

The Silver Mines of Combe Martin

A Heritage Summary of North Devon's Royal Silver Mines

May 2026. Edited and compiled from historical, archaeological and local heritage sources.

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Executive Summary: Combe Martin Silver Mines

The silver mines of Combe Martin in North Devon represent one of the most historically significant mining landscapes in south-west England, with an operational legacy spanning more than six centuries. Characterised by periods of immense prosperity followed by technical and financial challenges, the site highlights the long-standing relationship between a rural English community and national history.

Key Historical Themes

- **Medieval Royal Resource:** Officially organised by the Crown by 1292 under Edward I, the mines yielded argentiferous galena (silver-bearing lead [*led*] ore) to fund royal coinage and military campaigns in Scotland. Skilled miners were specifically relocated from Derbyshire in 1295 to manage production.
- **Tudor Innovation and Wealth:** Following a late-medieval decline, the enterprise was revitalised during the Elizabethan era. Renowned engineer Bevis Bulmer partnered with Adrian Gilbert in 1587 to extract a rich new vein, producing silver that was ultimately crafted into ceremonial plate for the City of London.
- **Wartime Finance:** Historical tradition strongly links the mines to royal finance and emergency wartime minting for King Charles I during the English Civil War.
- **Victorian Industrialisation:** The 19th century brought major operational revivals (notably between 1835 and 1848) that introduced Cornish-style deep-shaft mining technology and steam-powered beam engines.

Technological Evolution

- **Early Era:** Initial extraction relied on manual labour and primitive "bole hearths"—stone-lined structures built on exposed hillsides utilizing natural wind currents for smelting.
- **Later Innovations:** By the 16th century, bellows-powered ore hearths improved efficiency. Underground flooding remained a persistent obstacle until advanced drainage systems and pumping technology allowed miners to reach deeper levels.

Archaeology and Heritage Today

Major operations declined by 1880 and permanently ceased around 1902. Today, an extensive underground network of shafts and adits remains beneath Combe Martin. Visible surface ruins—including Williams' and Harris's shafts, engine house foundations, and water-management leats—survive as vital industrial archaeological monuments preserved by local heritage and community groups. These sites are protected.

Introduction

The silver mines of [Combe Martin in North Devon](#) are among the most historically significant mining sites in south-west England. Their origins can be traced to the medieval period, when silver extracted from the hillsides and valleys of the village contributed to royal revenues during the reigns of English kings including Edward I and Henry V.

For centuries, the mines formed part of the economic and industrial history of North Devon. They attracted royal interest, private adventurers, Tudor entrepreneurs, and later Victorian mining companies. They sought to exploit veins of silver-bearing lead beneath the valley of the River UMBER.

Although mining was intermittent and often difficult, the mines left a lasting impact upon the landscape and identity of Combe Martin. Beneath modern roads, cottages, gardens and fields lies a complex network of adits, shafts and underground workings that bear witness to more than six centuries of mining activity.

This publication brings together archaeological evidence, documentary records, local history and published research to provide an accessible overview of the history of the Combe Martin silver mines and their place within the wider story of England's mining heritage. Readers are reminded that these heritage sites are vulnerable and private.

1. The Medieval Origins of the Mines

The earliest surviving documentary references to the Combe Martin silver mines date from the late thirteenth century during the reign of King Edward I (1272–1307). Historical records indicate that the Crown regarded the mines as an important royal resource.

In historical reality, the very first clear documented mention of these mines actually dates slightly earlier, to 1249 (during the reign of Henry III), when a royal charter mentions the silver mines of Devon. It was later, in the 1290s under Edward I, that production spiked dramatically.

By 1292, silver mining at Combe Martin was sufficiently important for the Crown to organise production directly. Derbyshire lead [*led*] miners were reportedly brought to Devon in 1295 to work the mines, demonstrating both the technical difficulty of the operation and the strategic value of the silver deposits.

The mines operated during a period of economic expansion and military conflict. Edward I's campaigns in Scotland required substantial financial resources, and silver production helped support royal coinage and military expenditure.

The silver extracted at Combe Martin was associated primarily with argentiferous galena — lead [*led*] ore containing silver. Medieval mining methods were labour-intensive and hazardous. Miners followed veins underground using hand tools, while women and labourers washed and processed ore at the surface.

Historical accounts suggest that additional labour was recruited from several English counties and from Wales. Between approximately 1290 and 1340, records indicate that silver and lead from Combe Martin generated considerable income for the Crown.

Despite periods of prosperity, mining was inconsistent. Water ingress, unpredictable ore veins and technological limitations frequently disrupted production. Many workings were abandoned and later reopened by successive generations of miners.

2. Mining Technology and Early Smelting

Early silver mining at Combe Martin relied upon relatively simple extraction and smelting techniques.

