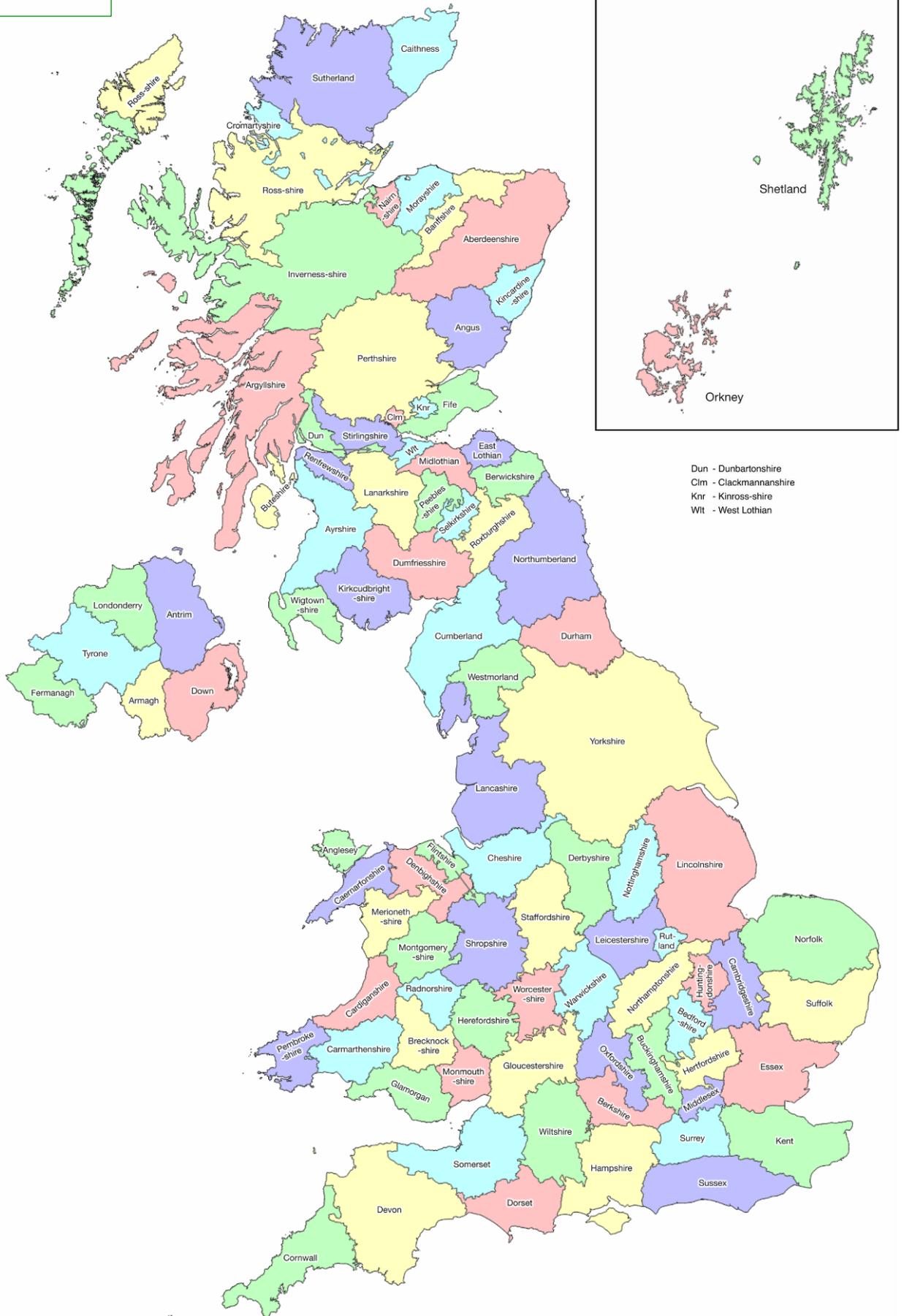


An Introduction to the Historic Counties



1. Introduction

The Association of British Counties (ABC) is the national body representing the 92 historic counties of the United Kingdom. ABC believes that the link that the historic counties provide between our present and our distant past adds great value to the life of the nation and should be cherished by us all. We promote the identities of the historic counties and the important part they play in our culture, heritage and geography.

The importance of the historic counties has been expressed well by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in its guidance *Celebrating the Historic Counties of England*^[33]:

“The historic counties are an important element of English traditions which support the identity and cultures of many of our local communities, giving people a sense of belonging, pride and community spirit. They continue to play an important part in the country’s sporting and cultural life as well as providing a reference point for local tourism and heritage. We should seek to strengthen the role that they can play.”

