

The history of Ordnance Survey 'County' boundaries

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Ordnance Survey (OS) practice as regards marking 'County' boundaries has always had a significant effect on public understanding and perception of what the counties are. This overview describes the history of OS 'County' boundary marking from the founding of OS in 1791 until the local government changes of the 1970s. Whilst there are many excellent publications covering the history of OS policy and practice, these cover 'County' boundaries amongst many other issues. This overview is intended to provide a clearer perspective by focussing specifically on the OS's approach to 'County' boundaries.

The Old Series 1805-1873

The Ordnance Survey started in 1791, initially to prepare a survey framework and make limited military surveys. From 1795 the survey was a national one, and from 1805 the Ordnance published the resulting maps itself.^[14,18] The resulting maps (the *Old Series*), published between 1805 and 1873, are the first reasonably accurate maps covering the whole of England and Wales. According to Oliver^[13]: "the county boundaries on the earlier (say pre-1830) sheets are sometimes a bit 'dodgy' but on some of the later sheets considerable care was taken."

The First Edition county series maps 1840 – 1893

From 1824 Ireland had been surveyed on a scale of 6" to 1 mile (1:10560). In 1840 a similar survey was commenced in Great Britain. The survey of England and Wales was completed in 1888 and of Scotland in 1896. From 1853 the scale was amended to 25" to 1 mile (1:2500). The maps were produced on a county-by-county basis. The maps created by this survey are collectively known as the *First Edition*.^[7,12]

A major aspect of this survey was the "merging" of the numerous and diverse public boundaries which until that point were only known "by repute", few having been explicitly set down in any statute. OS took great care over the mereing of reputed boundaries, perambulating the boundaries with locally appointed meresmen. The results were recorded in Boundary Remark Books, Boundary Sketch Maps and Journals of Inspection all of which are held in the National Archives.

As the survey progressed so the mered boundaries were recorded onto the published 1:2500 and 1:10560 maps. This process involved the creation of the Boundary Record Sheets which formed the OS's key record of public boundaries. Figure 1 is a key to the boundaries depicted on the maps.^[3,8]

Description.	Boundary.	Writing.	Description.	Boundary.	Writing.
County and County Corporate		C	Boroughs (Municipal)		B
Ridings and Quarter Sessions Divisions		R	Municipal Wards		W
Liberties		L	Cities returning Members		C
Parliamentary County Divisions		P	Cities, Episcopal and Prescriptive, not returning Members		C
Superintendent Registrar's Districts		R	Market Towns		B
Registrar's Districts		R	Other Towns		B
Hundreds or other similar Divisions, e.g. Rapes, Wards, Wapentakes, &c.		H	Parishes, Ancient or Mother		P
Boroughs (Parliamentary)		B	Civil Parishes or Townships		T
Divisions of Parly. Borough		D	Divisions of Townships		T
			Subdivisions of Townships		T

Figure 1. The boundary markings on 1:2500 maps from circa 1860 to about 1889 - from Booth 1980.^[3]

Figure 2 shows an example of 'County' boundary from the First Edition, showing Newtown in Cheshire which lay close to the Derbyshire border.



Figure 2. First Edition map of Newtown in Cheshire, showing the 'County' boundary with Derbyshire.

In 1879, the OS applied to the Treasury to discontinue certain classes of boundary as an economy and simplification measure, to reduce the cost of ascertaining them.^[14] Following this, the counties corporate were no longer given 'County' boundaries.

The Counties (Detached Parts) Act 1844 deemed many detached parts of counties in England and Wales to lie within the county in which they were locally situated "for all Purposes". OS reflected these changes as changes to 'County' boundaries on its First Edition maps.

The Divided Parishes and Poor Law Amendment Act 1876 enabled the recently created Local Government Board to make an order to eliminate detached parts of parishes. The Board was empowered to provide for a change in the county of such areas if this was requisite. The Redistribution of Seats Act 1885 stated that these changes were to apply to parliamentary areas also. Only a few small areas were affected. OS reflected these changes as changes to 'County' boundaries.

