

Combe Martin: A Journey Through Time

An Institutional Historical Chronicle of Parish Evolution

Nestled within a dramatic, narrow valley on the rugged North Devon edge of Exmoor, Combe Martin's rich history spans over 400 million years of geological upheaval, centuries of intense resource extraction, and generations of tight-knit seafaring and agrarian communities. Its unique linear layout follows the path of the River UMBER down to a sheltered, rock-strewn harbour. High-cliff panoramas, time-worn cob cottages, and structural remnants of ancient industries tell a profound story written in the silver veins, unique minerals, and rich folklore hidden beneath the surface.

EXHIBITION SUMMARY • AT A GLANCE

GEOLOGY & LANDSCAPE

400-million-year-old Devonian terrain featuring England's highest sea cliff (Great Hangman at 318m) and protected SSSI coastal bays.

THE LINEAR THOROUGHFARE

A continuous 2-mile (3.2 km) valley thoroughfare famously holding the official Guinness World Record for the longest street party.

ROYAL SILVER MINING

Rich silver-bearing lead veins discovered in 1292 that directly financed the medieval campaigns of King Edward I and the Crown Jewels.

COMMUNITY & CULTURE

A uniquely independent heritage proudly maintained by local "Shammickites" through centuries-old folk traditions and an award-winning village museum.

1. Geological & Prehistoric Foundations

Combe Martin's intricate natural landscape began forming approximately 410 to 360 million years ago during the Devonian Period. It belongs to the famous Hangman Sandstone group and Ilfracombe Slates (including the fossiliferous Combe Martin Slate member), which were compressed and buckled by ancient tectonic movements. As mineral-rich fluids filled these subterranean fractures, they crystallised to deposit heavy veins of iron, lead, zinc, and highly lucrative argentiferous galena (silver-bearing lead ore).

- **The Great Hangman & Little Hangman:** Looming directly over the bay within the North Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the hog-backed Great Hangman stands as England's highest sea cliff, rising to an imposing 318 metres (1,043 feet) with an 820-foot sheer rock face carved out by centuries of Atlantic swell.
- **SSSI Designation:** Due to its exceptional geological significance and rare coastal heathland habitats, Combe Martin Bay and its flanking cliffs are strictly protected as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

- **Fossil Formations:** The limestone bands hidden within the local cliffs offer a remarkably preserved window into early marine life. Patient beachcombers frequently discover ancient brachiopods, crinoids, solitary corals, and the delicate remains of prehistoric reef systems exposed by coastal erosion.

2. Feudal Origins & Early Mining

Evidence of Iron Age occupation sits right at the edge of the parish at the nearby Newberry Castle fort. Following the Norman Conquest of 1066, the manor was recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086 under the Norman tenant-in-chief William of Falaise, describing a modest community of 37 households supporting 20 ploughlands. The manor later passed to the Norman baron Martin de Tours, merging the Old English *cumb* (wooded valley) with the lord's name to form "Martin's Combe".

By 1292, the landscape shifted dramatically with the formal registration of the Combe Martin Silver-Lead Mines under the reign of King Edward I. Skilled miners were conscripted from Derbyshire to manage the works. This silver directly financed the English Crown's military campaigns in both Scotland and France, providing the essential capital for Edward III and Henry V, while yielding precious material used to forge items within the British Crown Jewels.

The legal landscape of British mining was heavily influenced by Combe Martin's deposits. The landmark 1568 legal ruling known as the *Case of Mines* firmly established the Crown's absolute prerogative over any domestic base metal ores containing structural amounts of gold or silver, shaping mining rights across the nation for centuries.

3. The Linear Thoroughfare & World Record Street Party

Due to the deep, steep-sided nature of the valley, Combe Martin developed uniquely as a linear settlement. It principally consists of one single, continuous main street running over 2 miles (3.2 km) inland from the harbour edge to the valley head. While many visitors confuse this layout with being the longest continuous high street in the UK, its true fame is securely cemented in global celebration records.

