The Medieval Descent of Combe Martin: *Domesday Origins to the Barony of Barnstaple (1066–14th Century)*

Nestled within the stunning landscapes of North Devon, Combe Martin's rich history unfolds as a tale of transformation and resilience.

From its roots as a prosperous Anglo-Saxon settlement to its elevation as a strategic manor in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest in 1066 CE, Combe Martin stands as a testament to the shifting tides of power, agriculture, and economy in medieval England.

This original paper tracks its evolution; a small valley holding great promise that blossomed into a cornerstone of the Barony of Barnstaple, showcasing how a community thrived against the backdrop of monumental change.

Interpretive notes, alternative readings and a glossary of terms are also included.

A Manor of Strategic Importance

The story of Combe Martin after 1066 reflects its transformation from a post-Conquest military reward into a stable, high-value estate at the heart of a major North Devon barony. By the thirteenth-century, Combe Martin was rich in silver-lead.

Anglo-Saxon Roots

Before 1066, Combe Martin was held jointly by two Anglo-Saxon nobles, Brictric and Edwin, who shared the manor *in parage* or with equal partnership. This unusual arrangement suggests the estate was significant even before the post-Conquest Norman redistribution of land.

Norman Beginnings

After the Norman Conquest in 1066 CE, the Combe or *Comba* manor was granted to William de Falaise, a prominent Norman nobleman associated with substantial landholdings in Devon and Somerset. The grant reflects the Norman practice of redistributing land to loyal supporters, following the Conquest.

William of Falaise held the manor directly from the Crown as a Tenant-in-Chief, and the immediate lord over the peasants after the Conquest. He was one of the major Domesday barons in the West Country. This indicates the manor’s strategic and economic value.

The Domesday Book of 1086 describes Combe [Martin] as a thriving and highly organised agricultural community. This is remarkable for its capacity to support 20 plough teams and it's one of the highest figures recorded in this West Country region.

With 37 recorded households in 1086, Combe Martin ranked among the largest 20% of all settlements in Domesday England. This was a substantial and populous community by contemporary standards.

Part of the Barony of Barnstaple

In the generations that followed, Combe [Martin], "the valley with manorial affix [Martin]", became firmly integrated into the Feudal Barony of Barnstaple.

Through the descent of the barony, the manor passed successively through the Beaumont, Tracy, and Martyn [Martin] families.

By the mid-13th century, national surveys such as the *Testa de Nevill* formally list Combe Martin as one of the barony's recognised fees.

Combe Martin's inclusion in the *Testa de Nevill* as a full knight's fee held by Nicholas FitzMartin (who was dead in 1282), places it among the more valuable rural manors of thirteenth-century Devon, and firmly within the economic strategy of the Honour of Barnstaple.

Far from being a peripheral backwater, the manor generated sufficient surplus to support knight service and attracted deliberate baronial intervention, most notably the establishment of a weekly market and annual fair.

These measures reflect a conscious effort by the FitzMartin lordship to formalise and exploit long-standing productivity through trade, mining, and market regulation, marking Combe Martin's transition from manorial settlement to functioning seigneurial borough.

The Martyn Overlords

The Martyn (de Martin) family emerge as the principal medieval lords of the manor.

The Book of Fees (Liber Feodorum) records Combe Martin under their tenure, and the 1326 *Inquisition Post Mortem for William de Martin* confirms the *"manor of Combe Martyn"* as a significant part of his baronial holdings.

A Continuity of Wealth and Organisation

Across the medieval period, Combe Martin retained the high productivity first recorded in Domesday. Its tenure evolved from a joint Anglo-Saxon holding—shared *in parage* or in partnership by pre-Conquest Anglo-Saxon nobles Brictric and Edwin—to a structured Norman estate, and finally into a stable, high-value baronial asset.

Sharing the estate *in parage* (equal partnership) between Edwin and Brictric suggests a somewhat unusual arrangement for the time. They were either unusually cooperative or unusually constrained by circumstance.

Throughout these transitions, the manor of Combe [Martin] remained intact as a key economic engine for its successive lords.

A Major Agricultural Settlement

By 1086, Combe Martin was already a thriving and highly organised farming community.

