



## FLAGS OF VAN DIEMEN'S LAND

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### INTRODUCTION

I have based my text and presentation on the unique maritime signal and flag charts designed, drafted and drawn by an untrained convict guard during the 1850s while garrisoned in Van Diemen's Land with his regiment, the 99<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot, also known as the Lanarkshire Volunteers.

Private Edward Murphy conceived the idea to produce his finely detailed illustrations and exactly coloured flags and signals of Hobart Town in charts produced originally for sale on speculation to meet the needs of the busy maritime service in 1851 during the commencement of the mass exodus from Van Diemen's Land of free settlers and emancipated convicts to the newly created and closest colony of Victoria due to the discovery of the huge alluvial gold deposits there.

### THE SIGNAL CHARTS

The colonial trading vessels were busy transporting the hopeful prospectors there.

My research has uncovered eleven signal flag charts and of these there are three that are identical in geometric design and layout dated 1851, suggesting that they were from a common template. I have selected to show the most colourful example for you to appreciate the veritable kaleidoscope of vibrant colours and the huge variety of individual merchant ship flag designs that developed during this time. (Fig 1)

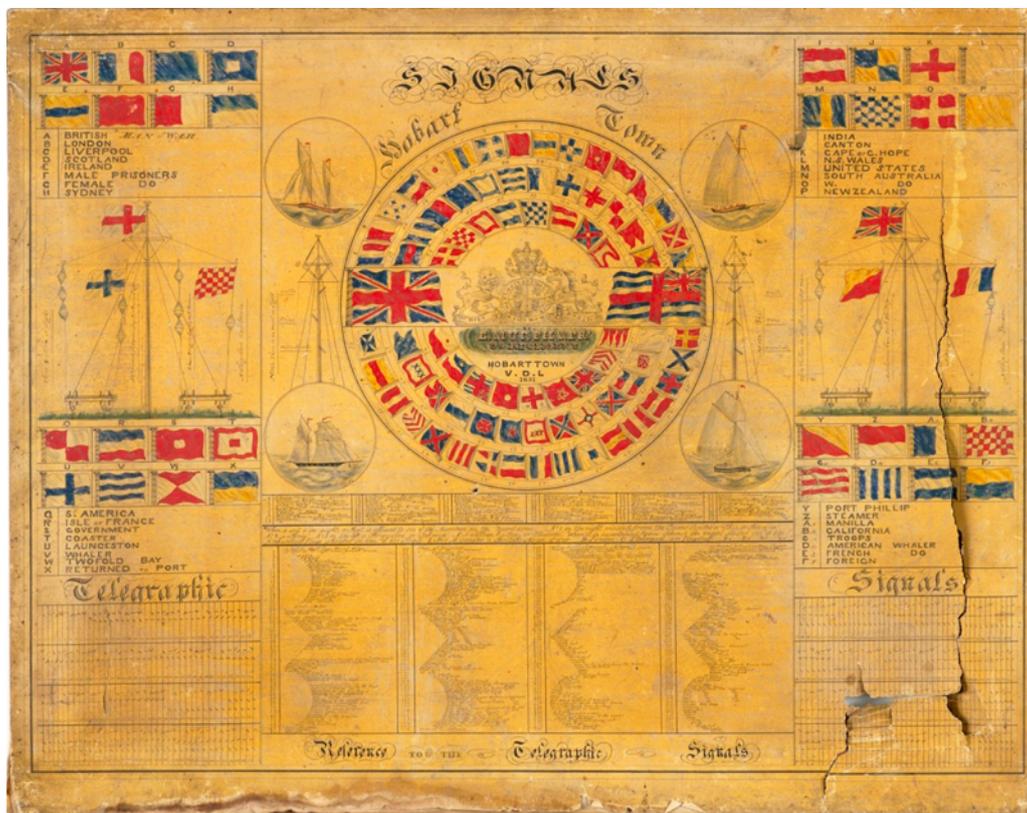


Fig 1 – “Signals Hobart Town” (1851)

1851 was a pivotal year for Van Diemen's Land and for Murphy.

