

Shire or County – what's in a name?

Visitors to England are often confused by the fact that our primary unit of regional government seems to have two names for what is in effect the same concept. They may find it helpful to learn that most of the natives have little idea of the difference either! The truth is even more complicated.

The largest regional administrative unit in England is generally referred to as the county, even if it is strictly a shire. Its traditional administrative centre is always the county town and never the 'shire town', although the offices of the county council (never a 'shire council') may be called 'County Hall' or 'Shire Hall'.

The traditional counties have existed as administrative units since before the Norman Conquest, and some much longer. In the late Middle Ages several towns and cities were elevated to the status of counties, and in the 19th and 20th centuries many changes were made to bring the model up to date, but the English still love their traditional counties even if they no longer exist as administrative units. There can be snobbery involved, as some people prefer to live in (say) Surrey than Greater London, and also great pride (think Yorkshire) or rivalry (Devon and Cornwall could easily go to war over which of them invested cream teas or pasties). We're going to focus here on the traditional counties, also known as ceremonial counties.

The simple distinction between counties and shires is that shires are usually named after their county town, like Northamptonshire or Derbyshire. Counties, by and large, are not (Cornwall, Suffolk). The reason for this is generally that counties bear names that precede the establishment of their county town whereas with shires, the town came first.

This is because, mostly, counties represent the remains of former independent kingdoms or regions which got absorbed into the emerging English kingdom between the seventh and tenth centuries (Essex, Kent, Middlesex, Norfolk, Suffolk, Surrey, Sussex), or other bits of Celtic Britain which the Anglo-Saxons conquered as entities (Cornwall, Devon, Cumberland, Westmorland). One other independent kingdom, Northumbria, also became a county (Northumberland). Much of its previous territory north of the river Humber became independent shires (Lancashire), though most of these got absorbed into Yorkshire, which is why that shire is so much bigger than most of the others. The sole English kingdom which survived the Viking invasions of the ninth century, Wessex, didn't become a county because it morphed into England, and its original area became several shires.

Shires emerged during this period of warfare with the Vikings as a way of defending a region around a strongly fortified town. The practice probably started in the Wessex heartland and was extended to the reconquered areas of Britain that Wessex went on to absorb on its journey to becoming England. So shires were a subdivision of an existing entity like Wessex. Worcestershire (pronounced 'Woostershire'), Warwickshire (pronounced 'Worricksire') and Gloucestershire (pronounced 'Glostershire') are examples of this. And while we're talking about pronunciation, on the end of a name like these, 'shire' is always pronounced 'sheer'.

That accounts for 31 of the 39 ceremonial counties, but, as always in England, there are several exceptions!

Shires which aren't named after their county town:

- Berkshire – pronounced 'Barkshire'. This shire was part of the heartland of old Wessex back in the early mediaeval period, like Hampshire and Wiltshire, so is one of the original shires predating the Viking wars. Its name probably derives from a wood called *Bearroc*.

- Hampshire –The principal town now is Southampton, which was originally called Hampton, and Hamp(ton)shire was abbreviated to Hampshire by the seventh century. This explains why there is a Northamptonshire but not a Southamptonsire. The capital city of Wessex, Winchester, has always been the county town of Hampshire, but the county isn't named after it. Possibly because the West Saxons didn't want to demean the prestige of their capital by making it a mere country town!

Shires which are named after their county town but appear not to be include:

- Lancashire – the name of Lancastershire just got a bit eroded over time.
- Shropshire – yes, it is named after its county town, Shrewsbury (pronounced 'Shrowsbury', unless you live there). A thousand years ago the town was called Scrobsbury, and the shire Scrobs(bury)shire. The natural evolution of the English language took the two words in different directions.
- Wiltshire – the county town is now Trowbridge, but a thousand years ago the county town was Wilton, leading to the name 'Wiltonshire'.

Counties that are named after their county town:

- Cheshire – named after Chester - Che(ster)shire – Cheshire is an unusual entity in that it was originally a country palatine. Because it was on the border of England with a powerful north Welsh kingdom, the Earl of Cheshire had great power granted by the king so that he was wealthy enough to maintain an army to defend this critical border.
- County Durham. Just to make sure you don't think it's a shire, Durham puts the word county in its name. Like Cheshire, it was a palatine, in this case in the hands of the Bishop of Durham, who ruled the county as a private kingdom.

Two counties – Dorset and Somerset – also merit a mention here. 'Saet' is a Saxon word for the land belonging to a people, and in the early years of the Anglo-Saxon conquest of what is now England, there were many other 'saet's such as Wreocensaet and Magonsaet. Originally based around the towns of Dorchester and Somerton, they might have formed into shires, but they were swallowed up by their neighbour Wessex while still in an early stage of development.

Devon is a curiosity in that it is often mistaken for a shire. There's a Duke of Devonshire, and a warship called HMS Devonshire, which makes it sound official that it's a shire. But it's a county because i) it's not named after it's county town, Exeter, ii) it has a County Hall, proving that Devon County Council thinks it's a county, and iii) its name comes from the name of the Romano-British tribe which ruled it till it was conquered en masse by Wessex.

Which leaves only one county unaccounted for – Rutland, England's smallest county. Unlike all the other counties, which are in the extreme north, southwest or southeast, it's right in the heart of England, in territory just asking to be a shire, and indeed, all its borders are with shires. Nobody knows why it's a county. Nobody cares. It's so pretty you could forgive it anything. Even if it should really be called Oakhamshire.