

How the Dual Baronies of Dartington and Barnstaple Shaped the History and Name of Combe Martin

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What Was the Barony of Dartington?

The **Barony of Dartington** was a major feudal honour based in South Devon, created shortly after the Norman Conquest of 1066. It comprised dozens of manors across Devon, providing political, military, and financial power to its holding lords.

Distinction from Barnstaple: While early antiquarians often grouped the FitzMartin family's lands together: modern research distinguishes Dartington from the Honour of Barnstaple, under which northern manors like Combe Martin were held.

Key Features of the Barony of Dartington

- **Feudal Scope:** Included broad territorial holdings throughout Devon, with Combe Martin as a significant northern manor.
- **Capital Seat:** Centred at Dartington, near Totnes, which served as the *caput baroniae* (head of the barony).
- **Economic Importance:** Combe Martin contributed valuable agricultural, coastal, and silver-mining revenue to the baronial estate.
- **Administrative Impact:** Lordship determined manorial courts, tenant rights, and land descent for centuries.

The parish of Combe Martin in North Devon possesses a rich medieval heritage, reflected vividly in its double name. The first element, *Combe*, derives from the Old English *cumb*, meaning a narrow valley or ravine. The second element, *Martin*, records the enduring impact of the Anglo-Norman FitzMartin family.

For centuries, antiquarian narrative—most notably Lysons' *Magna Britannia* (1822)—frequently treated the FitzMartin possessions under sweeping general titles such as "Baron Martin, of Barnstaple and Dartington."

However, modern feudal historiography reveals a more complex reality: the FitzMartins consolidated multi-baronial power across North Devon through two separate feudal honours, namely Dartington and Barnstaple. It was through this combined territorial dominance, and specifically under the jurisdiction of the Barony of Barnstaple, that the manor of *Cumbe* acquired its defining manorial affix.

The Feudal Footprint: Dartington and Barnstaple

To understand the feudal descent of Combe Martin, one must distinguish between the two core baronies held by the FitzMartin lineage in Devon:

- **The Barony of Dartington:** Established shortly after the Norman Conquest, Dartington was the family's original Devon foothold. It was acquired by Robert FitzMartin in the early 12th century through inheritance via his mother, Geva, who held land rights following her marriage to the Domesday tenant William de Falaise.
- Dartington provided the FitzMartins with immense prestige and territorial standing in South and Central Devon.
- **The Barony of Barnstaple:** The northern anchor of the family's estate was acquired much later, in the mid-13th century. Sir Nicholas FitzMartin (c. 1210-1282) married Maud de Tracy, co-heiress to the ancient Honour of Barnstaple. This alliance brought extensive manors across North Devon—including Combe—under direct FitzMartin lordship.

While nineteenth-century references often conflate these two honours due to their eventual union under a single baron, surviving medieval land records (such as the *Testa de Nevill* and the *Victoria County History of Devon*) demonstrate that the manor of Combe was formally a mesne tenancy held of the Barony of Barnstaple rather than Dartington directly.

The fame of Dartington as the primary caput of the FitzMartins led early historians to attribute the town's growth to that southern barony. **Yet it was the acquisition of Barnstaple that bound Combe Martin to the family estate.**

Chronological Lineage of the FitzMartin Lordship

Historical Figure	Approximate Dates	Key Feudal Role & Impact on Combe Martin
Martin de Tours (Martin of Wales)	fl. late 11th Century	Norman conqueror of <i>Kemes</i> [or <i>Cemaïs</i>] (Pembrokeshire); founder of the lineage.
Robert FitzMartin	c. 1095-1159	Secured the Barony of Dartington via maternal inheritance (Geva/William de Falaise); patron of monastic foundations.

