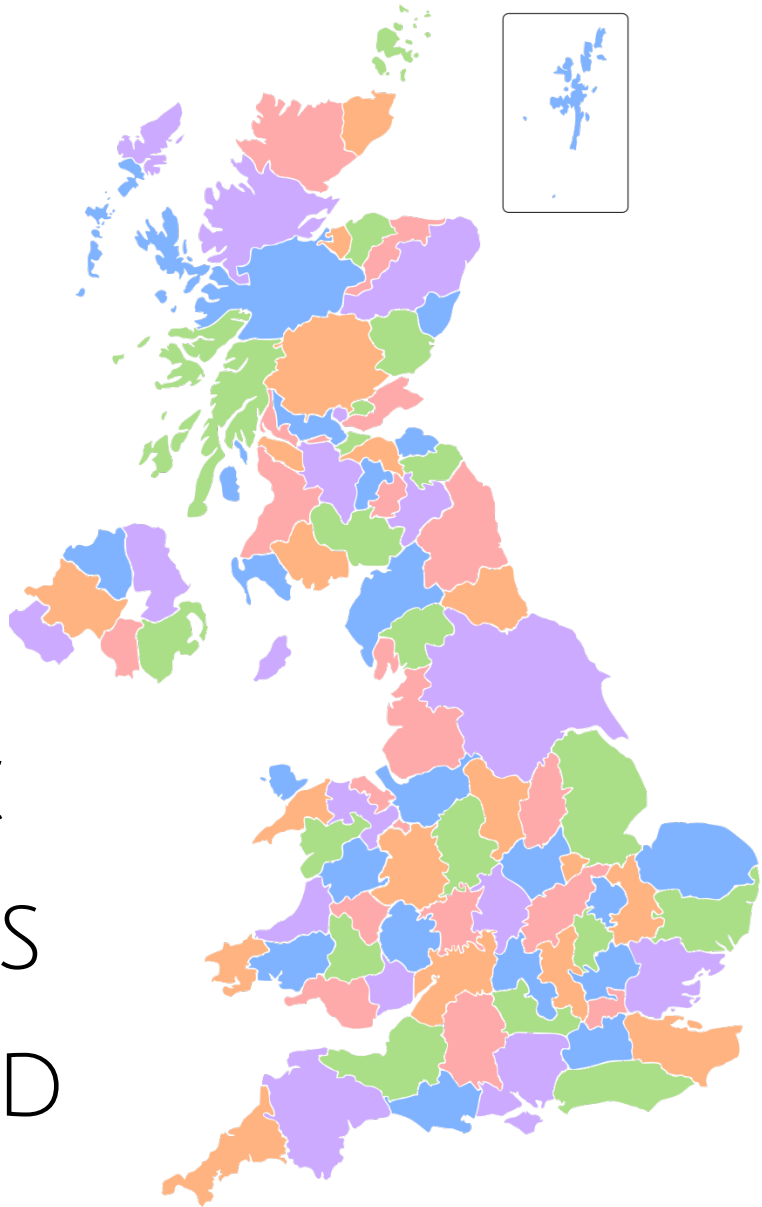




THE  
HISTORIC  
COUNTIES  
TRUST



THE  
HISTORIC  
COUNTIES  
STANDARD

*A Standard for the Definition of the Names, Areas and  
Borders of the Historic Counties of the United Kingdom*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Authorship

This Standard was prepared by the Historic Counties Trust and approved by the Trustees.

## 1.2 Publication History

The Standard was first published on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2015. This edition contains some minor textual amendments and an updated reference list. It was published on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2024.

## 1.3 The Historic Counties Trust

The Historic Counties Trust is a registered charity whose objects are:

- (a) To advance the education of the public in the history, geography, natural history, architecture, traditions and historic boundaries of the Counties and Ridings of the United Kingdom;
- (b) To ensure high standards of surveying and recording on definitive maps and other public records of the boundaries of Counties, Ridings and other areas of local and historical interest and of the United Kingdom's geography generally;
- (c) To preserve such maps and records referred to in (b) above and make them available for the public benefit.

The Historic Counties Trust is a company Registered in England and Wales with Company Number: 5439118.

Registered office: 4 Rugby Way, Croxley Green, Hertfordshire, WD3 3PH.

Registered Charity Number: 1114371.

## 1.4 Copyright

The copyright in this Standard vests in the Historic Counties Trust. Except as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 no extract may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the Trust's prior written permission.

Nevertheless, this does not preclude the free use, in the course of implementing the Standard, of necessary details and terminology.

## 2. PURPOSE

This Standard provides a comprehensive definition of the names, areas and borders of the historic counties of the UK. It also provides that the phrase '*historic county*' shall be the standard term to refer to these.

It is generally understood that the historic '*counties*' or '*shires*' of the United Kingdom are entities distinct from modern administrative areas. However, there is a degree of inconsistency in:

- the terminology used to refer to the historic counties, with several phrases commonly being used (e.g., '*traditional counties*', '*historic counties*', '*ancient or geographical counties*');
- the precise definition of what the historic counties are; in particular, in relation to the effects of 19<sup>th</sup> century legislation concerning detached parts of counties, divided parishes, parliamentary and local government areas.

By providing a definition for the terminology and the names, areas and borders of the historic counties, the Standard enables a more consistent use of the historic counties to be made in those numerous contexts for which they are the most natural geographical framework, principally in the fields of history, geography, heritage and education. For example:

- In the organisation, indexing and cataloguing of historical documents and artefacts;
- In descriptions of the location of historical events;
- In local history studies (e.g., place name surveys, county histories etc.);
- In historical geography (e.g., studies of changes in demography, land-use etc.);
- In the presentation to the public (e.g., in museums, libraries, record offices etc.) of material relating to history;
- In family history publications and data sources;
- In educational maps and publications;
- In the classification and cataloguing of ancient and historical monuments and buildings, and in publications describing these.

