Our counties matter!

A guide to the historic counties for the Press and Media

Be *County-Wise* and get to know the Historic Counties

county-wise.org.uk

First Edition

Visit *county-wise.org.uk* for more information about the Historic Counties

The Association of British Counties

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Contents

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Introduction

The identity of the historic counties has become confused by the use of the term 'county' to describe many varied geographical, statistical, and political entities. Whilst many of these identities such as 'Avon' and 'Humberside' have changed or disappeared over the years, the identity of the historic counties has remained constant. They are quite literally our *heritage, present and future.*

About the Association of British Counties

The Association of British Counties (ABC) is a society dedicated to promoting awareness of the continuing importance of the 92 historic (or traditional) counties of the United Kingdom. The ABC believes that the counties are an important part of British culture, geography and heritage. The ABC contends that Britain needs a fixed general-purpose geography, one divorced from the ever changing names and areas of local government but, instead, one rooted in history, public understanding and commonly held notions of community and identity. The ABC, therefore, seeks to fully re-establish the use of the counties as the standard popular geographical reference frame of Britain and to further encourage their use as a basis for social, sporting and cultural activities.

More information about the Association of British Counties can be found on our *Press and Media* page (*abcounties.com/about/press-and-media*) where you will also find a press and media pack for the Association itself.
Please contact us with your enquiries at: press-enquiries@abcounties.com

About *County-Wise*

County-Wise exists to assist and enable organisations, the media and public to use the historic counties as a standard geography for the United Kingdom. It provides the tools and advice you need to make use of the historic counties in your personal, social or working life.

Managing an address database? Building a directory of historic buildings? Studying your family history? Want to know why you should use the historic counties and how to do this? *County-wise* aims to provide the answers.

The *County-Wise* website contains a growing number of information sheets and guides for various applications of the historic counties. Much of the information in this guide can be found on *County-Wise*, in addition to county profiles and '*The problem of "county confusion" – and how to resolve it*' – visit: county-wise.org.uk

The Counties

The historic counties continue to form part of the vital tapestry on which British life has grown up over the generations. They are invested with the very essence of our culture, history and national mythology, and their disappearance from modern maps has given birth to a modern myth: that they were abolished or radically altered in local government changes of the 1960s and 1970s. This section brings clarity to why there is so much confusion, explains what the historic counties actually are, and how you can use them.

In this section you will find:

- An introduction to the historic counties
- Top ten county facts
- Quick county quotes
- Where to find a county – quickly and easily
- Frequently asked questions about the counties

An introduction to the historic counties

Our country's division into counties goes back to mediaeval times and before.

The counties emerge in England

The division of England into shires began in Wessex in the mid-Saxon period. With the Wessex conquest of Mercia in the 9th and 10th centuries, the system was extended to central England. At the time of the Domesday Book, northern England comprised Cheshire and Yorkshire. The remaining counties of the north were established in the 12th century. Rutland appears in the Domesday Book, but is first recorded as a county in 1159.

The counties emerge in Scotland

The Scottish counties have their origins in the shires first created in the reign of Alexander I (1107-24), and in accordance with the pattern further south, each had a shire reeve, or sheriff. The pattern of shires that existed by the time of the late Middle Ages is believed to be very close to that existing in the mid-nineteenth century. The central and western Highlands and the Isles were not assigned to shires until the early modern period, Caithness becoming a sheriffdom in 1503 and Orkney in 1540.

Their longevity has made the 92 historic counties an indelible part of the history, heritage, geography and culture of the nation.
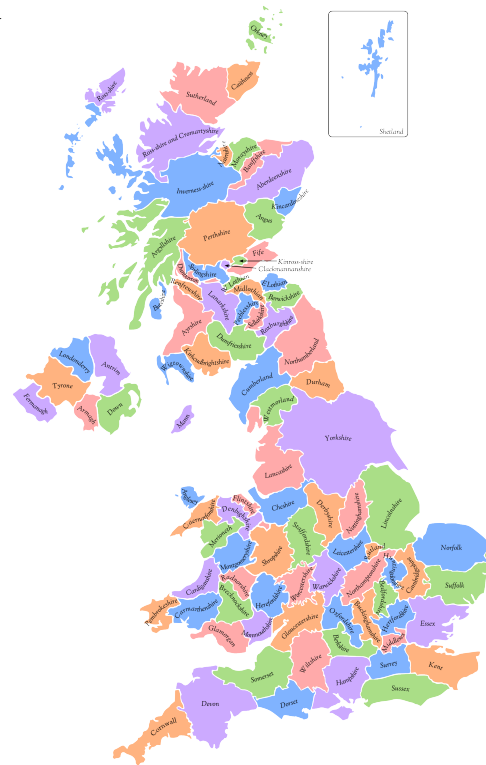
The Counties of the United Kingdom

