



# The Mineral Wealth of Combe Martin: A Historical Overview of Mining and its Impact

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## Abstract

This paper provides a historical overview of the diverse mining activities in the Combe Martin district of North Devon, England, from the medieval period through the 19th century.

It details the extraction of silver, lead, iron, manganese, copper, and umber, highlighting the economic, social, and technological impact of these operations on the local community and, at times, on national finances.

Special attention is given to the significant role of silver mining in financing Combe Martin's Anglican parish church, and fostering industrial innovation.

## 1. Introduction

The village of Combe Martin in North Devon possesses a rich mining history. While it is most famous for its silver deposits, the area has also yielded lead, iron, manganese, copper, and umber.

This paper traces the evolution of mining in the area and explores how these resources shaped local industry, infrastructure, and even national events.

## 2. Silver and Lead Mining: The Crown Jewel

Silver mining in Combe Martin is documented as far back as 1292, with operations carried out under royal oversight during the medieval period (Combe Martin Village History Project, 2023) [1].

The silver was obtained from argentiferous galena, a lead sulphide ore rich in silver content, making lead and silver mining closely interconnected throughout the district's history [1][5].

Local tradition holds that Combe Martin silver played a role in funding 14th-century English military campaigns, including the battles of Crécy and Poitiers.

While direct financial records verifying this connection are not extant, the claim appears consistently in secondary sources and is widely accepted in regional histories as plausible [1][5].

Mining experienced a resurgence under Queen Elizabeth I, particularly through the efforts of Sir Bevis Bulmer. In 1593, Bulmer commissioned two silver cups made from Combe Martin silver by London goldsmith Medley, of Foster Street.

One silver cup was gifted to the Earl of Bath, and the other, weighing 137 ounces, was presented to Sir Richard Martin, the Lord Mayor of London. These cups commemorated Bulmer's engineering achievements, including his work on London's water supply system [3].

The Lord Mayor's cup was later melted down and transformed into three tankards, which are now held in the Mansion House collection in London [3].

Key sites within the "Old Combe Martin Mine" complex—such as William's Shaft, Harris's Shaft, and Fayer's Mine (often linked to Bulmer from 1587 to 1594)—are documented mining locations [1][3][4].

These sites were periodically productive despite persistent flooding problems caused by the area's high water table [1][4].

### **3. Other Mineral Extractions**

Combe Martin's geological wealth extended beyond silver and lead.

Iron ore was mined at locations such as Little Hangman, Blackstone Point, and Girt Down. Mining peaked between 1796 and 1802, with thousands of tons of ore exported to South Wales ironworks [7].

Manganese, often found with iron, was extracted notably at Girt Down by the Combmartin Manganese and Haematite Iron Ore Company in the 19th century. Other manganese workings were likely located on the northern slopes of Little Hangman [6].

Copper was not a major product of the area, but mineralogical surveys have identified chalcocite ( $\text{Cu}_2\text{S}$ , a copper (I) sulphide mineral) in the Old Combe Martin Mine, indicating the presence of copper extraction at some scale [4].

Umber, a natural pigment derived from iron oxide, was also quarried in the area. According to local tradition, the valley and river may derive their name from this mineral, though this etymological link is not definitively established in scholarly sources [7].

#### **4. Economic and Social Impact**

The mineral resources of Combe Martin had a profound impact on the local economy and society.

One of the most tangible beneficiaries was the Church of St Peter ad Vincula. Historical evidence confirms that miners were required to pay tithes to the church, which supported clergy salaries, building maintenance, and poor relief.

The unusually grand scale and ornate decoration of Combe Martin St Peter ad Vincula Church—especially its medieval painted screen—are widely attributed by historians and local accounts to wealth generated by mining, though a direct accounting of mining revenue to church expenditures has not survived [2][9].

Mining also supported ancillary industries. While silver mining underwent cycles of boom and decline, more stable employment was found in local trades such as rope-making and wool production.

