geography southwest

Place To Walk

Exploring Combe Martin, North Devon

Location & Access:

The village of Combe Martin is located on the north Devon coast, midway between Ilfracombe and Lynmouth.

It can be accessed via the A361 road from Barnstaple (via Braunton and Ilfracombe), or the A399 road from South Molton (via Blackmore Gate).

Stagecoach operates a regular bus service from Barnstaple (and Ilfracombe) - route 301.

The most suitable car park in Combe Martin is the Lime Kiln car park (SS 578 473).



Combe Martin beach. Photo: Paul Berry

Key Geography: Industrial archaeology, social history, market gardening agriculture, mining, coastal scenery.

Combe Martin Walk - 'Silver, Ships, and Strawberries'

(Based on a self-guided walk titled 'Silver, Smoke, and Strawberries' by the North Devon AONB)



Wild Pear beach with Little Hangman in the background. Photo: Paul Berry

Introduction

Combe Martin is a relatively isolated village on the north Devon coast with a surprisingly rich history. It provides a fascinating example of how different industries have risen to prominence at different times in the past in response to elements of the natural landscape. Human activities here have been influenced by:

- *Geology - mining of silver ore & iron ore, quarrying of limestone & umber*
- *Sheltered bay - a natural harbour for ship building & fishing and in more recent times, tourism*
- *Steep sided valley with south-facing slopes - hemp and soft fruits*
- *River Umber - power for corn mills & water for washing ore*
- *Coastal cliffs - the South West Coast Path & tourism*

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Curiosity Questions:

Combe Martin is situated in the Exmoor National Park. How many National Parks are there in the UK in total?

There is a unique and famous public house on Combe Martin's High Street. What is it called, and why is it famous?

It is possible to see dinosaurs near Combe Martin. True or false?

Further information:

https://devongeography.wordpress.com/2026/04/23/a-walk-to-explore-the-geo-history-of-combe-martin-north-devon/

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'Exploring Combe Martin' Walk

This is quite a testing walk, including some steep gradients.



View over Cobbler's Park to Combe Martin beach. Photo: Paul Berry

1. Start in the Lime Kiln car park (SS 578 473). Follow the path close to the houses that leads from the upper (north) end of the car park, passing the Exmoor National Park sign. It soon branches to the left at a fingerpost signed the Seldon Way and to the Great Hangman. As you continue, to the left of the path is the open grassed area of Cobbler's Park, whose name gives a clue to one element of the industrial heritage of this village.

By 1535, hemp was being grown here, and the industry reached its height during the seventeenth century. Hemp is one of the earliest cultivated plants, and has a multitude of uses. The soft, outer fibres can be woven into cloth, while the woody inner fibres are used for rope making - important for the mines and ships at Combe Martin. Oil from the fruit of hemp is used in the manufacture of paint and moisturising cream while seeds provide bird food and fishing bait. Hemp grown in Combe Martin was of such good quality it could be used to make thread for use in shoemaking, hence the name of this local park.



Linear growth of Combe Martin along the valley of the river Umber. Photo: Paul Berry

2. As the path climbs toward the cliffline at Lester Point, excellent views are offered to the steep-sided valley of the river Umber which has influenced the growth of this linear village. You can also look down on the natural beach and harbour of Combe Martin with Newberry beach on the far side of the bay. Combe Martin Bay was formed by post-glacial flooding of the valley by the river Umber, with the valley originally created by erosion along a major south-east to north-west trending faultline. There are few natural harbours on the north Devon coast, and the one found here has a history of trading, fishing, and ship building at different times in the past.

Ship building became important on Newberry beach from 1837, and lasted until the end of the century. During this time, eight sloops and schooners were constructed here. In 1916, a landslide at Lester Point raised the beach level in the bay and this decreased the depth of water which affected the ability of larger vessels mooring in the harbour. In the later part of the nineteenth century, railway lines came to nearby Lynton and Ilfracombe, contributing to the decline in importance of shipping for trade.

Combe Martin was originally known as 'Marhuscombe' ('Mary's Combe'), and the name may have changed when the local manor was given by William the Conqueror to Martin de Touron (Martin of Tours) in the eleventh century. A combe is a name associated with a small, steep-sided valley, such as the one found here. Combe Martin grew up as two separate settlements, 'head town' being the medieval settlement slightly inland and further up the valley from the church. 'Seaside' came later, and closer to the harbour. By the twentieth century the two settlements had coalesced. It is said that

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the main road that currently runs through Combe Martin forms one of the longest village high streets in the country. It is two-miles-long, and boasts five name changes, appearing at different points as as Borough Road, King Street, High Street, Castle Street, and Victoria Street.



