
Ensigns of the Tudor Navy (1485-1603)

Autor:

Data de publicació: 25-07-2014

Ensigns and Streamers of the Tudor Navy (Great Britain)
1485-1603

Introduction to the Tudor Navy 1485-1603

The House of Tudor was a English royal dynasty that lasted 118 years and ruled between 1485 to 1603. The Tudors emerged from the Wars of the Roses as England's new rulers. The first Tudor to rule England was Henry VII (1485-1509). Born Henry Tudor, he married Elizabeth of York of the House of Plantagenet thus uniting the two families. He was followed on the throne by his son, the powerful Henry VIII (1509-1547), then Edward VI (1547-1553), Mary I (1553-1558), and finally the legendary Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603). The Tudors transformed the English navy into the most powerful naval force of its day.

English naval ensigns did not begin to be standardized until shortly before the Civil War. Therefore, Tudor ensigns varied from ship to ship. In 1896, flag historian Fredrick Hulme commented that "A hundred years ago or so, we may see that there was a considerable variety in the flags borne by our men-o'-war. Such galleries as those at Hampton Court or Greenwich afford many examples of this in the pictures there displayed..." Each of these were hand made and thus tended to be made in different materials and styles with no two exactly alike. They usually had horizontal stripes, in various colors, some with a canton and some without a canton, some with an overall Saint George's Cross and some with the Saint George's Cross in the canton.

Pete Loeser, 4 October 2012

Tudor Flags

(Notes from a presentation given at ICV 19 in York by David Loades.)

image by Rob Raeside

The presentation mainly concerned flags used at sea by Henry VIII's navy. Such flags served three purposes - decoration, identification, and information transfer. Decorative flags were used to glorify the prince, and were not used during rough weather or in battle. In order to understand the use of flags in battle in the early 16th Century, it must be noted that the concept of the sea battle was still being developed. Before the invention of guns on board, galleys fought mainly by ramming each other. With the appearance of guns in the early 15th Century, galleys began to fight as individual ships, although such battling was rare outside coastal waters or more sheltered seas like the Mediterranean. Sailing ships in use up to the late 16th Century were clumsy, and major sea battles were more by accident than by design. Sea battles were essentially land-type battles, fought at sea. Ships therefore copied land-based forces, and carried the arms of the travelers.

To demonstrate the decoration used by Henry VIII's ships, consider the record of purchase of flags for Grace à Dieu, his new flagship, in 1514. It was decorated with a 51 yard green and white streamer, 3 20 yard streamers, 3 5.5-yard long streamers, 10 3-yard long streamers, 10 St. George cross flags, and the image of the lion, the dragon and the greyhound (all provided at a cost of £112 19/8d). (See image above for an idea of the appearance of the streamer.) Some flags at this time were mostly streamers or banners, and some were made in metal. Special flags were made in fine wool or silk and embroidered.

At this time, ships were made or commandeered as needed for battle. After the battle, most ships reverted to the previous tasks. After the French War of 1512-14, Henry retained a fleet of 15 ships, essentially the beginning of the English navy. By 1545, the Naval Council existed with about 60 ships. Even in a smaller fleet, it was necessary to

denote which ship carried the admiral, and this was accomplished by flying the St. George Cross flag from the mizzen mast. With the introduction of a larger fleet, flags became used as signals of the squadron to which the ship belonged, initially by flying a flag on either the foremast, the top mast, or the mizzen mast. Arms were used abundantly to identify who was on board.

Henry VIII died in 1547, and [according to David Loades], by 1588, only the royal arms, the national flags, and the squadron ensigns (by this time red, blue and white flags, for the first, second and third squadrons respectively) were used. [disputed]

Rob Raeside, 8 August 2001

Squadron Ensigns during the Tudor Years

image by Tomislav Todorovi?

[Editorial Comment: This ensign is a "typical" example of the naval ensigns used during the Tudor Period, although the ratio shown here is based on more modern replicas. Some other examples follow using ratios more commonly associated with the Tudor period.]

