

Combe Martin in the Middle Ages

From Domesday Origins to the Barony of Barnstaple (1066–14th Century)

Nestled in a narrow North Devon valley, Combe Martin has a long and well-documented medieval history. Far from being an isolated rural settlement, it was a productive, populous, and valuable manor whose importance endured for centuries.¹

Anglo-Saxon Origins

Before the Norman Conquest of 1066, Combe Martin was already a significant estate jointly held by two Anglo-Saxon nobles, Brictric and Edwin. That arrangement that was relatively uncommon and suggests a structured estate rather than fragmented holdings.²

This arrangement suggests the estate was already cohesive and established before the Conquest, rather than a loose collection of smaller holdings.

The Norman Conquest and Domesday Book

After 1066, Combe Martin (recorded in Domesday Book as Comba) was granted to William de Falaise, a major Norman landholder who held his estates directly from the Crown.³ Its inclusion among his lands reflects its recognised value within the new Norman landholding system.

The Domesday survey of 1086 provides a detailed snapshot of the manor. Combe Martin was assessed as having land capable of supporting twenty plough teams, placing it among the more agriculturally productive manors in North Devon. Most manors in the region supported considerably fewer ploughs.¹

Domesday records:

- 18 villein households (peasants), indicating a comparatively large rural population
- 14 tenant plough teams and 3 ploughs on the lord's demesne
- A clear division between the lord's land and tenant holdings

Together, these details indicate a well-established and clearly organised manorial economy. The figure of twenty plough teams represents agricultural *capacity* rather than constant full cultivation, but it reflects long-standing productivity and potential.¹

Part of the Barony of Barnstaple

In the centuries after Domesday, Combe Martin became firmly integrated into the Feudal Barony of Barnstaple, one of the major lordships in North Devon. Through inheritance and descent, the manor passed through the Beaumont and Tracy families before coming into the hands of the Martyn (or Martin) family, who became its principal medieval lords.⁴

By the mid-13th century, national records such as the *Testa de Nevill* list Combe Martin as a full knight's fee held by the Martyns.⁵ This status places it among the more valuable rural manors in the county and confirms its role within the barony's wider economy.

A Productive and Prosperous Manor

Combe Martin's value rested on more than farming alone. By the 13th century it was associated with **silver-lead mining**, which likely enhanced its economic importance and attracted sustained baronial interest.⁶

In **1249**, the lord of the manor secured the right to hold a **weekly market and annual fair**.⁷ Such grants were intended to encourage trade and generate income through tolls and rents. While medieval markets did not always succeed, their establishment shows that Combe Martin was regarded as a place of genuine economic potential.

Together, agriculture, mining, and regulated trade made the manor a consistently valuable asset over many generations.

Continuity and Significance

What stands out most in Combe Martin's medieval history is a long medieval history documented through key national records. From its joint Anglo-Saxon ownership, through Norman redistribution, and into long-term baronial control, the manor remained intact, productive, and economically significant.

Its importance did not depend on a single moment or lord, but on centuries of sustained use, organisation, and integration into wider regional structures. While medieval records must always be interpreted with care, the surviving evidence consistently places Combe Martin as an important component of North Devon's medieval landscape.⁸

Conclusion

This concise synthesis shows that by the later Middle Ages, Combe Martin was no marginal village. It was a long-established manor with a substantial population, strong agricultural foundations, mineral resources, and recognised value within the Barony of Barnstaple. Its history illustrates how a small valley community could adapt and endure through some of the most profound changes in medieval England.

Footnote Key

1. Domesday Book (1086), Devon: Comba (Phillimore ed.; Exon Domesday)
2. Domesday Book, T.R.E. holders
3. Domesday Book; William de Falaise as Tenant-in-Chief
4. Victoria County History of Devon, Vol. I

5. *Testa de Nevill* (Liber Feodorum), mid-13th century
6. Medieval silver-lead mining in Combe Martin, 13th century
7. Market and fair grant, 1249
8. Domesday Book; *Testa de Nevill*; IPMs of the Martyn family

Verified by the Charter Rolls of Henry III for its economic status. The Exon Domesday is used for its agricultural output.

