

Flags of RMS *Olympic* and RMS *Titanic*



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For further information on modeling these flags, including scale sizes of all flags and a chronological listing of flags flown by Titanic on various dates, see David Cotgreave's Rivet Counter flag modeling reference accessed through the link on the main TRMA flags page.



Introduction

There is a great deal of misinformation in print and on internet sources regarding the flags and flag protocols of *Titanic*. Flag protocols are often misunderstood, quoted from the incorrect time period, or assumed to have been followed when they were not. The Pilot Flag is a good example of this: countless writers state that the Pilot Flag was hoisted above the bridge when *Titanic* cast off her hawsers at Southampton, and yet this flag does not appear in a single photograph. In other cases, period illustrations that were never intended to be exact representations of these flags have been held as accurate renditions; this is especially true of the White Star house flag.

Much of the misinformation is perpetuated by many of the countless *Titanic* websites in existence. While a few are run by serious historians knowledgeable in this field, many contain nothing more than erroneous information copied from elsewhere or written by someone with little more than superficial knowledge of the ship and no knowledge at all of flags and flag protocols.

This is a comprehensive reference and is intended to present accurate and definitive information on the flags flown by *Titanic* and *Olympic*. This includes the physical flags themselves and the regulations and/or protocols that dictated their use. Much of this information has been provided to David Cotgreave in the Flags section of his [Rivet Counter Titanic Scale Modeling Tutorial](#); consequently the accuracy of all flag information in David's work rests solely with this author. All information presented here is the result of research through photographs, period documents and publications, and archival sources. Any information not known for certain has been indicated as such.

Where changing protocols over time affected the flags flown by *Olympic* later in her career it has been indicated in the text. It should also be noted that none of the flag protocols herein should be considered applicable to *Olympic's* service during the war years, as wartime protocols differed from those of peacetime.

- Art Braunschweiger



The graphic illustrations of the flags on each page appear in the same scale relative to each other in order to give the reader a visual perspective on the relative sizes of the various flags. To give the reader a further perspective on each flag's size, the figure of a White Star officer (above) has been placed next to the flags on each page. This figure has been sized to a height of 5' - 10" plus an additional three inches for his uniform hat.

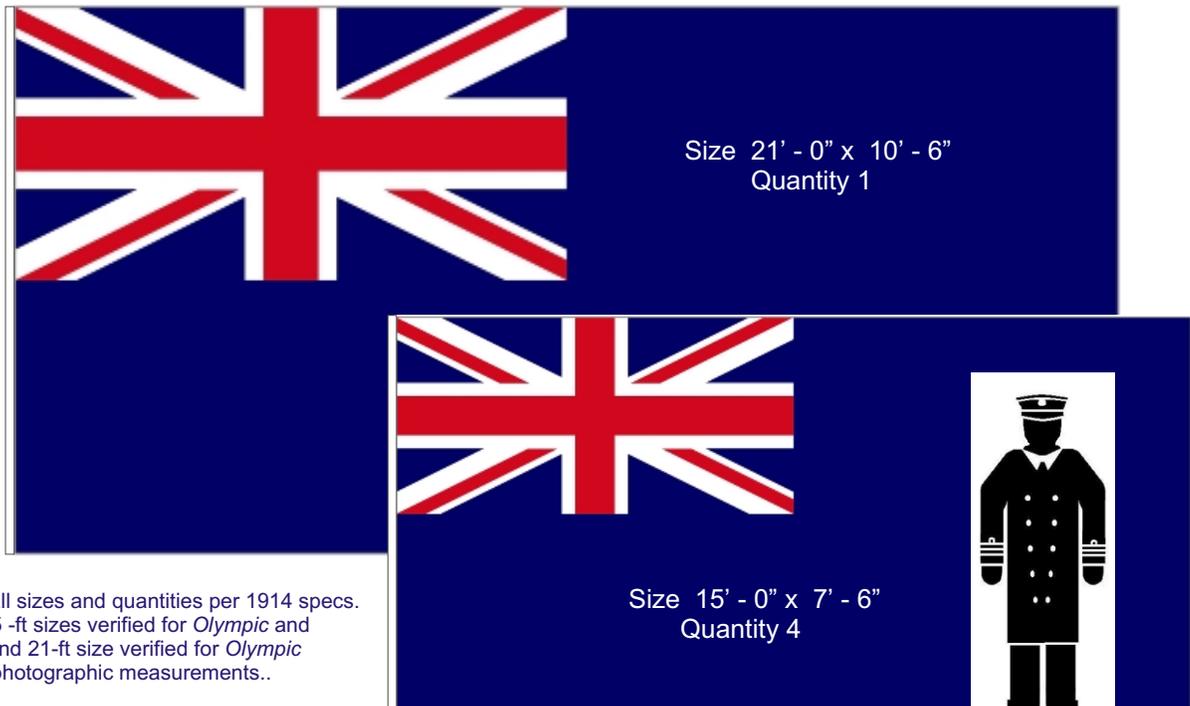
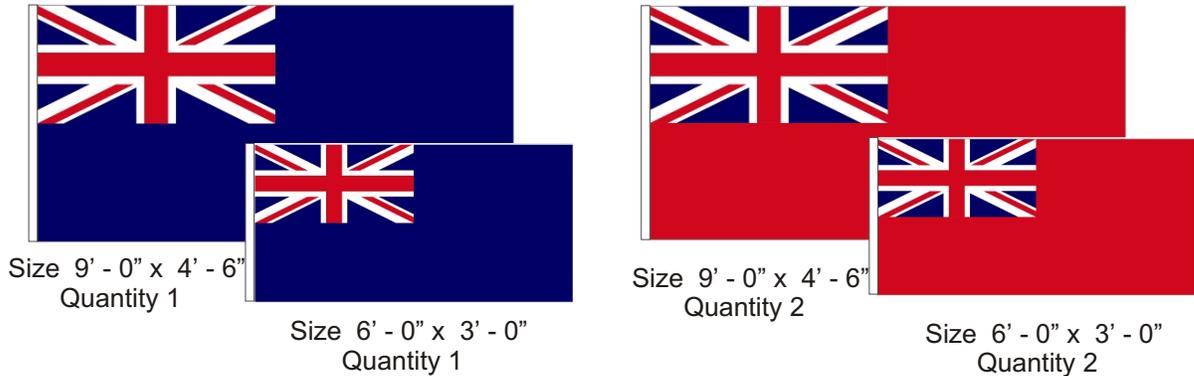
Thanks to Bruce Beveridge for his assistance in providing many of the flag specifications listed herein.

