

# The Union Jack

## A History for the Non-British

By David K. McDonnell (© David K. McDonnell, [www.clandonnell.net](http://www.clandonnell.net))

### Where does the stuff on the British Union Jack flag come from?

There are three sources, and here they are.

#### **Part one: The Flag of St. George, long associated with England.**

In 1188, England and France went on the Crusades. The English adopted a white cross, and the French a red cross, to distinguish their banners and troops. Somewhere along the way, the armies swapped crosses, and the English banners were white with a red cross. Why, who knows?

But within a century or so, English soldiers almost always went to war with a red cross somewhere on their clothing and on their banners. The red-cross flag began to appear at more and more official functions, and it became thoroughly associated with England. England didn't then adopt the red-cross flag as its official flag, only because nations didn't typically have official flags in those days.



The Flag of St. George

## Why is it called the Flag of St. George?

George has nothing to do with the flag or the red cross - or with England for that matter. He was born around the year 275 in the region which is now Israel, and was a soldier in the Roman army. In 303, the Roman emperor ordered the arrest of all Christians in his army. George, being Christian himself, refused to obey the order and vocally denounced the emperor. For this, George was executed by decapitation, which had to hurt. Sometime before he lost his head, which made him a Christian martyr, George killed a dragon.

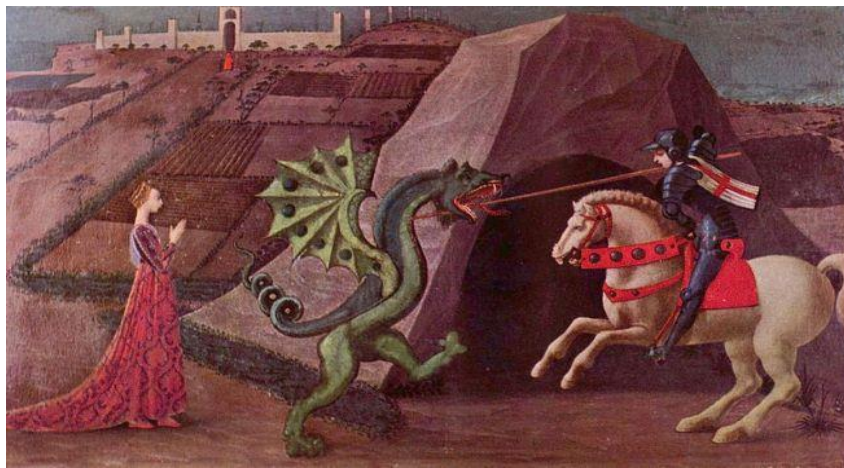
This is the legend, anyway. Historians have been able to document very little about George. Even a 5<sup>th</sup> Century pope admitted that whatever George did, or didn't do, is "known only to God". I'm pretty sure he did kill the dragon, though.

Perhaps because he was a soldier, George was adopted by many soldiers in the Middle Ages as their patron saint. English soldiers, in particular, had success in surviving wars by praying to St. George for survival.

English soldiers returning from the Crusades were especially loyal to St. George. Within a few hundred years, George supplanted all other saints in England and was universally recognized as the patron saint of England.

George's rise the status as the patron saint of England came at about the same time as the red-cross-on-white-background flag became a common symbol for England. And so the flag became known as the Flag of St. George.

When England broke with the Roman Catholic Church during the days of King Henry VIII, England banned all "saints" banners other than the red cross flag of St. George.



St. George, with the red cross on his back, slaying a dragon and thus rescuing a damsel in distress. Painting by Italian Paolo Uccello, c. 1460, now at the Musée Jacquemart André in Paris.

**Part two: The Flag of St. Andrew, long associated with Scotland.**

Andrew was one of the original disciples of Jesus. He and his brother Simon Peter were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus called them both to become “fishers of men”. Andrew and Jesus were on a first-name basis.

After Jesus was crucified by the Romans, Andrew moved north. He preached and established churches as far north as Ukraine and Russia and he remains today the patron saint of both countries, as well as Romania.