Feature	Statements	On Record
Lord (1086)	William de Falaise	William of Falaise (b.btw. 1040–1050 – d. btw. 1107-1120).
Plough Capacity	20 Teams	20 Ploughlands
Population	18 Villein Households	18
Market Date	1249	Feb 1249 (Henry III)
Lord (13th C)	Martyn Family	Nicholas Martyn (c. 1210-1282)

Domesday Book (1086)

Abbrev.: DB

The great survey of England commissioned by William I. Combe Martin appears as Comba in the Devon folios.

- Primary Manuscript: *Great Domesday Book*, The National Archives, series E 31.
- Modern Edition: *Domesday Book: Devon* (Phillimore, 1985), ed. Caroline & Frank Thorn — Entry 17,1.
- Supplementary Manuscript: *Exon Domesday*, Exeter Cathedral Library, MS 3500.

Victoria County History of Devon

Abbrev.: VCH-Devon I

Page, William (ed.), *The Victoria History of the County of Devon*, Volume I (1906).

Provides contextual analysis of the Domesday Survey and the lands of William de Falaise.

*Testa de Nevill (Liber Feodorum)***

Abbrev.: TdN

A national survey of feudal landholdings compiled in the 13th century.

- Edition: *The Book of Fees (Testa de Nevill)*, 3 vols., Public Record Office (1920–31).
Records the Martyn family's tenure under the Honour of Barnstaple.

Market and Fair Grant (1249)

Abbrev.: Charter 1249

Royal charter issued by Henry III granting Nicholas Martyn a weekly market and annual fair.

- Edition: *Calendar of Charter Rolls*, Henry III, Vol. I (1226–1257).
- Date: 6 February 1249, Westminster.
Supporting evidence may be found in the *Fine Rolls of Henry III* (online).

Medieval Silver-Lead Mining Records

Abbrev.: Mining Accts

Evidence for 13th-century mining activity at Combe Martin appears across several published Exchequer series:

- *Pipe Rolls* (Henry III, Edward I)
- *Calendar of Close Rolls*
- *Calendar of Patent Rolls*
These document royal oversight, mining licences, and production for the Crown.

Inquisitions Post Mortem (IPM)

Abbrev.: IPM

Official enquiries held upon the death of major landholders.

- Published Editions:
 - *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, Vol. II (Edward I)
 - *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, Vol. VI (Edward II)
These volumes record valuations, tenurial obligations, and the descent of the Martyn family estates.

Appendix: Sources, Methodology, and Evidential Context

This appendix provides researchers with a consolidated overview of the primary and secondary sources underpinning this document *Combe Martin in the Middle Ages* (Short v2, February 2026). It outlines the documentary basis for each major historical claim, explains the methodological approach used, and identifies the authoritative editions through which the records can be verified.

A. Primary Sources Consulted

1. Domesday Book (1086)

The foundational record for Combe Martin's early medieval history.

- Great Domesday Book, The National Archives, series E 31.
- Modern Edition: *Domesday Book: Devon* (Phillimore, 1985), ed. Caroline & Frank Thorn — Entry 17,1 (Comba).
- Supplementary Manuscript: *Exon Domesday*, Exeter Cathedral Library, MS 3500.
 - Provides additional agricultural detail not preserved in Great Domesday.

Use in document:

Supports statements on pre-Conquest ownership, plough capacity, population, and the identity of the Tenant-in-Chief.

Cited in the PDF: “Combe Martin (recorded in Domesday Book as Comba)... twenty plough teams...”

2. *Testa de Nevill (Liber Feodorum)***

A national survey of feudal landholding compiled in the 13th century.

- Edition: *The Book of Fees (Testa de Nevill)*, 3 vols., Public Record Office (1920–31).
- Records Combe Martin as a full knight's fee held by the Martyn family under the Honour of Barnstaple.

Use in document:

Supports the section “Part of the Barony of Barnstaple” and the identification of the Martyns as 13th-century lords.

3. Charter Rolls (1249 Market and Fair Grant)

The authoritative record of royal grants issued under Henry III.

- Edition: *Calendar of Charter Rolls*, Henry III, Vol. I (1226–1257).
- Date: 6 February 1249, Westminster.
- Confirms the grant of a weekly market and annual fair to Nicholas Martyn.

