

**New Columnist!**



**Caroline Gurney**

# ENGLISH COUNTIES

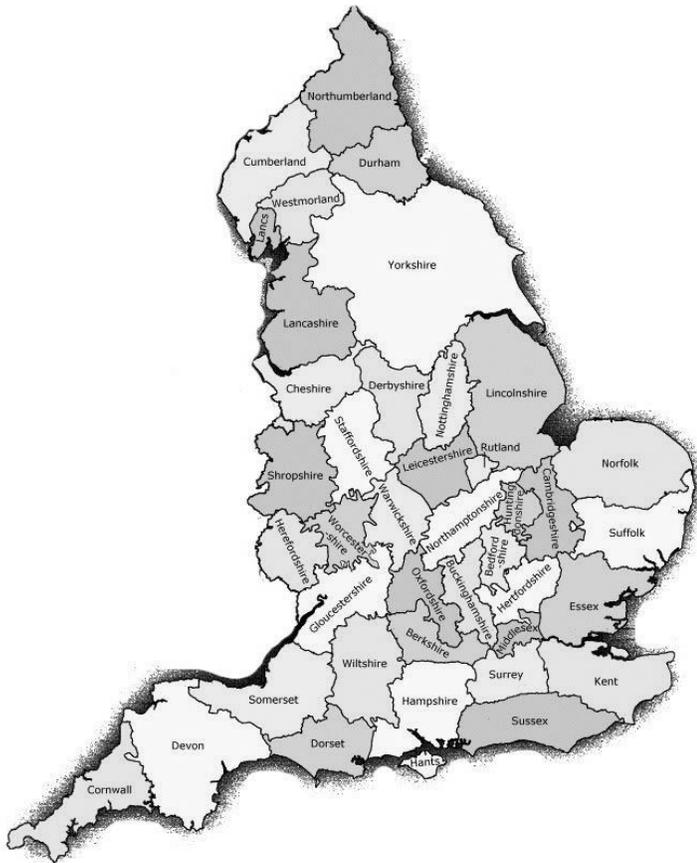
Administrative units called *shires* were first established by the Anglo-Saxons in Wessex in the 8th century. By the 10th century they had spread to most of England, including the Danelaw, the northern and eastern areas controlled by the Danes. After the Norman Conquest these administrative units were known by the French word *comté*, meaning earldom, from which the English

Some county names, such as Kent, never had the suffix -shire. It was generally used where there was a possibility of confusion with the name of a town, such as Bedford and Bedfordshire. Where that is not the case, it has gradually been dropped from some county names, such as Dorset, but not others, such as Berkshire. Durham is unique in having the county distinguished from the city by the name County Durham. It is the only English county for which it is correct to add the word County to the name, but even this usage is dying out.

Several county names contain contractions, such as "Hamp," from Southampton, in Hampshire and "Shrop," from the original Anglo-Saxon name for Shrewsbury, in Shropshire. Both these county names were further abbreviated to "Soton" and "Salop" (a Norman corruption of the Anglo-Saxon name for Shrewsbury), whilst Oxfordshire was abbreviated to "Oxon," a shortened form of its Latin name.

Between 1132 and 1622, starting with London, 18 cities and towns were granted the status of *counties corporate*, giving them administrative independence from their geographical counties. In 1889, 47 *administrative counties* were created as the basis for new county councils, with some of the original counties split between two or three councils. Sixty-one *county boroughs* were also created, adding towns and cities with a population over 50,000 to the old counties corporate.

The boundaries between these areas shifted considerably as a result of population changes. Further local government reorganisation since 1963 has created and abolished new administrative entities such as Greater London and Avon (around Bristol); abolished



Map of the Historic Counties of England  
©Association of British Counties

word *county* is derived. Five new counties were created in the 12th century, bringing the total number to 39.

and resurrected Rutland; subsumed Middlesex into London; and Cumberland and Westmorland into Cumbria. Different definitions of counties have also been used for the appointment of Lord Lieutenants and High Sheriffs for ceremonial purposes. Since 1997 there have been 48 of these *ceremonial counties*.

The 39 original counties still exist, however, and are referred to as *historic counties*. The convention in English genealogy has been to use these historic counties, plus the City of London, to record geographical locations. So, events in Bristol are recorded as taking place in Gloucestershire or Somerset, depending on the parish, rather than in

meaning a third part, so there were North, East, and West Ridings but no South. Lincolnshire was divided into three *parts*, Lindsey, Kesteven, and Holland, and Lindsey was further subdivided into North, South, and West Ridings. Two southern counties were similarly subdivided. Kent was organised into five *lathes* and Sussex into six *rapes*.