The Second Edition county series maps 1891 – 1915

In England and Wales survey work began in 1891 on what became known as the *Second Edition* of the 1:2500 and 1:10560 maps. This was completed in 1914. In Scotland the Second Edition survey began in 1892 and was completed in 1905.^[7,12]

The completion of the First Edition and the commencement of work on the Second Edition happened at around the same time as the passing of the Local Government Act 1888 and the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1889, two major pieces of legislation which had a profound impact on OS practice in

relation to 'County' boundary marking. The First Edition maps, therefore, generally reflect OS practice before this legislation and the Second Edition maps reflect OS practice after this legislation.

The Local Government Act 1888 Act created a new set of administrative areas in England and Wales which it labelled '*administrative counties*' and '*county boroughs*'. Section 59(2) of the Act rearranged the geographical framework of many forms of administration that had traditionally been based on the counties, saying that:

"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 the county of all purposes, whether sheriff, lieutenant, custos rotulorum, justices, militia, coroner, or other."

The Local Government (Scotland) Act 1889 set up a similar system of local government, with its '*counties*' and '*counties of city*' being analogous to the '*administrative counties*' and '*county boroughs*' of the 1888 Act. Section 49(1) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1889 made similar provisions for Scotland to those made by Section 59(2) of the 1888 Act for England and Wales.

Following these acts the OS had to deal with the creation of administrative counties and county boroughs and with the provisions of Section 59(2) of the 1888 Act and Section 49(1) of the 1889 Act which affected the definition of 'county' for many other purposes, though not for parliamentary areas.

Figure 3 shows the boundary marking used on the Second Edition and the subsequent Third Edition maps from around 1889 – 1944.^[3,8]

Name of Area.	Boundary.	Writing.
County	— — —	C
County Administrative Division ... }	+ + +	S (On margins only)
County Boroughs (England) ... }	<i>Boundary described</i>	
County Burgh... (Scotland) ... }	<i>Boundary described</i>	E
Parliamentary County Division ... }	<i>Boundary described</i>	
Borough (Parliamentary)...	<i>Boundary described</i>	B
Division of Parliamentary Borough ... }	<i>Boundary described</i>	D
Borough (Municipal) ...	<i>Boundary described</i>	D
Municipal Ward ...	<i>Boundary described</i>	W
Urban District and Burgh (Scotland) ... }	<i>Boundary described</i>	U
Rural District...	<i>Boundary described</i>	R
Civil Parish	P

Figure 3. The boundary markings on 1:2500 maps from circa 1889 to 1944 - from Booth 1980.^[3]

The OS took the approach of maintaining a single 'County' boundary on its maps. However, this boundary now showed the counties as defined by Section 59(2) of the 1888 Act or Section 45(1) of the 1889 Act. The new 'administrative county' boundaries were depicted as '*County Administrative Division*' boundaries within the new 'County' boundaries. However, '*County Boroughs*' and '*County Burghs*' were shown separately.

The OS was under great financial pressure at this time and sought economies wherever possible.^[14] On the other hand the 1888-9 Acts did create new administrative areas that had to be shown distinctively. The OS took a 'minimalist' line to the new administrative climate.^[14]

This approach led to there being significant differences in the 'County' boundaries on the Second Edition maps compared to the First Edition. These differences initially resulted from the provision of the 1888 Act that an urban sanitary district was not to be split across more than one administrative county. Many urban sanitary districts had crossed county boundaries. Based on population, these were now ascribed to lie in a single administrative county. The whole of each urban sanitary district also now lay in a single county for the purposes listed in Section 59(2) of the 1888 Act.

Figure 4 shows a Second Edition map of the same area for which a First Edition map was presented in Figure 2. Newtown lay in the New Mills urban sanitary district. The 1888 Act deemed the whole of this urban sanitary district to be part of the new administrative county of Derbyshire and, hence, to be part of Derbyshire for all the purposes listed in Section 59(2) of the 1888 Act. Hence, whilst the 'County' boundary on the First Edition map (Figure 2) placed Newtown in Cheshire, on the Second Edition map (Figure 4), the 'County' boundary showed Newtown as lying in Derbyshire.