Blue and Red Ensigns (Ensign of the UK)

Flown from ensign staff at stern and at the foremast for dressed ship



Titanic, sea trials (ensign staff)



NOTE: all sizes and quantities per 1914 specs. 9- and 15-ft sizes verified for *Olympic* and *Titanic*, and 21-ft size verified for *Olympic* through photographic measurements..

This flag was flown from the ensign staff at the stern during daylight hours* to identify the ship's nationality. The Blue Ensign could only be used upon issue of an Admiralty warrant which denoted that the captain and at least 10 ratings or officers were members of the Royal Naval Reserve. *Titanic* flew the Blue Ensign, and *Olympic* normally did as well. Photographs from 1911 and 1912 show that the 15-ft size was always flown from the ensign staff at the stern. The 21-foot size, not in use until after 1914, would have by tradition been known as the "Sunday ensign" or "holiday ensign." It was not used frequently, as it appears in very few photographs.

The Blue or Red Ensign was also flown from the foremast when the ship was dressed in British waters - as with *Titanic* on April 4th. The 9-ft size was the flag normally used here.

* see Page 8: "Display Of Flags At Sea"

American and French ensigns

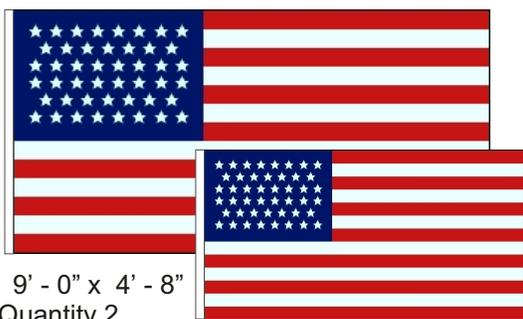
Flown at foremast



Olympic, 1934

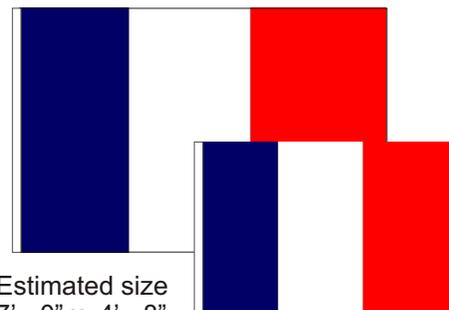


Olympic, 1920-1924



Size 9' - 0" x 4' - 8"
Quantity 2

Size 6' - 0" x 3' - 2"
Quantity 2



Estimated size
7' - 0" x 4' - 8"
Quantity 2

Estimated size
4' - 0" x 2' - 8"
Quantity 2

The design of the U.S. Flag varied in the number of stars, depending on the date flown:

Titanic, and *Olympic* up to July 4, 1912: 46 stars

Olympic, after July 4, 1912: 48 stars
(Number of states increased to 48 in Jan and Feb of 1912, but flag was not changed until July 4, 1912.)

This flag is also called the Stars and Stripes.

Quantities and sizes per 1914 specs. Larger size verified through photographs.

The French ensign, when flown at sea as either a civil or military ensign, has the proportions of its vertical stripes as 30:33:37 to give a better appearance when seen from a distance.

This flag is also called the Tricolor.

*Sizes estimated through photographs.
Quantities estimated as matching U.S. Ensigns.*

The foremast flag is frequently but incorrectly referred to as the "destination flag". While the flag at this location did at times reflect the ship's destination - prior to leaving Southampton, for example - the flying of a "courtesy flag" at this location always took precedence. A courtesy flag, or courtesy ensign, is the ensign of another country flown when entering that country's port and during the ship's entire time in port. This was done as means of honoring that country. Conversely, failing to do so was considered highly disrespectful, especially for naval vessels.

The American and French ensigns were flown on *Titanic* and *Olympic* as follows: The American ensign was flown at Southampton, and continued to fly for the duration of the ship's passage down Southampton water. The French ensign was flown entering Cherbourg, and for the entire time in port until sunset. (In *Titanic*'s case, she arrived approximately 15 minutes before sunset; so all flags were still flying when the vessel anchored.) Cherbourg was normally departed after dark, with no flags flown. The next morning, the American ensign was flown entering Queenstown and for the duration of her time in harbor. This reflected her final destination, Ireland not being a sovereign country at the time and therefore not requiring the display of a courtesy ensign. Entering New York, the American ensign would be raised a third time and flown daily from 8am to sunset during her entire time in port.

*See page 8, "Display Of Flags At Sea," for additional information.

The larger of each ensign was the size normally flown.

White Star house flag

Flown at mainmast

The following size and proportions have been taken from extensive study and measurements of available photographs and archival information of surviving flags.



Olympic, date unknown



9' - 0" x 4' -6" (estimated)

Quantity 6: 3 medium and 3 storm weight (1914 specifications)

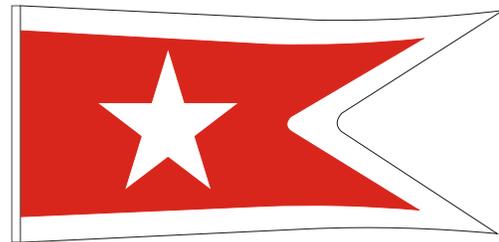
This was not the only size used in the White Star fleet, and other sizes were seen on occasion on *Olympic* in later years (1922 and after). This flag is a tapered swallowtail, with the swallowtail points flaring slightly outward.

