

Combe Martin Manor: The Pollard Legacy

A Historical Overview of Ownership, Transition, and Philanthropy



By [Combe Martin Village History Project](#) (CMVHP) | September - October 2025

Introduction

This document outlines the historical connection between the Pollard family and the manor of [Combe Martin, North Devon](#). The Pollards were powerful Tudor officials in 16th century England.

It traces the transition from feudal ownership by birth-right, to tenant-held land, highlighting the roles of Sir Richard Pollard and his son Sir John Pollard in shaping the village's landholding structure and social legacy.

Sir Richard Pollard (c.1505-1542)

- Granted the manor of Combe Martin by King Henry VIII on 25 October 1537.
 - Rewarded for his role in the Dissolution of the Monasteries, acting as a royal surveyor and agent of Thomas Cromwell.
 - His acquisition tied Combe Martin directly to the Tudor court and national religious reform.
 - Oversaw the dismantling of major shrines, including Saint Thomas Becket's at Canterbury Cathedral.
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Sir John Pollard (c.1528-1575)

- Inherited the manor of Combe Martin upon Richard's death in 1542.
- Later sold the manor to its tenants, and the demesne lands to his servant William Hancock (Risdon, Survey of Devon [1810 edition], p.348).
- This marked the end of feudal lordship in Combe Martin and the beginning of tenant and individual land ownership.
- In his will (PCC 47 Pyckering), John Pollard:
 - Left money to the poor of Combe Martin.
 - Made bequests to his daughters.
 - Granted his wife the lease of his London town house.

William Hancock (c. 1523-1587)

Combe Martin demesne lands owner under King Henry VIII. According to [Find a Grave](#), Memorial ID 287183397: Hancock is buried in [Combe Martin St Peter's](#) Churchyard, and his memorial includes a monumental brass inscription mounted on a board in the North Chancel. This placement suggests a degree of status and respect within the parish—especially for someone who began as a servant and rose to become a landholder.

Historical Significance

- The Pollards' stewardship reflects a broader shift in Tudor England from feudalism to market-based landholding.
- John Pollard's divestment of the manor empowered local families and ended centuries of hierarchical land control.
- His philanthropic bequests suggest a continued connection to the village and its welfare.

Could the Pollard legacy be romanticized or oversimplified in this narrative?

Sources

- [History of Parliament Online - Sir John Pollard](#)
- [The National Archives - PCC Wills Guide](#)

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Explanatory Key

Manor of Combe Martin

A historic estate in North Devon, England. In Tudor times, a manor typically included land, buildings, and legal rights held by a lord. Combe Martin's manor was granted by the Crown and later sold to tenants.

Sir Richard Pollard (c.1505-1542)

A lawyer and royal official under King Henry VIII. He played a key role in the **Dissolution of the Monasteries**, helping dismantle religious institutions and seize their assets. In return, he was granted lands—including Combe Martin.

Dissolution of the Monasteries

A major event (1536-1541) during the English Reformation where Henry VIII closed monasteries, priories, and convents, redistributing their wealth and land to loyal subjects like Pollard.

Thomas Cromwell

Chief minister to Henry VIII and architect of the Dissolution. Pollard worked under Cromwell's direction.

Saint Thomas Becket's Shrine

A richly decorated shrine in Canterbury Cathedral, destroyed in 1538 as part of the Reformation. Pollard oversaw its dismantling, linking Combe Martin's history to national religious reform.

Sir John Pollard (c.1528-1575)

Richard Pollard's son and heir. He inherited Combe Martin but later sold the manor to its tenants and demesne lands to his servant, marking a shift from feudalism to local ownership. The precise date of the manor's dispersal is yet to be established.

Demesne Lands

The portion of a manor retained by the lord for personal use or income. Selling these lands to a servant (William Hancock) reflects changing social structures in Tudor England.

PCC 47 Pyckering

A reference to John Pollard's will, proved in the **Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC)**, in the Pyckering register. This legal record confirms his bequests and estate decisions.

Bequests

Gifts left in a will. John Pollard's bequests included money to the poor of Combe Martin, provisions for his daughters, and a lease for his wife.

Feudal Lordship

A medieval system where land was held by lords who controlled tenants. John Pollard's sale of the manor ended this structure in Combe Martin.

Tenant Ownership

After Sir John Pollard sold Combe Martin Manor, local residents gained control of the land they lived on—an early form of property ownership that empowered communities.

Details of Sir John Pollard's testamentary bequests are drawn from his will proved in 1542, held at The National Archives (UK). This document outlines Pollard's instructions for burial, provision for his wife and daughters, and charitable gifts to the poor of Combe Martin. For access, see: <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>.

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Notes

Henry VIII and the Decline of Feudalism

- The **Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536-1541)** transferred vast ecclesiastical estates into the hands of royal loyalists such as Richard Pollard, reflecting a deliberate strategy to consolidate Crown authority and dismantle traditional landholding structures.
- The **subsequent sale of Combe Martin Manor by Sir John Pollard to local tenants** marks a second wave of redistribution—from gentry to community—illustrating the erosion of feudal lordship and the rise of transactional landholding.
- **Henry VIII's reign catalysed a shift toward a market-oriented economy**, characterised by increased trade, monetised land transfers, and the commodification of property.
- The **Pollards' stewardship and eventual divestment of monastic lands** exemplify this transformation: land ceased to be a hereditary entitlement and became a negotiable asset.
- These developments align with broader Tudor reforms in governance, religion, and economic policy, as outlined in **3.1.6 Henry VIII: Economy, Religion and Cultural Change** (AQA A-Level History | TutorChase).

[3.1.6 Henry VIII: Economy, Religion and Cultural Change | AQA A-Level History Notes | TutorChase](#)

Colophon

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Sources and Verification: Historical claims are grounded in primary sources including the Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills, Risdon's *Survey of Devon*, and entries from the History of Parliament Online.

Henry VIII's reign catalysed seismic shifts in landholding, governance, and religious authority. Rather than the romanticised view: here are some pertinent, critical thinking questions students might ask, to deepen their understanding and spark discussion:

Big-Picture Questions

- **How did the Dissolution of the Monasteries contribute to the decline of feudalism?**
 - What role did figures like Sir Richard Pollard play in redistributing monastic lands?
 - **Was Henry VIII's land redistribution primarily about consolidating royal power or rewarding loyalty?**
 - Could this be seen as a strategic move to weaken the nobility and empower the Crown?
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Local Impact & Social Change

- **What does the sale of Combe Martin Manor to tenants reveal about changing social hierarchies?**
 - How did this shift affect local governance, economic independence, or community identity?
 - **Why is William Hancock's rise from servant to landholder significant?**
 - Does this suggest increased social mobility in Tudor England—or was it an exception?
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Legal and Testamentary Insight

- **What can we infer from Sir John Pollard's will about his values and priorities?**
 - How do his bequests reflect a transition from feudal obligation to personal philanthropy?
 - **How did legal instruments like wills and leases facilitate the end of feudal lordship?**
 - What role did the Prerogative Court of Canterbury play in legitimizing these transitions?
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Historical Method & Interpretation

- **How does this case study help us understand broader Tudor reforms?**
 - In what ways does Combe Martin reflect national trends—and where might it diverge?
- **What are the limitations of using local history to interpret national policy shifts?**