Weaving and dyeing gave a new and very striking way of displaying such emblems. A piece of cloth fluttering in the breeze is not just beautiful but impressive and stirring. It seems to bring animals and birds to life. People of ancient times used streamers along with, or instead of, images and other badges which they bore ceremonially on poles.

Ideas are transmitted from place to place as others see how useful they are. One example of this is the fact that the Saracens were using flags at the time of the crusades and it was only then that the idea of flags and banners really took hold in Europe. Islam prohibited the use of any identifiable image because it could be seen as idolatrous. This means they used plain coloured flags. Flags are often mentioned in the early history of Islam.

The Basilica-Synagogue at Alexandria in Egypt was destroyed in about AD 90-117. It was so huge that it had several colonnades. The voice of the worship leader could not be heard so flags had to be waved to signal the people to perform their responsive amens. It was considered very important that the whole congregation joined in with the synagogue liturgy hence the use of flags.

The first flag in the western world with historical evidence and illustration, was the Roman vexillum. It came into use about 100 BC as a tactical distinguishing marker to enable one legion to be recognised from another. The fabric was usually purple or red but sometimes white or blue. It was generally plain but occasionally carried some device and was often richly fringed. It was hung by the upper edge, or, by the two top corners from a cross bar on a lance. The standard of the legion, usually an eagle, was carried as well as the vexillum.

The Vikings had a Raven flag and it is said by some that this was the first flag to reach America. There are stories of magical properties and mystery connected to this flag. The Raven flag was more like a hollow tube than a flag as we would know it. The Welsh dragon is another flag that developed at about this time and it too was thought to have mystical properties.

Flags can be seen in the Bayeux tapestry. There are war flags which are square and have 3 or possibly 4 or 5 tails. The triangular flag of Harold is seen being carried and later at his side. The Norman flag was semi-circular, had a bird on it, and was fringed. The next stage in the development of flags was the symbolism of heraldry.

Symbolism was a vital force in thought and action of medieval times. Symbols were useful for identification because it was hard to see just who was who with their visors down as many knights wore similar armour. The symbols used usually commemorated an event in the knight's life or some outstanding quality. One set of symbols developed during the crusades. The aim of the crusades was to fight the tide of Islam. They were started when Christian pilgrims were forbidden to visit the Holy Land. To demonstrate they were fighting on behalf of all Christians many of them used a cross as an emblem. Later, knightly feats in tournaments or pageants brought the development of other heraldic symbols. They were used in everyday life as most people were illiterate. Heraldic symbols were useful in authenticating documents using a seal rather than a signature.

To start with, in Europe, flags were more likely to be used to represent feudal lords or cities. There were many of these flags of a personal, family or local significance. Flags and other identifying items like shields were, at first selected by individuals. Heraldic devices were not just displayed on shields or on flags and banners, they were also worn on the surcoats. These surcoats were worn to protect knights from the baking sun in the Holy Land. This led to problems with the duplication of designs. To counter this, heralds were given the task of assigning certain designs to certain warriors. England and Scotland still have Colleges of Arms who grant coats of arms.

Heraldry developed into a subject all of its own. It has its own language. Heraldic devices are described using a set of long established technical terms like per pale, referring to the division of a shield and dexter, or sinister, referring to the right or left hand side of a shield. Heralds recorded the family history of people of rank and prepared coats of arms for them. Strangely enough, Japanese mon is a very similar idea to heraldry. It developed independently of European heraldry and has roots that go back to AD 900.

Many personal flags are older than national ones. It was only as national unity developed that national flags gained more importance than personal ones. In Europe the first national flags were adopted in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Many of the leaders of that time adopted the flag of their patron saint to present their country. In England for example, the cross of St. George was adopted in the 13th century. Banners with pictures of saints and other religious symbols were carried in solemn church processions around the streets or along church aisles. The names used for flags e.g. gonfalon reflect this tradition. The oriflamme was a flag that was kept by a religious house and used as a French war standard. There was even a Battle of the Standards in this period, so called, because it was waged around a cross and three standards.

Armies once went into combat carrying battle flags. Some of these were quite different from national flags. Many of them were based on the different coats of arms of the high ranking officers who commanded the various units. They marked the presence of high ranking officers. These leaders flags served as rallying points around which the struggle was fiercest. They became trophies which men would gladly die to capture or defend. Colours aroused deep feeling or patriotism, loyalty and pride in soldiers and still do as they represent the exploits of the past and hope for the future. They gained an almost religious meaning and the tattered remnants end up hung on the walls of places of worship to be kept there until they literally fall to pieces.

