

Historic parishes of England and Wales: an electronic map of boundaries before 1850 with a gazetteer and metadata

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I reviewed R. J. P. Kain and R. R. Oliver, *Historic parishes of England and Wales: an electronic map of boundaries before 1850 with a gazetteer and metadata* in the *Agricultural History Review* in 2002.⁽¹⁾ It was published by the History Data Service (HDS) of the UK Data Archive based at the University of Essex in 2001. This originally had a website at <http://hds.essex.ac.uk/> [2], but it has been renamed and expanded as one of the five centres of the Arts and Humanities Data Service for the collection, preservation and promotion of digital sources, this one supporting historical research, learning and teaching at <http://ahds.ac.uk/history/> [3] [this link is now outdated]. The 2001 product was a book explaining the project that led to its publication, a gazetteer of place names, which was one of the main outputs from the original project, and also an indication of where the electronic source mentioned in the title could be obtained. That source was originally held at the HDS. I was only given the book to review.

I suggested that historians among others were great users of maps, both in their own right but also when they construct their own maps of location, density, and distribution of the features that happened to be the subject matter of their work. I continued by suggesting that very often the historians' unit of study was the parish, or more likely collections of parishes, whether for county, regional, sub-county or sub-regional analyses. I contextualised this in my own early work as a historian of Buckinghamshire parliamentary enclosure, but bemoaned the fact that in the 1960s and 1970s when I began my academic career the electronic revolution had not yet arrived and map construction for most of us was mainly a process of traditional draughtsmanship. In my case it had involved using a base map which was an off-the-shelf version of Buckinghamshire parishes issued by the local authority which then had to be tweaked to replicate what the parish boundaries looked like in the era of parliamentary enclosure. For Buckinghamshire this mainly involved deconstructing modern-day Slough to reveal the rural parishes and parts of parishes that eventually went under concrete (Stoke Poges, Wexham, Upton cum Chalvey). In the review I commented: 'If only electronic means had been available, if only digitisation had been invented, if only I was thirty years younger and starting all again'. I then suggested that the future had now arrived, that a historic base map of more or

less mid-nineteenth-century parish boundaries was available courtesy of Kain and Oliver. I noted that the boundaries now published roughly equated to the 1851 census parishes and gave the list of sources from which they had been derived. I admired the feat and suggested that technically the task was enormous, not least in resolving scaling and planimetric surveying differences between different sources, but it was a task now complete—Kain and Oliver ‘had produced an electronic version of pre-1850 parish boundaries set within their geographic as distinct from registration counties, but including also townships and a variety of other local administrative areas’. My enthusiasm continued to the end of the review, but I baled out on a negative point, that the compact discs containing the business end were only available separately through <http://hds.essex.ac.uk> [2]. I am happy to report that the book has now been reunited with the electronic resource, and it is the latter only that I will review here.

I will start this review as if I believe and understand all of the literature now available to me, but without having engaged it. This engagement becomes a voyage of discovery in its own right which should become clear as I approach the last paragraphs below. There is a pleasant sting in the tail in what has been otherwise a frustrating journey.

In the 2001 publication we were told that the electronic version came in two forms. There was a three CD package that has limited usage and appeal and all of which is replicated in a separate nine CD package that has much greater appeal, can be broken down into parts, and can be manipulated or at least tweaked to combine with other software. Though I have now fully engaged the three CD version I will concentrate on the second version. The first CD in the nine CD set contains the basic introduction and instructions which lead to the remaining CDs containing the electronic business end of the package. The first item on this CD is a one-screen contents page for the collection, through which the other screens are engaged. There are five other screens. The first is an Instructions page to the whole collection (two screens). This is followed by an Instruction screen that sets out how to use the Gazetteer. The Gazetteer then follows in two versions: the first is in PDF format; the second in Microsoft Excel. The PDF version runs to one page of glossary and 4,605 other pages which list the many thousands of places that have been digitized in the collection, and the Excel version runs to one row of headers plus 18,355 rows containing up to 13 columns of information, a matrix containing nearly 240,000 cells. Finally there is a screen entitled Instructions for using the Historic Maps of England and Wales (two pages). This two-page Instructions screen includes, among other things, an indication of the contents of the remaining eight CDs on which are located the core of this collection, the digitized electronic versions of the parish boundaries that have been imposed on the base OS maps. It would be tedious to list every detail of this background information. Let it simply be said that trial and error, and practice, will familiarize even the most apprehensive computer users to the detail and the methods of working these CDs, and guide them to the CD that contains the parishes or groups of parishes that most interest the readers.

