

Combe Martin (Combmartin) in Three Nineteenth-Century Gazetteers: Lewis (1848), Wilson (1870-72) and White (1878-79)

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Abstract

This referenced research paper examines how Combe Martin, the coastal parish in North Devon, England, is described in three Victorian reference works: Samuel Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary of England* (1848), John Marius Wilson's *Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales* (1870-72) and William White's *History, Gazetteer, and Directory of the County of Devon* (1878-79).

It sets out the content of Lewis's entry, compares it with the two later accounts, and asks how far the differences reflect real change in the parish and how far they reflect each work's genre and its reuse of earlier text.

Lewis's seventh edition (1848) is used as the principal Lewis text; an earlier Lewis edition is consulted only for comparison.

The comparison shows a move from narrative to statistics, and from the history of the silver-lead mines to railway-era prospects for the cove. It also shows substantial textual inheritance, which limits the weight that can be placed on the recurring 'decayed market town' description. Points that still need checking against print copies are listed in section 6.

1. Introduction

Combe Martin lies about five miles east of Ilfracombe on the Bristol Channel coast, in a narrow valley running down to a small cove. Nineteenth-century sources spell the name *Combe Martin*, *Combe-Martin* and *Combmartin*, and all three forms occur in the texts discussed here.

Gazetteers are useful but treacherous evidence. They compress, they borrow from one another, and they update unevenly. This paper therefore treats each entry as a text with its own purpose and lineage, and it keeps observation (what a source says) separate from interpretation (what a difference might mean). Bracketed numbers refer to the Notes, which give the locator for each source; the Bibliography follows.

2. Sources and conventions

The principal texts are:

- **Lewis (1848).** The entry 'Combe-Martin (St. Peter)' in the seventh edition of Samuel Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary of England*, read on British History Online (HO) [1].
- **Wilson (1870-72).** The entry 'COMBE-MARTIN' in John Marius Wilson's *Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales*, read in the transcription on *A Vision of Britain through Time* [2].
- **White (1878-79).** The entry on pp. 234-5 of William White's Devon directory, read only in a partial transcription on a local-history website [3].

Two supporting texts are used for source criticism only: a passage from White's 1850 Devon directory quoted on GENUKI [4], and a transcription of Lewis's 1831 edition on a local-history site [5].

Conventions: quotations are kept short and are given for checking, not as a substitute for the originals. Paraphrase is used elsewhere. '[Ed.]' marks a gloss by the author of this paper that is not in the source (see Note 6).

Level of verification. The wording of Lewis (1848) was checked against the BHO text on 7 October 2026. Wilson was checked against the *Vision of Britain* transcription on the same date. White (1878-79), White (1850) and Lewis (1831) were seen only in secondary transcriptions and should be checked against scans or print copies before publication.

3. The Lewis entry (1848)

3.1 Name, location and size

Lewis describes Combe-Martin (St. Peter) as a market-town and parish in the union of Barnstaple and the hundred of Braunton, five miles east of Ilfracombe and 176 miles from London, with 1,399 inhabitants [1]. He explains the name in two parts: 'Combe' from the valley setting, and 'Martin' from the proprietor at the time of the Conquest. He does not name that proprietor. The parish is given as 3,600 acres, of which 1,837 were common or waste [1].

3.2 Mining

Mining is the longest historical thread in the entry [1]. Lewis reports the following sequence:

- Under Edward I, lead ore containing a considerable proportion of silver was discovered, and 377 men from the Peak in Derbyshire were brought to work it.
- Under Edward II the mines yielded enough silver to help the king meet the cost of the war with France.
- After many years of neglect they were reopened in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) and worked profitably under Sir Bevis Bulmer.
- An exploration in 1790 was unsuccessful. A 'more profitable attempt' in 1813 was discontinued after four years. Works were later renewed, and the mines were in operation when Lewis wrote.
- Iron and copper were also found, and limestone was quarried and burnt for agricultural use 'to a great extent'. Lewis also notes varied geological productions in one hill, and numerous fossils.

The figure of 377 miners and the Edwardian narrative are given without a source. Their origin has not been traced here (see section 6).