These fine sentiments apply to the historic counties of the whole United Kingdom.



Parliament Square on Historic County Flags Day 2022

This fact sheet is an introduction to the historic counties: what they are and why they matter (section 2); their origins and history (section 3); what they are not - administrative areas (section 4); how their names, areas and borders are defined and determined (section 5); and concluding with suggested steps to further strengthen their role in the national life (section 6).

2. The nature and importance of the historic counties

By the phrase ‘*historic counties*’ we are referring to the 92 areas which, throughout most of their histories, have commonly been known simply as ‘*counties*’ and which have formed the standard territorial divisions of the United Kingdom for many centuries.

Though formed in a variety of ways over a long period of history, the longevity of these divisions has led to them becoming an important part of the history, geography and culture of our nation.

The adjective ‘*historic*’ is used to draw a distinction between these ancient territorial and cultural entities and the various administrative areas which have, since the 19th century, confusingly also been given the label ‘*county*’.

There has always been an understanding that the administrative areas created by local government legislation are different in kind to the historic counties. This is expressed by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in its *Index of Place Names in Great Britain*^[35].

Index of Place Names in Great Britain (IPN) 2021 User Guide v 1.1

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.

Extract from the *Index of Place Names in Great Britain (IPN) 2021 User Guide*^[35] (Office for National Statistics)

The creation of modern local government in the late 19th century led to a need to differentiate between the counties themselves and those ‘*administrative counties*’ created for local government purposes. The phrase ‘*ancient or geographical county*’ was commonly used to make this distinction, e.g. by the General Register Office^[10,11,12,13,14], Ordnance Survey^[37] and Bartholomew’s Gazetteer^[2].

The adjective ‘*historic*’ (i.e. having a long history) has recently become more commonly used^[1,6,23,35,46,48] to make this distinction. The phrase ‘*historic county*’ is synonymous with the now more archaic ‘*ancient or geographical county*’.

At the most fundamental level, the historic counties are ancient territorial units which, though no longer used as the basis for any administrative purpose, remain of geographical and cultural importance. They are, though, far richer concepts than this.

The historic counties are the not just the landscapes into which our country is divided but are also the landscapes from which it is made up. But they are much more than areas of the country. They are sets of towns and villages, peoples, dialects, building styles, natural histories, histories and traditions. They are the focus of loyalty and identity to millions. They are the basis of innumerable sporting, social and cultural organisations and events. Our history was played out within them. A huge literature, going back centuries, focuses on each historic shire. Above all else, the historic counties are ‘places’: places where people ‘come from’, where they ‘belong’. And they often provide a family link with past generations.



Somerset Day (left) and Yorkshire Day celebrations in 2022

The continued relevance of the historic counties is acknowledged by their inclusion within major reference works, e.g. the ONS’ *Index of Place Names in Great Britain* (IPN)^[35], *Encyclopædia Britannica*^[6], the *Gazetteer of British Place Names*^[1], and *Wikidata*.^[46] Their geographical and cultural importance is expressed by ONS which recommends them as a stable, unchanging geography for the whole of Great Britain.

Recent years have seen growing public appreciation and celebration of the historic counties. County flags have become familiar symbols on flag poles, at sporting events, at festivals, and on bumper stickers.^[4] Fifty-two historic counties now have a flag registered with the Flag Institute^[18], including every English county. County Day celebrations grow in number and popularity year on year. Many have become huge celebrations. Organisations and social media channels dedicated to celebrating a particular county abound.^[15,16,19,20,21,26,27,31,32,34,39,41,42,43,44,49]



Road signs marking historic county borders

3. A brief history of the historic counties

The division of England into shires began in the Kingdom of Wessex in the mid-Saxon period. With the Wessex conquest of Mercia in the 9th and 10th centuries, the system was extended to central England. At the time of the Domesday book, northern England comprised Cheshire and Yorkshire. The remaining counties of the north were established in the 12th century. Rutland was first recorded as a county in 1159.^[7,45]

The Scottish counties have their origins in the '*sheriffdoms*' created in the reign of Alexander I (1107-24) and extended by David I (1124-53). Sheriffdoms had been established over most of southern and eastern Scotland by the mid-13th century. The central and western Highlands and the Isles were assigned to shires in the early modern period, Caithness becoming a sheriffdom in 1503 and Orkney in 1540.^[17,30]

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 of Denbigh, Montgomery, Radnor, Brecknock and Monmouth. The other 8 counties had, by then, already been in existence since at least the 13th century. The historic counties are based on older traditional areas.^[40]