The historic counties remain important cultural and geographical entities. Hence, the geography provided by the Standard can also be made use of in many contemporary contexts:

- In descriptions of the location of places by the media, in guide books and other publications;
- As a basis for sporting, social and cultural organisations;
- In the tourism and heritage industries.

The Office for National Statistics describes the geography of the historic counties thus:

*“While no longer a statistical geography, the historic counties are now included in the IPN for those users who wish to use them for historic, traditional or cultural purposes. They are recommended as a stable, unchanging geography which covers the whole of Great Britain.”*<sup>[25]</sup>

The Standard has a firm historic precedent, being fundamentally a re-statement of the definition of the historic counties which was used by the General Register Office (GRO) and the Ordnance Survey, subsequent to the passing of the Local Government Act 1888.<sup>[11,28]</sup> The GRO coined the phrase ‘*ancient or geographical county*’ to draw a distinction between the historic counties and those local government areas (the ‘*administrative counties*’ and ‘*county boroughs*’) created by that Act.<sup>[11]</sup>

In its Census Reports, the GRO did not consider that the LGA 1888 had affected the existence, names or areas of the ancient or geographical counties. It simply considered the administrative counties and county boroughs to be totally distinct entities<sup>[11-14]</sup> The Standard re-states this position, applying it to the whole of the UK and preferring the term ‘*historic county*’ to ‘*ancient or geographical county*’.

The Standard’s definition of the historic counties is also consistent with that currently used by several prominent publications:

- The definition of ‘historic county’ used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in its Index of Place Names in Great Britain.<sup>[25]</sup>
- The definition of ‘historic county’ used within the Wikidata<sup>[33]</sup> central storage repository of the Wikimedia foundation and hence within its Wikimedia sister projects including Wikipedia, Wikimedia Commons and Wiktionary.
- The definition of ‘*historic county*’ used by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.<sup>[2]</sup> Britannica provides a description of each historic county and relates places to their historic county.
- The definition of ‘historic county’ used in the *Gazetteer of British Place Names*,<sup>[1]</sup> the popular online reference source for British geography.
- The definition of ‘county’ used in Kain & Oliver’s *Historic Parishes of England & Wales*,<sup>[21]</sup> the standard electronic reference work for historic parish and county boundaries.

## 3. BACKGROUND – THE HISTORIC COUNTIES OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

### 3.1 Origins of the historic counties

The division of England into shires, later known as counties, began in the Kingdom of Wessex in the mid-Saxon period, many of the Wessex shires representing previously independent kingdoms. With the Wessex conquest of Mercia in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, the system was extended to central England. At the time of the Domesday book, northern England comprised Cheshire and Yorkshire (with the north-east being unrecorded). The remaining counties of the north (Westmorland, Lancashire, Cumberland, Northumberland, Durham) were established in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Rutland was first recorded as a county in 1159.<sup>[7,32]</sup>

The Scottish counties have their origins in the ‘*sheriffdoms*’ first created in the reign of Alexander I (1107-24) and extended by David I (1124-53). The sheriff, operating from a royal castle, was the strong hand of the king in his sheriffdom with all embracing duties - judicial, military, financial and administrative. Sheriffdoms had been established over most of southern and eastern Scotland by the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. Although there was a degree of fluidity in the areas of these early sheriffdoms, the pattern of sheriffdoms that existed in the late mediæval period is believed to be very close to that existing in the mid-nineteenth century. The central and western Highlands and the Isles (where resistance to Government was strongest) were not assigned to shires until the early modern period, Caithness becoming a sheriffdom in 1503 and Orkney in 1540.<sup>[16,24]</sup>

The present-day pattern of the historic counties of Wales was established by the Laws in Wales Act 1535. This Act abolished the powers of the lordships of the March and established the Counties or shires of Denbigh, Montgomery, Radnor, Brecknock and Monmouth from the areas of the former lordships. The other eight counties had, by then, already been in existence since at least the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The historic counties are, however, based on much older traditional areas.<sup>[30]</sup>

The division of Ireland into counties began during the reign of King John (1199-1216). This process continued for several hundred years, as more of Ireland came under the control of the English crown. Munster was divided into counties in 1571 and Connaught in 1579. Finally, Ulster was shired during the reign of James I. The complete set of counties as they are today were laid down in 1584 (with their modern boundaries not finally settled until 1605, or 1613 in the case of Londonderry albeit that it had existed as County Coleraine from Anglo-Norman times). As in Wales the counties were generally based on earlier, traditional areas.<sup>[4]</sup>

### 3.2 The historic counties and the ‘counties corporate’

Before 1888, the only ambiguity concerning what was or was not a ‘*county*’ concerned the status of the ‘*counties corporate*’; those towns or cities which various statutes had given the title ‘*county of a town*’ or ‘*county of a city*’ along with many of the administrative functions normally associated with a county. 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, always dealt with them as being part of the county in which they lay geographically.<sup>[9]</sup>

### 3.3 The detached parts of the historic counties

A '*detached part*' of an historic county can be defined as a small enclave of that county which is entirely separated from the main body of that county and locally situate either entirely within the main body of another county or between the main bodies and/or detached parts of two or more other counties. Many of the historic counties have detached parts. Like the exterior boundaries, most are believed to date back to at least the time of the Conquest. It has long been the convention to associate a detached part with both its parent county and the county in which it is locally situate.<sup>[22,23]</sup> This definition of a detached part would not normally include the Maelor Saesneg area of Flintshire, the Furness area of Lancashire or the Cumbernauld-Kirkintilloch area of Dunbartonshire. These areas form such large fractions of the total county area, that they are better considered separate parts of the main bodies of these counties.

