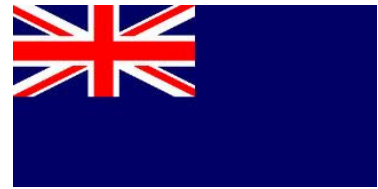


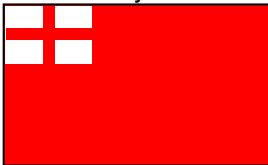
Why does St. Peter's Barge wear the Blue Ensign?



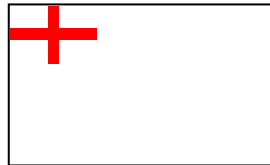
St. Peter's Barge is London's only floating church, and has spiritually been "flying the flag" in Canary Wharf since arriving at West India Quay in 2004. But until now, unlike many of the other vessels around her, the barge has not been flying an actual flag. This has now changed, and the flag that she flies – or, in nautical terminology – *the ensign that she wears* – is rather unusual.

From 1620 until 1864, the Royal Navy was divided into three squadrons: Red, White and Blue. The Red Squadron, which was the most senior, patrolled the Caribbean and the North Atlantic. The White Squadron patrolled the coasts of Britain and France and the Mediterranean, while the Blue patrolled the South Atlantic, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Ships of the three squadrons were identified by a flag or "ensign" of the appropriate colour, each incorporating the red-on-white cross of St. George (patron saint of England):

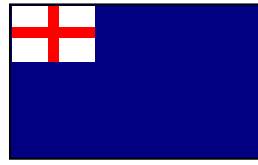
17th Century Naval ensigns:



Red Ensign



White Ensign



Blue Ensign

Captains of Royal Navy ships arriving in London needed to find a church where they could register the details of any deaths, births or marriages that had occurred during the voyage. Deaths were to be expected, of course, but remarkably there were often some births and occasionally even a marriage, as it was not uncommon for there to be women on board!

The church usually chosen as the place of registry was St. Dunstan's, Stepney, as its large (but then thinly-populated) East London parish extended all the way down to the river. In recognition of its important function and to make it stand out more clearly across the marshes, St. Dunstan's was given the right to fly, or "wear", the Red Ensign, the ensign of the senior squadron of the Royal Navy, a tradition which the church continues to this day.



As the population of London increased, growing parishes needed to be subdivided. In 1709 a new parish in Limehouse was formed from part of the parish of St. Dunstan. Queen Anne had come to the throne in 1702 so it was not surprising that the new parish church was named St. Anne's, although Nicholas Hawksmoor's magnificent building was not completed until 1727 and was finally dedicated in 1730, some 15 years after Queen Anne had died and had been succeeded by King George I. But the Queen had decreed that as the new church would be even closer to the river – and would therefore be more convenient as a place of registry – it should wear the second most senior ensign, the White Ensign. The prominent tower became a Trinity House "sea mark" on navigational charts, and Queen's Regulations still permit St. Anne's Limehouse to wear the White Ensign 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The Act of Union of 1707 had united Scotland, England and Wales into the Kingdom of Great Britain, so the White Ensign first worn by St. Anne's Limehouse would have included the diagonal white-on-blue cross of St. Andrew (patron saint of Scotland).



The Act of Union of 1801 joined Ireland with Great Britain to form the United Kingdom, which resulted in the diagonal red-on-white cross of St. Patrick (patron saint of Ireland) being added to the Union Flag in the canton (the top-left quadrant) of all the ensigns.

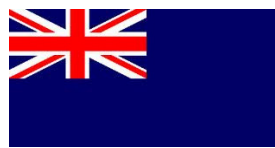
19th Century Naval ensigns (still in use today):



Red Ensign



White Ensign



Blue Ensign

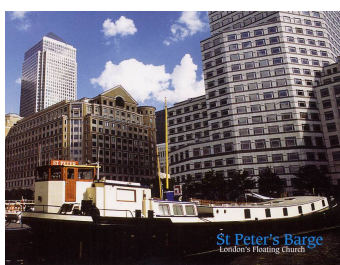
Wales was already joined to England by the Act of Union of 1536, so it has never been separately represented on the Union Flag. Sailors often insist that the British flag should only be called the “Union Jack” when it is flown from the jack-staff at the bow of a ship, but in fact the more general use of the name has been recognised by the Admiralty since 1902, and was officially sanctioned by Parliament in 1908.

In July 1864 the distinction between the Red, White and Blue squadrons was abolished and the White Ensign became the ensign of the Royal Navy. The Red Ensign became the ensign of the British Merchant Fleet, and the Blue Ensign was allocated to the Royal Naval Reserve.

Today any privately-owned vessel, even the humblest, may wear the Red Ensign. You will also see many Blue Ensigns, but if you look closely you will see that on the blue background there is nearly always some sort of crest or badge or other symbol, so that the ensign is “defaced”. Defaced blue ensigns are worn by vessels belonging to UK departments and public bodies, or to certain British yacht clubs. For example, vessels belonging to members of the Cruising Association, based at Limehouse, wear a Blue Ensign which is defaced by a white anchor on a red circle. Most UK overseas territories (except Bermuda and Gibraltar), and some members of the Commonwealth which in the past were British colonies or possessions, also have a defaced Blue Ensign as their national flag, which causes some confusion. European port officials often assume that Cruising Association yachts have sailed all the way from Australia or New Zealand!



But the plain, undefaced Blue Ensign is something very special. It can usually only be worn by British merchant vessels whose officers and crew include a certain number of retired Royal Navy personnel or Royal Navy reservists, or by vessels belonging to members of a very small and select group of yacht clubs. Since 1864, the penalty for infringing the regulations by wearing an ensign to which you are not entitled has been £500 – which was a lot of money in 1864!



However St. Peter's Canary Wharf was created within the parish of St Anne's Limehouse, which in turn was formed from part of the parish of St. Dunstan's Stepney. So as St. Dunstan's wears the most senior ensign (the Red) and St. Anne's wears the second most senior (the White) so now St. Peter's Barge has a Warrant to wear the third most senior ensign: the *undefaced* Blue Ensign!

This article has mentioned several “saints”: St. George, St. Dunstan, St. Anne, St. Andrew, St. Patrick and St. Peter. Only two of these – Andrew and Peter (who were brothers) – appear in the Bible, and we know very little for certain about the others. But in fact the Bible teaches that *all* Christians are saints, because it is through faith in Jesus Christ that a person is “sanctified”. Do visit our website to find out more or to listen to one of our online talks. Even better, come along and see for yourself. As well as our weekly services and talks we regularly run a course called ‘Christianity Explored’ for those who want to find out more. Welcome aboard!

Lunchtime Talks:

- Wednesday 1:05pm
- Thursday 1:15pm

Sunday Services:

- 4.00pm (with Sunday School & Crèche)
- 6.30pm

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By Jeremy Batch

- with thanks to:

- Revd. Gordon Warren RN (Hon), rector of St. Anne's Limehouse.
- Dave Holman, member of Greenwich Yacht Club.