ENGEL'S ENGLAND

Thirty-nine counties, one capital and one man

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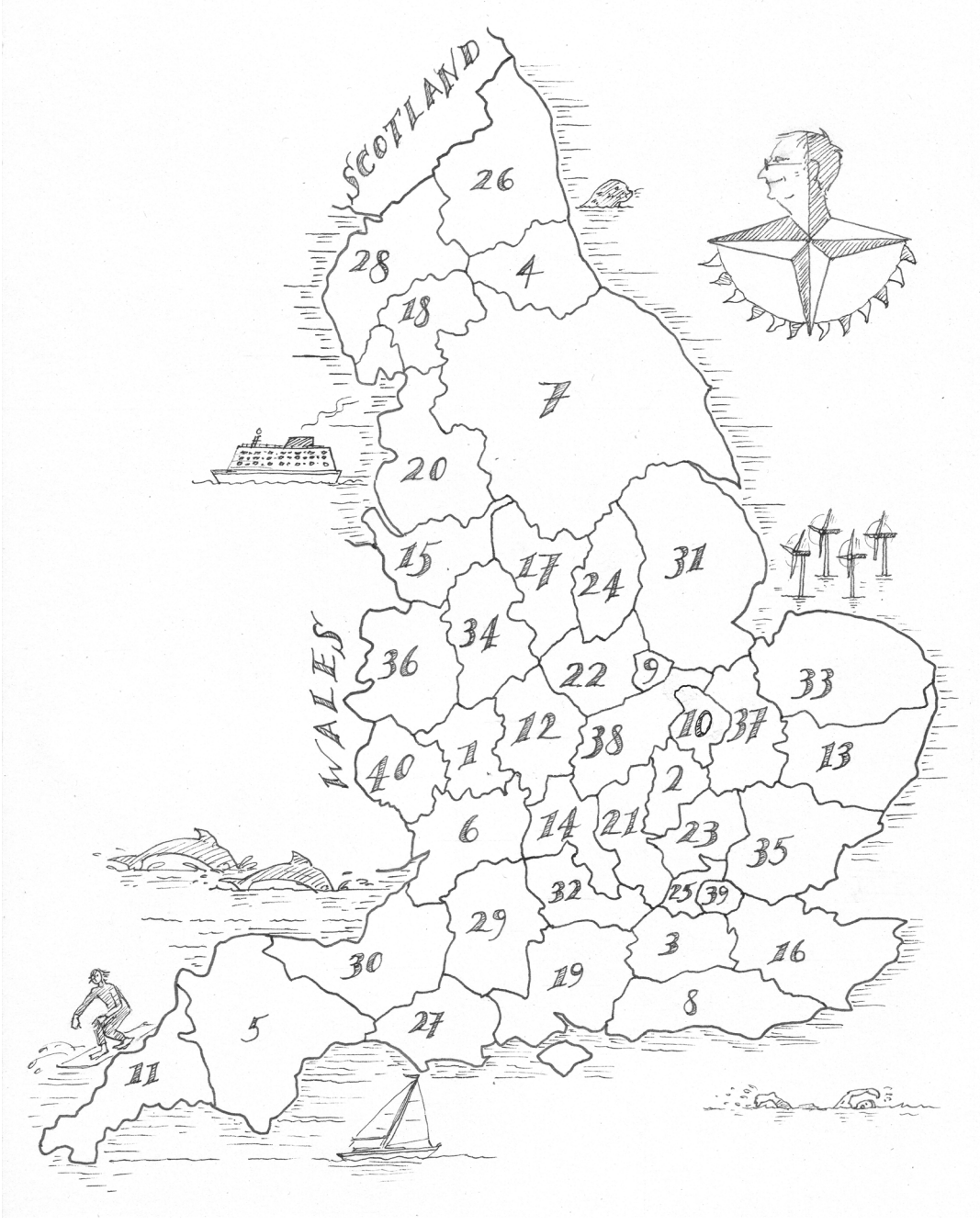

INTRODUCTION

When my son, Laurie, was about eight, I tried to explain to him which country we lived in. Since our home was barely five miles from the Welsh border and we crossed it without thinking all the time, it was not just a theoretical question: when we went into Wales, we entered a different country, but then again we didn't.

