



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government

CELEBRATING THE HISTORIC COUNTIES OF ENGLAND

GUIDANCE

Celebrating the Historic Counties of England

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Celebrating the Historic Counties of England

Background

This document summarises why the Government thinks the historic counties should be an important issue for both local and national partners. It sets out the rationale for the promotion of the historic counties, what local authorities can currently do in relation to these activities and collates the relevant guidance and regulations, Ordnance Survey mapping resources (which include ceremonial and historic maps), county flags resources and list of the county days.

Why is this important?

The Government attaches great importance to the history and traditions of this country. Our history helps to define who we are and where we come from, and we are stronger as a nation when we cherish and champion our local traditions. Understanding the past and how we have developed helps us to face the future with confidence and as a shared experience.

The tapestry of England's historic counties is one of the bonds that draws our nation together. The promotion of the historic counties can bring real benefits:

- 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 all seek to strengthen the role that they can play.
- The celebration of the historic counties can equally deliver real benefits for communities in terms of economic development and tourism, providing an important opportunity to make our rich past contribute to a bright future.

That is why the Government has been active in promoting the historic counties of England, and we have already done a number of things to make it easier for partners to celebrate the historic counties. These are summarised and brought together in this document.

The guidance

This guidance is designed to bring together in one place resources to help councils to prepare effective and well-supported local activities to celebrate the historic counties, boost community pride and provide opportunities for learning about local history and traditions.

It is non-statutory guidance, the Government is committed to seeing a greater level of activity to celebrate the historic counties, but believes local approaches must be locally-led if they are to be truly owned by communities and therefore fully effective.

Historical background

The legislation that currently defines counties for the purposes of the administration of local government is set out in the Local Government Act 1972. That legislation abolished previous administrative counties (those established by the Local Government Act 1933). Section 216 of the 1972 Act also substituted the new counties (i.e. those established under the 1972 Act) for counties of any other description for the purposes of commissions of the peace and the law relating to justices of the peace, magistrates' courts, the custos rotulorum, lieutenants, sheriffs and connected matters.

The Act did not specifically abolish historic counties, but they no longer exist for the purposes of the administration of local government, although some historic county areas may be coterminous with non-metropolitan county areas established by the 1972 Act. When the 1972 Act came into effect, it was said of the new councils created:

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

Diversity and inclusion

While some people will feel a strong attachment to the historic counties and the traditions they embody, others in our communities will be less personally connected to those traditions and cultural reference points. Local work to celebrate the historic counties should help people of all nationalities, ethnicities and faiths to understand the history and traditions of the places they live, work and enjoy their leisure time.

Recognising that communities in England are now more diverse than ever, local activities on historic counties should encourage learning, understanding and belonging in diverse, but cohesive and strong communities. That is why we will be working with national partners to encourage people from different backgrounds to look into the history and heritage of the places they are proud to call home.

Resources for celebrating historic counties

Historic county boundary signs

In 2014, planning rules were changed to allow for councils to put up boundary signs marking traditional English counties. The section on ‘advertisements’ in planning guidance issued by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government gives agreement for councils to put up historic counties signs:

“Local authorities may install signs indicating the boundary of a historic or traditional county on their land. Depending on circumstances, such signs may benefit from deemed consent or the authority may be able to grant itself express consent under regulation 15, these powers being exercised as usual in the interests of amenity and public safety. Authorities need to bear in mind how such sign-posting can benefit the local economy and reflect this through the decision-taking process, where such signs are appropriate and locally-supported.”

See paragraph 33 of Advertisement guidance:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/advertisements#Considerations-affecting-amenity>

Road signs marking historic county boundaries

The Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2016 issued by the Department for Transport also allows the signing of historic county boundaries (although these may not be placed as a substitute for administrative boundaries, which remain prescribed).

See paragraph 3.47 of The Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2016 guidance:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/traffic-signs-regulations-and-general-directions-2016-an-overview>

The Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2016:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2016/362/made>

Flying of flags

The Government has amended planning regulations to allow local and county flags to be flown without planning permission. A wider range of flags are now able to be flown without seeking express consent, meaning individuals, businesses and community groups are able fly their chosen flag with pride without incurring costs. The regulations specifically include reference to the historic counties of the United Kingdom.

Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2012/2372/contents/made>

The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government has published a plain English guide to flying flags which provides a brief summary of the new controls over flag flying that were introduced on 12 October 2012.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/flying-flags-a-plain-english-guide>

The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government has also supported The Flag Institute in producing guidance to encourage a new wave of county and other local flags to be designed and flown.

<https://www.flaginstitute.org/wp/british-flags/creating-local-and-community-flags/>

Useful resources on flags

The Flag Institute - The Flag Institute is the world's leading research and documentation centre for flags and flag information. The Flag Institute also maintains and manages the national UK Flag Registry to ensure there is a definitive record of those United Kingdom flags which exist, both nationally and regionally.

<https://www.flaginstitute.org/wp/>

Mapping resources

In 2015, the Government commissioned Ordnance Survey to produce historic and ceremonial county boundary datasets representing those counties based on historic records /mapping circa 1888 and using the primary sources of the Local Government (England and Wales) Act 1888, the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1889 and the Sheriffs Act 1887.

See link to the Ordnance Survey dataset and online map for the historic counties. (The dataset and map also show the ceremonial counties in the UK.)

Dataset: <https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/business-and-government/help-and-support/products/boundary-line.html#Historicdownload>

Interactive map: <https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/business-and-government/counties/>

County days

Bedfordshire Day – 28 November
Buckinghamshire – 28 July
Cornwall – 5 March
County Durham – 20 March
Cumberland – 24 September
Devon – 4 June
Derbyshire – 22 September
Dorset – 1 June
Essex – 26 October
Hampshire – 15 July
Huntingdonshire – 25 April
Kent – 26 May
Lancashire – 27 November
Lincolnshire – 1 October

Middlesex – 16 May
Northamptonshire – 25 October
Northumberland – 5 August
Rutland – 13 September
Somerset – 11 May
Staffordshire – 1 May
Suffolk Day – 21 June
Sussex – 16 June
Westmorland – 29 September
Wiltshire – 5 June
Yorkshire – 1 August
Yorkshire – East Riding – 24 August
Yorkshire – North Riding – 22 August
Yorkshire – West Riding – 29 March

Historic County Flags day – 23 July

Reference – <https://www.flaginstitute.org/wp/calendar/>