When we jump into the collection itself we see that the most important function for the page Instructions for using the Gazetteer is to indicate the thirteen shorthand codes used in organizing the 18,598 places (also called areas) in the England and Wales Gazetteer. Readers will notice from the previous paragraph that there are 18,355 rows of information, yet over 200 more places. This indicates that some places contain more than one settlement. The shorthand codes which relate both to the Excel columns and the line by line entries in Acrobat format are: the unique identifier for each record or line entry (REC), which combines a numerical identifier indicating the position each place is listed in its unique county and a unique number for each county (arranged in alphabetical order for England followed by Wales); a simplified version of the same identifier (NUM); the name of the area associated with that unique identifier (PLA); a term to indicate the category of place (CAT), whether borough, chapelry, division, hamlet, parish or township; the mother parish in which the ‘place’ was located (PAR); and any alternative names for the ‘place’ (APL). Further codes indicate the National Grid centroid of the area (NGR); the county in which it was placed in the mid-nineteenth century (CTY), which itself is based on sources across the years 1844–88; and the Ordnance Survey Sheet on which the place can be found (ONP). Another number comes next which is the unique number allocated to the place in the 1851 census (CEN), followed by the sources from which the boundary information was taken (SCE). These sources include the 1851 Census, drainage maps, enclosure maps, the

Ordnance Survey first edition 1:10,560 series, rating maps, sanitary maps, and Tithe Maps of the mid-nineteenth century, followed by precise references for those sources (REF) when they were other than the OS and the 1851 Census. Finally there is a column (Excel version) or line entry (Acrobat version) of additional remarks (COM).

At this stage the most important items are the two versions of the Gazetteer. The Excel version is the best because it can be edited and re-sorted in a number of ways. But for the record, the Adobe Acrobat version is a list of the places in the Gazetteer at more or less four to a page, arranged alphabetically according to historic counties, first for England and then for Wales. It takes up over 4,606 pages, thus indicating the scale of this work. For both versions, places within their respective counties do not look as though they are arranged in a recognizable order. They are not alphabetical, for example, and in the absence of a clear indication I have to guess that they are determined by the order in which the boundaries were originally entered. Thus, the first entries are for places in Bedfordshire, the first five of which are Tilbrook, Dean, Shelton, Yelden and Melchbourne. There are a number of differences between what is described and what is actually presented, and while it might be tedious to list these differences, on occasions it matters. For example, column four of the Excel version indicates the category of place (B for borough, C for chapelry, T for township, etc). But what are EP, X and Y? The first might indicate a place as extra-parochial or an ecclesiastical parish, but since the Oxbridge Colleges enjoy this designation it is presumably the former if it is anything at all. The second is a mystery, as is the third. A one-off journey to the University Library and the 1851 Census reveals that these are not standard diminutives.

But having located the Gazetteer and understood how it is arranged, the Excel version comes into its own because it is capable of sorting and manipulation. At this point my enthusiasm for this source, which was already gathering initial pace, immediately picked up further. Once in Microsoft Excel it can, of course, be imported and indeed saved in other ways. This is a case of horses for courses, but as a long-time Excel fan my Acrobat version will remain 'unwrapped'. My recommendation to new users is to experiment with sorting and resorting, if only as a means to understand how the Gazetteer works. It allows sorting on place name, type of place (parish, borough, hamlet, the mysterious EP, X and Y, and so on). As an indication of scale we have 8,545 parishes, 5,353 townships, 810 hamlets, 116 of the mysterious X (which look like mostly fells and commons of some description), 292 Y and 539 EPs, which includes the Oxbridge colleges, halls, abbeys, cathedral yards, some fens, and some less precisely designated 'places'. If there is a pattern to this it is not obvious. There are also sixteen undesignated places of which two look as though they have simply been left off (a portion of Wareham in Dorset which lies outside the borough boundary, and a division of Easington township in Easington parish in county Durham). The other fourteen undesignated places are scattered through six English and one Welsh county and are simply described as 'Record not used'. Sorting can also take place within counties. To recap, this is a spreadsheet of over 18,000 places with up to thirteen types of descriptor, of which only one is used relatively sparingly (column 13, the comments column, for which there are 3,852 comments out of the 18,355 line entries). Therefore this is a spreadsheet containing well over 200,000 pieces of information. In my enthusiasm I experimented by sorting and resorting these data on different columns, for example on alphabetical order of place, on their descriptions as parishes, tithings, townships, chapelries and so on.