3.3 Town, cove and trade

The town lies in a deep glen running north-west and opening into a small cove [1]. Lewis says the cove 'is capable of being converted into a good harbour'. It had served as a port for shipping the mineral produce and still enabled the inhabitants to bring in coal and lime and to receive corn and bark in return. The houses extend for nearly a mile in an irregular line along the vale, and many are described as ruinous and ivy-covered [1].

3.4 Market, fairs and administration

The market had been discontinued [1]. The charter granted to Nicholas Fitz-Martin by Henry III in 1264 was kept alive, according to Lewis, only by the display of trifling articles on market days, and the market-house was 'rapidly falling to decay'. Fairs were held on Whit-Monday and at Lammass. The county magistrates held a monthly petty session, on the first Monday of each month, at 'a small inn' [Ed.: the author identifies this as the Lion; Lewis does not name it, see Note 6].

3.5 Church, institutions and local curiosities

- **Living.** The rectory was valued in the king's books at £39 8s 9d, with tithes of about £400 a year and 60 acres of glebe with a glebe-house. The patron was the Toms family [1].
- **Church.** Lewis calls it a handsome structure with a tower, 'built about the time of Henry III' (reigned 1216-72), with a screen between nave and chancel. He gives the dedication as St. Peter [Ed.: the full dedication, St Peter ad Vincula, is the author's addition; see Note 6].
- **Nonconformity.** There were places of worship for Wesleyans and Independents. Lewis names two denominations and does not say how many buildings there were [1].
- **School.** A school was endowed in 1733 by George Ley, Esq., with land producing £25 a year, and the premises were rebuilt by his grandson of the same name [1].
- **Antiquities and biography.** Three rings of stone stand on the summit of Hangman Hill (1,189 feet). Lewis also records the birth in Combe Martin in 1512 of Dr Thomas Harding, a Roman Catholic divine and controversialist [1]. The date should be checked against a modern biographical source (Note 7).

4. Comparison with Wilson (1870-72) and White (1878-79)

4.1 Statistics

Wilson gives 3,815 acres, a population of 1,484, 342 houses and real property of £4,984 [2]. He places the town 4 miles east of Ilfracombe and 10 miles north by east of Barnstaple railway station, and gives its length as about a mile and a half [2]. Lewis has 3,600 acres, 1,399 inhabitants, a distance of 5 miles and a length of nearly a mile [1].

The differences in acreage and length may reflect remeasurement or different conventions, and nothing in either text settles the matter. The distance from Ilfracombe is not a reliable indicator of change: a transcription of Lewis's own 1831 edition gives 4½ miles [5], so Lewis's figures moved between his editions.

4.2 Townscape and market

Both authors keep the glen setting. Wilson says the town consists largely of 'old and decaying houses' [2], which parallels Lewis's ruinous, ivy-covered houses [1]. On the market, Wilson says only that the town was made a market-town about 1264 and has long lost its market [2]. He omits the named grantee, the token-sale detail and the decaying market-house that Lewis supplies [1].

4.3 Services, nonconformity and the church

Wilson lists a post office under Ilfracombe, an inn, a parish church, three dissenting chapels and an endowed school, and says the town is a seat of petty sessions [2]. Lewis lists places of worship for two denominations [1]. The two counts are therefore not directly comparable, and the texts do not show whether the difference reflects a new building, a new denomination or only a different way of counting.

On the church, Wilson calls it 'early and later English' with a very handsome tower [2]. This is a stylistic description where Lewis gives a date, which is consistent with the architectural vocabulary of mid-Victorian gazetteers, though a single pair of entries cannot establish a trend.

Both record that the Toms (rector) family held the living: Lewis names the family as patrons [1], and Wilson names the Rev. H. W. Toms as patron and gives the value as £387 [2]. The asterisk after that figure in the *Vision of Britain* transcription is not explained there.

4.4 Harbour and railway

Lewis says the cove could be converted into a good harbour [1]. Wilson reports that the North Devon Extension railway company had entertained a project to convert the cove into a harbour [2]. The idea persists across the two texts, but in Wilson it is attached to a named railway enterprise.