Kent – Surrey border just south of Surrey Commercial Docks (1841 artist unknown)

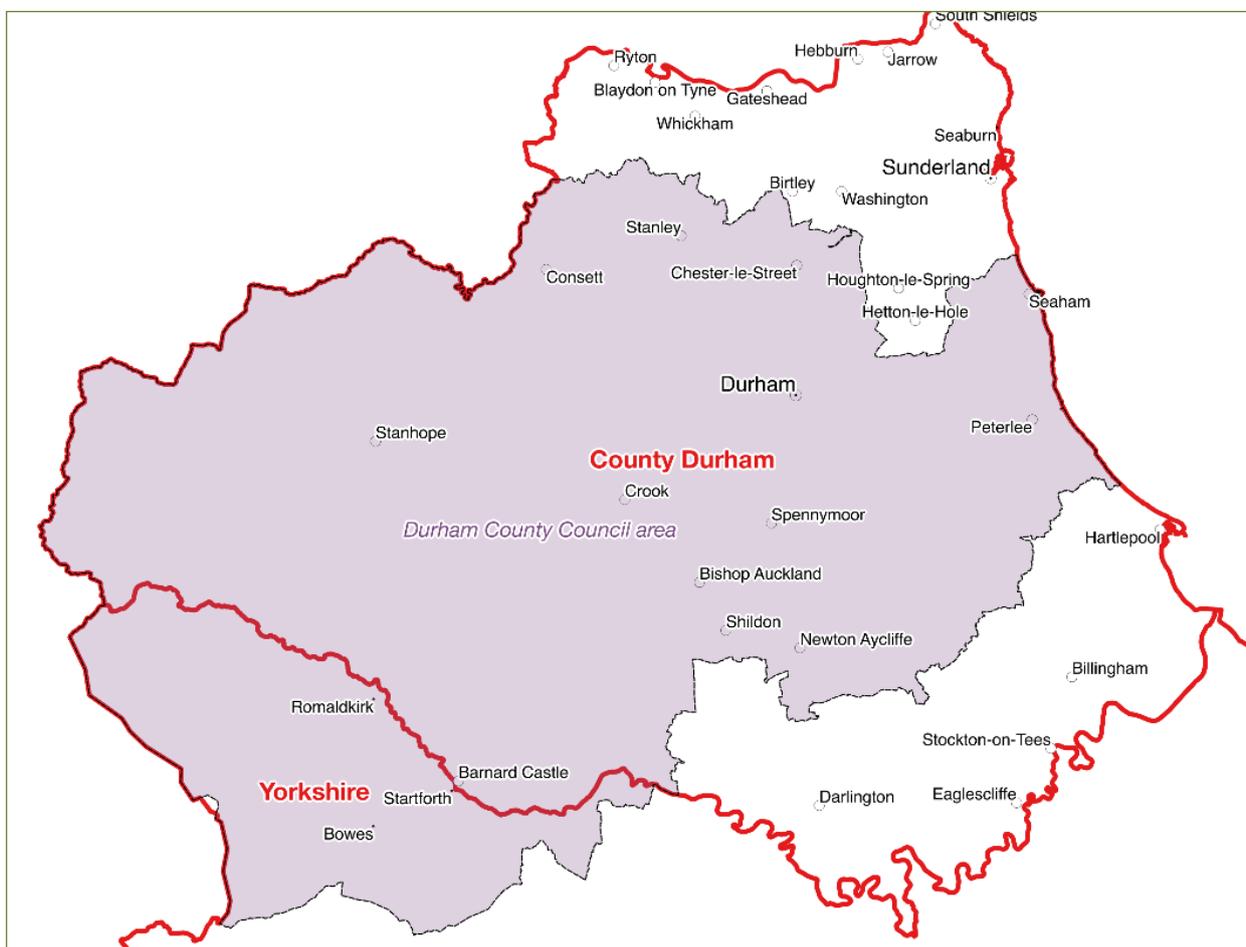
The division of Ireland into counties began during the reign of King John (1199-1216). This process continued for several hundred years. Munster was divided into counties in 1571 and Connaught in 1579. Finally, Ulster was shired during the reign of James I. The counties were generally based on earlier, traditional areas.^[5]

By the start of the 19th 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 in the centuries before this.^[8,9] Whilst administrative functions (e.g. sheriffs, justices, lieutenants, parliamentary areas) were based within them, these functions did not define the historic counties.^[23]

