

# **A Guide to Flag Protocol in the United Kingdom**

**(An extract from the book "*British Flags and Emblems*")**

**A Presentation at the 2002 AGM  
of the National Association of Civic Officers**

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## The Flag Etiquette of the United Kingdom

The National Flags of the United Kingdom (ie. the Union Flag and the flags of England, Scotland and Wales) should be displayed only in a manner befitting the national emblems; they should not be subjected to indignity and should not normally be displayed in a position inferior to any other flag or ensign. The National Flags should always be flown aloft and free.

It is improper to use any of the National Flags as a table or seat cover or as a masking for boxes, barriers, or intervening space between floor and ground level on a dais or platform. The use of any of the National Flags to cover a statue, monument or plaque for an unveiling ceremony is not common practice and is discouraged.

The National Flags should never be flown in a dilapidated or damaged condition, or when soiled. To do so is show disrespect for the nations they represent.

### Displaying the Flag

Flags are normally flown from sunrise to sunset. Flags may be flown by night as well as by day as long as they are properly illuminated at all times, preferably by spotlight.

No permission is necessary to fly the National Flags and they are explicitly excluded from planning regulations (although flagpoles are not).

**Important:** the Union Flag has a correct way up - in the half of the flag nearest the flagpole, the wider diagonal white stripe must be above the red diagonal stripe. It is considered improper to fly the flag upside down.



This flag is upside down!

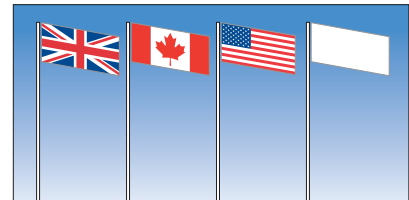
### Position of Honour

Whenever any of the UK's National Flags, or any other sovereign national flags, are displayed, due consideration should be given to flag etiquette and precedence. If a purely decorative effect is desired it is better to confine the display to flags of lesser status; for example, house flags, pennants or coloured bunting.

The basic order of precedence of flags in the United Kingdom is: Royal Standards, the Union Flag, the Constituent National Flag of the home country (England, Scotland or Wales), flags of other nations (in English alphabetical order), the flag of the European Union, flags of counties, flags of cities or towns, banners of arms, and house flags. See Appendix A for a more detailed precedence list and special precedence orders for international organizations.

When the National Flags are flown with the flags of other nations each flag should have the same width (the measurement from top to bottom) and should fly from a separate flagpole of the same height. International protocol prohibits the flying of any nation's flag higher than another in peacetime (apart from medal ceremonies during sporting events). If any of the flags are square or nearly square, they can have a slightly larger width (up to 125%) to give a more equal area.

The senior National Flag (ie. the Union Flag or the Constituent National Flag of the home country) should be raised first and lowered last, unless the number of flags permits them to be raised and lowered simultaneously.



Flags should be raised briskly and lowered ceremoniously. An alternative British tradition for flag raising is to hoist the flag while still rolled up and tied with a thin piece of cotton or a slip knot. A sharp tug of the halyard will break the cotton and release the flag to fly free. This is known as 'breaking' the flag, and is often used to mark the beginning of an event, or the arrival of a VIP.

The National Flags should be displayed as follows:

### On Buildings

Where there are two or more flagpoles parallel to the building line, the senior National Flag should be the first flag on the left of an observer facing the main entrance of the building. The remaining flags then appear in order of precedence from left to right.

Where there are two or more flagpoles on the forecourt of a building but at an angle to the main entrance, the senior National Flag should be flown on the outermost pole when the flagpoles are situated to the left of the main entrance and on the innermost pole when the flagpoles are to the right of the main entrance.