So I told him as succinctly as I could about England, Scotland, Wales and, heaven help us, the two Irelands; about Britain, Great Britain, the United Kingdom and the British Isles (a term now increasingly considered politically incorrect, some pedants preferring 'North-west European Archipelago' or 'Islands of the North Atlantic'). He got the hang of the outlines remarkably quickly. But the more I said, the less I understood the subject myself, and the more I realised how bizarre these distinctions were; grasping the three-fold nature of the Christian God was a doddle in comparison.

I also realised that explaining the subject through sport, our normal topic of conversation, would make matters worse. Each sport organises itself along different national lines. Feeling bolshie, I once pointed out to a British Olympic official that the term 'Team GB' was wrong because that excludes Northern Ireland. He replied in a gotcha tone of voice that the alternative, Team UK, would exclude the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. At any given moment, other countries may have more violently expressed divisions, but they generally know who, where and what they are.

In this century, as nationalism grew in Scotland and, to a lesser extent, Wales, the English began to chafe against their own bonds. One of the great successes of the new Celtic consciousness was the way it finessed any taint of racism: for these purposes, a Scot was someone who lived in Scotland. Attempts to find a matching English nationalism always seemed cranky.

England and Britain were once considered almost synonymous. If you met a compatriot abroad he was English unless he told you forcefully he wasn't. Until the late twentieth century 'United Kingdom' was reserved for the most formal occasions, like best china; and there were certainly no such people as 'Brits'. Within the new more inclusive vocabulary the English have found themselves a little lost.

The Scots could safely rail against English overlordship; the English became stuck in a general alienation that was difficult to express. Their lives were changing, at the mercy of forces beyond their control – a fragile economy, technological change, Brussels, bloody foreigners – and it was hard to know what to do about it. Meanwhile, all the wealth and power that England did possess was pouring inexorably into one corner of the country, the South-East, a process that was bad news even for those who lived there, at least if they were not homeowners. All this in a country whose name cannot be reliably found in drop-down internet menus. Are we U for United Kingdom, B for Britain, G for Great Britain or E for England?

It was against this background, in the financially difficult spring of 2011, with the country half-heartedly governed by David Cameron's coalition, that I set off.

This is a travel book about England, in the spirit and the footsteps of other travellers round this strange land: Defoe, Cobbett, Priestley, if it is not too pretentious to mention them. The difference is that this book is divided into the historic, ancient and traditional counties, the divisions of England that collectively withstood a thousand years of epic history but not the idiocy of the 1970s. It is not a gazetteer, nor a guidebook, nor a compendium of England's best anything.

This is emphatically not a book about local government, nor is it a prolonged whinge about the iniquities of the 1972 Local Government Act, though that will crop up as appropriate, to explain why the counties in this book are those of Defoe, Cobbett and Priestley and not those used by modern Whitehall. And a little background is essential in advance.

For a start, as people kept asking me, why cover just England, and not GB, UK or the whole archipelago? Firstly, there was the euphonious coincidence of my un-English surname, which lent itself to an obvious title. Secondly, the historic counties of Scotland and Wales – now almost all formally abolished – were primarily just administrative units and never had the wider resonance of those in England. This is not true of Ireland, where the frontier between the twenty-six counties now in the Republic and the six still attached to the UK is at the forefront of the island's tortured history. There is a happier side to that: everyone in Ireland can instantly recognise the perceived characteristics of a Corkman, Kerryman or Dub; and the former Taoiseach Brian Cowen was widely known as BIFFO – 'Big Ignorant Fucker From Offaly'. But all that is another book entirely.

Thirdly, *ars longa, vita brevis*. It would have been lovely to spend time exploring the mountains of Sutherland or the 35,000 acres of Clackmannanshire, 'the Wee County', which is one-third the size of England's pygmy, Rutland. But for any author, the prime object of writing a book is to get the damn thing finished and published, and three years' travel is long enough. Above all, it is unexamined England, so little understood even by its own inhabitants, that fascinates me, and where I felt that exploring the microscopic pieces of the puzzle might produce some insights into the big picture.

The idea of the county goes so far back in English history that exact dates are impossible. The best I can discover is as follows: Kent was probably recognisable as Cantium when Christ was a lad. Like Essex, it was an independent kingdom in the fifth century AD. The idea of a shire (*scir* = a division) originated in Wessex not much later. There are references to Hampshire and Devonshire from the eighth century. In the early tenth century, when Wessex conquered Mercia under Edward the Elder, son of Alfred the Great, the term spread into the Midlands.