### 3.4 The use of the historic counties as a basis for administration pre-1888

While each historic 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 that 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. This is witnessed by the fact that innumerable Acts of Parliament made reference to them and used them as the basic geographical framework for various administrative functions.

An illustrative example of the way in which Parliament used the historic counties is provided by the Militia Act 1802 (42 Geo III c. 90). This Act described the areas within which the militia were to be organised and, in particular, within which there was to be a lord-lieutenant. It ascribed a lord-lieutenant to each of the counties (and one each to the three ridings of Yorkshire). The Act made no attempt to qualify or define what it meant by the word '*County*'. It did not need to. The names and areas of the counties were universally known and accepted and had been so for centuries. However, what the Militia Act 1802 did do was to describe exceptions to the basic county geography for the organisation of the militia. For example, the Governor of the Isle of Wight was to be the lord-lieutenant of the island; the Warden of the Cinque Ports was to be lord-lieutenant of the Cinque Ports.

Other Acts used the historic counties as a starting point to define areas for other types of administration (e.g., Sheriffs and Members of Parliament). Again, these Acts did not need to define what the counties were or to detail their bounds. They also, however, explicitly listed those slight exceptions to the framework of the counties

which were considered necessary from the standpoint of administrative expediency. Hence the areas of the jurisdiction of lord-lieutenants and sheriffs could differ slightly (due for example to a different way of dealing with a particular detached part) without it actually affecting the general understanding of what the counties were.

### 3.5 The stability of the historic county borders

By the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the names and areas of all the historic counties of the United Kingdom had been fixed and universally accepted for many centuries. There were few reliably documented changes to the borders of the historic counties during the centuries before this,<sup>[6]</sup> any such changes were not such as to undermine the continuity of the counties as geographical and cultural entities.

There are two Acts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century which might be considered to have affected a real change in the historic counties.

***The Counties (Detached Parts) Act 1844:*** as noted in the example above, certain Acts would define certain of the detached parts to lie within their surrounding county for particular purposes (e.g., Craike to be taken as part of the North Riding Yorkshire for the Militia). The Parliamentary Boundaries Act 1832 described the division of the Country for the Election of Members of Parliament, using the historic counties as its basic geographical framework. It decreed that, for parliamentary purposes, most of the detached parts of the counties of England and Wales were to be deemed part of the county by which they were surrounded. The Counties (Detached Parts) Act 1844 then declared that:

*"... every Part of any County in England or Wales which is detached from the main body of such County shall be considered for all Purposes as forming Part of that County of which it is considered a Part for the Purposes of the Election of Members to serve in Parliament..."*

Unlike other Acts which had deemed areas to be in other than their county for a single administrative purpose, this Act deemed them to be elsewhere '*for all purposes*'. Whilst the Act did not actually explicitly say that the counties themselves were to be altered, the Ordnance Survey maps portrayed it as having done so. The Census Reports of the General Register Office were more equivocal. The parishes and places affected by the Act were now enumerated within their post-1844 County, although extensive side and footnotes were used to make it clear where one of these parishes was involved. In its 1851 General Report it quoted the "*for all purposes*" phrase as though inviting the reader to make up his/her own mind as to its meaning.<sup>[7]</sup> In all future Census Reports, it was made explicitly clear that the county population figures referred to "*the Ancient County as altered by the operation of the Counties (Detached Parts) Act 1844*". It was still noting this in its 1961 Report.<sup>[15]</sup>

***Divided Parishes and Poor Law Amendment Act 1876:*** this Act enabled the recently created Local Government Board to make an order to eliminate detached parts of parishes, either by creating separate parishes of each part or by amalgamating some or all of the parts with neighbouring parishes. The Board was empowered to provide for a change in the county of the parish or part of a parish if this was requisite. The effect of this on the historic counties was minimal compared to that of the Counties



(Detached Parts) Act 1844 with only a few very small areas being affected.<sup>[11]</sup>

### 3.6 The historic counties and local government legislation

The era of modern local government began with the passing of the Local Government Act 1888 (“LGA 1888”) for England and Wales, the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1889 (“LG(S)A 1889”), and the Local Government (Ireland) Act 1898 (“LG(I)A 1898”). The scheme of each Act was to create elected ‘*county councils*’ for the first time.

***England and Wales:*** The LGA 1888 created two different sets of administrative areas. Firstly, for the purposes of local government, it created a set of ‘*administrative counties*’. The historic counties provided the initial boundaries (Section 50(1)) of the administrative counties with the following provisos:

- Separate administrative counties were created from the Ridings of Yorkshire; the parts of Lincolnshire; the east and west divisions of Sussex; the east and west divisions of Suffolk; the Isle of Ely and the residue of Cambridgeshire; and the Soke of Peterborough and the residue of Northamptonshire.
- The area of the Metropolis, excluding the City of London, was created a separate administrative county called ‘London’.
- Where an urban sanitary district lay within more than one historic county, it was deemed to form part of the administrative county which bore the name of the historic county within which the greatest part of its area lay.
- A set of boroughs were deemed to be ‘*county boroughs*’ and to not lie in any administrative county.

Secondly, Section 59(2) of the LGA 1888 rearranged the geographical framework of many forms of administration which had previously been based upon the historic counties:

*“A place which is part of an administrative county for the purposes of this Act shall, subject as in this Act mentioned, form part of that county for all purposes, whether sheriff, lieutenant, custos rotulorum, justices, militia, coroner, or other.”*

Hence, the Act defined a set of ‘counties’ (labelled here as ‘*Section 59(2) counties*’) for sheriffs, lieutenants, justices etc. Usually the ‘*Section 59(2) county*’ comprised the combined area of one or more administrative counties with any county boroughs within. However, the county boroughs of Stockport, Bristol and Great Yarmouth each lay in two ‘*Section 59(2) counties*’.