The Domesday survey records land capable of supporting 20 plough teams — an exceptional figure for North Devon — revealing extensive arable fields and a landscape shaped by long-established cultivation.

The Domesday entry explicitly states:

> **“**These 20 ploughs can till.”

This is the line that proves the manor had arable land sufficient for twenty plough teams.

In Domesday terminology:

- A plough team = 8 oxen
- The number of plough teams a manor *could support* is the standard medieval measure of its agricultural capacity
- Most Devon manors had 4–10 ploughs
- Combe Martin is placed in the top tier of productivity for the entire county

A Large and Productive Population

The manor supported 18 villein households, suggesting a population of perhaps 80–120 people, though Domesday does not record all social groups. With 14 tenant plough teams and 3 on the lord’s demesne, Combe Martin was working close to full capacity. Its output placed it among the most productive rural estates in the region.

A *villein* was a type of unfree peasant in medieval England who was bound to a lord's manor. They owed labour services, rents, and dues to the lord in exchange for the right to work a plot of land.

Demesne refers to land owned and directly managed by a lord for their own use, rather than rented out to tenants. It was typically farmed by the lord's household or tenant labour.

A Manor of High Status

After the Norman Conquest, Combe Martin was granted to William de Falaise, a prominent baron with estates across Devon and Somerset. His lordship reflects the manor’s value and strategic importance within the new Norman order.

A Well-Organised Estate

Domesday distinguishes clearly between the lord's private land and the tenants' holdings. This separation shows a mature manorial system, with structured obligations, defined responsibilities, and a hierarchy typical of a well-run medieval estate.

One of North Devon's Richest Domesday Entries

In comparison with neighbouring manors, Combe Martin stands out for its size, population, and agricultural capacity. Its Domesday record captures a village already central to the region's economy — a little parish with a big story, even in the 11th century.

Interpretive Notes and Alternative Readings

The surviving evidence for Combe Martin is particularly strong for a rural manor, yet—as with all medieval documentation—it demands careful interpretation rather than simple transcription.

Parage often implies a family inheritance where one brother is the formal head, yet all share the land equally. This arrangement that suggests Combe Martin was a cohesive, mature estate long before the Normans arrived, rather than a collection of smaller fragments.

The transition to a "seigneurial borough" in 1249 might have been a strategic move by the Martyns to regulate not just agricultural trade but also the burgeoning mining industry.

The Domesday Book's statement that the estate was capable of supporting twenty plough teams should be read as an assessment of agricultural potential, not as a record of land under continuous full cultivation in 1086.

Comparable entries across Devon show that such figures often reflect long-established capacity rather than actual output at the moment of survey (Domesday Book, Exon version; Great Domesday, fol. 101v).

The apparent clarity with which Domesday distinguishes demesne land from tenant holdings similarly reflects the survey's administrative framework. Many manors appear "well organised" because they were recorded through a standardised lens, not because their internal management was uniquely structured. In this respect, Combe Martin seems typical of mid-Devon estates: substantial, orderly on paper, but not exceptional in complexity.

Population estimates derived from the eighteen villeins listed in 1086 must also be treated cautiously. Domesday omits several social groups—cottars, slaves, dependants, and unfree labourers may or may not be enumerated—so any reconstruction of total population remains approximate. The real number of inhabitants may have been higher or lower than the surviving figures imply.

The manor’s pre-Conquest joint holding by Brictric and Edwin hints at the layered and sometimes opaque nature of late Anglo-Saxon land tenure. Whether this arrangement was cooperative, familial, or imposed cannot be determined from the record.

Following the Conquest, the grant of Combe Martin to William de Falaise places it within the broader redistribution of estates to Norman lords. Its inclusion in a larger portfolio suggests recognised value, though not necessarily strategic importance.

While Domesday focuses on arable land and "plough teams", the later value of the manor, such as its status as a full knight's fee, was likely bolstered by mineral rights.

Later developments reinforce this picture. The manor’s assessment as a knight’s fee and the subsequent grant of a market and fair indicate baronial ambition and perceived economic potential within the Barony of Barnstaple. Yet medieval market grants were often aspirational; they signal opportunity rather than guaranteed commercial success.

