

The Combe Martin Poor Law Riot of 1836

Takeaway

The Combe Martin and wider North Devon disturbances during 1836 may be classed as anti-Poor Law riots or "Poor Law disturbances". The trigger wasn't a shortage of bread or its price; it was the *administrative* switch from cash relief to relief paid in bread, under the controversial 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. The bread itself became a symbol of the loss of cash allowances and the threat of the workhouse.

Introduction

In February 1836, tensions in Combe Martin escalated into rioting when the newly appointed relieving officer attempted to replace traditional cash payments with relief-in-kind, particularly the distribution of bread. The authorities called out the Yeomanry to restore order (Andrew Jones, 2010, "Victorian North Devon: A Social History").

W. J. Gilbert, the Assistant Commissioner responsible for organising the new Poor Law unions, reported to the Poor Law Commission that rumours had contributed significantly to the unrest (*ibid*).

People had been led to believe that accepting the bread would result in their furniture being confiscated, and that they would be sent to the workhouse without regard to their individual circumstances. Another rumour claimed that the bread itself had been poisoned, leading some to fear that they would die simply by touching it.

The disturbances at Combe Martin in 1836 formed part of a wider outbreak of resistance in North Devon to the implementation of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.

The episode occurred at a moment when the government was replacing the locally administered system of poor relief with a more centralised system of Poor Law Unions, Boards of Guardians and professional officers.

In Devon, where traditional outdoor relief was deeply established, the change provoked considerable suspicion and, in some places, open violence.

The Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 did not simply abolish outdoor relief overnight. Its purpose was to reorganise poor relief and encourage the use of the workhouse, particularly for able-bodied applicants.

Under the new system, parishes were grouped into Poor Law Unions administered by elected Boards of Guardians, while officers appointed under the new arrangements became responsible for administering relief. The system was intended to reduce expenditure and to make the receipt of relief less attractive than independent employment.

Combe Martin was incorporated into the Barnstaple Poor Law Union, which formally came into operation in December 1835. The Union contained 39 constituent parishes and was administered by a Board of Guardians.

Combe Martin already had a long history of parish poor relief: a parliamentary return of 1777 recorded a parish workhouse there, occupying what was subsequently known as Church House.

Thus, the arrival of the new Union system represented a change in the administration and conditions of relief, rather than the sudden creation of poor relief where none had previously existed.

The Background to Resistance

The strength of opposition in Devon needs to be understood against the economic and social circumstances of the early 1830s. Geoffrey Doye's study of the North Devon disturbances describes a period of severe economic depression accompanied by the closure of local industries.

Labouring people were consequently apprehensive about any reduction or alteration in the assistance on which families had traditionally depended. Doye argues that the poor understood that the new system was expected to produce financial savings for ratepayers, while they saw little prospect that the reforms would improve their own circumstances.

This was particularly important in Devon because the Old Poor Law had operated through local parishes. Before the reforms, parish overseers could provide outdoor relief—assistance given to people while they remained in their own homes.

The 1834 legislation sought to replace this relatively flexible system with a more standardised arrangement and encouraged the principle that able-bodied people should normally obtain relief through the workhouse.

The distinction between cash relief and relief in kind could therefore become politically and socially significant. A customary allowance of money could be used by a household according to its own needs. Replacing it with food supplied by the authorities represented a much more direct intervention in the household's independence.

The Combe Martin Disturbance

The surviving accounts indicate that opposition at Combe Martin centred on the administration of relief under the new system. Local people objected to the proposed provision of relief in kind, particularly the distribution of bread in place of money.

The protest should not simply be interpreted as hostility to bread or to poor relief itself. The dispute was about who controlled relief, in what form it was supplied, and what conditions accompanied it.

For people accustomed to receiving parish allowances, the substitution of food for money could be understood as evidence that the authorities intended to impose the more restrictive principles associated with the New Poor Law.

There was also a powerful fear of the workhouse. The workhouse was not merely a building in which food and accommodation were provided. For many working people it represented the loss of household independence and the subjection of poor families to institutional discipline.

The legislation's principle of making the workhouse the normal form of relief for able-bodied applicants, made rumours about the consequences of accepting the new system particularly potent.

The precise details of the Combe Martin confrontation are less securely documented online than those of some of the other North Devon disturbances. Later local accounts describe a crowd confronting the new relief arrangements and the authorities calling upon the Yeomanry to restore order.

The deployment of military-style forces was not unique to Combe Martin: contemporary and later accounts show that the authorities regarded the North Devon disturbances as sufficiently serious to require organised armed assistance.

The Wider North Devon Disturbances

Combe Martin was therefore one episode in a much larger regional reaction to the New Poor Law. Geoffrey Doye's detailed study, *Violence in North Devon - Responses to the Introduction of the 1834 New Poor Law*, published in the *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* in 2010, identifies a series of riots and other disturbances across North Devon and neighbouring districts.

The authorities responded with considerable force. According to Doye, the Yeomanry were called out, detachments of the regular army were sent from Plymouth, and London policemen were stationed in different parts of Devon.

Suspected ringleaders could be arrested and brought before the courts, sometimes under Yeomanry escort because the authorities feared attempts to rescue them.

One particularly well-documented example occurred at Sheepwash, where a riot over the operation of the New Poor Law resulted in five alleged ringleaders being taken to Exeter Gaol under guard of the North Devon Yeomanry. They were subsequently sentenced to three months' imprisonment.