Historical records indicate that Combe Martin had a significant rope industry, producing hemp ropes and cobblers' thread, alongside a strong wool trade. The presence of a mining workforce created broader demand for local goods and services, further supporting the local economy [2][8].

Technological innovation was another consequence of mining. The persistent issue of flooding in deeper shafts prompted engineering solutions over time. Early drainage relied on adits, while the late 18th and early 19th centuries saw the introduction of steam engines for pumping.

These adaptations reflect both the technical challenges and the ingenuity of Combe Martin's mining engineers [1][4].

#### **5. Decline**

By the mid-19th century, the mining industry in Combe Martin entered a period of decline. Factors included the rising cost of extraction, persistent drainage issues, and increasing foreign competition.

Nationally, the domestic lead mining industry had declined by nearly 50% by 1865. Combe Martin's silver mines ceased operation around 1880—not due to a lack of silver demand, but because mining had become economically unsustainable under the prevailing conditions [1][4].

## 6. Conclusion

Combe Martin's mining history showcases both the natural richness of the region and the ingenuity of those who mined it. From providing silver for national wars to fueling local innovation and supporting the church and trades, the area's mining legacy is profound.

Today, its remnants are etched into the landscape and preserved in historical accounts, a testament to its importance in both local and national contexts.

## References

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## **Clarifying Notes**

### **1. Bulmer's Operation of Faye's Mine (1587–1594)**

- The claim that Sir Bevis Bulmer operated Faye's Mine during this period is widely cited in respected secondary sources and local histories. However, no original leases, contracts, or contemporaneous documents directly naming Bulmer as operator or owner of Faye's Mine have been located in the sources reviewed. This interpretation relies on later historical synthesis rather than primary archival evidence.

### **2. Combe Martin Silver Funding National Campaigns**

- The assertion that silver from Combe Martin contributed to financing English military campaigns, such as the Hundred Years' War, is based on regional tradition and repeated in secondary sources. Extant direct financial records or royal account books would be required to confirm this specific allocation of funds. Therefore the claim should be understood as plausible but not definitively proven.

### **3. Mining's Impact on the Church of St Peter ad Vincula**

- The connection between mining wealth and the ornate features of the parish church is supported by local histories and architectural analysis. However, direct financial records linking specific mining tithes to particular church features are lacking. The interpretation is based on circumstantial evidence and the broader context of local economic history.

### **4. Identification of Key Mining Sites**

- The naming and dating of sites such as William's Shaft, Harris's Shaft, and Faye's Mine are based on mining surveys, local tradition, and secondary compilations. While these sites are well documented in local histories, the precise boundaries and operational periods are sometimes reconstructed from fragmentary evidence.

## **5. Extraction of Other Minerals (Iron, Manganese, Copper, Umber)**

- The extraction of Combe Martin iron, manganese, and umber is well documented in local records and mining databases. Copper extraction is less well attested, with only minor workings reported and the scale of activity uncertain. The etymology of “umber” as the source of the valley’s name is plausible but not confirmed by linguistic scholarship.

## **6. Decline of Mining in the 19th Century**

- The decline is attributed to a combination of economic, technological, and resource factors, as described in secondary sources. The relative weight of these factors is subject to interpretation, and alternative explanations (such as environmental degradation or changing market conditions) may also be relevant.

## **7. Technological Innovation and Social Impact**

- The discussion of technological advances (e.g., steam engines for drainage) and their social consequences is grounded in general mining history. Specific details for Combe Martin are sometimes extrapolated from broader regional trends, as direct documentation is limited.

## **8. Potential Biases and Interpretive Choices**

- The narrative emphasises the positive economic and cultural impacts of mining, reflecting the focus of most available sources.
- Less attention is given to negative consequences such as environmental damage or labour exploitation, which are less well documented for Combe Martin but were common in mining communities elsewhere.
- Readers should be aware of this potential bias in the historical record and interpretation.

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