Note: the term "burgee" is often used to describe this flag, but not all vexillologists are in agreement as to the proper use of that term as its meaning has changed over time. For that reason it has not been termed as such here.

The White Star house flag flew from one of the flag halyards at the top of the mainmast from 8am to sunset. See Page 8 - "Display of Flags at Sea" for additional information.



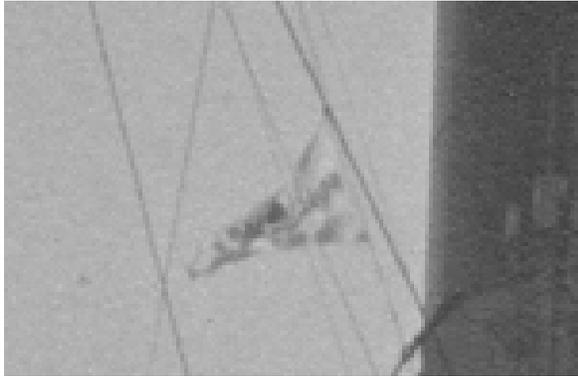
White Star advertising logos - these and similar flags appeared on china, stationery, shipboard items and White Star paperwork. These were stylized versions of the flag which do not accurately represent the proportions of the actual flags. Illustrations such as these have given rise to the erroneous belief that the White Star house flag was tapered much more radically toward a pennant shape.



Commodore's flag - use of this flag was granted only to a captain holding the rank of Commodore of the White Star Line Fleet. This flag never flew on *Titanic*. The White Star line had discontinued the rank of Commodore in 1889 and did not reinstate it until it was conferred on Captain Sir Bertram Hayes in 1922 upon his assuming command of *Majestic*. (This graphic patterned after flag at top for illustration only; actual flag proportions may have differed.)

Royal Mail pennant and U.S. Mail flag

Flown at mainmast (early years) & foremast (early 1920s onward for *Olympic*)
 Sizes estimated from photographic measurement.



Olympic, early 1920s



Olympic, 1913



Estimated size 8' - 0" x 3' - 6"

The Royal Mail pennant flew leaving Southampton and arriving Cherbourg, Queenstown and New York.



Estimated size 8' - 0" x 4' - 9"

Color of letters unknown - either black or, given the colors of the national ensign, may have been dark blue.

The US Mail pennant flew leaving New York and arriving Plymouth, Cherbourg and Southampton.

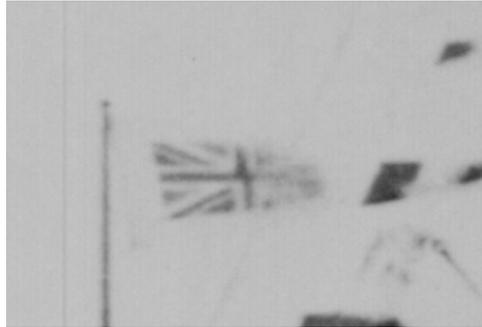
These flags reflected the ship's status as a carrier of the mails, under contract to the governments of Great Britain and the United States. They did not confer priority in docking, but simply to announce the presence of Royal or US mail on board which would need to be offloaded without delay.

The Royal Mail pennant and U.S. Mail flag initially flew from the second halyard at the mainmast, at the height of the backstays where they met the mast - approximately halfway between the Marconi aerial and the top of the ratlines. Photographs from the 1920s, however, indicate that by this time the position of these flags had been shifted to the foremast halyards, flying about halfway up.

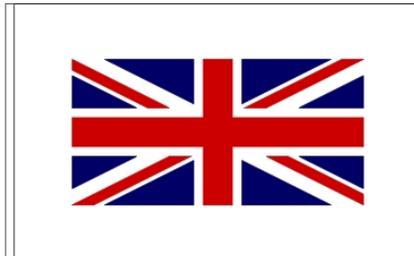
See Page 8 - "Display Of Flags At Sea" for additional information.

Pilot Jack

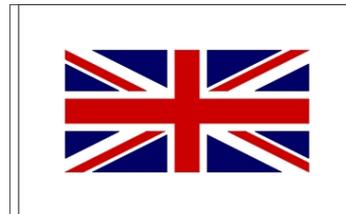
Flown from jackstaff at bow



Titanic at Southampton, April 3, 1912



Olympic:
Size 9' - 0" x 5' - 7"
Quantity 2
Size and quantity per 1914 specs.



Titanic:
Size 7' - 6" x 4' - 8"
Quantity 2
Size per photographic measurement
Quantity per 1914 specs.

This flag, sometimes referred to as a Merchant Jack, was a Union Jack with a white border. It was used to dress the bow of a ship in merchant service. As of 1894, it was also legal in British waters for use as a pilot summoning signal (indicating that the ship needed the services of a pilot), but only when flown from the foremast or signal halyard. However, in 1900 the International Code of Signals committee recommended that its use as a pilot flag be discontinued in favor of the internationally-recognized code flag "S", which carried the same meaning. The traditional name "Pilot Jack" remained, though (not to be confused with the term "Pilot Flag", which meant a pilot was aboard.)

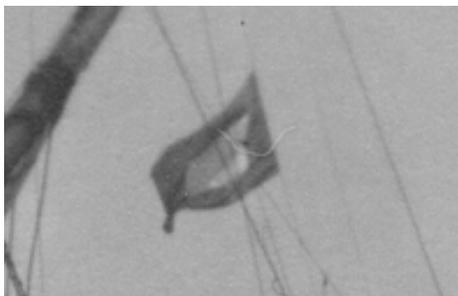
This flag consisted of the Union Jack* with a white border, the white border being 1/3 the breadth (the vertical dimension) of the Union Jack, per regulations set forth in 1833.

Titanic and *Olympic* flew this flag only on ceremonial occasions when they were dressed with flag lines. For *Titanic's* short life, this was on one day only - during daylight hours of Thursday April 4th at Southampton, following her arrival from Belfast shortly after midnight.