The *Press and Media* page (*abcounties.com/press-and-media*) on our website contains a selection of images for download, including the above map.
Contact us at press-enquires@abcounties.com if you would like an SVG version of the map or to discus specific requirements.

The counties emerge in Wales

The first eight counties of Wales were created by King Edward I in 1284, by the Statute of Rhuddlan. The present day pattern of the historic counties was established by the Laws in Wales Act 1535, which established Denbighshire, Montgomeryshire, Radnorshire, Brecknockshire and Monmouthshire from the areas of the former marcher lordships. The historic counties are, however, based on much older, traditional areas.

The counties emerge in Ireland

The division of Ireland into counties began during the reign of King John (1199-1216). The complete set of counties as they are today was laid down in 1584 (with their modern boundaries not finally settled until 1613. As in Wales the counties were generally based on earlier, traditional areas.

Since their establishment there have been few reliably documented changes to the borders of the historic counties, any such changes being tiny and not such as to undermine the continuity of the counties as geographical and cultural entities.

The advent of modern local government

When modern local government was first created, in 1888, the areas of its "administrative counties" were based on the historic counties. Local government remained fairly closely based on the historic counties from 1888-1965. However, the cumulative effect of the numerous local government reforms since then mean that few local authorities now have an area anything like any historic county. However, the words "county" and "county council" are still used in local government terminology. Many local authorities also still use the unqualified name of an historic county, despite having a very different area from that historic county.

The result is confusion. The public is led to believe that cherished historic counties have been altered or abolished by local government change; despite Governments repeatedly confirming that this is not the case.

The counties today and in future

The Association believes that local government needs to be given an identity totally distinct from that of the historic counties, to the benefit of both. We champion the historic counties as the basis of our standard geography. Administrative areas are wholly unsuitable for this purpose: there are too many of them, and their names and areas change too often. Administrative areas were created to facilitate public service provision, not as a basis for geographical descriptions.

A more detailed discussion concerning the identity of our counties can be found on the *County-Wise* website: *The problem of "county confusion" – and how to resolve it*.

Top ten county facts

92

There are **92 counties** in the United Kingdom – 39 in England, 6 in Northern Ireland, 34 in Scotland, and 13 in Wales.

The **largest county** by *both* size and population is **Yorkshire**. Over 5 million people live in Yorkshire.
Source: Office for National Statistics

Yorkshire

Clackmannanshire

The **smallest county** is **Clackmannanshire**, which nestles between Fife, Kinross-shire, Perth and Stirlingshire in Scotland.

There are a growing number of county flags – many of which have traditional origins. The design of **Essex flag** is perhaps the **oldest** with its three seaxes – an ancient emblem of the county.

© Association of British Counties
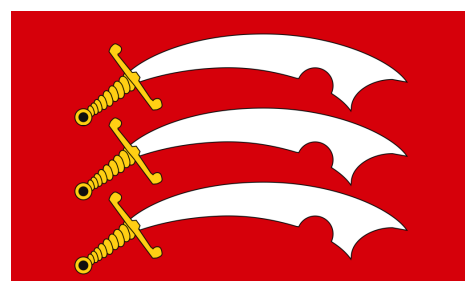
The county borders remain largely unchanged since their inception - it is the boundaries of the administrative areas and the Lieutenancies which change today.

One such example is the Middlesex/Essex Border which runs through the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, and reflects the original water course.

