

George Ley (c. 1648-1716) and the Pack o' Cards, Combe Martin

George Ley (c. 1648-1716) was a gentleman and landowner of Combe Martin, North Devon, whose name remains closely associated with one of the village's most remarkable historic buildings: the monumental *Pack o' Cards* on High Street.

Ley's memorial survives in the parish church of St Peter ad Vincula, while local tradition has long identified him as the man responsible for the extraordinary townhouse now known as the Pack o' Cards Inn.

George Ley of Combe Martin

George Ley was born in Devon about 1648 and died at Combe Martin on 26 June 1716, aged 68. His memorial in St Peter ad Vincula Church identifies him as a "Gent." of the parish. Historic England records the monument, in the north aisle of the parish church, as an early eighteenth-century wall monument to George Ley, who died in 1716 ([Historic England](#)).

He was the son of John Ley (1621-1701) and Bridget Ley. He married Margaret Harding at Combe Martin on 11 July 1685. Their children included Elizabeth, born in 1689, and George, born in 1692. Following Margaret's death in 1696, Ley married Grace Cutcliffe on 3 February 1703.

The surviving evidence places Ley among the established local gentry of Combe Martin. His importance to the village is particularly apparent through the building traditionally attributed to him and through the memorial erected after his death.

The Pack o' Cards

The building now known as the Pack o' Cards Inn stands on Combe Martin High Street. It is a Grade II* listed building, first listed on 9 March 1953. The Devon Historic Environment Record describes it as an early eighteenth-century public house and records the tradition that it was originally built as a private house by George Ley following a spectacular gambling win ([Heritage Gateway](#)).

The building's date is generally placed around 1690, although Historic England and the Devon Historic Environment Record use the broader description of an early eighteenth-century building. Its unusual design is central to the legend surrounding Ley.

According to local tradition, the house was conceived as an architectural representation of a pack of playing cards. The traditional symbolism includes four principal storeys representing the four suits and a total of 52 windows or other architectural features associated with the 52 cards of a standard pack.

These details should, however, be treated with some caution.

The surviving historic record establishes the building's unusual plan and its traditional association with George Ley, but not every individual numerical feature of the “pack of cards” story can be demonstrated from surviving architectural evidence. Historic England itself describes the symbolism as reputed rather than established fact ([Heritage Gateway](#)).

The Devon Historic Environment Record describes the building as having an elaborate symmetrical plan, rendered stone rubble and cob construction, slate roofs and distinctive tall chimney stacks. Its courtyard wall also incorporates historic bee-boles ([Heritage Gateway](#)).

The building was originally a private house rather than an inn. It was certainly functioning as an inn by the early nineteenth century. In 1822 it was recorded as the King's Arms Inn, with Jane Huxtable as landlady. The name “Pack of Cards” was already familiar locally, but the establishment was formally renamed the Pack o’ Cards on 1 June 1933 ([CAMRA - The Campaign for Real Ale](#)).

The King's Arms and the Pack o’ Cards name

For much of its documented history as an inn, the building was known as the King's Arms.

The precise circumstances in which that name was adopted are uncertain. It is tempting to associate the name with the accession of George I in 1714, but there is insufficient evidence to state that this was the reason for the change. For publication, it is therefore preferable to record the name without assigning a specific political or dynastic motive to it.

By the nineteenth century, contemporary visitors knew the building both as the King's Arms and by the popular name “Pack of Cards”. John Lloyd Warden Page, writing in 1895, described the King's Arms as an inn “commonly known as the ‘Pack of Cards’” ([Combe Martin Village History Project](#)).

A literary association: Marie Corelli

The building also has an association with the novelist Marie Corelli (1855-1924).

Corelli's novel *The Mighty Atom*, published in 1896, is closely associated with Combe Martin. She stayed at the King's Arms, now the Pack o’ Cards, and the building's third-floor room is traditionally identified as the place where she wrote part of the novel.

Historic England records the central room on the third floor as the place where Marie Corelli reputedly wrote *The Mighty Atom*. The wording is significant: this is a longstanding tradition rather than a fact that can be established beyond doubt from documentary evidence ([Heritage Gateway](#)).

George Ley's Memorial

Extant in St Peter ad Vincula Church Combe Martin.

The church is a Grade I listed building, and Historic England specifically records the early eighteenth-century monument to George Ley in the north aisle ([Historic England](#)).

The inscription commemorates his death on 26 June 1716 at the age of 68 and concludes with a verse praising wisdom, justice and charity.

The memorial provides important contemporary evidence for Ley himself and should be distinguished from later local traditions surrounding the Pack o' Cards.

