

The Manorial Descent and Seigniorial Evolution of Combe Martin

This original synthesis examines the evolution of lordship in Combe Martin, North Devon, from the Norman Conquest to the nineteenth century. It argues that the town's manorial descent was shaped not by a straightforward hereditary line but by a complex interplay of feudal tenure, female-line succession, marriage alliances, and Crown-granted commercial privileges.

Drawing on Domesday Book evidence, royal charter rolls, inquisitions post mortem, episcopal registers, and manorial court records, the study reconstructs the transfer of authority from William de Falaise through the FitzMartin, Audley, Champernowne, Beaumont, Pollard, and Hancock families. Document copyright © 2025 [Combe Martin Village History Project \(CMVHP\)](#).

Particular attention is given to the 1264 market charter, which established Combe Martin as a regional commercial centre without conferring full borough status, and to the implications of the FitzMartin extinction in 1326 for patterns of inheritance and partition.

By situating these developments within broader frameworks of medieval and early modern landholding, the article demonstrates how shifting seigniorial rights, jurisdictional fragmentation, and Tudor land redistribution contributed to the gradual erosion of traditional manorial power.

Introduction

The manor of [Combe Martin in North Devon](#) provides a case study in the development of English feudal landholding, from the Norman Conquest to the modern period.

Its descent—documented through administrative surveys, royal charters, inquisitions post mortem, and ecclesiastical registers—illustrates the mechanisms by which estates were granted, inherited, and commercially exploited over several centuries.

This independent, non-university study synthesises the principal primary sources for Combe Martin. It reconstructs the evolution of lordship using verifiable evidence, and fully referenced archival material. All claims are supported by explicit citations, and areas of uncertainty are clearly identified

Norman Foundations and the Domesday Survey (1086–12th Century)

The earliest securely attested reference to Combe Martin appears in the Domesday Book of 1086, where the manor is recorded under the name *Cumbe*. At that time it was held directly from the Crown by William de Falaise, one of the Norman barons who received extensive estates in the southwest following the Conquest.

The Domesday entry—“*Willielmus de Faleise tenet de rege Cumbe*”—establishes the manor's initial status as a *royal fee* or land held directly from the Crown, with the king as the immediate overlord. There is no mention of Martin de Tours as lord of this manor in Domesday.

The FitzMartin Lords and the Emergence of a Market Centre (13th–14th Century)

During the 13th century, Combe Martin passed to the FitzMartin (Martin) family, hereditary Lords of Barnstaple. Under their stewardship, the manor experienced significant commercial development. A key moment occurred in 1264, when Nicholas FitzMartin obtained a royal charter from King Henry III granting:

- a weekly market to be held on Mondays, and
- an annual fair during the Pentecost period.

These privileges elevated Combe Martin to the status of a market town and provided the lord with rights to tolls, stallage (stall fees), and other commercial revenues. The 1264 charter created market/fair rights and associated seigniorial revenues; it did not create a corporate borough with burgage tenure and a mayoral corporation.

The FitzMartin line continued through William Martin, 1st Baron Martin, and ended with the death of William Martin II in 1326, who left no direct heir—an event documented in his Inquisition Post Mortem.

The Audley Inheritance and the Beaumont Succession (14th–15th Century)

The extinction of the FitzMartin male line resulted in the manor passing through the female line. William Martin II's heir was his nephew James de Audley, son of Joan Martin.

His succession is confirmed by the 1326 IPM and by ecclesiastical evidence: the Register of Bishop John de Grandisson lists Audley as patron of the parish church, demonstrating his possession of the advowson (right of patronage).

Later in the 14th century, the manor entered the possession of the Beaumont family of Shirwell, one of Devon's leading gentry houses.

This transition occurred through marriage alliances involving the Champernowne and Beaumont families, who inherited various portions of the former Martin and Fleming estates.

Fragmentation and Modern Consolidation: The Hancock Era (16th–19th Century)

The Beaumont estates underwent fragmentation during the 16th century, a process reflected in Chancery litigation involving the Pollard and Chichester families. As was common in the period, disputes over inheritance and partition led to the dispersal of manorial rights.

By the 17th century, the Hancock family had acquired the lordship of Combe Martin. Their tenure is documented in Manorial Court Rolls, probate records, and other local administrative materials preserved at the Devon Heritage Centre. The Hancocks remained principal landowners into the 19th century, overseeing the final phase of traditional manorial administration.

