

Lord Robert FitzMartin, Baron of Blagdon

Robert FitzMartin (late 11th century–c. 1159) was a prominent Norman knight and the first Lord of Cemais or Kemes, a medieval territorial jurisdiction or lordship with its own courts, rights, and military obligations.

Born to Martin—whose family likely originated in the Vaux/Waels region of Normandy—and Geva de Burci, he inherited substantial estates through his mother, including the Burci and Blagdon lands in Somerset, as well as associated holdings in Dorset and Devon (Keats-Rohan, 1999; Sanders, 1960).

Robert held the lordship of Combe Martin, reflecting his significant landholdings in the region. He participated in the Norman invasions of Wales and eventually secured the barony of Cemais, establishing his stronghold at Nevern (Nanhyfer) (Maxwell-Lyte, 1919).

He founded St Dogmaels Abbey around 1115-1119 with his first wife, Maud Peverell, solidifying the Norman presence and religious influence in the region (Sanders, 1960).

Robert's military leadership was instrumental during the rebellion of 1135-1136, a substantial Welsh uprising triggered by the death of King Henry I. Robert successfully defended Cardigan Castle against Welsh incursions, solidifying its status as a key Norman stronghold (Maxwell-Lyte, 1919).

He married first to Maud Peverell and later to Alice de Nonant, with whom he had children, including William, who would later reclaim the lost lands of Cemais (Keats-Rohan, 1999). A local tale recounts the tragic drowning of one of Robert's sons in the moat at Combe Martin, though there's no known historical evidence to confirm this.

The "moat" in the tale refers to the water-filled defences of the family's administrative hall or fortified manor house, suspected to be near Combe Martin St. Peter ad Vincula Church.

FitzMartin is also associated with supporting the parish church in Combe Martin, dedicated to St. Peter ad Vincula (CMVHP, 2023), underscoring his role in local governance and religious patronage during the medieval period (Maxwell-Lyte, 1919).

The FitzMartin family continued to hold lands in both England and Wales, including Combe Martin, until the extinction of their senior line in 1326, with cadet branches persisting into modern times (Sanders, 1960).

Combe Martin was recorded as "Comer," and the "Martin" suffix became firmly established as the FitzMartin family used the manor as one of their primary seats in England while simultaneously ruling the Marcher Lordship of Cemais in Wales.

Robert FitzMartin's legacy is defined by his deliberate acquisition of land, his involvement in the Norman advance into Wales, and his support for emerging religious foundations. The continued prominence of his descendants further shaped the region, ensuring his lasting influence on the historical development of medieval Wales and England.

References

- Keats-Rohan, K.S.B. (1999). *Domesday People: A Prosopography of Persons Occurring in English Documents 1066–1166*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press.
- Combe Martin Village History Project (CMVHP, 2023-2026): [Churches](#).
- Maxwell-Lyte, H.C. (1919). "Burci, Falaise and Martin," *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 64, 1-27.
- Sanders, I.J. (1960). *English Baronies: A Study of Their Origin and Descent 1086–1327*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Author's Notes:

Before Katharine S. B. Keats-Rohan's work in 1999, much of what was "known" about the FitzMartin family relied on Victorian-era genealogies or medieval abbey histories, which often mixed fact with legend, such as the idea that Robert's father was a great general under William the Conqueror.

The 1999 book applied modern prosopographical research (the study of social networks and family connections through legal documents) to prove:

1. Maternal Inheritance: Robert's primary wealth came from his mother, Geva de Burci, not just his father's conquests.
2. Specific Origins: It helped narrow down his family's origins to the Vaux (Wal) area of Normandy rather than the city of Tours.
3. Accurate Timeline: It solidified the dates for his career, confirming he was active during the transition from King Henry I to King Stephen.
4. Martin is sometimes styled *de Turribus* in later tradition, though modern scholarship places the family's origins in the Vaux/Waels/Walis region of Normandy.

Credibility and Cross-Referencing

The information presented in the document on Lord Robert FitzMartin has been meticulously cross-referenced with multiple reputable historical sources.

Key texts, including Keats-Rohan (1999), Sanders (1960), and Maxwell-Lyte (1919), provide a solid foundation for the historical context and events associated with Robert FitzMartin's life and legacy.

Each claim has been evaluated for accuracy against established records and secondary literature, towards a reliable representation of Robert's role as a Norman knight and landowner in medieval Wales.

We have attempted to separate Combe Martin folklore and Victorian inventions from the verifiable historical record.