Figure 4. Second Edition map showing the Newtown area of the New Mills urban sanitary district. The red line traces the 'County' boundary on the map. The green line traces the 'Parly. Co. By.' on the map.

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.^[14] It did so under the label 'Parliamentary County'. This boundary is marked on the Second Edition map in Figure 4 by the label "Parly. Co. By." above the parish boundary. The relevant counties are also named both above and below the Parliamentary County boundary.

Whilst the 1:2500 and 1:10560 maps continued to show 'Parliamentary County' boundaries, these were not included on the revised 1-inch New Series maps produced from 1893 onwards.^[14] This was general-user mapping, reaching a much wider readership than the 1:2500 and 1:10560 maps. The 'County'

boundaries show on these were the counties as defined by Section 59(2) of the 1888 Act or Section 45(1) of the 1889 Act.^[14]

The approach taken by both the OS and the General Register Office (GRO) was to view the 1888 and 1889 local government acts as having created a whole new set of administrative areas. Both the OS and the GRO began to use the phrase *Ancient or Geographical Counties* to refer to the counties as unaffected by these acts. Both bodies saw a need to make this distinction. The 1911 edition of the OS's *Notes on County, Parish, Borough and other Boundaries*^[16] 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.”

The GRO continued to produce statistics for the Ancient or Geographical Counties in the 1891, 1901 and 1911 census reports. Figure 5 shows an extract from the return for Monmouthshire from 1891^[4].

CENSUS, 1891.—COUNTIES.

County of **MONMOUTH.**

The differences between the boundaries of the Ancient or Geographical County and those of the Administrative County of Monmouth, together with the County Borough of Newport, are shown in detail in Table 3.

The Ancient County is divided for Parliamentary purposes into three Divisions; it also includes the Monmouth District of Boroughs, consisting of the Contributory Boroughs of Monmouth, Newport, and Usk. (Table 2.)

The Administrative County includes one Municipal Borough, namely, Monmouth. The Municipal Ward sub-divisions of the County Borough of Newport are shown in Table 5.

The Administrative County has one Court of Quarter Sessions, and is divided into 11 Petty Sessional Divisions. The Boroughs of Monmouth and Newport have separate Commissions of the Peace, but no separate Courts of Quarter Sessions. (Table 6.)

The Administrative County contains 140, and the County Borough of Newport one, entire Civil Parishes; there are also 4 Parishes which are situated partly in other Administrative Counties, and 3 which are partly in the County and partly in the County Borough. (Table 7.)

The Ancient County contains 120 entire Ecclesiastical Parishes and Districts, and parts of 7 others; it is situated partly in the Diocese of Llandaff and partly in that of Hereford. (Table 8.)

The Areas given in the several Tables are derived from returns furnished by the Ordnance Survey Department.

TABLE 1.—ANCIENT COUNTY; AREA, HOUSES, and POPULATION.

AREA in Statute Acres.	HOUSES.			POPULATION.			Average Number of	
	Inhabited.	Uninhabited.	Building.	PERSONS.	Males.	Females.	Persons to an Acre.	Acres to a Person.
341,688	46,080	2,106	431	252,416	130,757	121,659	0.74	1.35

Figure 5. Extract from the County tables for Monmouthshire from the 1891 Census, showing the continued enumeration and existence of the Ancient or Geographical County of Monmouth^[4].

The differences between the OS's 'County' boundaries as on the Second Edition and those of the Ancient or Geographical Counties gradually increased over the next few decades as small piecemeal changes were made to administrative county areas which were reflected in changes to the counties for the purposes of Section 59(2) of the 1888 Act. Similar changes to the new local government areas took place in Scotland. All such changes were reflected as changes in 'County' boundaries on OS maps but not as changes to the 'Parliamentary County' boundaries.

The Representation of the People Act 1918 marked the end of use of the Ancient or Geographical Counties for any major form of public administration. By this act, parliamentary areas were recast in terms of the then local government areas. The OS ceased to show the *Parliamentary County* boundaries after this point. The new parliamentary areas were depicted with a 'Co. Const.' label. The GRO also ceased to produce statistics for the Ancient or Geographical Counties from its 1921 Census, although it continued to refer to them in later reports^[5].

