

## What place is that then?

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The concept of place is a fundamental one – we all think we know where we live. It's also a very old one and once a place has established its own identity it's remarkably difficult to get rid of it! We can track this looking at the evolution of the units of place and their boundaries.

The structure of local government before the advent of modern elected councils looked like this:

COUNTY  
HUNDRED  
PARISH  
TOWNSHIP

The oldest and fundamental unit is the township. It was the basic unit of a self-sufficient and self-governing community. It was the first unit to be established by Saxon settlers. But the Celts had a similar system ("tref" in Welsh, which means much the same thing) which was probably older and survives extensively in Wales, and in a more cryptic way in SW England. There is archaeological evidence that some units go back to Roman times.

Now as time went on, townships were grouped into hundreds and counties, for the purposes of administering justice and raising men to fight for the king.

The Parish is an ecclesiastical unit, and started out as a group of townships sharing a church. In the 8th century all were large. From the 9th century onwards, and particularly in the 10th-12th centuries, parishes became smaller and ended up as single townships as each local lord built himself a church on his estate. This trend was most pronounced in the south and east of England. In the 13th century, the church clamped down on the power of the lay lords, and the process virtually stopped, fossilising parish boundaries for 600 years. However, since the church had a building and elected officers, the parish became a convenient unit to devolve civil functions to, especially once powers ebbed away from lords of the manor.

Now this looks a simple hierarchy, but it was complicated by:

1. Regional variations in nomenclature
2. Borders of the units were not always co-incident with those at other levels
3. Areas could be common to two more units
4. Detached portions
5. Exceptions – areas which fell outside the hierarchy at one or more levels.

Let's look at these in a bit of detail:

1. Regional variations in nomenclature. In the areas ruled by the Vikings in the 10th-11th century – the East Midlands and Yorkshire - hundreds became known by the Norse word Wapentake. In SW England a township was called a tithing, in some other places it was called a hamlet. So when a Somerset man said he lived "in the tithing of X in the hundred of Y" and a Yorkshireman said he lived "in the township of X and the wapentake of Y", they were both saying the same thing, all though that's now not remotely obvious, and probably never was.

2. Borders not co-incident. This was particularly true for parishes, which commonly straddled county borders.

3. Common areas. Land which belonged jointly to two or more units. This was widespread at parish and township level. It included heath, moor land and water meadow.

4. Detached bits. This was widespread at all levels. In England those at county level existed before the Norman conquest, although none matched the patchwork effect of the two counties of Ross and Cromarty in Scotland, created in the 17th Century.

For townships and parishes there were four stages of detachment:

1. A parish or township could have started out with detached portions when it was created
2. For parishes, the clampdown on new parishes by the church in the 13th century sometimes left townships cut off from their mother parish by a township that had become a parish of its own. This is common in Somerset.
3. The Black Death. It killed off half the peasants, and those left were demanding more rights and proper wages. Landlords took to sheep to make money. Common land – temporarily un-needed by the reduced population – was enclosed and split between the parishes and townships – to our eyes in an irregular way
4. Parliamentary enclosure in the 18th & 19th centuries. This was the same idea as before but the division of land was much more regular.
5. Exceptions. These could happen at any level. For example the New Forest was a hundred in the county of Hampshire with no parishes or townships.

The exceptions looked like this

Unit	Exception
COUNTY	County corporate
HUNDRED	Liberty
PARISH	Extra-parochial place
TOWNSHIP	(no name)

These exceptions often arose when a place got a special exemption. For example, the merchants of mediaeval Bristol found it most inconvenient that their city straddled two counties – Somerset and Gloucestershire – and was consequently administered from Taunton and Gloucester. In 1373 King Edward III granted Bristol the status of a separate county in exchange for a large contribution to the costs of the war with France, and Bristol became a County Corporate.

