PASTPLACE – the historical gazetteer service from the people who brought you A Vision of Britain through Time

WHY PASTPLACE?

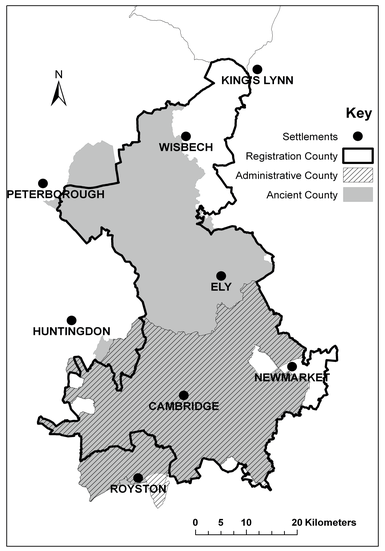
The database behind A Vision of Britain through Time already holds far more than just Britain: outline coverage of Europe as a whole; detailed listings from the Swedish and Estonian National Archives; developing detailed coverage of Ireland. PastPlace.org seems a more appropriate name in the long term. We cannot re-brand the whole site for now, but will use PastPlace.org for new services, starting with our gazetteer API (Applications Programming Interface). That API accesses exactly the same database as A Vision of Britain through Time, although some information has had to be excluded for now for copyright reasons.

WHAT IS THE PASTPLACE API?

The API offers a simple web service, responding to a variety of queries by returning information from the database in a range of structured formats. These queries can be typed into a web browser as URLs, and the response viewed in the browser. However, the queries would more usually be sent by another server on the web, and the response processed by that server. That server might itself be creating web pages for use by the general public, but it might also be a cataloguing or records management system, using our API as a name authority.

WHAT'S IN THE UNDERLYING DATABASE?

- **Places:** Gazetteers created by mapping agencies like the Ordnance Survey are based on topographic maps and list landscape features, classified using a feature type thesaurus; so Gruinard Island, Gruinard House and the Gruinard river are three different adjacent features in NW Scotland. Over history features come and go; and historians and archivists are more concerned with documents than the landscape. We therefore currently list 22,095 places which are bundles of name attestations appearing in documents and maps. For us, Gruinard is a single place, defined by Francis Groome in 1882 as "Greinord or Gruinard, a bay, an island, and two streams of NW Ross-shire."
- **Units:** More formal documents tend to be about legally defined administrative units, not just places. These can have detailed boundary polygons, but their locations may be unknown. Many towns had ten or twenty parishes, districts, constituencies etc named after them, so we group units into places, and all those units' names are also names of the relevant place. We currently define 79,266 units.
- **Place names:** In some senses, we aim to define as few places as possible, but to hold many different names for each of them. As a result we currently hold 190,264 names, each assigned to either a place or a unit, and many to both.
- **Locations:** All this information is held in an object-relational database which can hold geographical coordinates as well as text, numbers and relationships. As a result, it can also be queried by location.



Map showing the different geographical extent of Cambridgeshire as an Anceint, Registration and Administrative county – we treat all of these as parts of the place *Cambridgeshire*

ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE FORMATS

The "format" parameter provides a choice of output:

- **xml:** A simple schema defined by the Open Street Map project
- **html:** An HTML table, the easiest output for a human to read
- **rdf:** RDF/XML, a format developed by the W3C (Worldwide Web Consortium) for representing RDF (Resource Description Framework) as XML. RDF is maybe the most fundamental building block of the semantic web
- **n3:** N3/Turtle data, an alternative and less verbose way of representing RDF
- **json:** JavaScript Object Notation, a text-based open standard that is just about human-readable and maybe the easiest format for another computer program to work with

SOURCES

Our database of administrative units includes the main name authorities identified by the National Council on Archives in their 1997 report, Rules for the Construction of Personal, Place and Corporate Names (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/naming-rules.pdf):

- Frederick Youngs' *Guide to the Local Administrative Units of England* (Royal Historical Society, 1979 and 1991)
- Melville Richards' *Welsh Administrative and Territorial Units* (Univ. of Wales Press, 1969)
- Richard Cheffins' *Parliamentary Constituencies and their registers since 1832* (British Library, 1998)
- *Gazetteer of Scottish Administrative Units* compiled from census reports and other sources, including the Scottish Archives Network (SCAN) Gazetteer.

However, the system has been greatly extended by us from historical census listings, TNA's Manorial Documents Register, listings of medieval vills and many other sources.

KINDS OF QUERY:

SEARCHING FOR ANYTHING

For more information about the API, call it without any parameters: http://data.pastplace.org/search

SEARCHING FOR PARTICULAR UNITS BY NAME

This is currently impossible as, before you search for units of a particular type, we need to create a mechanism by which you can explore our typology of, so far, over 200 kinds of unit