Conclusion

Taken together, the main sources show that Combe Martin was a long-established and fairly important manor. Its significance didn’t depend just on how many people lived there or how it happened to be described in Domesday. Instead, its importance came from its long history, its steady line of lords, and the role it played in the wider area.

Combe Martin can claim longstanding value, continuity of lordship, and integration into wider regional structures. Where the evidence is thin or formulaic—as in Domesday’s standardised categories—interpretation must remain cautious.

The record allows us to see Combe Martin as a meaningful component of the medieval landscape, while reminding us of the limits of what can be known with certainty.

Glossary of Domesday & Medieval Manorial Terms

Advowson

The right to appoint a priest to a parish church. Often attached to manors and recorded in later medieval documents.

Acre

A unit of land area used in medieval England. Not used in Domesday assessments, but helpful for modern comparison. Roughly the amount of land a team of oxen could plough in a day.

Bordar / Bordarius

A smallholder with less land than a villein. Bordars often held a cottage and a small plot, providing labour or services to the manor.

Carucate

A northern English land unit equivalent to the amount of land a plough team could work in a season. Not used in Devon, but sometimes appears in comparative studies.

Demesne

Land farmed directly for the lord's benefit. Worked by the lord's household or by tenant labour obligations.

Fee / Knight's Fee

A unit of land held in return for military service. A barony consisted of multiple knight's fees.

Feudal Barony

A large territorial lordship held directly from the Crown, made up of many manors and knight's fees. Combe Martin belonged to the Barony of Barnstaple.

Geld

A land tax levied by the king. Domesday records how much geld a manor was assessed for, not its physical acreage.

Hide

A unit of assessment, not a fixed area. Often treated as roughly 120 acres, but varied widely. Represents the land needed to support a household.

Hundred

An administrative division of a shire. Combe Martin lay in the Shirwell Hundred.

In Parage (Pariter)

Joint tenure by equals. Indicates that two Anglo-Saxon nobles shared lordship of Combe Martin before 1066.

Inquisition Post Mortem (IPM)

A royal inquiry held after the death of a tenant-in-chief. Lists all lands held and under what terms. Essential for tracing medieval landholding.

Manor

The basic unit of rural administration. A manor included the lord's demesne, tenant holdings, rights, and obligations.

Plough Team

A team of eight oxen needed to pull a heavy medieval plough. Domesday uses plough teams to measure agricultural capacity.

Seigneurial Borough

A town created by a lord (seigneur) by granting a charter, intended to generate revenue through market tolls and rents.

Serf

A general term for unfree peasants, including villeins and bordars. Bound to the land and owing labour services.

Socage

A form of tenure involving fixed rents or services rather than military service. More common in later medieval periods.

Tenant-in-Chief

A person who held land directly from the king. William de Falaise held Combe Martin in this capacity.

T.R.E. (Tempore Regis Edwardi)

“In the time of King Edward” — meaning before the Norman Conquest (before 1066). The king was Edward the Confessor, who ruled 1042–1066.

Villein

An unfree peasant tenant owing labour services, rents, and dues to the lord. Formed the backbone of the manorial economy.

Virgate

A quarter of a hide (roughly 30 acres). Used to measure tenant holdings

Primary Sources

Domesday Book: Devon.
Phillimore Edition. Entry for *Comba* (Combe Martin).
Provides the earliest record of the manor’s size, population, and holders before and after 1066.

Domesday Book, Devon, fol. Xb (Phillimore ed.)

William of Falaise | Domesday Book

Liber Feodorum (The Book of Fees).
Vol. I, p. 444.
Lists Combe Martin as a fee held of the Barony of Barnstaple under the Martyn family.

Combe [Martin]

Combe [Martin] was a settlement in Domesday Book, in the hundred of Braunton and the county of Devon.https://opendomesday.org/place/SS5846/combe-martin/

Testa de Nevill (Book of Fees).
Public Record Office, p. 195.
Records Combe Martin among the fees belonging to the Barony of Barnstaple in the mid-13th century.

Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem.
Edward II, Vol. 7 (1326), no. 397.
The IPM of William de Martin lists the "manor of Combe Martyn" as part of the barony.

Secondary Sources

Victoria County History of Devon.
Vol. I.
Summarises the descent of the Barony of Barnstaple and cites Domesday, Testa de Nevill, and the Book of Fees for Combe Martin.