In June 2002, to commemorate the Queen's Golden Jubilee, the community unified along this immense corridor to claim the official **Guinness World Record for the longest village street party in the world**, filling the entire thoroughfare with tables, bunting, and thousands of residents.

Historically, this long highway was supported by a robust social economy. At one point, the village street was home to nine active public houses catering to weary travellers and labourers, including *The Castle*, *The Dolphin*, *The Fo'c'stle*, *The George and Dragon*, *The Lion Inn*, *The London Inn*, *The Marine*, *The Top George*, and the iconic architectural card-house curiosity, *The Pack o' Cards*. This fuelled the enduring local saying: "At the George and Dragon they talk about my sprained thumb, at the Dolphin they talk about my broken leg."

4. The Church of St Peter ad Vincula

Known colloquially as the "jewel in the centre of Combe Martin," the Grade I listed Anglican Parish Church of St Peter ad Vincula acts as a striking custodian of the village's socio-religious narrative. It is one of only 15 churches in England dedicated to "St. Peter in Chains," an uncommon tribute derived from the ancient 5th-century Basilica of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome.

While Victorian documentation vaguely dated the building to the 12th century, architectural historians suggest the current structure stands over an even older Anglo-Saxon wooden church, potentially dedicated to the 6th-century Welsh prince and Christian missionary, Saint Petroc. The site's Norman lineage is formally cemented by a Latin charter from 1133 CE, which outlines a dispute resolution involving Lord Robert FitzMartin and confirms the existence of a "new church" under manorial patronage.

- **Architectural Evolution:** The church's core—the chancel, south transept, and sections of the nave—retains its 13th-century Early English Gothic origins. Prosperous medieval silver mining tithes later funded dramatic 15th-century expansions, adding the north aisle, the Lady Chapel (north chancel chapel), and a magnificent 99-foot (30-metre) west tower built in the classic Somerset Perpendicular style.
- **Historical Artefacts:** The interior safely guards rare medieval survivors of the Reformation's iconoclasm. These include an exquisite 15th-century rood screen, a baptismal font dated around 1427 still bearing traces of original paint, a 16th-century "Peter's Pence" poor chest, and an original vestry door complete with ancient locks and a sanctuary ring.
- **Structural Folklore:** A distinctive architectural anomaly inside the church is the slight northward lean of the nave. According to enduring West Country folklore, this deliberate misalignment was crafted intentionally by medieval builders to symbolise Christ's tilted head on the cross.

5. George Ley & The Pack o' Cards Inn

During the late 17th and early 18th centuries, Combe Martin was home to an eccentric local squire and landowner named George Ley. Around the year 1690, following an extraordinary and legendary winning streak at a high-stakes card game, Ley decided to commemorate his financial windfall by building a whimsical, highly structured monument to his luck.

He commissioned an architectural curiosity: a grand townhouse explicitly modelled after a standard deck of playing cards. Built on a plot of land measuring exactly 52 feet square, the structure featured 52 windows (one for every card in a deck), 4 floors (matching the 4 suits), and 13 doors or rooms per floor (representing the 13 cards in each suit). Formerly called "The King's Arms", this historic Grade II listed building serves the community as the famous Pack o' Cards Inn, preserved beautifully as a celebration of historic brick craftsmanship and local architectural folklore.

6. Industrial Diversification & the River Umber

As mining experienced cyclical booms and busts, Combe Martin turned to the natural power of the River Umber to drive a varied industrial economy. The river's steady currents fuelled multiple processing mills, which evolved to meet the changing demands of the 18th and 19th centuries.

