

VITALI VITALIEV

ATLAS OF
**GEOGRAPHICAL
CURIOSITIES**
BRITAIN



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The Giant's Causeway • Northern Ireland

A natural wonder and a symbol of Northern Ireland

Ireland's only UNESCO World Heritage site (since 1986), the Giant's Causeway is a promontory of basalt columns along 4 miles (6 kilometres) of the northern coast of Northern Ireland. It lies on the edge of the Antrim plateau between Causeway Head and Benbane Head, some 40 kilometres (25 miles) north-east of Londonderry. There are approximately 40,000 of these stone pillars, each typically having six sides, jutting out of the cliff faces as if they were steps creeping into the sea. The basalt columns are indeed reminiscent of huge stepping stones – some reach as high as 12 metres into the air. They were formed over 50 million years ago, when volcanic basalt seeped through the surface of the earth after a huge eruption. The molten rock then cooled slowly and, in a long geological process, the huge plain of basalt began to contract and crack as the temperature lowered, ultimately forming into hexagonal shapes.

The Causeway has been a visitor attraction for at least 300 years and has come to be regarded as a symbol of Northern Ireland.

Causeway Tales

The spectacular sight of the Causeway has inspired legends of giants striding over the sea to Scotland. The mythical tale of the giant Finn McCool claims that the Causeway was originally created by him, adding a certain mysterious quality to the place. Another popular tale goes that it was here that King Robert the Bruce (1274–1329) in exile from Scotland in 1307 coined the phrase, 'If at first you don't succeed try, try and try again', while watching a spider struggle to form a web in the wind and rain in a nearby cave.





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Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds, Norfolk • England

Britain's 'Great Barrier Reef'

Britain is home to the longest chalk reef in Europe, dubbed metaphorically 'Britain's Great Barrier Reef', or in real terms – the Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds.

It is Europe's largest chalk reef, covering an area of around 320 sq kilometres and extending some 10 kilometres into the North Sea. (The world's largest coral reef is the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Queensland, Australia, extending over 1,429 miles and spanning an area of about 133,000 square miles.)

Lying just a few metres below the sea's surface and stretching for 32 kilometres along the coast, the chalk reef remains invisible from the shore, albeit at several points exposed chalk can be clearly seen during low tide. Some geologists believe that it could be a part of the chalk seam which stretches across England and includes the White Cliffs of Dover.

With dramatic features such as towering arches and deep chasms formed during the Ice Age, the Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds are one-and-a-half times longer than the 14-mile-long Thanet coast chalk reef in Kent, once considered the longest in the world. Made from a 460 mm-thick layer of ancient plankton, the reef teems with marine life: shrimps and prawns, purple sea slugs and orange anemones, marine worms and snails, which in turn provide food for fish and foraging seabirds. It is also home to blue mussel beds, over 30 species of sea slug, harbour porpoises and grey and harbour seals. Sunfish and basking sharks have also been sighted.

In January 2016, the reef, with all its sea life, including the threatened pink sea fan coral, as well as countless crabs and lobsters that colonise the soft chalk beds, was officially designated a Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ).