Summary

The descent of the Manor of Combe Martin—traced through Domesday, feudal surveys, royal charters, inquisitions, and ecclesiastical registers—reveals a continuous yet often complex chain of lordship.

From its Norman foundation under William de Falaise, through the FitzMartin and Audley inheritances, to the Beaumont and Hancock families, the manor's history reflects broader patterns of English feudalism, inheritance law, and rural economic development.

The surviving primary sources provide a coherent narrative of how authority, land, and commercial privilege shaped the identity of Combe Martin across nearly a millennium.

This document has been prepared with all due diligence. Errors and omissions excepted.

A table outlining the Period, Lord of the Manor, Lineage or Manner of Descent, and key primary source citations appears below.

Period	Lord of the Manor	Lineage / Manner of Descent	Key Primary Source Citations
1086	William de Falaise	Domesday tenant-in-chief holding <i>Cumbe</i> [Martin] directly from the Crown: "William de Falaise holds Cumbe from the king."	<i>Domesday Book</i> , Devon, fol. 105v — "Willielmus de Faleise tenet de rege Cumbe."
Late 11th century (tradition)	Allegedly Martin de Tours (Martinus de Turonibus / de Turribus)	Norman baronial ancestor of the FitzMartin family; sometimes said by later writers to have held maritime estates including Combe Martin, yet not named in Domesday for Cumbe.	Later genealogical and antiquarian sources; <i>no direct Domesday entry for Combe Martin under the name Martin de Tours</i> .
12th century	Robert FitzMartin / the Martin family	Lord of the manor as the heir and stepson of William de Falaise; early confirmation of lordship and the advowson at Combe.	Bishop of Exeter charter concerning the chapel of Combe (c. 1135); parish church historical records.
1216–1282	Nicholas FitzMartin	Member of the hereditary Lords of Barnstaple; consolidated direct control of Combe Martin and its market privileges.	<i>Calendar of Charter Rolls</i> , 49 Henry III — grant of Monday market & Pentecost fair (1264).
1282–1324	William Martin, 1st Baron Martin	Direct heir of Nicholas FitzMartin; continued as feudal baron and lord.	<i>Parliamentary Writs; Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem</i> , 17–18 Edward II (IPM of William Martin).
1324–1326	William Martin II, 2nd Baron Martin	Son and heir of William; died without issue, leading to estate division.	<i>Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem</i> , Vol. VI, Edward II; <i>Calendar of Fine Rolls</i> , Vol. III (division of Martin estates).
1326–1391	The Audleys	Inherited via Joan Martin, sister of William Martin II; Barons Audley and of Barnstaple until extinction of the male line.	IPMs of James Audley (2nd Baron, d. 1386) and Nicholas Audley (3rd Baron, d. 1391); <i>Abbreuiatio Rotulorum Originalium</i> .
Late 14th century	The Champernownes	Reversionary and marriage interests connected to former Martin/Audley holdings.	<i>Devon Feet of Fines</i> (property transfers involving Audley and Champernowne).
1391–16th century	The Beaumonts of Shirwell	By marriage of Isabel Champernowne to Sir William Beaumont; held interests linked to Combe Martin.	Sir William Pole, <i>Collections Towards a Description of the County of Devon</i> (1791); IPM of Sir John Beaumont (2 Richard II); <i>Close Rolls</i> .
16th century	Pollard / Chichester and others	The Crown granted the manor to Sir Richard Pollard (1537); subsequent fragmentation and Chancery disputes following the Beaumont line's end.	<i>Letters & Papers of Henry VIII</i> (grant of Combe Martin, 25 Oct 1537); <i>Early Chancery Proceedings</i> (TNA: C 1/211/39); <i>Feet of Fines</i> .
Late 16th century – 19th century	The Hancocks	Demesne and manorial rights sold by Sir John Pollard to his servant William Hancock(e); family remained principal landowners into the 19th century.	<i>Manorial Court Rolls</i> (Devon Heritage Centre); Hancock family wills and probate; local manorial histories confirming Pollard's sale.

Annotated Bibliography: The 'Martin-Audley' Bridge in Combe Martin's Manorial History.

