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Combe Martin Strawberries: History and Export Legacy



Overview

[Combe Martin](#), a scenic village near Ilfracombe on England's North Devon coast, is renowned for its historic strawberry industry which flourished from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century.

The town's transition from silver mining to market gardening in the 19th century, especially the cultivation of superior strawberries, is a defining chapter in its multifaceted heritage.

Origins and Development

- After the decline of its local silver mining around 1880, Combe Martin shifted to agriculture, capitalising on the valley's sunny, south-facing slopes.
- Market gardening expanded rapidly, with strawberries becoming the dominant crop, boosted by the area's favourable climate and well-cultivated coastal soil.
- By the early 20th century, Combe Martin was famous across Britain for the quality and flavour of its strawberries, described as some of the "world's most delicious".

Cultivation and Varieties

- Strawberries were grown on small holdings, typically 2-4 acres, using largely manual and traditional methods.
- Early varieties included "Pinkies" (resembling wild strawberries), Joseph Paxton, Royal Sovereign, and Madame Lefebvre, with later varieties such as Cambridge Favourite, Redgauntlet, and Rearguard gaining popularity.
- The main strawberry fields stretched two miles inland and several hundred yards up the valley sides.

Export and Trade

- Combe Martin strawberries were initially sold locally and to nearby markets in Barnstaple, Ilfracombe, and Lynton.
- As production increased, exports expanded:
 - Strawberries were packed in 12-25 pound baskets and shipped by steamboat (notably the SS Snowflake and PS Brighton) from Ilfracombe and later directly from Combe Martin beach to South Wales, especially Swansea, and to Bristol.
 - In the late 1930s, shipments also went by rail to the English Midlands and even London.
- At peak times in the early 1900s, up to five tons of strawberries per day were exported, and as many as 26 carts could be seen transporting fruit from the fields to the Seaside harbour.

Economic and Social Impact

- The strawberry industry provided significant employment, with the entire community participating in harvests.
- Combe Martin's strawberries were highly esteemed by wholesale fruiterers, especially in Wales, for their exceptional quality.
- The industry supported related businesses, such as jam production (Combe Martin Preserves and Co. Ltd, founded in 1911).

Decline and Legacy

- By the 1960s, competition from larger producers, urbanization, and changing agricultural practices led to a decline in profitability and output.
- Many growers diversified into other crops or left farming altogether, though strawberries remained an important symbol of local identity.
- The tradition is celebrated annually with the Combe Martin Strawberry Fayre, held on the first Sunday of June.

Summary Table: Combe Martin Strawberry Export History

Period	Main Export Destinations	Transport Methods	Notable Varieties
Late 19th C	North Devon, Ilfracombe	Horse cart, steamboat	Pinkies, Joseph Paxton
Early 20th C	South Wales, Bristol	Steamboat (SS Snowflake)	Royal Sovereign, Madame Lefebvre
1930s-1940s	Midlands, London, South Wales	Rail, steamboat	Cambridge Favourite, Redgauntlet
Post-WWII	Local markets	Road, limited rail	Rearguard, Talisman

Cultural Significance

- The landscape of Combe Martin still bears the imprint of its strawberry fields and medieval strip farming system.
- The strawberry industry's legacy endures in local memory, museum exhibits, and annual festivities.

Combe Martin's strawberries are a testament to the village's adaptability and its place in Britain's agricultural and export history.

Citations:

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