

# The Valley of the Martins

## A Deep Dive into Combe Martin's Toponymy, Geology, and Economy

By [Combe Martin Village History Project](#) © July 2026

### I. Toponymy & Linguistic Stratigraphy

The place-name [Combe Martin](#) (also known as *Combmartin village*) is widely regarded as a clear example of linguistic stratigraphy, preserving successive layers of cultural and linguistic influence. This civil parish lies in the North Devon District within the county of Devon, England.

Geographically, it is situated on the rugged North Devon coast, immediately on the western periphery of Exmoor National Park.

#### Brittonic (Celtic) layer

The element *cumb* (reconstructed as \**cumb*) is a Brittonic topographical term meaning a deep, bowl-shaped valley. It belongs to the indigenous Dumnonii culture of the Iron Age.

#### Combe Martin Old English (Anglo-Saxon) Layer

During the westward Anglo-Saxon expansion (c. AD 650-850), the indigenous Brittonic term was adopted into local Old English as *cumb* or *cumbe*. As argued by linguist Kenneth H. Jackson (*Language and History in Early Britain*, 1953), the high density and survival of this term in Devon place-names serves as evidence for a prolonged period of bilingual interaction and cultural overlap between Brittonic and Germanic speakers, rather than immediate displacement.

#### Norman French layer

After the Norman Conquest of 1066, the manorial affix *Martin* was added, indicating possession by the FitzMartin family and distinguishing the settlement from other "Combes" in the region.

#### Key references

- Margaret Gelling & Ann Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (2000), pp. 104-110.
- Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (4th ed., 1960).
- A. D. Mills, *Oxford Dictionary of British Place Names*.

### II. Geological Foundations

Combe Martin's industrial history was strongly influenced by its geology, which developed during the Devonian Period (approximately 419-359 million years ago).

## 1. Tectonic evolution

Marine sediments accumulated in a shallow sea before being compressed and folded during the Variscan (Hercynian) Orogeny in the late Palaeozoic. This mountain-building event affected much of southwest England and Wales.

Reference: Leveridge, Brian; Hartley, A.J.. 2006. *The Variscan Orogeny : the development and deformation of Devonian/Carboniferous basins in SW England and South Wales*. In: Brenchley, P.J.; Rawson, P.F., (eds.) *The geology of England and Wales*. London, Geological Society of London, 225-255.

## 2. Principal rock formations

Formation	Description
Ilfracombe Slates	Dark, fine-grained mudstones and siltstones subjected to low-grade metamorphism.
Morte Slates	Grey-green metamorphosed sedimentary rocks.
Hangman Grits	Coarse sandstones and gritstones deposited in shallow marine conditions.
Baggy Sandstone	Reddish-brown sandstone rich in iron oxides, used in local building.

## 3. Mineralisation

Hydrothermal fluids circulating through fractures deposited lead-zinc-silver mineralisation, often associated with limestone horizons. The principal ore was galena (lead sulphide), which commonly contains recoverable silver.

## III. Archaeology & Early Settlement

### Iron Age evidence

North Devon contains numerous Iron Age hillforts, including:

- Wind Hill (thought to be the Anglo-Saxon battle site of [\*Cynwit\* or \*Cynuit\*](#))
- Hillsborough
- Clovelly Dykes
- Windbury Beacon

Combe Martin's own Iron Age enclosure, Newberry Castle (HER MDV12550), is a small univallate hillfort dating from roughly 700 BC to AD 43.

### The Phoenician legend

Stories linking Combe Martin with Phoenician sailors and the so-called Phoenician Steps are part of local folklore. Modern archaeology has found no evidence for Phoenician settlement or mining activity in Devon.

## IV. Feudal Development

### Domesday Book (1086)

Recorded manor

Households

**37**

c. 150-200 people

Ploughlands

**20**

Woodland

**5 acres**

Annual value

**£5**

Tenant-in-chief

William of Falaise

Villagers

18

Smallholders

10

Slaves

9

Lord's plough teams

3

Men's plough teams

14

### The FitzMartin Family and the Lordship of Combe Martin

Following the Norman Conquest, the manor of Combe passed into the hands of the FitzMartin family, descendants of Martin de Tours, a Norman nobleman who held extensive estates in south-west England. The surname FitzMartin simply means "son of Martin," reflecting the family's descent from this early Norman lord.