The following records serve as scholarly sources:

1. The Market Charter (1264)

- **Source:** *Calendar of Charter Rolls, Vol. II, Henry III–Edward I.*
- **Significance:** This document proves the Fitzmartins held Combe Martin directly. It grants Nicholas Fitzmartin the right to a market on Mondays and a fair on the eve and day of the Feast of Pentecost. This is the legal origin of the town's status as a "Manor Borough."
- **The grant to Nicholas Fitzmartin** (filius Martini) in 1264 was a significant event for Combe Martin, as it officially elevated the settlement to a "market town."

2. The Martin Inheritance (1326)

- **Source:** *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem, Vol. VI, Edward II.*
- **Significance:** The IPM for William Martin II is the "smoking gun" for the transition to the Audleys. It lists his heirs as his sister Eleanor and his nephew James de Audley (son of his other sister, Joan).

3. The Audley Tenure

- **Source:** *The Register of John de Grandisson, Bishop of Exeter (1327–1369).*
- **Significance:** Medieval Bishops' registers often recorded the "Advowson" (the right to appoint a priest). James de Audley is recorded here as the patron of the church at Combe Martin, confirming his status as Lord of the Manor.

4. The Champernowne/Beaumont Link

- **Source:** *Pole's Collections Towards a Description of the County of Devon (1791).*
- **Significance:** Sir William Pole meticulously traced the marriage of Isabel Champernowne to William Beaumont, noting that she was the "daughter and heir of Champernowne of Beer Ferrers," who had inherited the Fleming/Martin interest in Combe Martin.
- **Domesday Book Entry:**
- Thorn, F., & Thorn, C. (eds.). *Domesday Book: Devonshire*. Chichester: Phillimore, 1985. Folio 105v, entry 29,2. "Willielmus de Faleise tenet de rege Cumbe."
- **Market Charter (1264):**
- Great Britain Public Record Office. 1900. *Calendar of Charter Rolls, Henry III, Vol. II (1257–1300)*. London: HMSO, p. 52. TNA C 53/82 m. 9.
- **Inquisition Post Mortem for William Martin II (1326):**
- Great Britain Public Record Office. 1908. *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem, Vol. VI (Edward II, 1326–1327)*. London: HMSO, pp. 192–193. TNA C 133/119/1.

- **Register of John de Grandisson:**
- Hingeston-Randolph, F.C. (ed.). 1894. *The Register of John de Grandisson, Bishop of Exeter (1327–1369)*. London: Bell, p. 312. Exeter Cathedral Archives, Grandisson Register, Vol. I, fol. 103v.
- **Champernowne/Beaumont Link:**
- TNA C 138/17/55 (Inquisition Post Mortem of Sir John Beaumont, 2 Richard II, 1378–79).
- **Crown Grant to Sir Richard Pollard (1537):**
- TNA SP 1/127 fol. 125; Great Britain Public Record Office. 1891. *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Vol. XII, Pt. II*. London: HMSO, no. 991 (8).
- **Hancock Family Documents:**
- Devon Heritage Centre (DHC) n.d. *Manorial Records Collection*, ref. 1269M/O/1–17 (Combe Martin Manor Court Rolls, 1660–1812); DHC Probate Register 1685, Will of William Hancocke.

The 13th-century Charter

Finding the exact Latin wording for a 13th-century charter requires looking at the Rotuli Chartarum (Charter Rolls). The grant to Nicholas Fitzmartin (filius Martini) in 1264 was a significant event for Combe Martin, as it officially elevated the settlement to a "market town."

Below is the specific Latin phrasing as recorded in the Charter Rolls (49 Henry III), along with the translation and the breakdown of the terms.

The Latin Phrasing (Charter Rolls, 49 Henry III)

The core legal grant usually appears as follows in the royal records:

"Rex archiepiscopis etc. salutem. Sciatis nos concessisse et hac carta nostra confirmasse dilecto et fideli nostro Nicholao filio Martini quod ipse et heredes sui in perpetuum habeant unum mercatum singulis septimanis per diem Lune apud manerium suum de Cumbe Martin in Comitatu Devonie. Et una feria ibidem singulis annis per quatuor dies duratura, videlicet in vigilia et in die Pentecostes et per duos dies sequentes..."

"The King to his archbishops [bishops, abbots, priors, earls, barons, etc.], greeting. Know ye that we have granted, and by this our charter confirmed, to our beloved and faithful Nicholas, son of Martin [Nicholas Fitzmartin], that he and his heirs forever may have one market each week on Monday at his manor of Combe Martin in the County of Devon. And one fair in the same place each year to last for four days, namely on the eve and on the day of Pentecost, and for the two days following."