4.5 The Manor of Combe Martin

Lewis names no proprietor [1]. Wilson says the manor belonged, in the time of Henry II, to the Norman baron 'Martynde Tours' [2], which is probably a transcription artefact for 'Martyn de Tours'. White's 1878-79 text says that William the Conqueror gave the manor to Martin de Tours, ancestor of the Lords Martin, from whom it passed to the Lords Audley [3].

The Conquest-era grant in White and the Henry II date in Wilson sit in some tension, since roughly a century separates them. The sources do not resolve this, and a specialist manorial history would be needed (section 6).

4.6 Mining

All three texts treat the mines, but they treat them differently.

- Lewis presents Combe Martin's silver-mining history through a succession of royal reigns – Edward I, Edward II and Elizabeth I – with Sir Bevis Bulmer named in connection with the Elizabethan revival, followed by dated accounts of later attempts in 1790 and 1813 [1].
- **Wilson** is technical and statistical. He says silver-lead mines had been worked at intervals since Edward I and were last resumed in 1835. They had shafts of from 20 to 120 fathoms and yielded from 20 to 168 ounces of silver per ton of ore. He also records a cup of 137 ounces said to have been given by Queen Elizabeth I to the Lord Mayor of London [2].
- **White (1878-79)**, as transcribed, is antiquarian. It cites Tristram Risdon for the discovery of the mines in the 22nd year of Edward I (King of England from 1272 to 1307), mentions a letter of Charles I (r. 1625-1649) about the mines three months before his death, and says their working was strongly recommended to the Long Parliament in 1659. It also gives a trade figure: 9,293 tons of ore shipped to Wales between 1796 and 1802 [3].

The chronologies do not align neatly. Lewis has an unsuccessful exploration in 1790 and a profitable but short attempt from 1813 [1]. White's 1850 directory, as quoted on GENUKI, lists unsuccessful attempts about 1800, 1813 and 1817 and a reopening in 1837 [4].

Wilson says the mines were last resumed in 1835 [2]. The two later dates (1835 and 1837) differ by two years. The 1796-1802 shipments in White (1878-79) [3] are not necessarily inconsistent with Lewis's 1790 failure, because a later working could account for them, but the texts do not reconcile the two. In other words, the 1796-1802 shipments recorded by White cannot readily be reconciled with Lewis's account from the text.

4.7 Other trade

White (1878-79) adds that coal vessels and fishing smacks used the cove, that Bristol Channel pilots were generally to be found there, and that there were several lime works [3]. Lewis mentions the coal and lime trade and the burning of limestone, but not pilots or fishing [1].

5. Discussion

Textual inheritance. Three observations suggest that these entries are not independent. First, the market passage in the 1831 transcription of Lewis is nearly identical in wording to the 1848 passage, including the Fitz-Martin charter and the decaying market-house [5][1].

Second, White's 1850 text and White's 1878-79 text share sentences about the manor passing from Martin de Tours to the Lords Audley and about coal vessels, fishing smacks and Bristol Channel pilots [4][3]. Third, Lewis (1848) and White (1850) both give 1,837 acres of common or waste land [1][4].

A shared figure of this kind more likely points to a shared source than to two independent measurements. The persistence of the 'decayed market town' description should be read with this in mind: part of it is repetition.

Genre. The three works do different jobs. Lewis follows the formula of a topographical dictionary, with administrative, ecclesiastical and antiquarian detail. Wilson is a statistical gazetteer, compressing each place into a few lines of figures and services.

White's directory draws on antiquarian authority for history and on local information for trades and residents. Many of the differences in section 4 are therefore differences of emphasis rather than evidence of change on the ground.

What does seem to change. Two shifts are visible even allowing for reuse. The first is the move in the mining account from royal-reign narrative (Lewis) to technical yields and a notable object (Wilson), and then to older documentary authority (White).

The second is the harbour, which is a possibility in Lewis and a railway company's project in Wilson. The additional services Wilson lists, such as a post office, are consistent with Victorian infrastructure growth, but they are evidence of what Wilson chose to list as much as of what existed.