Image Source:
Open Street Map and Historic Counties Trust

Lough Neagh – Britain's largest freshwater lake – is large enough to swallow the two **smallest counties**, Clackmannanshire and Kinross-shire, with room to spare!
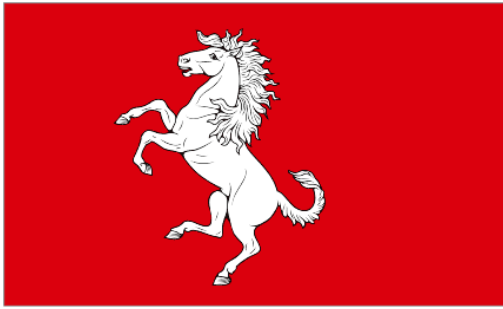
Image Source: NASA
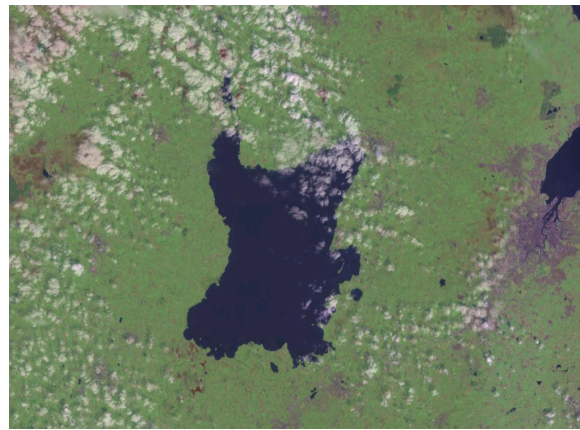
Middlesex

Middlesex has the **second-smallest area** of any county in England, but the **third-largest population**.

Cromartyshire consists of twenty-three separated portions stretching from the east to the west coast.

Cromartyshire
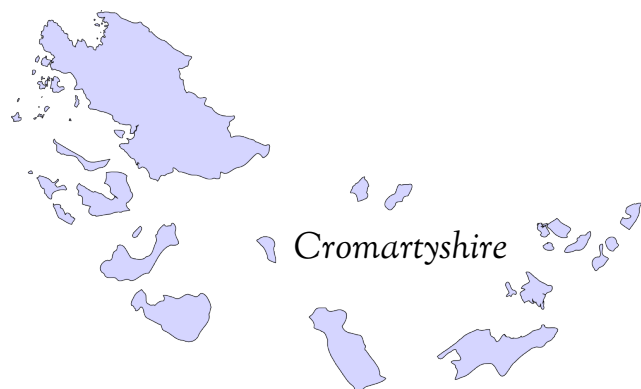
Kent has the **oldest name** of any county: it predates the Roman period and may even be pre-Celtic.

Three counties consist entirely of their own **islands**: Anglesey, Orkney and Shetland. Only Anglesey is joined (by bridge) to mainland Great Britain.