The range of weapons increased so that colours became useless as rallying points. It also became needlessly dangerous to carry or rally round the colours in battle so they were left at headquarters. These days, the armed forces carry flags for parades and ceremonies. Large units like regiments have special colours which often bear the names of battles or campaigns where the unit has served with distinction. These colours are used to add dignity to inspections, guards of honour and reviews. They are seldom used except at such parades.

Different types of regiment have different types of colours. The household cavalry and the dragoon guards have rectangular standards. The light cavalry have drum banners embroidered with badges and honours which are swathed around the drums. Infantry battalions have two colours, the Queen's colours and the regimental colours, both embroidered with the names of battles in which the regiment distinguished itself.

Individual regiments have had colours for hundreds of years but it was only in 1938 that the British army gained a flag to represent the whole service. There were special flags for the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force as whole entities, long before the army did.

The US army attach battle streamers to flags to show where they have fought. Flags are also useful to the army in that smaller flags or guidons are used in the USA in parades so the marchers have something to use as a guide or marker.

The modern battlefield still has flags to mark the position of commanders. These are now functional rather than decorative items. They are not patriotic symbols or a target for warfare in their own right. Small flags or pennants can be seen on vehicles carrying senior officers.

What are flags used for?

Originally, flags were mainly used in warfare. They were, and still are to some extent, the insignia of leadership. They help in the identification of friend and foe, and as rallying points.

National flags represent all the people in a country. In Britain the armed forces pledge alliance to the Queen and her heirs and descendants but in the United States the armed forces and others pledge alliance to the flag. The flag is so important to Americans that it is not allowed to be used in any form of advertising not even as part of flags of American companies. The flag is an important representative symbol of the country. Some flags stand for people in smaller areas like states or cities and some represent one person or part of the government. People use flags to express their feelings for their country and its people, their loyalty and sense of patriotic duty, by showing respect for its emblem the national flag.

The Queen has her own flag, the Royal Standard. It is normally raised above any building when she enters it. This is her own flag and none of her subjects should use this flag, not even for decoration. It is the representative flag of the monarch and when the reigning monarch dies it then immediately becomes the symbol of the new monarch. It is never flown at half mast because the monarch never dies. If the Royal Standard was flown below the flag of another country then the message would be that that country is holding her prisoner. She also has a personal standard that she uses while visiting commonwealth countries. There are a number of other flags associated with the British royal family. Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh has his own standard. Prince Charles has three flags, one as Prince of Wales and two personal flags, one for Wales and one for Scotland. Children and grandchildren of monarchs have their own flags which are based on the Royal Standard with extra items added to it.

Flags represent an identity. Ethnic groups who want to establish a national identity have flags e.g. the Basques, Breton, Normans and Freisans. Almost every group that wants to have an identity can have a flag. This can include commercial organisations, recreational clubs like yacht clubs, churches, universities and schools. Indeed any group of people working together in a common cause may devise an emblem for use not only as a badge but also as a banner e.g. Captain Scott's sledge flag in Exeter Cathedral.

The British flag is commonly known as the Union Jack but its real name is the Union Flag. The name Union Jack is in such current usage that it is now seen as pedantic to call it the Union Flag. It is a flag based on the union of the flags that now make up Great Britain. In 1603 the then King of Scotland became the King of England as well. Once the thrones were united it was thought that a new flag combining the flags of the two countries should be adopted. To start with this was only flown by naval vessels. In 1801 Ireland became officially part of the union and the red saltire was added to make the flag we know today.

Flags have always been important in the armed forces. Most have special flags for individual units and some have separate flags for each branch of their armed forces or for top ranking officers. Regimental colours are used for ceremonial purposes. Colours are so important that they are presented by a member of the royal family. The officer receiving them kneels on one knee and the colours are then consecrated by the regimental chaplain. The old colours which go out of service are trooped, that is they are borne along the ranks to stirring music before being taken to their last resting place on the walls of a church or cathedral.

The best-known type of flag is that used for identification, such as the flag of a country or flags that distinguish governmental subdivisions, i.e. officials, agencies, and services. They

are also used to identify military units, classes of yachts, yacht clubs and various other types of organisations and institutions. Members of the executive branch of the Royal Navy above the rank of captain have their own flags.

Displaying the flag of your country shows that you want to be associated with it. Here is a quotation from an American source on the internet “Flying the flag shows your patriotism and your love of God and country and your respect for all those who have served and given their utmost namely the veterans.”

Every country has a national flag. It is seen as the prime expression of national identity and the supreme mark of independence. The hoisting of a national flag is almost always the symbol of the achievement of independence.