6. Limitations and points to verify

- **Page numbers.** BHO gives only the section range for Lewis's entry (pp. 668-72, 'Colton - Comberbach'); the entry is the 27th of 30 headings in that section. The printed page should be confirmed from the BHO page image or a print copy [1].
- **Wilson.** The *Vision of Britain* text has an ellipsis after its first sentence and does not give volume or page. Both should be added from a scan of the original [2].
- **White.** Only a fragmentary transcription of pp. 234-5 was available, with visible gaps. The imprint is given as in that transcription and should be checked [3].
- **Origin of the 377 miners.** Lewis gives no source. Daniel and Samuel Lysons's *Magna Britannia*, vol. 6 (Devonshire), is available on BHO and is a possible lead, but it has not been examined here [8].
- **Manorial descent.** The relationship between the Conquest-era Martin de Tours and the Henry II reference in Wilson needs a specialist manorial source.
- **Biographical date.** Compare Lewis's 1512 for Thomas Harding with the Oxford *Dictionary of National Biography* [7].
- **Access dates.** All web sources were accessed on 7 October 2026 and should be re-checked before citing.

Notes

1. Samuel Lewis, ed., *A Topographical Dictionary of England*, 7th edn (London: S. Lewis, 1848), entry 'Combe-Martin (St. Peter)', in the section 'Colton - Comberbach', pp. 668-72, *British History Online*, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/topographical-dict/england/pp668-672> (heading 27 of 30 in the section). Accessed 7 October 2026.
2. John Marius Wilson, *The Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales* (Edinburgh: A. Fullarton & Co., 1870-72), entry 'COMBE-MARTIN', as transcribed in 'Combe Martin', GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, *A Vision of Britain through Time*, <https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/place/1779>. Accessed 7 October 2026. Volume and page are not given there.
3. William White, *History, Gazetteer, and Directory of the County of Devon* (1878-79), 'Combe Martin', pp. 234-5, as transcribed (partially) by the Combe Martin Village History project, <https://www.combemartinvillage.co.uk/white-s-gazette-1878-1879>. Accessed 7 October 2026. The transcription gives the imprint as Birmingham, with Simpkin, Marshall & Co., London; to be checked against a library copy.
4. Passage quoted from 'White's Devonshire Directory (1850)' in the GENUKI page for Combe Martin, <https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/DEV/CombeMartin>. Accessed 7 October 2026. The page also carries a separate attribution of a 'Description & Travel' section to Lewis (1831), which is not relied on here.
5. Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of England* (1831), entry for Combmartin, as transcribed at <https://www.combemartinvillage.co.uk/early-histories/combe-martin-in-1831-1845>. Accessed 7 October 2026. Seen in a partial snippet only; to be checked against a scan of the 1831 edition.
6. Editorial glosses by the author, not found in Lewis (1848): that the 'small inn' was the Lion, and that the church's full dedication is St Peter ad Vincula. Each should be given its own source (for the church, for example, the Historic England listing; for the inn, a local or licensing source) or removed.

7. Thomas Harding: compare with the Oxford *Dictionary of National Biography* entry. The date has not been checked here.
8. Daniel Lysons and Samuel Lysons, *Magna Britannia*, vol. 6 (Devonshire), BHO, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/magna-britannia/vol6/pp129-151>. This URL was listed on the Combe Martin Village History site as a related BHO source; its content has not been examined.

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Lysons, Daniel, and Samuel Lysons. *Magna Britannia*, vol. 6 (Devonshire). *British History Online*. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/magna-britannia/vol6/pp129-151>. [Not examined.]

White, William. *History, Gazetteer, and Directory of the County of Devon*. 1878-79 edition. Consulted via <https://www.combemartinvillage.co.uk/white-s-gazette-1878-1879>.

White, William. *History, Gazetteer and Directory of the County of Devon, including the City of Exeter*. 2nd edn. Sheffield: William White, 1878-79, pp. 234-235.

White, William. *White's Devonshire Directory* (1850). Consulted via <https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/DEV/CombeMartin>.

Wilson, John Marius. *The Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales*. Edinburgh: A. Fullarton & Co., 1870-72. Consulted via *A Vision of Britain through Time*, <https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/place/1779>.

