
From very early times, as soon as a land had inhabitants, names were of necessity given to places and to persons, in order to distinguish one place from another and one person from another.

In many cases the original names have passed away and others have taken their place. A successful invasion, for example, might sweep away inhabitants, names, and even language, and the new comers would proceed to give fresh names to the places they had captured. Our country was once called Albion, the White Island, from its chalk cliffs facing the continent of Europe, but that name is scarcely heard now, and even Britain, another name given to it, is not now used for this particular part of the British islands, but only as a general name embracing more than this island itself. We know it as England, that is Angleland—the land of the Angles or Engles—and we shall see later how this name came to be applied to the country.

Names of places are very often closely connected with those of persons, sometimes a person is named after a place, sometimes a place after a person. In early days an individual had but one name; a man named Henry,
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for example, might leave his native village of Ellington, and would become Henry of Ellington, and hence Henry Ellington. Or sometimes the man’s trade gave him his name—surname as we call it—and John the smith, and Philip the tailor, became known as John Smith and Philip Taylor. Or perhaps the name came in a different way. William, whose father was named John, was spoken of as William, the son of John, soon abbreviated to William Johnson. Names of places, too, were often very appropriate and conveyed a meaning, thus “ey” was an old word of Scandinavian origin, meaning “island,” so Ramsey conveys to us the fact that Ramsey is, or once was, an island. Similarly the ending of a name in “ford” suggests that the place was near a fordable river—thus Hemingford is the ford near which the Hemmings or sons of Hemma lived. “Den” or “dene” means a hollow, so we find Denton in a hollow.

Names of places, then, are often very closely connected with those of persons, and this is the case as regards the name of Huntingdon. There can be little doubt that one Hunta, a hunter of such note that he had acquired his name from his skill in that calling, had possessions and his residence at or near the site of the present town of Huntingdon. In time, the hill on which stood Hunta’s residence came to be called Huntandun, or Hunta’s Hill; the name gradually taking a wider signification and being applied to the whole county which we now know as Huntingdonshire. Who Hunta was or whence he came is entirely unknown, but as he was a man of sufficient note to give his name not only to his residence but to the
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district round it, he may have ruled or owned that part of England which is now Huntingdonshire.

To-day we have England divided into counties, and it will be noticed that the names of some of these end in “shire”—as Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire—and some, as Kent and Essex, do not. We naturally ask the reason for this difference. Let us consider the meanings of the two words “shire” and “county.” England was not in early days one country under a single king, but consisted of many small kingdoms, and even the boundaries of some of these were often changed as one kingdom or another obtained ascendancy. The kingdoms themselves were frequently subdivided, the subdivisions being ruled by ealdormen or earls under the king; these subdivisions were called “shares” or “shires,” that is, parts of a kingdom, so we have Huntingdonshire, the “shire” or “share” under Hunta. The counties of Kent and Essex, however, are the original undivided kingdoms; they are not “shires” or “shares” “shorn off” (for the word is the same) from any larger dominions.

After the Norman Conquest, Counts were appointed to govern parts of England. The district governed by a Count was called his county; this frequently corresponded exactly with the area of a dispossessed Saxon Earl, so the district previously called a shire now came to be called a county, and this latter name applied also to other areas, as to Kent. In time such divisions came to be called county or shire indiscriminately.

Alfred the Great is usually credited with the division of England into counties, but that has been a very gradual
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work. Even at the present day changes are being made in the boundaries of counties; that of Huntingdonshire has been changed, and a new County of London has been formed.

It is worth noting how compact the kingdom of East Anglia was—almost a square—and how ready the early inhabitants were to take advantage of natural boundaries. The northern and eastern limits of East Anglia were formed by the sea, and the invaders, having occupied the seaboard, pushed up the Ouse on the west and the Stour on the south, advancing as far inland as possible and gradually extending till all South Hunts was occupied, availing themselves, in short, of much the same natural boundaries as did their predecessors, the Iceni.

It is interesting to note, too, that many of our parishes are bounded by streams, large or small, for parishes were formed out of manors, portions of property held by some individual owner, who had as the boundary of his estate some immovable and natural landmark. The Saxon earl's estate or manor was a kingdom on a small scale.

A glance at a map of the United States will show that natural boundaries had little weight with those who formed the plan of the later States. It is true that these are sometimes bounded by rivers or mountains, but far oftener by straight lines arbitrarily drawn, in accordance with smaller subdivisions, which are always, where possible, rectangular. We can see, in short, that these countries have not grown slowly and naturally, as has been the case in England, but have been arbitrarily and simultaneously parcelled out by the hand of man.
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2. General Characteristics of the County. Its Position.