Whilst the local government areas created by the LGA 1888 were initially based on the historic counties, small piecemeal changes to the local government areas began almost as soon as the legislation was passed. Hence, the boundaries of the local government areas (and the ‘*Section 59(2) counties*’) slowly diverged from those of the historic counties throughout the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Local Government Act 1933 consolidated the situation, stating that “*For the purposes of local government, England and Wales (exclusive of London) shall be divided into administrative counties and county boroughs*”.

Major local government reforms in England and Wales followed in the 1960s, the 1970s and the 1990s. Few modern local government areas are now anything like any historic county. There are still local government areas known within the Local Government Act 1972 as ‘counties’ (these are the direct successors to the ‘administrative counties’ of the LGA 1888). There are also areas known as ‘counties’ within the Lieutenancies Act 1997 (in a more limited respect these might be considered the successors to the ‘Section 59(2) counties’ of the 1888 Act). However, the Government has consistently maintained that these two types of ‘county’ are distinct entities to the historic counties.

**Northern Ireland:** The LG(I)A 1898 created a local government set-up of ‘administrative counties’ and ‘county boroughs’, based on the historic counties, similar to that created in England and Wales. It also (Section 69(1)) created a set of ‘counties’ for all purposes of sheriffs, lieutenants, justices etc. However, unlike in England and Wales, sheriffs and lieutenants were appointed to the county boroughs created. Hence, in what became Northern Ireland, the Act created six administrative counties and two county boroughs, each with a sheriff and lieutenant. Only minor changes were made to the local government areas during the twentieth century until the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 declared that the administrative counties and county boroughs were to cease to be administrative areas for local government purposes. They have, however, been retained for sheriff and lieutenancy purposes.

**Scotland:** The LG(S)A 1889 created a more complex local government system than in England, Wales or Ireland, though also initially based on the historic county system. This Act defined a set of ‘counties’ each of which was to have a ‘county council’. These ‘counties’ were based on the historic counties but did not include any ‘county of a city’ within that historic county. ‘Large burghs’ were also mostly independent. Although the Act used different terminology, the ‘counties’ and ‘counties of a city’ of the LG(S)A 1889 were analogous to the ‘administrative counties’ and ‘county boroughs’ of the LGA 1888. In the years following the Act, a considerable number of small changes were made to its areas. Such changes generally also affected the counties for purposes of lieutenancies etc.

The Local Government (Scotland) Act 1947 consolidated this position, stating that “*For the purposes of local government, Scotland shall be divided into counties, counties of cities, large burghs and small burghs*”.

The 1947 Act’s ‘counties’ and ‘counties of cities’ were abolished under the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 which created a new system of ‘regions’ and ‘districts’. Under the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1996, that system was replaced by a set of single-tier ‘local government areas’ (commonly known as ‘unitary authorities’ or ‘council areas’). The lord-lieutenants of Scotland are now appointed to ‘lieutenancy areas’ under the Lieutenancies Act 1997.

It should be noted that the late-19<sup>th</sup>-century local government legislation did not totally end the use of the historic counties of the UK as a basis for administration. The division of the country into parliamentary seats remained based upon the historic counties throughout the UK. It was not until the Representation of the

People Act 1918 that parliamentary seats were re-organised and based upon the local government areas. This point marked the end of the use of the historic counties as the basis for any major form of public administration.

As noted in Section 2, in its Census Reports the GRO did not consider that the LGA 1888 affected the existence or areas of the historic counties, even coining the phrase ‘ancient or geographical county’ to differentiate them from the new administrative counties.<sup>[11]</sup> Its 1891,<sup>[11]</sup> 1901,<sup>[12]</sup> and 1911<sup>[13]</sup> Censuses provided detailed statistics for both sets of areas (it ceased to do so in 1921<sup>[14]</sup> after the re-organisation of parliamentary seats). This Standard is essentially a re-statement of the General Register Office’s interpretation of the (non-)effect of the local government legislation on the historic counties.

### 3.7 Mapping of the historic counties

Unlike modern administrative boundaries, which are explicitly defined in an Act of Parliament or Order, at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was no reference source or small-scale, accurate mapping denoting the borders of the historic counties. Rather, as with the boundaries of parishes, extra-parochial places, hundreds, townships etc., the historic county borders were known ‘*by repute*’. They had been common knowledge for generations. The ascertaining of all such reputed boundaries was a major undertaking of the Ordnance Survey throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Whilst many county maps had been produced before this (starting with Saxton’s *Atlas of the Counties of England and Wales* in 1579), none of these claimed to show detailed borders for the historic counties (i.e., as related to recognisable features on the ground).

The Ordnance Survey (OS) started in 1791 to prepare a survey framework and make limited military surveys.<sup>[20,31]</sup> From 1795 the scope of the survey was national, and in 1805 the Ordnance began to publish its mapping at one-inch scale. These maps are now known as the ‘*Old Series*’. The Old Series maps are the first reasonably accurate maps covering the whole of the England and Wales. The accuracy of the historic county borders on the earlier editions of these maps is considered unreliable.<sup>[3]</sup> However, on later (circa post-1830) sheets the accuracy is considered to be relatively reliable.<sup>[26]</sup>

In 1824 the OS was instructed to survey all Ireland and used the scale of 6 inches to 1 mile (1:10,560).<sup>[20]</sup> This famous survey, led by Lt Col. Thomas Colby and completed in 1845, was the first trigonometrically accurate small-scale survey of its kind undertaken anywhere in the world. The ‘County’ boundaries on these maps provide the first definitive, topographically accurate record of the borders of the historic counties of Ireland.

