

PRESS RELEASE
For Immediate Release



County lovers call on Government to resolve 'county chaos' of 1974

On the 50th anniversary of the local government re-organisation of 1st April 1974, lovers of our historic counties are calling on the Government to finally resolve the 'county chaos' created in 1974, by establishing an identity for local government that is totally separate from the historic counties.

Peter Boyce, Chairman of the Association of British Counties^[1] (ABC) said,

"Who doesn't love our historic counties? Yorkshire, Middlesex, Glamorgan, Caithness and the rest hold a special place in our history, geography and culture. And in our hearts.

And yet all is far from well with our beloved shires. For the last fifty years their identities have been needlessly confused with those of the local government areas and councils created on 1st April 1974.

The folly of the Local Government Act 1972 was in giving its top-tier local government areas the label 'county' and giving many of the new 'county councils' the name of a historic county, despite the council's area being radically different to that county.

Confusion has reigned ever since. 'Lancashire County Council'^[9] covers about half of the historic county palatine and a chunk of Yorkshire! 'Oxfordshire County Council'^[10] includes northern Berkshire! The effect on the real counties is lamentable."

The Government confirmed at the time that the 1974 re-organisation only affected the local government 'administrative counties' which had first been set up in 1889^[2,3]. It did not affect the ancient counties, most of which had by then already been in existence for more than a thousand years. Despite this, postal addresses, maps and road signage were altered and the new administrative geography became widely used by the media.

The 1974 administrative geography has since been altered beyond recognition. Of the 54 top-tier 1974 county councils, only 20 exist today and of those, only 9 cover their original area.

Peter Boyce continued,

"The historic counties formed the standard general-purpose geography of Great Britain for centuries, one rooted in history and commonly held notions of community and identity. In 1974, this was swept away and replaced by a new geography based on a set of transient local government areas, a geography that lasted only 20 years before it started to fall apart.

Our nation needs a fixed general-purpose geography, a commonly accepted set of names and areas for people to use in all walks of life: travel, business, tourism, addressing, sport, leisure, weather forecasts etc. The historic counties are the only credible choice."

Alongside the collapse of the 1974 geography, the 21st century has seen a renaissance of the historic counties, witnessed by the growth of county flags^[5], county days^[7] and border signs^[8].

ABC Chairman Peter Boyce noted:

"It is gratifying to see that, despite all the confusion, millions still love their county. We encourage them to promote and celebrate its history and heritage at every opportunity.

Embrace your county's flag. Join in the celebration of your county's day. The most effective thing anyone can do to promote their county is easy and free - use your county in your address. The Post Office now permits this in any UK address."^[6]

The Government has lent its support, publishing its [Celebrating the Historic Counties of England](#)^[4] guidance. On Historic County Flags Day (23rd July) it flies all the county flags in Parliament Square.^[5]

ABC Chairman Peter Boyce concluded:

"The Government's support for the historic counties is very welcome. Nonetheless, the Government should end 'county confusion' by establishing an identity for local government that is totally separate from the historic counties.

The term 'council area', already used in Scotland, should be adopted across the UK.

A historic county name should only be used in a council name if it makes geographical sense, e.g. as it does in 'West Northamptonshire Council'. Otherwise, find other names for councils.

Resolving the confusion would massively strengthen the role of the historic counties in the national life and ensure that future generations can be enriched by this living part of our ancient history."

Contact Details

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Notes and Downloadable Images

[1] The [Association of British Counties](#) is a society which promotes and celebrates the historic counties of the United Kingdom and their role in our culture, heritage and geography.

[2] In its [Index of Place Names in Great Britain](#), the Office for National Statistics makes clear that the local government changes of 1974 only affected the local government 'administrative counties' which had been created in 1889. The 1974 changes did not affect the historic counties of Great Britain. It also recommends the historic counties as a stable, unchanging geography which covers the whole of Great Britain.

Index of Place Names in Great Britain (IPN) 2023 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.

[3] At the time of the 1974 local government changes the Government said of the new local government areas:

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

[4] The Government actively promotes the historic counties, saying in its guidance [Celebrating the Historic Counties of England](#):

“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.”

[5] Fifty-six historic counties now have an official flag registered with the [Flag Institute](#). They have become a common sight on flag poles, at festivals, on marches, on car bumper stickers etc. The Government flies all of the registered flags in Parliament Square each year on Historic County Flags Day (23rd July), in a spectacular display.



The historic county flags in Parliament Square for Historic County Flags Day [[Image](#)]

[6] The *Convert a Postcode* feature on the [Gazetteer of British Place Names](#) can be used to find the county of any postcode.

[7] Starting with Yorkshire Day in 1975, the concept of a County Day on which to celebrate the history, heritage, culture and people of a county, has grown in popularity year on year. Around 25 historic counties now have a county day. Many are major events, on the ground and on social media. Yorkshire Day and Lancashire Day have a global reach.



Littleborough clog dancers celebrating Lancashire Day at the East Lancashire Railway [\[Image\]](#)

[8] The Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions (2016) permit the marking of the historic counties on public highways. An increasing number of such signs now exist.



Brecknockshire sign at Builth Wells [\[Image\]](#)

[10] Oxfordshire County Council has an area that roughly covers the historic county of Oxfordshire but also includes a huge area in the north-west of Berkshire, including Didcot, Wantage and the famous White Horse of Uffington.



The Oxfordshire County Council area compared to the historic counties [[Image](#)]

The historic counties of the United Kingdom

The standard definition of the historic counties, e.g. as used by the ONS' [Index of Place Names in Great Britain](#) and the [Gazetteer of British Counties](#), is provided by the [Historic Counties Standard](#). [\[Map\]](#)