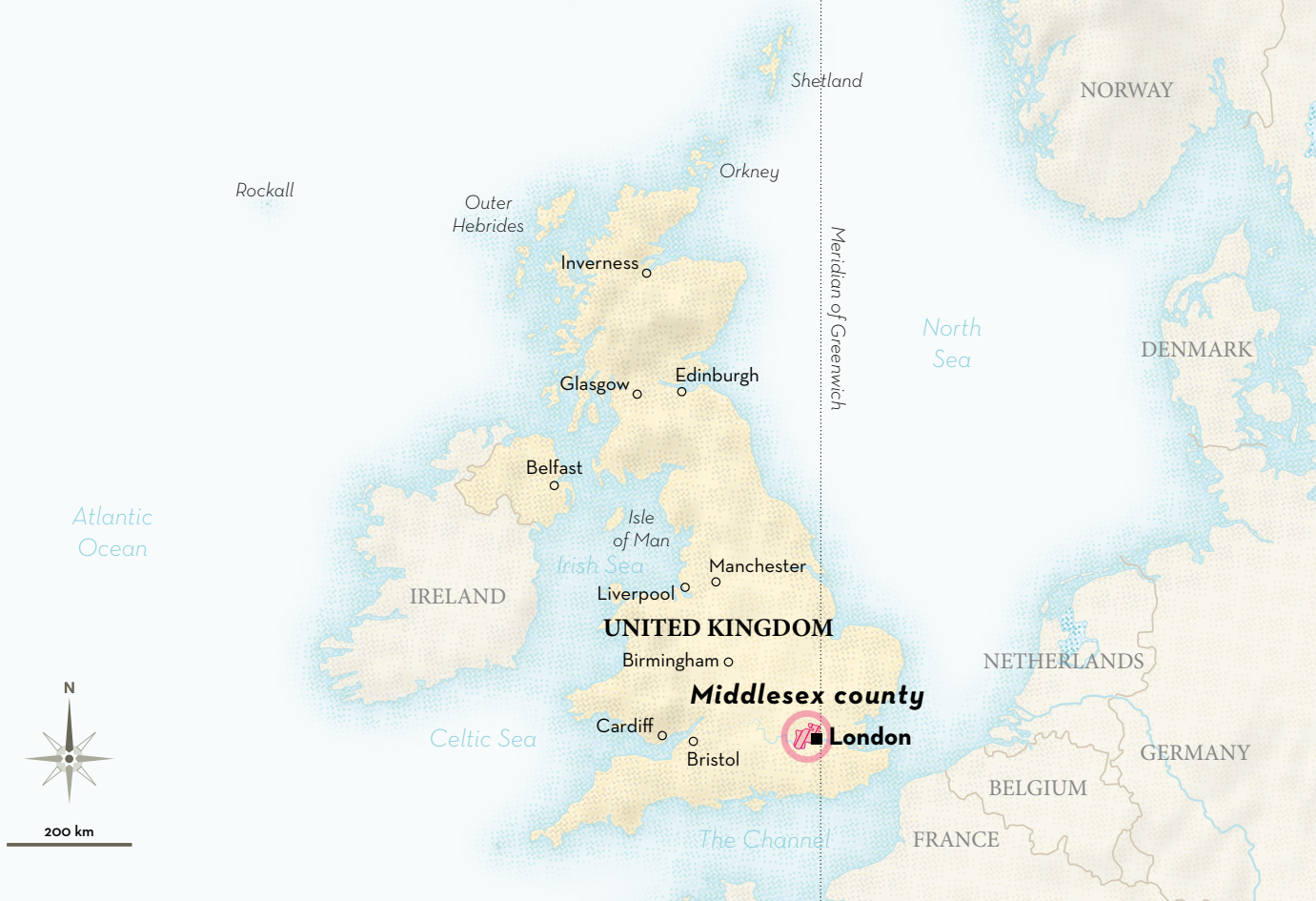


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Middlesex county • England

The county that does not exist but still features in postal addresses

'Dear Middlesex, dear vanished country friend/

Your neighbour, London, killed you in the end...'

So lamented poet John Betjeman in the late 60s, after the county of Middlesex was deleted from the administrative map.

Middlesex is a historic county in south-east England. Abolished as an administrative unit back in 1965, it continues to feature in signs and postal addresses.

Originally, the county of the Middle Saxons (hence the name), Middlesex first appeared in a charter of AD 704 and became a shire in the 10th century BC. Its boundaries were the River Thames to the south, the River Colne to the west and the River Lea to the east, with the northern boundary running along the ridge of the watershed of the rivers Brent and Colne. The county was in the Domesday Book and was divided into six 'hundreds', the historical subdivisions: Edmonton, Elthorne, Gore, Hounslow, Ossulstone and Spelthorne.

With the alluvial soil of its boundary rivers and the clay of the Thames Basin, ideal for market gardens which provided food for the county and for the City of London, Middlesex was mainly agricultural.

The City of London and the county of Middlesex were closely linked and shared the same county sheriff. As London grew, the villages and towns of Middlesex (such as Hammersmith, Chelsea and Edmonton) were slowly swallowed up and became suburbs of London. Middlesex eventually vanished as an administrative unit and geographical entity.

Middlesex lost much of its area as early as in 1888, when the Local Government Act, forming the County of London, was passed. The new Middlesex County Council met for the first time in 1889, but ceased to exist in March 1965, when, together with parts of Hertfordshire, Kent, Essex and Surrey, most of Middlesex (except for its south-western part, namely Staines, Sundbury-on-Thames and Potters Bar districts that became parts of Surrey and Hertfordshire), was incorporated into the new administrative area of Greater London.