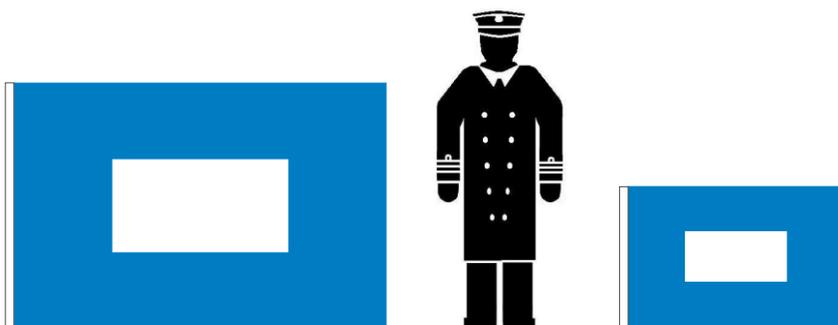
* See page 13 ("Terminology") for more on this term.

Blue Peter

Flown from bridge or foremast halyards



Olympic, early 1920s



Size 7'- 0" x 4' - 8"
quantity 2

Size 4'- 0" x 2' - 8"
quantity 2

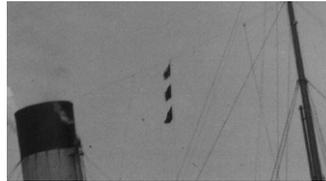
Sizes and quantities per 1914 specifications.

This flag, the signal for the letter "P" in the International Code, carried a special meaning when hoisted aloft by itself – it meant "Am About to Sail". On the *Olympic*-class ships, this flag could be flown from one of the signal halyards off the bridge or from the second halyard at the foremast (the first being already in use for the courtesy ensign). A second Blue Peter could also be flown from one of the mainmast halyards; this was done on at least one occasion with *Olympic* in the 1920s, although it is unknown whether or not this was common practice.

Photographs showing this flag are rare, as the Blue Peter was only flown for a brief period of time prior to departure. No photographs are known to exist to indicate whether or not *Titanic* flew this flag prior to her departure from Southampton.

International Code flags (signal flags)

Flown from signal halyards at bridge

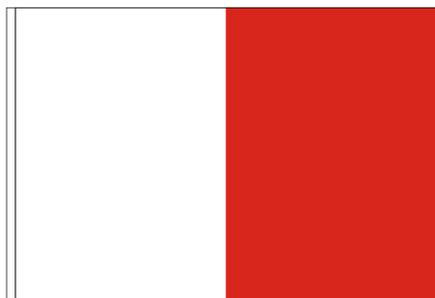


Olympic, 1911

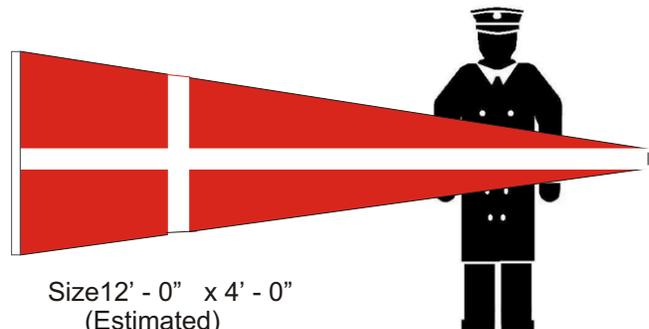
	Burgee, White and Blue, divided vertically. Blue half Swallow-tailed.		Square Flag, White and Red, divided vertically. White at Mast.		Square Flag, Yellow and Red, divided Diagonally. Yellow at Mast.		Square Flag, Red and White, quartered. Red at Hoist.	
	Burgee, Red Swallow-tailed.		Square Flag, Yellow, with Black Ball in centre.		Square Flag, Blue, with White Square in centre.		Square Flag, White, with Red St. Andrew's Cross.	
	Pennant, White, with Red Ball near Mast.		Square Flag, Blue, White, Blue, divided horizontally.		Square Flag, Yellow.		Square Flag, White, with Broad Blue Border and Red Square in centre.	
	Pennant, Blue, with White Ball near Mast.		Square Flag, Yellow and Blue, divided vertically. Yellow at Mast.		Square Flag, Red, with Yellow St. George's Cross.		Square Flag, White, with Blue St. George's Cross.	
	Pennant, Tricolour, Red, White, Blue, divided vertically, Red at Mast.		Square Flag, Yellow and Black, quartered. Yellow at Mast.		Square Flag, White, with Blue Square in centre.		Square Flag, 5 Yellow and 5 Red Bars, Diagonally. Yellow at Hoist.	
	Pennant, Red, with White St. George's Cross.		Square Flag, Blue, with White St. Andrew's Cross.		Square Flag, Tricolour, Red, White, Blue. Red at Mast, Blue at Fly.		Square Flag, Black, Yellow, Blue, Red, quartered Diagonally. Black at Mast, Blue at Fly, Yellow at top, Red at foot.	
	Pennant, Yellow and Blue, Vertically. Yellow at Mast.		Square Flag, Blue and White, Chequered, 16 Squares. Blue at Mast.	<p>Code Flag and Answering Pennant.</p>				<p>Red and White Stripes, Vertically, Red at Hoist.</p>

From *Brown's Signalling*, 1914. Note: the pennants C-G above do not accurately represent the correct proportions of the actual flags. See graphic below right.

International Code flags were flown from the signal halyards on the bridge wings. Various messages, including numbers, could be communicated by two-, three-, and four-letter flag groups. In addition, certain flags as indicated carried special meanings when flown singly, as indicated above.