Following the success of the survey of Ireland, the OS began the first national small-scale survey of Great Britain in 1840.<sup>[20]</sup> The survey was conducted on a county-by-county basis. The survey of England and Wales was completed in 1888 and of Scotland in 1896. The 1:2500 and 1:10560 maps produced from this survey are collectively known as the ‘*First Edition*’.<sup>[17,27]</sup> The ‘County’ boundaries depicted on the First Edition maps form the first definitive, topographically accurate mapping of the borders of the historic counties of Great Britain. It should be noted that:

- a) The First Edition maps considered the Counties (Detached Parts) Act 1844 to have affected a real change in the areas of the counties. Hence, First Edition maps show the counties as affected by that Act. Similarly, those few small changes brought about by the *Divided Parishes and Poor Law Amendment Act 1876* were depicted as changes to the counties on First Edition maps.
- b) Most of the First Edition maps gave the counties corporate a ‘County’ boundary mapping. In 1879, the OS applied to the Treasury to discontinue certain classes of boundary as an economy and simplification measure.<sup>[18,20]</sup> Following this, the counties corporate were no longer given ‘County’ boundaries, although it took many years for this change in policy to be reflected in published maps.

Survey work began in 1891 on the ‘*Second Edition*’ (or first national revision) of the 1:2500 and 1:10560 maps.<sup>[20]</sup> This was completed in 1914.

The OS and General Register Office (GRO) took different approaches in response to the late-19<sup>th</sup>-century local government legislation. The GRO continued to produce statistics for the ‘*ancient or geographical counties*’ but also produced statistics for ‘*administrative counties*’ and ‘*county boroughs*’. It never produced statistics based on the ‘Section 59(2) counties’ defined for the purposes of sheriffs, lieutenants, justices etc., or even referred to them.

In contrast, the OS changed what it marked under the unqualified label ‘*county*’. Henceforth it did not mark the ancient or geographical counties under this label. Instead, it marked the ‘*county*’ as defined for ‘*all purposes of justices, sheriff, militia, lieutenant etc.*’ Section 59(2) of the LGA 1888 had moved these areas in England and Wales from the historic counties and defined them in terms of the new administrative counties. Section 69(1) of the LG(I)A 1898 and Section 49(1) of the LG(S)A 1889 had made similar provisions for Ireland and Scotland respectively. The OS denoted administrative county boundaries by ‘*county - administrative division*’ boundaries within its new ‘*counties*’, although ‘*county boroughs*’ and (in Scotland) ‘*county burghs*’ were shown separately.

Even with the first passing of the LGA 1888 the ‘Section 59(2) counties’ were not exactly the same areas as the historic / ancient or geographical counties, principally because an urban sanitary district was not allowed to lie in two administrative counties. Of course, subsequent local government changes gradually moved the ‘Section 59(2) counties’ further away from the historic counties.

The OS continued to show the boundaries of the counties as unaffected by the 1888 and 1889 acts, but in their role as parliamentary constituency boundaries, as these were not affected by the local government legislation. It did so under the label ‘*Parliamentary County*’.<sup>[20]</sup>

In the 1911 edition of *Notes on County, Parish, Borough and other Boundaries*<sup>[28]</sup> OS pointed out that:

“*The counties now shown on OS maps, both of England & Wales and of Scotland, are of two kinds, viz, Parliamentary - agreeing generally with the Ancient or Geographical County as existing at the passing of the Redistribution of Seats Act*”

*1885, and Administrative - as defined by the Local Government Act 1888, and the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1889. To these may be added County Boroughs, which, although locally situated in the Administrative Counties, do not form part of them.”*

As with the GRO, the historic counties ceased to be used by the OS after 1918 when parliamentary seats were re-cast in terms of the local government areas. The new parliamentary areas were depicted with a ‘Co. Const.’ label.

Following the LG(I)A 1898, the OS began to show all the administrative counties and county boroughs of Ireland with a ‘county’ boundary. This was presumably because each of the county boroughs was given a sheriff and lord-lieutenant. This practice has continued: the OSNI still marks the six administrative counties and two county boroughs of Northern Ireland on its present-day maps.

From 1944, the OS changed its boundary definitions slightly in Great Britain.<sup>[3,18,20,29]</sup> In Scotland it only attempted to show the local government areas, marking ‘*county (county council)*’, ‘*county of a city*’ and ‘*burgh*’ areas. In England and Wales it began to apply the label ‘*geographical county*’ to the ‘Section 59(2) counties’. This was an unfortunate choice of phrase since it was easily confused with the term ‘*ancient or geographical county*’ which referred to a different set of entities. It also began to explicitly denote ‘*administrative counties*’ on its maps (i.e., rather than just as an ‘*administrative division*’ of a ‘*county*’).

Following, the local government reforms of the early 1970s, the OS began to mark the ‘*counties*’ of the LGA 1972 in England and Wales under the unqualified label ‘*county*’ on its maps and to mark the new ‘*regions*’ and ‘*districts*’ on its maps in Scotland. At that point, the OS ceased to show anything like the historic counties on its maps.

The decision of the OS to change its definition of ‘*county*’ post-1889 has had a profound effect on popular geography and the identities of the counties ever since. The tying of its definition of ‘*county*’ to lieutenancy areas, themselves related to local government areas, meant that its ‘*counties*’ inevitably changed with local government changes. Ultimately, this led to the total removal of anything like the historic counties from its maps following the 1974/75 local government reorganisations. The starkly different approach of the other major public body with a concern in geography (the GRO) to the effects of the LGA 1888 is fascinating. To the OS the lieutenancy areas became the ‘*counties*’: the GRO didn’t even bother referring to them, let alone producing any statistics based on them.