A fleet of four English squadrons and one Dutch squadron were sent to Cadiz in 1596. Lord High Admiral, Howard of Effingham, was Joint Admiral of the Fleet, and led one squadron. Robert, Earl of Essex, was the other Joint Admiral, and led the second squadron. Lord Thomas Howard, Vice-Admiral, led the third squadron. Sir Walter Raleigh, Rear-Admiral, led the fourth squadron. Each squadron then had its own Vice-Admiral and Rear-Admiral.

Two flags (shown by Perrin, 1922) were flown by the following admirals:

image by Martin Grieve

St George canton and striped field:

Sir Robert Southwell, Vice-Admiral in Howard of Effingham's squadron, at the foremast of Lyon.
Alexander Clifford, Rear-Admiral in Effingham's squadron, at the mizzen of Dreadnought.
Lord Thomas Howard, Fleet Vice-Admiral, at the mainmast of Merhonour, plus St George at the foremast.
Sir Robert Dudley, Vice-Admiral in Thomas Howard's squadron, at the foremast of Nonpareil.
Rear-Admiral in Thomas Howard's squadron, at the mizzen of Crane(?)

image by Martin Grieve

Blue barred St George:

Sir Francis Vere, Vice-Admiral in the Earl of Essex's squadron, at the foremast of Rainbow.
Sir John Wingfeild, Rear-Admiral in Essex's squadron, at the mizzen of Vanguard.

image by Martin Grieve image by Christopher Southworth

From Sir William Slyngsby's "Relation of my Lord of Essex voyage to Cales", a manuscript in the Duke of Northumberland's collection reproduced in Navy Records Society's Naval Miscellany volume 1; edited by Sir Julian Corbett, 1902.

David Prothero, 6 May 2004

The stripes in question are a greenish-blue. However the intended colour must be blue as exactly the same colour is used in the fleur-de-lis quarters of the royal standard. Perrin's account of the flags used on the expedition differs from the Naval Miscellany that he is quoting, in two respects. The last sentence of the penultimate paragraph on page 88 of "British Flags" reads; "The Vice- and Rear-Admirals of his squadron flew at the fore the St George barred with blue horizontally." I think that the words "and mizzen respectively" have been omitted after the word "fore". In middle of the same paragraph, the flags of the Vice- and Rear-Admirals of the Lord High Admiral's squadron are described as: "..., a flag with striped field (red white and blue in seven horizontal stripes) and the St George in the canton." The stripe which is described as "red" is not the same colour as the cross of St George in the canton. It is brown. Perhaps the heraldic

stain tawny ?

The Editor of the Naval Miscellany, Sir Julian Corbett wrote, "The tinctures of the squadronal flags of 1596 as here represented are difficult to account for. The green and white are of course the ordinary Tudor colours. But the tincture of the first two squadrons bear no relation, as might have been expected, to those of the arms of Essex or Howard, or to those of any of the Queen's standards."

To summarise the admiral's flags used in the 1596 Cadiz expedition. The four English squadrons had the usual three ranks of admiral, vice-admiral and rear-admiral, but the full admiral of each squadron was also a fleet admiral; two were Joint Fleet Admirals, one was a Fleet Vice-Admiral and one was a Fleet Rear-Admiral.

The flag of the Fleet Admirals was St George; at the fore for the Vice-, and at the mizzen for the Rear-. One Joint Admiral had St George at the main, while the other had St George at the fore. To balance the latter inferior position, this admiral, who was also Lord High Admiral, flew the royal standard at the main.

The Vice- and Rear-Admirals of the first squadron had, at the fore and mizzen respectively, a flag with a St George canton, and horizontal stripes of tawny, white and blue shown here.

The Vice- and Rear-Admirals of the second squadron had, at the fore and mizzen respectively, St George barred blue shown here.