4. Confusion of the historic counties with administrative ‘counties’

The era of modern local government began with the Local Government Act 1888, the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1889, and the Local Government (Ireland) Act 1898. These Acts created sets of statutorily defined administrative areas for local government purposes, initially based on the historic counties. Councils were created to manage service provision within the new administrative areas. Many of the administrative functions previously based within the historic counties (e.g. sheriffs, justices, lieutenancies) were also tied to the new areas. Parliamentary areas remained based on the historic counties until 1918. From that point, the historic counties were no longer used as the basis for public administration.^[23]

Innumerable changes to administrative areas have taken place since 1888, although the ‘counties’ as defined for lieutenancy purposes remained reasonably similar to the historic counties until the 1960s. Following the many local government reforms since 1963, few current administrative areas are now close to any historic county.^[23]



The Durham County Council area (shaded purple) compared to historic County Durham and Yorkshire

Despite this, the word ‘county’ is still used within the terminology of local government, the lieutenancy and the shrievalty. Many administrative areas still bear an historic county name despite having a radically different area. The resulting confusion is to the detriment of both the historic counties and local government.

5. The Historic Counties Standard: defining the historic counties

Whilst most of the major reference works [1,6,35,46,48] feature the historic counties, there is some minor inconsistency in the precise definitions used to determine their borders. The Historic Counties Standard^[23] provides a consistent, historically accurate approach to defining the names, areas and borders of the historic counties. The adoption of such a standard approach across all reference works would aid public understanding and appreciation of the historic counties.

In defining a set of historic county borders there are several issues to be addressed. The slight diversity in approach across current reference sources results from differences in the way these issues are dealt with:

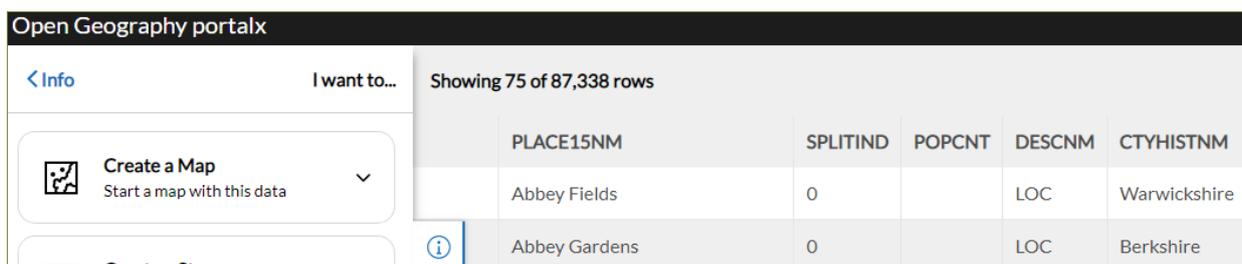
- One requires a reliable source of border data. The borders of the counties were established over many centuries and known by repute. These boundaries were ascertained to high accuracy by the Ordnance Survey in the 19th century and presented on the *First Edition* maps^[3,22,25,36,38];
- Many of the counties have so-called “detached parts” within the main bodies of other counties. Traditionally, these have been viewed as being associated with *both* their parent county and their host county.^[28,29] Interpretations differ on the effects of the Counties (Detached Parts) Act 1844 which assigned some of these detached parts to lie within their host county^[23];
- Interpretations differ on the effects of the Divided Parishes and Poor Law Amendment Act 1876 which led to several minor changes to county borders.^[23]

The Historic Counties Standard^[23] does not consider any of the 19th century legislation concerned with detached parts or divided parishes to have effected a territorial change in the counties. It follows the traditional approach that detached parts should be considered to be associated with both parent and host counties. This means that two sets of areas are defined by the Standard:

- **Definition A** does not separately identify detached parts but instead associates them with their host county;
- **Definition B** identifies all detached parts and associates them with their parent county.

Definition A is intended to have a wider, more general-purpose applicability. Definition B is intended to be of more use to historical studies, county histories etc. The Historic County Borders Project^[24] provides digitised border data for both Definition A and Definition B of the Historic Counties Standard.

The Historic Counties Standard has been adopted by several publishers and data providers. Notably, the ONS has adopted Definition A as the definition of historic county within its Index of Place Names in Great Britain.^[35]



PLACE15NM	SPLITIND	POPCNT	DESCNM	CTYHISTNM
Abbey Fields	0		LOC	Warwickshire
Abbey Gardens	0		LOC	Berkshire

The Office for National Statistics' Index of Place Names in Great Britain^[35]

Other publishers take a slightly different approach. For example, Encyclopædia Britannica^[6] is generally consistent with the Historic Counties Standard but deals with detached parts in a different way.