One custom that grew up during World War Two was that when a house was destroyed the survivors hastened to hoist a Union Jack over the ruins. They did this to express their courage, their undaunted spirit in the midst of a disaster, their defiance of the enemy and their stern determination never to yield.

Victory day saw many houses decorated with Allied flags. This was a way of paying tribute to the Allies and expressed rejoicing as nothing else could. Flags are like words in that they are a means of explaining our idea and like words can be misused. Ignorance made some people say the exact opposite of what they wanted to say with their flags. In the blitz some people put the flag upside down so that it became a symbol of distress rather than triumph or defiance. During the victory celebrations one or two people unintentionally displayed German flags that were older than the Swastika.

In recent times there has been a great deal of discussion in Australia on whether they should become a republic. Currently, the flag of Australia includes a Union Jack in it. If Australia became a republic they would need a new flag to demonstrate their new circumstances. Flags can tell us something about the country for example its culture, the predominant religion, or its history. That is why there is such an interest in vexillology. People are looking at flags as symbols and trying to understand their meanings. Indeed there are many books on that subject.

Ships out of courtesy fly the flag of the country that they are visiting as they enter port. Merchant ships also fly the house flag to identify the company that owns it. This is a form of advertising much like the livery or logo used on a road transport vehicle.

One important use of flags is signalling or conveying information. It was flags that were used by Nelson for his famous signal ‘England expects every man to do his duty’. This system has been updated a few times since and has to some extent been superseded by technology like radio but still ships carry signalling flags for use when necessary. Most people who have spent any time in the scouts or guides will have come across semaphore. This is a method of spelling out words using two flags.

Another important use of flags is as warnings. Lifeguards use a system of flags to indicate when it is safe to swim or when someone is watching to see if anyone is getting into difficulties. The American coastguard uses a system of flags to warn ships about impending storms.

Flags are also used for decoration and for display. Sometimes flags serve as trophies of achievement or victory in athletic contests.

Flags do not always have simple visual purposes. Tibetan prayer flags are inscribed with auspicious symbols, innovations, prayers and mantras. Tibetan Buddhists plant them outside their homes for the wind to carry the good vibrations across the countryside.

A quotation from a file found on the internet says it all about what you can do with a flag “parade it, kiss it, unfurl it, burn it, pledge alliance to it, loft it in battle, salute it, stomp on it, drape a soldiers casket, rocket it into space, lower it, wave it, ignore it, die for it”.

Signalling using flags

International marine flag signalling system

The international marine flag signalling system uses a set of forty flags twenty six represent letters, ten represent numbers and the rest are used as substitutes for others. There is a code book that is written in English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Russian and Spanish. The aim of the code is to ensure the safety of navigation and persons, especially when language difficulties arise. There is a system of numbers keyed to medical charts so the code can expedite communications on health problems and quarantine procedures. The same code can be used when communicating by radiotelephony and radiotelegraphy or even face to face. All you need to be able to do is to say the letters of the alphabet and the numbers one to ten in the same language as the person receiving the message and you can pass on hundreds of important messages.

Each flag that represents a letter is also used to pass on messages that need to be quickly understood. Below is a list of these meanings.

- A diver below (when stationary) or I am undergoing a speed trial
- B I am taking on or discharging explosives
- C (affirmative)
- D keep clear of me, I am manoeuvring with difficulty
- E I am altering my course to starboard
- F I am disabled, communicate with me
- G I require a pilot
- H I have a pilot on board
- I I am altering my course to port
- J I am going to send you a message in semaphore
- K you should stop your vessel instantly
- L you should stop, I have something important to communicate
- M I have a doctor on board
- N no (negative)
- O man overboard
- P all aboard the vessel I about to proceed to sea
(at sea) your lights are burning badly
- Q my vessel is healthy and a request for free pratique
- R the way is off my ship. You may feel you way past me
- S my engines are going full speed astern
- T do not pass ahead of me
- U you are standing into danger
- V I require assistance (not distress)
- W I require medical assistance
- X stop carrying out your intentions and watch for my signals
- Y I am carrying mails
- Z to be used to address or call shore stations

Two flag signals also have a meaning, e.g. NC (I want immediate assistance) BD (I have headway) RS (mutiny)

Three flag hoists gives points of the compass, time signals or general messages, e.g. PYU wishes another ship a good voyage

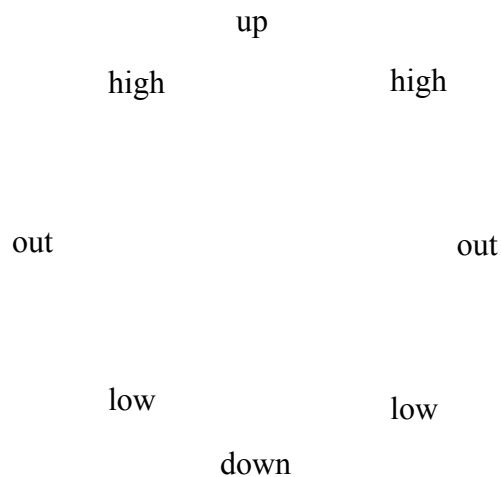
Four flag hoists beginning with the letter A are geographical e.g. AJMJ is London. Other four flag hoists give names of ships.

