

# A Guide to Combe Martin on The Bristol Channel

Fact Checked

The **Bristol Channel (and the Severn Estuary)** has [the second-highest tidal range in the world](#), with a range that can reach up to 15 metres (49 feet) during spring tides.

The Bristol Channel, a major UK inlet, defines the maritime geography of [North Devon](#), where [Combe Martin](#) lies.

[Combe Martin](#) is a historic coastal village known for its linear layout, [industrial history including silver mining](#), Victorian-era strawberry trade, and market gardening heritage.

[With its own local history website](#), the sheltered village is a popular walking spot on the [South West Coast Path](#).

## Key Facts About the Bristol Channel

- **Geography:** It separates South Wales from Devon and Somerset, stretching about 75 miles from its western limit between Hartland Point and St. Govan's Head.
- **Distance to South Wales:** Combe Martin to Cardiff direct across the Bristol Channel is about 25 nautical miles (direct).
- **Practical Navigation to South Wales:** Distance often nears 40 nautical miles, due to the Bristol Channel's extreme tidal range, shipping lanes, and sandbanks, which prevent travelling in a straight line.
- **Tides:** Features the second-highest tidal range in the world (after the Bay of Fundy).
- **Historical Significance:** Historically important for trade, it was severely affected by a 1607 flood, which is still commemorated, and it maintains maritime links with Cardiff.

## Key Facts About Combe Martin

- **Location:** Situated on the edge of Exmoor in North Devon, surrounded by some of the highest sea cliffs and densest coastal forests in the country.
- **History & Heritage:** Known historically for 600 years of silver and lead mining, lime burning in the 19th century, and being famous for superior quality strawberries in the Victorian era.
- **The SS *Snowflake*:** The *Snowflake* was a genuine Clyde-built puffer steamship (built 1893 as *Maid of Lorn*) that became closely associated with Combe Martin after its purchase by the Irwin family in 1897.
- **Bristol Channel Trade:** For over four decades, *Snowflake* operated across the Bristol Channel, carrying strawberries and other produce to South Wales and returning with coal.

**Snowflake's existence** is confirmed by official maritime records, museum collections, and regional archival sources.

- **Unique Structure:** The village is uniquely linear, running along the Umber Valley for over two miles. Combe Martin has one of the longest main streets in Britain.
- **Visitor Economy:** A popular destination with a sheltered, sandy cove and beaches popular for kayaking, swimming, and rock pooling, as detailed on Visit Devon.
- **Cultural Links:** The community, as described on the **Combe Martin Museum** site, has deep cultural connections across the channel to South Wales through mining and trade.
- **Impact on North Devon and Combe Martin:** The village of Combe Martin sits along this dynamic coastline, and the tidal range strongly influences:

Coastal landscape: Dramatic cliffs, exposed rock platforms, and rapidly changing shorelines.

Marine life: Rich intertidal ecosystems due to regular exposure and submersion.

Local activity: Fishing, boating, and coastal access are all shaped by tide timing.

Safety considerations: Fast-rising tides can catch out visitors unfamiliar with the area.

**A Defining Geographic Feature:** The Bristol Channel doesn't just border North Devon—it actively shapes its identity, from natural scenery to human activity.

### Map of the Bristol Channel, England/Wales.



Map Source: Combination of CIA World Factbook map and Demis Map Server (<http://www2.demis.nl/mapserver/mapper.asp>) data with additional annotations and modifications by Author: ChrisO.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ABristol\\_channel\\_detailed\\_map.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ABristol_channel_detailed_map.png)

## Regional Novels Tied to Combe Martin's Landscape

- *Lorna Doone* — by R. D. Blackmore
  - Set in nearby Exmoor (“Blackmore Country”)
  - The landscape around Combe Martin directly informed its atmosphere
- *Westward Ho!* — by Charles Kingsley
  - Popularised North Devon’s coast and helped shape its literary image
- *The Mighty Atom* — by Marie Corelli
  - Written partly during time spent in Combe Martin
  - Reflects the late-Victorian trend of coastal literary tourism

These authors collectively put North Devon “on the literary map”, with Combe Martin inside that imaginative geography.

## Direct Historical And Descriptive Writing

- Daniel Lysons and Samuel Lysons
  - Included Combe Martin in *Magna Britannia* (1822), one of the earliest systematic descriptions of the area
- John Lloyd Warden Page
  - Described the village’s fertile valley and everyday life in the 19th century
  - Example (short quote):

“gardens galore, varied with orchards...”

These works are important because they document the lived landscape, not just romanticise it.

## Specific Artworks & Artists

### Named paintings of Combe Martin

- *Combe Martin, Devonshire* (1855)
  - by George Wolfe
  - A coastal watercolour showing harbour life and topography

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## 2. J.M.W. Turner sketches

- *Combe Martin Harbour* (c. 1811)
  - by J. M. W. Turner
  - Sketches of the harbour and coastline

Turner's involvement is particularly significant—it places Combe Martin within the Romantic landscape tradition, alongside more famous British coastal scenes.

