

BOUNDARIES

Readers may have noticed the recent decision by the Government that Dorney is to fall under a new unitary authority combining the existing functions of Bucks County Council and South Bucks District Council. This outcome has not so far been greeted with much discernible enthusiasm by local residents. Rather, some have expressed dismay that decisions on local services will now all be made in faraway Aylesbury, and wondered whether Dorney might not be better served by coming under Windsor and Maidenhead. So how did we get to this position?

The establishment of shire counties began in England once the separate Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were consolidated under one king, Aethelstan, in 925. The Normans continued to develop the system, and the county became accepted as a convenient administrative unit, a useful way to divide the country into manageable chunks. This can be seen in all sorts of contexts, like the Domesday Book, or the collection of taxes remitted to fund the latest military campaign; and from within the county, men could be called upon to fight in defence of the county town.

Buckingham was the county town for the shire which bore its name, close to the northern boundary. The southern boundary was formed by the river Thames, and extended east as far as the river Colne. Professor Stephen Rippon has written, "*The historic...county of Buckinghamshire was a curiously shaped long, narrow territory whose boundaries cut across two very different landscapes: to the south of the chalk escarpment it included part of the dip slope of the Chilterns and lowlands of the Middle Thames valley...while to the north it embraced part of the clay vales...It is almost as if two formerly separate blocks of landscape were bolted together to create this tenth-century shire in order to support the burb at Buckingham*". Dorney found itself in the southernmost part of the county.

When John Speed drew his map of Buckinghamshire in 1610, it was notable that none of its eleven market towns was large and prosperous, and even the most important, Buckingham, was much less developed than, say, Reading. The same point was being made in 1912 (by which time Aylesbury had become the county town), when it was observed that market towns just outside the county, like Windsor and Maidenhead, attracted far more business from Buckinghamshire villages than those within the county.

England's county structure remained unaltered for centuries. Buckinghamshire's boundaries did not change until 1844, when there was some rationalisation, and subsequently sporadic adjustments occurred. Locally, significant change came in 1974, when Slough and neighbouring parishes, including Eton Wick, moved to Berkshire. The eastern county boundary was now much closer to Dorney – just the other side of Dorney Common.

This change followed intense debate locally. Since 1894, Dorney had been part of Eton Rural District, a local authority with a set of responsibilities which had their origin in the poor law union established in 1835. In 1971, as part of the national reorganisation of local government, the Government had initially proposed that the whole of Eton Rural District, together with Eton Urban District and Slough Borough, should transfer from Buckinghamshire to Berkshire. Driven, apparently, by a fear of being swallowed up by Slough, Dorney residents strongly opposed this change, arguing that their connections were with Taplow and further north, and that they wished to be within a local authority sympathetic to small rural communities. The Government accepted these arguments and agreed that Dorney could remain in Buckinghamshire.

As a consequence of the county boundary changes, Eton Rural District was abolished. Dorney along with Burnham and the parishes north of Slough joined Beaconsfield Urban District to become Beaconsfield District, renamed in 1980 as South Bucks District. A review in 1985 saw Berkshire's bid to take over Dorney, Taplow and part of Burnham countered by Buckinghamshire seeking a return to the 1974 position; both were rejected, and the status quo remained.

A final major change occurred in 1998. As part of the national move to unitary authorities, Berkshire disappeared, and its responsibilities were passed to the equivalent of district councils. Locally, these were the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (which includes Eton Wick, Eton and Datchet) and Slough Borough.

Now it is Buckinghamshire's turn to go down the route of unitary authorities. In this case, however, the Government has decided to merge county and district councils into a single body covering the whole county, combining South Bucks with Chiltern, Wycombe and Aylesbury Vale (Milton Keynes became a unitary authority in 1974). It is too early to say what the impact will be for us, and the new arrangements are not due to take effect until 2020. It is clear, though, that, in setting priorities, the new authority must have regard to a greater extent than South Bucks to the needs of communities which are much larger and more urbanised than our own.

Rather like the people of Dorney in the tenth century, we find that a central decision has been taken to impose on us a system of administration which is geographically remote and maybe unfamiliar with our concerns. But perhaps more than those early inhabitants, we may question whether we might prefer to be aligned with closer neighbours...

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