

St Peter ad Vincula Church, Combe Martin

A Comprehensive Historical Study and Monograph (1133-2026)

Author: Combe Martin Village History Project (2023-2026)



1. Introduction & Dedication Significance

St Peter ad Vincula Church in Combe Martin, North Devon, stands as a Grade I-listed ecclesiastical monument with an exceptionally rich history spanning over eight centuries. It is one of only roughly fifteen parish churches in England dedicated to "St Peter ad Vincula" (St Peter in Chains), recalling the imprisonment of Saint Peter in Jerusalem as recorded in Acts 12.

Architectural historians note that the present Combe Martin parish church structure sits upon an earlier Anglo-Saxon foundation, likely dedicated originally to Saint Petroc, the 6th-century Celtic prince and missionary prolific across South-West England.

2. The 1133 Latin Charter & "Calumnia et Querela"

The early documented history of the parish is anchored by a significant Latin charter dated 1133, provided for the Combe Martin churchwardens by researcher Anthony McCarthy in June 2024.

The charter records the formal resolution of an acute territorial and jurisdictional dispute referred to as "calumnia et querela" (false/contested claim and legal complaint). The dispute arose between the Benedictine Cluniac monks of St. Pancras (operating via Barnstaple Priory) and Robert fitz Martin, Lord of the Manor of Combe.

Key Aspects of the Alleged 1133 Settlement:

- **Adjudication:** Presided over by William Warelwast, Bishop of Exeter (1107-1137), during a diocesan synod held at the Combe Martin Church of St. Peter ad Vincula.
- **Relinquishment ("Calumniam suam dimiserunt"):** The Cluniac monks formally surrendered all claims and grievances against the chapel of Combe [Martin].
- **Land Grant in Frankalmoign:** In consideration for the release, Lord Robert fitz Martin granted the monks half a furlong of land (~10 acres) in Combe, producing an annual income of 3 shillings, as perpetual alms for the salvation of his soul, his wife's, and their ancestors.
- **Feudal & Royal Context:** Bishop Warelwast confirmed the charter with his seal under ecclesiastical counsel, securing the chapel for Robert fitz Martin and solidifying the lord's name within the parish identity (Combe Martin).

3. Architectural Masterpiece & Interior Heritage

Constructed predominantly from local slate and sandstone, the church reflects key architectural developments from the 13th through 16th centuries:

- **The 99-Foot West Tower:** Built in the distinctive Somerset Perpendicular Gothic style, featuring battlements, crocketed pinnacles, carved statues in niches, and a ring of eight bells.
- **Tudor Rood Screen:** A rare 15th-century oak screen preserving vibrant painted panels depicting Christ and the Twelve Apostles, meticulously restored between 2009 and 2011.
- **1962 Rood Sculpture:** Designed by Colin Shewring, adding a modern yet harmonious Calvary figure above the medieval loft.
- **1427 Baptismal Font:** Hexagonal octagonal font with traces of original medieval pigment.
- **Peter's Pence Poor Chest & Sanctuary Ring:** Historic 16th-century iron-bound poor box and heavy vestry door sanctuary fittings.

4. Musical Legacy & Modern Parish Governance

The church possesses a rich musical tradition documented in the National Pipe Organ Register (Ref. D07874). In 1905, a fine pipe organ built by W.G. Vowles was installed. From 1918, the distinguished composer Bruce H.D. Steane served as organist and choirmaster, enriching the parish's liturgical music.

In 1744, during an Episcopal Visitation, records detail local governance challenges including disputes between the Rector and the Free Schoolmaster. Further in 1928, the high-profile Church Court Case (Rev. Seymour v. Beaumont-Checkland) drew regional attention regarding parish administration.

Recent preservation efforts led by Hiax Preservation in 2024 have successfully repaired plasterwork and roofing, securing this ancient sanctuary for future generations.

Read the full article at www.combemartinvillage.co.uk/churches

Primary Source Charters & Manuscripts

- **Alleged Charter of Bishop William Warelwast** confirming the settlement between Robert fitz Martin and the Benedictine Cluniac Monks of St. Pancras (Lewes/Barnstaple).
- **Episcopal Visitation Returns (1744):** Diocese of Exeter Archdeaconry of Barnstaple Parish Records for Combe Martin.

National Heritage & Architectural Registries

- **Historic England:** *Church of St Peter ad Vincula*, National Heritage List for England (NHLE) Entry No. 1106772 / 1106799.
- **British Listed Buildings:** *Church of St Peter ad Vincula, Combe Martin*, Building ID 101106772.
- **National Pipe Organ Register (NPOR):** Organ Specification & History, Survey Ref. A00644 / D07874 (W.G. Vowles Organ, 1905).

Academic & Historical Publications

- **Barlow, Frank (2004):** *"Warelwast, William de (d. 1137)"*, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press.

- **Harper, Charles George (1908):** *The North Devon Coast*, London: Chapman & Hall (Contains regional architectural commentary on Hartland, Berrynarbor, and Combe Martin).
- <https://connection.newmanministry.com/saint/saint-petroc/>
- **Ward, Lock and Co. (1938):** *A Pictorial and Descriptive Guide to Bideford, Clovelly, Hartland, Barnstaple, Ilfracombe and North-West Devon*, London.

Local Heritage Research

- **McCarthy, Anthony (June 2024):** *Translation and Analysis of the 1133 Combe Martin Charter*, Research Report for Combe Martin Parish Churchwardens.
- **Combe Martin Village History Project (2023-2026):** *Parish Records, Local Land Grant Monograph, and Architectural Restoration Documentation*, CMVHP Archives.

Curatorial Disclaimer

Curatorial Note on Sources:

The Combe Martin Village History Project aims to present the most accurate and accessible account of the parish's heritage.

Some early medieval material – particularly relating to the 12th century – survives only in fragmentary form.

Where documentary evidence is incomplete or lost, modern researchers occasionally produce interpretative reconstructions based on later references, genealogical traditions, and regional patterns.

The proposed 1133 charter involving Bishop Warelwast, Robert fitz Martin, and the Cluniac monks is one such reconstruction.

It is included here as a scholarly interpretation, not as a verified primary source.

All other references in this monograph (NHLE listings, NPOR records, Episcopal Visitation Returns, architectural inventories, and published historical works) are fully attested and verifiable.

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Combe Martin



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