

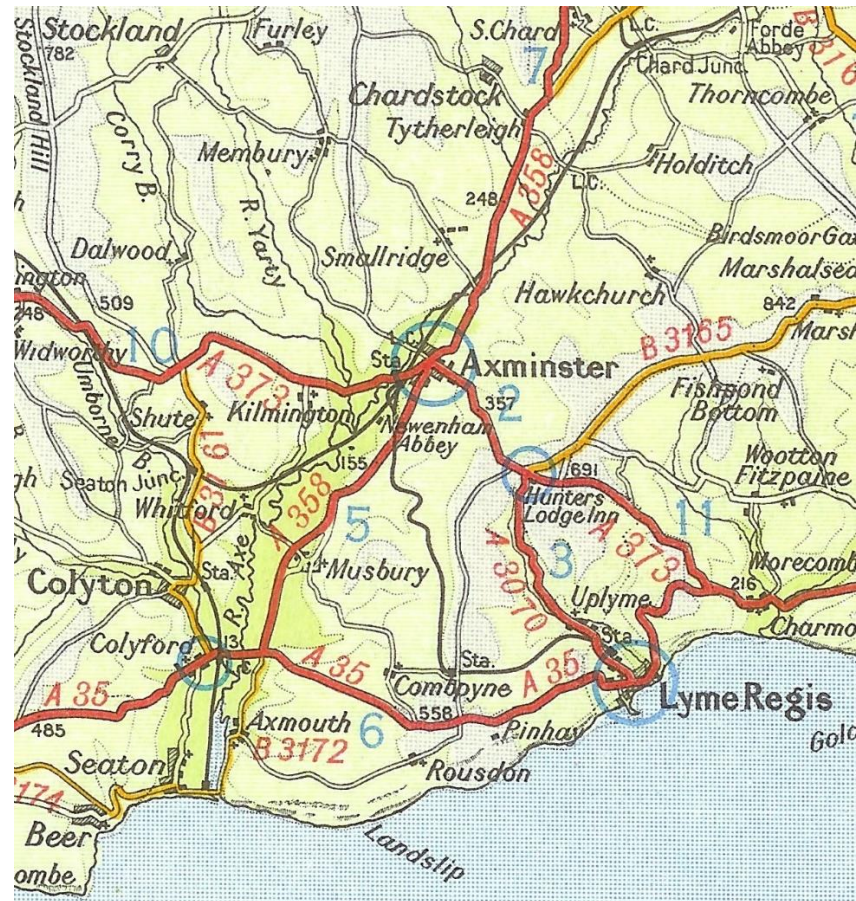
# Axminster's 'Natural Hinterland': Parishes, Villages and Hamlets

## Introduction

Axminster is not only a market town with a very long history in its own right; it is both a civil parish and an ecclesiastical one (the two entities now cover largely, but not precisely, the same geographical area, but the boundaries have frequently been changed over time).

Its strategic location is based on two geographical 'facts on the ground': the town overlooks the confluence of the Axe and the Yarty rivers, some 5 miles from the sea; and it sits at the junction of the ancient 'Portway' trade route and the Roman Fosse Way<sup>1</sup>. As the population density grew, these facts made it a natural focus for surrounding settlements, and in 1204 King John granted the Lord of the Manor the right to hold regular markets at Axminster. The question then arises: how far does this 'natural hinterland' spread?

This map, from the 1950s, represents an area measuring about 16km (or 10 miles) from south to north (from Beer to Stockland), and about 13km (or 8 miles) from west to east (from Stockland to Forde Abbey).



<sup>1</sup> There is scope for debate as to whether the Roman road which passes through Axminster formed part of the Fosse Way itself, or was simply one of several 'feeder' roads which joined the Fosse Way to the north of Chard.

## **Parishes, and what happened before they were established**

Parishes form important building blocks in any consideration of a town's history and significance. In the era since written records started to become both widespread and necessary (particularly since the 1550s when records of births, marriages and deaths were required by law to be kept) every parish had (at least in theory) a resident educated man in the form of the local priest, and a defined set of boundaries which could form the basis for the raising of taxes and the administration of the law. Furthermore, no land was allowed to slip between the boundaries of parishes, except in very remote areas with few if any residents. If tax was collected from all parishes, the King knew that he was spreading his net over the whole country.

Lords of the Manor also had their roles to play, and great influence over what was actually done locally, but the footprint of their landholdings seldom coincided with parish boundaries.

This situation had developed over time. The records of lawsuits from the 14<sup>th</sup> to mid-16<sup>th</sup> centuries which are held in the National Archives show that references to places are increasingly references to parishes as we would understand them.

Much earlier than this, when churches and chapels were fewer and further between, documents such as the Domesday Book (of 1086) focused on settlements, without reference to parishes per se.

For an excellent overview of a parish-based approach to the history of Devon, look no further than the [Genuki.org.uk](http://Genuki.org.uk) website. For Dorset parishes, a good starting point is the [opcdorset.org](http://opcdorset.org) website.

For a wonderful and accessible account of what is recorded in the Domesday Book, go to the [Opendomesday.org](http://Opendomesday.org) website.

## **Hamlets**

The parish of Axminster includes parts of Smallridge, and outlying hamlets (or groups of farms) at Westwater, Weycroft and Wyke. The rest of Smallridge, together with All Saints, Churchill and Alston, are in the parish of Chardstock. Furley is a hamlet within Membury parish, and Whitford and Hampton both fall within Shute parish. Maidenhayne is part of Musbury, and Yawl is in Uplyme parish. For centuries Beer and Seaton formed a single parish, with Beer being the larger of the two settlements.