Andrew was crucified by the Romans in Greece, at least per legend. Upon sentencing, he asked not to be crucified on same shaped cross as Jesus, since he didn’t think himself worthy. And so (again per legend), he was crucified on an X shaped cross (called a “saltire”).



*Martyrdom of St. Andrew* by Carlo Dolci, c. 1631 or 1643, show the X-shaped cross. Dolci painted three versions of this scene. This version is at the Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

Andrew never did make it as far north or west as Scotland, but some of his relics may have. By relics, I mean body parts. After Andrew's crucifixion, parts of his body were sent to Constantinople and centuries later to Rome. A monk had a vision to take some of these parts to "the end of the earth" for safekeeping. The "end of the earth" at the time meant Scotland. The monk took a tooth, a kneecap, an arm, and some fingers to a small settlement that is now St. Andrews, Scotland.

Centuries later, a Scottish king saw a vision of St. Andrew in a dream, and saw a saltire in the sky, all before a battle with the English. The Scots won the battle. Even William Wallace and Robert the Bruce appealed to St. Andrew for help in battle. All of this was enough for Andrew to become the patron saint of Scotland.

No one is entirely sure where those relics are today. They are probably buried beneath St. Andrews. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the pope gave Scotland a shoulder blade. The shoulder blade is now at St. Mary's Cathedral in Edinburgh.

So Andrew is Scotland's saint, and thus the saltire or St. Andrew's cross is Scotland's national symbol.

Why is the flag blue with a white saltire?



The Flag of St. Andrew

It wasn't always such colors. For many years the saltire was silver. In 1385, the Scottish Parliament ordered its soldiers to wear a white saltire stitched to their uniforms. The order wasn't so much because Parliament preferred white. It simply wanted consistency, so that its soldiers could be readily identified in battle. The St. Andrew's saltire is common on many national and other flags, in a variety of colors.

Why blue? I think it is because it is. The guys who designed coats of arms and such in the Middle Ages attached a lot of symbolism to various colors. Blue symbolized vigilance, truth and

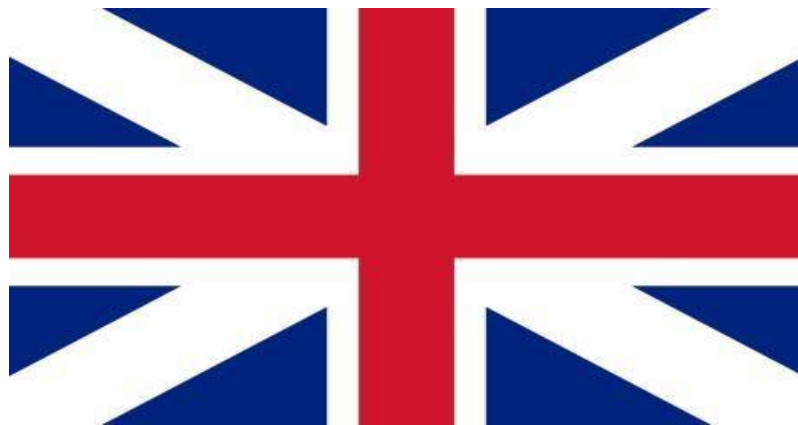
loyalty, perseverance and justice, and thus often used on banners and flags. The Celtic Picts in Scotland often painted their faces blue before going into battle. So the white saltire was often placed on a blue background. As people got used to it, it became the standard.

The shade is typically a light, sky blue, as is shown in the photograph above. But not always. The white saltire is sometimes on a field of a darker, marine blue. You see this in the photos of the first Union Jack!

**The First Union Jack: The marriage of the St. George and St. Andrew flags.**

Scotland and England evolved into “nations” as we now think of such things when kings consolidated power within the two regions. They each had their own king (or queen) until the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603. King James VI of Scotland then became king of both Scotland and England. He then changed his name to King James I.