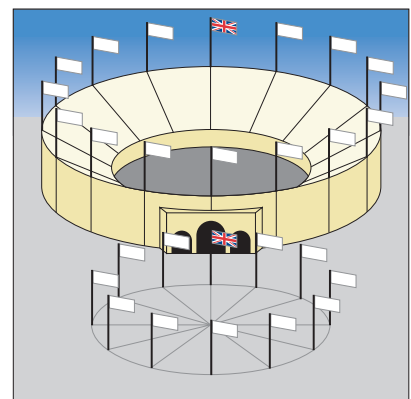
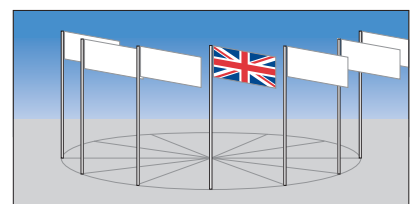
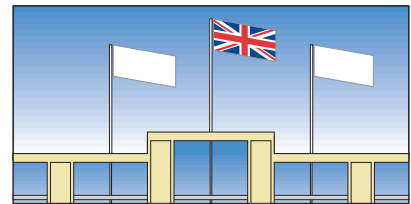
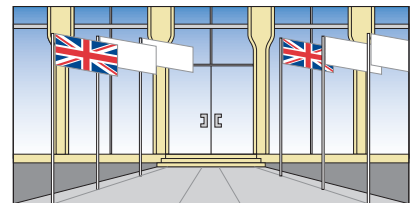
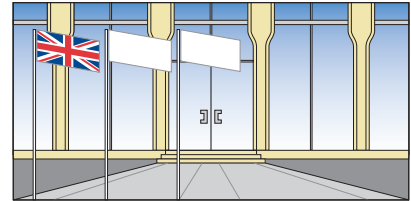
If only one flag is to be flown and there are two flagpoles, it should be flown on the flagpole to the observer's left. If there are more than two flagpoles, it should be flown as near as possible to the centre. This only applies when the other flagpoles remain empty.

If one flagpole is higher than the rest then the senior National Flag can fly from that flagpole but no other national flags can be flown on the other flagpoles. These can still be used for more junior flags such as county and house flags. Alternatively the higher flagpole can be left empty and the remaining flagpoles used as if it did not exist. In general when siting flagpoles it is a good idea to keep them all at the same level to avoid these protocol problems.

### Within a Circle of Flags

In a semi-circle of flags representing a number of nations, the senior National Flag should be in the centre. The remaining flags should be placed with the next most senior flag (or first in alphabetical order if all the flags are of equal seniority) on the left of the central flag, the next on the right of the central flag, the next on the 2<sup>nd</sup> left from the central flag, and continuing to alternate left and right.

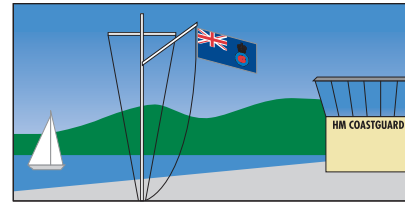
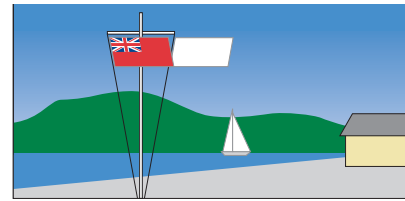
In an enclosed circle of flags representing a number of nations, the senior National Flag should be flown on the flagpole immediately opposite the main entrance to the venue, or above the Royal Box if there is no main entrance. The remaining flags should be arranged as for the semi-circle of flags described above.



### From a Flagpole with Yardarm and Gaff

When displayed with the flag of another nation on a flagpole fitted with a yardarm, the senior National Flag should be positioned on the left hand side of the yardarm as viewed from the front.

If the flagpole is fitted with a gaff, the senior National Flag should be flown from the gaff and above any other flag. If another national flag is to be flown on the same flagpole the gaff cannot be used as this would breach international protocol. In this case the flags would go on the yard-arm as above.

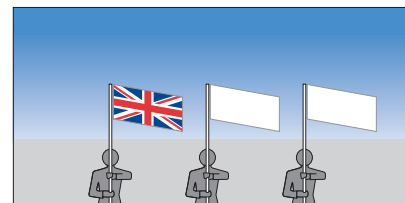
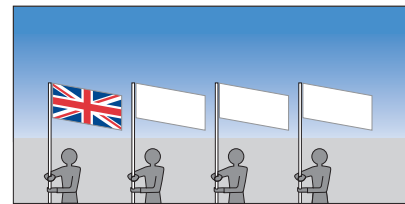


### In Processions

The senior National Flag should always lead in a single file of flags.

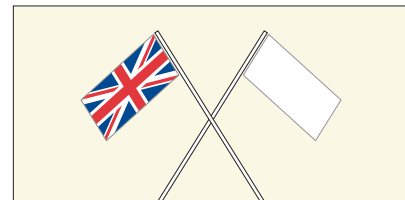
When two or more flags are carried side-by-side, the senior National Flag takes the position of honour on the right-hand end of the line facing the direction of movement.