The Vice- and Rear-Admirals of the third squadron had, at the fore and mizzen respectively, a flag with a St George canton and horizontal stripes of green and white, shown here. This flag was also flown at the main by the Squadron Admiral who as Fleet Vice-Admiral had St George at the fore.

The Vice- and Rear-Admirals of the fourth squadron had, at the fore and mizzen respectively, a white flag. A white flag was also flown by the Squadron Admiral, who as Fleet Rear-Admiral had St George at the mizzen.

David Prothero, 12 June 2004

The Discovery Channel carried a documentary account of the life and adventures of Sir Francis Drake. It showed his vessel The Golden Hind sailing up the west coast of South America and capturing several Spanish treasure ships off the coast of Peru. The flag flown on the Golden Hind consisted of four broad green vertical stripes separated by three broad white ones. In the canton was what looked like an English flag, but the arms of the St George's Cross were much broader than one commonly sees. Is there any info regarding this flag?

Ron Lahav, 26 December 2004

I have never come across an ensign of the period with vertical stripes (although references are scant) but it would appear that the actual design was very much a matter of personal choice? Green and white were, of course, the Tudor livery colours and very popular in flags up to the Stuart accession, and what information we have suggests that the canton of St George was (with the odd exception) almost universal until 1707. The width of the arms of the St George varied considerably, so no significance need be attached to their size. As a matter of personal opinion only, I would have been inclined to have made the stripes horizontal, but given the 16th Century's freedom of design there is no real reason why such a flag should not be used? Indeed, I would not be at all surprised if someone came up with an exact reference.

Christopher Southworth, 27 December 2004

In earlier times, a stern ensign was apparently something of a luxury - a special occasion flag - with what evidence we have listing only one per ship (together with an ensign staff to fly it from), and there was certainly no regulation or convention extant with regard to the colour, number or disposition of the stripes. As examples, one source I have gives the naval ensign of c1623 as having 15 horizontal stripes alternately blue, white and yellow with a Cross of St George in the canton, whereas the flag of the Honorable East India Company (which may or may not date from the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign) is often shown with thirteen - we have visual evidence that the striped ensign was in use by HIEC ships in the 1660's, but no way of knowing whether the ensign ("ancient") listed in an inventory of 1601 was of this type?

Christopher Southworth, 22 May 2006

Tudor Naval Pennants

The use of multiple ensigns and flags flown from the masts to ceremonially decorate Tudor ships seems to have been the general practice of the times, and is sometimes confusing especially with the apparently interchangeable terms used to sometimes describe them. We have chosen to use the term "pennant" for the shorter ones and "streamer" for the longer ones here, some which appear to have reached prodigious lengths at times.

According to Frederick Hulme: "The Pennant, or pendant, is a long narrow flag with pointed end, and derives its name from the Latin word signifying to hang. ...some of the flags employed in ship-signalling are also of pennant form. It was in Tudor times called the streamer. Though such a flag may at times be found pressed into the service of city pageantry, it is more especially adapted for use at sea, since the lofty mast, the open space far removed from telegraph-wires, chimney-pots, and such-like hindrances to its free course, and the crisp sea-breeze to boldly extend it to its full length, are all essential to its due display. When we once begin to extend in length, it is evident that almost anything is possible: the pendant of a modern man-of-war is some twenty yards long, while its breadth is barely six inches, and it is evident that such a flag as that would scarcely get a fair chance in the general "survival of the fittest" in Cheapside. It is charged at the head with the Cross of St. George."

Source: The Flags of the World (1896) by Frederick Edward Hulme, p 20

Pete Loeser, 5 May 2012

Tudor Fleur-de-Lys Pennant 1520

image by Tomislav Todorovi?, 02 May 2013

In the description of one of the City pageants in honour of Henry VII. we find among the "baggs" (badges), "a rede rose and a wyght in his mydell, golde floures de luces, and portcullis also in golde," the 'wallys' of the Pavilion whereon these were displayed being 'chekkyrs of whyte and grene.'"

