

Combe Martin: Notable Figures Connected with the Village



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This research was conducted for [Combe Martin Museum](#) in May 2026. Across the centuries, Combe Martin has attracted – and produced – a remarkable range of people. Some shaped the village’s early development, others left their mark through scholarship, charity, Arts, or public life.

This collection introduces the key historical and cultural figures connected with Combe Martin, from medieval clergy and Tudor administrators to botanists, actors, artists, and modern public personalities. Together, they offer a window into the village’s long and varied story.

Norman Baron Martin de Tours (11th century - d. before Domesday 1086)

Traditionally Martin de Tours, Gen. & 1st Baron of Kemys (1030 - 1086). Also known as: "Martinus of Combe", "Martin de Turribus", "Kemys William", "Martin de Walis de Tours". A Norman knight, supposedly granted lands in North Devon following the Norman Conquest of 1066 ([Geni.com](#)).

St Dogmaels Priory was founded around 1113-1115 by Robert fitz Martin, Lord of Cemais, and his wife Maud Peverel, as a [Tironensian priory](#) ([St Dogmaels- details of Foundation, c.1113](#)). Following a second visit by Robert to Tiron in 1118, the community was enlarged and soon elevated to the status of an abbey.

The Tironensians were a Benedictine reform movement that emphasised simplicity, manual labour, and a stricter observance of the Rule of St. Benedict ([The Congregation of Tiron: JSTOR](#)).

- Their monasteries spread rapidly through Normandy, England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland during the 12th century.

Almost nothing is officially recorded for a Martin de Tours. Combe Martin later became part of the FitzMartin family’s holdings, whose earliest known member, Robert FitzMartin, appears in the Domesday Book in 1086.

It’s more likely that Combe Martin takes its name from the FitzMartin family. Robert’s father, traditionally named “Martin,” is not documented in records and no primary source describes his role in the formation of the manor.

Martin de Tours is not documented in surviving medieval charters, and no primary source describes his holdings or role in the formation of the manor.

An early 19th-century scholarly source (*Magna Britannia*, Lysons, 1822) identifies a figure named Martin de Tours as the progenitor of the Norman Martin/Martyn family, whose descendants held Barnstaple and Dartington, and were present in Combe Martin from an early period. We are lacking medieval evidence for the life and possessions of Martin de Tours.

See [General history: Extinct noble families | British History Online](#).

Robert Fitzmartin (died c. 1159)

Historians often note a distinction between the Martin de Tours of 1066 and his son Robert FitzMartin (son of Martin). We know that Robert FitzMartin was real and held land in 1086.

- Martin de Tours was apparently the founder of the FitzMartin family.
- Robert FitzMartin significantly expanded the family's influence and made various grants to the Church –such as the Abbey of St. Dogmael's– solidifying the family's legacy in the region.
- Robert fitz Martin and his descendants (the FitzMartins) held the land for several generations. It's more likely that this long-term ownership by the "Martin" family caused Combe Martin village to be distinguished from other "Combes" in Devon.
- Martin and Robert represent the first and second generations of the dynasty that shaped Combe Martin.

Sir William Tracy / de Tracy (early 14th century)

A Sir William Tracy appears in 1309 as a secular rector of Combe Martin. He is likely the same William de Tracy later associated with St Mary's, Morteheo. His tomb (d.1322) is now recognised by modern church historians as belonging to this person, not William de Tracy who was one of the four knights involved in the murder of Thomas Becket in 1170.

A secular rector in medieval England was a parish priest who was neither a member of a monastic order nor bound by religious rules. They held the parish in their own right among the laity, received the full tithes (traditional church taxes), and were responsible for the spiritual care of the parishioners.

The earlier William de Tracy, feudal baron of Bradninch, was one of the four knights who murdered Archbishop Thomas Becket in 1170. The Combe Martin rector belongs to the wider Tracy family but should not be confused with him.

Sir Richard Pollard (c.1505-1542)

Pollard, a prominent North Devon lawyer and MP, served as Sheriff of Devon (1537-38) and held senior posts in the Henrician financial courts, including King's Remembrancer and General Surveyor of the Court of Augmentations.

He worked closely with Thomas Cromwell during the Dissolution of the Monasteries and, by the late 1530s, held the manor of Combe Martin by royal grant.

Historians have associated Sir Richard Pollard with the wider campaign against Canterbury's shrine of St Thomas Becket in 1538, although direct documentary evidence placing him personally at Canterbury remains limited.

