

St Peter ad Vincula Church, Combe Martin

Historical Study and Reference Guide

Revised September 2026 with Disclaimer

1. Introduction and Significance

The Church of St Peter ad Vincula on Church Street, Combe Martin, North Devon, is a Grade I-listed parish church and one of the finest examples of Perpendicular Gothic architecture in North Devon.

The tower at St Peter ad Vincula Combe Martin is frequently cited alongside nearby churches—such as Chittlehampton, Atherington, and Berrynarbor—as one of the peak architectural achievements of the late-medieval period in North Devon.

Combe Martin and Berrynarbor church towers share nearly identical proportions, buttress designs, and decorative detailing, strongly suggesting they were designed by the same late 15th-century master mason or master builder.

Key reasons Combe Martin St Peter ad Vincula Church deserves its reputation include:

- **Tower Proportion & Detail:** At four stages high, its sheer scale, elaborate crocketed pinnacles, carved statues in niches, and finely cut stone belfry windows set it apart from simpler rural parish churches.
- **Symbolic & Court Connections:** Wealthy parishioners with royal appointments contributed directly to the church's interior. For example, a prominent marble monument in Combe Martin's chancel chapel belongs to Judith Ivatt (d. 1634), whose husband Thomas Ivatt was "his Majesty's principal searcher in the Port of London" under King Charles I.
- **Key Points of Significance:**
Direct Bridge Between London Court & Local Manor:
Judith Ivatt (1608-1634) was the daughter-in-law and widow of local gentry, but her second husband, Thomas Ivatt, held a high-ranking royal patent as "principal searcher in the Port of London" under King Charles I. This royal office—effectively head of customs searchers at England's main port—was a position of enormous influence and wealth.
- **Elite Artistry in a Rural Church:**
Because of Thomas Ivatt's court connections and wealth, he was able to commission a high-status memorial for his young wife (who died at age 26). Positioned in the chancel chapel, it features a fine white marble bust. Scholars note its design mirrors high-end London/court-style sculpture of the 1630s (similar to monuments in Chipping Campden and Somerset).
- **Continuity of Local Lordship:**
Before marrying Thomas Ivatt, Judith was married to William Hancock, Lord of the Manor of Combe Martin. Her monument highlights how wealthy landed families intermarried with high-ranking royal officials, reinvesting court wealth back into the manor's parish church.
- **Symbolic Power Display:**
In the post-Reformation era, prominent wall monuments and ledger stones served as permanent displays of family piety, lineage, and royal favour. By placing a lavish court-style monument in St Peter ad Vincula Church, the Ivatt and Hancock families asserted their status both locally and within the wider kingdom.
- **Intact Medieval Interior:** Unlike many churches whose medieval interiors were stripped during the Reformation or heavily altered by 19th-century Victorian restorers, Combe Martin retains its 15th-century woodcarving, including the fan-vaulted rood screen and original painted panel figures.
- **Quality of Craftsmanship:** The stonework and woodwork reflect the significant wealth flowing into Combe Martin during the 15th century—conceivably driven by local silver and lead mining—which allowed Combe Martin parish to hire top-tier regional master masons and carpenters.

- **Direct Patrons and Lords of the Manor:** Were noble families, such as the fitz Martins, rather than of the Crown itself. Lords held their lands under feudal grant from the monarch.

Historic England identifies substantial 13th-century fabric in the church's south transept and, principally on the south side, in the chancel and nave. Major additions followed in the early 15th century, including the north aisle, north chancel chapel, north porch and west tower; a north transept was added in the late 15th or early 16th century. The south porch was rebuilt in 1725, and the church was restored in 1858 and 1881.

The dedication is to St Peter ad Vincula, conventionally rendered "St Peter in Chains", referring to the biblical account of St Peter's imprisonment in Acts 12. Local heritage sources describe Combe Martin St Peter ad Vincula Church as one of a small number of English churches; frequently stated as fifteen, not an independently established national count.

