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PastPlace: the historical gazetteer service from the people who brought you A Vision of Britain through Time

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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.

WHATS 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 the-saurus; so Gruinard Island, Gruinard House and 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 “Grenroird 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, 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 “Grenroird or Gruinard, a bay, an island, and two streams of NW Ross-shire.”
- **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.

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

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
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

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 Challifoms’ 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.

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