Semaphore

Semaphore is another well known means of communicating with flags. A flag is held in each hand and is waved according to a set pattern. Proper semaphore flags are usually square and in two colours divided diagonally. They are very often red and yellow and are held with the red uppermost.

The flags are held, arms extended, in various positions representing each of the letters of the alphabet.

The pattern resembles a clock face divided into eight positions: up, down, high and low for each of the hands. Six letters require the hands to be brought across the body so that both flags are on the same side.



You can describe the positions of the flags using the table below.

	left hand	right hand
a and 1	down	low
b and 2	down	out
c and 3	down	high
d and 4	down	up
e and 5	high	down
f and 6	out	down
g and 7	low	down
h and 8	across low	out
i and 9	across low	up
j and alphabetic	out	up
k and zero	up	low
l	high	low
m	out	low
n	low	low
o	across high	out
p	up	out
q	high	out
r	out	out

s	low	out
t	up	high
u	high	high
v	low	up
w	out	across high
x	low	across high
y	out	high
z	out	across low
numerical	high	up
annul	low	high
error	left and right hands raised and lowered together	

Other uses of flags for signalling

The US coastguard fly storm warning flags at coastal stations. There are four levels of warning.

- ☞ one red triangular flag signifies winds to 38 mph
- ☞☞ two red triangular flags signifies winds from 39 to 54 mph (gale force winds)
- ☞ one red square flag with a black square in the middle signifies winds from 55 to 73 mph (storm force winds)
- ☞☞ two red square flags with a black square in the middle signifies winds over 74 mph (hurricane)

It is not only the coastguard who use flags as warnings. Lifeguards use a red flag to warn bathers not to go into the sea when the conditions are poor or when there is no one available to assist them if they get into difficulties.

It is possible to signal in Morse code using a single flag.

There are other forms of signalling distress using a flag. One is to fly a ball above or below the flag and the other is tie the flag in the middle so that it cannot fly free.

Points to bear in mind when designing flags

There is actually a name for a person who designs flags, they are called a vexillographer. The art of designing flags is called vexillography.

Flags are usually oblong and attached by one edge to a staff or halyard. The part nearest the staff is called the hoist and the outer part the fly. The length usually exceeds the width. Many national flags have a width to length ratio of 2:3 but other popular ratios are 3:5 and 1:2. There are other ways of altering oblong flags. A triangle can be cut out of the fly leaving a swallow tail. A double swallow tail can be made by leaving a tongue of cloth. Triangular flags are generally seen as representing inferior things to rectangular flags. These are known as pennons.

The usefulness of a flag depends on it blowing out freely in the wind. The material used is usually light. The pattern or device is usually the same on both sides. This accounts for the lack of wording and the simple designs used on most flags. For example it would be very difficult for any new flag that was designed for Australia to have a map of the country on it. One side would be correct and other would be wrong. You could avoid this problem by having a double thickness flag but then you would have another problem, it would not be light enough to blow in the wind. There is another problem with a double thickness flag and that is only apparent when the sun shines on it because one side will show through to the other and the effect would be spoilt. It would also cost more to produce because of the extra time and materials required.

Words are seldom used because they are difficult to read when waving in the breeze or sagging in a lull and when they are visible they are seldom impressive. This does not mean that there are no flags with words on. The Saudi Arabian flag has the Mohammedan declaration of faith on it, i.e. there is no god but god and Mohammed is the prophet of god.

The pieces of a flag should be easy to cut out and sew onto the main piece. Flags flown at sea or over buildings need to be stronger than the cotton ones used to ornament a house or the delicate regimental colours made of silk that soldier carries on ceremonial parade.

The end furthest from the pole (fly) wears out first as it flaps in the breeze. It is also the part that is less visible when the flag is not fully unfurled. This is one reason why many flags feature designs that mainly occupy the top left hand corner next to the flag pole.

Flags are often described as if they are separated into quarters known as cantons. The canton is the top corner nearest the pole. It is the place of honour in a flag and may have a special design. Canton comes from the heraldic word meaning quarter and the canton is the most important part of the flag. This is why the Union Jack is in the canton of some Commonwealth countries as it signifies a position of dominance over them.