When passing the person taking the salute the flag should be lowered so that the staff is horizontal or almost horizontal. This can be done by simply lowering the staff straight ahead, or by lowering the staff towards the person taking the salute and then swinging it round to be straight ahead. All the movements should be slow and graceful and care should be taken that the flag does not touch the ground. After the person taking the salute has been passed the flag should be raised to its original position.



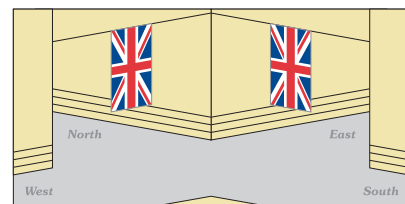
### With Crossed Flags

Whenever crossed with the flag of another nation or organization, the senior National Flag should be on the left of the observer facing the flag. Its staff should be in front of the staff of the other flag.



### Suspended Vertically Above a Street

The flag's top-left corner (the canton), or uppermost broad white diagonal in the case of the Union Flag, should be on the north side in an east-west street, and the east side in a north-south street, thus being on the left of the observer facing east or south respectively.



### Flat Against A Surface

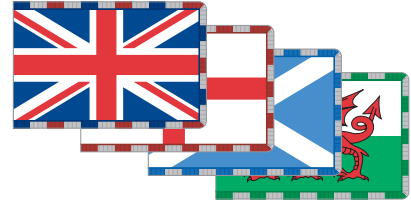
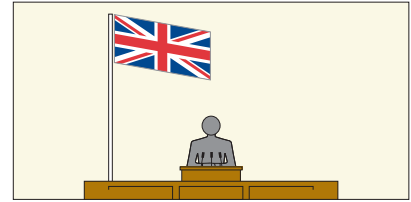
Union Flag - If hung horizontally or vertically, the uppermost broad white diagonal should be in the top-left corner.

Other flags - If hung vertically, the edge that would normally be the top of the flag should be on the left, so for example, ensigns have their Union Flag canton in the upper left corner. On ensigns that have an armorial badge, if possible the badge should be upright, and the correct way round.



### On a Speaker's Platform

When displayed from a staff, on a speaker's platform, the senior National Flag should be placed on the right-hand side of the speaker. For interior or parade use a "Dress Flag" may be used. This is normally made of silk or satin with a fringe around three sides. The fringe can be gold or red/white/blue for the Union Flag, red/white for St. George's Cross, blue/white for St. Andrew's Cross and green/white for the Red Dragon. The fringe is purely decorative.



### As a Pall for a Casket at Funerals

If the national flag is to be placed on a coffin during a funeral procession or service, it should be placed so that the top-left corner of the flag is over the deceased's left shoulder. The flag should be removed before interment or cremation and folded.

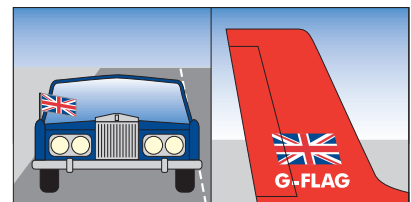
In the United Kingdom it is not normal practice to present the flag to the next of kin, but should they have expressed a desire to retain the flag it may be presented to them after being folded. There is no prescribed method of folding the flag for this purpose, and any method that produces the desired result can be used.



### On Vehicles

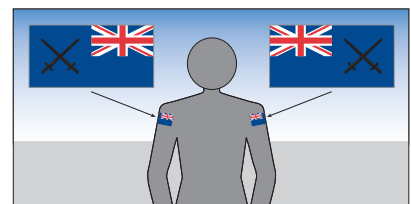
If a vehicle is to fly a car flag it should be placed on a mast fitted to the front-right wing or fender, or in the centre of the front edge of the roof. If two flags are to be flown the more senior flag should be on the front-right wing or fender and the junior flag on the front-left wing or fender.

When flags are painted onto a vehicle, for example on the tail fin of an aircraft, the flag on the port side should show the obverse of the flag (ie. the flagpole on the left), while that on the starboard side should show the reverse (ie. the flagpole on the right). On surfaces perpendicular to the direction of travel the obverse of the flag should be shown.



