Some frequently asked questions and answers regarding our counties. This selection is taken from information provided online by the Association of British Counties located at

https://abcounties.com/questions/

Weren't many of the historic Counties altered or abolished by local government reorganisations in the 1960s and 1970s?

It is a commonly held misconception that the local government changes of the 1960s and 1970s actually altered the historic Counties of Britain. 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 labeled "administrative counties" and "county boroughs". Nobody ever confused the local government areas with the historic Counties themselves. After all, the Counties of England had, by 1889, already been in existence for over 800 years (many for centuries longer). Those of Wales and Scotland 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 traditional 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 The problem of “county confusion” – and how to resolve it.

The continued existence of the traditional 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 traditional County names 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.). In fact the Royal Mail now permits the correct traditional County name to be used in every UK address. More details can be found in the Traditional County Postal Directory

Why should we care about the Counties?

(A) Because they are important cultural entities.

ABC believes that the link which the traditional Counties provide between our present and our distant past adds great value to the life of the nation and therefore deserves to preserved and enhanced.

The 39 Counties of England have mostly existed largely unchanged since before 1066, the 13 Welsh ones (including Monmouthshire), like the 34 in Scotland, have been fixed in name and areas for over 400 years. Historically speaking, having been adopted or created in mediaeval times for the exercise of a kind of administration, Essex, Yorkshire, Pembrokeshire, Fife and the rest have long since come to represent something much wider than that. They have become bedrocks of the history, culture and geography of Britain. They provide an instant means of reference to different parts of the country, to a set of cities, towns and villages; to distinctive scenery, architecture and wildlife; to particular industries and pastimes, accents and dialect, tourist attractions, weather and so on. A large literature focuses on each of the Counties; they give their names to clubs and societies, to teams people play for, to regiments they serve in; they are familiar holiday and business destinations. Above all else, they are places – places where people live and "come from", where they "belong". And they often provide a family link with past generations.

Our County heritage is something to be treasured and nurtured by society, not tossed aside simply because the Counties are no longer considered suitable as a basis for administration.

(B) Because they provide a fixed and widely understood geographical reference frame.

The names and areas of the historic Counties stay fixed throughout the frequent changes to those of local government units. The geographical framework provided by the traditional Counties is still familiar to most people and widely used in everyday speech and by many in the media. The traditional County names can be used in any postal address in the UK (see Traditional County Postal Directory).
There is no reason why the traditional Counties cannot be more widely used (e.g. in gazetteers, guide books, by the media etc.). The Counties still exist. The Government has no objection to their use as a geographical reference frame. After all, the six Counties of Northern Ireland are still the universally accepted geographical reference frame of the province. These Counties have nothing to do with local government, which at present is provided by 26 unitary authorities, the areas of which cut across County borders in many places. If the traditional Counties of Northern Ireland can be universally used then so can those of Great Britain.

Why have the identities of many of the historic Counties become obscured?

Because following the local government changes of the 1960s and 1970s, many map-makers, publishers of guide books and gazetteers etc. and, increasingly, sections of the media began to use the new local government areas as a geographical framework. The absurdity of this policy is now clear to see. We have now had two major reorganisations of local government in England, Wales and Scotland in the last 30 years. To tie our concept of geography to local government areas is to condemn the British people to a continually shifting geographical framework. Can we all seriously be expected to re-learn our whole notion of where places are every decade or so ? Are we also expected to change our perceptions of community and identity on a similar timescale ?

Local authority areas were created to facilitate the provision of certain services to the community. They were not designed to play a wider geographical or cultural role. The Government never directed or recommended that they be so used. After all they are only one type of a number of very important administrative areas which assist in the provision of public services. The police areas and the areas of the NHS are arguably just as important to the public as local authority areas. Yet no-one would suggest erecting road signs marking their boundaries or producing a tourist guide book to them. Nor should local authority areas be so used.

The present set of local authority areas present some particular problems to those who would attempt to use them as a geographical framework. The names and areas of many of them are unfamiliar to most of the public. To use them within geographical descriptions therefore conveys no information. Many of the unitary authority areas have “borrowed” the name of a town or city within the local authority area. This leads to nonsense if one tries to use the unitary area within a geographical description. Consider the unitary authority area of

“Caerphilly”. The town of Caerphilly lies within this. How does one describe where Caerphilly is ? “Caerphilly in Caerphilly” ! How does one describe where other towns in the unitary authority area are ? One can’t say “New Tredegar in Caerphilly” since New Tredegar is a totally separate town 30 miles away from the town of Caerphilly. Similarly to describe Maidenhead as being in “Windsor and Maidenhead” scarcely conveys any information.

A more detailed consideration of these points can be found in The problem of “county confusion” – and how to resolve it.

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.”*

Aren’t 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”.