It was the catalyst that Murphy saw as his opportunity to offer his charts to ships masters who had no written record or diagrams to refer to so they could identify other vessels, decode the semaphore messages or recognise the Hobart port signal flags. Murphy achieved this in a single chart for them, plus he included illustrated examples and instructions on how to prepare, send and decipher the signals on the signal mast. An additional maritime emphasis has been achieved with the delightful vignettes of sailing vessels in their day to day activities in and around the port. (Fig2)

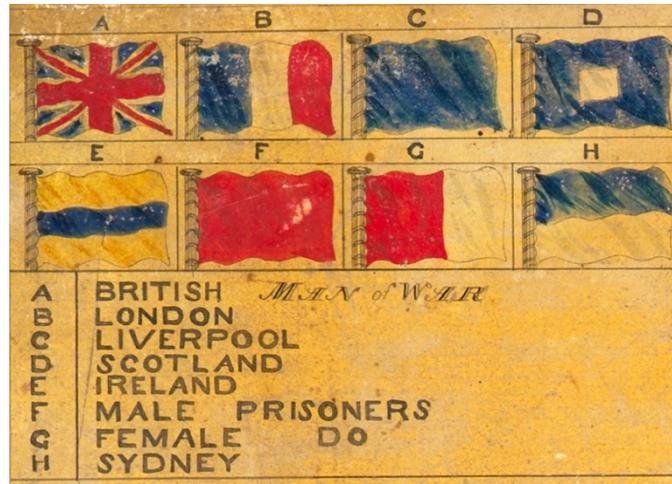


Fig 2

His ultimate aim was to supplement his meagre military wage with sales of his charts.

He had deserted three times during his postings to Newcastle, Port Jackson and Port Phillip seeking better opportunities for himself only to be recaptured and punished. With his marriage and posting to Van Diemen's Land he attempted to turn over a new leaf.

In the following years from 1852 till 1856 with his works receiving publicity in the local newspapers and the greater general public become aware of his works, he commenced receiving specific requests for his charts as individual commissions. This led to Murphy expanding his repertoire of flags to international standards and world flags personalising each chart upon the request of his patrons. Fig 3