Any colours or devices can be used. There was a set of standard colours prepared by HMSO to enable accurate reproduction of flags from other nations and so avoid the offence that could be caused by using the wrong shade.

European flags generally follow the rules of heraldry. This limits the number of colours that can be used to five if you use British heraldic rules and seven if you use European heraldic rules. Heraldry also uses two metals, i.e. silver (argent), often portrayed as white and gold (or) often portrayed as yellow. In heraldry metal cannot be next to metal and colour cannot be next to colour. To avoid this fimbriation is used. This is a thin line of a metal between colours or a colour between metals. This is why there is a white strip either side of the red saltire to separate the red from the blue on the Union Jack. The idea behind the design would suggest

that there should be a white strip only on one side of the red but the rules of heraldry dictate that there should be a white strip on either side. Most of the European tricolour flags have white or yellow as a middle strip with heraldic colours either side of the white or yellow e.g. France's red white and blue.

It is often thought that different colours have different meanings. In the World Book Encyclopædia there is a list of the meanings of colour in heraldry.

Heraldic name	English name	Meaning
or	gold (yellow)	honour and loyalty
argent	silver (white)	faith and purity
gules	red	bravery and courage
azure	blue	piety and sincerity
sable	black	grief and sorrow
vert	green	youth and hope
purpure	purple	high rank and royalty
tenne	tawny orange	strength and endurance
sanguine	red purple	sacrifice

In heraldic devices two furs are used, ermine and vair (squirrel) but These are rarely seen on flags because of the difficulty recognising them at a distance.

There is no national flag in current use (1996) that includes purple. The advantage of keeping to heraldic rules is that heraldic colours show up well next to heraldic metals. One point to watch when designing a flag is that light colours should not be placed next to light colours and dark colours should not be placed next to dark colours. This makes the colours indistinguishable at a distance. There are other points to be borne in mind when deciding what colours to use in a flag design. One is that colours or shades that are difficult to reproduce in fabric or in print are best avoided. It is also preferable to use colours that stand out at a distance and are readily recognised against the sea and the sky.

Colours are also seen as representing various things. The colour most often used by Islamic countries is green because of the historical connections with their religion. Red was seen as the colour of defiance back in the 17th century and is now most often seen in flags from communist countries.

Designs on flags are not chosen at random but because of their meaning. Some have been deliberately selected in recent times and others have been used from time immemorial and have origins lost in the past. To interpret the meaning of a flag helps us to understand and appreciate something of the history and ideas of the country that flies it. Sometimes birds or animals are used and if so they should be facing the flag pole.

There are many European countries that have flags like the tricolour of France. One explanation is that those countries who wish to be associated with the French ideals of liberty fraternity and equality use similar flags. The other explanation is that it is a good design and many of them copied it. Eire copied the European idea of the tricolour and withdrew from the Commonwealth to show that she is different from Britain. The Irish flag uses heraldic colours but even uses a colour (tenne) that is European rather than British.

Flags form part of the tradition of nations that fly them. Peoples that are related or who have a similar history are akin in ideals and usually express themselves by flying the same kind of flag. Many Scandinavian countries use a flag similar to this one.

Denmark uses what it calls the Dannebrog or strength of Denmark which is a white cross on a red field. If this was printed in colour this picture would be a Dannebrog. This is one of the oldest flags in continuous use in the world. Norway was once ruled by the same king as Denmark. The Norwegian flag is the same as the Danish flag but with the addition of a blue cross over the white cross. Iceland was once ruled by Norway and the Icelandic flag uses the same colours and design as the Norwegian flag but the colours are reversed. Sweden has a similar design as Denmark but uses blue and yellow, the colours of the Swedish royal family. Finland gained its independence about seventy years ago and they use a flag that is the same design as Denmark's but using different colours. They use white and blue to represent the snow and the lakes commonly seen in their country.

Symbols used on flags often have a meaning. The crescent moon, with or without an additional star or stars, has become the accepted symbol of Islam. Symbols on flags are not chosen at random but because of their meaning. Some have been deliberately selected in recent times and others have been used from time immemorial and may have their origins lost in the mist of time. To be able to interpret the meaning of a flag helps us appreciate something of the history and ideas of the country that flies it.

Flags are really only any good if they are recognisable by the people they are supposed to represent. It is essential that a national flag is recognisable internationally. There is no point in designing a national flag that is so like that of another nation that it is confused with it. There are though, many national flags that are deliberately similar, to reflect a common history or regional identity.

