



# Birdwood Flag

**Client** Birdwood Heritage Committee, on behalf of the Dean and Chapter of Newcastle Cathedral, and the University of Newcastle

**Services** Textiles Conservation

## Overview

Named in honour of General William Riddell Birdwood, the commander of the Australian forces on the Western Front during the latter part of WWI, the Birdwood Flag served as the Australian ensign, and was the first recorded, and officially sanctioned, presentation of an Australian flag in the field of war (as distinct from the Union Jack which had hitherto been flown by Australian forces). This highly significant Australian flag has outstanding social and historical significance for the people of Newcastle (and Australia), since the funds raised for the flag's creation and manufacture came from a public appeal organised by Miss Dora Sparke and the Newcastle Field Force Fund.

## Condition

The Birdwood Flag had deteriorated badly due to age, use and having been 'laid up', or hung, within St Michael's Chapel in the Newcastle Cathedral since 1924. After 60 years, the flag began to disintegrate, falling in small pieces, over time. Many of these pieces were collected by former Dean Emeritus Graeme Lawrence and placed in a small cardboard box in the bottom of the strong room at the Cathedral. The hundreds of fragments, most smaller than 3 sq.cm., included recognisable portions from seams within the Union Jack, sections of the Hoist Edge, sections of the outer edge seam of the flag, the Commonwealth Star and three of the stars of the Southern Cross. The silk itself is in poor condition, with little remaining strength.

## Treatment

A range of alternative approaches to the conservation of the Birdwood Flag were considered, from stabilisation and storing of the fragments, to construction of a reproduction version, to a combination of known and conjectural reconstruction. Following extensive discussions between stakeholders, including the Newcastle Cathedral, the University of Newcastle, the Birdwood Heritage Committee, and International Conservation Services, and a program of fundraising by the Birdwood Heritage Committee which included a



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major grant from the Copland Foundation, work commenced on a known and conjectural reconstruction. The hundreds of fragments of the Birdwood Flag were painstakingly sorted, cleaned, and humidified (to relax and soften the deteriorated silk fabric in preparation for stitching). The fragments were then laid out into original positions where this was able to be determined, or approximate positions based on the colour of the silk, evidence of seams or other information. The fragments were tacked (stitched) into position between two layers of tulle fabric which is commonly used as lining in the conservation of fragile silk textiles.

A new ensign replicating the original Birdwood Flag was commissioned and attached to a padded backing board. The fragments of the original flag, held between the tulle lining layers, were then laid over the replica ensign and sewn into position.

A new protective showcase was commissioned so that the Birdwood Flag can once again be hung for display, in turn, at the Newcastle Cathedral and at the University of Newcastle.

#### More information

- Check out this video on the ICS Youtube Channel, <https://youtu.be/WEvEkXMvFIU>
- Read this article by ABC News, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-29/australian-first-flag-found-and-restored-in-nsw/8663158>
- Read these two blog posts by University of Newcastle Cultural Collections; 'Launch of Birdwood Flag Restoration Project' <https://uoncc.wordpress.com/2016/06/22/birdwood-launch/> and 'Local Treasures: The Birdwood Flag' <https://uoncc.wordpress.com/2014/05/09/birdwood-flag/>



*After treatment*



*After treatment*