Pollard's connection is inferred from his documented role within Thomas Cromwell's administration during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, rather than from surviving eyewitness accounts.

Squire George Ley (17th century)

Squire George Ley of Combe Martin was a prominent local landowner during the late 17th and early 18th centuries and is traditionally associated with the construction of the Pack o' Cards Inn, one of the village's most distinctive historic buildings.

According to longstanding local tradition – repeated in Devon Historic Environment Record (HER) entries and Historic England's National Heritage List for England – Ley built the house following a spectacular gambling win.

Historic descriptions further state that the original architectural design incorporated symbolic references to a pack of playing cards, with the numbers of windows, doors, chimneys, and floors reflecting the components of a deck of cards.

While some details of this symbolism are difficult to verify precisely today, the tradition has formed an enduring part of the building's identity and local folklore.

The Pack o' Cards is an early 18th-century building and is now protected as a Grade II* listed structure (NHLE 1169072).

Historic England describes the *Pack o' Cards* as an architecturally elaborate public house with a highly unusual symmetrical design, incorporating rendered stone rubble, cob construction, formal projecting wings, Venetian windows, decorative plasterwork, and historic bee-boles within the courtyard walls.

The building remains an important landmark within the architectural and cultural history of Combe Martin and is widely regarded as one of North Devon's most recognisable historic inns.

Sources: Devon HER MDV31327; Historic England NHLE 1169072; Cherry & Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Devon* (1989).

George Ley the Schoolmaster & Charity Founder (18th century)

A different George Ley, active in the 1700s, was a schoolmaster in Combe Martin and the founder of the George Ley Charity which still runs today. His charitable bequest supported the education of poor children in the parish and appears in 18th-century parish records and charity accounts. This George Ley belonged to the same extended family but lived a generation or more after the Pack o' Cards squire.

Botanist Clara Ethelinda Larter (1847-1936)

A respected botanist of the Devon flora, Clara Larter moved to Combe Martin in 1899 and lived in the village for around a decade. She used the surrounding coast and moorland as a base for extensive fieldwork and published widely on West Country plants.

Artist J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851)

English artist J. M. W. Turner visited North Devon in 1811, producing sketches of [Combe Martin](#) and its harbour that are now part of the Turner Bequest at Tate Britain. One of these studies later formed the basis for the engraved plate *Combe Martin, Devonshire*, published in 1825 in *Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England*.

These works provide some of the earliest well-known artistic depictions of Combe Martin's harbour and coastline during the early nineteenth century.

The 1811 Visit: Turner visited the area as part of a clockwise tour of the West Country, focusing on the Devon and Somerset coast.

- Sketchbook Details: The studies, featuring Seaside Hill and early harbour scenes, are found in the [Somerset and North Devon sketchbook](#) and the *Devonshire Coast, No. 1 sketchbook*.

Additional Historical Artworks

Artist: George Wolfe (- 1890)

- Title: *Combe Martin, Devonshire*
- Date: 1855
- Medium: Watercolour on paper
- Collection: Government Art Collection (George Wolfe)
- [Combe Martin, Devonshire - Government Art Collection](#)

Sir Henry Irving (1838-1905)

The first actor to be knighted for services to the stage, Henry Irving visited Combe Martin in August 1899. Notices in the *North Devon Journal* confirm his presence, placing the village within the leisure circuits of late-Victorian theatrical celebrities.

Terry-Thomas (1911-1990)

The comic actor Terry-Thomas [Thomas Terry Hoar Stevens], famed for his raffish "cad" persona, holidayed in Combe Martin and was well-remembered locally, particularly at the Pack o' Cards Inn. His ashes are interred in St Peter ad Vincula churchyard, on the west side of the church near the west door, where his engraved monument stands today.

Combe Martin Sexton James Norman and Fictional "Reuben Dale"

Author Marie Corelli wrote *The Mighty Atom* (1896) while staying in Combe Martin. Local research and archival evidence identify James Norman (c.1844-1898), sexton and verger of St Peter ad Vincula Church, as the real-life model for the character "Reuben Dale".

A National Archives copyright entry explicitly describes a photograph of "James Norman, the original of Marie Corelli's Reuben Dale". James lived in a thatched High Street cottage now known as "Reubendale" (since destroyed) opposite Corelli House.

James Norman's grave stands just inside the lych-gate of St Peter's, providing a tangible link between the real sexton and his fictional counterpart. Members of the Norman family served as sextons in Combe Martin across the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Modern Cultural Connections:

Petula Clark (Singer)

During the Second World War, singer Petula Clark spent part of her childhood as an evacuee in Combe Martin, North Devon ([Combe Martin Museum](#) exhibit). She began performing for the BBC in 1942.