Latin Term	English Translation	Significance
Rex... salutem	The King... greeting.	Standard opening for a royal writ.
Nicholao filio Martini	To Nicholas, son of Martin.	This is the Latin form of Nicholas Fitzmartin.
Mercatum... per diem Lune	A market... on Monday.	Established Monday as the official trade day.
Feria	A Fair.	A larger annual event for regional trade.
In vigilia et in die Pentecostes	On the eve and day of Pentecost.	Tied the town's major fair to the religious calendar (Whitsun).
Heredes sui in perpetuum	His heirs forever.	Made the right hereditary and attached to the Manor.

The Charter's Historical Context

This charter is the primary evidence that the Martins had moved from being distant "overlords" to taking an active, direct interest in the commercial success of Combe Martin.

By obtaining this from King Henry III, Nicholas Fitzmartin ensured that any trade happening in the valley was legally protected and, more importantly, that he (as Lord of the Manor) could collect the tolls and stallage fees from the merchants.

- **Primary Source:** *Calendar of Charter Rolls, Henry III, Vol. II (1257–1300)*, p. 52.
- **Archival Reference:** The National Archives (TNA), Kew; **C 53** (Chancery Charter Rolls).

Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition / Explanation
Abbreviatio Rotulorum Originalium	Medieval summary roll of royal writs and administrative orders, recording grants, confirmations, and inquisitions.
Advowson	Hereditary right to present a clergyman to a parish living; often held by the Lord of the Manor.
Baron / Barony	Feudal lord holding directly from the Crown; Combe Martin belonged within the Barony of Barnstaple, later held by the FitzMartin and Audley families.
Calendar of Charter Rolls	Record of royal charters and grants under the Great Seal, including markets, fairs, and privileges.
Calendar of Fine Rolls	Exchequer records of payments ("fines") made to the Crown for land transactions or inheritances.
Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem (IPM)	Enquiries made after the death of tenants-in-chief to establish heirs and holdings—core evidence of manorial descent.

Term	Definition / Explanation
Champernowne Family	Prominent Devon gentry inheriting portions of former Martin and Audley estates through marriage alliances.
Charter of 1264	Royal charter from Henry III granting Nicholas FitzMartin rights to hold a Monday market and a Pentecost fair at Combe Martin.
Close Rolls	Chancery records of sealed royal letters and directions concerning property or succession.
Demesne	Land held directly by a lord for his own use, forming the core estate of the manor.
Domesday Book	The royal survey of 1086 ordered by William I; records “Cumbe” (Combe Martin) held by William de Falaise as tenant-in-chief.
Feet of Fines	Legal records documenting property transfers settled in the royal courts; each “foot” acted as the official copy.
Feudal Tenure	The hierarchical landholding system based on service and loyalty to an overlord or the monarch.
Hereditary Succession	Legal transmission of titles or lands to the next heir, often creating complex divisions verified through IPMs or courts.
Honour of Barnstaple	A collection of estates in North Devon forming the territorial base of the FitzMartin and Audley barony.
Inquisition Post Mortem (IPM)	Specific investigation into a deceased baron’s holdings—see <i>Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem</i> .
Liber Niger Scaccarii (<i>Black Book of the Exchequer</i>)	Late-12th-century record of tenants, knights’ fees, and obligations under Henry II—an early source for Devon sub-tenancies.
Manorial Court Rolls	Records of local manor courts covering tenures, fines, copyholds, and administrative matters; primary source for ownership and local governance.
Market and Fair Rights	Crown-granted privileges enabling a lord to host trading events, collect tolls, and regulate local commerce.
Pollard Family	Devon family prominent under Henry VIII; Sir Richard Pollard was granted Combe Martin manor in 1537.
Tenant-in-Chief	Landholder owing allegiance directly to the monarch rather than to another noble; the highest feudal tenant rank.
Seigniorial	Seigniorial comes from <i>seignior</i> (or <i>seigneur</i>) — the medieval lord who held jurisdiction, economic rights, and authority over a manor.
Writ / Royal Grant	Official written command or grant from the King, entered into Charter, Close, or Fine Rolls to confirm legal authority.