Glamorgan, Welsh **Morgannwg**, historic county, southern **Wales**, extending inland from the Bristol Channel coast between the Rivers Loughor and Rhymney. In the north it comprises a barren upland moor dissected by narrow river valleys. Glamorgan's southern coastal section centres on an undulating plain known as the Vale of Glamorgan and extends into the Gower Peninsula.



Glamorgan

Encyclopædia Britannica's article on Glamorgan

Whilst Wikipedia^[47] commonly makes reference to the '*historic county*' of places, there is inconsistency in the apparent meaning of the term as used within the publication. Some articles treat the current local government or lieutenancy areas known as '*counties*' as a continuation of the historic counties. Other articles attempt to view the historic counties as some kind of historical equivalent to modern administrative areas. Neither approach is correct. Although modern local government areas were originally based on the historic counties, they have always been understood to be distinct from them. Administrative areas are created by statute and exist only for their specified administrative purposes. The historic counties cannot be viewed through this paradigm. They are ancient territorial divisions and broad cultural entities, made use of for innumerable purposes.

The Historic Counties Standard provides a precise, historically accurate definition of the historic counties. Whether such a strict definition is required depends on context. It would certainly be helpful across reference works and more generally in the fields of history, geography, heritage and education. For example, in cataloguing historical documents and artefacts; descriptions of historical events; place name surveys; county histories; cataloguing of historic buildings and so on.

In other contexts, the Historic Counties Standard should be viewed as a framework against which to consider the suitability of an organisation or area to bear an historic county name. If a sporting organisation or administrative body bears an historic county name then it is reasonable to expect it to cover an area fairly close to that historic county. Small differences from the strict definition of that county are to be expected in many cases. For example, those small changes to lieutenancy areas between 1888-1960 are often reflected in the areas of county-based organisations.

6. Concluding Remarks: strengthening the role of the historic counties

There are many ways in which government, local government, businesses, community organisations, charities and individuals can celebrate our historic counties and strengthen their role in the national life.

The support of the UK Government for county flags, county days and Historic County Flags Day is welcomed and applauded, as is the publication of its *Celebrating the historic counties of England*^[33] guidance. There are, however, several further steps the Government should take to strengthen the role the historic counties can play:

- Extend the *Celebrating the historic counties of England* guidance to cover the whole of the UK;
- Endorse the Historic Counties Standard^[23] as the recommended definition of the names, areas and borders of the historic counties;
- Remove the word ‘county’ from administrative terminology and council names;
- Recommend the phrase ‘*council area*’ be used to refer to all local authority areas;
- Ensure that administrative areas and bodies do not make inappropriate, unqualified use of historic county names;
- Provide for a set of historic county border signs on highways throughout the UK;
- Include within the national curriculum appropriate reference to the importance of the historic counties to our history and culture.

A further step would be to re-align the lieutenancies with the historic counties by defining the lieutenancy areas of the Lieutenancies Act 1997 directly in terms of the Historic Counties Standard.^[23]



A comparison of the current Berwickshire lieutenancy area to the historic counties

The appointment of the Queen’s representative to the historic counties should be seen as a recognition of their importance. The office of lord-lieutenant has never defined the counties, most of which pre-date its creation by many centuries, and should not be seen as such.

The heritage sector (e.g. English Heritage, National Trust, National Trust for Scotland, Cadw etc.) could also play a major part in promoting the historic counties by make full use of them in the promotion and presentation to the public of historic properties, landscapes, artefacts and documents.

The cultural section (museums, galleries, archives etc.) should also ensure that correct reference is made to the historic counties both in record and artefact management and in the public presentation of artefacts, records, pictures etc.

Individuals and non-governmental organisations also have a huge role to play in strengthening the role of the historic counties. The development and registration of county flags and the ever-growing popularity of county days are terrific ways to promote and celebrate our counties. For example, the Somerset Day Community Interest Company^[42] not only promotes the Somerset Flag and Somerset Day but uses these as the basis for a year-long celebration of the county.



Somerset Day promotional logo (left), the Lincolnshire flag at Glastonbury

There is huge scope for further development of ideas and organisations along these lines. Most of all, there is huge scope for new, imaginative, innovative ways of promoting and celebrating the historic counties.

However, a long-term future for the historic counties requires the end of ‘*county confusion*’. It is essential that the Government establishes an identity for local government which is totally separate from that of the historic counties.

If the Government were to remove the word ‘county’ from administrative parlance and end the inappropriate use of historic county names within administration, then the era of county confusion would be brought to an end, the adjective ‘*historic*’ could be dropped and the counties would once again just be the counties.

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