No records of the reasoning behind the OS’s post-1889 change of approach to ‘*county*’ boundaries have been traced. However, the OS was under great financial pressure at the time and sought economies wherever possible. The OS may have taken a ‘minimalist’ approach to including the new administrative geographies of the 1888-89 Acts.<sup>[20]</sup> Two definitions from Booth’s<sup>[3]</sup> *Public Boundaries and Ordnance Survey 1840-1980* give a different perspective as to OS’s thinking:

*“All-purpose County: This reference is usually to the ‘county’ in existence immediately before 1888 - also sometimes referred to as the ‘county at large’,*

*‘ancient county’, or regarded as synonymous with the later ‘geographical county’.*”

*“Geographical County: This term has never been defined by statute. OS defines it as the area within the Lord Lieutenant’s jurisdiction i.e. the county referred to in his Commission. This was post-1888, regarded as the pre-1888 county.”*

Booth’s<sup>[3]</sup> comments suggest that the OS regarded the post-1888 ‘Section 59(2) counties’ (later dubbed ‘*geographical counties*’) as synonymous with the pre-1888 ‘*all-purpose counties*’, whilst accepting that the two were distinct entities. The implication is that post-1888 the OS felt some need to mark something like the historic counties on its maps (it could, after all have just mapped the ‘*administrative counties*’ and ‘*county boroughs*’). It possibly felt that since the ‘*ancient or geographical counties*’ were no longer being used for administrative purposes (apart from parliamentary areas) then the ‘Section 59(2) counties’ gave it something close to the historic counties that was also some form of contemporary administrative area.

Certainly, the post-1944 adjective ‘*geographical*’ suggests that these areas were depicted since they were considered to have a geographical significance, rather than because of a public need to show the lieutenancy areas. It is rather ironic that, by following this approach to its logical conclusion throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the OS eventually totally removed anything like the historic counties from its maps after the 1970s local government changes.

### 3.8 Terminology used to describe the historic counties

Following the LGA 1888, the GRO coined the phrase ‘*ancient or geographical county*’ to differentiate between the historic counties and the ‘*administrative counties*’ and ‘*county boroughs*’ created by that Act <sup>[11]</sup>. This phrase was also used by the OS post-1888 to explain the nature of the areas marked as ‘*parliamentary counties*’ on its maps.<sup>[28]</sup> This phrase, and its diminutive ‘*ancient county*’, became the standard way to differentiate between the historic counties and the creations of the LGA 1888<sup>[5]</sup>. However, much confusion was caused by the OS adopting (from 1945) the term ‘*geographical county*’ to refer, not to the ancient or geographical counties, but to the ‘*Section 59(2) counties*’ of the LGA 1888.<sup>[3,29]</sup>

There is still a need for a terminology which draws a clear distinction between the historic counties and administrative areas, since there are currently two different sets of administrative areas which have been given the label ‘*county*’ (the ‘*counties*’ of Section 1(1) of the Local Government Act 1972 and the ‘*counties*’ of the Lieutenancies Act 1997). The phrase ‘*ancient or geographical county*’ has declined in popularity. In its stead the phrase ‘*historic county*’ has become popular.<sup>[1,2,25,33]</sup>

## 4. THE STANDARD

### 4.1 Definition of the historic counties

The term ‘*historic county*’ shall mean one of the 92 areas of the United Kingdom commonly known as ‘*shires*’ or ‘*counties*’ as existing immediately before the passing of the Counties (Detached Parts) Act 1844.

The Counties (Detached Parts) Act 1844 and the Divided Parishes and Poor Law Amendment Act 1876 shall not be considered to have effected any actual territorial changes to the historic counties, nor shall any other subsequent legislation (e.g., the Local Government Act 1888, the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1889, the Local Government (Ireland) Act 1898 or any subsequent local government legislation) be considered to have affected the historic counties.

### 4.2 Status of the detached parts of historic counties

Following historical precedent, detached parts of historic counties shall be considered to be associated with both their parent historic county and the historic county in which they locally lie (their ‘host’ county). This means that two sets of areas are defined by this Standard.

#### ***Historic Counties Definition A: detached parts not separately identified***

Definition A does not identify detached parts, but instead associates them with their host county. Definition A has a wider, more general-purpose applicability than Definition B. It may, for example, be useful in the following contexts:

- In the organisation, indexing and cataloguing of historical documents and artefacts;
- In descriptions of the location of historical events;
- In the presentation to the public (e.g., in museums, libraries, record offices etc.) of material relating to history;
- In family history publications and data sources;
- In educational maps and publications;
- In the classification and cataloguing of ancient and historical monuments and buildings, and in publications describing these;
- In descriptions of the location of places by the media, in guide books and other publications;
- As a basis for sporting, social and cultural organisations;
- In the tourism and heritage industries.

Note (Section 3.3) that the Maelor Saesneg area of Flintshire, the Furness area of Lancashire and the Cumbernauld-Kirkintilloch area in Dunbartonshire are not considered detached parts by this Standard and, hence, these areas are represented in Definition A.

### ***Historic Counties Definition B: detached parts separately identified***

Definition B identifies all detached parts and associates them with their parent county. Note that this definition makes no distinction between those detached parts deemed by the Counties (Detached Parts) Act 1844 to remain part of the parent county or those deemed by this Act to be part of their host county. It might, nonetheless, be useful to make this distinction in any dataset based on Definition B. Definition B is useful to historical studies, e.g., county histories, historical geography, historical records research etc. It is not likely to have a more general-purpose applicability.

## 4.3 Status of the counties corporate

The ‘county corporate’ status granted to some towns and cities shall not be taken to imply that they no longer lie in their parent historic county. Where a county corporate lies within more than one historic county, the historic county borders shall not be considered to have been altered by the creation of the county corporate. For example, that part of the county of the city of Bristol to the north of the old course of the River Avon shall lie within the historic county of Gloucester, whilst that part to the south of the old course of the River Avon shall lie within the historic county of Somerset.

## 4.4 Status of Ross-shire and Cromartyshire

Whilst Ross-shire and Cromartyshire shall be considered to be separate historic counties, for many practical purposes it shall be reasonable to consider them as one unit. However, Ross-shire and Cromartyshire are represented separately in both Definition A and Definition B of this Standard.

