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Map of Ceremonial Counties of England © Wikimedia Commons contributors  
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# **The Making Of England's Counties**

**History, Confusion, and  
Misunderstanding  
Unravelled**

**Philip GW Baker**



**NOCTUA  
EDITIONS**

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For Dave Lovell OBE  
A lover of maps



# Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction  | 9  |
| <b>1</b> What is a County? Origins and Concepts   | 11 |
| <b>2</b> How Counties Developed over Time   | 17 |
| <b>3</b> Medieval transformations, consolidation,<br>jurisdiction and identity                                  | 23 |
| <b>4</b> Counties Corporate, Liberties, Peculiars<br>and the Patchwork of Jurisdictions                         | 31 |
| <b>5</b> Counties Corporate: Towns That Became Counties   | 37 |
| <b>6</b> The 18th–19th Century Push for Administrative Rationalisation  | 45 |
| <b>7</b> The Local Government Act 1888 and the New Administrative<br>Counties                                   | 53 |
| <b>8</b> The Reforms of 1929, 1933, 1965 and the 1974 Reorganisation  | 63 |
| <b>9</b> Cornwall: County, Duchy, or Something Else?  | 71 |
| <b>10</b> The Ordnance Survey and the Myth of the 'Fixed' County Map  | 77 |
| <b>11</b> Why 'Historic County' Definitions Conflict: Victorian Census<br>Practice and Later Misinterpretations | 85 |
| <b>12</b> Late-20th and 21st-Century Campaigns  | 93 |
| Conclusion  | 99 |





# Introduction

The counties of England and Wales are often spoken of as if they were a single, coherent, deliberately designed system: clearly defined, unchanging, and universally understood. Modern debates, especially those concerning 'historic counties', administrative boundaries, or the legacy of the Local Government Act 1972, frequently assume that the counties once existed in some perfect, definite form that has since been disrupted. Yet the reality is far more complex, and far more interesting. England's counties did not emerge from a master plan, nor were they ever defined by a single founding statute. They are the product of a thousand years of gradual development, shaped by conquest, legislation, custom, administration, local identity, economic geography, ecclesiastical authority, and simple historical accident.

To grasp this properly, it is useful to compare England's experience with that of France. During the Napoleonic period, the old French provinces were swept away and replaced with departments, the equivalent of counties, rationally designed, centrally imposed, and deliberately constructed so that no citizen could be more than a day's ride from the departmental capital. The departments were created at a single stroke, on the basis of uniform size and administrative convenience. Their boundaries remain essentially unchanged today. This decisive moment, when a modernising state intentionally redrew France's territorial map, stands in sharp contrast to the English experience.

England never had such a moment. The English county system was never designed, and never imposed wholesale by royal decree or act of Parliament. There was no English equivalent of the departments, no moment when the entire map was restructured for uniformity. Instead, English counties evolved piecemeal from Anglo-Saxon shires, merged and divided under Norman rule, acquiring new jurisdictions during the Middle Ages, becoming entangled with liberties, borough counties and ecclesiastical territories, and continually being reinterpreted by

administrators, cartographers, judges, statisticians, military officers, and local inhabitants. At every stage, old patterns persisted alongside new structures.

This long history explains why the counties have never been a simple or tidy system. Boundaries were often known only 'by repute' or marked by stones, streams, and tree lines rather than formal surveys. County towns might lie outside their own counties; detached parts could be miles from their parent shire; and special jurisdictions, counties corporate, royal forests, sokes, liberties and palatinates, existed as overlapping layers of authority. The notion of a single, correct, historically fixed county map is therefore a modern invention, born largely in the nineteenth century through administrative reforms and the mapping practices of the Ordnance Survey.

The purpose of this book is to explain how the county system actually developed:

- how it emerged from early medieval administration
- how it adapted to changing royal and parliamentary needs
- how modern reforms created new 'counties' for administrative purposes
- why different authorities recognised different sets of counties at different times
- why competing modern definitions, 'historic', 'traditional', 'ancient', 'administrative', and 'ceremonial', are often based on misunderstandings of earlier practice.

This is not a book about defending one map of counties over another. It is a study of *how* and *why* counties have changed, how they were used, and how we came to hold certain assumptions about them. By exploring their true historical evolution, from fluid medieval jurisdictions to the administrative transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we can better understand both the origins of today's debates and the enduring cultural significance of county identity.

## **Chapter 1**

# **What is a County?**

## **Origins and Concepts**

The word county is deceptively familiar. It appears solid, obvious, and timeless, something that simply is. Yet counties are not natural features of the landscape like rivers or mountains. They are man-made territorial constructs, formed for political, judicial, and administrative purposes <sup>1</sup>. Indeed, in many cases it is misleading to say that counties were 'created' at any specific moment; it may be more accurate to say they developed over time, absorbing older territorial units, adapting to shifting power structures, and taking shape through centuries of precedent <sup>2</sup>.

The very earliest county-like divisions in England arose from the consolidation of Anglo-Saxon power, particularly in the Kingdom of Wessex during the early and mid-Saxon periods <sup>3</sup>. Many shires corresponded not to arbitrary administrative inventions but to earlier independent kingdoms, such as Kent, Sussex, and Essex, which long pre-date any formal notion of a 'county.'<sup>4</sup> As the Anglo-Saxon monarchies expanded, these territories were reorganised around royal authority and defence, producing the first recognisable shires. The process was not uniform, and it was not instantaneous. Territories in northern England, for example, only acquired their later county outlines centuries after those in the south <sup>5</sup>.

The situations in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland were similarly fluid. Wales' counties as we know them today were largely formalised under the Tudor 'Acts of Union' (1536–1543) but they were built upon older medieval lordships and traditional regional identities <sup>6</sup>. Scotland's counties emerged from the medieval system of sheriff-