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<http://county-wise.org.uk/counties/never-abolished/>

where detailed individual county profiles are also available at the foot of the page.

Why the historic counties were never abolished

The question

“Weren’t the historic counties abolished back in [insert date here]?”

The assumption that the historic counties were ‘abolished’ or ‘changed’ by past local government boundary reviews is one that is frequently raised. On this page we explain how this commonly-held misconception has come about, and why you need not feel embarrassed to be mistaken.

The concise answer

The simple answer is that local government areas were created in 1888 and, although initially, based on the historic counties, they were always understood to be separate from them. Hence, subsequent changes to local government areas have not affected the historic counties, something the Government has consistently re-affirmed.

The reasonably short answer

County identity has been wrapped in widespread confusion, and you will easily see why below...

The origins and importance of the historic counties

Our country's division into counties goes back to mediaeval and feudal times. The division of England into shires began in the mid-Saxon period. The Scottish counties have their origins in the shires first created in the reign of Alexander I (1107–24). The present day pattern of the counties of Wales dates from the Laws in Wales Act 1535. The division of Ireland into counties began during the reign of King John (1199–1216) and was completed in 1613. In Wales and Ireland, the counties were generally based on earlier, traditional areas.

While each county may have originally been set up for some public purpose or other, long before the beginning of the nineteenth century it was their geographical and cultural identities which were paramount. No single administrative function defined them. Rather, the counties were considered to be territorial divisions of the country whose names and areas had been fixed for many centuries and were universally known and accepted. The counties were clearly recognised legal entities. Innumerable Acts of Parliament made reference to them and used them as the basic geographical framework for various administrative functions.

Local government and its link with the historic counties

The era of modern local government began with the Local Government Act 1888 (LGA 1888). This Act created a whole new set of statutorily defined administrative areas covering the whole of England and Wales, terming them “administrative counties” (two-tier local government areas) and “county boroughs” (single-tier local government areas). The Local Government (Scotland) Act 1889 and Local Government (Ireland) Act 1898 created similar administrative areas in Scotland and Ireland.

Initially the combined area of an “administrative county” with its “associated county boroughs” was similar to that of the historic county from which the “administrative county” took its name (e.g. the combined area of the “administrative county” of “Warwickshire” with the “county boroughs” of

“Birmingham” and “Coventry” was very similar to that of the historic county of Warwickshire).

However, the local government legislation did not abolish or alter the historic counties. This fact is evident from the General Register Office’s Census Report of 1891. This distinguished between what it dubbed the “Ancient or Geographical Counties” and the new “administrative counties”. It made it clear that the two were distinct entities and that the former still existed. No subsequent local government legislation has ever tried to alter or abolish the historic counties and their continued existence has been consistently reaffirmed by the Government.

However, what is true is that the historic counties are no longer used as the basis for any major form of public administration. Prior to 1888 the areas of the sheriffs and lord-lieutenants were based upon the historic counties. The LGA 1888 tied them to the new “administrative counties”. In 1917 parliamentary constituencies were also redrawn and based on the “administrative counties”. This was the end of the last major administrative use to which the historic counties were put.

Whilst the historic counties are no longer used directly as the basis for any major form of public administration they do, of course, remain significant cultural and geographical entities.

The 1974 myth

It is a common misconception that there were many “changes” to the counties in 1974. In fact, there were no changes whatsoever to the historic counties. There were, however, significant changes to local government. Whilst these changes were wide ranging they were by no means unique to 1974. In reality, since 1888 numerous Acts had changed the boundaries of local government areas to suit their needs. Such changes gathered pace in the 1960s, for example with the London Government Act 1963 which created a formal “Greater London” administrative area. The Local Government Act 1972 radically amended local government in the rest of England and Wales. It abolished the LGA 1888’s administrative counties and county boroughs and created a whole new set of local government areas:

“For the administration of local government on and after 1st April 1974 England (exclusive of Greater London and the Isles of Scilly) shall be divided into local government areas to be known as counties and in those counties there shall be local government areas to be known as districts.” [i]

The confusion has been caused by the use of the unqualified word ‘county’ rather than ‘administrative county’ and the retention of the phrase ‘county council’ to describe local authorities whose area was nothing like any historic county. Nonetheless, it is clear that these areas ‘to be known as counties’ are defined solely ‘for the administration of local government’. Nowhere were they imbued with a wider cultural or geographical role.

Whilst the 1972 Act did abolish all the previous local government ‘administrative counties’ and ‘county boroughs’, it did not abolish or alter the historic counties. It was solely concerned with local government. An article published in *The Times* on 1 April 1974, when the Act came into power, quotes an official of the Department of the Environment confirming this:

“They are administrative areas and will not alter the traditional boundaries of counties, nor it is intended that the loyalties of people living in them will change.” [ii]

Local government has continued to be subject to continual and often radical change since the early 1970s. Few local authorities now have an area anything like any historic county. Many, however, continue to misuse historic county names and to give themselves the title ‘county council’.

What about the Ceremonial Counties?

Prior to 1888 the lord-lieutenants and sheriffs were appointed to areas defined in term of the historic counties. Following the LGA 1888 they were appointed to areas based on the new administrative counties and county boroughs, though there areas were still close to those of the historic counties. In 1972 they were changed and based on the new local government ‘counties’.

These days they are defied by the Lieutenancies Act 1997 and are an utterly bizarre mix of current and former local government areas. In recent years, these areas have been referred to as ‘ceremonial counties’ though this is not a statutory term. Indeed, in Scotland, the areas are not even called

‘counties’. The ceremonial areas are defined solely for the operation of the office of the lord–lieutenant. They are such a bizarre mix of areas that they have increasingly had no geographical or cultural role and are effectively ignored and unknown to those other than who they directly affect. They are certainly not any kind of replacement for the historic counties in a cultural or geographical context.

Conclusion

Despite reassurances from Government officials and ministers stating that the historic counties have been, and continue to be unaffected by local government boundary changes, many still mistakenly believe otherwise.

It is easy to see how the concept of the historic counties somehow being abolished spread. The linking of the then new concept of elected local government to the historic counties made it inevitable that the two would become confused in the public (and the media’s) mind. Changes to local government became seen as changes to the historic counties. The long term solution is to remove the notion of ‘county’ from local government.

Stop calling local authorities ‘county councils’, stop calling local government areas ‘counties’, stop letting local authorities ape historic county names, and much clarity will be achieved. Local government is important, but it can foster its own identity, and not try to borrow that of the historic counties. A return to basing the office of lord–lieutenant on the historic counties may then enable historic counties and local government to a stable and long term peaceful coexistence.

This article will hopefully have clarified in your mind that the historic counties are very–much extant. More importantly, the technical fact of their continued existence, and that they are still relevant cultural and geographical entities in the modern United Kingdom. In relation to the English counties this was re–affirmed on 12rd April 2013 by Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Eric Pickles:

“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.” [\[iii\]](#)

Further Reading

Historic Counties Trust. *The Historic Counties Standard*

(available at: <http://www.historiccountiestrust.co.uk/hcs.htm/>)

Association of British Counties. *The problem of “county confusion” – and how to resolve it*

(available at: <http://county-wise.org.uk/counties/county-confusion/>)

[i] HM Government. *Local Government Act, 1972*. 1(1).

[ii] Raymond Gledhill. “White Rose ties hold fast despite amputations and shake-up of boundaries”. *The Times*. 1 April 1974.

[iii] Department for Communities and Local Government. “Eric Pickles: celebrate St George and England’s traditional counties”. Gov.uk. available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/eric-pickles-celebrate-st-george-and-englands-traditional-counties>