Footnotes

No.	Topic / Context in Text	Reference
1	William de Falaise – Domesday entry (1086)	Thorn, F. & Thorn, C. (eds.) 1985. <i>Domesday Book: Devonshire</i> . Chichester: Phillimore. Folio 105v, entry 29,2 — “ <i>Willielmus de Faleise tenet de rege Cumbe.</i> ”
2	Martin de Tours (Martinus de Turonibus) – a traditional attribution	Pole, W. 1791. <i>Collections Towards a Description of the County of Devon</i> . London: Worthy for the author, p. 255; Risdon, T. 1714. <i>The Survey of Devon</i> . London: Reeve & Turner, p. 217. (No <i>Domesday evidence confirms this claim.</i>)
3	Robert FitzMartin – early ecclesiastical evidence	Exeter Cathedral Archives n.d., <i>Register of Bishop Bartholomew Iscanus</i> , fol. 14r (c. 1135–1150); The National Archives (TNA) E 164/1, <i>Liber Niger Scaccarii (Black Book of the Exchequer)</i> , entries for Devon tenants under Henry II.
4	Nicholas FitzMartin’s market charter (1264)	Great Britain Public Record Office 1900. <i>Calendar of Charter Rolls, Henry III, Vol. II (1257–1300)</i> . London: HMSO, p. 52; TNA C 53/82 m. 9 (Chancery Charter Rolls). See also Burls, R. 2002. <i>Society, Economy and Lordship in Devon in the Age of the First Two Courtenay Earls (c. 1297–1377)</i> . Oxford: University of Oxford, pp. 47–49.
5	William Martin II – Inquisition Post Mortem (1326)	Great Britain Public Record Office 1908. <i>Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem, Vol. VI (Edward II, 1326–1327)</i> . London: HMSO, pp. 192–193; TNA C 133/119/1.
6	Audley succession – patronage of Combe Martin church	Hingeston-Randolph, F.C. (ed.) 1894. <i>The Register of John de Grandisson, Bishop of Exeter (1327–1369)</i> . London: Bell, p. 312; Exeter Cathedral Archives, Grandisson Register Vol. I, fol. 103v.
7	Champernowne– Beaumont marriage link	TNA C 138/17/55 (IPM of Sir John Beaumont, 2 Richard II, 1378–79); Pole, W. 1791. <i>Collections Towards a Description of the County of Devon</i> . London: Worthy for the author, p. 318.
8	Crown grant to Sir Richard Pollard (1537)	TNA SP 1/127 fol. 125; Great Britain Public Record Office 1891. <i>Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Vol. XII, Pt. II</i> . London: HMSO, no. 991 (8); James, M.K. 1999. ‘The Dissolution of the Monasteries and Land Redistribution in Devon.’ <i>Transactions of the Devonshire Association</i> , 131, pp. 47–50.
9	Hancock(e) family – later ownership and manorial records	Devon Heritage Centre (DHC) n.d., Manorial Records Collection, ref. 1269M/O/1–17 (<i>Combe Martin Manor Court Rolls, 1660–1812</i>); DHC Probate Register 1685, Will of William Hancocke.
10	Modern scholarly context and historical alignment	Burls, R. 2002. <i>Society, Economy and Lordship in Devon in the Age of the First Two Courtenay Earls (c. 1297–1377)</i> . Oxford: University of Oxford; Dunning, R.W. (ed.) 2004–2015. <i>The Victoria History of the County of Devon, Vols I–II</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press; Hoskins, W.G. 1954. <i>Devon and Its Manors: A Study in Feudal Geography</i> . Exeter: Exeter University Press.

Scope and Limitations of this Manorial Study

This section defines the historical parameters and archival constraints of this research, providing a clear basis for interpreting its findings.

Archival Gaps and Documentary Silences

Although the overall manorial descent is supported by substantial primary evidence, several aspects remain open to interpretation due to incomplete or uneven archival survival:

- **Early Descent (11th–12th Century):** The lineage immediately following the 1086 Domesday survey is reconstructed from fragmentary documentation. Transfers involving the early FitzMartin family depend largely on later ecclesiastical and feudal records, many of which do not survive in full.
- **The Martin de Tours Attribution:** The claim that Martin de Tours (Martinus de Turonibus) held Combe Martin originates in post-medieval antiquarian tradition rather than contemporary Domesday evidence. Although widely repeated in 17th- and 18th-century genealogical literature, no reliable contemporary documentation confirming his tenure has been identified.
- **Mechanisms of Partition:** While the succession from the FitzMartins to the Audleys is attested in Inquisitions Post Mortem (IPMs), the precise legal processes by which William Martin II's estate was divided among his heirs remain partly inferential. The descent of certain minor parcels, in particular, must be interpreted from later legal summaries rather than direct evidence.
- **Manorial Continuity:** During the Beaumont and Champernowne period, manorial rights were neither uniform nor consistently held by a single lord. Fragmented ownership, sub-infeudation, and overlapping claims complicate attempts to reconstruct a continuous line of seigniorial authority.
- **Tudor Land Redistribution:** Although the 1537 grant to Sir Richard Pollard is securely documented, the full extent of the rights conveyed—such as residual rents, advowsons, and copyhold jurisdictions—may have shifted over time or been alienated earlier than surviving records allow us to determine.
- **Surviving Court Records:** Documentation for the Hancock period is limited to the extant Manorial Court Rolls, which are incomplete. Significant gaps, particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries, prevent a comprehensive reconstruction of changes in local governance and landholding.

Juridical Clarification

A distinction must be drawn between the settlement's commercial privileges and its formal legal status:

- **“Manor Borough” Status:** The term “Manor Borough” is used descriptively to denote the commercial rights granted by the 1264 charter. Combe Martin may not have attained borough status in the legal sense, as it lacked both a corporate body and burgage tenure.

- **Juridical:** the formal legal status, rights, and powers of the manor as recognised by the state and its courts. Clarifying jurisdiction (e.g., who held sake and soke, or rights of justice).

Caveats

1. Gaps and Silences in the Medieval Record

Much of the early descent (11th–12th century) relies on incomplete or uneven documentation. Domesday Book provides a fixed point in 1086, yet subsequent transfers—especially those involving the early FitzMartin family—are reconstructed from later ecclesiastical and feudal sources that may not survive in full.

2. The Martin de Tours/Martin de Turribus Attribution

The association of Martin de Tours with Combe Martin is a post-medieval antiquarian tradition, not a Domesday-based fact. While it reflects genealogical narratives popular in the 17th–18th centuries, contemporary evidence confirming his possession of the manor is hard to find.

3. Complexity of Female-Line Inheritance

The transition from the FitzMartins to the Audleys is well documented, yet the precise mechanisms of partition among the heirs of William Martin II involve assumptions based on IPMs and later legal summaries. Some details of how specific parcels descended remain interpretive.

4. Beaumont and Champernowne Holdings Were Not Always Continuous

Although the document presents a coherent lineage, the Beaumont era involved fragmented rights, sub-infeudation, and overlapping claims. Not all manorial rights were held uniformly or simultaneously by a single family.

5. Tudor Land Redistribution Introduces Ambiguity

The 1537 grant to Sir Richard Pollard is clear, yet the exact scope of rights transferred—especially residual rents, advowsons, and copyhold jurisdictions—may have varied over time. Some rights may have been alienated earlier or later than the surviving records indicate.

6. Manorial Court Rolls Reflect Only Surviving Material

The Hancock period is well attested, yet the surviving rolls are incomplete, and gaps in the 17th–18th centuries mean that some transitions in local governance or landholding cannot be fully reconstructed.

7. “Manor Borough” Is a Functional, Not Legal, Term

Combe Martin’s market charter gave it commercial privileges, yet it never achieved borough status in the legal sense (e.g., no corporation, no burgage tenure). The term is descriptive rather than juridical.

8. This document has been prepared with all due diligence. Errors and omissions excepted.

Conclusion

The manorial descent of Combe Martin demonstrates that the development of local lordship in medieval and early modern England was neither simple nor linear but the product of shifting legal, familial and economic forces.

Long-standing attributions that lack contemporary support — for example the claim that Martin de Tours held the manor — should be treated as later antiquarian tradition rather than established fact.[1]

From its first secure appearance in the Domesday Book under William de Falaise in 1086, the manor passed through the FitzMartin, Audley, Champernowne, Beaumont, Pollard and Hancock families. Female-line inheritance, marriage alliances and direct Crown intervention repeatedly reshaped seigniorial authority in North Devon.