Source: The Flags of the World (1896) by Frederick Edward Hulme, p 26

Image Source: Plate Three

Tudor Portcullis Pennant 1520

image by Tomislav Todorovi?, 02 May 2013, based on Wikipedia image of badge of the Portcullis Pursuivant of Arms

Image Source: Plate Three

Tudor Rose Pennant 1520

image by Tomislav Todorovi?, 02 May 2013, based on Wikipedia image of the Tudor Rose

Image Source: Plate Three

Tudor Red Dragon Pennant 1520

image by Tomislav Todorovi?, 02 May 2013, based on Wikipedia image of the flag of Wales

Image Source: Plate Three

Tudor Naval Streamers

The Tudor naval streamer was a long, tapering flag, flown from the top of the forecastle, between 20 yards or longer in length, and up to 8 yards wide. For example, according to period records, the ship that took Beauchamp, the Earl of Warwick, to France in the reign of Henry VII flew a "great streamer" 40 yards in length and 8 yards wide. About the closest thing to a Tudor streamer today would be a Royal Navy commissioning pennant, which, in addition to the white ensign, is flown as a long streamer from the maintop gallant masthead.

Pete Loeser, 5 May 2013

A streamer shall stand in the toppe of a shippe, or in the forecastle, and therein be putt no armes, but a man's conceit

or device, and may be of the lengthe of twenty, forty, or sixty yards." — Harleian MS., No. 2,358, dealing with "the Syze of Banners, Standardes, Pennons, Guydhomes, Pencels, and Streamers."

Source: The Flags of the World (1896) by Frederick Edward Hulme, p 26

Image Source: Plate Three

Streamer flown by the H.M.S. Tiger

image by Tomislav Todorovi?, 02 May 2013

Image Source: Plate Three

Streamer flown on an unidentified warship 1520

image by Tomislav Todorovi?, 02 May 2013

Image Source: Plate Three

Cross of St. George and Tudor Livery Colours - 16th Century

image by Tomislav Todorovi?, 02 May 2013

Tudor Ensigns with red and white stripes

Source: These flags were shown on a painting of the H.M.S. Tiger by Van de Velde

The Flags of the World (1896) by Frederick Edward Hulme, p 41

Pete Loeser, 5 May 2013

Flag hoisted at the poop (9 stripes)

image by Tomislav Todorovi?, 07 May 2013

Source: Chapter Two

Image Source: Plate Eight

Flag hoisted at the bow

image by Tomislav Todorovi?, 07 May 2013

Source: Chapter Two

Flags hoisted at the mastheads

image by Tomislav Todorovi?, 07 May 2013

The flags with same design were hoisted at three mastheads of the ship.

Source: Chapter Two

Image Source: Plate Seven

Tudor Ensigns with green and white stripes

image by Klaus-Michael Schneider, 8 May 2013

An 11-stripes flag divided horizontally into alternating green and white stripes, according to source flown in the 16th

Century.

Source: E.H.H. Archibald: Dictionary of Sea Painters, flag chart opp. to p.20, flag no. 25.

Klaus-Michael Schneider, 8 May 2013

Royal Navy Ensigns used after the Tudor Years 1603-1673

In 1603 the House of Stuart replaced the House of Tudor as England's ruling family with Elizabeth's death. James VI of Scotland became James I of England. Around 1620 we began to see the striped Tudor ensign give way to naval ensigns with solid-color fields. By the middle of the 17th Century the three basic British flags had become the Cross of St. George, the Union Flag, and the Red Ensign with a canton of the Cross of St. George.

Pete Loeser, 5 May 2013

Ensigns using a striped format are known to have been flown by the Navy Royale until the late 1620's, and some parts of the merchant service somewhat longer - it is known, for example, that the red and white striped ensign of the Honourable East India Company was still in general use by ships of that company in 1673.

Christopher Southworth, 6 May 2013

See also: Possible sightings of striped ensigns after 1630