Martin de Tours (1030 - 1086) is identified as a Norman general officer and 1st Baron of Kemys. He is notionally credited as being awarded the manor of *Cumbe* after the Norman Conquest of 1066. Also known as: "Martinus of Combe", "Kemys William", "Martin de Walis de Tours", "Robert FitzMartin".

Source: [Martin de Tours, Gen. & 1st Baron of Kemys \(c.1030 - 1086\) - Genealogy.](#)

Throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the FitzMartins emerged as one of the most influential baronial families in Devon and the Welsh Marches. Their estates extended well beyond Combe Martin, including lands in Devon, Somerset, and South Wales, where they played an important role in the Norman expansion into Pembrokeshire.

The family's influence increased substantially through strategic marriage alliances. Most notably, **Nicholas FitzMartin** married **Maud de Tracy**, heiress to the **Feudal Barony of Barnstaple**, bringing Combe Martin into one of North Devon's most important feudal honours. This strengthened the family's political and economic standing, linking the manor to a wider network of estates, markets, and administrative authority across the region.

During the High Middle Ages, Combe Martin was administered as part of this extensive feudal estate. The lord exercised manorial rights through local officials, collected rents and customary dues from tenants, presided over the manorial court, and oversaw the management of agricultural land, woodland, and the increasingly valuable silver-bearing mines.

The manor almost certainly possessed a **great hall or manorial residence**, although its exact location has never been securely identified archaeologically. Documentary evidence also indicates the existence of a **medieval deer park**, reflecting the wealth and status of its lords.

The direct male line of the FitzMartins ended with the death of **William FitzMartin** in **1325**. Their estates subsequently passed through the **Audley family** before eventually reverting to the Crown in **1391**.

Although the family's ownership came to an end, the place-name **Combe Martin** permanently preserved their association with the manor, providing a lasting reminder of one of medieval Devon's most powerful noble dynasties.

## **The 1264 market charter**

In 1264, Henry III granted Nicholas FitzMartin a charter for a market and fair, formally establishing Combe Martin as a regional trading centre.

## **Tithes and lordship**

Medieval tenants owed various rents, labour services, and feudal obligations to the lord of the manor. Tithes, however, were generally payable to the Church rather than directly to the lord.

## **V. Economic History**

### **Silver mining**

Combe Martin became an economically significant mining district because of its silver-bearing galena veins. Under the law of Mines Royal, precious-metal extraction was subject to royal prerogative and frequently operated under Crown leases.

### **The Crown Jewels legend**

A popular tradition claims that Combe Martin silver survives in the modern Crown Jewels. The evidence does not support this claim. During the English Civil War, after the execution of King Charles I, the Parliamentarians systematically destroyed the historic Crown Jewels. See [\*The King, the Crown and the Colonel - The National Archives\*](#).

## **What CMVHP Says**

### **Evidence-based: Interregnum destruction (1649-1660)**

Well documented: Most medieval and Tudor regalia were dismantled and melted down during the Commonwealth period.

The Coronation Spoon may be the only survivor.

The late 12th-century spoon is a known survivor of the medieval regalia, but its silver cannot be traced to Devon.

### **Restoration regalia (1661)**

Newly commissioned

The present Crown Jewels were commissioned for Charles II from newly purchased bullion.

Conclusion: Combe Martin silver almost certainly entered the wider English bullion economy, but its presence in the current Crown Jewels remains unproven.

## **Wool and hemp**

Alongside mining, the parish depended on two durable industries:

- Wool production – a consistent source of agricultural income.
- Hemp cultivation and spinning – particularly noted for the manufacture of strong shoemakers' thread from the medieval period into the nineteenth century.

## **VI. Landscape & Governance**

### **Blackmore Country**

Combe Martin lies on the edge of Exmoor within the landscape later celebrated by R. D. Blackmore in Lorna Doone. "Blackmore Country" is best understood as a literary-geographical designation rather than a formal historical region.

### **Parish government**

The parish system emerged in Anglo-Saxon England between the seventh and ninth centuries and became the basic framework for local religious life, poor relief, and community administration.

Reference: John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (2005).

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## Additional References

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- Historic England
- Devon Historic Environment Record (HER)
- British Geological Survey (BGS)
- Thomas Westcote (c.1567-1637): *A View of Devonshire*. Written around 1630.
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- Daniel and Samuel Lysons: *Magna Britannia: Devonshire* (1822)
- W.G. Hoskins: *Devon* (first published 1954)
- English Place-Name Society
- North Devon Archaeological Society publications

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