

# How the Dartington Barony Shaped the History and Name of Combe Martin

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Dartington, in the South Hams of Devon, was originally the centre of a substantial medieval barony. At the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086, the estate was held by William de Falesia [of Falaise] <sup>12</sup>, one of the Norman tenants-in-chief established in Devon following the Conquest of 1066.<sup>1</sup>

Soon after Domesday, the barony passed to Robert FitzMartin, son of Martin de Tours also known as Martyn de Tours (died before 1086), a prominent Norman lord with estates in both Devon and Wales.<sup>2</sup>

Robert appears to have acquired Dartington through marriage, a mechanism frequently used by Norman families in the late 11th and early 12th centuries to consolidate land and influence.<sup>3</sup> Although no surviving charter explicitly records the marriage, the transfer of the Falesia lands into the FitzMartin family aligns with known inheritance patterns.<sup>4</sup>

From this point onward, the family became known as the FitzMartin (or Martyn) dynasty. They held the barony of Dartington for six successive generations or more, establishing themselves as one of the principal landed families in the West Country.<sup>5</sup> Their influence extended beyond Devon: the FitzMartins also held the lordship of Cemaes in Wales and several manors in North Devon, including Combe [Martin].<sup>6</sup>

It is from this long association that the modern place-name Combe Martin derives. The manor of Combe, held by the FitzMartin family from at least the 12th century, became closely identified with its lords.<sup>7</sup>

Over time, the settlement came to be known as Combe [Martin] — literally “the Combe belonging to the Martins.” The name is a direct reflection of the family’s tenure and enduring influence on the landscape and identity of North Devon.<sup>8</sup>

The FitzMartin line ended in the early 14th century with the death of William, Lord Martin (d. 1324/5), who left no surviving sons.<sup>9</sup> His estates, including both Dartington and Combe, passed to his nephew James, Lord Audley, whose father, Nicholas Audley, had married Joan Martin, one of William’s sisters and co-heiresses.<sup>10</sup>

When James’s successor, Nicholas, Lord Audley (d. 1391), also died without male heirs, the estates reverted to the Crown, in accordance with an earlier entail specifying this outcome in the absence of male issue.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the same inheritance pattern that transferred Dartington from the FitzMartins to the Audleys — and eventually to the Crown — also shaped the history of Combe Martin. The village’s very name preserves the memory of the FitzMartin family, whose tenure linked these estates and left a lasting imprint on the historical geography of North Devon.

## Excerpt from *Magna Britannia* Vol. 6 – “Devonshire”. Lysons, 1822.

*Dartington was anciently the seat of a barony, which, at the time of the Domesday survey, belonged to William de Falesia. Shortly afterwards, Robert, son of Martin de Tours, Lord of Camois, in Wales, became possessed, probably by marriage, of the barony of Dartington, and all the lands which had belonged to the said William. This baronial family, by the name of Fitz Martin, or Martyn, continued to possess and reside at Dartington for six descents. Upon the death of William Lord Martin, who was a parliamentary baron, this estate devolved to James Lord Audley, whose father had married one of his sisters and co-heiresses. Upon the death of Nicholas Lord Audley, it passed, pursuant to an entail, made in default of issue male, to the crown (Lysons, 1822, *Magna Britannia*, Vol 6, pp. 150-155).*

### What Was the Barony of Dartington?

A barony in medieval England was not just a large estate — it was a feudal jurisdiction, a territorial unit held directly from the Crown by a baron in return for military and administrative service. A barony typically included:

- a principal manor (the “caput” or head manor)
- dependent manors and lands
- rights of jurisdiction (courts, fines, obligations)
- military service owed to the king

The Barony of Dartington was one such feudal barony. Its caput was the manor of Dartington in the South Hams, Devon.

Key features of the Barony of Dartington

- It appears in the Domesday Book (1086) under William de Falesia, a Norman tenant-in-chief.
- It later passed to Robert FitzMartin, son of Martin de Tours, forming the FitzMartin baronial line.
- The barony included multiple estates in Devon, including Combe (later Combe Martin).
- It remained in FitzMartin hands for six generations or more.
- It later passed to the Audley family and eventually reverted to the Crown.

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## How This Barony Shaped the History and Name of Combe Martin

The Barony of Dartington was the feudal lordship under which Combe Martin was held. The FitzMartin family — barons of Dartington — also held the manor of Combe in North Devon. Their tenure was long, influential, and well-documented.

Because the FitzMartins were the dominant lords associated with the manor, the place gradually became known as:

Combe (of the) Martin: Combe Martin

This naming pattern is common in medieval England, where a manor becomes identified with its ruling family. “Combe” as Old English *cumb* and “Martin” as the family name.

### The inheritance chain that shaped Combe Martin

1. William de Falesia holds Dartington at Domesday.
2. Robert FitzMartin acquires the barony soon after.
3. The FitzMartin dynasty holds Dartington and Combe for six generations or more.
4. William Lord Martin dies without male heirs (1324/5).
5. His estates pass to his nephew James Lord Audley.
6. Nicholas Lord Audley dies without male heirs (1391).
7. The barony — including Combe [Martin] — reverts to the Crown.

This is the same sequence that governs the descent of Combe Martin.

### Summary

- The Barony of Dartington was a major feudal lordship in medieval Devon.
- The FitzMartin barons held both Dartington and the manor of Combe.
- Their long tenure gave Combe its distinctive name: Combe Martin.
- When the FitzMartin line ended, both Dartington and Combe passed to the Audleys, then reverted to the Crown by default.
- The Fitzmartin barony’s history is therefore directly tied to the identity and naming of Combe Martin.
- The Fitzmartins constructed Dartinton St. Mary’s Church and enclosed a deer park. However, the estate fell into neglect over time.

Footnotes attached.

## Footnotes

1. *Domesday Book: Devon*, ed. Caroline and Frank Thorn (Phillimore, 1985), fol. 102b; William de Falesia listed as tenant-in-chief.
2. J. Horace Round, *Family Origins and Other Studies* (London, 1930), pp. 145–150; Martin de Tours documented as holding lands in Devon and the Welsh March.
3. R. R. Davies, *The Age of Conquest: Wales 1063–1415* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 68–70.
4. I. J. Sanders, *English Baronies: A Study of Their Origin and Descent 1086–1327* (Oxford, 1960), pp. 34–35.
5. *Magna Britannia: Devon*, vol. 6 (London, 1822), pp. 154–155.
6. K. L. Maund, *The Welsh Kings: Warriors, Warlords and Princes* (Stroud, 2006), pp. 112–114; FitzMartin holdings in Cemaes and Devon.
7. *Book of Fees* (Liber Feodorum), vol. 1 (London, 1920), p. 305; Combe listed under FitzMartin tenure.
8. Gover, Mawer & Stenton, *The Place-Names of Devon*, English Place-Name Society, vols. 8–9 (1931), s.v. “Combe Martin.”
9. *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, vol. 6 (London, 1908), no. 63: IPM of William Martin, 1325.
10. *Complete Peerage*, vol. 1 (London, 1910), pp. 337–339; genealogical descent of the Audleys.
11. *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, vol. 17 (London, 1983), no. 744: IPM of Nicholas Audley, 1391; reversion to the Crown noted.
12. Powell-Smith, A. (n.d.) *William of Falaise*. Open Domesday. Available at: <https://opendomesday.org/name/william-of-falaise/> (Accessed: 8 January 2026).

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