

Rone House - King Street, Combe Martin

From Temperance Hotel to Village Bakery

Rone House and the Commercial Evolution of the Delve Family Business in Combe Martin

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1. Introduction

Reconstructing the social and commercial history of small rural communities often relies on reconciling fragmented sources, including census records, local trade directories, and archival photographs. In Combe Martin, North Devon, the prominent multi-story building known today as Rone House (located near the junction of High Street and King Street) provides a compelling case study of commercial adaptation during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

While modern usage identifies the building primarily as private flats and holiday lets, primary visual and documentary evidence demonstrates that Rone House served as a dual-purpose commercial enterprise, operating successively as Delve's Temperance Hotel, Delve's Machine & Steam Bakery, and a general provision store.

2. Genealogical Framework: William Delve (1845-1922)

The anchor of this historical sequence is William Delve (Senior). According to genealogical records and index entries from the Combe Martin Village History Project (CMVHP):

- **Birth & Origins:** William Delve was born circa 1845 in Shirwell, Devon, the son of John Delve.
- **Marriage & Family:** He married Mary Tossell in 1871. Their family unit expanded in Combe Martin, including a son, William Delve Jr., born in 1875.
- **Lifespan:** Delve lived from 1845 to 1922, a timeframe that directly overlaps with the height of the Temperance movement in Victorian and Edwardian Britain.

As a prominent local tradesman, baker, and hotelier, Delve's involvement with village venues was commercial and civic; utilising public halls for local committee meetings, community functions, and parish events.

3. Archival Evidence: The Staff Photograph & Property Identification

The crucial link identifying Rone House as a temperance establishment comes from an archival photo index entry referencing a historical staff photograph (CMVHP Staff Photo #7), catalogued under the heading "Delve, William – 1845-1922 – Temperance Hotel, Rone House."



Figure 1: Historic photograph of Rone House operating as Delve's Machine & Steam Bakery and Family Grocer (CMVHP Photo #7).

An examination of the surviving photograph confirms several critical architectural and operational details:

1. Architectural Footprint: The photograph shows a substantial, three-story stone and brick structure featuring prominent bay windows on the upper floors and an expansive first-floor balcony with decorative wrought-iron balustrades.
2. Ground-Floor Frontage: Supported by classical stone columns, the store-front accommodates a recessed entrance, wide display windows, and prominent fascia signage.
3. Dual Commercial Signage: The primary lower fascia reads "DELVE'S MACHINE & STEAM BAKERY". A secondary sign mounted behind the first-floor balcony reads "WILLIAM DELVE / FAMILY GROCER & PROVISION...". Painted window advertisements feature major non-alcoholic brand names of the period, including Fry's Cocoa and Cadbury's Cocoa.

4. The Temperance Context in Rural North Devon

The identification of Rone House as a temperance hotel highlights the influence of the 19th-century Temperance movement within rural Devon. Driven largely by Nonconformist chapel culture (predominantly Methodist and Baptist congregations in North Devon), temperance hotels offered alcohol-free lodging, dining, and social space for travellers and local residents seeking alternatives to traditional public houses.

By offering lodging alongside non-alcoholic refreshments, tea, cocoa, and baked goods, William Delve's establishment aligned with broader national efforts to promote teetotalism through viable commercial alternatives.

5. Post-1922 Continuity: Wm. Delve & Son, Bakers

Following the death of William Delve in 1922, the family business continued to operate within Combe Martin. Local press entries and historical records—such as a [1945 Combe Martin Carnival supporters' list published in the local journal](#)—document the continued presence of "Wm. Delve & Son, Bakers."

This demonstrates commercial continuity across at least two generations, with the bakery business established by William Delve Sr. continuing under his descendants through the mid-20th century before the eventual closure of the enterprise and the building's subdivision into residential apartments.

6. Conclusion & Further Research Directions

The photographic and documentary record establishes that Rone House was a multi-faceted business premise central to the social and economic life of Combe Martin. Further investigation into census returns (1881-1921) and trade directories (Kelly's Directory of Devonshire) will help pinpoint the exact years during which the property transitioned primarily from hotel lodging to dedicated steam baking and grocery retail.

The specific movement that shaped Rone House and rural North Devon in the late Victorian era was Teetotalism. It operated as a Nonconformist-led commercial and social counter-culture, that provided alcohol-free lodging, dining, and community gathering spaces as alternatives to the local pub.

References

• Archival & Photographic Sources

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- Combe Martin Village History Project (n.d.) *Staff Photo #7: Delve, William (1845-1922) - Temperance Hotel, Rone House* [Unpublished Archival Photograph]. Combe Martin: CMVHP Archive.
- [Combe Martin Carnival 1945 / Community | Combe Martin Village History \[The Little Parish with a Big Story\]](#)

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• Historical Newspaper Archives

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- **Published History on Temperance**

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Harrison, Brian (1971). British socio-religious history. London: Faber & Faber.

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- **Secondary Regional & Social History**

- [Devon History Society - *Eating Out in Devon in the 1920s*. Exeter: Devon History Society.](#)
- [Combe Martin Village Hall / Community | Combe Martin Village History \[The Little Parish with a Big Story\]](#)
- [Combe Martin Carnival 1945 / Community | Combe Martin Village History \[The Little Parish with a Big Story\]](#)

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