

## Rupert Barnes: Let's do more to celebrate our historic counties

By [Rupert Barnes](#)



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Certain words cause an immediate reaction in the hearer, triggering a torrent of thoughts, reactions and feelings, all bundled up in that one word. Let me try these on you: Yorkshire, Cornwall, Norfolk, Argyll.

Your reactions to each name are not drawn from a sudden analysis of current official reports but come from generations of familiarity with the conception of those places – this is the essence of their heritage.

It is a buzzword of our generation, ‘heritage’, but it is real, and here I like to make a distinction: history is what happened in the past, but heritage is that which has come down to us today from the past.

The value of a county’s name is clear: a seaside B&B may look like any other, but with the name “Cornwall” attached and all the collective understanding is engaged, maybe holiday beaches, or bleak moorland, tin-mining, Poldark, or pasties, it is all contained in that magic name.

Kent may remind you of its oast houses and cathedrals; Fermanagh of its lakes and skies; Westmorland of soaring fells and Wordsworth’s poetry; Norfolk of broads, windmills and Norwich. No Yorkshireman would allow me to characterise his county in a single sentence (just as I should not have tried to characterise the others so briefly). Reactions are individual: Sussex makes me think of long walks over the chalk Downs, while others may think of the seaside, and Caithness sings of its cliffs on the edge of the world, or the sadness of the roofless, abandoned croft houses. Take your pick any of our ninety-two shires. In each case its name is more evocative than any brand name.

These common understandings have grown over centuries, in a way that only ancient places can: you would not expect romantic notions to blossom over Whitehall inventions such as ‘Neath Port Talbot’ or indeed ‘Three Rivers’. They have attached to historic counties because they are ancient: the shires of England all have their names recorded for a thousand years and more (apart from a youngster, Lancashire at just 800 years). The Domesday Book shows their borders unchanged into modernity. That is an impressive framework on which our collective imagination has been able to settle.

Over the summer, I set out to walk the border of Hertfordshire, to discover more of my own home county, and 180 miles later I was back where I started. Over the whole walk I had not a single disappointing day. It is an exercise I can recommend to anyone as every county has its

own variety of characteristics to be sampled and enjoyed. This year I may do Buckinghamshire.

The most perfectly Hertfordshire place I found myself on my walk was on Totteridge Common, which is administratively within the London Borough of Barnet. It is a lesson that the conveniences of bureaucracy do not define the character of a place. We know that already though: a Somerset of cider and cheese is fine enough, but it is also the county of Regency Bath, which is outside what Whitehall thinks is encompassed in the label.

It should be needless to say it, but the identity of a place is not defined by which bureaucratic entity empties the bins there. Those entities are only relevant because they have the cash to promote their own corporate branding, and in doing so they steal from the real places beneath. They should not forget: the ancient counties underlie all. They are not dependent on bureaucracies for their existence and have not been superseded by administrative areas which might borrow their names. Not a single line in the Local Government Acts abolishes any ancient county as a geographical area, and nothing transfers from them the birthright of fifty generations.

We are left with an unnecessary confusion then, that the word “county” describes two wholly different things – an administrative area and a historic, geographical area. The heritage, which is of such value, attaches to the county with the history, and nowhere with a claim to that inheritance is to be excluded because it lies the wrong side of a line drawn on a map in Whitehall.

Cities too have their own characters. When you think of Coventry your mind may go to many things which make the townsfolk proud; the mediæval cloth trade, the tragic cathedral or women riding horses naked through the street (they don’t do it these days – believe me; I’ve looked). As important is that it is the city in the heart of Warwickshire, from which county it drew its prosperity. Its mediæval tradition of wandering players reached as far as Stratford-upon-Avon, whose bard set the beginning of the Wars of the Roses at the lists in Coventry, in his home county, so the city has an equal right to the heritage of the shire which is the birthplace of the British imagination. However leaving the city you are welcomed to “Shakespeare’s county”, as if Coventry were shunned, expelled from that which is its own by right.

Durham’s council is admirably keen on its heritage, welcoming visitors to the “Land of the Prince Bishops”, but they exclude from this Stockton, Darlington, Jarrow, Gateshead; all towns with just as much a claim to this heritage and each with its story to tell. What authority does one new-minted council have to steal a thousand years of history from a town, just because that shard of officialdom has borrowed the county’s name?

Recently Jake Berry, the Minister for the Northern Powerhouse and Local Growth, announced that something should be done about this, and that local authorities should be encouraged to celebrate their historic counties. He has proposed that they should fly their counties’ flags. These flags are a colourful new tradition, and can be encouraged without cost. Do not let it stop there though: the rich seam of each county’s unique heritage is there to be opened up. Darlington will celebrate its own history, but also let it assert that it is part of the “Land of the Prince Bishops”, and Coventry and Birmingham that they are equal parts of “Shakespeare’s County”. Huntingdonshire is not the embarrassing pregnant bulge on the edge of Cambridgeshire but is a unique, exquisite shire. This should be written into every cultural plan: remember where we are; remember what has come down to us.

Those of us who are councillors should have the humility to recognise that local government is just a functional convenience, and when the meeting is over and the office closes, the ancient land beneath us is all that matters, bearing all those ideas and overlapping elements of local identity that shape us.

The common picture of place does not derive from the shifting lines of administrative geography but from the shires bearing the inheritance of ages.