Masland, W.
"The Barony of Barnstaple."
Transactions of the Devonshire Association, Vol. 3 (1869).
Discusses early descent and reproduces primary references.

Dymond, R.
"Notes on the Barony of Barnstaple."
Transactions of the Devonshire Association, Vol. 5 (1872).
Clarifies the Beaumont → Tracy → Martyn succession.

Chanter, J. F.
"The Lords of the Barony of Barnstaple."
Transactions of the Devonshire Association, Vol. 26 (1894).
Includes quotations from the 1326 IPM naming Combe Martin.

Great Britain. Public Record Office. *Liber Feodorum: The Book of Fees, Commonly Called Testa de Nevill. Part II: A.D. 1242–1293 and Appendix.* London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1923. Digitised by the Internet Archive, 2020. https://archive.org/stream/liberfeodorumboo00grea/liberfeodorumboo00grea_djvu.txt .

Notes on North Devon Families.
Transactions of the Devonshire Association, Vol. 38 (1906); provides genealogical context for the Beaumonts and Martyns.

Notes

The Domesday entry divides the land into:

1. Lord's demesne

> "William has 3 virgates and 3 ploughs in demesne."

This shows:

- A central lord's farm
- Managed land
- Labour obligations from tenants

2. Tenant land

> "And the villeins 1½ hides and 14 ploughs."

This shows:

- A large tenant population
- A highly productive peasant economy
- A structured manorial system

The clear division between demesne and villein land is what historians mean by "highly organised". Combe or *Comba* [Martin] was already functioning as a coherent manorial unit before William de Falaise took it into demesne.

Combe Martin had a large population

The Domesday entry states:

> "There William has 18 villeins."

A villein = a household, not an individual. This implies a population of 80–120 people, which is large for rural Devon in 1086.

Proving the interpretation

Everything rests on three Domesday statements:

1. "These 20 ploughs can till."

→ Suggests extensive arable land and high productivity.

2. "William has 3 ploughs in demesne… the villeins 14 ploughs."

→ Proves a structured, organised manorial economy.

3. “There William has 18 villeins.”

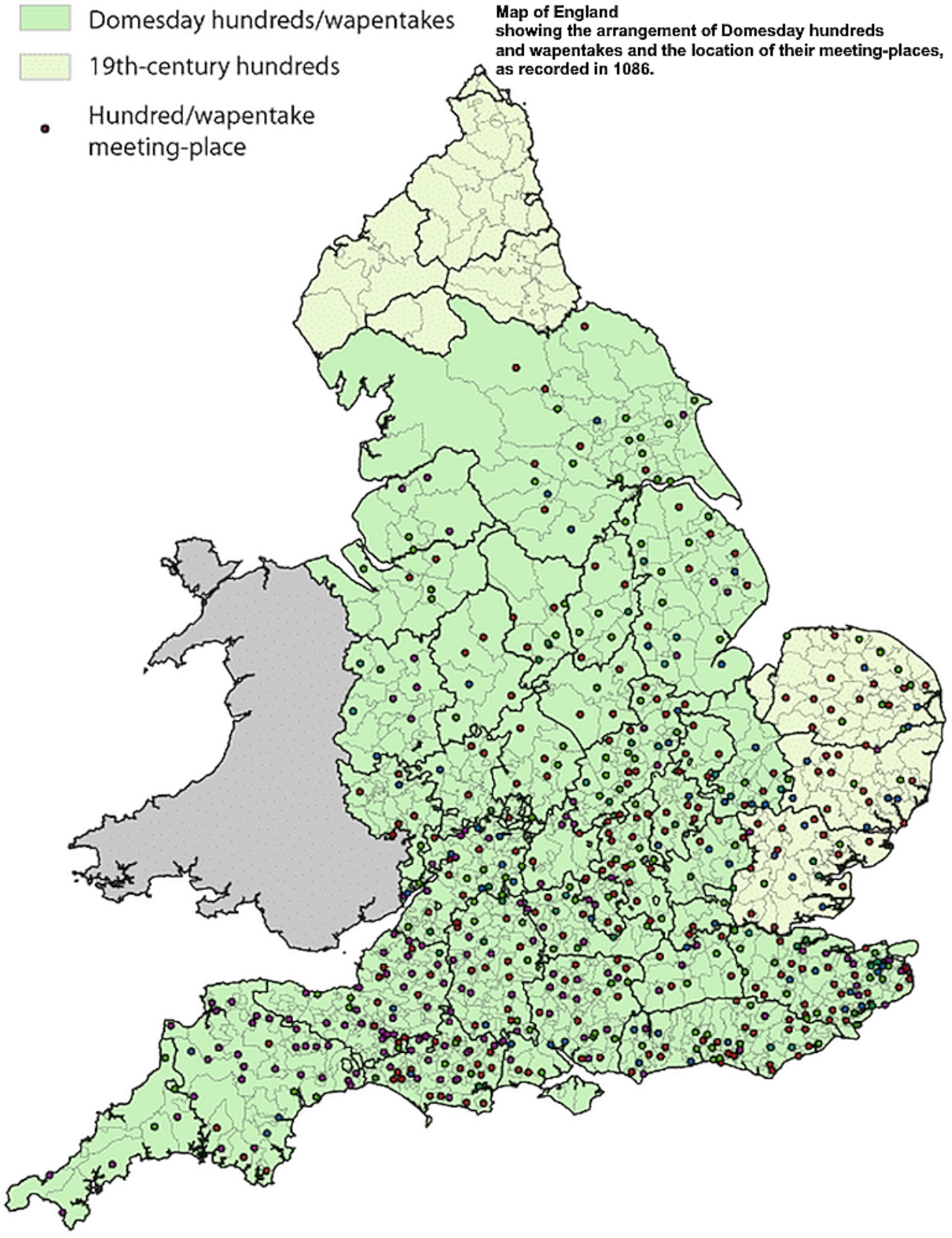
→ Proves a large population and substantial tenant community.