SEARCHING FOR A PLACE BY LOCATION

Specified longitude and latitude in n3/Turtle format (first 2 of 20 results):
http://data.pastplace.org/search?q=1.7&q=50.8&format=n3

```
# baseURI: http://auo.gbhgis.geog.port.ac.uk/uri/#
@prefix cc:      <http://creativecommons.org/ns#> .
@prefix owl:     <http://www.w3.org/2002/07/owl#> .
@prefix dcterms:  <http://purl.org/dc/terms/> .
@prefix xsd:     <http://www.w3.org/2001/XMLSchema#> .
@prefix dcam:    <http://purl.org/dc/dcam/> .
@prefix geo:     <http://www.w3.org/2003/01/geo/wgs84_pos#> .
@prefix rdf:     <http://www.w3.org/1999/02/22-rdf-syntax-ns#> .
@prefix auo:     <http://auo.gbhgis.geog.port.ac.uk/uri/#> .
@prefix rdfs:    <http://www.w3.org/2000/01/rdf-schema#> .
@prefix dc:      <http://purl.org/dc/elements/1.1/> .

auo:VOB_Place_HINTONADMIRAL23297
      a       auo:VOB_Place ;
      rdfs:comment "<b>HINTON-ADMIRAL</b>, a hamlet and a chapelry in Christchurch
parish, Hants. The hamlet lies 2 miles N of Christchurch bay, and 3 NE of Christchurch r.
station. Real property, £1, 829. Pop., 334. The chapelry includes the hamlet, but does
not seem to have definite limits. Post town, Christchurch. Hinton House is a chief
residence. The living is a p. curacy in the diocese of Winchester. Value, £72. Patrons,
Sir G. Gervis, Bart. and the Vicar of Christchurch. (In 1870-72, John Marius Wilson's
<i>Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales</i>)"^^xsd:string ;
      rdfs:label "HINTON ADMIRAL"^^xsd:string ;
      auo:hasPlaceId "23297"^^xsd:int ;
      auo:hasUnit auo:VOB_Unit_10021662 , auo:VOB_Unit_10513078 ;
      auo:isInContainer auo:VOB_Place_HAMPSHIRE ;
      =       <http://sws.geonames.org/2646851/about.rdf> ;
      geo:lat "50.762649483006 4"^^xsd:double ;
      geo:lon "-1.7050488612712 2"^^xsd:double .

auo:VOB_Place_MUDDIFORD21022
      a       auo:VOB_Place ;
      rdfs:comment "<b>MUDDIFORD</b>, a village in Christchurch parish, Hants; on a creek
of Christchurch bay, 1½ mile E of Christchurch. It contains lodgings for summer visitors,
and commands an excellent bathing-beach; and it had Coleridge as a lodger in 1816.
Gundimore villa, in its vicinity, was formerly the residence of W. S. Rose, Esq.; and was
visited, in his time, by Walter Scott, who there wrote part of his \" Marmion.\" Mr. Rose
afterwards wrote a poem called \" Gundimore; \" and lie said, in that poem</p>
<blockquote><p> Here Walter Scott has woo'd the nor thern muse;<BR>Here he with me has
joy'd to walk or cruise;<BR>and hence has prick'd through Ytene's holt, where we<BR>Have
call'd to mind how, under greenwood tree,<BR>Pierc'd by the partner of his woodland
craft,<BR>King Rufus fell by Tyrell's random shaft.<BR>Hence have we rang'd by Celtic
camps and barrows,<BR>Or climb'd th' expectant bark, to thread the Narrows<BR>Of Hurst,
bound westward to the gloomy bower<BR>Where Charles was prison'd in yon island tower.\"
</p></blockquote (In 1870-72, John Marius Wilson's <i>Imperial Gazetteer of England and
Wales</i>)"^^xsd:string ;
      rdfs:label "MUDDIFORD"^^xsd:string ;
      auo:hasPlaceId "21022"^^xsd:int ;
      auo:isInContainer auo:VOB_Place_HAMPSHIRE ;
```

SEARCHING FOR A PLACE BY NAME

The simplest possible query is as follows. This particular name matches just one place, but many names would return many separate matches:
http://data.pastplace.org/search?q=colwall

This XML file does not appear to have any style information associated with it. The document tree is shown below.

```
▼<results>
  ▼<copyright>
     (c) 2012, Great Britain Historical GIS, University of Portsmouth, UK. Published under
     the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 UK: England & Wales License
     (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/uk/).
   </copyright>
  ▼<place>
     <id>2791</id>
     <name>COLWALL</name>
     <container>HEREFORDSHIRE</container>
     <lat>52.0789516379389</lat>
     <lon>-2.37359727202308</lon>
    ▼<gazetteerText>
     ▼<p>
        <b>COLWALL</b>
        , a parish in Ledbury district, Hereford; under the Malvern Hills, and on the
        Worcester and Hereford railway, 3¼ miles NE by N of Ledbury. It has a station on
        the railway, and a post office, of the name of Colwall-Green, under Malvern.
        Acres, 3, 771. Real property, £5, 714. Pop., 1, 628. Houses, 290. The surface
        shares the scenery of the Hereford beacon on the Malvern Hills. A gold circlet,
        set with stones, was found, in 1850, at Wind's point. The living is a rectory in
        the diocese of Hereford. Value, £540.* Patron, the Bishop of Hereford. The church
        is decorated English, with a castellated tower; and contains some brasses and
        monuments. A school has £35 from endowment; and other charities £33. (In 1870-72,
        John Marius Wilson's
        <i>Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales</i>
        )
      </p>
     </gazetteerText>
     <link>http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colwall</link>
    ▼<link>
       http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/HEF/Colwall/index.html
     </link>
     <link>http://www.geonames.org/2652518</link>
    ▼<unit>
       <id>10078271</id>
       <status>CP/AP</status>
       <name>COLWALL</name>
     </unit>
    ▼<unit>
       <id>10169926</id>
       <status>EP</status>
       <name>COLWALL</name>
     </unit>
    ▼<nearByPlace>
```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