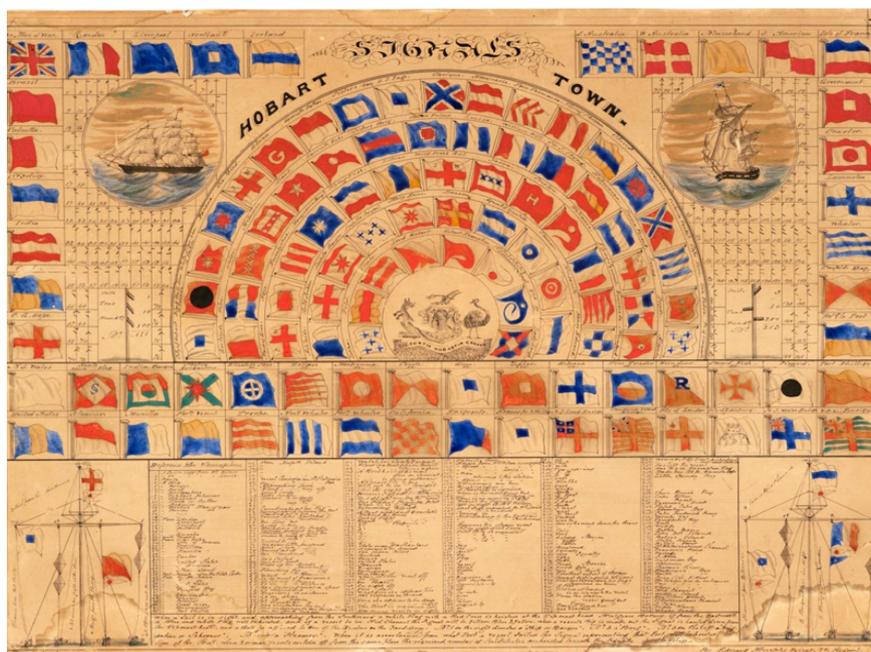
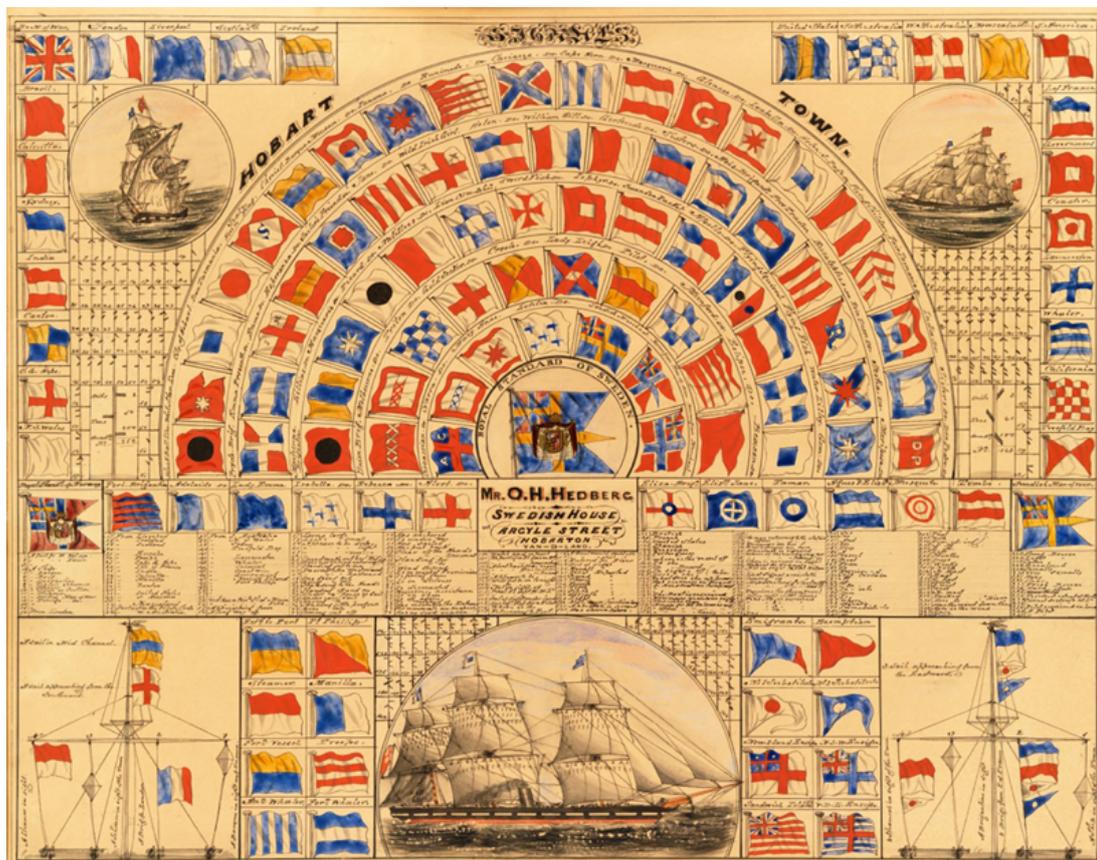


Fig 3 – "Signals Hobart Town" (Between 1853 and 1856)

The colony met the gap in manpower with the introduction of an assisted passage scheme of selected immigrants under the British Governments Bounty Ticket System. The Black Ball Line and its fiercest rival, the White Star Line, both ran regular packet services to and from the United Kingdom, transporting many thousands of willing workers to the Australian colonies. Both of their house flags appear regularly in the signal and flag charts



(Fig 4 - Nov. 1855)



A Black Ball Line colonial clipper.

The other event that occurred in 1851 that would have a profound effect on Van Diemen's Land was the introduction of the Australian Constitutions Act 1850 (UK).

The legislative changes implemented meant that Van Diemen's Land must have responsible government and the transportation of convicts and their incarceration to this penal island must cease. This eventuated in 1853

and the stigma attached to the colony's first name would be replaced in 1856 with the name change to Tasmania.