Use in document:

Supports the statement: “In 1249, the lord of the manor secured the right to hold a weekly market and annual fair.”

4. Exchequer Records: Mining Activity

Evidence for silver-lead mining in Combe Martin during the 13th century.

- Pipe Rolls (Henry III, Edward I)
- Calendar of Close Rolls
- Calendar of Patent Rolls

These series document royal oversight, mining licences, and production for the Crown.

Use in document:

Supports the section “A Productive and Prosperous Manor.”

5. Inquisitions Post Mortem (IPM)

Official enquiries into landholding at the death of major tenants.

- Published Editions:
 - *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, Vol. II (Edward I)
 - *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, Vol. VI (Edward II)

Use in document:

Supports the concluding footnote: “Domesday Book; Testa de Nevill; IPMs of the Martyn family.”

B. Secondary Sources Consulted

Victoria County History of Devon

- Page, William (ed.), *The Victoria History of the County of Devon*, Vol. I (1906).
- Provides contextual analysis of Domesday entries, feudal descent, and the lands of William de Falaise.

Use in document:

Supports the section “Part of the Barony of Barnstaple.”

C. Methodological Notes

1. Use of Published Editions

All references in this document rely on published, stable editions rather than speculative archival catalogue numbers. This ensures:

- long-term verifiability
- consistency with academic practice
- accessibility for researchers without direct access to manuscript collections

2. Cross-Referencing Across Record Series

Where possible, claims are supported by multiple independent sources, e.g.:

- Domesday + Exon Domesday for agricultural capacity
- Testa de Nevill + IPMs for Martyn family tenure
- Charter Rolls + Close Rolls for market and fair activity

This triangulation strengthens historical reliability.

3. Interpretation of Domesday Data

Ploughland figures represent potential capacity, not constant cultivation.

Population figures reflect recorded households, not total inhabitants.

These interpretive principles follow standard Domesday scholarship.

E. Researcher Access Points

To support further study:

- Domesday Book (Phillimore): widely available in academic libraries
- Exon Domesday: Exeter Cathedral Library
- Book of Fees: Public Record Office edition
- Charter Rolls: HMSO calendars
- IPMs: HMSO calendars
- Pipe/Close/Patent Rolls: HMSO calendars and digital facsimiles

Glossary

- **Anglo-Saxon:** A term used to describe the people and culture in England from the 5th century until the Norman Conquest in 1066.
- **Barony:** A feudal estate or lordship controlled by a baron, often encompassing multiple manors and significant landholdings.
- **Domesday Book:** A comprehensive survey of England and Wales completed in 1086, commissioned by William the Conqueror to assess land and resources for taxation.

- **Feudal System:** A hierarchical system of land ownership and duties prevalent in medieval Europe, where lords owned land and vassals (tenants) would hold and manage it in exchange for services.
- **Knight's Fee:** A unit of land sufficient to support a knight, often used to denote the amount of land held by a tenant in exchange for military service.
- **Manor:** An estate consisting of a lord's residence and the surrounding lands that included villages, farmland, and common land, typically managed as a single economic entity.
- **Tenant-in-Chief:** A person who held land directly from the Crown and was responsible for paying taxes and providing military service.
- **Villein:** A peasant or serf in the feudal system who was tied to the land and had certain obligations to the lord of the manor, including labor and rent.
- **Inquisition Post Mortem (IPM):** An official inquiry held after a landholder's death to determine the value of their estate and who would inherit it.
- **Silver-Lead Mining:** The process of extracting silver-lead ore, which was significant in the 13th century for both local economies and royal revenue.
- **Market and Fair Grant:** A royal charter or permission allowing a manor to hold market days or fairs, which were essential for trade and commerce.
- **Testa de Nevill:** A 13th-century survey recording feudal landholdings in England, detailing the tenants and their obligations under the feudal system.

Document Citation

For academic use:

Combe Martin Village History Project (CMVHP, 2026). *Combe Martin in the Middle Ages (Short v2)*. Based on Domesday Book (Phillimore ed.), Exon Domesday (MS 3500), Testa de Nevill (Book of Fees), Charter Rolls (Henry III), and the Calendars of IPMs, Close Rolls, Patent Rolls, and Pipe Rolls.

Disclaimer

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