Wild Pear beach. Photo: Paul Berry

3. Continue on the path steeply uphill to Lester Cliff. A little further along, you will get a glimpse of Wild Pear beach below, and be able to identify the hill of Little Hangman ahead. Wild Pear Beach was once the location for administration offices for miners who arrived by sea from Wales in the mid-1800s. On a clear day, you can pick out the detail of the coastline of South Wales across the water of the Bristol Channel.



Photo: Paul Berry

4. When you reach a fork in the path, head left towards Little Hangman, and climb the hill (218 metres) to gain an overview of this stretch of coastline. Little Hangman consists of sandstones, slates, and mudstones of Devonian age (350 to 400 million years old), deformed during the Variscan Orogeny when the two continents of Gondwana and Laurentia collided to form the super continent of Pangea. They now form the classic 'hog's back' shaped north Devon cliffs. From here, rocks get older towards Exmoor (to the east) and get younger as you travel westwards back towards Combe Martin, where there are slates and mudstones interspersed with limestones. Any view of the cliffs will reveal the banding of these layers of rocks, and the lines of folding from the continental collision. The name 'hangman' probably comes from the Celtic 'an maen', meaning a sloping headland or hill. There has never been any record of gallows ever being located here, although a local legend tells of a sheep rustler who got caught up in a rope and hung himself on nearby Great Hangman. At the top of Little Hangman, archaeologists have found evidence of late neolithic or early Bronze Age sites, possibly ritualistic or ceremonial in origin rather than for settlement.



View from Little Hangman looking east to Great Hangman and hog's back cliffs. Photo: Paul Berry



View from Little Hangman looking west to Watermouth Cove. Photo: Paul Berry

** You could extend your walk to visit the Great Hangman. From Little Hangman, take one of the paths inland to rejoin the main South West Coast Path and then continue east to the cairn at the top of Great Hangman (318 metres), the highest point on the entire South West Coast Path, and one of the tallest cliffs in England. Although it is 100 metres higher than Little Hangman, Great Hangman is a rounded summit, and rather less spectacular, although there are good views eastwards to Holdstone Down. From the cairn, follow the South West Coast Path (Tarka Trail) inland to a

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junction, turn right to Girt Down Farm, and then join the road. Turn left and then immediately right to Knappdown Farm. Continue the walk by following from instruction ten.

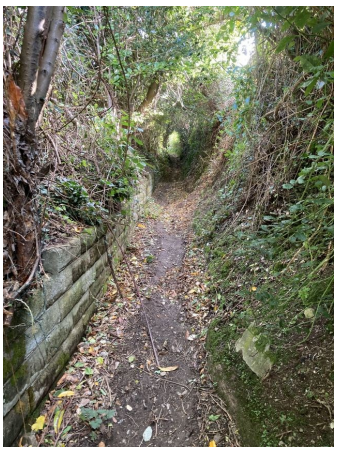


West Challacombe House. Photo: Paul Berry

5. Retrace your steps to the path fork, and turn eastwards to head inland. Drop down away from the cliffs to pass through an old gateway before reaching a gate leading onto a lane. Turn left to get a closer look at West Challacombe House.

In the Middle Ages, England was run under a feudal system. William the Conqueror awarded his supporters with land that previously belonged to the Saxons. Norman knights and nobles were given estates known as manors, like West Challacombe. Parts of the building date back to the twelfth century, but the main building and some of the outbuildings were built in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century by the Challacombe family. Various modifications were added in later years. Inside the building is an excellent preserved example of a medieval wooden roof, part of the remains of the original manor house. Wood in the beams has been dated to have been felled between 1449 and 1474. At the far end of the house to the right is a cruck barn that dates back to the fourteenth century. The curved timbers used in the construction are known as crucks and used to support the roof. The current barn is only a part of the original, which would have been much larger. The building here was acquired by the National Trust in 1992, and has been converted into a holiday cottage.

6. After viewing the manor house, turn back towards the gate and continue down the lane (called West Challacombe Lane) towards Combe Martin. As you cross a bridge, upstream are the remains of of old workings of the West Challacombe silver mine. Ignore the footpath signed to Combe Martin on the left, and continue walking past Nethercombe and a number of other houses until you arrive at a five-fingered wooden path sign.



Rock Lane. Photo: Paul Berry

7. Opposite the sign, turn left to follow the public bridleway signed to Knap Down. This is a narrow, stony path known as Rock Lane, used by early mining operations that this area is famous for. Mining started in this area in 1292, and possibly even earlier. Ancient sunken lanes like this cut into the bedrock run close to the location of the ore deposits.

8. After a steep climb along Rock Lane, the path eventually meets up with the metalled surface of Shute Lane. Turn left here, and close to the junction is a gateway that offers a good view back across to West Challacombe House.