Local tradition and antiquarian sources frequently state that the towers of **Berrynarbor, Combe Martin, and Hartland** form a famous North Devon "trio" **designed by the same master mason or architect**.

An old North Devon rhyme celebrates their connection:

"Hartland for length, Berrynarbor for strength, and Combe Martin for beauty."

- **Shared Master Mason / Workshop:** While 15th-century parish churches did not have named "architects" in the modern sense, architectural historians agree that the west towers of Combe Martin and Berrynarbor were almost certainly built by the same itinerant lodge of master masons (or designed using the same master templates).
- **Somerset-Style Influence:** The towers at Combe Martin and Berrynarbor share distinct structural hallmarks influenced by late-medieval Somerset tower design:
 - Four tall, distinct stages.
 - Corner buttresses adorned with carved, trefoil-headed niches holding statues.
 - Elaborate crocketed corner pinnacles and embattled parapets.
 - Fine, tall three-light Perpendicular bell openings.

While there is no named, single individual recorded in historical archives, the striking stylistic identity strongly suggests they were constructed by the same regional master builder or mason workshop.

2. Early History and the Proposed 1133 charter

Local research proposes that an early church or chapel existed at Combe Martin by 1133. The evidence presented by the Combe Martin Village History Project concerns a Latin charter associated with Bishop William Warelwast, Robert fitz Martin and the Cluniac monks of St Pancras.

The research supplied by Anthony McCarthy to the churchwardens in 2024 interprets the document as recording the settlement of a dispute involving the chapel at Combe Martin.

The 1133 charter is a reconstruction and not a peer-reviewed primary source. It should therefore not be presented as definitive proof of the present church's foundation date. It is better described as proposed evidence for an early medieval ecclesiastical establishment at Combe Martin.

Ecclesiastical Patronage: Anglo-Norman lords routinely granted land, chapels, or tithes to monastic houses to secure prayers for their souls and consolidate territorial control. The proposed 1133 charter context—involving Robert fitz Martin, Bishop William Warelwast, and the Cluniac Priory of St Pancras at Lewes—reflects standard 12th-century feudal patronage, even if the specific document survives only as a reconstructed text.

3. Architecture

Combe Martin St Peter ad Vincula Church is predominantly medieval, with an architectural history extending from the 13th century into the early 16th century. Historic England describes the west tower as a particularly impressive four-stage Perpendicular structure, with embattled parapets, crocketed corner pinnacles, carved figures in niches, and large Perpendicular bell openings.

The church contains fine waggon roofs, a Perpendicular font, medieval and later screens, carved bench ends, monuments, stained glass and other historic fittings. The font is described by Historic England as a 15th-century octagonal, lead-lined bowl decorated with blind traceried panels, supported on a short circular stem with four outer colonettes.

4. Rood Screen and Later Sculpture

St Peter ad Vincula church retains a fine late-15th-century screen of nine and a half bays. Historic England records that the bays retain numerous original painted figures. The North Devon Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty notes that the painted saints in the wainscoting appear stylistically to be fifteenth-century. The screen originally supported a rood loft, reflecting the medieval liturgical arrangement.

The surviving rood sculpture in the church is a much later intervention. Local church-history material attributes the 1962 Calvary figures to Colin Shewring. While the surviving steps leading to the rood may be original, the original medieval rood itself should not be confused with this twentieth-century sculpture.

5. Musical Heritage

The church has an important twentieth-century musical history. Local heritage research records a pipe organ installed in 1905 by W. G. Vowles as a memorial to the Rev. Humphry William Toms, rector from 1842 to 1904. The same source records Bruce H. D. Steane as organist and choirmaster from 1918. The National Pipe Organ Register is cited by the local project in connection with the organ.

