



Flying the Customs flag

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Customs has its own flag that flies on Customs vessels and, on certain occasions, on buildings.

It is the most recent in a series that goes back to before Federation - two from colonial NSW and three since Federation. The use of flags by "revenue cutters" and other Customs and Excise vessels is mentioned in an English proclamation of 1694. An act of 1784 instructed Customs vessels to fly the flag (and a pennant) when giving chase. The design of the flag changed over time and these changes are described in *"Flags at sea" by Timothy Wilson (London HMSO, 1986, pp 40/1)*. The Australian colonies followed the practice of using Customs/Custom House flags.

The five flags so far identified are:

1. Customs House Flag of 1832 - the source is a facsimile of an engraving by W. Wilson for the NSW Calendar and General Post Office Directory. It is titled "Australia - Code of Signals for the Colony of New South Wales" dated January 1, 1832 and signed by a Mr Nicholson, Harbour Master. No description is given, but using a combination of the 1817 English Customs flag and the engraving, a replica has been made.
2. Customs Colonial Flag of 1882 - taken from "Supplement to the NSW Government Gazette, No. 193, Friday, 12 May 1882". A replica has been made using a description given as a regulation under the "Customs Regulation Act of 1879":
 "The proper ensign for Customs shall be the red English ensign with the addition of a white cross, being in the form and proportion the same as the white ensign, but with the colours of the flag reversed, and with the letters CH in the outer lower quarter of the flag; and the pendant shall be the red pendant."

3. Australian Customs Flag of 1901 - Section 14 of the original *Customs Act of 1901* states that "The vessels and boats employed in the service of Customs shall be distinguished from other vessels and boats by such flag as shall be prescribed". In the Commonwealth of Australia Gazette No. 53 of 10 October 1901, page 172, under the heading "Customs Regulations", Section 14 "The Customs Flag" states, "The Customs flag shall be the Blue Ensign, with the addition in the fly of the letters "HMC" in bold character, and the word 'Australia'". A replica has been made.
4. Australian Customs Flag circa 1904 to 1988 - the removal of the word "Australia" from the flag is first noted in an "order in council" dated 16 June 1904, with the appropriate change to Section 14.
5. Australian Customs Flag - current (see picture above). This flag has the word "Customs" in bold on the fly, replacing "HMC". The legislative backing for this change was an amendment SR297, published 17/12/1987 to commence on 1/01/1988.