The Anti-transportation movement began in Van Diemen's Land in 1847 and became a crusade for social freedom. Victoria also joined and the white border on three sides of their flag, the Australasian Anti-transportation League Flag, produced in 1851, must be the basis for the Victorian ensign illustration shown in the Watts chart of 1855. (Fig 5)

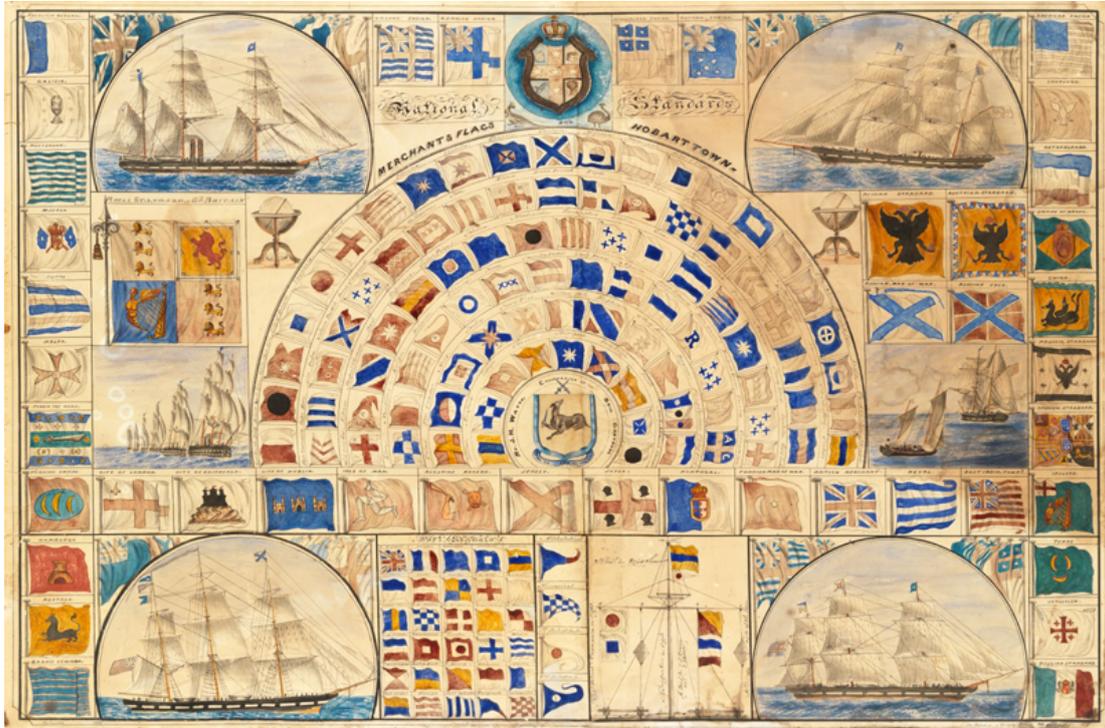
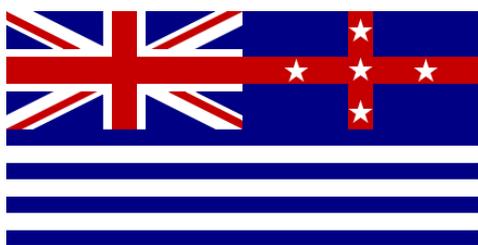


Fig 5 – Watts “National Standards Merchants Flags Hobart Town” (1855)



Top close-up of the Watts 1855 Chart

The most significant and profound single flag illustration contained in Murphy's charts has to be the Van Diemen's Land Colonial Ensign, an unofficial merchant ship flag for the colony's trading vessels. Thanks to him, his numerous and varying depictions of this ensign are our only known complete illustration of this flag, reflecting the obscure existence of it. No actual flag example has survived for our reference. Murphy was a first-hand observer and eyewitness illustrator of the development and use of this flag.



Upper Murray River Flag



Combined Murray River Flag

Fig 6.