Together, these lines justify the interpretation that Combe Martin was:

- thriving
- populous
- highly organised
- agriculturally significant
- among the more productive rural manors recorded in North Devon

All of this comes directly from the Domesday text.

Taken together, Domesday evidence for exceptional agricultural capacity, its assessment as a full knight’s fee in the *Testa de Nevill*, sustained baronial tenure within the Honour of Barnstaple, and the grant of a market and fair in 1249 demonstrate that Combe [Martin] was not a marginal rural settlement.



Map of England
showing the arrangement of Domesday hundreds and wapentakes and the location of their meeting-places, as recorded in 1086.

Map of England showing Domesday hundreds and wapentakes

The manor was a deliberately cultivated baronial asset, whose productivity and organisation were recognised, and exploited, from the late eleventh through to the fourteenth century.

The attached map of England is a historical-geographical visualisation of England's administrative divisions known as hundreds and wapentakes, showing how they evolved from the Domesday Book era (11th century) to the 19th century.

What Are Hundreds and Wapentakes?

- Hundreds: Subdivisions of counties used for administrative, judicial, and military purposes in southern and western England.
- Wapentakes: The equivalent term used in northern and eastern England, especially in areas influenced by Danish law.

These units were central to local governance, tax collection, and justice—each had a meeting-place where free men gathered for court sessions and communal decisions.

Map Legend and Color Coding

- Light Green Areas: Hundreds and wapentakes recorded in the *Domesday Book* (1086), showing the early medieval administrative landscape.
- Pale Green Areas: Hundreds as they existed in the 19th century, reflecting later reforms and boundary changes.
- Dark Red Dots: Known meeting-places for each hundred or wapentake—often at prominent landmarks like hills, crossroads, or ancient trees.

What the Map Reveals

- Continuity and Change: Some Domesday divisions persisted into the 19th century, while others were merged, renamed, or dissolved.
- Regional Density: Southern and eastern England show a dense network of hundreds, reflecting early administrative rigour. Northern regions have fewer divisions, often larger in size.
- Wales in Grey: Wales is excluded from this dataset, as it used different administrative structures.

Historical Significance

- This map helps historians trace the evolution of local governance, landholding patterns, and judicial organisation.
- It also aids genealogists and archaeologists in locating lost meeting-places, which were often sites of early communal activity.

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