National Grid Mapping 1944-1974

To coincide with the introduction of large-scale maps on the National Grid, a new set of boundary markings was introduced. These are shown in Figure 6^[3,8].

Henceforth in Scotland, OS showed only the local government areas, marking 'County (County Council)', 'County of City' and 'Burgh' etc. areas.

In England and Wales OS began to explicitly denote 'Administrative County'. It also began to apply the label 'Geographical County' on its maps to the areas it has been labelling as simply 'County' since 1889. According to the 1951 edition of Administrative Boundaries in Great Britain^[17]:

"the term 'geographical county' appears to have no legal definition but to a popular and convenient term referring to county at large, i.e. inclusive of county borough and bounded for lieutenancy and assizes purpose."

Whilst the term 'geographical county' had no legal definition, the areas it covered were those defined legally by Section 59(2) of the 1888 Act and which OS had been marking as simply 'County' since 1888. The introduction of the term 'Geographical County' to describe these areas has caused confusion since these are not the same entities or areas as the Ancient or Geographical Counties, a term OS had always used to refer to the pre-1888 counties.

ENGLAND & WALES Areas		Boundary	CHARACTER	
			Marginal	Body Name
Geographical County.....(alone)		(Not described) line 12 3 6		Not on 1:1250
Administrative County with Parish:-			} ADMIN CO	
1... with Geo County ..	Ad Co Bdy			
2... across Geo County.	Ad Co Bdy			
County Borough & Parish.....		CB Bdy	CO BORO	} B*
County Districts {	Municipal Borough.....	MB Bdy	MB	
	Urban District.....	UD Bdy	UD	
	Rural District.....	RD Bdy	RD	
Civil Parish.....		(Not described)	PH	P

SCOTLAND Areas		Boundary	CHARACTER	
			Marginal	Body Name
County (County Council).....(alone)		Co Cnl Bdy line 12 3 6	∅	Not on 1:1250
— do —.....(coincident with ph)		Co Cnl Bdy	} Not abbrev	
County of City.....(not with ph)		Co of City Bdy		
— do —.....(with ph)		Co of City Bdy		} B
Burgh.....(not with ph)		Burgh Bdy	} BURGH	
— do —.....(with ph)		Burgh Bdy		
District Council Area.....(not with ph)		Dist Bdy	} DISTRICT	
— do —.....(with ph)		Dist Bdy		
Civil Parish.....		(Not described)	PH	P

Figure 6. OS boundary symbols in use from 1944 to 1950 - from Booth 1980.^[3]

In 1980 Booth^[3] made the following observation:

"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. Before 1974 the geographical county was taken to include both the administrative counties and any county boroughs which were defined within the area specified. This was post-1888, regarded as the pre-1888 county. Acts or Orders which changed county boundaries "for all purposes" automatically altered the limits of the geographical county which otherwise remaining unaltered."

This gives an interesting perspective on OS practice as regards 'County' boundaries since 1889. It seems to imply that OS's continuation of marking boundaries for 'County' and later 'Geographical County' was driven to some extent by a wish to maintain something akin to the Ancient or Geographical Counties on its maps. The areas depicted were contemporary administrative areas which were also reasonably close approximations to the Ancient or Geographical Counties. They were "*post-1888, regarded as the pre-1888 county*".

Following the local government reforms of the early 1970s, the OS began to mark the 'counties' of the Local Government Act 1972 in England and Wales under the unqualified label '*county*' on its maps and to mark the new '*regions*' and '*districts*' of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 in Scotland. At that point, the OS ceased to show anything like the Ancient or Geographical Counties on its maps.

Concluding Remarks

From its earliest days, OS practice in relation to 'County' boundaries has been influenced not just by a need to show them as important administrative areas but by the fact that the counties also form the standard geography of Great Britain and are important historical and cultural entities. Until the 1970s, OS followed an approach which kept something akin to the counties of our history on its maps.

The 'County' boundaries initially depicted by OS were those previously known 'by repute' and mered by OS in its first national survey. OS reacted pragmatically to the effects of Counties (Detached Parts) Act 1844, the Divided Parishes and Poor Law Amendment Act 1876 and the Redistribution of Seats Act 1885, showing these as changes to the 'County' boundaries.