These events demonstrate that the North Devon disturbances were not simply isolated acts of local disorder. They formed part of a regional confrontation between communities accustomed to locally administered poor relief and authorities determined to establish the new Poor Law system.

Why Bread Became a Symbol of the New Poor Law

The controversy over bread illustrates why apparently minor administrative changes could generate such intense resistance.

Under the Old Poor Law, a labouring household could receive an allowance while continuing to live in its own home. Under the new regime, the authorities wanted to discourage what they regarded as excessive dependence upon outdoor relief. The workhouse consequently became an important instrument of the new policy.

This helps explain why a change from money to food could be interpreted by the poor as something much larger than a change in payment method. It could appear to be the first stage in a process that would eventually place them under workhouse discipline.

There is, however, an important distinction between the intention of the Poor Law authorities and popular perceptions of their intentions. The 1834 Act established a framework within which outdoor relief could be restricted, but implementation varied from place to place. It would therefore be misleading to state that every person who received bread under the new system was automatically destined for the workhouse.

The fear itself, nevertheless, was historically significant. Doye's research shows that popular suspicion of the new Poor Law was a major factor in the violence that occurred across North Devon.

The Significance of Combe Martin

The Combe Martin disturbance is important because it reveals the essentially local character of opposition to a national reform.

The 1834 Act was devised at Westminster, but its consequences were experienced in villages and small towns. In Combe Martin, the question was not an abstract debate about public expenditure. It concerned the daily survival of working families and the relationship between those families and the people administering poor relief.

The conflict consequently brought several different forms of authority into confrontation:

- **The central government and Poor Law Commissioners**, who promoted a more uniform system;
- **The Barnstaple Poor Law Union and its Board of Guardians**, which implemented the new arrangements locally;
- **Under the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act**, a relieving officer was a salaried local official. Appointed by a Poor Law Union's Board of Guardians, they managed day-to-day welfare applications in the field.
- **Poor Law officers**, who administered relief;
- **Local magistrates and the Yeomanry**, who were responsible for maintaining public order;
- and **the labouring poor**, who resisted changes that they regarded as threatening established forms of assistance and independence.

Outdoor relief - the financial support formerly given to the able-bodied - was no longer to be available to them so as to compel them to work. Outside assistance was widely available to the sick and elderly. Yet in many areas, assistance was only given within the confines of the workhouse, where the regime was deliberately harsh and often cruel

Source: www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/poorlaw/

Thus, the violence was both an economic and political act. Rather than opposing the concept of poor relief, the protesters targeted the newly imposed conditions of aid, and rejected the authority of outside administrators to enforce them.

Conclusion

The Combe Martin riot of 1836 should be understood as part of the wider North Devon resistance to the implementation of the New Poor Law. The immediate dispute concerned the administration of relief, including the move towards relief in kind, but beneath it lay deeper anxieties about the loss of customary parish rights, the reduction of outdoor relief, and the prospect of workhouse discipline.

The Combe Martin episode also illustrates the limits of describing the New Poor Law simply as a piece of national legislation. Its impact depended upon the way it was introduced locally.

In North Devon, implementation encountered communities with established expectations about poor relief and a difficult economic environment. The result was a series of protests, riots and attacks that required an increasingly forceful response from the authorities.

Combe Martin was consequently one part of a broader regional struggle over the meaning of poverty, independence and public authority in early Victorian Devon.

References

- **Barnstaple Poor Law Union records and history.** The Union formally came into existence on 2 December 1835 and incorporated Combe Martin among its constituent parishes. The pre-1834 history of Combe Martin's parish workhouse is also documented.
- **Doye, Geoffrey.** "Violence in North Devon - Responses to the Introduction of the 1834 New Poor Law," *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, vol. 142 (2010), pp. 97-126. The Devonshire Association's abstract identifies the paper's principal subject as the North Devon riots and describes the use of Yeomanry, regular troops and London policemen in suppressing the disturbances.
- **Historic England.** Devon local heritage material, provides additional context for the construction and development of the new workhouse system in Devon during the 1830s.
- **Jones, Andrew, 2010.** "Victorian North Devon: A Social History", p. 75.
- **Parliament UK, 2026.**
www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/poorlaw/.
- **Poor Law Commissioners' Report, 1834.** The Commissioners' investigation contains contemporary evidence concerning the existing system of parish relief in North Devon, including the widespread use of monetary allowances to labourers.
- **South West Heritage / North Devon Record Office.** The archive holds collections relating to North Devon Poor Law Unions, local authorities and associated institutions, making it an important repository for the original administrative and legal records behind the 1836 disturbances.
- **Workhouses.org.uk, 2026.** <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/poorlaws/1834.shtml>.



North Devon Poor Law Disturbance 1836

A detailed monochrome sketch depicting a confrontation in a 19th-century North Devon village street. On the left, a crowd of working-class men and women shout, wave sticks, and throw loaves of bread at mounted troops. A large banner in the crowd reads: "NO BREAD FOR CASH! NO WORKHOUSE! 1834 ACT IS OPPRESSION!" On the right, uniformed Yeomanry soldiers on horseback face the crowd with swords drawn. Loaves of bread lie scattered on the dirt road between them. A caption at the bottom reads: "North Devon Poor Law Disturbance 1836."