Huntingdonshire is an inland county in the south-eastern midlands of England, lying south-west of the Wash, from which its nearest point is distant about 30 miles. King’s Lynn is the nearest seaport. As Huntingdonshire produces neither coal nor iron, its manufactures are naturally on a small scale, and the energies of its inhabitants are devoted principally to agriculture. Huntingdonshire was anciently forest, that is uncleared land, and so specially suited for hunting; here and there would be clearings with small cultivated spots—the homes of a sparse population. Its deforestation took place in the reign of Edward I, and doubtless had the effect of increasing the productiveness of the county; indeed in the early part of the nineteenth century much corn was exported, and, as the fen drainage became more and more effective, additional land was brought into cultivation, till the agricultural produce of the county has become much above the average in proportion to its acreage.

The southern and western portions of Huntingdonshire present just such a picture as one may see in many midland counties of England—pleasantly diversified hill and dale, with no hills of remarkable height and no very deep valleys, but each valley with its stream making its way to the Ouse or the Nene. This part of the county is locally known as the “highland,” in contradistinction
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to the fen, which will be mentioned later. Part of the highland is arable and produces the usual crops, part is devoted to dairy farming, but as we reach the northern part of the county we find a soil not so good as in the southern part, and the tall chimneys of the brickyards tell us of the industry that is carried on in this part of the county.

The Mere Mill, River Nene

There is a great change when we enter the north-eastern portion of the county. As we approach it from the hills on a bright summer day, there appears what looks like an absolutely level plain, dotted with a few homesteads surrounded by clumps of trees, and here and there a cottage, while the straight dykes, cut beside the
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Fields, in which the water glistens in the sunlight, make it look like some floor ruled with silver lines. Once we are in it, we can fancy ourselves in Holland; the roads are usually perfectly straight for miles, with a ditch—or dyke as it is termed—on either side and every field is bounded in the same way by a perfectly straight dyke on each side. These are all part of the system of drainage, all those on each level being connected, and each level with a higher or lower one. Hedges there are practically none; dykes take their place and serve the double purpose of draining the land and dividing the fields.

In the fen is very little grass land, the soil being too light for pasture, but abundant crops of mangolds, celery, potatoes, and other roots are grown, and these often reach a large size—while heavy wheat crops with long straw alternate with the above.


Huntingdonshire is one of the smallest counties in England, Rutland and the old county of Middlesex alone being smaller. It is about 30 miles in length from north to south and 23 in breadth from east to west, and is approximately diamond-shaped, but in the northern part is a considerable projection westward which makes the west side very irregular. Northamptonshire forms the northern and north-western boundary, Bedfordshire the south-western, and Cambridgeshire the north-eastern, eastern, and south-eastern.
SIZE SHAPE BOUNDARIES

Few counties have more irregular boundaries than Huntingdonshire, and few are so little dependent upon natural features to form them. Starting from Peterborough which stands at the junction of the three shires of Northampton, Cambridge, and Huntingdon, and working westward, we find that the river Nene does indeed form the limit of the county for some 12 miles or so, but it ceases to do so at Elton. Here the boundary turns east, formerly passing actually through the house at Elton Hall, though lately it has been slightly shifted. From here its course, though roughly southerly, is extremely irregular. At Covington is the Three Shire Stone, marking the limit of Bedfordshire to the north. From this point the general direction of the boundary is south-eastward. At one time the boundary was complicated still further here by a detached portion—Swineshead, which will be referred to later—lying isolated in Bedfordshire. For about half a mile the Kym, or Kim, forms the limit just below Kimbolton and again for about the same distance in the neighbourhood of St Neots, immediately before its junction with the Great Ouse. Near Waresley the southern limit of the county is reached, and the third side of the diamond is entered upon, the general trend being north-east. At first, however, the line separating the county from Cambridgeshire is extraordinarily sinuous, two portions of the latter projecting as peninsulas far into Huntingdonshire. Reaching Ermine Street the line leads south again along it for a short distance and thus brings in Hilton with its quaint old-world green and curious maze, and crossing the Via
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Devana reaches the Ouse again at Holywell near St Ives. For nearly six miles to the end of the third side of the diamond the river is the boundary until Earith is reached. Here the Bedford River runs in, and here begins the last section running north-east through the great flats of Fenland and hardly passing anything larger than a farm or small hamlet until Peterborough is once more reached.

The Local Government Act of 1888 has made some alterations in county boundaries. By this Act, Swineshead has, for administrative purposes, been transferred to Bedfordshire. Tilbrook has been transferred from Bed-