### On Uniforms

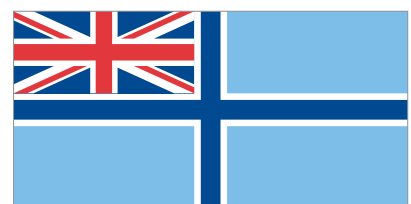
When shoulder patches of the National Flag are used on uniforms the flag on the left shoulder or sleeve should show the obverse of the flag (ie. the flagpole at the wearer's front). If it is considered necessary to have a patch on the right shoulder or sleeve it should show the reverse of the flag (ie. still with the flagpole at the wearer's front). If more than one flag is to be shown the Union Flag should be at the top.



### At Civilian Transport Facilities

Civilian marine facilities should fly the Civil Ensign (the Red Ensign) as their national flag, unless they belong to an organization that holds a warrant for a special ensign, when that ensign should be used instead.

Civilian air facilities, such as airports and airfields, should fly the Civil Air Ensign as their national flag, rather than the Union Flag. They may additionally fly the appropriate constituent national flag.



The Civil Air Ensign

## The Proper Disposal of Flags

When a flag becomes tattered or faded and is no longer in a suitable condition for use, it should be destroyed in a dignified way, for example by burning it privately, or by tearing or cutting it into strips that no longer resemble the original flag.

## Flags on UK Government Buildings

The Lord Chamberlain's Department, through the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the national Executives, issues a list of Flag Days on which UK Government buildings should fly the national flag. This does not prevent them flying the national flag on any other day that they feel is appropriate or desirable.

20th January	Birthday of HRH The Countess of Wessex
6th February	Her Majesty's Accession
19th February	Birthday of HRH The Duke of York
1st March	St. David's Day (in Wales only, see note 1)
10th March	Birthday of HRH The Earl of Wessex
17th March	St. Patrick's Day (in Northern Ireland only)
March	Commonwealth Day (second Monday)
21st April	Birthday of Her Majesty The Queen
23rd April	St. George's Day (in England only, see note 1)
9th May	Europe Day (see note 2)
2nd June	Coronation Day
10th June	Birthday of HRH The Duke of Edinburgh
June	Official Celebration of Her Majesty's Birthday (see note 3)
17 <sup>th</sup> July	Birthday of The Duchess of Cornwall
15th August	Birthday of HRH The Princess Royal
November	Remembrance Day (second Sunday, see note 4)
14th November	Birthday of HRH The Prince of Wales
20th November	Her Majesty's Wedding Day
30th November	St. Andrew's Day (in Scotland only, see note 1)

Also on the day of the opening of a Session of the Houses of Parliament by Her Majesty and the day of the prorogation of a Session of the Houses of Parliament by Her Majesty (see note 5). In Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales on the day of the opening and prorogation of a Session of their Parliament or Assembly.

### Notes

1. Where a building has two or more flagpoles the appropriate national flag may be flown in addition to the Union Flag but not in a superior position.
2. The Union Flag should fly alongside the European Flag. On Government buildings that only have one flagpole, the Union Flag should take precedence.
3. Date announced annually.
4. Flags should be flown right up all day.
5. Flags should be flown on this day even if Her Majesty does not perform the ceremony in person. Flags should only be flown in the Greater London area.

6. The Royal Standard is never hoisted when the Royal person is passing in procession. If the Royal person is to be present in a building, the Lord Chamberlain's Department, Buckingham Palace, London SW1 should be consulted.

## Flags on Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Executive Government Buildings

Buildings belonging to the Scottish and Welsh Executives normally fly their own national flag rather than the Union Flag. Where two flagpoles are available both flags may be flown, with the Union Flag having the senior position. Northern Ireland Executive buildings may only fly flags on specified days (see the previous list of days), and on these days they fly the Union Flag alone.

## Flags at Half-mast

Half-mast means the flag is flown two-thirds of the way up the flagpole, with at least the height of the flag between the top of the flag and the top of the flagpole, allowing space for the traditionally invisible flag of Death. On poles that are more than 45° from the vertical flags cannot be flown at half-mast and the pole should be left empty.

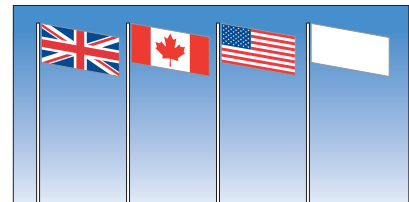
When a flag is to be flown at half-mast, it should first be raised all the way to the top of the mast, allowed to remain there for a second and then be lowered to the half-mast position. When it is being lowered from half-mast, it should again be raised to the top of the mast for a second before being fully lowered.