Others here may hold a different opinion, but I believe this ensign preceded any other similar flag, namely the Upper Murray River Flag or the Murray River Flag. I hold this view as the VDL Ensign as verified in Murphy's 1851 chart was several years earlier before the Murray River flag. (Fig 6) The actual design, I believe, was based on the Whaler signal flag as shown in the Port Signal flags of Murphy's charts which had three blue and white bars. The 1855 VDL ensign reflects this connection with three blue and white bars above and below the St George's cross central arm. (Fig 8)

Whaling was a hugely important industry for the economy of Hobart Town. The biggest individual fleet was owned by a local businessman, Mr Charles Seal, and his house flag appears regularly in the charts. Whaling provided crew employment, the town provided all the necessary supplies required at sea such as victuals, whale longboats, spars, firewood, coal, oil barrels, sail cloth, cordage and timber for repairs. Not to mention the money spent in the taverns and brothels by the many nationalities from the various whaling fleet crews from around the world. The Port Signals carried four separated whaling flags specific to the nationality and country of origin, they were for Whaler (British and colonials), American, French and Foreign whalers. (Fig 7)

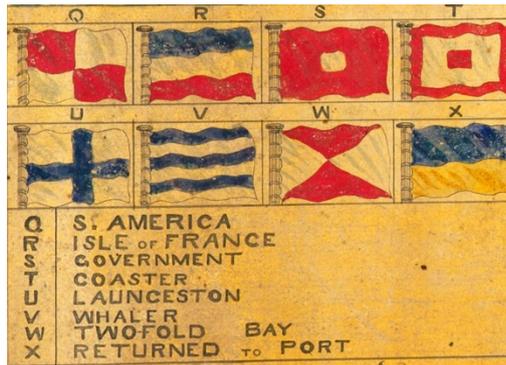


Fig 7

However, the VDL Ensign's actual final design seems to have been refined with common usage over time, as the illustrations in various charts reveal, the number of blue and white bars varies from the first original picture in the 1851 chart. (Fig 8 & Fig 9)

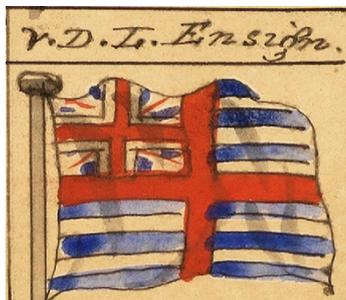


Fig 8



Fig 9

I have assumed that the earliest and largest illustration of 1851 VDL ensign is accurate when comparing it with the accuracy of Murphy's rendition of the Union flag in the centrepiece opposite it. The passage of a few years reflects how the design was modified when compared with the ones that appeared in the Hedberg and Dodd commissions of 1855, which have the inclusion of more blue and white bars now.

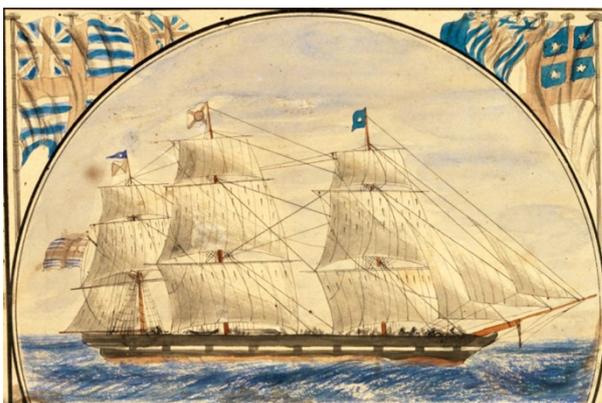


Fig 10 – Extracts of Watts "National Standards Merchants Flags Hobart Town" (1855)

Some illustrations, I believe, are just plainly incorrect as the VDL ensign of the Watts commission testifies. (Fig 10). Whether Murphy was distracted due to long tedious hours on guard duty, tired, unsettled due to garrison transfer or drunk, I can only guess, but the number of flag variations he has drawn suggests that it was a commonly used ensign and individual flag makers may have added their own number of alternate blue and white bars as a personal choice.

Interestingly, the Wyne Index, a collection of Tasmanian Government records and colonial newspapers compiled by Amelia Lucy Wyne in the early 1920s, reveals that the description of the VDL ensign was tantalisingly vague, mentioning only that the flag had blue and white bars (pointing out that the Whaler signal flag does also), the Union flag and the St George cross on a white ground. A VDL ensign appears in all of Murphy's charts.