To signify the union of the two countries (or, at least, of the two crowns), James ordered the combination of the two flags – with the St. George Cross over the St. Andrew Cross. Scotland and England formally “merged” into a single country – the Kingdom of Great Britain – a century later. The combined flag became the official flag of the combined country.



Top image is the first Union Jack. It is simply the combination of the two flags below it - England's Flag of St. George and Scotland's Flag of St. Andrew.

## Why is the flag called a “jack”?

A jack, in the old slang of British sailors, is anything small. The smaller version of the flag flown near the bow was called the Union Jack, and this name stuck.

There are those who suggest that Union Jack is the appropriate term when it is flown aboard ship, and Union Flag is appropriate on land. This became a “rule” in the Victorian era, when people wanted to be proper about everything and made up a lot of rules.

But British vexillologists recently announced that all of this was quite silly. The words -- “jack” and “flag” -- have been used interchangeably for centuries, and Britain’s symbol can be called either the Union Jack or the Union Flag.

What’s a vexillologist, you might ask? It’s a person who studies flags and flag usage. So I suppose they should know.

Whether it’s a jack or a flag, the Scots were not always happy with it. The St. George’s cross is placed over St. Andrew’s, which might suggest dominance. Scots would much prefer the other way around.



A more “Scotland-centric” version of the Union Jack, from a book published in 1704.

The background blue of the Union Jack is much darker and deeper than the sky blue background of Scotland’s Flag of St. Andrew. There’s no real symbolism or politics involved. Fabric dyed with the darker blue was more durable, when exposed to salt water and salty air, than that dyed with the lighter blue. So the British Navy used the darker blue background, and eventually so did the British Army, and eventually everyone else.

### **Part three: The Flag of St. Patrick, never really associated with Ireland.**

St. Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland. Duh. George never made it to England; Andrew never made it to Scotland (other than some of this bones); but Patrick spent much of his adult life in Ireland. A lot of what we think we know about Patrick is legend, rather than substantiated fact. One fact though is clear – there were few Christians in Ireland when Patrick arrived, and nearly everyone was a Christian by the time Patrick died.

One would think from this that the Flag of St. Patrick would be universally accepted as the flag for the island. But no – that would be too easy.



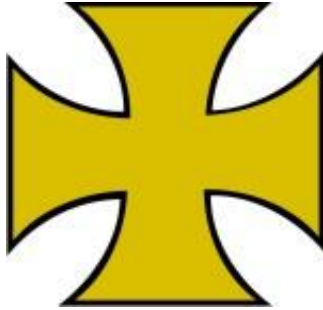
The Flag of St. Patrick

The problem is the absence of a flag representative of St. Patrick. The flag show above – with the red saltire on white background – was artificial creation with a contentious history.

Ireland was initially subjugated by the English in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, and the conquest was complete by early 1600s. Ireland remained nominally independent but under a British king. This nominal independence included an Irish Parliament – thoroughly dominated by the English landlords.

The Irish Parliament established an order of knighthood, called the Order of St. Patrick, and knighthood was granted to those who demonstrated exemplary service to the king. Someone designed an insignia for the knights, which included a red saltire on a white background. There are several theories on why this design was used, all of which are equally plausible and equally difficult to verify.

Unlike Andrew, Patrick had nothing whatsoever to do with a saltire – red or any other color. Two crosses were then commonly associated with Patrick – neither of which was a saltire or the more traditional crucifix cross.



One was the cross pattée – a cross narrow in the center and wide at the ends – like the one shown on the left. Irishmen frequently wore pins with the cross pattée on St. Patrick’s Day and other holidays.



The other is the familiar Celtic cross like the one in the left photo. This combines the Christian cross with a circle at the junction. This may have been designed to incorporate the pagan symbol for the sun, or the sun god, into the Christian cross.

Either cross might have been acceptable to the Irish. But the saltire made the cross look too much like St. Andrew’s. And the red on white looked too much like St. George’s. So the Irish, or at least those not in the knighthood, hated the flag design.