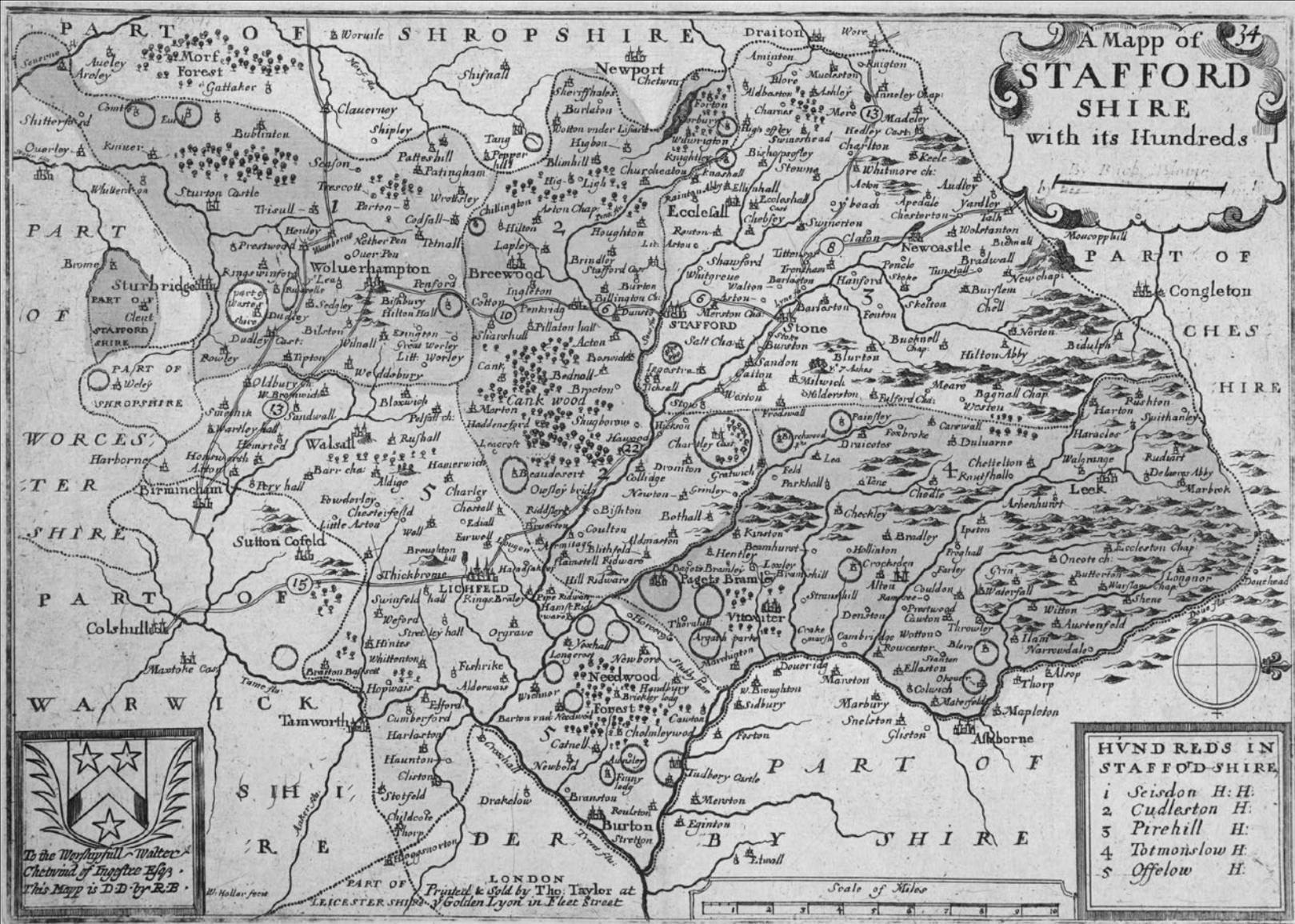
The Anglo-Saxon counties, lathes, and rapes were divided into *hundreds* from the 10th century onwards. In Cornwall the hundreds were originally known as shires and several, therefore, have names which end in -shire. In the Danelaw the counties, ridings, and parts were divided into *wapentakes*, some of which

COUNTY	CODE	COUNTY	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
Bedfordshire	BDF	Hampshire	HAM	Oxfordshire	OXF
Berkshire	BRK	Herefordshire	HEF	Rutland	RUT
Buckinghamshire	BKM	Hertfordshire	HRT	Shropshire	SAL
Cambridgeshire	CAM	Huntingdonshire	HUN	Suffolk	SFK
Cheshire	CHS	Kent	KEN	Somerset	SOM
Cornwall	CON	Lancashire	LAN	Surrey	SRY
Cumberland	CUL	Leicestershire	LEI	Sussex	SSX
Derbyshire	DBY	Lincolnshire	LIN	Staffordshire	STS
Devon	DEV	Middlesex	MDX	Warwickshire	WAR
Dorset	DOR	Northumberland	NBL	Westmorland	WES
Durham	DUR	Norfolk	NFK	Wiltshire	WIL
Essex	ESS	Northamptonshire	NTH	Worcestershire	WOR
Gloucestershire	GLS	Nottinghamshire	NTT	Yorkshire	YKS

the county corporate of Bristol or its administrative successors. Back in the 1970s Dr. Colin Chapman devised three letter codes for the counties, which are often used in genealogy as abbreviations for their full names.