### 3. Ongoing artistic and documentary representation

- Photography and visual archives (e.g. 20th-century coastal images) continue to depict the area as a “classic Devon seascape”
- Local publications like *Out of the World and Into Combe Martin* (1989) preserve community storytelling and micro-history.

#### What makes Combe Martin distinctive:

- **Landscape continuity:** the same cliffs, valleys, and coast appear across art, fiction, and history
- **Embeddedness in “Blackmore Country”:** tied to a broader literary region rather than standing alone
- **Blend of genres:**
  - Romantic fiction
  - travel writing
  - antiquarian history
  - visual landscape art

### Suggested Reliable Sources

#### Combe Martin Village History Project (CMVHP)

Combe Martin Village History Project  
<https://www.combemartinvillage.co.uk/>

#### Why it's useful

- A **dedicated digital archive focused only on Combe Martin**
- Uses:
  - Domesday Book records
  - medieval manorial documents
  - mining and parish archives
- Strong emphasis on **primary sources and citations**

#### Strengths

- Very detailed (especially mining, medieval manor, silver industry)
- Good for timelines and structured local history

#### Limitations

- Independent/community-led (so best used alongside academic sources)

## 2. British History Online (essential academic baseline)

<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/>

### Why it's reliable

- Hosted by UK academic institutions (not commercial tourism)
- Contains:
  - county histories (like Devon volumes)
  - medieval records
  - parish and land surveys

### Why it matters for Combe Martin

- Often includes entries from:
  - *Victoria County History (Devon)*
  - medieval taxation and land ownership records

### Strength

One of the **most academically trusted UK history databases**

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## 3. National Archives (UK government records)

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

### Why it's reliable

- Official repository for:
  - legal documents
  - mining leases
  - land ownership records
  - Crown records (important for Combe Martin's silver mining history)

### Strength

**Primary-source authority level**

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## Devon Heritage Centre (local authority archive)

<https://swheritage.org.uk/devon-archives/>

### Why it's reliable

- Holds:
  - parish records
  - maps (e.g. enclosure maps)
  - census records
  - local government documents

## 5. Open Domesday (medieval baseline)

<https://opendomesday.org/>

### Why it's reliable

- Digital reconstruction of the **Domesday Book (1086)**

### Relevance

- Combe Martin appears in early medieval records as part of its manor system

### Strength

Excellent for **earliest documented history**

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## 6. Historic England Archive

<https://historicengland.org.uk/>

### Why it's reliable

- National body for:
  - archaeological sites
  - listed buildings
  - landscape heritage

### Relevance to Combe Martin

- Coastal archaeology
  - mining remains
  - historic buildings and church records
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## 7. Exmoor National Park Authority

<https://www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/>

### Why it's useful

- Covers surrounding landscape context:
  - settlement history
  - farming
  - coastal heritage

### Strength

Best for understanding Combe Martin as part of the wider **Exmoor/North Devon system**

## Document Creation and Attribution

Historical data and primary research provided courtesy of the **Combe Martin Village History Project** (<https://www.combemartinvillage.co.uk/>). April 2026.

Map data provided by ChrisO via Wikimedia Commons.

## Fact Checking

The reliability of the facts presented in this guide is established through a combination of institutional evidence, academic transcription standards, and specialized local research.

### 1. Curation & Verification

The **Combe Martin Village History Project (CMVHP)** serves as the primary architect of this information.

- **Independent Research:** Unlike crowd-sourced encyclopedias, the project is curated by dedicated local historians who rely on original investigation rather than anonymous contributions.
- **Institutional Synthesis:** The facts are synthesized from verified official records, including **British History Online**, **Exmoor National Park Authority** reports, and the **Exmoor Historic Environment Record (HER)**.
- **Evidence-Based:** The project explicitly states that its content is grounded in tradition or institutional historical evidence, avoiding speculative content or AI-generated text.

### 2. Academic & Government Baselines

The guide cross-references information with some of the UK's most trusted historical databases:

- **British History Online (BHO):** This digital library hand-transcribes primary and secondary content to a minimum **99.95% accuracy**. All keyed text undergoes quality assurance by editors at the Institute of Historical Research before publication.
- **The National Archives (TNA):** As the official repository for the UK government, the TNA holds authentic legal documents, mining leases, and Crown records that verify Combe Martin's silver mining history.
- **Historic England:** This national body follows strict professional standards for investigating and recording historic buildings and archaeological sites to ensure records are accurate and suited for scholarly use.

### 3. Transparency & Cross-Checking

While the materials are designed to be a reliable entry point for researchers, the CMVHP maintains a standard of academic transparency:

- **Peer Verification:** For higher-level scholarship, the project encourages users to cross-check claims with the primary sources they cite.
- **Revisions:** The archive routinely revises and republishes its research papers to reflect the most current historical understanding.
- **Disclaimer:** Use of the materials is at the discretion of the researcher, who is ultimately responsible for verifying suitability for their specific needs.