When the national flag is at half-mast, other flags on the same stand of poles should also be at half-mast or should not be flown at all. Flags of foreign nations should not be flown, unless their country is also observing mourning.

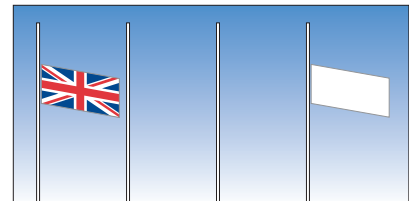
The Royal Standard never flies at half-mast. It represents the Monarchy, which is continuous, and it would therefore be inappropriate for it to fly at half-mast.

Flags should be flown at half-mast on the following occasions:

- (a) From the announcement of the death until the funeral of the Sovereign, except on Proclamation Day, when they are hoisted right up from 11am to sunset.
- (b) The funerals of members of the Royal Family, subject to special commands from Her Majesty in each case.
- (c) The funerals of foreign Rulers, subject to special commands from Her Majesty in each case.
- (d) The funerals of Prime Ministers and Ex-Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom, subject to special commands from Her Majesty in each case.
- (e) The funerals of First Ministers and Ex-First Ministers of Scotland and Northern Ireland and First Secretaries and Ex-First Secretaries of Wales, subject to special commands from Her Majesty in each case. Unless otherwise commanded by Her Majesty this only applies to flags in their respective countries.
- (f) At British Embassies, High Commissions and Missions when flags in



A Stand of Flags at Full-mast



The Same Stand at Half-mast

the host country are being flown at half-mast, subject to the discretion of the *Chef de Mission*.

(g) Any other occasions where Her Majesty has given a special command.

If a Flag Day occurs on a day when flags are flying at half-mast the flags should still be flown at half-mast.

If the body of a very distinguished subject is lying in a building the flag should fly at half-mast on that building until the body has left.

The above cover State Mourning, and do not prevent the flying of flags at half-mast on private or non-Government buildings on other occasions.

## Appendix - Precedence of Flags

There are four main orders of flags in the United Kingdom, depending upon the occasion:

### General Precedence

The Royal Standard

The Personal Flag of

HM Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother

HRH The Duke of Edinburgh

HRH The Prince of Wales

HRH Prince William of Wales

HRH The Duke of York

HRH The Earl of Wessex

HRH The Princess Royal

HRH The Duke of Gloucester

HRH The Duke of Kent

HRH Prince Michael of Kent

HRH Princess Alexandra

The Other Members' Standard

The Union Flag

The White Ensign of the Royal Navy

The Ensign of the Royal Air Force

The Blue and Red Ensigns

National Flag of the host constituent nation, crown dependency or overseas territory

National Flags of England, Scotland, Wales, crown dependencies and overseas territories

National Flags of other nations (in English alphabetical order)

The United Nations Flag

The Commonwealth Flag

The European Union Flag

The British Army Flag

Counties and Metropolitan Cities

Other Cities and Towns

Banners of Arms (both personal and corporate)

House Flags

### Commonwealth Events Order

Royal Standards (as above)

The Commonwealth Flag

The Union Flag

National Flag of the host constituent nation, crown dependency or overseas territory

National Flags of the Commonwealth in order of original accession to the Commonwealth

### United Nations Events Order

The United Nations Flag

National Flags of the United Nations in order of their name as used at the UN. The exceptions to the normal alphabetical order are (with the sorting letter in bold):

Côte d'Ivoire (was called Ivory Coast), Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Republic of Korea (South Korea), Republic of Moldova (Moldova), The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (Macedonia), United Republic of Tanzania (Tanzania)

### European Union (and NATO) Events Order

The European Union (or NATO) Flag  
National Flags in order of their name in their primary local language (EU in **bold type**):

**België / Belgique / Belgien** (Belgium), *Canada, Ceska Republika* (The Czech Republic), **Danmark** (Denmark), **Deutschland** (Germany), **España** (Spain), **France**, **Hellás** (Greece), **Ireland**, **Ísland** (Iceland), **Italia** (Italy), **Luxembourg**, **Magyarország** (Hungary), **Nederland** (The Netherlands), **Norge** (Norway), **Österreich** (Austria), **Polska** (Poland), **Portugal**, **Suomi** (Finland), **Sverige** (Sweden), *Türkiye* (Turkey), **United Kingdom**, **United States**