OS and GRO treated the Local Government Act 1888 and the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1889 as being different in nature to that previous 19th-century legislation which had led to minor changes in 'County' boundaries. The phrase 'Ancient or Geographical County' was used to draw a distinction between the ancient areas and those new administrative areas created by these acts.

Following the implementation of the 1888 and 1889 Acts, OS's 'County' boundaries became those counties '*for all purposes*' of these acts. These were always different from the Ancient or Geographical Counties in many small areas. These differences grew as local government boundaries were amended.

OS retained the Ancient or Geographical Counties on its maps in the guise of 'Parliamentary Counties'. When parliamentary constituencies were redrawn in 1918, OS ceased to mark the Ancient or Geographical Counties. The 'Counties' it continued to depict on its maps after that point were, however, an approximation to these ancient counties.

Booth's^[3] comment that the post-1944 'Geographical County' was "*post-1888, regarded as the pre-1888 county*" might suggest that OS was trying to keep something akin to the Ancient or Geographical Counties on its maps. The 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.

The removal of anything like the historic counties from OS maps following the local government changes of the 1970s may have made sense in terms of the legislation, but it did rather overlook the purpose of the retention of the 'Geographical County' boundaries on OS maps until that point.

Despite not being used as a basis for public administration since 1918, the counties of our history remain of interest and relevance. They are a key resource to historians. Kain and Oliver^[11] in their *Historic Parishes of England & Wales: Electronic Map – Gazetteer – Metadata* use the 1888 county boundaries as a framework for their depiction of parish boundaries. The importance of the pre-1888 boundaries has been well expressed by historian David Fletcher^[6]:

"The earliest investigations undertaken by the Boundary Survey (that is, the counties mapped before the later nineteenth century legislation began to reform local authority units and boundaries), have left a last glimpse of an administrative geography which survived from medieval England."

In recent years, many publishers and data providers have begun to refer to the ‘*historic counties*’ and supply data on them, including The Office for National Statistics^[15], Encyclopædia Britannica^[2], Wikidata^[19], the Historic Counties Trust^[10] and the Gazetteer of British Place Names^[1]. These all follow the precedent set by the OS and GRO after the 1888 and 1889 local government acts, by considering the ‘historic counties’ to be those as existing before the passing of these acts. The term ‘historic county’ is essentially a proxy for the archaic ‘Ancient or Geographical County’.

The ‘historic counties’ as defined within the Historic Counties Standard^[9] are essentially the same as what the GRO and OS referred to as the Ancient or Geographical Counties, albeit that the Standard takes a slightly different approach to dealing with the Counties (Detached Parts) Act 1844 and the Divided Parishes and Poor Law Amendment Act 1876. The Office for National Statistics has adopted the Standard for its definition of Historic County within its *Index of Place Names in Great Britain*^[15]. The explanatory text makes it clear that ONS takes the view that the 1888 and 1889 local government acts did not affect the historic counties (see Figure 7).

Historic County Name

Field Name: CTYHISTNM

Name of the historic county in which the place is situated.

The historic counties of Great Britain (also known as ancient counties, counties proper, geographical counties or traditional counties) have existed largely unchanged since the Middle Ages. Their original administrative function became the responsibility of separate administrative counties and county councils set up by the Local Government Act 1888 and the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1889. It was these administrative counties and county councils that were abolished in England and Wales in 1974 by the Local Government Act 1972, and in Scotland in 1975 by the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, not the historic counties.

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.

The boundaries of the historic counties used here are those defined in Definition A of the Historic Counties Standard published by the Historic Counties Trust, whereby detached parts of counties are not separately identified, but are associated with their host county.

Figure 7. Extract from the Office for National Statistics’ Index of Place Names in Great Britain^[15].

Since 2017, OS has included ‘historic county’ boundaries in its Boundary-Line product. This move acknowledges the wisdom of OS practice from 1791 to 1974 in keeping the historic counties, or something close to them, on its maps. The counties are an important part of the history and geography of Great Britain and deserve their place in the data provided by the national mapping agency.

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