YACHT REGISTRATION, FLAG ETIQUETTE AND VISUAL SIGNALS

INTRODUCTION

Flags are colourful and brighten any yacht, but that is not why they are flown. Each is flown for a precise reason from recognised positions that together convey an explicit meaning. This was fully understood in the days of Nelson when there was no other means of signalling between ships at sea. Had his Lordship simply raised the 32 flags above without reference to these 'rules', then the famous signal would not have been understood.

This pamphlet aims to clarify the main points of flag etiquette which, as a whole, is a mixture of written law, tradition and good manners. Many yachtsmen today either do not understand the legal requirements and traditions associated with flag etiquette or are simply unaware; it is good therefore to make the effort to understand and observe its traditions and customs.

Flag etiquette is not difficult and the basic rules are simple. With a little thought, common sense will often guide one away from any action that could cause offence and upset others, particularly when abroad, and the satisfaction gained from getting it right should not be underestimated.

The original RYA book (C4/01) has been reorganised into 3 parts for publication on the RYA web site:

Part I gives the essential flag etiquette (what, where and when) that you should know about when you decide to register your yacht on the UK Shipping Register which, for all practical purposes, any yacht intending to voyage outside UK territorial waters must do; it will help you to stay on the right side of the law and may save you from embarrassment at your club's bar! It is if you like a 'quick start'.

Part II gives detailed advice on other aspects of flag etiquette including special ensigns, signal flags, house flags, mourning and dressing overall that you will almost certainly need to know from time to time. It is intended to be an advanced guide.

Part III lists distress signals and the most useful visual signals. It is intended as a useful reference.

Finally, this book uses the term 'yacht' in its correct sense; yacht means any vessel, motor or sailing, that is used for private pleasure purposes.

Again and again you will read the terms 'wear' and 'fly'. It is correct terminology to wear a maritime ensign of the national shipping register (the colours) and to fly all other flags. Finally and for completeness, it should be noted that an ensign is never worn ashore, it is flown.

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