Size 8' - 0" x 5' - 6"



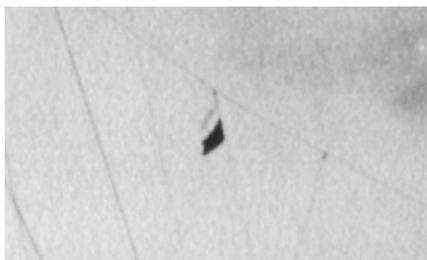
Size 12' - 0" x 4' - 0"
(Estimated)

Quantity 2 sets per 1914 specifications, plus 1 set of code flags for ship's Distinguishing Signal (A ship's distinguishing signal was used to identify herself to another vessel or shore station during an exchange of signals. *Titanic's* assigned signal was HVMP and *Olympic's* was HSRP)

Pilot Flag

(1st Class Pilot Flag)

Flown from signal halyard at bridge



Olympic, 1912

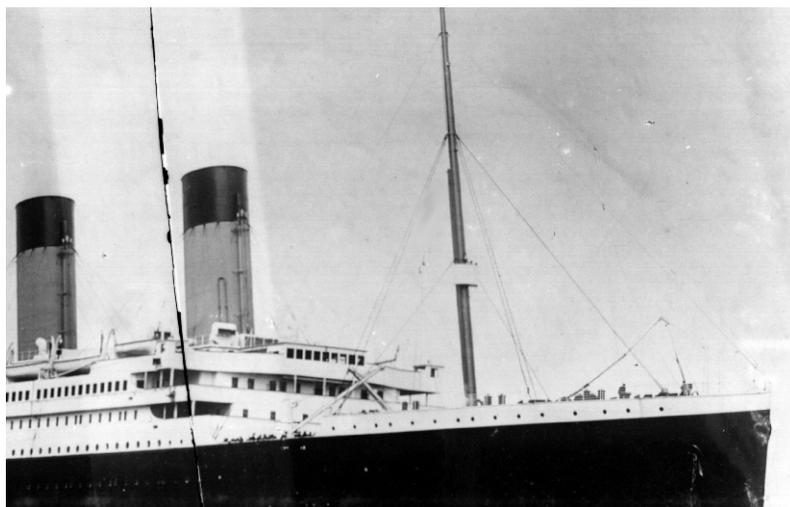


Estimated size 8' - 0" x 5' - 6"

Size is estimated to be the same size as the International Code flags, which dimensions are known.

Used only in British waters, this flag was also known as the British 1808 pilot flag. When flown at the fore or above the bridge, it indicated that there was a licensed pilot aboard. Contrary to what is frequently written, this flag was not hoisted on *Titanic* upon her departure from Southampton, nor was it flown by *Olympic* during her maiden voyage. It does appear in some photographs of *Olympic* during her career, but not many. Although the Merchant Shipping Act of 1894 stated that a pilot was to "exhibit a pilot flag to show that the vessel has a qualified pilot on board", photographs show that this regulation was not strictly followed. The specific reasons are lost to history, but qualified opinion holds that in the case of the large Atlantic liners, the responsible authorities were well aware of whether or not a pilot had been dispatched to a particular ship, and therefore did not look to the display of a flag to confirm that the vessel was under pilotage.

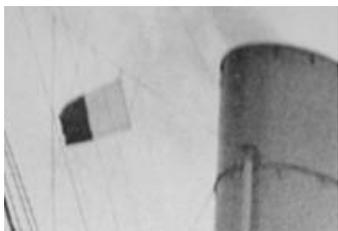
The flag shown above is the flag for a 1st Class Pilot. There was also a 2nd class Pilot flag (see next page for information.).



In this photograph of Titanic steaming down Southampton Water, there is clearly no pilot flag visible above the bridge.

Historical Note: 2nd Class Pilot Flag

(Not known to have been flown by *Olympic* or *Titanic*)



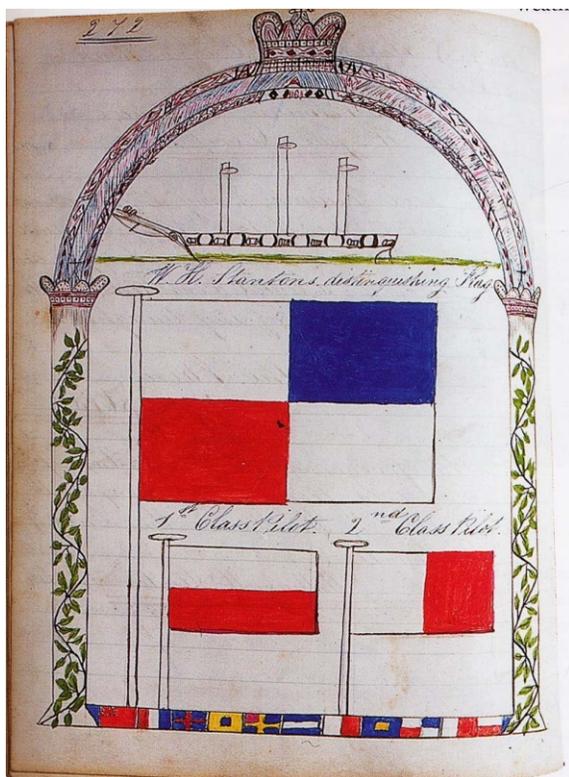
Aquitania, 1923



The flag above is a 2nd Class Pilot flag. This class of pilot, which existed at least as far back as the mid-1800s, was the first at which a pilot was licensed before later being rated as a 1st Class Pilot. Although not known to have ever been flown on *Olympic* or *Titanic*, it appears in photographs of other liners under pilotage in British waters, including *Mauretania*, *Aquitania*, *Vaterland*, *Berengaria*, and others. Curiously, although this class of pilot is clearly documented, no reference appears to the 2nd Class Pilot flag in either Brown's Signalling or the Merchant Shipping Act of 1894. This class of Pilot still exists*, and it is interesting to note that today this flag is the official flag to signify that a pilot is aboard, although it is no longer displayed frequently.

This flag is identical in appearance to the International Code Flag H. This flag was designated as the letter "H" flag in 1857, when the first "Commercial Code of Signals for use of all Nations" was drawn up. Prior to that, it had been the numeral "3" flag in the older "Code of Signals for the Merchant Service" drawn up by Captain Frederick Marryat.

