

# The Pollard Family and Combe Martin in the 16th Century

This essay examines a significant period in the history of Combe Martin, when the Pollard family—an established Devon gentry lineage with strong legal and administrative connections—held the manor during the Tudor period. Their tenure reflects wider changes in landownership, governance, and resource control in 16th-century England.

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## Key Takeaways

- The 1537 grant of the manor of Combe Martin to Sir Richard Pollard reflects the wider redistribution of former monastic lands following the Dissolution of the Monasteries.
- A series of administrative and legal processes initiated by Henry VIII between 1536 and 1541, resulting in the disbandment of Catholic monasteries in England, Wales, and Ireland, and the seizure of their wealth and property.
- The grant also reserved precious metal rights to the Crown, demonstrating early modern royal control over mineral resources.
- Combe Martin's silver-lead deposits placed the manor within a broader national framework of strategic mineral exploitation.
- Royal ownership of gold and silver was later confirmed in principle by the Case of Mines (1568), reinforcing the Crown's authority over valuable subsoil resources regardless of surface land ownership.
- The Pollard family's tenure illustrates the role of Tudor officials as both landholders and administrators of royal policy. Their position within the Court of Augmentations reflects the growing importance of bureaucratic governance in managing former ecclesiastical property.
- Over time, the manor was progressively divided and sold off, a process consistent with wider patterns of land fragmentation in post-medieval England.
- This shift contributed to the emergence of a more diversified landscape of tenant farming and smallholding.
- The legal and economic context of mining in this period is further illuminated by studies such as Roger Burt's *The Mines Royal*, which highlights the development of early chartered mining enterprises and the increasing integration of mineral wealth into state-directed economic policy.
- The Pollards can be seen as part of a broader Tudor pattern in which legally trained gentry engaged in royal administration and local governance, with such service occasionally contributing to enhanced social status and, in some cases, increased access to land and patronage.

# 1. Royal Patronage and the Manor Grant

In 1537, Henry VIII granted the manor of Combe Martin to Sir Richard Pollard (Letters and Papers, 1890-1902, vol. 12).

This grant is recorded in the *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of Henry VIII*, which documents the transfer of the manor together with an important reservation: the Crown retained rights to any gold and silver mines within the estate (Letters and Papers, 1890-1902, vol. 12).

Sir Richard Pollard served as an official in the Court of Augmentations, the institution established to administer lands confiscated during the Dissolution of the Monasteries (Dickens, 1964).

His role involved surveying and managing former monastic property, making him a Crown agent of royal policy—though he is not generally regarded as a principal architect of the Dissolution (Dickens, 1964; Hoyle, 2001).

## 2. Land, Law and Economic Change

### Mining and Royal Authority

The reservation of mineral rights in the 1537 grant reflects established Tudor policy that precious metals were the property of the Crown (Baker, 2019).

This principle was authoritatively confirmed in the Case of Mines, reported in *Plowden's Reports*, which held that gold and silver mines belonged to the sovereign regardless of land ownership (Plowden, 1571).

Although this case postdates Pollard's tenure, it reflects earlier Crown practice and is directly relevant to Combe Martin's long-standing silver-lead mining industry, which had been significant since the medieval period (Rippon, 2008).

### The Break-up of Combe Martin Manor

During the later 16th century, under Pollard ownership and subsequent holders, the manor appears to have been sold off in parcels. Later sources sometimes describe this as the "dismemberment" of the manor (Thirsk, 1967).

This break-up process reflects a broader national trend rather than a uniquely local development. Its effects likely included:

- more fragmented patterns of landownership
- the growth of tenant farmers and smaller-scale proprietors
- a reduced dominance of a single resident manorial lord

Rather than representing a sudden collapse of medieval structures, this should be understood as part of a longer transition towards more commercialised and decentralised landholding (Thirsk, 1967; Hoyle, 2013).

This was not an isolated event but part of a national trend toward fragmented landownership and the rise of tenant farming.

This transition moved the local economy away from a singular manorial lord toward a more commercial and decentralised structure.

### 3. A Legally Prominent Family

The Pollards' rise was closely tied to their legal and administrative background.

Sir Lewis Pollard, father of Sir Richard, served as a Justice of the Court of Common Pleas in the early 16th century (Baker, 2019; History of Parliament, 2023).

His position established the family within the upper ranks of the legal profession. The family's legal training and court connections helped secure royal favour and advancement (History of Parliament, 2023).

Descriptions of their aptitude for law, found in later historical accounts such as the *Visitations of Devon*, should be understood as retrospective characterisations rather than strictly contemporary evaluations (Vivian, 1895).

### What the Research Typically Covers

Studies of Combe Martin and the Pollard family generally draw on a combination of primary records and later compilations, including:

- **Genealogy:** Lineage from Sir Lewis Pollard to Sir Richard Pollard, with connections to Devon families such as the Bury and Stucley families (Vivian, 1895)
- **Manorial records:** Evidence of ownership, rights, and transactions from the 1530s onwards (The National Archives, E series)
- **Mining history:** The interaction between the Tudor state and private landholders in managing silver-lead extraction (Rippon, 2008)

### Historical Note

Sir Richard Pollard was involved in the dismantling of the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral in 1538, one of the most symbolically significant acts of the English Reformation carried out under the direction of Thomas Cromwell (Letters and Papers, 1890-1902, vol. 13; MacCulloch, 2018).

### Summary

The Pollards' association with Combe Martin is well documented and illustrates:

- the redistribution of land following the Dissolution of the Monasteries
- the expanding reach of Tudor administrative government
- the gradual restructuring of landownership and local economies

Taken together, these developments place Combe Martin within the wider transformation of Tudor England, while reflecting the role of a locally significant gentry family operating within national change.

# Reference List

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## Note on Sources and Interpretation

This article is based on a combination of primary sources, including *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of Henry VIII*, and established secondary scholarship. While every effort has been made to ensure historical accuracy, interpretations may evolve as new evidence or research emerges.