- **Smuggling Culture:** The jagged, cave-riddled coastline surrounding Combe Martin Bay made the area a notorious hotbed for smuggling. Untaxed brandy, tea, tobacco, and salt were run ashore under the cover of night, evading customs officers via hidden inland tracks.
- **Shipbuilding and Manufacturing:** Between 1837 and 1843, a bustling steam-powered sawmill and shipyard operated along Borough Road. Sturdy timber hulls were drafted, assembled, and launched locally to handle the coastal cargo trade.
- **The Lower Mill Smelting Works:** In 1845, the historic Lower Mill was converted into a dedicated silver and lead smelting works, refining the ores on-site before they were carted out via the harbour.
- **Umber Extraction:** The valley was rich in native umber—a natural iron and manganese oxide pigment. Pits located near the river extracted this raw earth, which was washed, processed, packed into barrels, and shipped across the globe to be used as a premium paint and industrial colouring agent.

7. Victorian Enterprise & Artistic Legacy

The arrival of the Victorian era brought a fresh wave of public interest, transport connections, and cultural renown to the isolated North Devon valley. The spectacular landscape caught the attention of visionary landscape artists, most notably J.M.W. Turner, who visited in 1811 to sketch the dramatic geology and daily labour inside the harbour.

Local craftsmanship reached a peak when the Exeter silversmiths Ellis & Son proudly showcased an elegant collection of intricate silverware—crafted exclusively from newly reopened Combe Martin mines—at the historic Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. As national infrastructure expanded, the village transformed into a sought-after escape, with the widely distributed 1938 Ward Lock travel guides cementing its status as an idyllic destination for walking, coastal exploration, and health-centric tourism.

8. The Blackmore Country & Civil War Minting

Combe Martin occupies a vital geographical and structural position within the legendary "Blackmore Country"—the regional moniker popularised by Victorian and early 20th-century travelogues following R.D. Blackmore's famous novel, *Lorna Doone*. In his definitive 1911 work, *The Blackmore Country*, historian and artist Frederick J. Snell B.A. detailed the village's rich tapestry of early history, drawing attention to a fascinating seventeenth-century narrative involving the parish and the English Civil War.

During the height of the conflict (c. 1640–1660), Combe Martin's royal silver mines were overseen by Thomas Bushell, an indefatigable English mining engineer and devoted Royalist. Bushell famously governed Lundy Island,

turning it into one of the final bastions of the King's cause. Historical and numismatic evidence suggests that Bushell operated a clandestine Royal Mint right inside Combe Martin, using the local silver yields to strike "siege money" and clothing for King Charles I's cash-strapped forces.

While scholars continue to debate the output, Snell's records spotlighted an extraordinary archival discovery: an authentic, Combe Martin-minted half-crown coin bearing the date 1645 and featuring a distinct "Lis" mint mark. The coin later surfaced in a London auction room where it was sold for the then-princely sum of £5 12s 6d, serving as a physical testament to the parish's high-stakes role in national royal history.

9. Horticulture & The Strawberry Fayre

Beyond its industrial outputs, Combe Martin was a highly successful engine of agricultural innovation. Thanks to the unique, highly sheltered microclimate of the long, south-facing valley, the village was shielded from the harshest Atlantic winds, creating exceptionally fertile conditions.

From 1835 onward, a highly organised network of up to 96 distinct allotment patches was established along the steep valley ridges. Local smallholders mastered terraced farming, cultivating massive yields of early-season strawberries, potatoes, and top-tier market garden crops. This booming industry not only fed the village but created a highly profitable export trade that supplied towns across the Bristol Channel. While commercial strawberry shipping has shifted in modern times, this heritage remains passionately celebrated. Every year in early June, the village hosts a traditional Strawberry Fayre, setting up vibrant stalls across the valley to showcase local farm produce, artisan crafts, and ongoing charitable activities.

10. Maritime Trade & the Bristol Channel

Before reliable roads pierced the cliffs of North Devon, Combe Martin relied completely on its harbour to connect with the wider world. The beach was a constant hub of maritime commerce, where ships regularly beached at high tide and discharged or loaded cargo directly from horse-drawn carts and hand-carts.

