National flag took years to create

For more information about living in Britain, call Linda Laws, community relations advisor, at Ext. 3145.

Our present-day national flag is a combination of the flags of St. George of England, St. Andrew of Scotland, and St. Patrick of Ireland, but it has taken a few centuries and some changes to reach the final version.

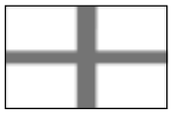
Origin of flags

The word "flag" is derived from the old Saxon or Germanic word "fflaken" or "ffloegan" meaning to fly or float in the wind. A flag usually flies from a vertical staff or mast, whereas a banner is flown from a horizontal bar.

The first Union Flag

The first Union Flag was used in 1606 and comprised the flag of St. George, a red cross on a white background, and the flag of St. Andrew, a white cross on a blue background.

The Cross of St. George (England)



Information on the background of the cross of St. George is rather sketchy, but it's probable that St. George became Patron Saint of England in 1277. St. George was martyred in the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian at or near Lydda (now Lod in Israel) around A.D. 303. The Cross was first used during the Welsh Wars of Edward I (1272-1307). Why St. George, rather than a native British saint, came to be chosen is a mystery. One theory is that as a soldier, he was popular with the crusaders. He assumed special symbolic importance in England as a result of King Richard I's (the Lionheart — 1189 - 99) crusade to Palestine (1189 - 92), during which the English king restored the church at Lydda containing St. George's relics to Christian hands. Richard adopted the saint as his army's patron and St. George is still the patron saint of soldiers.

Also dating from around this time is the famous legend of St. George and the dragon, which was probably based on Greek mythology. The story tells of Perseus rescuing Andromeda from a sea monster. According to this legend, a dragon with poisonous breath terrorised the region. After it had exhausted the supply of sheep given by the people to placate it, it started to demand human offerings. The poor victims were drawn by lot. It came to the turn of the king's daughter, who was led to her fate in her bridal gown. But the intrepid St. George intervened, attacked the dragon with his lance and, when he had cornered it, offered to destroy it on condition that the people converted to Christianity. The feast day of St. George is April 23 and the symbol of England is a red rose.

The Cross of St. Andrew (Scotland)

Andrew was one of the 12 apostles of Jesus of Nazareth. He and his brother, Peter, were fishermen from Capernaum. It was Andrew, a follower of John the Baptist, who brought Peter to Christ. According to legend, Andrew preached in Greece, but in A.D. 69 was crucified on a diagonal cross (known as a saltire in heraldic terms) and was buried in Patras in Greece.

In the year A.D. 370, a monk called Regulus, on hearing that the saint's remains were to be removed to Constantinople, took an arm bone and other portions of the body of the saint and escaped with these to sea. After a stormy voyage, he was wrecked on a rocky coast — which turned out to be Scotland. At the place Regulus is reputed to have landed, a church was founded to house the relics of the saint. It is believed that in A.D. 736 Angus, son of Fergus who was King of the Picts of Scotland, adopted St. Andrew as his patron saint. The church and the little hamlet that grew up around it has now become the university town of St. Andrews. His feast day is Nov. 30 and the symbol of Scotland is a thistle.

The Commonwealth Flag

This flag was in use from 1649 until 1801. On the left hand side (known as the hoist) was the Cross of St. George and the right (known as the fly) was a yellow harp (one of the symbols of Ireland) on a blue background.

Present Union Flag (1801-date)

The current flag now incorporates the Crosses of St. George and St. Andrew as well as the Cross of St. Patrick.

The Cross of St. Patrick (Ireland)

St. Patrick lived around A.D. 390-461 and was a major figure in the development of Christianity in Britain. Patrick was born in mainland Britain, but at the age of 16 was captured by Irish pirates and spent six years in slavery in Ireland. During this time, he converted to Christianity before escaping back to Britain. He is reputed to be buried at Downpatrick Cathedral, which commemorates links with the saint with a 35-foot granite statue. Before the end of the 7th century, Patrick had become a legendary figure with stories of how he drove the snakes out of Ireland into the sea. He was also said to have used the shamrock to explain the concept of the Holy Trinity. His feast day is March 17 and the symbols of Ireland are the shamrock and harp.

The Irish have never used the Cross of St. Patrick as a national emblem and, on becoming an independent country, Eire (southern Ireland) adopted a quite different flag — a vertical tricolour of green, white and orange.

The Flag of Wales

The flag of Wales isn't featured as part of the Union Flag. It is quite a distinctive flag with a white top half and a green bottom half and the symbol of a red dragon in the centre. The flag is known as Y Ddraig Goch (the Red Dragon). The dragon is probably the oldest emblem in continuous use in the British Isles. White and green were the livery colours of the Princes of Wales (the current Prince of Wales is Prince Charles, son of the Queen).

The "Jack"

The Union Flag is often referred to, incorrectly, as the Union Jack. A "Jack" means "a diminutive of the National Flag flown from the bows of a ship." The term "Jack" was first used by the British Navy and described the Union Flag that was at that time flown at the main masthead. Flags which have a badge are also called "Jacks."

The Royal Air Force Ensign

You will note that it isn't the Union Flag which flies alongside the Stars and Stripes at Lakenheath. Rather, it is the RAF Ensign. This is because the base is a military establishment of the Royal Air Force. The RAF Ensign has a light-blue background and the Union Flag in the top left-hand corner. It also has the distinguishing mark used on aircraft of the Royal Air Force – a roundel of red, white and dark blue. The blue is on the outside of the target and the red is in the centre.

The colours of the Royal Air Force are red, dark blue and air force blue. The red represents the Royal Flying Corps in the British Army. The dark blue represents the Royal Naval Air Service of the Royal Navy. These represent the two arms from which the Royal Air Force sprang. The lighter blue represents the Royal Air Force in the air.