The unique numbering system of column 1 needs explaining. It starts not at 1, but at 01001, the entry for Tilbrook in Bedfordshire. The numbers are sequential thereafter, but do not involve all numbers down to the last, which is 56063, the entry for a place within a parish in Radnorshire. These unique identifiers are replicated in the second column with a small tweak. Thus, Tilbrook, number 01001, becomes 01/1 indicating the first record in the first county (where the counties are in alphabetical order, of first the English counties followed by the Welsh counties). Thus, 28253 which is Beeston in Nottinghamshire is also 28/253.

There are some inconsistencies in the spreadsheet, but it would be tedious and too picky to list them. We conclude that given the size of the whole project, by any fair measure of consistency and proofing this is a tremendously accurate document according to the parameters that the compilers have created for it.

The Ordnance Survey sheets which are the basis of this work contain the county boundaries and these

boundaries are located on the electronic maps, as are the parish or place boundaries. A system of colour coding is employed to delineate them. In turn, the boundaries themselves are the ones that existed in the mid-nineteenth century (which is a moveable definition of the mid century from 1844 to 1888). Each 'place' has a second unique identifier, and this is the number that was assigned to it in the 1851 Census. But other sources apart from that census were also used in the identification process. These included drainage maps, enclosure maps, the Ordnance Survey 1:10,560 series, principally the first edition, and also different editions of the 1:63,360 series, rating maps, sanitary maps and title maps. Repository reference numbers for such sources are also given in detail where they are not either the 1851 Census or the OS, and typically these are repositories located in local or county archives, or The National Archives (TNA).

We have lingered long on the Gazetteer because it is an important data source in its own right, but it is twinned with the electronic boundaries, to which we now turn. The first CD is the master CD and contains everything described so far. The maps themselves are contained on the remaining eight CDs. To engage or view a map one has to call up the instruction on CD1 which contains the 'Index map'. This is literally a map of England and Wales divided up into rectangles conforming with the OS 1:63,360 or one inch to one mile, New Popular Edition Maps (1945–8) which have been scanned as bitmap images. This reference map contains 115 numbered rectangles where the numbers in turn relate to the remaining eight CDs in the collection. It contains three electronic layers: the OS maps stored as grey tone sheet images, making the physical, cultural and place name contents of those maps visible in the background; a second layer consisting of the boundaries; and a third layer containing the reference numbers linking the places on the maps to the Gazetteer. The boundaries themselves are shown on the screen in colour codes, the red lines relate to the parishes, townships or other administrative areas, and yellow indicates county boundaries. The reference numbers on the maps relate to counties (in orange) and places (in green). From the master map I see that Hull must be on map 99 or 98, but which one? The Gazetteer will tell me. But here we encounter a small problem. The names on the Gazetteer are determined by the mid-nineteenth-century census and only through a process of search and elimination do I discover that Hull is really St Mary (the parish church) Kingston-upon-Hull. This is perfectly accurate according to the parameters in force but generally or colloquially speaking we in Hull rarely recognize the place by that name. This is not to suggest that there should be a separate column in the spreadsheet related to modern usage, but users be warned. When we do locate Hull by its proper mid-nineteenth-century name, sure enough it is on sheet 99 which is on CD3.