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Notes on Sources, Method and Interpretation

1. Scope and purpose

This paper is a comparative study of three nineteenth-century published descriptions of Combe Martin: Samuel Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary of England* (1848), John Marius Wilson's *Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales* (1870-72), and William White's *History, Gazetteer, and Directory of the County of Devon* (1878-79). Its purpose is to examine what these works record about Combe Martin and to compare their treatment of particular subjects. It is not intended to provide a definitive history of the parish, its mines, manor or institutions.

2. Source evidence and interpretation

A distinction is made throughout between what a source actually states and what may reasonably be inferred from a comparison of sources. Statements attributed to Lewis, Wilson or White describe the contents of those works; they should not automatically be taken as independently verified facts. Where a conclusion is interpretative, it is expressed cautiously.

3. Historical gazetteers as sources

Gazetteers are valuable historical sources, but they are not necessarily independent records of contemporary conditions. They were compiled for particular purposes and could incorporate earlier published material, antiquarian tradition, statistics, local information and material inherited from previous editions or works. Similar wording or figures occurring in more than one gazetteer should therefore not automatically be treated as independent confirmation.

4. Use of transcriptions

The Lewis (1848) text has been checked against the British History Online transcription. Wilson (1870-72) has been consulted through the transcription provided by A Vision of Britain through Time. White (1878-79), White (1850) and Lewis (1831) have been consulted through transcriptions rather than directly from complete scans of the original printed editions. Minor differences in spelling, punctuation, typography or transcription may therefore exist between the versions consulted and the original printed works.

5. Historical spelling

Nineteenth-century sources use varying forms of the name of the parish, including *Combe Martin*, *Combe-Martin* and *Combmartin*. Historical personal names and place-names are retained in their source form where relevant. Differences in spelling are not, by themselves, evidence for different people, places or traditions.

6. Mining history

The accounts of Combe Martin's silver-lead mines contain a mixture of historical narrative, antiquarian tradition, documentary reference and technical information. This paper records those accounts as they occur in the gazetteers and compares their chronology and emphasis. It does not attempt to establish independently the complete history of the mines. In particular, figures, medieval narratives and statements for which the gazetteers do not themselves provide a source should be regarded as statements made by those publications unless independently corroborated.

7. Conflicting dates

Where dates given by the gazetteers differ, the differences are reported rather than reconciled by assumption. A discrepancy between two sources does not necessarily establish that one source is wrong: the publications may have drawn on different information, used different definitions, referred to different stages of an undertaking, or reproduced earlier material. Further archival or specialist research would be required before resolving such discrepancies.

8. Manorial history

References to Martin de Tours, the FitzMartins and the later descent of the manor are presented here as they occur in the nineteenth-century sources. The detailed medieval and later descent of the manor is a specialist subject and is not independently reconstructed in this paper. Where the gazetteers appear to give different chronological accounts, the discrepancy is identified rather than resolved without additional evidence.

9. Textual transmission

Similar wording, figures or historical statements appearing in successive publications are treated as possible evidence of textual transmission or reliance upon a common earlier source. Such similarities do not, without further bibliographical investigation, establish precisely which publication supplied the information to another.

10. Editorial additions

Explanatory material supplied by the present author but not found in the source text is identified as editorial material. Such additions should not be read as quotations or as statements made by the historical author.

11. Limitations of the evidence

The paper identifies several points that would benefit from checking against original printed editions, archival material or specialist historical studies. These include the precise bibliographical details and pagination of some sources, the origin of Lewis's figure of 377 miners, the medieval and later descent of the manor, and the biographical information concerning Thomas Harding. These matters are identified as areas for further verification rather than presented as settled conclusions.

12. Further research

This paper is intended as a contribution to the study of Combe Martin's documentary and published history. Its comparisons may provide useful starting points for further investigation of the original printed gazetteers, their sources and the historical subjects they describe. The identification of uncertainty is deliberate: where the available evidence does not permit a firm conclusion, the paper leaves the question open rather than supplying an unsupported explanation.

Author's note

The paper aims to distinguish clearly between historical source evidence, repeated published tradition and the author's interpretation. Corrections, additional documentary evidence and references to original sources are therefore welcomed as part of the continuing study of Combe Martin's history.