Counties were divided into smaller administrative units in a variety of different ways. In the largest county, Yorkshire, the word *riding* was used for the first level of subdivision. It is derived from the Norse *thriding*,

later came to be known as hundreds. Lincolnshire had *wapentakes* and *sokes*. In Cumberland, Durham, Northumberland, and Westmorland the county divisions were known as *wards*. The size of these subdivisions varied considerably. Huntingdonshire had only four hundreds, whilst Hampshire had forty. Whatever their name, they were all used for administrative, judicial, military, and taxation purposes. They had their own courts and were the basis for organising hearth tax returns, muster rolls, militia lists,



Map of the Hundreds of Staffordshire, c.1650.

and the 1841 census. The last of their functions were not formally abolished until the 20th century.

Hundreds, wapentakes, sokes, and wards, in their turn, were made up of a number of ecclesiastical *parishes*. These also served as administrative units and formed the basis for later *civil parishes*. Parishes were further divided into *tithings*, which were based on the Anglo-Saxon grouping of ten households for law and order purposes. In different parts of England the word *division* was used for either a grouping of hundreds or a subdivision of a hundred. Another term for the latter unit was *half hundred*. Areas not subject to the jurisdiction of the sheriff of the county were known as *liberties* and places described as *extra-parochial* were not

**BELVOIR, co. Leicester and Lincoln.**

P. T. Grantham (110) 7 m. WSW. Pop. 88.  
An extra-parochial liberty, partly in the hundred of Framland, county of Leicester, and partly in the soke of Grantham, parts of Kesteven, county of Lincoln. Here is

**BONINGTON, co. Kent.**

P. T. Ashford (53) 6½ m. SE b S. Pop. 152.  
A parish, partly within the liberty of Romney Marsh, and partly within the lower half hundred of Street, lathe of Shepway; living,

**DENWICK, co. Northumberland.**

P. T. Alnwick (308) 1½ m. E b N.  
Pop. with Pa.  
A township in the parish of Alnwick and south division of Bambrough ward.

**EMSWELL, E. R. co. York.**

P. T. Great Driffield (196) 2 m. W.  
Pop. with Kellethorpe 93.  
A township in the parish of Driffield, an Bainton Beacon division of the wapentak of Harthill.

**ENCOMBE, co. Dorset.**

P. T. Kingston (117) 1½ m. Pop. with Pa.  
A hamlet in the parish of Kingston and hundred of Cogdean, Shaston division, seated

**EWEN, co. Wilts.**

P. T. Malmesbury (96) 7 m. NE b N.  
Pop. with Pa.  
A tithing in the parish of Kemble and hundred of Malmesbury.

**EWHURST, co. Sussex.**

P. T. Robert's Bridge (50) 4 m. E b N.  
Pop. 1225.  
A parish in the hundred of Staple, rape of Hastings; living, a rectory in the archdean-

Examples of county subdivisions from Gorton's *Topographical Dictionary of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1833.

part of any ecclesiastical parish. Some places straddled more than one jurisdiction and even more than one county.

Finally, 26 of the 39 historic counties had *exclaves*, or detached parts, which were surrounded by another county. Most exclaves were very close to the county boundary. For example, less than a mile of Bedfordshire separated Huntingdonshire from its exclave parish of Swineshead. However, parts of the parishes of Shinfield,

Sonning, and Wokingham in Berkshire were exclaves of Wiltshire, some 30 miles to the west. Boundaries were substantially realigned in 1844, eliminating most of the exclaves and transferring a large amount of land from Durham to Northumberland. But exclaves remained in nine counties and there was a significant adjustment of the boundaries of Warwickshire, Worcestershire, and Gloucestershire as late as 1931. 🌀



Map showing the Huntingdonshire exclave of Swineshead.

**Caroline Gurney, MLitt, QG**, is a professional genealogist, historian, and speaker. Based near Bristol, her clients include individuals researching their family histories, family history societies, authors, collectors, businesses, newspapers, and TV companies. Caroline specialises in breaking down genealogy “brick walls,” tracing living people (including DNA analysis), house histories, research in the West of England, and Jewish research. She recently graduated with a Master’s degree in Family and Local History from the University of Dundee and is about to embark on research for a PhD at the University of Bristol, studying Bristol’s Jewish community in the 18th and 19th centuries. Caroline is a member of the Register of Qualified Genealogists.