

The Industrial Topography of Combe Martin: A Historical and Economic Review of a North Devon Maritime and Extractive Settlement

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Abstract

This paper examines the multi-sector industrial evolution of Combe Martin, North Devon, over a 700-year trajectory. Characterised by an unusual linear topography shaped by the River UMBER valley, the settlement hosted heavy mineral extraction, specialised metallurgy, maritime trade, and large-scale commercial horticulture.

By analysing recent archaeological data alongside municipal and state records, this study charts how Combe Martin repeatedly adapted its local economy in response to geological limitations, technological shifts, and market pressures.

Rather than a strict linear succession, the settlement's industrial profile is best understood as an overlapping network of concurrent extractive, agricultural, and maritime activities.

1. Introduction and Geographical Context

Combe Martin is situated within a narrow, steep-sided valley on the northwestern boundary of the Exmoor massif. Geologically, the parish sits on a complex interface of Devonian sandstones, limestones, and heavily folded slates.

This specific stratigraphic arrangement exposed veins of argentiferous galena (silver-bearing lead ore) alongside secondary deposits of iron-manganese oxides (umber).

While primarily recognised as a rural parish, Combe Martin's access to the Bristol Channel, paired with hydraulic power from the River UMBER, allowed it to foster a remarkably diverse industrial heritage.

2. Agrarian, Monastic, and Mechanical Foundations (12th–14th Centuries)

2.1 Textile Processing

Hemp cultivation and processing formed a major part of Combe Martin's industrial economy. Historical records and archaeological evidence show that hemp was grown and processed in the River UMBER valley for centuries:

- **Tudor Royal Mandate:** Driven by Henry VIII and Elizabeth I's mandates for naval supplies (ropes, sailcloth, and cordage), Combe Martin became a primary hub for Devon's hemp production from the 16th century onward. Topographer Thomas Westcote recorded in the early 1600s that Combe Martin was nationally recognised for its extensive hemp trade.
 - **Support for Local Mining:** The strong fibres produced locally were essential for weaving heavy-duty ropes and rigging used to haul equipment and ore in Combe Martin's silver and lead mines.
 - **Archaeological Evidence:** Excavations in the village uncovered features identified as medieval retting pools—water pits used to soak hemp stalks to separate the useful bast fibres from the woody core.
 - **18th & 19th Century Trade:** Local records show hempland plots and sales continued into the 18th and 19th centuries, supplying threadmakers, local ropers, and maritime outfitters along the Bristol Channel before industrialisation and foreign imports shifted the valley toward strawberry market gardening
- Prior to the late 13th-century mining boom, evidence suggests the valley sustained localised textile processing. In 2008, archaeological excavations led by Trevor Dunkerley uncovered an industrial complex buried beneath post-medieval debris.
 - Pottery shards and structural remains indicate 12th-century activity, including features interpreted as a stone-built retting pool and associated processing mill.
 - While local traditions link the retting pool to Cluniac monks operating from St Mary's Priory in Barnstaple, documentary evidence for a formal monastic grange remains circumstantial.

2.2 Corn Milling and Manorial Monopolies

- The earliest formal secular industrial record occurs in the 1198 *Feet of Fines*, which confirms the operation of water-powered milling within the parish.
- Two principal medieval corn mills—Higher Mill (situated near the modern Pack o' Cards inn) and Lower Mill (located on King Street)—operated under manorial soke rights. This legal framework required local tenants to grind their grain at the lord's mills, establishing mechanical milling as a key feature of the early local economy.

3. Extractive and Metallurgical Eras

- **3.1 Silver-Lead Mining and Royal Prerogative** The economic landscape shifted in 1292, when the silver-lead mines were formally registered under King Edward I. Because the galena ore yielded a notable silver content, these workings were designated as "Mines Royal".
- Miners were brought in from Derbyshire to develop underground shafts, which reached deep below the water table. Bullion generated from the site contributed to Crown expenditures during the Hundred Years' War under Edward III and Henry V.
- Furthermore, the landmark 1568 *Case of Mines* drew upon Combe Martin's precedent to establish the sovereign's absolute prerogative over domestic base metal ores containing trace precious metals.
- Operations followed volatile cycles. Notable revitalisations occurred under Elizabeth I's engineer Sir Bevis Bulmer, and later during the English Civil War via Thomas Bushell, who utilised local silver for Royalist minting.
- However, operations were continually hampered by severe flooding within major shafts, such as William's Shaft and Fayes Mine.

3.2 Industrial Processing and Secondary Minerals

- Small-scale lead smelting occurred within the village during the 16th and 17th centuries, but centralisation increased in the mid-19th century.
- By the 1840s, processing was established at the site of the Lower Mill on King Street, utilising furnaces to process ore locally. Operations at this location were short-lived, closing around 1850 as ore yields dwindled.

Concurrently, secondary minerals were worked throughout the valley:

- **Umbur:** Iron and manganese oxide deposits in the valley slates were mined, crushed via watermills, and processed as an industrial pigment.
- **Culm:** Anthracite (culm) brought in along the North Devon coast was heavily utilized to fire local lime kilns, supplementing domestic and agricultural fuel needs.

- **3.3 The Victorian Decline** By the mid-19th century, deep-level extraction became economically unviable. High pumping costs to clear flooded shafts, combined with an influx of cheaper foreign imports, severely impacted domestic production.
- Mining operations entered a rapid decline after the 1840s, culminating in the workings being formally listed in official mining records as “not worked” by 1881.

4. Maritime Trade, Manufacturing, and Commercial Horticulture

Industry	Primary Location	Active Era	Primary Output / Purpose
Hemp and Rope Processing	Cross Street (The Ropery) / Umber Valley	15th Century – Late 19th Century	Ropes for silver mines, ship rigging, canvas, and cobblers' thread
Lime Burning	Coastline / Beachheads	18th Century – 1930s	Quicklime for soil mineralisation/ conditioning & mortar
Shipbuilding	Harbour / Beachheads	Mid-19th Century	Wooden coastal cargo vessels
Commercial Fishing	Combe Martin Bay	Medieval – 20th Century	Local herring, cod, and shellfish harvesting
Market Gardening	Valley Terraces	Late 19th – Mid-20th Century	Early-season strawberries, flowers & a variety of agricultural produce.
Jam Manufacturing	Pig Lane	1914	Processing local fruit yields until 1924.

Maritime trade supported these terrestrial industries. Coastal vessels, such as the local Clyde Puffer ***SS Snowflake***, transported lime, timber, and agricultural goods along the Bristol Channel, ensuring Combe Martin remained integrated into regional trade networks throughout its transition into a tourist and agricultural economy.

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