Most liberties probably came about in the same way. Extra-parochial places were a wider type of exception, broadly falling into the following classes:

- Royal Forests. All the large ones – New Forest, Forest of Dean, Exmoor
- Royal castles
- Cathedral closes
- some monastic buildings in boroughs and cities
- land reclaimed from the foreshore (the parish structure stopped at High Water Mark until 1868 – except in Orkney and Shetland where old Norse land law survived)
- off shore islands and other bits that never made it into the parochial structure or that managed to escape

Confused? I hope so! If not, you haven't been paying attention!

But you'll see that as time went by things kept getting more complicated.

Not until the 19th century was there any effort to clear up the mess. In 1844 work was started on the detached parts of counties: a process that took a 130 years for the last bits of Worcs. and Flint weren't eliminated until 1974.

The trouble was there were vested interests in maintaining the status quo. A bill to end Extra-parochial places was introduced in 1836 but defeated in the commons. An 1857 Act to do the same was passed but completely ineffective. Not until 1868 were they finally turned into "civil parishes". As such they lingered on: York Castle didn't become part of the city of York until 1996; about the same time as the Cathedral Close of St. David's finally ceased to be a separate civil parish from the rest of our smallest city. St. Michael's Mount in Cornwall is still a separate civil parish. And Middle and Inner Temple in London are still extra-parochial liberties outside all modern local government structures.

The biggest change came in 1883 when all detached areas that were completely surrounded by another parish were incorporated into the surrounding parish. Thousands of detached bits disappeared literally overnight. Tidying up has continued ever since, but still ancient place units and special rights cling on to their existence.

So, what's the relevance to us today?

#### 1. Locating Old Records.

As a council, we need to locate old records for all kinds of reasons. These include evidence that a piece of land is historically associated with a property, that a lane is a highway, or that someone lived in a certain place at a certain time. County record offices have masses of information that can help us but without knowing which historic unit a place was in, you will have little chance of finding the information you need.

For this reason I ended up digitising the boundaries of the parishes and townships of Somerset – something every council should do. If you're in the north, Ordnance Survey will have done all the hard work for you and published it on their 6":1 mile maps. In Somerset, as in much of the south, the OS 6" maps date after the big clean-up of 1883 and other sources need to be consulted – 1:2500 maps, OS boundary records in the NRO at Kew, tithe maps, parliamentary enclosure awards and estate maps.

#### 2. Defining places and localities

A second use is in defining the extent of a place locality. People's ideas of the place where they live are both strong and fuzzy. A historical boundary can give an objective position for an otherwise subjective concept. While modern development means that won't always work, it can save a lot of arguments about where one place begins and another ends.

#### 3. BS7666

Anyone who is a gazetteer custodian will tell you that the concept of a locality is a tricky one. The BS7666 approach makes it a division of a "town" to be used where to make the address un-ambiguous. It's a top-down approach. As you'll see from what I've said, this is at odds with the whole concept of place in Britain which had been a bottom-up approach. Local government has essentially been about townships (and their modern successors, civil parishes). All the higher units – hundreds, poor law unions, highway boards, sanitary districts, and modern local authorities – are aggregations of townships. Local government re-organisation has largely been about re-clustering existing small units. Look at my authority, B&NES: although created in 1996, most of its boundaries are much older, many dating back to Saxon times.

I would thus argue that BS7666 is fundamentally wrong. The basic unit should be the lowest unit (the "locality" in BS7666 terminology). By clustering them together you can make up larger units – "towns" (if you need them), districts, counties, unitaries. Until we grasp this fact, the arguments about how we record "place" in the NLPG and NSG are never likely to be resolved.

### Background Reading

- Historic Parishes of England and Wales. Roger J.P. Kain and Richard R. Oliver. University of Essex. 2001.
- The Parish Churches of Medieval England. Colin Platt. Chancellor Press 1981.
- The Medieval Landscape of Wessex. Ed Michael Aston & Carenza Lewis. Oxbow Monograph 46. 1994.

### Useful websites

- [www.old-maps.co.uk/](http://www.old-maps.co.uk/) Landmark's site allowing you to browse old maps
- <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/map.aspx> More old maps to look at
- <http://www.genuki.org.uk> Genealogy website with masses of information about places and their history