It was, nevertheless, the only flag officially recognized as the national flag of the entire island of Ireland (at least as of 1800).

Interest in the Flag of St. Patrick has increased lately, particularly in Northern Ireland. Flags, of course, are symbols of allegiance. If the allegiance of two neighbors is different, they are unlikely to pledge allegiance to the same flag. This is precisely the situation in Northern Ireland. The self-identity of a majority of people is British and these people have significant affection for the Union Jack. The self-identity of a substantial minority is Irish and these people have significant affection for the Irish tri-color flag.

Northern Ireland doesn’t have a politically neutral flag – except, perhaps, the Flag of St. Patrick. Some communities in Northern Ireland have encouraged use of the St. Patrick flag, particularly at holiday parades, as a means to keep the peace.

### **The Union Jack for the United Kingdom**

The Irish Parliament remained dominated by English landlords, but it did have a vocal minority. There were a few Irish in Parliament who dared utter the words *Ireland* and *Independence* in the same sentence.

All of this blew up into an actual rebellion in 1798, which the British army thoroughly crushed. Most of the Irish involved were hanged, imprisoned, or exiled.

For centuries, the English employed a variety of strategies for dealing with the Irish. After the 1798 rebellion, they tried another – they abolished Ireland!



With the Acts of the Union of 1800, the Irish Parliament was permanently dissolved, and Ireland ceased existence as a separate nation. It was annexed into the United Kingdom, administered by the British Parliament in London.

The British changed the name of their country – from the *Kingdom of Great Britain* to the *United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland*.

And it added the Flag of St. Patrick to the original Union Jack, to form the Union Jack still in use today.



The 1800 Math for the Union Jack:

The prior Union Jack (England & Scotland) + The Flag of St. Patrick = the new Union Jack



The Union Jack (since 1800)

The southern 26 counties of Ireland won independence from the British in the 1920s. The northern six counties remained. The British changed the country name yet again – to the *United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*.

But the Union Jack remained unchanged.

If you are an astute observer, you noticed that the Union Jack is not entirely symmetrical. The red St. Patrick's cross is closer to the bottom, on the left hand side, and closer to the top, on the right hand side. Once in a while, the Union Jack is inadvertently displayed upside down – even at official government functions.



The plastic flag on the left was used at the signing ceremony for a UK/China trade agreement.

The flag is upside down.

### **What about Wales?**

I don't want to stir up any trouble, but I've often wondered why Wales is not represented anywhere on the Union Jack.



The Flag of St. David is shown in the above photo, with a yellow cross on a black field. St. David was a 6<sup>th</sup> Century Welsh bishop and is, indeed, the patron saint of Wales. This flag, and this color scheme, is in use in Wales primarily as a counterpoint to the flags of St. George, St. Andrew and St. Patrick. But it has never been viewed as the Flag of Wales.

For centuries, the flag associated with Wales is the Red Dragon. These flags are not at all standardized but do include the Red Dragon and green and white colors.



A Red Dragon flag of Wales

There are multiple theories as to the association of the dragon to Wales. I have it on good authority that a red dragon fought a white dragon in Wales in the year 830. I do not know who won, but the Welsh took a liking to the red one.

### **And what about Cornwall?**

Cornwall is not represented on the Union Jack either, and, like Wales, it is neither English, nor Scottish, nor Irish.

St. Pirran's Flag, with its white cross and black background, is usually recognized as the Flag of Cornwall.



The St. Pirran's Flag

St. Pirran was a 5<sup>th</sup> Century abbot in Cornwall, although originally from Ireland. Pirran is the patron saint of tin-miners and there was a lot of tin mining going on in Cornwall in those days. He is not universally accepted as the patron saint of Cornwall and there are those who claim the honors belong to one or two others.

The flag's colors supposedly represent the white tin flowing from a hot black rock, or at least that is the myth. There are many theories or fantasies as to where the flag came from, and even whether it has a history of more than a few hundred years.

Maybe that doesn't matter. It is enough that the people of Cornwall recognize it as theirs.