

## The County

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Of all the many geographies in the United Kingdom, this one is probably calculated to cause the most confusion. But why should that be? After all, everyone knows what a county is and which county (if any) they live in, don't they? Well, that depends entirely on which particular type of county you're talking about.

Over the years, counties have (and still do) come in many flavours: administrative counties, ancient counties, ceremonial counties, counties for lieutenancy purposes, counties proper, geographical counties, historic counties, metropolitan counties, non-metropolitan counties, postal counties, preserved counties, registration counties, traditional counties, and probably more.

When someone says 'county', which of these do they mean? Leaving aside postal county, which is no longer required by Royal Mail for the delivery of mail, there are three types of county which are most likely to be used.

County for administrative purposes – in England only, e.g. Hampshire (excluding Southampton and Portsmouth unitary authorities)

County for lieutenancy purposes – ceremonial county in England, e.g. Hampshire (including Southampton and Portsmouth unitary authorities); preserved county in Wales, e.g. Gwent; lieutenancy area in Scotland, e.g. Banffshire.

County for historic, traditional or cultural purposes – e.g. Middlesex, Yorkshire (as a single entity), Glamorgan, Peeblesshire.

The geography of ONS statistics has dealt primarily with modern and current administrative areas, as these are the areas with the up-to-date responsibility for financial and other resources in the divisions of the country – so in terms of top tier administrative areas, statistics are generally allocated to (non-metropolitan) counties and to unitary authorities. The Index of Place Names (IPN) produced by ONS has followed this rationale, and allocated place names to these areas.

But this is not suited to every potential user of the IPN. Many people would like to know in which traditional geographical area a place lies and use this historic county when talking or writing about areas or when addressing a letter. Recent moves to recognise the cultural importance of historic counties led to a change in planning policy in 2014 so that road signs for these areas may now be put up by local authorities.

The forthcoming 2016 IPN will offer a variety of changes and new features designed to be useful to a wide range of users. As well as their continued listing against current administrative areas, place names will now also be assigned to historic county and to lieutenancy county (i.e. the ceremonial county in England, the preserved county in Wales and the lieutenancy area in Scotland).

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