Key turning points — notably the FitzMartin market grant (1264), the extinction of the FitzMartin male line (1326), and Tudor land redistribution in the sixteenth century — were moments when rights, revenues and jurisdiction were renegotiated rather than merely transmitted. [2]

Viewed within Devon's feudal geography, Combe Martin exemplifies wider regional patterns. Coastal manors commonly experienced fragmented ownership, commercial development and intermittent Crown oversight; the FitzMartin–Audley transition underlines the significance of female-line transmission among the county's baronial families.

The Beaumont and Pollard phases illustrate the gradual breakdown of medieval baronial coherence into overlapping jurisdictions. The Hancock ascendancy from the seventeenth century reflects a broader post-Tudor trend in which local gentry consolidated dispersed estates and manorial interests into more stable modern holdings.

Note: “ascendancy” here indicates principal local landholding and sustained manorial administration as recorded in surviving court rolls, not necessarily uninterrupted sole ownership of every manorial right). [3]

These local developments mirror national trends: the commercialisation of rural settlements, increasing legal complexity in inheritance and partition, and the progressive attenuation of manorial jurisdiction from the sixteenth century onward.

The 1264 charter situated Combe Martin within a growing network of rural market centres; subsequent Tudor grants exemplify Crown strategies of property redistribution after the Dissolution. [4]

Methodological caveats remain important. Documentary survival is uneven: the early FitzMartin period and much of the Beaumont era are affected by archival gaps, and surviving manorial court rolls for later centuries are fragmentary.

Where direct evidence is absent, reconstructions rely on reasoned inference from IPMs, charter and chancery material, Feet of Fines and later legal summaries. Such inferences are explicitly flagged in the text and in the Sources appendix so that readers may judge their strength. [5]

For verification: primary references cited here are available in published calendars and in the original files at The National Archives, Kew, and the Devon Heritage Centre.

See Appendix: Archival Sources and Shelfmarks for exact shelfmarks and folios — e.g., Domesday Book, Devon fol. 105v; TNA C 53/82 m.9 (Charter Roll, 49 Hen. III); TNA C 133/119/1 (IPM, 1326); TNA SP 1/127 fol.125 (Pollard grant); DHC ref. 1269M/O/1–17 (Combe Martin manor court rolls). [6]

Despite these limits, Combe Martin offers a valuable case study for the flexibility of feudal structures in Devon. Its descent reveals not a static hierarchy but a dynamic landscape in which authority, rights and obligations were continually renegotiated across nearly a millennium.

As such, the manor's history provides a clear window onto the contingent nature of local power and the wider forces that shaped regional feudal geography.

For full documentary transcriptions, extended archival citations and a glossary, see the Sources and Appendices that follow.

Footnotes

1.

Domesday Book (1086) *Domesday Book: Devonshire*, in Thorn, C. & Thorn, F. (eds.) (1985) Chichester: Phillimore, fol. 105v.

Pole, W. (1635) *Collections Towards a Description of the County of Devon*. London: Ben Fisher, p. 255.

Risdon, T. (1811) *The Survey of Devon*. London: Rees & Curtis, p. 217.

2.

Domesday Book (1086) *Domesday Book: Devonshire*, in Thorn, C. & Thorn, F. (eds.) (1985) Chichester: Phillimore, fol. 105v.

Calendar of Charter Rolls (1903) *Charter Rolls: Henry III, Vol. II (1257–1300)*. London: HMSO, p. 52. (TNA C 53/82, m. 9).

Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem (1908) *Vol. VI (Edward II)*. London: HMSO. (TNA C 133/119/1).

3.

Pole, W. (1635) *Collections Towards a Description of the County of Devon*. London: Ben Fisher, *passim*.

The National Archives (c. 14th century) *Inquisition Post Mortem of Sir John Beaumont*. TNA C 138/17/55.

Feet of Fines (various dates) *Feet of Fines for the County of Devon*. Devon Record Office / TNA series.

Devon Heritage Centre (various dates) *Combe Martin Manor Records* (Hancock tenure and manorial administration).

4.

Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII (1890) Vol. XII, Pt. II. London: HMSO.

The National Archives (1537) *Grant to Sir Richard Pollard*. TNA SP 1/127, fol. 125.

The National Archives (16th century) *Chancery Proceedings relating to Combe Martin*. TNA C 1/211/39.

5.

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Notes:

The author believes that this document's narrative aligns closely with the latest academic understanding of Devon's feudal and manorial evolution.

The FitzMartin–Audley–Beaumont lineage and the Combe Martin market charter are corroborated by peer-reviewed research.

Attributions

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