

An Introduction to Flag Etiquette

As a member of a Royal Yacht Club, it is expected that members as far as possible will maintain a suitable standard of flag etiquette and set others an example.

Flag etiquette is a combination of law, good manners and tradition. Being ill-informed of your obligations could lead you to cause insult at home or abroad by giving a signal you do not intend to give, or could lead you to a fine for breaking the law. Only with the right flag, correctly positioned, can you be sure that you are giving the correct message and that any signal you are giving is clear.

The most senior position for a flag on a vessel is reserved for the Ensign - this is worn as close to the stern of the vessel as possible and denotes the nationality of the vessel. A UK registered vessel should wear the national maritime flag, the Red Ensign, unless entitled to wear a privileged Ensign.

The burgee takes the next most senior position on the vessel which is the main masthead. Only one burgee may be flown on the vessel. A privileged ensign may never be worn without its club burgee.

The starboard spreaders are used for signaling. This is where both a national courtesy flag and the Q flag should be flown.

With the advent of all sorts of equipment and aerials at the main masthead, it is now common practice to fly the burgee at the starboard spreaders, however, no other flag may be flown above the burgee on the same halyard. You also may not fly any other flag above a national courtesy flag on the same halyard. If you fly your burgee at the starboard spreaders and are sailing in the territorial waters of another country you have a dilemma. However you choose to solve this, unless you fly your burgee at the top of the mast you will be contravening one or another element of flag etiquette.

House flags are flown from the port spreaders. A house flag may indicate membership of an association (e.g. the RYA House Flag) or society or may be to indicate membership of another club, if the burgee of a more senior club is already being flown. More than one house flag may be flown on the port halyard, but with caution that they are flown in order of seniority.

The Union flag, Welsh Dragon and the Crosses of St Andrew, St George and St Patrick are primarily land flags and should not be flown at sea by cruising yachtsmen. At sea the cross of St George is the flag of an Admiral and it should therefore not be flown by anyone else, without special dispensation. A vessel flying the St Andrew's Cross could be mistaken as saying "My vessel is stopped and making no way through the water" as this is the meaning of code flag M which has the same design and the St Patrick's Cross could be misinterpreted as code flag V "I require assistance"

When in harbour, your Ensign should be hoisted at 0800 (0900 between 1st November and 14 February) and lowered at sunset (or 2100 local time if earlier). As stated above, if you hold a permit, the Blue Ensign may only be worn when the Club burgee is flown at the main masthead or other suitable position.

The Club burgee should only be flown when the owner is in the vicinity of his yacht.

The sizes and condition of flags are important. They should not be tatty and should not hang in the water, but should still be large enough to be seen.