When they arrived, the Normans did not attempt to interfere with these arrangements, but changed the nomenclature: the *ealdorman*, the Anglo-Saxon officer in charge of a shire, mutated into a *comes* or count, and thus the shire became known as *comitatus*, or county. As England was more or less pacified, united and systematised, the concept spread into the Danelaw and the barbarous North (and even more barbarous Wales). Not all shires made it into full-blown counties. In the early days Yorkshire was

divided into subordinate shires, including Hallamshire and Richmondshire, whose names persisted though their roles disappeared. The walled town of Winchcombe in Gloucestershire was regarded as Winchcombeshire between about 1007 and 1016, its presumed millennium being marked by a bell-ringing commemoration in 2007. But by the Middle Ages England was a country of counties in a manner that would remain fundamentally unchanged for the best part of a millennium.

Oh, there were all kinds of anomalies and bits of weirdness which were gradually tidied up. There were counties palatine (Lancashire, Cheshire and Durham) that were directly under the control of a local princeling. There were counties corporate, boroughs that were regarded as self-governing although nearly all still fell under the jurisdiction of the Lord Lieutenant for military purposes; to this day, on feeble evidence, Bristol fancies itself as a separate county. There were enclaves and exclaves. There were ancient liberties like the Soke of Peterborough and the Isle of Ely. Yorkshire was divided into three ridings (a thirding) and Lincolnshire into three parts. Most of the counties were divided into hundreds, areas big enough to offer a hundred men at arms. But some counties had wapentakes instead, while Kent had lathes and Sussex rapes.

The very distinctions show just how important the county was in the lives of the people. The monarch was in the far distance; authority was channelled through the Lord Lieutenant and the sheriff, though the sheriff's power later devolved on the justices of the peace. Counties developed their own laws, dialects, customs, farming methods, building styles. They formed the tapestry of the nation. In 1911 P. H. Ditchfield asked in the preface to his book *Counties of England*: 'Why should Devonshire farmers shoot their apple-trees on New Year's Day to make them fruitful, singing curious verses, and those of Surrey or Sussex be ignorant of the custom? Why should a dark man bring luck as a first-foot on the same day in Lancashire, and a fair man in Shropshire?' The answer is that these were real places that had real differences and inspired real loyalties.

The Local Government Act of 1888 brought the new-fangled notion of democracy to the hierarchical shires by establishing county councils, while giving the larger municipalities independence within the counties by designating them county boroughs. The biggest change came in London, where the disorganised administration of the capital, outside the City itself, was given some sense by carving chunks from surrounding counties and creating the London County Council. Until this point,

the monarch, Parliament and Eros were all living in Middlesex, which was somewhat absurd.

Elsewhere, the integrity of the counties was respected. There was very minor tinkering with borders and some of the counties were subdivided: the ridings of Yorkshire and parts of Lincolnshire acquired separate councils, but the people remained unarguably Tykes and Yellowbellies. Indeed, county identity was perhaps stronger than ever around the turn of the twentieth century. In peacetime, county cricket was at the heart of the sporting calendar; and, come 1914, the young men marched proudly off to war in their county regiments. This was a mistake, since it meant they died in clusters and, when the bugles sounded from sad shires, they often did so en masse from the same shire, which was bad for morale.

The map of England was almost entirely left alone until the early 1960s, when the London County Council was expanded to take in the outer ring of suburbs as the new Greater London Council. This fitted with the orthodoxy of the time that large metropolitan areas should be planned holistically; more importantly, it served the ruling Conservatives' purposes since the old inner-urban LCC was almost always a Labour-led nuisance. The Labour Party huffed and puffed and then, characteristically, allowed the act to come into force as planned after it had returned to power. The main effect was the total abolition of Middlesex, but the outcry was limited: Middlesex had long since become amorphous suburbia and it survived both as a cricket team and (crucially) as a postal address.

The lack of uproar encouraged the Labour government, under Harold Wilson, to start on the rest of the country. It set up a royal commission under a classic Whitehall committee man, Sir John Maud (later Lord Redcliffe-Maud). His report, issued in 1969, was not to be confused with the MAUD report of 1941 (Military Application of Uranium Detonation), which started the British atom bomb project, and actually led to remarkably little devastation in comparison. The new Maud report proposed dividing England into eight provinces and sixty-one numbered units, nearly all of them 'unitary', so that virtually all local government would be in the hands of city-based regions, governing half a million people or more, checked from below only by local parish councils, which, after much thought, were graciously to be allowed to continue. Existing boundaries were considered irrelevant: the map was redrawn from scratch.