*Today there are four classes of Pilots, 1 through 4.



At left:

Hand-drawn illustration from the journal of Deal pilot William Stanton, showing 2nd class pilot flag at lower right. Stanton became a pilot in 1834 and retired in 1867, so the 2nd class pilot flag can be dated to this period if not earlier.

The flag at top is Stanton's Distinguishing flag. Pilots at that time flew a flag with a design unique to them, for purposes of identifying which pilot was aboard.

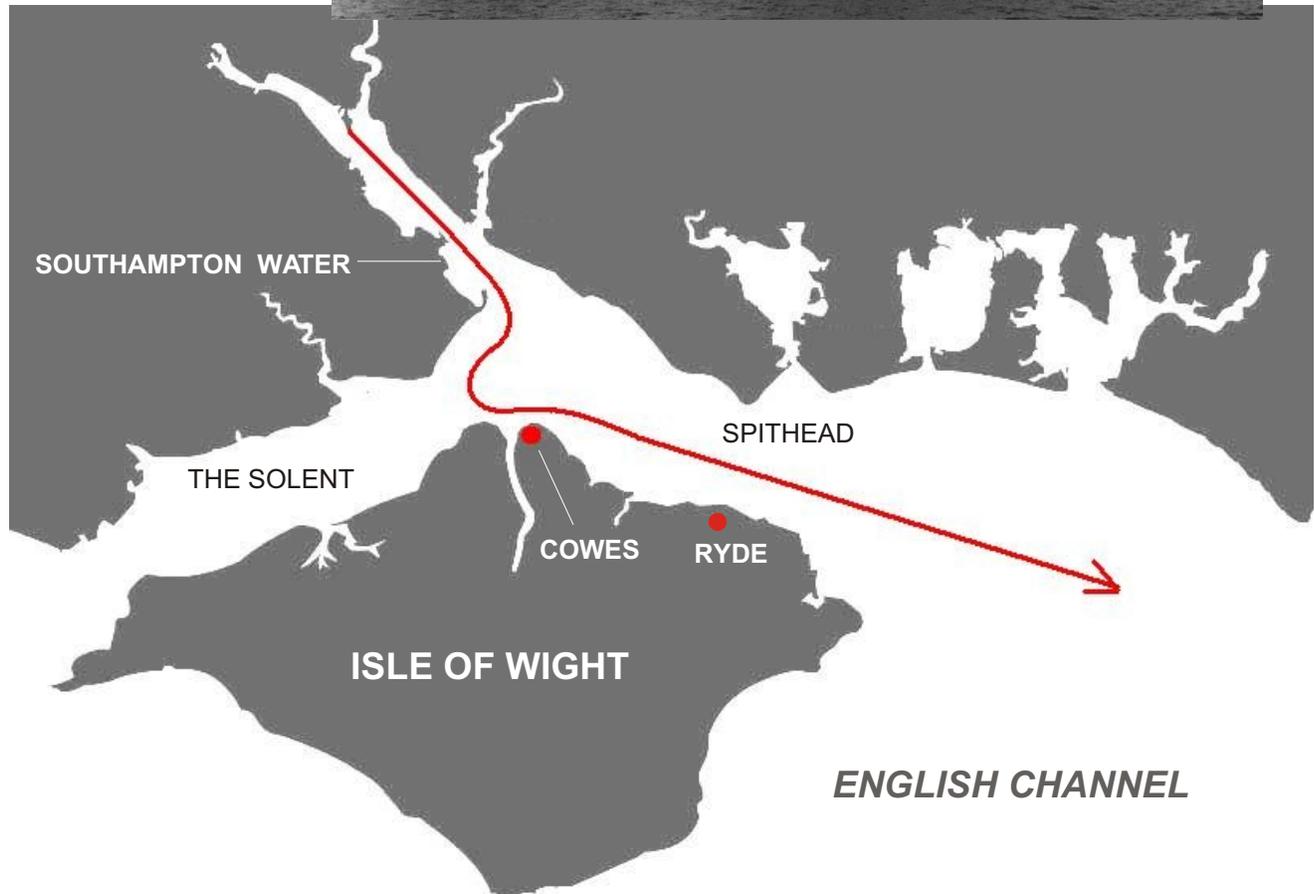
*This illustration appears in the book *Pilots*, volume 2, by Tom Cunliffe. More information about this book can be found in the References list on page 15.*

Image © Deal Maritime & Local History Museum.
Used by TRMA with permission.

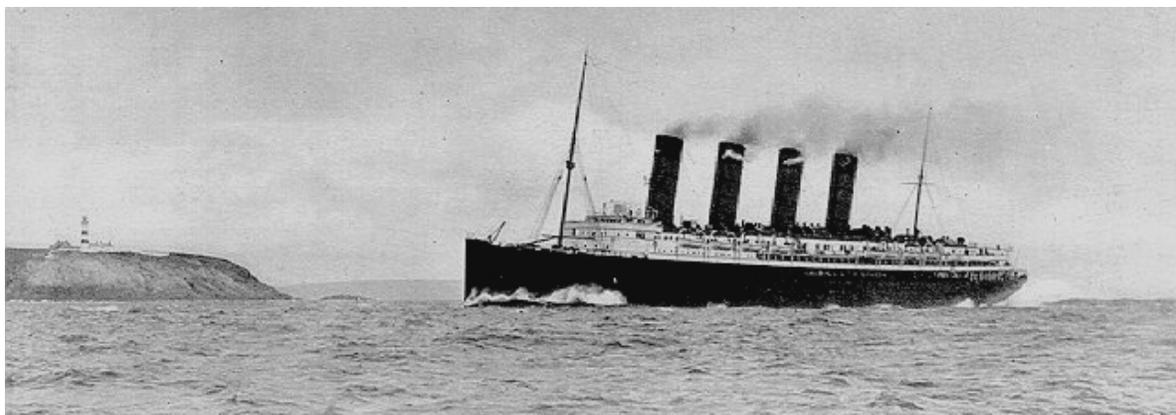
Display Of Flags At Sea

Although there are many photographs of *Titanic* and *Olympic* departing Southampton and many of *Olympic* at New York, very few photographs were ever taken of *Olympic* at sea. However, *Olympic* was frequently photographed off Cowes on the Isle of Wight, just before entering the open waters of the English Channel. Here, the deep channel for outbound ships runs fairly close inshore, with broad promenades along the shoreline that offered spectacular viewpoints for photographers and sightseers. The numerous passenger vessels that crossed between Cowes and the mainland also provided opportune platforms for photographers. Some of the best pictures were taken by marine photographer Frank Beken of Cowes, who became such a frequent sight that some captains took to saluting him with their whistle when passing him in his 14-foot dinghy.

