

1. County and Shire. The word *Middlesex*. Its Origin and Meaning.

Middlesex is the metropolitan county of England, and only Rutland and London are smaller in point of area. For more than one thousand years it contained London, or the greater part of London, and this fact contributed to its wealth and importance. Although the whole of London north of the Thames was taken from Middlesex in 1888, the county is at the present time one of the most populous of English counties; and we shall certainly understand much better the progress and development of England as a whole, if we first carefully study the geography and history of this small, but very important, portion of our land.

In this chapter we will first consider the meanings of the two words, *shire* and *county*, and then endeavour to trace the origin of the county of Middlesex and the meaning of its name. Since the ninth century, and perhaps from an even earlier time, the county, or shire, in England has been the chief unit of local government, in much the same way that the department is regarded in France, the canton in Switzerland, and the state in

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65291-0 - Cambridge County Geographies: Middlesex

G. F. Bosworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

America. Although we now have the two words, shire and county, it is well to remember that before the Norman Conquest the word shire only was used.

We find that the word shire, in the earliest period of our history, simply meant a division, and was thus used to denote the various portions of Cornwall, and the two kingdoms of Kent. As time passed on, however, the word acquired a new meaning, and was applied to any portion that was *shorn* off or cut off from a larger division. The portion cut off was a *share* or *shire*, and hence many of our counties have retained this affix since the settlement of the English in our land.

The word county is of later date and is due to the Norman invaders, who identified the old English *shire* with their own *comitatus*, the district of a *comes* or *count*. And thus it comes about that we use the two words shire and county to denote the larger divisions of our land that were made long ages ago.

The counties of England differ considerably in their origins, and their names are often a key to the right knowledge of their historical development. Such counties as Middlesex, Essex, Kent, and Sussex had a different origin from Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, and Northamptonshire. While the former are probably survivals of early kingdoms, the latter are undoubtedly shares, or shires, of the once important kingdom of Mercia. We shall see in the third chapter that, for more than a thousand years, Middlesex kept its name and boundaries, and it was not till 1888 that a great change was made in its extent. It is the knowledge of such facts as these that makes the

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-65291-0 - Cambridge County Geographies: Middlesex
G. F. Bosworth
Excerpt
[More information](#)

COUNTY AND SHIRE

3

study of county history and geography so interesting, for here we find an important clue to the continuity of our history, and to the growth and development of our local institutions.

It is rather difficult to trace the origin of some of our counties and the meaning of their names, but there is not much difficulty with regard to Middlesex. Here we have a county with a distinctly English name, which was derived from the Saxons who dwelt in this part of England. The Saxons were perhaps the strongest of the various invaders of our country in the fifth century, and they were distinguished by the kingdoms they formed along our eastern and southern shores. Thus we read of the East Saxons, South Saxons, West Saxons, and so on, while the other invaders, the Angles and Jutes, settled elsewhere. There is no evidence that Middlesex was originally a separate kingdom, and we may say with a considerable amount of certainty that it formed part of the kingdom of Essex, which at its first settlement included the modern county of that name, the present Middlesex, and possibly the whole of Hertfordshire. The name of Middlesex seems not to be mentioned by Bede, but it occurs in a charter of 704, where it is called *provincia*, and also (with the same title) in one of Ethelbald's charters. It is mentioned again in 767, and after that date it is of fairly frequent occurrence. From our scanty knowledge of the formation of the early English kingdoms, we may come to the conclusion that Middlesex represents the territory which fell to one of the kings when the original kingdom of Essex was divided. This

I—2

came about at some time in the eighth century, and so we can understand why Middlesex received its name. It was the territory between, or in the middle of, the East Saxon kingdom and the West Saxon kingdom, which were conterminous. Perhaps Middlesex was separated from the East Saxon kingdom and made into a county, owing to the growth of London, which had been the capital of Essex. There is another point of interest that deserves our notice in this chapter, for the East Saxon kingdom was also the see of the bishop of London, and so it continued till quite recent times, when, owing to the growth of population, Essex and Hertfordshire were annexed to the see of Rochester, and afterwards to that of St Albans. Middlesex, however, remains in the diocese of London, another interesting fact which links the county with the earliest period of our history.

Thus we may say that the modern county of Middlesex grew out of the East Saxon kingdom, which was formed in a district that had been settled by a Celtic tribe known as the Trinobantes, or Trinovantes, who were living in Britain when the Romans first landed in our country.

2. General Characteristics — Position and Natural Conditions.

Middlesex is a small inland county on the left bank of the Thames, in the south-east of England. It is the metropolitan county of England, and as such occupies

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65291-0 - Cambridge County Geographies: Middlesex

G. F. Bosworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

5

a somewhat anomalous position, for it contained within its old borders practically the whole of London north of the Thames, which was severed from it by the Local Government Act of 1888.

As we shall find in later chapters, Middlesex has suffered from the overpowering influence of London. It is a matter of history that London was founded long before Middlesex, and from the time of King John to 1889 one of the London sheriffs acted as sheriff of Middlesex. It was not till that year that Middlesex had its own High Sheriff, and even now it can hardly be said to have its own county town. Brentford is sometimes mentioned as the capital, but the county business is practically carried on in London. The County Council sits at the Middlesex Guildhall in Westminster, and there also the Quarter Sessions are held. In another way, too, the position of Middlesex is anomalous, for it is the only county that has not its own constabulary. Here again it is dominated by London, the whole county being served by the Metropolitan Police.