That describes what the document contains. What is less easy to assess is the use to which we can put it. This is not least because computer technology has advanced so much so quickly that techniques of engagement are redundant almost as soon as they hit the market. I exaggerate, of course, but in this case there have been important developments. For a start, we are enjoined to link these data with Adobe Illustrator v. 6, which no doubt was the state of the art link in 2001. I invite readers of this review to have a look at the appropriate Adobe website at <http://www.adobe.com/products/illustrator/> [4] where we learn that the main product they now provide is Illustrator CS2 at a further cost of US\$499 but with an upgrade price of US\$169 which, of course, implies that you have previous versions already installed. But surely my University Computer Centre has a library of versions or, at worst, the latest version. Perhaps Hull is impoverished or perhaps such licences are not so popular. Indeed, on further inquiry I learnt that as a whole the University does not support this software – or not on a campus-wide basis – because the licence attaches to the individual user, with no doubt some kind of multiple user discount available. I did not explore this further but instead learnt that I could obtain an individual site licence with an educational discount through the Computer Centre, and this would provide a multi-product Adobe Creative Suite comprising seven Adobe products for just £295 plus VAT.

To highlight this series of cul-de-sacs is unfair on Kain and Oliver but it does indicate how rapidly computing and computing services change. I did take up a web offer from Adobe to install the latest Illustrator package on a 30 day trial offer, which after much download time I installed on my machine, and I did manage to engage the individual maps from the Kain/Oliver collection. But each time I engaged a map I did have to accept some adjustments in what were, I presume, the original font arrangements of Historic Maps. But from then it was not a simple task to do anything with these maps except to appreciate the

enormity of the task achieved. To be fair, Kain and Oliver foresee user questions (I will not call them problems) because they tell us in their briefing document that the maps can be edited and the layers we have identified can be selected, but the user can only guess at the nature of selection, or work through the updated Illustrator guidance with some care.

At this stage I was left with a question: have we moved on in the last five years? The answer is yes. After this laborious travelogue through the Kain and Oliver CD-ROM collection, and with frustration mounting and indifference beginning to set in, we discover by other means that there is an easier way. The AHDS has extended the availability of this material to the wider academic community through JISC and the census data archive at <http://census.data-archive.ac.uk/> [5]. This in turn requires you to have an Athens username and password (not a problem for the UK university community), which then opens the door to <http://edina.ac.uk/ukborders/> [6]; and that is where the user can follow instructions to download the Kain and Oliver boundaries by parish, by county, by ... well I have yet to experiment further than this. Even then, after following the instructions on those websites the user will still have to engage other software to fill in the desired data. In my case this is likely to be choropleth maps of English crop yields by county, or by density of enclosure by parish, or average rent per acre by county, or whatever is appropriate to the English and Welsh counties, parishes and townships of my choice and for which I have data.

So, what have we learnt apart from the speed with which technology has changed? Two messages emerge which will make some of my future work more manageable. I now have an easy to use, easy to sort place name index (where place is defined according to those units I listed earlier). For this I am truly thankful. I also have a three CD-ROM set which requires no further software for me at least to get the basic parish, township, etc., county base maps on the screen. To this end, for this user, I see no great advantage in having the extended nine CD set since I will have to buy further software. Instead, my frustrations have made me discover the extended data archive resources involved in the UK Borders website. I will still need some GIS software and further instruction, but my short glimpse into my own future suggests that this should not be a problem

Finally, readers might like to see how a colleague in an adjacent discipline, archaeology, has reviewed the nine CD version of this source in <http://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue13/reviews/pickles.html> [7], and how the source is described on History Data Service website at <http://hds.essex.ac.uk/hpew/hpew.asp> [8].

Notes

1. M. Turner, Review of R. J. P. Kain and R. R. Oliver, *Historic parishes of England and Wales: an electronic map of boundaries before 1850 with a gazetteer and metadata*, *Agricultural History Review*, 50.2 (2002), 134–5. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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Links

- [1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2965>
- [2] <http://hds.essex.ac.uk/>
- [3] <http://ahds.ac.uk/history/>
- [4] <http://www.adobe.com/products/illustrator/>
- [5] <http://census.data-archive.ac.uk/>
- [6] <http://edina.ac.uk/ukborders/>
- [7] <http://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue13/reviews/pickles.html>
- [8] <http://hds.essex.ac.uk/hpew/hpew.asp>