After slowing and making a wide turn around the shoals known as the Bramble Bank, outbound liners would present their starboard side to shore as they gathered speed. Photographs of *Olympic* taken here frequently show the masthead flags (the house flag and the American ensign) in the process of being lowered, or already absent by this point (see photo below). This practice did not appear to be followed consistently, though. Some photographs of *Olympic* do show the American ensign being changed over to the French tricolour, so some captains evidently did elect to fly the masthead flags for the while crossing the Channel instead of hauling them down and hoisting them again to enter Cherbourg. This is what *Titanic* apparently did, as there is one photograph of her passing Ryde (see map) with no sign of her flags being lowered..

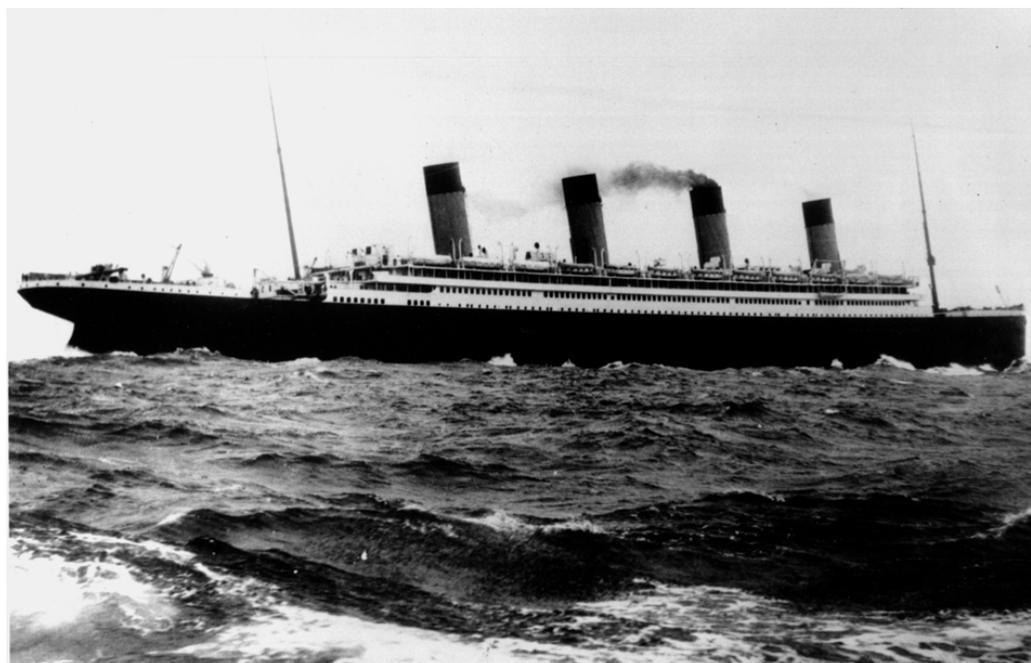


Given that *Olympic* normally hauled down her masthead flags prior to reaching the Channel, we can safely conclude that *Olympic* and *Titanic* did not fly them at sea either. Photographs of other liners such as *Mauretania* and *Lusitania* show no flags either, and this appears to have been standard practice at the time. Even photographs of liners in coastal waters, close to land, routinely show the no flags, as in this famous image of *Lusitania* off Old Head of Kinsale, Ireland, in 1911. (Note that there are several grainy spots in this photo, which should not be mistaken for flags.)