Orkney

Shetland

Anglesey

© Association of British Counties
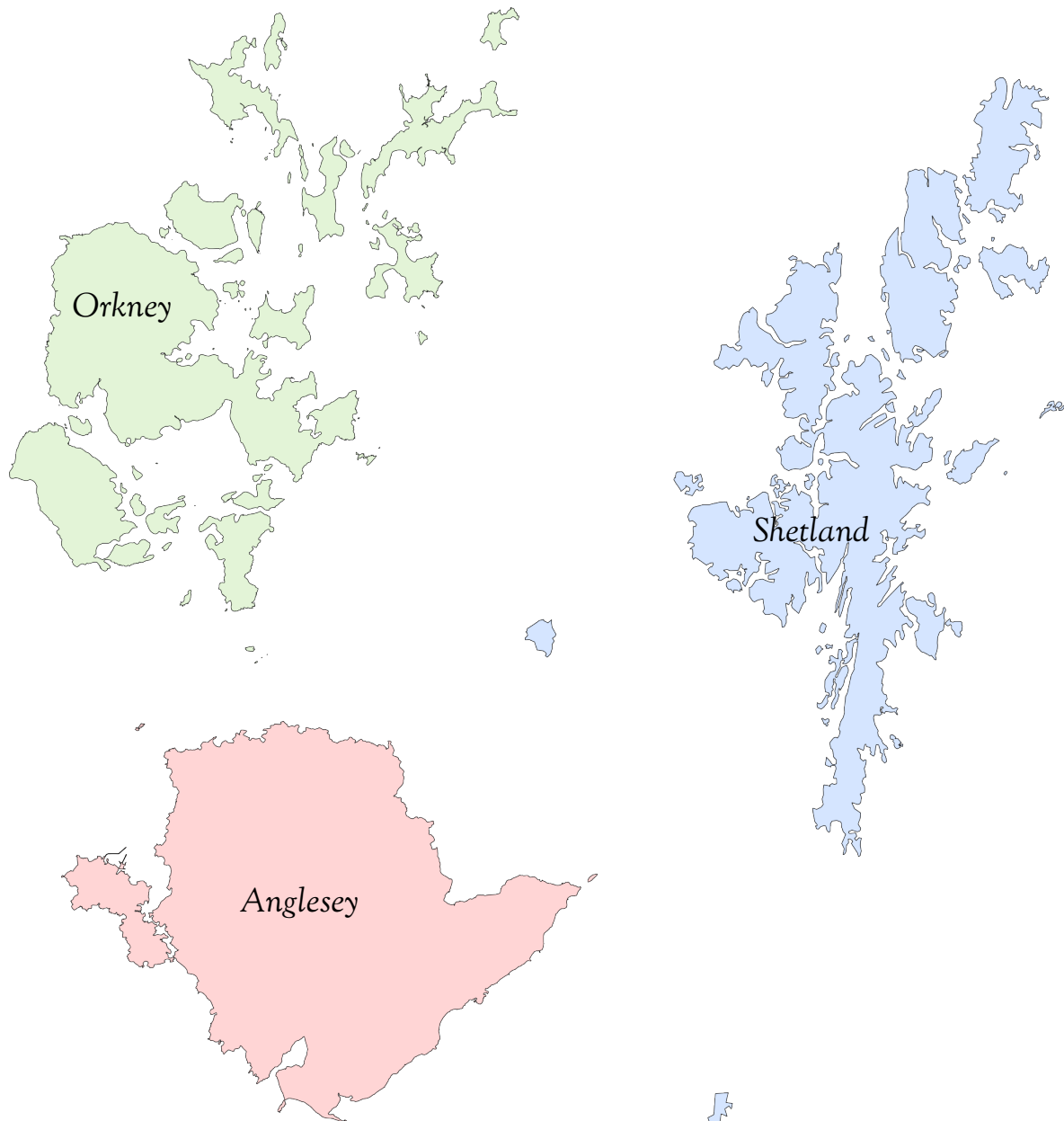
Quick county quotes

"Today, on St George's Day, we commemorate our patron saint and formally
acknowledge the continuing role of our traditional counties in England's public and
cultural life"[1]

Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. 23 April 2013

"Above all else, the historic counties are places where people live and 'come from',
places where they 'belong'."

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"The identity of our counties is marred by a confusion of geographical and
administrative boundaries created in the middle of the last century and perpetuated to
this day."

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/eric-pickles-celebrate-st-george-and-englands-traditional-counties

Where to find a county – quickly and easily

The *Gazetteer of British Place Names* provides an exhaustive Place Name Index to Great Britain, containing over 50,000 entries. It lists the historic county and the main administrative areas in which each place lies.

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Gazetteer *of*
British Place Names

http://www.gazetteer.org.uk

Search the Gazetteer and find the historic county for your location...

Westminster, Middlesex

Place Name:
Westminster

Grid Reference:
TQ2979

Latitude and Longitude:
51.495233, -0.1431191

Historic County:
Middlesex

Unitary Authority:
Westminster

Police Area:
Metropolitan

Country:
England

back to results

Click on map pin to zoom and centre the map, right-click to zoom further ([control] + click for Mac). Please note that map pins are indicative, and may not precisely fall on the settlement.

An example of a search result for 'Westminster'

Frequently asked questions about the counties

Are some towns and cities (e.g. Bristol, Haverfordwest) counties in their own right?