Historical Figure	Approximate Dates	Key Feudal Role & Impact on Combe Martin
William I FitzMartin	d. 1209	Lord of Kemes and Dartington; married Avice de Tracy, cementing early ties to North Devon families.
Sir Nicholas FitzMartin	c. 1210-1282	Married Maud de Tracy, acquiring the Barony of Barnstaple. Secured a royal charter for a weekly market and annual fair at Combe Martin from Henry III (1265).
William II FitzMartin (1st Baron Martin)	1257-1324	Summoned to Parliament as 1st Baron Martin; oversaw peak silver mining productivity and agricultural development in Combe Martin.
William III FitzMartin (2nd Baron Martin)	d. 1326	Died without male issue, ending the direct male FitzMartin line; estates passed to co-heiresses Joan (Audley) and Eleanor.

How Feudal Lordship Shaped Combe Martin

1. Toponymy and Naming

In the Domesday Survey of 1086, the settlement appears simply as *Cumbe*, held by William de Falaise. As the FitzMartin family consolidated their northern holdings under the Barony of Barnstaple during the 12th and 13th centuries, the affix "Martin" was appended to distinguish the manor from numerous other "Combes" in Devon (such as Combe Raleigh or Higher Combe).

Thus, the name *Combe Martin* stands as a permanent marker of FitzMartin seignorial administration.

2. Economic Expansion and Charters

Under Sir Nicholas FitzMartin, Combe Martin transitioned from a quiet agrarian valley into a thriving market town. In 1265, King Henry III granted Nicholas a royal charter permitting a weekly Thursday market, and an annual fair during the feast of St. Bartholomew.

This economic foundation was further heightened in the late 13th and 14th centuries when rich industrial veins of silver and lead were exploited in the parish under royal direction, providing substantial wealth to the realm and employment to the locality.

3. Feudal Division and the Audley Inheritance

The direct male line of the FitzMartins ended abruptly in 1326 with the death of William III FitzMartin (2nd Baron Martin). Because he left no surviving male heirs, the vast combined estates of Barnstaple, Dartington, and Kemes were partitioned between his sister Eleanor (who married Philip de Columbars) and his nephew **James Audley** (son of his sister Joan FitzMartin).

James Audley subsequently became Lord of Combe Martin, cementing a new dynastic chapter while preserving the town's historical name.

Historiographical Re-evaluation

Earlier accounts of Combe Martin's history often oversimplified the family's land holdings by attributing all regional developments to the Barony of Dartington.

While Dartington established the family's baronial status in Devon, it was the marriage into the Tracy family and the acquisition of the Barony of Barnstaple that directly attached the manor of Combe to the FitzMartin domain.

Recognising this dual-baronial context provides an accurate understanding of North Devon's medieval political geography and honours both the primary seat at Dartington and the northern jurisdiction at Barnstaple.

Notes and References:

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The key revisions made to update the historical paper centre around correcting feudal terminology and clarifying the specific baronial jurisdiction over Combe Martin:

- **Dual Baronial Distinction:** The revised text explicitly distinguishes between the **Barony of Dartington** (the family's initial South Devon foothold) and the **Barony of Barnstaple** (their North Devon holdings).
- **Specific Jurisdiction of Combe Martin:** The paper corrects earlier 19th-century accounts (such as Lysons) that conflated the two baronies. It incorporates modern feudal historiography to clarify that Combe Martin was held specifically under the jurisdiction of the **Barony of Barnstaple**, rather than Dartington directly.
- **Acquisition Details:** It details how Sir Nicholas FitzMartin acquired Barnstaple in the mid-13th century through his marriage to Maud de Tracy, co-heiress to the Honour of Barnstaple.
- **Detailed Feudal Timeline:** The revision expands the chronological lineage into a structured breakdown outlining individual lords, their dates, and their exact feudal roles—such as Sir Nicholas FitzMartin securing a royal market charter in 1265 and William II FitzMartin overseeing silver-mining development.
- **Etymological Precision:** It notes the precise linguistic origin of "Combe" (from the Old English *cumb*) and specifies that the affix "Martin" was added specifically during the 12th and 13th centuries under Barnstaple lordship to distinguish the manor from other Devon "Combes".

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