6. The 1744 Episcopal Visitation

The 1744 Episcopal Visitation provides a valuable record of parish life in the Georgian period. The Combe Martin research identifies George Gregory as rector and records information concerning worship, communion, catechising (the act of teaching religious doctrines, specifically Christian principles, through a structured system of questions and answers), education, the Free School, parish charity and the workhouse.

The visitation should therefore be seen as evidence about parish administration and religious life, rather than simply as a dispute between the rector and the schoolmaster.

7. Restoration and Twentieth-Century History

Historic England records major restorations to St Peter ad Vincula Church in 1858 and 1881. Local heritage research also records later work, including restoration of the rood screen and twentieth-century additions such as choir stalls and altar rails. CMVHP reports a 2024 roof and plasterwork restoration led by Hiax Preservation.

8. Claims Requiring Further Archival Verification

Local histories report a 1928 church court case described as “Rev. Seymour v. Beaumont-Checkland”. The story is sourced from author Peter Christie’s *North Devon History* (p. 119, Gaskell 1995).

The story also features in the North Devon Journal - Heritage Album - *175 years in North Devon (1824-1999)*, a commemorative historical booklet published by the [North Devon Journal](#) in late 1999 to mark its 175th anniversary

Similarly, the detailed terms of the proposed 1133 land grant, including its exact acreage and annual value, should be reproduced only after the underlying Latin text and its provenance have been independently checked.

9. Conclusion

St Peter ad Vincula, Combe Martin, is a significant medieval parish church whose surviving fabric and furnishings document several centuries of architectural, liturgical and social history. The strongest documentary and architectural evidence concerns the surviving medieval building, particularly its 13th-century fabric, early-15th-century additions, Perpendicular tower, late-medieval screen and 15th-century font.

The proposed 1133 charter is potentially important but remains provisional and should be presented as such.

Editorial Notes

This revision distinguishes documented evidence from local tradition and provisional research. In particular, the proposed 1133 charter mentioned herein, is treated as a reconstruction rather than as a verified surviving primary document. Architectural descriptions have been aligned with the current Historic England listing, and the Historic England list-entry number for this church is 1106799.

The Rev. Humphry William Toms, M.A. served as the rector of St Peter ad Vincula Church in Combe Martin for 62 years, from 1842 until 1904.

His remarkably long incumbency spans most of the Victorian era. Following his death, the current pipe organ was installed in the church in 1905 as a dedicated memorial to his six decades of service to the parish

References & Sources

1. Historic England, "Church of St Peter AD Vincula, Combe Martin", National Heritage List for England, List Entry No. 1106799.
2. North Devon Coast National Landscape, "Church - St Peter Ad Vincula - North Devon Coast", heritage interpretation page.
3. Combe Martin Village History Project, "St Peter ad Vincula Church, Combe Martin, North Devon", local historical research and bibliography.
4. Combe Martin Village History Project, "Combe Martin - Visitation 1744 / Churches", based on Friends of Devon Archives material.
5. Combe Martin Village History Project, *Court Case in 1928: Rev. Seymour v. Beaumont-Checkland*.
6. McCarthy, Anthony (June 2024), *Translation and Analysis of the 1133 Combe Martin Charter*, research report supplied to the Combe Martin parish churchwardens.
7. National Pipe Organ Register (NPOR), Combe Martin parish church organ records (Survey A00644).

Reference links

Historic England: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1106799>

North Devon Coast National Landscape: <https://northdevon-aonb.org.uk/explore/point/church-st-peter-ad-vincula>

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

Best-Efforts Note & Disclaimer:

This historical information is compiled using best efforts based on local heritage sources, architectural comparisons, and research collated by the Combe Martin Village History Project.

Disclaimer: Historical interpretations, local traditions, and unverified charters—such as reconstructed 12th-century documents—are presented as provisional local research rather than definitive primary evidence.

While architectural similarities between the towers are widely recognized, exact medieval mason identities remain unrecorded in surviving archives. Architectural records should be verified against official listings, such as Historic England (List Entry No. 1106799).