Ore was broken manually using hammers before being sorted and washed. Once processed, the ore was smelted in structures known as boles or bole hearths. These primitive furnaces were normally built on exposed hillsides where natural air currents could intensify the heat of the fire.

The bole hearth consisted of a shallow stone-lined structure filled with alternating layers of wood and crushed ore. When weather conditions were favourable, the furnace would be ignited and left to burn for extended periods. The resulting heat separated molten lead from waste material.

The silver itself was not extracted directly from the ore. Instead, silver remained dissolved within the lead during the smelting process. Further heating and refining were then required to separate the silver from the lead.

By the sixteenth century, mining technology had improved significantly. Bellows-powered ore hearths replaced the earlier dependence upon natural wind draughts. These developments allowed furnaces to reach more controlled temperatures and improved the efficiency of silver extraction.

Water presented a continual challenge to miners. Many early workings closed during winter because rising groundwater flooded shafts and tunnels. Improved drainage systems and pumping technology later enabled deeper mining.

3. The Tudor and Elizabethan Revival

After periods of decline during the late medieval era, renewed interest in the mines emerged during the Tudor period.

By the late sixteenth century, improved technology and renewed investment encouraged attempts to reopen abandoned workings. One of the most significant phases occurred during the reign of Elizabeth I.

In 1587, Adrian Gilbert of Sandridge near Dartmouth, together with the London lapidary John Poppler, became associated with the rediscovery of a rich silver-bearing vein at Combe Martin.

Although early efforts encountered difficulties, the venture attracted the attention of Bevis Bulmer, one of the most prominent mining engineers of the Elizabethan age. Bulmer was already well known for his mining activities in the Mendip Hills and elsewhere.

Bulmer negotiated a partnership with Gilbert to develop the mine, possibly known historically as Feyes Mine. Contemporary accounts describe workings reaching approximately thirty-two fathoms in depth.

The enterprise appears to have been profitable for several years. Historical sources suggest that both partners made substantial financial returns from the venture before the mines again declined.

The silver extracted during this period also entered the symbolic and ceremonial life of the nation. According to tradition, silver from Combe Martin was used to create elaborate cups and ceremonial plate presented to the City of London. Elements of this silverware later became incorporated into the Mansion House collection.

4. Royal Finance, Coinage and War

Throughout the medieval and early modern periods, silver held enormous economic and political importance.

English monarchs depended upon reliable silver supplies for coin production, taxation and military finance. The relationship between silver mining and royal power was especially important during periods of war.

The mines of Combe Martin are frequently associated with the financing of military campaigns from the reign of Edward I through to the English Civil War of the seventeenth century.

During the reign of Charles I, royalist mints established outside London struck emergency coinage using available precious metals.

Although direct links between Combe Martin silver and specific Civil War coinage remain difficult to verify conclusively, historical tradition has long associated the mines with royal finance and wartime minting.

Silver coins produced during medieval and early modern England were more than simple currency. They represented royal authority, economic stability and political legitimacy.

The importance of silver to warfare, taxation and trade ensured that mining districts such as Combe Martin occupied a significant place within the wider national economy.

5. Seventeenth to Nineteenth Century Mining

Mining activity at Combe Martin continued intermittently after the Elizabethan period.

Historical records indicate attempts to reopen the mines during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though many operations struggled with flooding, exhausted veins and financial instability.

Renewed industrial activity occurred during the nineteenth century when improvements in engineering made deeper mining possible.

In 1813, mining recommenced but the venture survived only a few years. More substantial operations began again in 1835 when new companies attempted to exploit deeper levels of the mine.

By the Victorian era, Cornish-style mining technology had been introduced to parts of the site. Surviving remains include the foundations of beam engine houses, retaining walls, spoil heaps, blacksmiths' workshops and associated structures.

Around Harris's Shaft and Williams' Shaft, archaeological remains still survive within the landscape. These features provide important evidence of nineteenth-century industrial activity.

Mining finally declined towards the end of the nineteenth century and largely ceased by the beginning of the twentieth century.

6. Archaeology and the Historic Landscape

Today, the surviving remains of the Combe Martin silver mines form an important industrial archaeological landscape.

Historic Environment Records identify numerous shafts, adits, spoil heaps, leats, wheel pits and associated structures distributed across the valley and surrounding hillsides.

Archaeological surveys undertaken during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have revealed evidence for both medieval and later workings. Geophysical investigations at

Mine Close identified possible mine shafts and structural remains associated with mining activity.

Many early workings are now concealed beneath vegetation, fields and modern development. Nevertheless, the underground network remains extensive.

The site retains considerable significance for industrial archaeology because it demonstrates the long continuity of mining within a rural English landscape.