Prior to the abolition, Middlesex used to incorporate some areas of present-day Western and Central London, including Westminster. When London's boundaries were redrawn in 1965 by the London Government Act, aimed at reducing the number of local government bodies, and 32 new boroughs were created, the entire county was swallowed up by Greater London and Surrey.





Between 1965 and 1996, Middlesex used to be known as a 'postal county', i.e. a county created by Royal Mail for operational reasons, but since then it can be best characterised as a 'historic county', i.e. a former administrative unit, with no territory, existing only in a 'ceremonial' (read traditional) sense, i.e. featuring only in the names of certain institutions and in a handful of postal addresses.

Postal counties were abandoned in 1996 in favour of postcodes. It was another nail in the coffin for Middlesex, which had had expired both as a political and a postal entity.

Although it disappeared from maps, Middlesex continues to lead a curious afterlife. Some 19,000 students study at Middlesex University in Hendon. Many of them are members of Middlesex Cricket Club. Other eponymous sporting bodies include Middlesex Rugby, Middlesex Tennis and the Middlesex County Chess Association.

The London and Middlesex Archaeological Society is also still in operation. And a North Middlesex University Hospital still exists in Tottenham.

But, most importantly, thousands of Londoners still include the non-existing 'Middlesex', in their postal addresses!

'The Provinces of England'

As far back as in 1919, C.B. Fawcett – a semi-forgotten British writer and geographer, published a book *The Provinces of England*, in which he suggested a new administrative division of the country: larger, economically and demographically defined provinces, instead of the smaller and industrially amorphous and archaic counties. Among a dozen or so 'provinces' he drafted were the Province of North England, the Province of Peakdon ('... the central and southern Pennines', '... the largest coal-field of Britain'), the Bristol Province, the London Province (a bit of an oxymoron - VV) and even the stretch of territory with an intriguing name 'The Anglo-Welsh Boundary'! For better or worse, that clearly utopian idea didn't take off...



Dungeness, Kent • England

Britain's only desert

On the coast of Kent, Dungeness (from the Old Norse for ‘headland’) is a unique desolate landscape, with wooden houses, power stations, lighthouses and expansive gravel pits. But above all, it is Britain’s only desert. Formed by a pebbled beach in the shape of a cusped foreland, it is also one of the largest shingle landscapes in the world, with the pattern of shingle ridges built up over 5,000 years. The height of a shingle ridge can be used to determine the sea level at the time it was formed: across Dungeness, the ridges have been used to produce a series of records showing how the sea level has changed naturally over the past 5,000 years. The site has attracted the gravel extraction industry for generations. Today, the legacy of this extraction can be seen in the number of gravel pits across the landscape. These pits are home to a plethora of wildlife: from breeding seabirds and wintering wildfowl, to the rare great crested newt and bloodsucking medicinal leech.



Officially, a desert is a place which on average loses more moisture than it receives each year and can only support sparse vegetation. Both in fact apply to Dungeness.



It is also home to a wide variety of plants: over 600 different species, populated with rare types of moths, beetles, bees and spiders.

The hamlet of Dungeness consists of 100 homes of different shapes and sizes. Some were built from old railway carriages dragged across the shingle nearly 100 years ago. Houses near the lifeboat station are larger and inhabited mainly by fishermen, often drying their fishing nets in the lofts.

Greatstone Sound Mirrors

At the back of two gravel pits on the north-eastern edge of Denge Marsh on the Dungeness coast, three giant concrete listening mirrors were built in the 1920s and 1930s to detect enemy aircraft as they approached Britain. Sound waves were caught in the belly of the mirror and relayed back through microphones and a stethoscope to an operator who raised the alarm. Anti-aircraft defences were then deployed. The mirrors effectively gave Britain a 15-minute warning of an impending attack.

This is the only site in Britain where all three designs of such mirrors can be found in one place: a 61-metre-long curved wall, a 9-metre-tall parabolic dish, and a 6-metre-tall shallow dish. With a range of 20 miles, this early warning system became obsolete by the time the Second World War began. The mirrors, known locally as 'concrete ears', are visible from Greatstone Beach – part of the Dungeness National Nature Reserve.



© Keith Jump





The Severn Bore • England

A spectacular tidal surge

The Severn Bore is a world-famous tidal surge in the Severn Estuary, which is where the River Severn meets the Bristol Channel. It is an example of a tidal surge, caused by a combination of a rising tide and the physical shape of the Severn Estuary. This shape is such that the water is funnelled into an increasingly narrow channel as the tide rises, thus forming the large wave.

