1. County and Shire. The Name Devonshire.

The word "shire," which is probably derived, like "shear" and "share," from an Anglo-Saxon root meaning "to cut," was at one time used in a wider sense than it is at present, and was formerly applied to a division of a county or even of a town. Thus, there were once six small "shires" in Cornwall.

The word shire was in use at the time of King Ina, and occurs in the code of laws which that monarch drew up about the year 709; but the actual division of England into shires was a gradual process, and was not complete at the Norman Conquest. Lancashire, for example, was not constituted a shire until the twelfth century. Alterations in the extent and limits of some of the counties are, indeed, still being made; and in the case of Devonshire the boundaries have been changed several times within the memory of persons still living.

The object of thus dividing up the country was partly military and partly financial. Every shire was bound to provide a certain number of armed men to fight
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the king’s battles, and was also bound to contribute a
certain sum of money towards his income and the expenses
of the state; and in each district a “shire-reeve”—or
sheriff, as we call the officer now—was appointed by the
Crown to see that the people did their duty in both
respects. The shire was a Saxon institution. County
is a Norman word, which came into use after the
Conquest, when the government of each shire was
entrusted to some powerful noble, often a count, a title
which originally meant a companion of the King.

It has been suggested that the reason why the names
of some counties end or may end in “shire,” while in
other cases this syllable is never used, is that the former
were “shorn off” from some larger district, while the
latter represent entire ancient kingdoms or tribal divisions.
According to this theory, Yorkshire is a “shire”
because it originally formed part of the kingdom of
Northumbria; and Kent is not a “shire” because it
practically represents the ancient kingdom of the Cantii.
The form “Kent-shire” is, however, found in a record
of the time of Athelstan.

In the case of our own county both forms are in use,
and we say either “Devon” or “Devonshire,” although
the two names are not exactly interchangeable. Thus,
while we generally talk of “Red Devon” cattle, we
always speak of “Devonshire” cream. “Devon,” which
is the older form, may be derived either from Dumnonii,
the name given by Ptolemy, an Alexandrian geographer
of the second century, to the inhabitants of the south-west
of Britain, perhaps from a Celtic word Dumnon, “people”
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—or it may come from the old Welsh word *Dyfnaint* or *Dyfnaint*, “the land of the deeps,” that is to say, of deep valleys or deep seas. To the Saxon settlers the people they found in possession of the district were *Defn-sætan* or “dwellers in Devon”; and in time these settlers called themselves *Defenas*, or “men of Devon.” In the Exeter Domesday Book—the Norman survey of the five southwestern counties, completed probably before 1086—the name of the county is given as *Devensesiria*. It would appear, then, that the Britons called their province “Devon,” and that the Saxons called it “Devonshire.” It is characteristic of the peaceable nature of the Saxon occupation that the two names, like the two nations, seem to have quietly settled down side by side.

It is believed that it was Alfred the Great who marked out the border-line between Devon and Somerset; and it was undoubtedly Athelstan who, after his victory over the West Welsh, made the Tamar the boundary between Devon and Cornwall.
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2. General Characteristics.

Devonshire is a county in the extreme south-west of England, occupying the greater part of the peninsula between the English and Bristol Channels, and having a coast-line both on the south and on the north. Situated thus, on two seas, and possessing, especially on its southern sea-board, a remarkable number of bays and estuaries, it has always been noted as a maritime county. And although many of its harbours have, in the lapse of ages, become silted up with sand or shingle, and are now of comparatively slight importance, it has one great seaport, which, while only thirtieth in rank among British commercial ports, is the greatest naval station in the Empire.

The county has in the past been famous for its cloth-weaving and for its tin and copper-mining, but these industries are now greatly decayed, and the main occupation of the people is agriculture, to which both the soil and the climate are particularly favourable.

A special characteristic of Devonshire is its scenery, which is so striking that it is very generally considered the most beautiful county in England; while there are probably very many who regard its mild and genial, equable and health-giving climate as more noteworthy still. It is a remarkably hilly country, and it also possesses not only many rivers, but a great number of broad river estuaries. Another characteristic with which every visitor to the district is struck is the redness which distinguishes
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its soil, its southern cliffs, and its famous breed of cattle, which is not less noticeable than the soft and pleasant dialect, with its close sound of the letter “u” so typical both of Devon and of West Somerset.