Designing a national flag is an extraordinarily difficult task. You need to remember that a flag is not a static object but makes fluid shapes. The challenge is to symbolise an entire nation with a few colours and simple geometric shapes.

A Case Study of flags and society- Fante Flags

There is a tradition of making flags in Ghana. They are seen as sacred objects and are hidden from view. They are made on behalf of the military companies of Ghana. These are small armies formed from fishing or farming communities and at one time formed the defence squad for the town or village. There have been no wars for 100 years but the military companies still continue for mutual support e.g. putting out fires and rescues.

Fante flags are admired in Britain as works of art but that is not their purpose. They have meanings as well as a powerful visual effect. They are used to decorate the sterns of fishing boats. Flags are part of the regalia of office for the chief elders of the company and are treated respectfully. To be given permission to see the flags the presenter had to bring some snapps to make a libation offering i.e. pour it on the ground to honour the spirits.

These flags are really hand made fabric collages which have taken their inspiration from all over the world. Some bear resemblance to the flags of other nations e.g. Israel and France. Long flags (over 20 feet long) tell the story of the town in pictures. The pictures have meanings which are reflected in the proverbs of the area. Other designs reflect the history of an area so if there was a plane crash nearby a flag of that period would have a plane on it. Flags also represent the life of the company so a company of fishermen would have a marine theme. Each town has a special symbol. Ghana was once under British rule so at that time the Union Jack might be incorporated into their designs as might pictures of the king or queen.

The fabrics used in these flags form a unique document of textiles in Europe. Some are made out of what Europeans would call rags. Some use cloths that normally would be unseen such as the red flannel once used for underwear for the background for a flag. Some use prints of animals skins as imported from Europe. The choice of the fabrics is left to the flag maker who is given a theme or the ideas around which to design the flag and left to get on with it.

Some are about 4 foot by 5 foot and attached to a pole and are waved about to the sound of drums as part of a dance or celebration. At other times a lot of flags are brought out and displayed rather like washing on a line. The earliest flags date from about 1720 and are quite delicate and precious now.

There are festivals kept by the military companies where the flags are taken and danced with around the sacred sites of each of the military companies in the town. A fishing military company might have a sacred site which looks like a whale or a battleship. A land based company would have a large elephant or a fierce lion as its shrine. They try to use the supreme symbols for what they represent. These sites are well decorated and colourful. Sometimes these events can become violent as the dancers and their flags can torment the company whose sacred site they are visiting. In 1906-7 some flags were confiscated because they were seen as provocative.

Flags are part of their culture and as such their worth is not appreciated by outsiders. A few fante flags are housed at the British Museum as curiosities. Others are seen as objects of art to be displayed in colour supplements or bought and sold as decorations. They are more than just this. They were like banners which led the companies into battle and are revered as much as our military banners are today.

Flags in the Bible

This is not an easy subject because the translations and historical background make it difficult to know what was happening at the time. For example in Numbers chapter two there are a number of references to standards. What were those standards like? Were they the standards as we know them, i.e. pieces of fabric attached to a pole or, were they sculptured objects set on a pole. The historian would say that they were most likely to be standards of the latter type. Does it really matter which type of standard they were? The difference was in their appearance not in their function.

There is certainly mention of a sculptured object being set upon a pole in Exodus i.e. the bronze serpent that the Israelites looked at in order to avoid dying from snake bites. This bronze serpent is mentioned in three places in the bible. Numbers 21:4-9 is the original passage but it is referred to again in 2 Kings 18:4 and John 3:14.

There are some parallels with salvation in the original passage. The Israelites had been grumbling and not doing as they were told so God punished them by sending the snakes. Like many other people they find themselves in hard situations because they have not been obedient to God. God provided a way out for the Israelites but, only once they had realised that they had a real problem. It was only when they realised that they had a problem, in this case a severe problem as some of them were dying, that they could profit from God's way out for them. They had to come to a place where they did not just want the punishment to be taken away but also had to be really sorry as well. They were told to look at the bronze snake and this made them realise their sin and only then could they admit their sin. Once they had admitted they had sinned it was only then that they could be healed.

The same bronze snake is seen a few centuries later in 2 Kings 18:4. It was now misused and worshipped. They were worshipping the created instead of the Creator. Jesus mentioned the bronze serpent when He said He must be lifted up like Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the desert. In this case it is Jesus himself that is the banner or standard. Christians speak of Jesus drawing people to himself. Raising a banner draws people to it who are prepared to fight for that cause.

