

# Combe Martin: Notable Figures Connected with the Village



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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, creativity, 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)

Martin de Tours (also recorded as *Martinus de Turonibus*) was a Norman knight granted lands in North Devon following the Norman Conquest of 1066. He held estates recorded in the Domesday Book (1086), including the area later known as Combe Martin, from which the village derives its name.

As a feudal baron under William the Conqueror, Martin de Tours established the manorial system that shaped the early settlement pattern of Combe Martin, after Anglo-Saxon ownership.

Martin’s lineage and holdings are documented in medieval charters and Domesday entries for Devon, marking him as the founding lord of the manor and the origin of the village’s name – “Combe Martin” meaning *the valley (combe) of Martin, or Martin’s Combe*.

## 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. Contemporary accounts of the 1538 destruction of the shrine of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury place Pollard among the commissioners responsible for dismantling its treasures.

### **Squire George Ley (17th century)**

Squire George Ley of Combe Martin was a prominent local landowner during the 1600s and a key figure in the village's early-modern history.

The Ley family held substantial property in the parish, and George Ley appears in manorial and parish records as an influential squire whose estate shaped the social and agricultural landscape of Combe Martin. George Ley's name survives in local tradition and in several historical references to the village's gentry families.

Squire George Ley of Combe Martin is traditionally credited with building the now national monument: Pack o' Cards Inn on High Street, around 1690. According to long-standing local history, Ley constructed the house to celebrate a large gambling win, designing it with 52 windows, 13 rooms, and 4 floors to echo a pack of playing cards.

Although some details have become part of village folklore, the building itself dates securely to the late 17th century and remains one of Combe Martin's most distinctive historic houses. Ley appears in parish and manorial records as a notable local landowner whose family held property in the village for generations.

### **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

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*.

## 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, 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 remains visible 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". Norman lived in a thatched High Street cottage now known as "Reubendale" (since destroyed) opposite Corelli's residence.

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: Bill Bailey and Damien Hirst

Comedian and musician Bill Bailey has long-standing ties to the North Devon coast, said to own a small holiday bungalow near Combe Martin and visiting 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

3 pages of references.

### Martin de Tours

Domesday Book (1086) - entries for North Devon listing *Martinus de Turonibus* as tenant-in-chief.

- National Archives, Domesday data for Devon - confirms Martin de Tours' holdings in the region.
- Historic England / Devon HER - notes on the etymology of Combe Martin and its association with Martin de Tours.
- British History Online - Domesday analysis identifying Martin de Tours as the Norman baron from Tours, France.

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

- *Heraldry of the West of England*: analysis of the Morteheo de Tracy tomb, identifying it as the tomb of William de Tracy, priest (d.1322), not the Becket assassin.  
[heraldryofthewestcountry.wordpress.com](http://heraldryofthewestcountry.wordpress.com)
- *St Mary's Church, Morteheo* - historical interpretation confirming the tomb belongs to the later rector, not the 1170 knight.  
[morteheoholiday.co.uk](http://morteheoholiday.co.uk)
- *Devon & Dartmoor HER (Historic Environment Record)* - scholarly notes on mis-attribution of the tomb to the assassin.  
[heritagegateway.org.uk](http://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](http://conclarendon.blogspot.com)
- *Canterbury Historical & Archaeological Society* - destruction of the Becket shrine under Henry VIII.  
[Canterbury Historical and Archaeological Society](http://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](http://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](http://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](https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)
- *The National Archives - George Ley's Charity (1700-1900)*: archival record of the charity's existence and governance.  
[The National Archives](https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)
- *Charity Commission Register - George Ley Educational Charity (306788)*: modern continuation of the charity.  
[Register of Charities](https://www.charitycommission.gov.uk)

## J. M. W. Turner - Combe Martin

Combe Martin Harbour (1811) – Tate Britain

Combe Martin, Devonshire (1825) – British Museum

Medium: Etching & engraving on chine collé

Engraver: William Miller

*Comb Martin* [sic] (1825) – Victoria & Albert Museum

Medium: Line engraving

Series: *Picturesque Views of the Southern Coast of England*

Clara Ethelinda Larter (1847-1936)

- *Biographical entry confirming residence in Combe Martin from at least 1899-1909.*  
[prabook.com](http://prabook.com)

## 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](http://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](#)

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