Bill Bailey and Damien Hirst

Comedian and musician Bill Bailey has long-standing associations with the North Devon coast and has visited the area since childhood. In 2022, he completed a widely reported 100-mile sponsored walk from Bude to Combe Martin in memory of Sean Lock.

Contemporary artist Damien Hirst also has connections to the Combe Martin-Ilfracombe area; his monumental bronze *Verity*, installed at Ilfracombe harbour, has become a major landmark and a significant draw for visitors.

References

Martin de Tours and Robert fitz Martin

- National Archives, Domesday data for Devon
- Historic England / Devon HER - notes on the etymology of Combe Martin and its association with Martin de Tours.
- British History Online (BHO) - *In Magna Britannia: Volume 6, Devonshire (1822)*, the Lysons brothers believed that the Martin/Martyn family traced its origin to a man called Martin de Tours.
- They considered him the founder of the family, not the founder of Combe Martin.
- They place him four generations before Nicholas, who lived in the reign of Henry I (1100-1135).
- This implies Martin lived in the late 11th century, consistent with Norman arrival.

The Domesday Book (1086): The official land survey commissioned by William the Conqueror.

The Pipe Rolls (1155-1160): Annual financial records of the English Exchequer under King Henry II. The rolls for 1159-1160 record William fitz Martin paying for his inheritance, confirming Robert fitz Martin's death.

The Liber Niger (Black Book of the Exchequer, 1166): A survey of knights' fees which officially identifies William fitz Martin as the successor to the family estates in North Devon.

St Dogmaels Abbey Charters: Medieval legal documents detailing the grants made by Robert fitz Martin (c. 1118) and his subsequent heirs, providing a genealogical timeline of the family.

Sanders, I.J. (1960). English Baronies: A Study of their Origin and Descent 1066-1327: A standard scholarly reference for the lineage of the Baron Martin family and their holdings in Combe Martin and Dartington.

Sir William Tracy / de Tracy (early 14th century)

- *Heraldry of the West of England*: analysis of the Morteheoe de Tracy tomb, identifying it as the tomb of William de Tracy, priest (d.1322), not the Becket assassin.
heraldryofthewestcountry.wordpress.com
- *St Mary's Church, Morteheoe* - historical interpretation confirming the tomb belongs to the later rector, not the 1170 knight.
morteheoholiday.co.uk
- *Devon & Dartmoor HER (Historic Environment Record)* - scholarly notes on mis-attribution of the tomb to the assassin.
heritagegateway.org.uk

Sir Richard Pollard (c.1505-1542)

- *Henry VIII's Proclamation on the destruction of Becket's shrine (1538)* - contemporary context for the dismantling of the shrine.
conclarendon.blogspot.com
- *Canterbury Historical & Archaeological Society* - destruction of the Becket shrine under Henry VIII.
Canterbury Historical and Archaeological Society
(Note: These sources confirm the event; Pollard's involvement is inferred from his documented role as Cromwell's commissioner.)

Squire George Ley (17th century) - Pack o' Cards builder

- *Devon Heritage (Index for Combe Martin)* - identifies George Ley as the builder of the Pack o' Cards around 1690 and records the traditional symbolism (52 windows, 13 doors, 4 floors).
devonheritage.org
- *Combe Martin Village History Project (CMVHP)* - heritage article on the Pack o' Cards, confirming Ley's association and late-17th-century date.
combemartinvillage.co.uk

George Ley (18th century) - Schoolmaster & Charity Founder

- *The National Archives - Counterpart Lease (1716)*: identifies George Ley of Combe Martin, schoolmaster.
[The National Archives](#)
- *The National Archives - George Ley's Charity (1700-1900)*: archival record of the charity's existence and governance.
[The National Archives](#)
- *Charity Commission Register - George Ley Educational Charity (306788)*: modern continuation of the charity.
[Register of Charities](#)

J. M. W. Turner - Combe Martin

- *Combe Martin Harbour (1811)* – Tate Britain
Sketch from Turner's North Devon tour, held within the Turner Bequest.
- *Combe Martin, Devonshire (1825)* – British Museum
Etching and engraving on chine collé. Engraved by William Miller for Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England.
- *Comb Martin [sic] (1825)* – Victoria and Albert Museum
Line engraving from the series Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England.

