

## Where am I? are you searching in the right place?

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**The United Kingdom** (the UK), or to give it its full title, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, is a sovereign state, in other words, it is a political entity with an autonomous government. It is currently made up of Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England, as well as islands that are part of those countries. It does not include the Isle of Man or the Channel Islands, which are self-governed, so are not part of the UK.

**The British Isles** is a geographical but not a political, unit that consists of over 6000 islands, many of which are uninhabited. The Isle of Man, the Channel Islands, the Hebrides, Orkneys, Shetland islands and the Scilly Isles, as well as others, are all part of the British Isles but as we have seen, some but not all, are part of the UK. The British Isles also includes the whole island of Ireland but the Republic of Ireland (Southern Ireland) is a completely separate country. For the purposes of family history research, it is important to remember that this has not always been the case and that for centuries, until 1922, the whole of the island of Ireland was under British rule.

**Great Britain**, sometimes just Britain, is different again. This is a term that refers to the main island that includes Scotland, Wales and England. Although England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales are countries, they are not sovereign states, as although they have devolved governments, they are not fully autonomous.

**Counties** England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are divided into counties. Unlike American counties, these are not referred to as County Surrey, County Kent and so on and never Kent County, Surrey County etcetera. They are counties but that is not part of their name. The exceptions are County Durham in England and the six counties of Northern Ireland, all of which can correctly be referred to with County at the beginning as part of the place name.

Beware of county reorganisation in 1974 and changing county boundaries.

Colin Chapman devised a series of three letter codes for all the counties of the UK.

**Parishes** There is nowhere in Britain that is not part of a parish. These are an ecclesiastical construct. Historic parishes consisted of a church and its surrounding area. Since the Reformation in the sixteenth century, these were Anglican (Church of England) churches. As other denominations sprung up, they may have built places of worship within the Anglican parishes. The term 'parish registers', will normally mean the records of the Anglican church.

Villages frequently clustered round the parish (Anglican) church and would share the parish name. So, as is common, the parish of Tenterden in Kent contains the village of Tenterden and outlying farms and hamlets that were not part of the village of Tenterden but were nonetheless in Tenterden parish. As populations grew, one Anglican church in larger communities was insufficient, so more were built in towns, notably from the 1840s onwards. This created new ecclesiastical parishes, each with their own set of parish registers.

**Settlements** have a hierarchy, based on size and facilities. At the top of the tree are the cities. These used to be places that had a cathedral but more recently, many new cities have been created using other criteria. Next are the towns. Historically, almost all the country was within fifteen miles of a town. This was considered a practical distance for walking to market.

Villages are smaller settlements that, until the early twentieth century, would have been largely self-sufficient and able to provide most services that the inhabitants required for their day to day needs. Hamlets are groups of a small number of dwellings that are too small to be a village and may have few, if any, services or facilities.

Beware of duplicating place names.

**Registration districts.** The registration of births, marriages and deaths began in 1837 in England and Wales, 1855 in Scotland and 1864 in Ireland (with the exception of non-Catholic marriages, which were registered from 1845). The process was administered locally by Superintendent Registrars who were in charge of an administrative area known as a registration district. This was usually a town and the surrounding rural area, although cities might contain several registration districts.

**Poor law unions** were set up in 1834, when the administration of poor relief was taken out of the hands of the parish. Initially, the registration districts used the same boundaries as poor law unions, so you would expect a poor law union to cover a town and the rural hinterland, or a smaller area in a very large settlement. Each poor law union had its own union workhouse. If your ancestors needed poor relief, they would be the responsibility of the workhouse that served the poor law union in which they lived.

**Ecclesiastical jurisdictions**, recognised by the Church of England, are also important. Until 1858, English and Welsh wills were proved in a hierarchy of church courts. If you are looking for a will, you need to know which courts (and there will be more than one) had jurisdiction in the place where your ancestor had property. This means becoming familiar with such things as provinces, archdeaconries and dioceses. There are also ecclesiastical courts known as peculiars, which tended to cover very small areas.

**Manors.** In the Middle Ages, the main unit of local government was the manor and you may find manorial records into the eighteenth century and beyond. Manors are not the same as parishes, although some parishes and manors might share boundaries. If you want to research in these fascinating and useful manorial records, that may hold all sorts of clues and anecdotes about your ancestors, you need to know which manor they lived in. You then need to know the whereabouts of any surviving manorial records. The Manorial Documents Register, accessed via The National Archives website can help here

<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/manor-search>.

**Townlands.** These are geographical areas that you are likely to come across in Ireland and Scotland but also in parts of Northern England. In Ireland, the area covered by a townland was based on the ballyboe (baile bó), or cow townland. This was an area that was sufficient to rear a certain number of cows, so it was not a consistent size, as it would depend on the quality of the land.

A **hundred** is yet another unit of government. Historically it was sufficient land to support a hundred families. A hide supported one family, so one hundred hides was the equivalent of a Hundred. In the north of England you may find the term Ward used instead of Hundred and in areas of strong Danish settlement, notably the eastern counties, you can find wapentake used instead. A tithing was ten hides, or a tenth of a hundred.

**Boroughs.** Historically, these were fortified towns that had been given the right to self-government in certain matters.

This is not an exhaustive guide to the jurisdictions you will contend with when searching for ancestors in the United Kingdom but it should at least make you aware that a sense of place is not straightforward. When our ancestors are elusive, it is very often because we are looking in the wrong place; we just need to be clear what we mean by a place.

Map showing the difference between the United Kingdom, Great Britain and the British Isles

<https://www.britannica.com/place/British-Isles#/media/1/1346048/223620>

Chapman Codes <https://www.lochinpublishing.org.uk/about>

Jeremy Gibson's *Probate Jurisdictions: where to look for wills*

Phillimore's *Atlas of Parish Registers*

The Manorial Documents Register, accessed via The National Archives website can help here

<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/manor-search>.