Another characteristic of the people has always been their loyalty to their sovereign, to their county, and to each other. Devon is proverbial, like Cornwall and Yorkshire, for the clannishness of its inhabitants. It is a land, too, where superstition dies hard. Belief in pixies—fairies, as they are called elsewhere—in witches and witchcraft, in whist-hounds and other weird and uncanny creatures, and in portents and omens, still lingers, especially on Dartmoor.
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Dartmoor itself, with its wild and picturesque scenery, its unrivalled wealth of prehistoric antiquities, and its singular geological structure, forms one of the most striking features of the county, and one to which there is no parallel in England. The marine zoology of Devonshire is more interesting than that of any other English county, and nowhere else in the island has there been discovered clearer evidence of the great antiquity of man than was found in Kent's Cavern and other Devonshire caves.

Above all things, its position has made Devonshire a native land of heroes. Very few other counties have produced so many men of mark, so many men of enterprise
and daring. Certainly no other has played a greater part in the expansion of England. From Devonshire came not only some of the most distinguished seamen of the Golden Age of Elizabeth, some of the most skilful and daring of her naval captains, but some of the earliest and most famous of our explorers; the founder of the first English colony, the first Englishman to sail the polar sea, the first Englishman to circumnavigate the globe.


Devonshire, which occupies rather more than one-twenty-second of the whole area of England and Wales, is one of the largest counties in the British Islands, being exceeded in size only by Yorkshire and Lincoln in England, by Inverness and Argyll in Scotland, and by Cork in Ireland. Its extreme length from east to west, measured along a horizontal line drawn through the middle of the county, starting at the Dorsetshire border half-way between Lyme Cobb and the Seven Rocks Point, passing close to the city of Exeter, and reaching to the point where the river Ottery enters the county, is 67 miles; exactly the same as that of the county of Somerset. Its greatest breadth, from Countisbury Foreland on the north coast to Prawle Point on the south, is 71 miles. It may be added that a longer east and west line can be drawn only in Yorkshire and Sussex, and a longer meridional line only in Yorkshire and Lincoln. The area of the “Ancient” or “Geographical” county of Devonshire,
SIZE  SHAPE  BOUNDARIES

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according to the revised return furnished by the Ordnance Department, is 1,667,154 acres, or 2605 square miles. Compared with the counties that adjoin it, it is two-and-a-half times the size of Dorset, it is roughly twice as large as Cornwall, and it is more than half as large again as Somerset. It is fifteen times as large as Rutland, it is

Glen Lyn, near Lynmouth

about half the size of Yorkshire, and its area is less than that of Lincolnshire by only 48 square miles.

Although usually said to be irregular in form, the outline of the county has a certain degree of symmetry, being roughly shaped like a life-guardsman’s cuirass, with nearly equal sides, with a small hollow at the top or
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north coast, and a much larger one at the bottom or south coast.

Devonshire, like Kent and Cornwall, is bounded on two sides by the sea, having the Bristol Channel on the north and north-west, and the English Channel on the south. On its western side the river Tamar, with its tributary the Ottery, forms almost the whole of the frontier between it and Cornwall. The eastern and north-eastern border is less definite, but is roughly marked by Exmoor and the Blackdown Hills, which partly separate Devonshire from Somerset. The short length of frontier between Devonshire and Dorsetshire is marked by no natural feature.

No part of Devonshire is now, as was formerly the case, wholly surrounded by any other county. Three of its parishes, however, are partly in Dorset, one is partly in Cornwall, and one, a district of Exmoor containing no houses or inhabitants, is partly in Somerset. Culmstock, which before 1842 was considered to belong to Somerset, although completely islanded in Devon, and Stockland and Dalwood, which were reckoned with Dorset, although they were entirely inside the Devonshire border, have now been formally transferred to this county. On the other hand, Thornecombe and Ford Abbey, which belonged to Devonshire although they were situate in the adjoining county, have been handed over to Dorset. Still later alterations were the transfer of Hawkchurch and Churchstanton from Dorset to Devon in 1896.