The Severn Bore's course takes it past Avonmouth, where the river is approximately 5 miles wide, then past Beachley, Aust, Lydney and Sharpness where it is approximately 1 mile wide. Soon the river is down to a width of a few hundred yards. By the time the river reaches Minsterworth, it is less than a hundred yards across, maintaining this width all the way to Gloucester.



© Mark Humpage



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The UK's Other Bores

- The River Dee, England/Wales
- The River Eden, Cumbria, England
- The River Great Ouse, Cambridgeshire/Norfolk, England
- The River Kent, Cumbria, England
- The River Lune, Lancashire, England
- The River Mersey, Merseyside/Cheshire/Greater Manchester, England (photo opposite above)
- The River Nith, Dumfries & Galloway, Scotland
- The River Parret, Dorset/Somerset, England
- The River Ribble, Cumbria/Lancashire, England
- The River Trent, Midlands/Eastern England



© Larry from Charlottetown, PEI, Canada

Other bores in the world

As many as 60 bores happen throughout the world in places where the river estuary is the right shape and the tidal conditions are such that waves can be formed.

A bore normally travels at between 10-13 miles per hour; and the largest ones are around 2 metres high.

The Severn Bore (one of eleven in the UK, see above) is one of the biggest in the world, but bores also occur on the Seine and Gironde (France), on the Indus, Hooghly and Brahmaputra (India), on the Amazon (Brazil), on the Petitcodiac (New Brunswick, Canada, photo opposite below) and also at the head of Cook Inlet (the Knik Arm bore, Alaska – USA).

By far the biggest bore in the world is the Ch'ient'ang'kian (Hang-chou-fe) in China. At spring tides the wave attains a height of up to 25 ft (7.5 metres) and a speed of 13-15 knots (24-27 kilometres/h). It is heard advancing at a distance of 14 miles (22 kilometres).



Britain's forgotten rainforests

There are rainforests in the British Isles, too!

Although rainforests are normally associated with the tropics and the subtropics, many would be surprised to learn that there are rainforests in the British Isles, too. They are so-called 'temperate rainforests', also known as Atlantic woodland or Celtic rainforests, which normally grow in cooler climates, but are still vibrant and full of life.

A temperate rainforest is 'a woodland of a usually rather mild climatic area within the temperate zone that receives heavy rainfall, usually includes numerous kinds of trees, and is distinguished from a tropical rainforest [...]' (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). These rainforests can only be found in mid-latitude, temperate zones, in places which receive heavy rainfall due to a wet and mild maritime climate, with about 1,400 mm of rain a year.

Temperate rainforests once covered up to one fifth of Britain and Ireland, but centuries of destruction by people, as well as the changing climate, have meant that only small, isolated pockets of Britain's rainforests remain intact. In total, they now amount to 18,870 hectares (46,628 acres), or just 0.5% of the British mainland.

To spot a rainforest, just like in the tropics, you should look for conditions wet enough for the trees to have other plants growing on them, known as epiphytes – this is a key indicator. Another sure sign is the presence of lichens, mosses and fungi. Some of the more concrete biological indicators are:

Beefsteak fungus (*Fistulina hepatica*): it resembles a slab of raw meat, complete with dripping blood, and thrives on oaks.

Octopus suckers (*Collema fasciculare*): a kind of jelly lichen, found mostly in the rainforests of western Scotland.

Hazel gloves fungus (*Hypocreopsis rhododendri*): can be seen on the decaying branches of hazelwoods on the Atlantic coast.

Irish lichens (*Lobaria virens*): a green, shiny lichen marked by orange disks. It grows in the wettest parts of the Lake District, Wales, Scotland and the West Country.

The British government recently published a strategy to protect and recover the UK's forgotten rainforests, and committed £750,000 to their development.





Britain's surviving rainforests are now located in the following areas:

- Dartmoor National Park, Devon, England
- Ceredigion, Wales
- Powys, Wales
- Gwynedd, Wales
- The Highlands, Scotland
- Argyll, Scotland
- The Glens of Antrim, Northern Ireland
- West Highlands of Scotland
- Cornwall – in areas of Bodmin Moor and near the town of Looe
- Cumbria – in Borrowdale in the Lake District, in Glencoyne Woods near Ullswater Lake, and along the shores of Derwent Water Lake





Bishop Rock, Cornwall • England

The world's smallest island with a building

The lighthouse-turned-guest house at Bishop Rock, about 6 kilometres west of the Isles of Scilly, can house up to four visitors. The historic 49-metre-tall structure, which was lit by paraffin lamps and candles, now has modern power and even a helipad. It is perched on a small, rocky Atlantic ledge 46 metres long by 16 metres wide, making this the world's smallest island with a building on it, according to the *Guinness Book of Records*.