The first mention of the word banner in the Bible is found in Exodus 17. The Israelites were about to be attacked by the Amalekites at Rephidim. The Amalekites had already defeated Israel in Numbers 14 so they were rather more wary the second time around. To help them Moses said he would go up on the hill and hold up his staff. Remember Moses did many things with his staff during the time he led the Israelites. In fact earlier in the same chapter he had used his staff to bring forth water from a rock. The staff became a standard. Moses let the staff drift down as he became tired but then the Israelites seemed to start losing the battle. It became obvious that Moses needed help so Aaron and Hur came to help him keep his arms up. It has been suggested that Moses was so very tired because he was not just lifting up a piece of wood but interceding for his people in spiritual warfare at the same time. If that is true then it would be the spiritual warfare that would tire him out rather than just holding up a piece of wood.

Later in the same chapter we read of Moses building an altar to Jehovah Nissi, the Lord is my Banner. This is one of the names of God that demonstrate his character.

The word standard occurs eight times in the first two chapters of the book of Numbers. This is because it describes how the Israelites camped around the Tabernacle. In 2:2 we see the general picture as "The Israelites are to camp around the tent of meeting some distance from

it, each under the standard with the banners of his family". There were standards all around the Tent of Meeting which was the central point of the camp. The first ring of the Israelites were the Levites who had the responsibility of taking down the tent when they moved on and could actually touch the holy things. There were tribes on each side. On the east there were Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, on the south Rueben, Simeon and Gad, to the west Ephraim, Mannasseh and Benjamin and on the north Dan, Asher and Naphtali. These tribes could be equated with the regiments of an army as they each had different responsibilities and different roles but all came together to create one whole group of fighting men.

Numbers chapter 10 describes the moving on of the camp. They had become an organised group of people. They moved at the sound of trumpets. They had an ordered pattern for setting off, i.e. Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, the tabernacle carried by the Gershonites and Merarites, Rueben, Simeon, Gad then the Kohathites carrying the holy things, Ephraim, Mannasseh, Benjamin and finally Dan Asher and Naphtali as a rearguard. Each tribe had its own standard that it marched under.

Banners are mentioned three times in Psalms. In 20:5 there is mention of banners being lifted up when God's victories have been won. Lifting banners is a way of celebrating when God answers his people's prayers. In Psalm 60:4 a banner is used in a very different way. It is a means of protecting those who fear the Lord and follow him. It is God that raises the banner this time. This banner symbolises the power and presence of God protecting them from the bow. This banner is unfurled so presumably it must have been made of some kind of flexible material like cloth. Like many banners it animated them and put life and courage into them and struck terror into the hearts of their enemies, to whom it was a banner of defiance. Psalm 74 speaks of what happened when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed by Nebuchannezzar. The enemy set up banners as signs (verse 4) and the miraculous signs that the Lord would give them do not appear (verse 9).

One of the ways in which the Song of Songs can be viewed is as Jesus with his bride, i.e. the church. If the interpretation of the passages spoken by the beloved is that they are spoken by Jesus it will sound as though Jesus has but a banner over me which is love (2:4). What on earth does that mean? If a banner represents the presence and power of something then this means that the power and presence of Jesus over is us love. Later in 6:4 the beloved is described as "majestic as troops with banners" Banners show the pomp and pageantry involved in celebrations.

Isaiah talks about banners quite a lot. He uses them as rallying points and gives them the ability to attract people like a magnet. He uses them in two time frames. In the immediate period, that is during the time span of the Old Testament, he uses them in terms of attracting others to punish God's people this is seen in Isaiah 5:26. In the longer term he uses them as means of explaining in how God's people will return to Jerusalem.

Isaiah 5:26 talks about God lifting up a banner for distant nations. This banner was not to help His people but to call other people to come and administer His punishment for them. They had been told that they would be protected as long as they did things God's way but they stopped doing this. The result of this was that God called on other nations to come and wreak havoc among his people. The banner is here a sign for a foreign army to gather around.

In Isaiah 13:2 a banner is raised on a bare hill top to encourage the enemies of King people to come and take care of King Nebuchanazzar that is to gather and come against him. Isaiah prophesies that the Jews will beckon them and shout to encourage them to enter the city. This time the banner is to attract those who are not God's people but, instead of being a

punishment, it is a device to encourage a change of power that will enable God's people to return home from exile.

Later in Isaiah there is another mention of banners being used. This time it is the Root of Jesse (that is Jesus) standing as a banner. This banner will be used to rally all God's people from every nation. In 11:10 this banner raised by God will bring about the restoration of all God's people even those who have been scattered to the four winds in exile. This is often seen as portraying the return of the Jews to Israel.