There are, within England and Wales, 18 towns or cities which have, at various times, been granted charters apparently making them "counties" in their own right. These areas are collectively known as the "counties corporate". Such charters were actually concerned with the judicial arrangements of these towns and cities rather than their geographical status. The "county corporate" status has generally been seen as an extra dignity added to a town and has not usually been taken to mean that the town has literally been removed from its host county. For example, the General Register Office, within its Census Reports, never considered them to be so and always dealt with them as being part of the county in which they geographically lay. Numerous legal judgments found that the "counties corporate" were not "counties in the ordinary sense of the term". This convention is followed by ABC. This is done without prejudice to the special status which many feel these places deserve.

Were many of the historic counties altered or abolished by local government reorganisations in the 1960s and 1970s?

The historic counties are extant and unchanged. It is a commonly held belief that the local government changes of the 1960s and 1970s actually altered the historic Counties of Britain, but in fact they did no such thing. Modern local authority areas were only created in 1889 (in England and Wales) and 1890 (in Scotland). Initially these areas were closely based upon the historic Counties.

However, they were always understood to be separate entities from the Counties themselves and, indeed, had separate terminology: they were labelled "administrative counties" and "county boroughs". There should be no confusion between the local government areas and the historic Counties themselves. After all, the Counties of England and Scotland had, by 1889, already been in existence for over 800 years (many for centuries longer). Those of Wales and the Highlands had also been fixed in name and area for several centuries.

The local government reorganisations of the 1960s and 1970s abolished all the "administrative counties" and "county boroughs" and created a whole new set of local government areas. However, it did not alter or abolish the counties themselves. In Scotland the new top tier administrative areas were called "regions". However, in England and Wales the new top tier local government areas were, confusingly, labelled

"counties". It is this use of the word "county" to mean something other than the real historic counties which lies at the root of the confusion of the last 40 years. Nonetheless, the government has consistently made it quite clear that these "counties" are simply narrow administrative areas created for a specific purpose and are not intended to be replacements for the historic counties in a cultural or geographical sense.

For example, on 1st April 1974, a DoE spokesman said: *"The new county boundaries are solely for the purpose of defining areas of ... local government. They are administrative areas, and will not alter the traditional boundaries of counties, nor is it intended that the loyalties of people living in them will change."*

These points are covered in more detail in our article *The problem of "county confusion" – and how to resolve it*.[2]

The continued existence of the historic counties is no mere legal curiosity. The counties continue to play an important role in contemporary society. They are still social and cultural units of great significance. They are still the focus of strong feelings of loyalty and identity to many people. Innumerable cultural, sporting and social activities are still based upon them. They are also still widely used as a geographical reference frame both in everyday speech and by the media.

Importantly, many historic county names not used in administrative geography have continued to form part of Royal Mail recommended postal addresses despite no longer being used as a basis for administration (e.g. in most of Scotland and in Herefordshire, Middlesex, Worcestershire etc.). The Royal Mail now permits the correct historic county name to be used in every UK address. More details can be found in the *Historic Counties Postal Directory*.[3]

What are the "home counties"?

The phrase "home counties" has no specific legal definition but as a popular expression it appears to have been around for many years. According to the OED it is simply *"the counties nearest to London, namely Surrey, Kent, Essex and Middlesex; sometimes with the addition of Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and occasionally Sussex."*

Further county FAQs can be found on the County-Wise website:

http://county-wise.org.uk/counties/frequently-asked-questions/

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[2] available at: county-wise.org.uk/counties/county-confusion

[3] available at: postal-counties.com

The historic counties are an important part of the nation's heritage; but with so many different entities using their names and inventing others, the identity of the historic counties remains confused in the minds of many.

The *County-Wise* campaign seeks to address this confusion and promote use of the historic counties. county-wise.org.uk

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The *Association of British Counties* is a society dedicated to promoting awareness of the continuing importance of the 92 historic counties of the United Kingdom.
abcounties.com

The *Historic Counties Postal Directory* provides a list of the historic county for each post town of the UK, allowing the historic county for any UK address to be easily be determined.
postal-counties.com

The *Gazetteer of British Place Names* provides an exhaustive Place Name Index to Great Britain, containing over 50,000 entries.
gazetteer.org.uk

The Association of British counties *Press and Media* page contains all the latest press information from the Association of British Counties. Find press releases, images, information packs, and further details.
abcounties.com/press-and-media

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