## **Hundreds**

From Saxon times parishes were grouped together into 'Hundreds'. This is not the place to discuss the origins or details of the term; suffice it to say that they were created to give a group of parishes a single place where they could look for some sort of justice, and as the population grew, so some of the Hundreds were split up.

Axminster was the focus of a Hundred from the start, but whereas the earliest manifestations covered large swathes of East Devon, in due course new Hundreds were created centred on Colyton and Ottery St Mary (uniquely in Devon, a single-parish Hundred, reflecting Ottery's importance and wealth).

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the practical significance of Hundreds was in steep decline, Axminster Hundred wrapped around Colyton, taking in Honiton at the western end and the slopes of the Blackdown Hills in between.

## **County boundaries**

Axminster has always been part of Devon, but several nearby parishes have been the subject of boundary adjustments since the 1840s.

At that time Stockland was an 'island' parish which belonged to Dorset, but was surrounded by Devon parishes. Until 1842 Dalwood was a chapelry within the parish of Stockland (and therefore also part of Dorset in ecclesiastical and administrative terms), but in 1842 it became a parish in its own right. Likewise Thorncombe was a Devon 'island' parish within Dorset. Both Chardstock (including All Saints) and Hawkchurch also formed part of Dorset at that time, but unlike Stockland they were not surrounded by Devon lands.

In 1844 Stockland and Dalwood were transferred to Devon, and Thorncombe was transferred to Dorset. It was not until 1896 that Chardstock and Hawkchurch were transferred from Dorset to Devon.

## **Axminster Registration District**

On 1 July 1837 Axminster became a Registration District for births, marriages and deaths, covering an area which went as far as Beer in the west. The 'next district over' was centred on Honiton, with Yarcombe falling into the Chard district. As the parishes identified above moved into Devon they were transferred to the Axminster Registration District. These arrangements survived until 1930, when the much larger Honiton district was created, and Axminster was amalgamated into that.

## **Deaneries**

Parishes were also organised into 'Deaneries' by the Church of England. Like the Hundreds, Deanery boundaries were subject to periodic review and adjustment, but for a significant period Axminster formed part of the Honiton Deanery, which when combined with parts of some smaller adjacent Deaneries, was comparable in size and composition to the post-1930 Honiton Registration District (see above).

## **Axminster Rural District Council area (20<sup>th</sup> century)**

At one time Axminster had both an Urban District Council and a Rural District Council, which covered the outlying parts of Axminster parish, plus several adjacent and nearby Devon parishes. In 1939 the 14 other parishes covered were: Axmouth, Beer (including Seaton), Chardstock (including All Saints), Colyton, Compyne, Dalwood, Hawkchurch, Kilmington, Membury, Musbury, Rousdon, Shute, Stockland and Uplyme.

## **Axminster County Court District (20<sup>th</sup> century)**

When the County Court sat at Axminster, the court's remit covered Axminster itself plus the 14 parishes named immediately above, plus five Dorset parishes: Catherston Leweston, Charmouth, Lyme Regis, Thorncombe and Wootton Fitzpaine.

## **Summary**

The table below identifies all parishes which lie wholly or largely within the area shown on the map at the start of this document.

The table shows which of these parishes:

1. Lie physically adjacent to Axminster parish (ignoring the ancient Axminster tithings of Beerhall and Shapwick).

2. Were included within the historic 'Hundred' of Axminster.
3. Were included within the Registration District centred on Axminster, as defined in 1837.

<b>Parishes</b>	<b>Adjacent to Axminster?</b>	<b>Axminster Hundred?</b>	<b>Axminster Reg. District?</b>
All Saints	See Note 1	From 1896	From 1896
Axminster	(Yes)	Yes	Yes
Axmouh	No	Yes	Yes
Beer	No	(Colyton)	Yes
Chardstock	See Note 1	From 1896	From 1896
Charmouth	No	(Dorset)	(Dorset)
Colyton	No	(Colyton)	Yes
Combpyne	No	Yes	Yes
Dalwood	Yes	From 1844	From 1844
Hawkchurch	Yes	From 1896	From 1896
Kilmington	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lyme Regis	No	(Dorset)	(Dorset)
Membury	Yes	Yes	Yes
Musbury	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rousdon	No	Yes	Yes
Seaton	No	(Colyton)	Yes
Shute	No	(Colyton)	Yes
Stockland	No	From 1844	From 1844
Thorncombe	No	Until 1844	From 1844 to 1896
Uplyme	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wootton Fitzpaine	Yes	(Dorset)	(Dorset)

Note 1	Chardstock parish used to include All Saints, and All Saints is adjacent to Axminster. Chardstock has a local history website which also covers All Saints.
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As set out above, all of these parishes were covered by the Axminster Division of the County Court in 1939, and all of the Devon parishes were also at that time in the area administered by Axminster Rural District Council. The only parish in either of these administrative sets not listed in the table above is Catherston Leweston, a very small parish to the north east of Charmouth.

These parishes can therefore quite reasonably be considered to constitute Axminster's wider natural hinterland, with the links being looser the further one travels from Axminster itself.

Taking into account the way that neighbouring towns have developed, as well as the historical ties outlined above, the parishes which are unequivocally linked to Axminster are Kilmington, Membury and Musbury, closely followed by Hawkchurch, All Saints, Chardstock, Stockland, Dalwood, Shute, Axmouth, Combpyne, Rousdon and Uplyme, not forgetting Wootton Fitzpaine just over the county boundary.