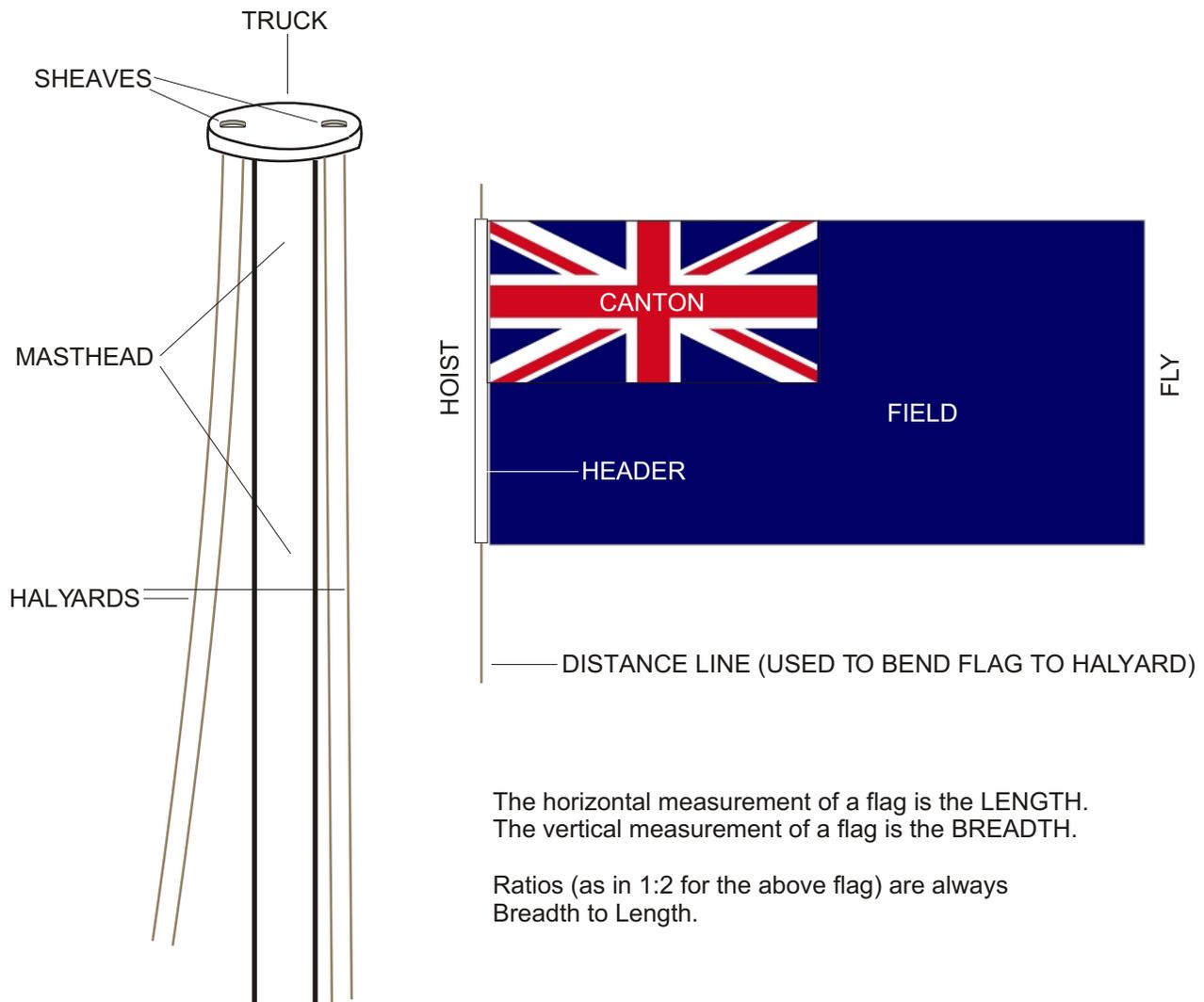
As to whether or not the ensign at the stern was flown at sea, the same photographs off Cowes that show no flags at the mastheads do show an ensign still in place at the stern (see photo p. 11). It is quite possible that this ensign continued to be flown for the entire Atlantic crossing. *Olympic* and *Titanic* carried four 15-foot ensigns for use at the stern - more than any other flag carried. If the ensign here was intended to be flown daily at sea, it would be likely that several of the required size would be carried, to allow for rotation to prevent premature wear.

Resolving this through photographs is not as easy as it might sound. A photograph of a ship with nothing but water in the background does not guarantee that the picture was taken in mid-Atlantic. Relying on photographs of ships from other lines cannot be relied on, as protocols did vary between shipping lines. Textbooks on flags, both contemporary and from the period, are not definitive on this. And protocols are not regulations - they may outline a recommended practice, but are not absolute. The evidence supports certain conclusions, but there are no guarantees.



Olympic, location and date unknown. (The ensign staff is not visible in this picture.)

Flag Terminology



The horizontal measurement of a flag is the LENGTH.
The vertical measurement of a flag is the BREADTH.

Ratios (as in 1:2 for the above flag) are always
Breadth to Length.

ENSIGN: the national flag of a country flown at sea. May be the same as the version flown on land (as in the US flag) or modified (as in the British flag). The British ensign consists of the Union flag ("Union Jack") as the canton, on a larger field of blue or red.

JACK: Technically, a flag flown at the bow of a ship on the jackstaff. However, the British Union flag flown on land is widely known as the "Union Jack," and this name is officially accepted for common use.

DRESSED SHIP: Rigging flaglines (signal flags arrayed along wire ropes) for ceremonial display. On the Olympic-class ships, one flagline ran from the bow to the foremast, another between the masts, and a third from the mainmast to the stern, thereby providing a continuous fore-and-aft flagline up and over the ship.

The study of flags is VEXILLOLOGY. An expert in the study of flags is a VEXILLOLOGIST.

References

The following sources were principle reference sources used in researching the flag information in these pages:

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British National Archives, London:

MT 9/358 Exhibition of flags at British Consulates; and carriage of flags by British merchant ships.

MT 9/360 Use of flags in the British merchant service; and display of colours by tugs and coasting vessels.

MT 9/741 Signals. "White bordered union flag", and pilot signals.

Squire Law Library, Cambridge University: Excerpt from Oppenheim's International Law, 1908

Deal Maritime & Local History Museum, Deal, England: Journal of William Stanton, Pilot

National Maritime Museum, Greenwich: House Flags collection

National Postal Museum: information accessed online at www.postalmuseum.si.edu:

"Harbor Boat Mail Service" exhibit

"Posted Aboard the RMS Titanic" exhibit

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Wilson, Timothy. Flags at Sea. (London: Chatham Publishing, in association with the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, 1999)

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Article of July 5, 1920: "Hayes to be Commodore"

Article of October 12, 1905: "Mails for Shipping Trust"

The Commutator (Titanic Historical Society):

Issue No 146, 1999: "The Story of the White Star House Flag" (reprint from *White Star* magazine)

Issue No 161, 2003: "Titanic at Southampton: A Time of Great Expectations", by Stanley Lehrer

Mariner's Mirror magazine:

Volume 89, Issue 1, February, 2003: "Maritime Pilotage Acts of the Nineteenth Century" by Tri Tran

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 US Flag.org: <http://www.usflag.org/history/historicflags.html>
 Photograph archives of White Star Line ships at Shaw, Saville & Albion Lines website
 (www.shawsavillships.co.uk). Thanks to Mike Foreman for providing additional photographs
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Individuals -

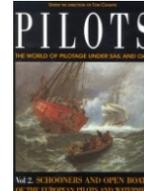
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