The information on this document is available online from the Association of British Counties at

http://county-wise.org.uk/counties/

The Counties

The Counties of
Great Britain & Northern Ireland
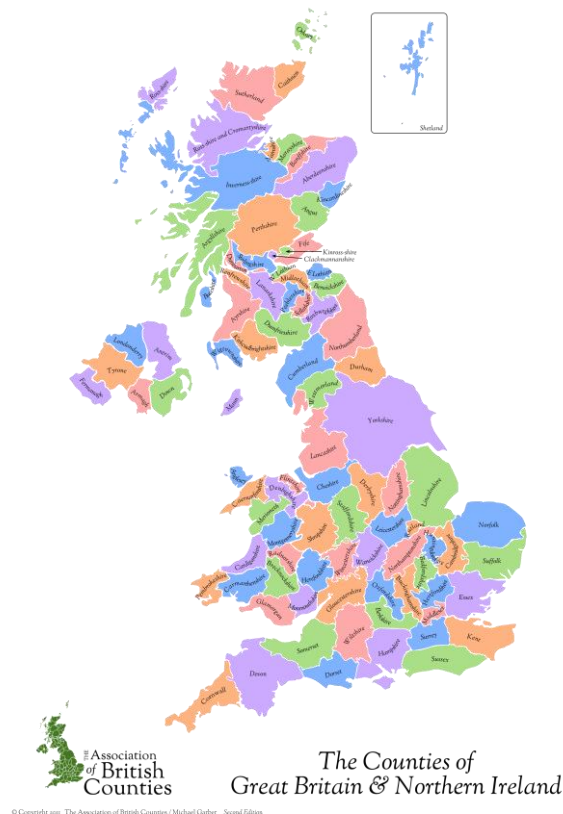
Their longevity have made the 92 historic counties an indelible part of the history, heritage, geography and culture of the nation.
Our country's division into counties goes back to mediaeval and feudal times.

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.

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 in *The problem of "county confusion" – and how to resolve it*.

Further Reading

- Why the historic counties were never 'abolished'
- The problem of "county confusion" – and how to resolve it
- Frequently asked questions about the counties