Because the VDL ensign was unofficial I can understand why there are no copies of it in any of the maritime flag compendiums. Unofficial certainly, as there is absolutely no mention of it in any of the local government or marine gazettes of it being officially adopted for use by the merchant ship colonial traders of Hobart Town.

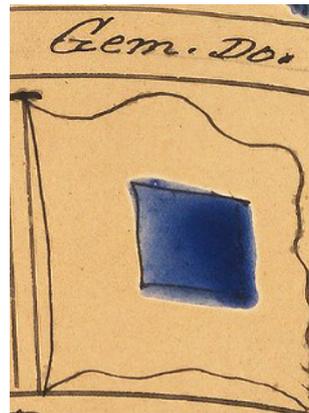


Fig 11

The sighting of my own family's house flag and merchant ship ensign in several of the Murphy charts sent me on a personal journey of discovery to uncover the reason why this particular flag was chosen. (Fig 11) I already knew that my forefather upon landing in Van Diemen's Land due to resettlement from Norfolk Island in 1808 commenced business as a ship builder and when his sons were in their early teens they joined him in manufacturing first class whale longboats from the local endemic Huon pine. They enjoyed considerable success with their longboats in the extremely popular and highly competitive anniversary Royal Hobart Regatta held annually and introduced by the then governor, Sir John Franklin in 1838 to commemorate the discovery of Van Diemen's Land by Abel Tasman in 1642.

Their huge success at the regattas won them numerous first prizes, not only for themselves but their whaling customers who had competed as well. I surmise that the 'number one' signal flag from the Marryat Signal Code was adopted by my family then as its house flag reflecting their proud commercial achievements. It has flown from the mast head of our trading ketches, business houses and private homes since then.

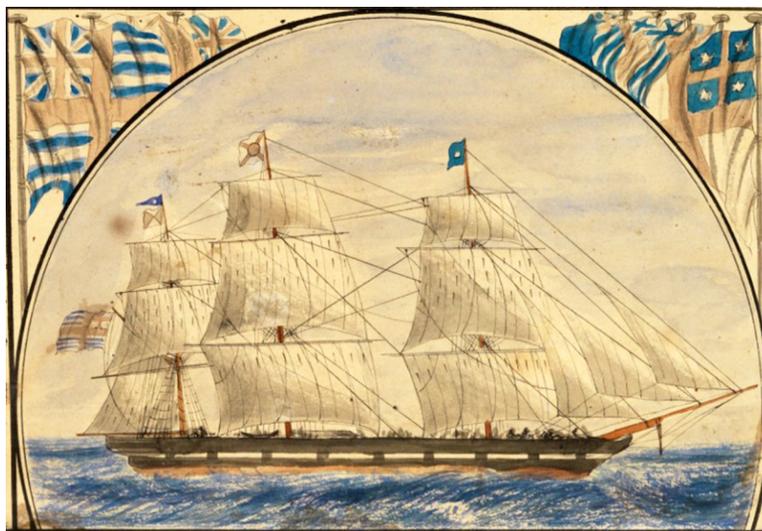


Fig 12 – The whaling ship, *Jane*

147 different merchant ship identification flags are illustrated in the eleven charts. Some vessels have been omitted altogether. One example is the flag identifying the whaling ship *Jane*. (Fig 12) This vessel appears in one chart as a maritime vignette flying the VDL ensign and her uniquely designed personal flag. Due to the miniaturisation of the illustration the fine detail of this flag has been omitted but fortunately the colonial journeyman painter William Duke captured the accurate particulars in his oil painted *Jane - A Hobart Town Whaler* dated 1848. The flag features a red kangaroo over a red St. Peter's saltire on a white field. As can be seen from the various charts the design of the identification flag was an individual one reflecting personal choice and preference. (Fig 13)



Fig 13

The port signal flags for Hobart Town were of particular importance as they signalled the purpose of the voyage and port or country of registration.