George Wolfe - Combe Martin

Combe Martin, Devonshire (1855) – Government Art Collection. Watercolour by George Wolfe. [Combe Martin, Devonshire - Government Art Collection](#).

Clara Ethelinda Larter (1847-1936)

- *Biographical entry confirming residence in Combe Martin from at least 1899-1909.*
[prabook.com](#)
- Fraser, G.T. (1936-1937) 'Obituaries: Clara Ethelinda Larter', *Proceedings of the Linnean Society of London*, 149(4), pp. 200-202.
- Harvey, J. and Ogilvie, M. (2000). *The Biographical Dictionary of Women in Science: Pioneering Lives from Ancient Times to the Mid-Twentieth Century*. New York: Routledge.

Petula Clark (Singer)

During the Second World War, Petula Clark was evacuated to Combe Martin and began performing for the BBC as a child in 1942. [Petula Clark](#). Combe Martin Museum exhibit.

Bill Bailey

(No primary archival record needed; modern press coverage is acceptable for contemporary figures.)

- *Regional and national reporting* on Bailey's 2022 charity walk from Bude to Combe Martin.

Damien Hirst

- *Local heritage and tourism sources* confirm Hirst's residence in the Ilfracombe-Combe Martin area and the installation of *Verity* at Ilfracombe Harbour.
(Supported by multiple regional news and heritage sources.)

Sir Henry Irving (1838-1905)

- *North Devon Journal* (archival newspapers via British Newspaper Archive) - reports Irving's visit to Combe Martin in August 1899.
(Primary source: BNA; subscription required.)

Terry-Thomas (1911-1990)

- *Find a Grave - St Peter's Churchyard, Combe Martin*: confirms burial location and monument.
[Find a Grave](#)

James Norman ("Reuben Dale")

- *Combe Martin Village History Project - Corelli's Reuben Dale* - detailed historical article confirming Norman as the model for Corelli's character.
combemartinvillage.co.uk
- *The National Archives - Copyright Office (COPY 1/426/527)*:
"Photograph of James Norman, the original of Marie Corelli's Reuben Dale."
[The National Archives](#)

Religious Reformers & Scholars

- Bishop John Jewel (1522-1571): A towering figure in the English Reformation, and Bishop of Salisbury. Born in the nearby parish of Berrynarbor but linked to the local area, Jewel was a leading defender of the Elizabethan Church.
- Thomas Harding (1516-1572): English Roman Catholic priest and controversialist. Born in Combe Martin, Harding was the Catholic "counter-voice" to John Jewel.

The Great Debate: Jewel vs. Harding

In the mid-16th century, the theological future of England was fought over by two childhood contemporaries from the same corner of North Devon. Their "Challenge Sermon" and the subsequent years of written warfare became a famous doctrinal battle during the Elizabethan age.

- Bishop John Jewel (1522-1571): Born in nearby Berrynarbor and educated at Barnstaple, Jewel rose to become the Bishop of Salisbury and the "apologist" for the Church of England. His seminal work, *Apologia Ecclesiae Anglicanae*, was so important that Queen Elizabeth I ordered a copy to be chained in every parish church in the country.
- Thomas Harding (1516-1572): Born right here in Combe Martin, Harding was a brilliant scholar who remained loyal to the Roman Catholic faith. From exile in Belgium, he became the sharpest critic of the new English Church, specifically targeting his fellow North Devon contemporary, John Jewel.

The Stakes: Their "long-distance duel" consisted of massive volumes of printed arguments smuggled across the English Channel. It centred on one fundamental question: Was the Church of England a legitimate continuation of the early Christian faith, or a radical break from it?

A Village Divided: It is a fascinating historical irony that the two men defining the soul of the nation—one the voice of the Protestant establishment and the other the voice of Catholic resistance—grew up just a short walk from one another along the North Devon coast.

Literary & Folklore Figures

- **The Earl of Rone:** While a folkloric figure rather than a single person, this character is the centrepiece of Combe Martin's unique "Hunting of the Earl of Rone" festival—a tradition revived to celebrate the village's distinct local identity.

At a Glance: The "Shammickite" Legacy

"Shammickite" is the traditional nickname for a Combe Martin local. Whether it was Squire George Ley (who allegedly built the Pack o' Cards Inn after a massive gambling win) or the silver miners who fuelled the English Treasury and financed wars, the people of this valley have always been known for their grit, wit, and occasional eccentricity.

While every effort has been made to ensure the historical accuracy of the information contained in this document, it is synthesised from various historical and folkloric sources. The content is subject to change as new research comes to light.

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