Surviving monuments include:

- Williams' Shaft
- Harris's Shaft
- Vivian's Shaft
- Director's Shaft
- Goss Shaft
- spoil heaps and retaining walls
- adits near the River UMBER and Church Street
- the remains of a nineteenth-century engine house
- associated leats and water-management systems

These remains contribute to the historic character of Combe Martin and form part of the wider mining heritage of Devon and Exmoor.

7. The Mines and Local Identity

The silver mines remain central to the heritage and identity of Combe Martin.

For generations, stories of hidden tunnels, buried treasure, lost workings and royal silver formed part of local tradition. Mining shaped both the physical landscape and the social history of the village.

Modern archaeological and heritage groups continue to investigate and preserve this history. Local researchers, historians and mining enthusiasts have helped document surviving features and interpret historical records for wider audiences.

The work of heritage organisations and community groups has contributed significantly to public understanding of the mines and their historical importance.

Today, the mines are recognised not only as industrial remains but also as part of the cultural memory of North Devon.

8. Historical Significance

The Combe Martin silver mines occupy a distinctive place within English mining history.

Their importance lies not only in the quantity of silver produced, but also in their association with:

- medieval royal finance
- Tudor mining enterprise
- Elizabethan industrial development

Historical Significance

- Civil War economic history
- industrial archaeology
- and the long relationship between local communities and extractive industries.

The mines demonstrate how a relatively small rural settlement became connected to national events through the extraction of valuable natural resources.

They also illustrate the risks and uncertainties of historic mining. Periods of prosperity were often followed by flooding, technical failure or financial collapse.

Yet despite these difficulties, mining at Combe Martin persisted in various forms for more than six hundred years.

Timeline of Major Events

Date	Event
c.1292	Earliest documented references to silver mining at Combe Martin
1295	Derbyshire miners brought to work the mines under Edward I
1299	Mines leased to the Frescobaldi banking family
14th century	Continued intermittent royal mining operations
c.1490	Mines described as deep and worn out
1537	Henry VIII reserves rights to gold and silver mines

Date	Event
1587	Rich new silver vein rediscovered by Adrian Gilbert and John Poppler
1587–1593	Bevis Bulmer partnership develops the mines
17th century	Further attempts to reopen workings
1813	Nineteenth-century reopening attempt
1835–1848	Major Victorian mining operations
1876–1880	Combmartin Mining Company works Harris's Shaft
c.1902	Final closure of major mining activity

Sources and Further Reading

Primary and secondary historical sources consulted for this publication include:

- Devon & Dartmoor Historic Environment Record
- Historic Environment Record for Exmoor National Park
- Douglas Stuckey, *Adventurers' Slopes: The Story of the Silver Mines and other Mines of Combe Martin in Devon* (1965)
- Peter Cloughton, *Silver Mining in England and Wales, 1066–1500*
- Rippon, Cloughton and Smart, *Mining in a Medieval Landscape: The Royal Silver Mines of the Tamar Valley* (2009)
- Ordnance Survey historical mapping
- English Heritage archaeological reports
- History of Parliament research materials
- Local heritage publications and archaeological surveys

Conclusion

The story of the Combe Martin silver mines is one of endurance, ambition and historical continuity.

From medieval royal enterprise to Victorian industrial archaeology, the mines connect North Devon to broader national themes of monarchy, finance, warfare, technology and industry.

Although much of the underground system remains hidden, the surviving documentary evidence and archaeological landscape continue to reveal the remarkable history of one of England's most important historic silver-mining districts.

The preservation and interpretation of this heritage remain essential for future generations seeking to understand the industrial and social history of Devon and the wider history of mining in Britain.

Prepared from historical and archaeological sources relating to the Combe Martin silver mines and the industrial heritage of North Devon.

License & Intellectual Property Notice

© 2026 combemartinvillage.co.uk.

This work is licensed under a **Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)**.

Under the terms of this license, you are free to copy and redistribute this material in any medium or format, provided that you comply with the following conditions:

- **Attribution (BY):** You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.
- **NonCommercial (NC):** You may not use this material or its historical text compilation for commercial purposes.
- **NoDerivatives (ND):** If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material.

To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Editorial Disclaimer & Heritage Access Notice

The historical and archaeological overview presented on this page has been compiled in good faith from reliable primary and secondary sources. While every effort has been made to ensure chronological and factual accuracy, historical interpretation is shaped by ongoing research, new archaeological findings, and continuing scholarly review.

The information provided is intended for educational and general informational purposes, supporting the appreciation of Combe Martin's heritage. It does not constitute professional, legal, or geological advice.

Visitors are reminded that many surviving mining features lie on **private land** or form part of a **fragile historic landscape**. Much of the underground network is concealed, unstable, or inaccessible. Any visible surface remains should be treated with the utmost care and respect to ensure their preservation. Please explore the area responsibly and only via public rights of way or designated heritage routes.

Publication Date: May 28, 2026