

COMBE MARTIN MILLS AND MILLING

An Analytical Survey of the Water-Powered, Textile, and Metallurgical Extraction Industries of the River UMBER Valley

Research Monograph Series • Combe Martin Village History Project 2026

1. Introduction and Geographical Context

[Combe Martin](#), recorded in the Domesday Book (1086) as “Combe”, is a long-established settlement in North Devon whose name later became associated with the FitzMartin family, giving rise to “Martin’s Combe.” The element “combe” comes from an Old English/Brythonic word meaning valley, and the village lies within a steep-sided valley (the UMBER valley) on the edge of Exmoor.

The unique topography of the parish was forged between 410 and 360 million years ago during the [Devonian Period](#), shaped fundamentally by the Hangman Sandstone Group and the fossiliferous Ilfracombe Slates, which encompass the specific Combe Martin Slate member.

South West England was shaped by an ancient mountain-building episode known as [the Variscan Orogeny](#). Around 290 million years ago, the geology of the Combe Martin area was intensely compressed, folded, and faulted during this period of tectonic deformation.

This major episode of tectonic deformation fractured the local slate rocks and allowed mineral-rich fluids to circulate through them, depositing veins of valuable ores. As a result, the area developed significant concentrations of iron, manganese, and argentiferous galena—a silver-bearing form of lead [‘led’] sulphide that supported historically important mining operations.

Running along the central structural spine of this deep dale, the River UMBER flows rapidly down toward a sheltered coastal cove. The steep hydraulic gradient of the watercourse provided a continuous source of kinetic energy, prompting generations of engineers and millwrights to harness its power.

Across centuries of local structural change, the River UMBER sustained an extensive milling network that worked alongside, and frequently integrated with, the parish's celebrated royal silver mines, maritime coastal trades, and agrarian economies.

2. Early Feudal Landholding and the Manorial Monopolies

The institutional history of water milling within Combe Martin traces its lineage back to the Norman Conquest of 1066. As compiled within the Domesday Book of 1086, the coastal manor of Cumbe was held directly from King William I — 'The Conqueror' — by the Norman tenant-in-chief William de Falaise.

The census records a rural populace consisting of 37 households supporting 20 ploughlands, alongside five acres of woodland and extensive pasture lands. During the late eleventh century, the manor became associated with the Norman baron Martin de Tours, also known as Martinus de Turonibus. His descendants, the Martins and later the FitzMartin family, held the lordship for successive generations, giving rise to the enduring place-name Combe Martin.

Marthuscombe is recorded as an early historical name for the settlement, and some local historians interpret it as 'Mary's Combe' (Mary's Valley). However, it was not the Domesday name. The manor appears in the Domesday Book of 1086 as Cumbe (or Combe), simply meaning a valley or hollow.

Following the Norman Conquest, the manor became the caput of the Martin lordship in North Devon. Under the descendants of Martin de Tours—subsequently known as the Martins and FitzMartins—the settlement acquired the appellation 'Martin', from which the modern name Combe Martin derives.

The first explicit documentary evidence confirming active water milling within the parish appears within the Feet of Fines for the year 1198, during the ninth year of the reign of King Richard I. This legal record, detailing the transfer of real estate and manorial holdings, mentions active watermills in direct reference to the transfer of 12 furlongs (approximately 2.4 kilometres) of land spanning the manors of Combe, Holdstone, and Girt.

Further administrative evidence survives in the manorial accounts of 1507, compiled by John Lovering, Steward of the Manor, which record that Combe Martin's two corn mills were leased for an annual rent of £4. This figure was only marginally higher than the valuation of 70 shillings per annum, recorded in the 1326 Inquisition Post Mortem of William FitzMartin. This suggests a notable degree of continuity in the economic value of the mills across nearly two centuries.

Under the strict legal frameworks of the English manorial system, the Lords of the Manor maintained an absolute seigniorial monopoly over grain processing, known as soke rights. Tenants within the parish boundaries were legally compelled to grind all cereal crops exclusively at the lord's designated mills.

By the high medieval period, this processing network was concentrated at two primary sites: the Higher Mill (sited near the location where the Pack o' Cards Inn was later constructed c. 1690) and the Lower Mill (established at the upper end of Cross Street near the harbour).

Manorial leases typically conveyed both corn mills to a single master miller, ensuring centralised administrative control over the valley's grain processing and toll revenues.

3. Architectural Scale and Engineering of the Grist Mills

The mechanical operation of Combe Martin's grist mills required rigorous water management to cope with the seasonal flow fluctuations of the River UMBER. Millwrights executed a complex system of water engineering, excavating artificial open channels or leats parallel to the natural riverbed and building small stone dams or weirs to divert water into deep storage millponds.

This infrastructure ensured a reliable, high-velocity head of water to drive the mill wheels.

The physical fabric of the mills is described in surveys by the North Devon Archaeological Society (NDAS) as substantial two-storey structures built of colour-washed local rubble stone topped with pitched slate roofs. These facilities operated as grist mills, exclusively grinding grain for local consumption, converting wheat, barley, and oats into flour and meal.

The internal machinery operated on a multi-tier gravity sequence: grain sacks were raised to the upper floor using a mechanical sack-hoist driven by the rotation of the main axle, and the grain was then fed downward via wooden hoppers into the millstones on the floor below.