The aim was to 'revitalise' local government, then in the hands of 1,210 different authorities. A civil servant who worked on the report told

me, with some passion, of the idealism that lay behind it. Though full of staid old farts, the committee had reported in the spirit of the 1960s: bigger trumped smaller; new trumped old. Down with the slums! Up with the tower blocks! Their report almost totally ignored local loyalties, and so did the initial newspaper commentaries.

The report was never implemented. The Conservatives regained power under Ted Heath in 1970 and constructed their own version of reform, based on the dear old counties which they usually controlled. The 1970s proved to be a more sentimental, rustically minded decade: hereabouts began the renewed enthusiasm for country cottages, real ale and (too late) steam trains. However, the minister involved was Peter Walker, a dashing, dodgy, self-conscious moderniser, and the counties he proposed were only loosely based on the ancient ones. The Heath government as a whole, whose one great achievement was Britain's entry into Europe, was deeply in love with biggism.

This time there would be 380 councils. Since these proposals bore some resemblance to existing reality, people understood more easily what they meant and began to fight for their own history. The proposals were not immutable: the women of Barlborough, Derbyshire, marched on Westminster and averted absorption into Sheffield. But the government soon tired of the arguments: Herefordshire was festooned with posters opposing merger with Worcestershire but got dragged to the altar regardless, kicking and screaming. Most surprising of all was the near-silence of Yorkshire. The bold-as-brass, shout-the-odds, proud Tykes and terriers allowed their county to be sliced, diced and divvied up. No bite, nary even a bark.

Some protesters were mollified by assurances that the proposals were entirely about local government and would have nothing to do with history, geography or loyalty. Cricket, for instance, simply ignored the 1972 act. But these intentions were thwarted for two main reasons. After the changes took effect in 1974 the Post Office this time insisted that the new county names should be used. And the media, led by the BBC, slavishly followed.

Local government remained the most consistently worthless of all British institutions. Indeed it got worse. This was largely due to central government's insistence on untrammelled power: the new metropolitan county councils, including and especially the GLC, terminally irritated Margaret Thatcher and in 1986 were liquidated. Another decade later,

with the sole exception of Cumbria, all the other made-up county names – Avon, Cleveland, Hereford and Worcester, Humberside – had also gone.

Except that they hadn't really. Because no one knew where anywhere was any more. Is Sunderland now in County Durham, where it spent a good eight centuries? In the county of Tyne and Wear (which lasted only slightly longer than Winchcombeshire), as Wikipedia still insists? Is it Sunderland, Sundld, which is what my AA atlas calls it? Or, as most search engines imply, does it exist only as a football team? The AA ('Britain's Clearest Mapping'), trying desperately to follow the endless shifts in council boundaries, also awards county status to such confections as Halton, Kirklees, Knowsley, Sandwell and Trafford, remote centres of power even to locals, meaningless to outsiders. Other atlases and websites use different formulae. My special favourite is 'Wigan, Wigan', which makes it on to the BBC Weather website. So good they named it twice!

Contrast this with America. Everyone knows it's Boston, Massachusetts, Chicago, Illinois, and Memphis, Tennessee: ('Long-distance information, give me Memphis, Tennessee!'). An American president can nuke Moscow in an instant, but cannot possibly interfere with the domestic arrangements of Memphis City Council. The current British government is far more subtle than Mrs Thatcher. It preaches 'localism' while at the same time whittling away at the two major areas of authority left with councils: education and planning.

The communities secretary, Eric Pickles, has expressed support for traditional counties and abandoned a rule barring the erection of signs denoting their historic boundaries. But councils don't have enough money to mend the roads, never mind anything else. And a sign is meaningless when Royal Mail is agitating to get county names off envelopes entirely. No traditions attach themselves to a postcode.

Even modern birthing practices conspire against local loyalties. Maternity hospitals are increasingly centralised, so whole swathes of the country will be filled with children born in another county, or even across national borders. And the populace are themselves guilty. If, by some strange fluke, a decision is taken locally and does not come down from Brussels, Westminster, Whitehall or the distant HQ of an avaricious multinational, the cry goes up, 'Unfair! Postcode lottery!'