The Ley Family and the Educational Charity

An important point of identification arises from the later history of another George Ley.

The 1822 *Magna Britannia* records that:

“Mr. George Ley, in 1718, gave land, now let at 25/. per annum ... for the endowment of a free school and a house for the master.”

This gift was made two years after the death of George Ley of the Pack o' Cards, who died in 1716 ([Wikimedia Commons](#)).

The evidence points to a later George Ley of the same family. Local archival research identifies an eighteenth-century George Ley as a schoolmaster and charity founder, distinct from the earlier squire associated with the Pack o' Cards Inn.

The National Archives records a George Ley of Combe Martin as a schoolmaster in a 1716 counterpart lease, while the surviving George Ley charity developed from this later charitable foundation ([combemartinmuseum.org](#))

The charity remains registered today as **George Ley Educational**, Charity No. 306788, on the Charity Commission's register ([Register of Charities](#)).

Accordingly, the two men should be treated separately:

George Ley (c. 1648-1716) – the gentleman traditionally associated with the building of the Pack o' Cards.

George Ley (fl. [active] early eighteenth century) – the later George Ley associated with the educational foundation and schoolmastership.

This distinction is important for the avoidance of confusion.

The Ley family in Combe Martin

The Ley family had longstanding connections with Combe Martin. Their presence in the parish, and their position among its established families, provide the wider context for understanding George Ley Senior's status.

The surviving evidence is stronger for describing Ley as a gentleman or local squire than for assigning him more elevated titles. He should therefore not be described as lord of the manor unless documentary evidence establishing that title is produced.

George Ley Senior's importance was local: landholding, family connections, social standing and participation in parish life placed him among the more prominent inhabitants of the community.

Combe Martin Parish Churchyard Tradition

Further folklore survives in the churchyard surrounding St Peter ad Vincula.

A tombstone near the Ley family plot bears the familiar verse:

“Marvel not you standers by
As you be now once was I
As I be now so must you be
Prepare for death and follow me”

Local tradition adds a humorous response said to have been scratched beneath it:

“To follow is not my intent
Until I know which way you went.”

The story belongs to local folklore and should be presented as such rather than as a documented historical incident.

George Ley's legacy

George Ley's historical importance rests on a combination of documentary evidence and enduring local tradition.

His death in 1716 and his memorial at St Peter ad Vincula are securely documented. The Pack o' Cards is a Grade II* listed building, and both Historic England and the Devon Historic Environment Record preserve the tradition that it was built as Ley's private house following a gambling win ([Heritage Gateway](#)).

The more elaborate details of the card symbolism belong partly to the folklore that has accumulated around the building. They are nevertheless an important part of the cultural history of Combe Martin, explaining why the house has retained its extraordinary identity for more than three centuries.

The later George Ley's educational foundation represents a separate strand of the family's legacy. The survival of George Ley Educational Charity as a registered charity demonstrates that the name continued to be associated with education and charitable giving in Combe Martin, long after the death of the original squire ([Register of Charities](#)).

Taken together, the evidence presents a more nuanced picture than the traditional story alone: a seventeenth-century gentleman remembered for an extraordinary house, a later member of the same family associated with education, and a village that preserved both men in its historical memory.

Principal Sources

- Historic England, The Pack of Cards, Combe Martin, National Heritage List for England, List Entry No. 1169072.
- Devon Historic Environment Record, Pack of Cards Inn, Combe Martin, HER No. MDV31327.
- Historic England, Church of St Peter ad Vincula, Combe Martin, List Entry No. 1106799.
- Daniel and Samuel Lysons, *Magna Britannia*, Vol. VI, Devonshire (London, 1822).
- Charity Commission for England and Wales, George Ley Educational, Charity No. 306788.
- John Lloyd Warden Page, *The Coasts of Devon and Lundy Island* (London, 1895).
- National Archives records concerning George Ley and the George Ley charity.
- Combe Martin Museum and local historical records concerning the two George Leys and the Pack o' Cards.

Catalogue Reference

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CMVHP is the local history project website for the parish of Combe Martin, North Devon.

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Historical Distinction (Fact vs. Legend): While dates, parish register entries, and charitable endowments cited in this document are supported by primary public records, certain architectural associations—specifically the card-deck layout (52 windows, 4 suits) of the Pack o' Cards Inn and the composition location of Marie Corelli's novel—are recorded as tradition and reputed lore rather than verified physical or documentary facts.

Minor variations in 17th- and 18th-century spelling or dating conventions may occur.