Bishop Rock is at the eastern end of the North Atlantic shipping route used by ocean liners in the first half of the 20th century; the western end being the entrance to Lower New York Bay. This was the route ocean liners took when competing for the transatlantic speed record, known as the Blue Riband.

The rocks around the Isles of Scilly have wrecked many ships. When Sir Cloudesley Shovell's squadron of the British Fleet sank in 1707 along with at least 1,300 men, the Elder Brethren of Trinity House decided the lighting off the Isles of Scilly was inadequate. They resolved to build a lighthouse on the most westerly danger: the Bishop Rock.

So, in 1847, it was decided to build a screw-pile lighthouse at a cost of £12,000. The first task was to sink cast-iron legs into the solid granite, braced and stayed with wrought-iron rods. Engineer-in-chief James Walker's idea was that the waves would crash through the piles instead of slamming into a solid masonry tower. Within two years it was complete, apart from lighting apparatus. But, the following season, a heavy gale swept away the whole structure on 5 February 1850.

Walker shrugged off the news and turned to the idea of a granite tower. It was a dangerous task, because the sea was rough and the island too small. The workmen had to be housed on a nearby, barren islet, where living quarters and workshops were built. The men were carried to and from the site as the weather permitted. All the granite was brought from the mainland to the islet depot, where it was shaped and numbered before being sent to the rock. After seven years, the tower was completed in 1858. Bishop Rock was converted to automatic operation in 1991 and the last keepers left the lighthouse in December 1992. The lighthouse is now controlled from Trinity House's Planning Centre in Harwich, Essex.





Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogogoch • Wales

Europe's longest place name

Europe's longest toponym happens to be in the UK, more specifically in Wales.

Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogogoch is a Welsh place name and means (in English) 'St Mary's Church in the hollow of white hazel near a rapid whirlpool and the Church of St Tysilio near the red cave'. Originally, the town had a shorter, easier to pronounce name: Llanfairpwllgwyngyll. However, in the 1880s, in an attempt to attract tourists, the rest of the name was added, bringing the total length to 58 letters.

There's not much to do in 'Llanfair PG', as it is listed on most maps, other than buy the T-shirt (available at the tourist office), take pictures of the sign on the train station platform, and pester the tourist office lady to pronounce the town's name over and over again.

The longest place name in the world

Incredibly, however, Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogogoch is not the longest place name in the world: there's a town in Thailand with a 163 letter-long name:

Krungthepmahanakornamornratanakosinmahintarayutthayamahadilokphopnoppa-ratrajathaniburiromudomrajaniwesmahasatharnamornphimarnavatarnsathitsakkat-tiyavisanukamprasit, or Krungthep, for short.

The UK's shortest place name

The UK's shortest place name, incidentally, is just one letter longer than the world's shortest (A, in Norway) – it is Ae, a village (population 200) in Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland.

As for the UK's shortest toponym, other than the name of a settlement, it is undoubtedly the River E in the Scottish Highlands.

Unusual place names

Other peculiar British place names include Bacon End – a hamlet in Essex; Dull – a village in Scotland; Great Snoring – in Norfolk; Drinkers End – a farm in Gloucestershire; Bedlam – a small village in North Yorkshire; No Place – a hamlet in County Durham, and Cold Christmas – a small village in East Hertfordshire, officially registered as an 'unusual place name'.



ATLAS OF GEOGRAPHICAL CURIOSITIES BRITAIN

Great Britain and its dependencies are among the quirkiest areas of the world, as revealed in this unique atlas of Britain's geographical curiosities, the first of its kind.

Compiled by an acclaimed author and geographer, a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, the Atlas describes (among many other things) a British county that does not exist, Britain's very own desert, rainforests and 'Great Barrier Reef', royal duchies that exist only on paper, Britain's smallest city and town, the world's narrowest street (in Devon), a remote island that still adheres to the Gregorian calendar, a hotel situated right in the geographical centre of Britain, the world's longest toponym (in Wales), the last remaining markers of the England–Scotland border, a small London lane that is part of Cambridgeshire, a patch of US territory near Windsor ...



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