Colonial Traders took great care to fly the two port exemption flags after they had qualified by completing three consecutive voyages between any port of the Australian colonies or the colony of New Zealand. The exemption of pilot fees allowed the ships master entrance and berthing at Hobart Town which saved the merchantmen a significant amount of money as duty and tariffs still needed to be paid on most imported goods they carried. The exemption flags needed to be flown within six leagues of approaching the shore under the Port Act of 1854 and they appear in several of the signal flag charts.

Of the eleven charts discovered, six at least were for personal commissions. Mister J M Watts had his own family crest and motto as the centrepiece along with the National Standards of 36 foreign nations, Mister O H Hedberg, a Swedish national who later took British citizenship, had various Swedish and Norwegian national standards, ensigns for merchant ships and man-of-war, Mister Ogilvie and Clinch had their newly launched brigantine, the *Swordfish*, identification flag as the centrepiece. (Fig 14)

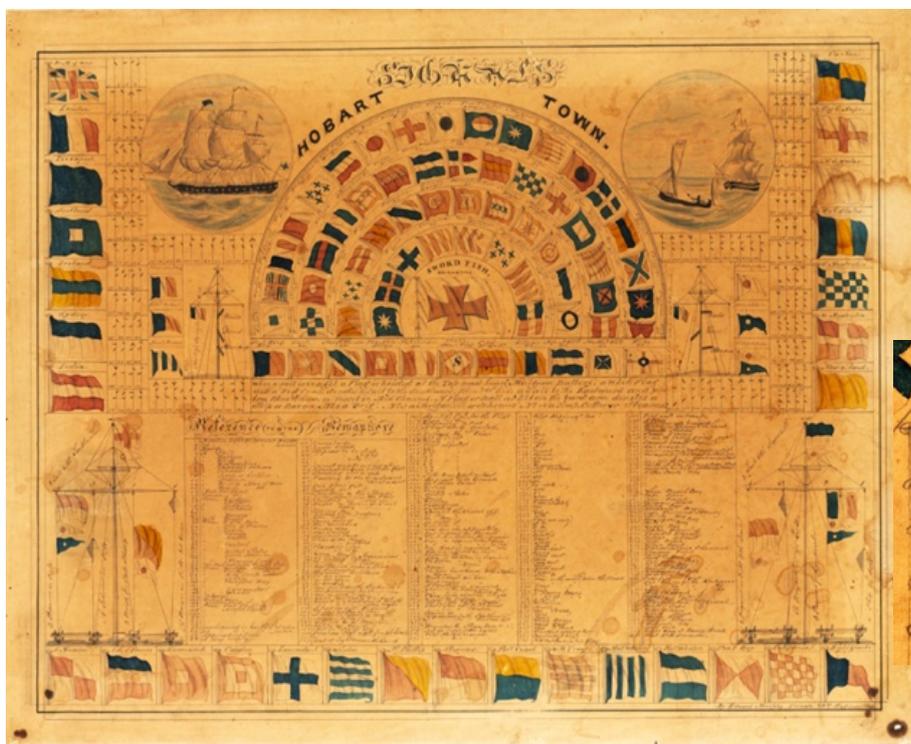


Fig 14  
Signals Hobart Town (1844)



The outbreak of the Crimean War in 1853 and the resulting mounting death toll, due to military and political blunders documented by war reporters, was the subject of great concern and interest to the fervent British colonials reflected in three of the charts with the inclusion of the enlarged British Royal Standard and the Russian Standard (the two principal adversaries) (Fig 16) in the George Dodd and the James Watt commissions. An unnamed commission has the large British Royal Standard along with the French Standard (the two major allies in this conflict) plus a vignette showing a line of battleships in line astern, possibly the British Baltic Fleet. (Fig 15)



G. Dodd 23 Aug. 1855



Fig 15 – “Signals Hobart Town” (undated estimated 1855-56)



Fig 16 Extracts from the Watts “National Standards Merchants Flags Hobart Town” (1855)

The great detail and complexity of Murphy’s signal and flag charts has left us with a wonderful insight into the maritime ships of Hobart Town and their use of the multi coloured flags and signals unparalleled by any other colonial illustrator. Murphy’s legacy has enriched our colonial maritime history and heritage with his exceptional signal flag charts of Van Diemen’s Land.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



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