

The union jack: A very complex flag



Flags are powerful symbols of identity and belonging, and few are as instantly recognizable as the union flag.

Whether draped around Olympic athletes or the focus of protests in Northern Ireland, this quintessential emblem of Britishness has been a source of controversy and high emotion since it was first flown more than 400 years ago.

It made its earliest appearance in 1606. James VI of Scotland had recently ascended to the throne of England, bringing the two countries together in a new realm he styled "the Kingdom of Great Britain". His ships were commanded to fly a flag that combined the red cross of Saint George and the white cross (saltire) of Saint Andrew.

Unhappy unions

Predictably, some Scots were unhappy that English Saint George overlaid Scottish Saint Andrew and a design for a "Scottish union flag" was put forward, placing the white cross over the red. The issue¹ was settled in 1707 by Queen Anne, who chose red over white from a variety of designs.

That same year, the **Acts of Union** were passed, unifying the two crowns and the two parliaments in one United Kingdom.

A further **Act of Union**, this time with Ireland in 1801, gave us the union flag we recognise today, when the red cross of Saint Patrick was added.

The union flag survived the partition of Ireland in 1921 and the Saint Patrick element of it continues to represent the place of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom.

What about Wales?

Then there is the one glaring omission: Wales. Because Wales was annexed by England's Edward I back in 1282 and then "integrated" during the 16th Century, its place in the flag is represented by the cross of Saint George.

✓ Five things you may not know about the flag

Uniquely, the union flag has been - and for many still is - a feature of the flags of several other nations, a legacy of the size and endurance of the British Empire. Many, such as Canada, South Africa and Hong Kong, have since dispensed with the emblem of their former colonial rulers.

Others, such as New Zealand and Australia, have chosen to retain the symbols of their close connection with Britain by keeping the union flag in the canton (upper left hand corner) of their national flags. Fiji retains it despite independence and having left the Commonwealth.

By Richard Cable - BBC

¹ The issue = the problem