We shall understand the position of Middlesex much better if we realise from the outset that it has always been considered as dependent on London, or as of some use to the metropolis. From the earliest time all the great roads ran through Middlesex to London Stone, and the great forest of the county was the hunting-ground of Londoners. Even when the forest had been cleared away, the villages that succeeded it were the sources of supply for the needs of the ever-increasing London. It is not too much to say that corporate life has been crushed out of this county,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65291-0 - Cambridge County Geographies: Middlesex

G. F. Bosworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)



Stone at Staines
[*Marking the western boundary of the jurisdiction of the City of London on the River Thames*]

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65291-0 - Cambridge County Geographies: Middlesex

G. F. Bosworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

7

owing to the greatness of London ; not a single place has grown into real importance, nor is there outside of London a building of first-rate importance with the exception of Hampton Court Palace. The villages on the Thames, such as Teddington and Twickenham, early began to increase in size because of the convenience of their position by the river and consequent accessibility from London. It is only since the extension of the railway and tramway systems that the villages to the north and north-west of London have grown in size, and their growth has been almost entirely due to the building of houses for the use of Londoners.

Two centuries ago it was written that Middlesex "is in effect but the suburbs at large of London, replenished with the retiring houses of the gentry and citizens thereof," and to-day these words are even more true when we find the great increase in population in the suburbs bordering on London. Places like Tottenham, Edmonton, Enfield, Willesden, Hornsey, Wood Green, Acton, Chiswick, and Ealing were quite country villages a hundred, or even less years ago, while to-day they have ever-increasing populations and are almost entirely dependent on London. Thus we find large tracts of Middlesex being suburbanised, and whenever the boundaries of the county of London are re-adjusted, Middlesex is bound to be the loser, as it was in 1888. Since 1901, the chief agency at work in the development of Middlesex has been the electric tramway systems, which now run along some of the main high roads of the county in the direction of Hounslow, Uxbridge, Enfield, Edgware, Tottenham, and Finchley.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65291-0 - Cambridge County Geographies: Middlesex

G. F. Bosworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

As an agricultural county Middlesex is of some importance, for about three-fifths of its area are under crops and grass. The greater portion of this acreage is used for pasturage and dairy farming, while increasing attention is being paid to fruit-growing to meet the needs of the metropolis, where the Middlesex farmers and market-gardeners find a ready market for their produce.

Middlesex has little claim to rank as an industrial county. We have only to remember that in 1911, 1,078,334 people were living in urban districts near London, while the rural population was 48,131, in order to understand how Middlesex is completely overshadowed by the importance and proximity of London. On the other hand, industries are rapidly springing up at such centres as Willesden, Acton, and Hayes, and also along the Lea valley.

Fortunately, however, there are parts of Middlesex which retain some of their old characteristics. A recent writer on this county says that, "though the great cornland of Middlesex has largely become pasture or market-gardens, and old-fashioned farmsteads are few and far between, there are still some rustic 'bits' to be seen away from the tram-dominated highways." The same writer also remarks that "if in Middlesex we have a district lacking any of the more striking beauties even of some of its nearest neighbours, we have one that can vie with the best of them in the variety and multiplicity of its associations with men and events." There is scarcely a parish in the county without its memories of some one who made himself famous in the great metropolis, and

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65291-0 - Cambridge County Geographies: Middlesex

G. F. Bosworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS 9

we shall find, in a later chapter, that Middlesex is particularly rich in its associations with poets, from Milton and Pope down to Keats and Tennyson. In his *Autobiography*, Leigh Hunt prided himself on being born in the “sweet village of Southgate”; and rather more than a century ago, he wrote, “Middlesex in general is a scene



Shepperton

of trees and meadows, of ‘greenery’ and nestling cottages; and Southgate is a prime specimen of Middlesex.”

It has been remarked that the proximity of Middlesex to London has kept it largely free of the horrors of battle, and the same association has made it in the past a place for the stately homes of princes and noblemen, of statesmen and city merchants. There is no doubt, too,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65291-0 - Cambridge County Geographies: Middlesex

G. F. Bosworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

that its nearness to the capital has had an important share in making its open spaces famous in the annals of high-waysmen.

It is not possible to claim that Middlesex is a beautiful county in the same sense as Surrey, yet there are picturesque spots and beautiful villages. The Thames valley is delightful at Twickenham and Teddington, and in the higher reaches at Shepperton and Laleham. The views across the Colne from Harefield are typical pastoral scenes, while the stretches of undulating country in the Stanmore district are altogether pleasant. The most picturesque villages are Ruislip, Ickenham, Northolt, Harefield, and Cranford, and perhaps the most famous view is obtainable from Harrow churchyard. Here on the top of Harrow Hill, at a height of rather more than 400 feet, the view is said to extend into thirteen counties. The view from the churchyard has been made famous for all time by Byron, who wrote to his publisher, Murray, in 1822, "there is a spot in the churchyard near the footpath, on the brow of the hill, looking towards Windsor, and a tomb under a large tree where I used to sit for hours when a boy. This was my favourite spot."

3. Size. Shape. Boundaries.

We have seen in the previous chapters how Middlesex came to be a county, and we have also learnt something of its general characteristics. Now we are in a position to consider its size and shape, and with the help of a good