- **The Strawberry Fleet:** Specialised coastal vessels, including the celebrated steamship *SS Snowflake*, loaded baskets of fresh Combe Martin strawberries daily, racing them across the channel to the lucrative markets of Cardiff, Swansea, and Bristol.
- **The Coal Exchange:** On their return voyages, these ships brought back essential Welsh coal to supply the village's household grates, lime kilns, and industrial smelting operations.
- **Cultural Exchange:** This constant maritime highway created deep bonds between Devon and South Wales, directly influencing local accents, family lineages, and trade customs on both sides of the water.

11. Social History & Cultural Identity

The physical isolation of Combe Martin generated an independent, highly distinct cultural identity. Combe Martin locals, along with their descendants, proudly refer to themselves as "Shammickites." The demonym titles the village magazine "The Shammickite". The origins of this nickname remain subject to debate; some attribute it to a

corruption of "shambles" or "shammick" (referring to Victorian descriptions of Combe Martin's smoggy industrial landscape and poor cottages), while others link it to an old West Country dialect. The community's geographic footprint is split into distinct historical zones. It winds organically along the UMBER Valley, starting from the traditional farming and church-centred community at "Head Town," moving through the commercial centre, and terminating at the bustling, maritime-oriented "Seaside and Cove."

12. Seaside Resort & Tourism Boom

By the tail end of the 19th century, industrial labour gave way to a booming holiday economy. Visitors flocked by steamship and railway to experience the dramatic coastline and fresh air. Elegant Victorian and Edwardian guesthouses, hotels, and rustic tea rooms quickly replaced old tackle sheds along the seafront. This golden era of tourism is richly captured in collections of historic postcards showing families exploring the rock pools, promenading along the harbour edge, and hiring rowing boats.

This period also saw the survival and revival of vibrant community folklore, most notably the annual **Hunting of the Earl of Rone** festival. Held over the Spring Bank Holiday weekend, this unique custom features a bizarre procession involving a hobby horse, a fool, grenadiers, and the mysterious "Earl," drawing thousands of modern visitors to witness Combe Martin's living heritage.

13. Modern Heritage & Education

In the late 20th century, a passionate movement emerged within the village to formally preserve its melting pot of history. In 1989, the Combe Martin Local History Group published their definitive chronicle, *Out of the World and Into Combe Martin*, an exhaustive text capturing oral histories, mining maps, and family genealogies before they were lost to time.

This momentum culminated in the official opening of the Combe Martin Museum in 1991. Dedicated to educating both locals and global tourists, the museum rapidly outgrew its original footprint. In 2009, following a successful fundraising and modernisation campaign, the museum relocated to its current, state-of-the-art facility on Cross Street, steps away from the beach. Today, it stands as an award-winning museum for local heritage collections, for visitors, families and walkers, and for community education.

14. Cultural & Literary Connections

The haunting beauty of Combe Martin's deep ridges and wild coast has left an indelible mark on British literature and natural history. Renowned multi-volume authors and Victorian novelists, such as Marie Corelli, drew deep inspiration directly from the village's winding streets and mysterious mining folklore for their atmospheric prose. Famous contemporary conceptual artist Damien Hirst also maintains an active farmhouse residence and studio near the village boundaries.

Furthermore, pioneering naturalists and antiquarians (such as botanist Clara Larter, 1847–1936) travelled extensively through the parish during the 18th and 19th centuries, compiling detailed catalogues of its coastal

botany, complex marine life, and unique mineral specimens, ensuring Combe Martin a permanent place in the annals of British scientific history.

Glossary of Terms

SSSI

Site of Special Scientific Interest; a formal conservation designation denoting a protected area of premier geological or ecological importance within the UK.

Crown Prerogative

The sovereign legal entitlement of the reigning monarch to claim ownership over precious metals (specifically gold and silver) discovered on public or private land.

Shammickite

A traditional local dialect term for a longstanding Combe Martin resident or a native descendant of Combe Martin.

Argentiferous Galena

A naturally occurring, heavy mineral compound composed of lead sulphide that contains highly valuable trace percentages of silver metal.

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