The grinding mechanism comprised a matching pair of massive circular millstones. The lower stone, or bedstone, remained fixed to the timber floor joists, while the upper stone, or runner stone, was rotated by a vertical iron spindle linked via wallower and pit gears to the external waterwheel.

As the runner stone revolved against the bedstone, the grain was sheared into flour, which spilled into collection spouts on the ground floor for immediate bagging.

The physical reality of this historic industry remains visible today: a large granite millstone remains preserved within the residential courtyard at the top of Cross Street, while local place names like Millweir Cottage provide lasting toponymic markers of the valley's vanished water networks.

4. Textual Traditions and the Monastic Hemp Industry

Beyond food production, Combe Martin's watermills played a central role in the historical mechanisation of textile finishes. Industrial archaeological fieldwork, conducted within the parish in 2008, uncovered structural foundations identified as a 12th-century monastic industrial hemp and fulling complex.

Field assessments suggested the site functioned as a monastic grange or demesne farmstead, established by the Benedictine Cluniac Order from the Priory of St Mary Magdalene in Barnstaple (originally founded c. 1107). This monastic link is further supported by regional medieval pottery shards excavated directly from the site's foundations.

The introduction of mechanized fulling mills by religious orders during the 12th century transformed the medieval English textile trade. In these mills, raw woven woollen cloth was immersed in large troughs filled with water and fulling agents, where it was continuously beaten by heavy wooden stocks or hammers driven by a waterwheel cam-shaft.

This process cleansed the fabric, shrank the weave, and forced the opposing wool fibres to interlock, transforming rough cloth into a dense, uniform, and weather-resistant textile. Historical trade records compiled by specialized topographers show that North Devon ports increasingly specialized in the export of these high-grade kerseys (coarse woollen cloths) and specialised ropes.

The Cluniac monks targeted the Combe Martin valley primarily due to its damp, fertile soils, which were ideal for cultivating hemp crops. From the 15th century through to the Victorian era, Combe Martin was celebrated as a major source of high-quality hemp, supplying regional rope-makers and sail-makers with raw materials.

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, local production was so substantial that formal proposals were drafted to establish a new port facility at the nearby Hartland Peninsula to handle the volume of Combe Martin's maritime hemp trade. To utilise sea breezes and ensure proximity to shipping vessels, Cross Street—running directly to the tidal cove—was historically utilised as a public ropery where long strands of hemp rope were twisted and braided.

5. Industrial Evolution: Smelting, Shipping, and Pigment Extraction

The mill sites chosen by medieval craftsmen were consistently adapted for alternative heavy industries across successive centuries, demonstrating the reliability of the initial hydraulic designs. The evolution of these sites reflects the broader shifts in British industrial history, where mills moved from grain processing into metallurgical and chemical extraction:

Site / Enterprise	Operational Era	Industrial Function & Output
Higher Mill	12th Century – c. 1850	Manorial grist mill; hydraulic grinding of wheat, barley, and oats for local parochial consumption.
Lower Mill (Grist)	12th Century – 1845	Manorial corn mill processing grain; subsequently transferred for heavy metallurgical conversion.
Lower Mill Smelting Works	Established 1845	Converted to a silver and lead smelting mill, using water-driven bellows to refine mined argentiferous galena ore before coastal export.
Borough Road Sawmill & Shipyard	c. 1835 – 1843	Established by John Dovell; operated by Messrs Dovell, Partridge and Co. Powered steam sawmills to cut timber and build schooners up to 100 tons.
Umbur Extraction Pits	18th – 19th Century	Water-driven extraction and washing of native iron and manganese oxide pigments; packed in timber barrels for global paint trade.

6. Economic Decline and the "Shammick" Identity

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the traditional watermills of Combe Martin were rendered economically obsolete by sweeping macroeconomic changes. The repeal of protective grain tariffs (the Corn Laws) allowed cheap foreign grain to flood British markets, making small parochial grist mills unviable.

Simultaneously, the local silver-lead mining operations suffered severe technical failures, including uncontrollable underground flooding and prohibitive pumping costs, which forced the closure of the Lower Mill smelting furnaces.

The intensive industrial activity left a profound visual mark on the community; during the Victorian era, the smoke from smelting works, coal dust from Welsh maritime trade, and muddy run-off from the riverside umbur pits led visiting topographers and writers to describe the busy parish as a 'Shammick'—a traditional West Country dialect term denoting a mess, slum, or shambles.

Remarkably, the local population adopted the derogatory description as a badge of pride. Transforming the term into a celebrated local demonym, multi-generational inhabitants proudly identified themselves as 'Shammickites'—a title that remains active within the regional dialect and continues to serve as the name of the monthly village magazine today.

Following the final cessation of heavy industrial milling and mining around 1902, the community shifted rapidly into market gardening, utilizing the valley's steep, south-facing slopes and ancient medieval strip-field systems. Combe Martin became renowned across the United Kingdom for its early soft fruits, flowers, and vegetables, exporting millions of strawberries by cart and ship across the Bristol Channel and by rail to London.

Today, the physical legacy of this industrial evolution is curated by [the Combe Martin Museum](#) and [Silver Mines Society](#), protecting one of North Devon's most important industrial archaeological landscapes.

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