This absence of local pride and engagement was noted by Raymond Seitz, the US Ambassador to Britain in the early 1990s. Seitz was a notable Anglophile, but he regretted, for instance, the dreary car number plates

that resulted from Britain's inability to permit diversity. 'Its licence plates are unimaginative and uninformative. There is no "Kent: The Garden County" or "Cumbria: Land o' Lakes". I wonder what games British children play on long trips.'

To me, the destruction of local pride in general, and the counties in particular, is a tragedy. Not a thousand-dead tragedy, but a slow-burn, almost unnoticed disaster leading to an irrevocable loss of self-respect. Not a deliberate act, but a case of criminal negligence. A crime against history, a crime against geography. Of course, mobility and mass media and globalisation make some degree of homogenisation inevitable. But that means it is even more urgent to cherish the things that make our own small patch of the planet special.

It is not just the US where they do things differently. In France and Germany and Belgium, no one needs a government to preach localism: the strength of the *commune* or the pull of *Heimat* is very strong. In Scotland and Wales the nations themselves have awoken from slumber. In England people know less and less what they are and where they are. You can see the consequences in sad, once self-governing northern county boroughs like Dewsbury, their town halls echoing and empty. And you can see it on the Berkshire Downs, where the White Horse of Uffington has probably been a symbol of local pride for a couple of thousand years, and specifically Berkshire pride for eleven hundred. It was then moved to Oxfordshire. Decisions like this instantly rendered inoperative such adornments of the nation's cultural heritage as the *Victoria County History* series and Pevsner's *Buildings of England*. The benefit was negligible, the loss incalculable.

Though much is taken, much abides. And although this book is something of an elegy, it is also a celebration of the remarkable and continuing distinctiveness of every part of England. It is the product of a three-year journey – to be more exact, a series of journeys, since real life did not cease – through thirty-nine counties and one capital: an average of just over one a month.

To others, my wanderings appeared unexotic. Once I sent a friend an email saying 'Am in Grimsby.' 'Bloody hell,' he replied. 'You're like some third-rate Henry Kissinger – couldn't you have said you were in Rio?' Another time I really was going abroad, to Crete with the family. But obviously part of my brain refused to believe it. So somehow I managed to start a message to a colleague with the words 'Just off for a week in Crewe'.

As the project continued, people would ask me if I had a favourite county. But I soon ceased to answer. Since no one else seemed to cherish the counties, I found myself acquiring a mother's fierce protectiveness. These were my forty children. Some had become gratifyingly more famous of late, like pushy Essex and tarty Cheshire, even though certain aspects of their celebrity might cause a little maternal concern; some found it ever harder to assert themselves and make their way in the world, so they needed my care even more; some were frankly exasperating. But I never had a dull day. And I never met a county I didn't love.

Despite all the pressures towards uniformity, each one is still individual, unique. My tone of voice may occasionally be sharp, as a mother's should be, and some readers may say I have been unkind to their county or home town. But I do hope my underlying affection shines through.

The notion that there are forty counties is an old one. Thomas Moule stated it as a fact in *The English Counties Delineated* (1839). Charlotte M. Mason used the title *The Forty Shires* for a book in 1881, implying it was a well-known phrase. She begins: 'The writer ventures to hope the following pages may help to acquaint English children with their native land in the only way in which England can be practically known – county by county.' And I applaud the sentiment.

My forty chapters are not quite hers, though. Mason, like Moule, included Monmouthshire as part of England, which was technically correct from 1542 to 1974. And though the 1974 changes were almost all terrible, this one tidied up an obvious piece of nonsense. It is not entirely clear why the 1542 Laws in Wales Act should have omitted Monmouthshire: I thought at first it was either some Machiavellian Tudor manoeuvre or a straightforward cock-up. Monmouthshire was then far more Welsh than it is now, and for many purposes in those intervening 432 years the standard formulation was 'Wales and Monmouthshire'. It was never truly an English county. Rhodri Morgan, the erudite former First Minister of Wales, thinks this anomaly arose from an earlier act which rejigged the judicial circuits – then vital cogs in the governmental machine. This took Monmouth out of the Welsh circuit and on to the Oxford circuit, apparently to even up the populations. In other words, it was an example of precisely the kind of insensitive tinkering that was repeated over and over again at the very time this ancient mistake was finally being corrected.

On the other hand, Mason did not count London. Her book was published seven years before the formation of the London County