## 4.5 Status of the ridings of Yorkshire

The historic county of York comprises the City of York (within the walls), the West Riding, the East Riding and the North Riding. The ridings shall not be considered to be historic counties, although for many practical purposes it may be reasonable to consider a riding the equivalent of an historic county. The provisions in Section 4.8 relating to the borders of the historic counties shall apply also to the borders of the ridings.

## 4.6 The names of the historic counties

The standard names of the 92 historic counties are presented in Schedule 1 along with commonly accepted alternative spellings and alternative names.

## 4.7 Historic Counties Standard (HCS) Numbers

This Standard ascribes each of the 92 historic counties an ‘*Historic Counties Standard (HCS) Number*’. These are listed in Schedule 1. There are many circumstances in which the use of the HCS Numbers will prove convenient, for example where the historic county of a place needs to be stored within a computer database.



## 4.8 Historic Counties Standard (HCS) Codes

This Standard ascribes each of the 92 historic counties an ‘*Historic Counties Standard (HCS) Code*’. These are listed in Schedule 1. These are three letter abbreviations of the historic county name. Note that these are all distinct from the widely used Chapman Codes. Whilst the Chapman Codes are frequently used by genealogists to refer to the historic counties, many of the Chapman Codes are also used within British Standard BS6879 and International Standard ISO3166-2:GB to refer, not to an historic county, but to a local government area. For example, a genealogist may use the code ‘MON’ to refer to the historic county of Monmouth. However, in BS6879, this code refers to the local government unitary authority called ‘*Monmouthshire*’. The use of the same code to refer to two distinct entities totally undermines its value. Hence, the codes of the Historic Counties Standard are distinct from any Chapman Code or any code in BS6879 or ISO 3166-2:GB. Each of the HCS Codes unambiguously refers to an historic county and can be used for this purpose within reference works, databases and national and international standards.

## 4.9 The borders of the historic counties

The primary source data for the borders of the historic counties of Great Britain shall be that obtained by the Ordnance Survey during its first national survey of Great Britain and presented on the resultant First Edition 1:2500 and 1:10560 maps; the primary source data for the borders of the historic counties of Northern Ireland shall be that obtained by the Ordnance Survey during its survey of Ireland commenced in 1824, and presented on the resultant 1:10560 maps.

However, there may be a need to refer to secondary sources of data where the primary source data can be shown to be in error or do not purport to be depicting the borders of the historic counties as defined in Section 4.1 (e.g., where the First Edition maps show the borders of the counties corporate). Secondary sources of data shall include:

- The Census Reports of the GRO and the GRO for Scotland;
- The ‘Old Series’ Ordnance Survey maps;
- The ‘Second Edition’ Ordnance Survey maps;
- Boundary Remark Books, Boundary Sketch Maps, Journals of Inspection, Boundary Reports, Boundary Records Sheets etc. (Public Record Office);
- Tithe maps;
- Lewis’s Topographical Dictionary of England;<sup>[22]</sup>
- Lewis’s Topographical Dictionary of Wales.<sup>[23]</sup>

Since there have been many changes to watercourses and the coastline since the primary and secondary source data were gathered, the following conventions as regards historic county borders in watercourses and at the coast shall be adopted:

***Non-estuarine watercourse borders:*** where a non-estuarine watercourse forms the border between two historic counties, the border between the two historic counties shall be considered to lie at the centre of the watercourse (normal winter flow levels) for the time being. Hence, for natural and gradual changes to the watercourse, the border shall be considered to change with the course of the

watercourse. Changes to the watercourse due to man-made activities or flooding shall not be considered to alter the border: the old watercourse shall remain the border. Where an island lies within a non-estuarine watercourse, it shall lie within the historic county identified by the primary or secondary source data. If the historic county of an island cannot be identified from the primary or secondary source data, then, if the main flow of the watercourse is almost entirely on one side of the island, the island shall be considered part of the historic county of the nearer bank. Otherwise, the land on the island shall be considered to lie within whichever historic county is defined by the centre line of the watercourse. If an island lies entirely within one historic county, then the border between the two historic counties shall be considered to lie at the centre of the watercourse between the island and the bank which is part of the other historic county.

***Estuarine watercourse borders:*** where an estuarine watercourse forms the border between two historic counties (i.e. below the normal tidal limit of a watercourse, ‘Point C’<sup>[3]</sup>), the border between the two historic counties shall be considered to be the centre channel at low water.

***Coastal limits of historic counties:*** there shall be no formal definition of the coastal extent of an historic county. However, for practical purposes, the historic counties may be considered to extend to either the Mean High Water (MHW) line or the Mean Low Water (MLW) line, as appropriate in a given context. Similarly, where an estuarine watercourse forms the border between two historic counties, that border may be considered to extend to the line where the level of the watercourse meets the level of the sea at low water (‘Point B’<sup>[3]</sup>). Note that whilst local government areas are generally considered to extent to the MLW line (following the Boundary Act 1868 and the Poor Law Amendment Act 1868) there is no reason to apply this convention rigorously to the borders of historic counties. There may be contexts in which the MHW line forms a more appropriate/practical limit.

***Accreted land:*** where land is accreted from the sea, it shall be deemed to belong to that historic county with which it is contiguous.

***Off-shore islands:*** Each off-shore island, or part thereof, shall be considered part of the historic county with which it was associated immediately before the passing of the Counties (Detached Parts) Act 1844.

## 4.10 Border data for the historic counties

The Historic Counties Trust has produced digitised border data for the historic counties based on the Historic Counties Standard. The data are available from the [Historic County Borders Project](#).<sup>[19]</sup> The data are available in ArcGIS SHP and Google Earth KMZ formats and for both Definition A and Definition B of the Historic Counties Standard. The data are provided free of charge for all personal, educational, non-commercial and commercial use.