It does not stop there though. In Isaiah 49:22 it says that the gentiles will be reckoned with the children of the exiles. God will lift up his banner to the peoples and then the gentiles will carry home the exiles. In other words the exiles will not have to do it all themselves. Others will help them make their way home. In 62:10 the banner for the nations is raised to attract them to walk on the highway of holiness from Babylon (often used allegorically for the most wicked place on earth) to Jerusalem.

Banners are signs that can be seen. They are often spoke of as being raised on a hill top to make them even more visible. Raising up a banner is a sign of calling people to war. In Isaiah 18:3 it is Cush that the Lord is calling people to war against. Isaiah also uses the image of a flagstaff in 30:17. This is where it is the symbol of an empty place with just a few people around. This is where a few people are left after the devastating defeat who can then warn others about what has happened.

The Assyrian is a type of demonic power in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 31:9 it is said that their commanders will panic at the sight of the battle standard. Think of it in terms of spiritual warfare. If we raise the battle standard then the commanders of the demons will panic, not just the foot soldiers, but the commanders. The rest of the verse says that their strongholds will fall because of the terror that seeing the battle standards will bring. Imagine when the church lifts up its battle standards what will happen to the demonic commanders and how easily strongholds will be brought down.

Jeremiah has quite a different role in the prophetic ministry than Isaiah had. He tries to persuade a stubborn people to listen to the voice of God calling them to repentance and only ever succeeds in going into exile with them. Jeremiah uses the battle standard and the trumpet in 4:21 as signs of calling God's people to war. God's people did not see the sounds of war so were unprepared for what lay ahead. He also proclaims that Babylon will be captured and her gods put to shame. The banner is the sign of warfare in Chapter 51. It is the Lord who will bring the Medes to Babylon to capture it in verses 12 and 27.

There is also mention in the Bible of things being waved in God's house. A close look at verses like Exodus 29:24 or chapters like Exodus 35 will show that the Israelites used something called a wave offering. Part of the elaborate procedure for the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests included a wave offering of a breast of lamb. In Exodus 35 the Israelites are gathering materials to make the Tabernacle. In verses 4 to 9 Moses makes a request for materials for the building work and in verses 10 to 19 asks for skilled artisans to come forwards to prepare the Tabernacle. Verses 20 to 29 show the Israelite's response to these calls. Verse 22 states "All who were willing, men and women alike, came and brought jewellery of all kinds; brooches, ear-rings, rings and ornaments. They all presented their gold as a wave offering to the Lord." It also says there was a wave offering of bronze as well and a collection of silver.

There are other places where as part of the sacrificial ritual, part of the animal sacrifice was waved before the Lord. Part of the fellowship offerings of Israelites were waved before the Lord and were then consumed by the priests and the members of their families who were

ceremonially clean. There were other things that were offered to the Lord as part of the sacrificial ritual that were waved before the Lord like bread and cakes or grain. This can be seen in Leviticus Chapter 23 where the requirements of a number of festivals are given. The first sheaf of the harvest is waved before the Lord as a celebration of Firstfruits. The Festival of Weeks included the waving of "two loaves made of two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour, baked with yeast" before the Lord.

Why mention about other things being waved before God in a chapter in a work about the use of flags? It is interesting to note that there was such a thing as wave offering. In the Old Testament things that were given to God were often destroyed. Towns captured in warfare were seen as God's property and were destroyed. Sacrifices given to God were destroyed as burnt offerings. There were some offerings that people made to God that human beings could take advantage of and these were waved before the Lord. The offerings of jewellery that were waved before the Lord were taken advantage of by human beings to build the place where they met God. The offerings of food were consumed by the ceremonially clean. Flags are not just a sign of warfare. They are a wave offering to the Lord and speak of the sacrifice, in terms of time and effort, required of human beings who are willing to enter spiritual warfare.

Conclusion

A flag then is a symbol of great power and beauty and great history. Here are two quotations from the founder of the Vexillological Institute Whiston Smith.

“Flags represent the presence, origin, authority, possession, loyalty, glory, beliefs aspirations of a person, an organisation or a political entity. They are employed to honour or dishonour, warn and encourage, threaten and promise, exalt and condemn, commemorate and deny.”

“To display a flag is to participate in a group or a philosophy that spans time and distance; it is to express ones own views to others in a concise but dramatic form.....The flag is then the externalisation of the fears and hopes, the myths the magic of those who carry them.”

I hope that by know you realise that there is far more to flags that what you can see with your eyes. There is a whole realm of symbolism connected to them.

It has become obvious why the Holy Spirit discourages some things, for example using plain green flags as these are used as a symbol of Islam. Equally obviously, the Holy Spirit encourages the use of flags in spiritual warfare. I hope that what you have found out by reading my project will help you use flags wisely in your own situation.