Schedule 2 is a small-scale map of the historic counties produced from the Historic Counties Border Project data, based on Definition A of the Historic Counties Standard.

## SCHEDULE 1: HISTORIC COUNTY STANDARD NUMBERS, CODES AND NAMES

Each historic county can be referred to in one of two forms, either prefixed by “county of” or as a proper noun. Generally speaking, if the proper name ends with “shire”, this is dropped in the first form to avoid tautologies. Where the proper name is derived from a shortened version of the county town’s name, the first form uses that name in full, e.g., “Cheshire” and “County of Chester”.

In some cases, there are alternative versions for each, which are presented in this table.

Historic County Number	Historic County Code	County of	Proper Name	Alternative Spellings/Names (*Welsh version)
01	ABN	Aberdeen	Aberdeenshire	
02	AGL	Anglesey	Anglesey	Sir Fôn*
03	ANG	Forfar, Angus	Angus	Forfarshire
04	ANM	Antrim	County Antrim	
05	ARG	Argyll	Argyllshire	
06	ARH	Armagh	County Armagh	
07	AYS	Ayr	Ayrshire	
08	BNF	Banff	Banffshire	
09	BED	Bedford	Bedfordshire	
10	BER	Berks	Berkshire	
11	BRW	Berwick	Berwickshire	
12	BRN	Brecon, Brecknock	Brecknockshire	Breconshire, Sir Frycheiniog*
13	BUC	Buckingham	Buckinghamshire	
14	BTE	Bute	Buteshire	
15	CRN	Caernarfon	Caernarfonshire	Caernarvonshire, Sir Gaernarfon*
16	CTN	Caithness	Caithness	
17	CMB	Cambridge	Cambridgeshire	
18	CRD	Cardigan	Cardiganshire	Ceredigion*, Sir Aberteifi*
19	CRM	Carmarthen	Carmarthenshire	Sir Gaerfyrddin*
20	CHE	Chester	Cheshire	
21	CLM	Clackmannan	Clackmannanshire	
22	CNW	Cornwall	Cornwall	
23	CRT	Cromarty	Cromartyshire	
24	CUM	Cumberland	Cumberland	
25	DBH	Denbigh	Denbighshire	Sir Ddinbych*
26	DRB	Derby	Derbyshire	
27	DVN	Devon	Devon	Devonshire
28	DRS	Dorset	Dorset	Dorsetshire
29	DWN	Down	County Down	Downshire
30	DMF	Dumfries	Dumfriesshire	
31	DUN	Dumbarton	Dumbartonshire	Dumbartonshire
32	DRH	Durham	County Durham	
33	ELT	Haddington, East Lothian	East Lothian	Haddingtonshire

34	ESE	Essex	Essex	
35	FRM	Fermanagh	Fermanagh	County Fermanagh
36	FFE	Fife	Fife	
37	FLT	Flint	Flintshire	Sir y Fflint*
38	GLM	Glamorgan	Glamorgan	Morgannwg*
39	GLC	Gloucester	Gloucestershire	
40	HMP	Southampton, Hants	Hampshire	
41	HRF	Hereford	Herefordshire	
42	HTF	Hertford	Hertfordshire	
43	HNT	Huntingdon	Huntingdonshire	
44	INS	Inverness	Inverness-shire	
45	KNT	Kent	Kent	
46	KNC	Kincardine	Kincardineshire	
47	KNR	Kinross	Kinross-shire	
48	KCB	Kirkcudbright	Kirkcudbrightshire	
49	LNK	Lanark	Lanarkshire	
50	LCS	Lancaster	Lancashire	
51	LCR	Leicester	Leicestershire	
52	LNC	Lincoln	Lincolnshire	
53	LDR	Londonderry	County Londonderry	
54	MRN	Merioneth	Merionethshire	Meirionnydd*, Sir Feirionnydd*
55	MSX	Middlesex	Middlesex	
56	MLT	Edinburgh, Midlothian	Midlothian	Edinburghshire
57	MNM	Monmouth	Monmouthshire	Sir Fynwy*
58	MTG	Montgomery	Montgomeryshire	Sir Drefaldwyn*
59	MOY	Elgin, Moray	Morayshire	Elginshire
60	NRN	Nairn	Nairnshire	
61	NRF	Norfolk	Norfolk	
62	NHP	Northampton	Northamptonshire	
63	NHB	Northumberland	Northumberland	
64	NOT	Nottingham	Nottinghamshire	
65	ORN	Orkney	Orkney	
66	OXD	Oxford	Oxfordshire	
67	PBS	Peebles	Peeblesshire	
68	PMB	Pembroke	Pembrokeshire	Sir Benfro*
69	PRT	Perth	Perthshire	
70	RDN	Radnor	Radnorshire	Sir Faesyfed*
71	RNF	Renfrew	Renfrewshire	
72	RSS	Ross	Ross-shire	
73	RXB	Roxburgh	Roxburghshire	
74	RTL	Rutland	Rutland	
75	SKK	Selkirk	Selkirkshire	
76	SHT	Shetland	Shetland	Zetland
77	SHP	Salop	Shropshire	
78	SMS	Somerset	Somerset	Somersetshire

79	STF	Stafford	Staffordshire	
80	STL	Stirling	Stirlingshire	
81	SFF	Suffolk	Suffolk	
82	SUR	Surrey	Surrey	
83	SUS	Sussex	Sussex	
84	SRL	Sutherland	Sutherland	
85	TYN	Tyrone	Tyrone	County Tyrone
86	WRW	Warwick	Warwickshire	
87	WLT	Linlithgow, West Lothian	West Lothian	Linlithgowshire
88	WML	Westmorland	Westmorland	
89	WGT	Wigtown	Wigtownshire	
90	WTS	Wilts	Wiltshire	
91	WRC	Worcester	Worcestershire	
92	YRK	York	Yorkshire	



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