9. Shute Lane demands a long and very steep ascent, and although there is no pavement, the route is usually free from traffic. Strawberry Fields Farm is passed on the right, the name a clue to how land on the south-facing slopes here have been used in the past for intensive market gardening. At Netherton Cross, one lane runs off to the right to Silver Dale, another clue to the past, this time the mining legacy of this part of north Devon.

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All along Shute Lane, views are offered across the valley to the south. The lines of relic strip fields from medieval farming can be identified, forming narrow fields on the south facing slopes. These strips formed part of the open field system of farming used in medieval manors, and ran downhill so no-one ended up with just shaded lower ground or unsheltered high ground. An acre was the area of land that could be ploughed in one day by a yoke of oxen, and was one chain wide (22 yards) and one furlong long (220 yards). Three large open fields were split up into furlongs which in turn were divided into strips. These were originally separated from each other by shallow earth banks. When enclosure came to English farming, hedges replaced these banks to divide the land which was then distributed amongst local landowners.

10. Continue along Shute Lane, passing a lane signed to Girt Down camping on the left. Shortly after, a lane leads off to the right to Knapdown Farm (signed 'footpath'). Around 100 metres past a caravan site and the farm, the lane branches in two. Take the right branch (called Corner Lane), and on the left look out over the hedge for the ivy-covered chimney of an old engine house, built in 1843 to pump water out of this old silver mine. The mine closed down in 1873, and much of the construction stone was removed, but in front of the engine house are the old workings and spoil heaps.



Knap Down engine house.
Photo: Paul Berry

Silver-lead ore (argentiferous galena) was mined here, with the industry first appearing around Combe Martin in the thirteenth century, and perhaps even earlier. The ore was found in sedimentary deposits in lodes and veins, with the main deposits running west-north-west, parallel to the village main street, and sloping towards the south. The deposits were cut by north-south faults known as cross-courses, and at the junctions of these the ore was often at its richest. In the early days, all silver mined here belonged to the Crown, so all profits went to the King. These rights continued up to the end of the seventeenth century. Medieval records (The Chartered Rolls) show that between 1292 and 1297 one third of the silver produced in Devon came from the Combe Martin mines, most of the rest coming from Bere Ferrers in the south part of the county.

There were three stages in early ore extraction, cobbling (when the host rock is broken up), gravitational washing (when water is used to separate the mineral from its waste), and smelting (when the ore is heated in a furnace to separate the metal). It is likely that some refining was done at Combe Martin, but most of the ore was shipped to south Devon for this process, and then on to London for final refinement including minting into coins at the Tower of London. Ore from this area had an unusually high silver content (Combe Martin silver = 168 oz/ton or 0.47% compared with a typical ore content of 0.085% silver), and mining continued during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when miners were impressed from Derbyshire, the Mendips and Wales. However, it was not until the sixteenth century that silver mining at Combe Martin was at its most profitable. Silver from Combe Martin was used to make a cup for the Lord Mayor of London, and this was melted down to make tankards which are of

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100% Combe Martin silver and are known as the Bevis Bulmer Cups. They are found today at the Lord Mayor's home of Museum House and are still used at formal banquets. The royal rights to silver were removed at the end of the seventeenth century, and local landowners took over the running of the mines, even though by then they were no longer profitable. A renewed attempt to breathe life back into the Combe Martin mines at the end of the nineteenth century came about following the demand for mixed ore to feed the Bessemer process (purification of steel) and improvements in pumping technology that meant mines could be extended to greater depths, but this new interest was short-lived. Silver mining at Combe Martin came to an end in the late 1870s - marking the end of six centuries of mining history in the village.

11. Continue down the rutted and rough track of Corner Lane, passing Silver Mines Farm. Over the hedge to the left are other old silver-mine workings. Harris Mine and Williams Shaft at Mine Tenement (the nucleus of the mining operations during the nineteenth century) are located in this area, named after the directors of the Combe Martin and North Devon Silver Mining Company. Sadly, there is not much left to see today.

The Harris Mine dates back to to the Civil War (1640-1648) and was used to bring ore to the surface. Williams Shaft was originally an air vent, but was enlarged to pump out water using a Cornish beam engine. Mine Tenement (1835) would have consisted of the Harris Shaft, an engine house, blacksmith's forge, a powder house, boiler house, and carpenter's shop. In the 1840s, a counting house was added. Little evidence of these buildings can be found today. In 2001, the Combe Martin Silver Mines Research and Preservation Society managed to excavate the site and began to offer guided tours.

12. Further along Corner Lane you pass a crossroads with Usticke Lane to the left and a track to the right called Portland Head Lane which is cut into a rocky cliff. After passing through a gate, Corner Lane emerges by a house called Cato Ridge and passes a number of other houses before meeting up with Combe Martin High Street.

13. Cross the main road into Church Street, and turn right to continue past the war memorial and the church, which you may choose to visit. The large church of St Peter and Vincula ('St Peter in Chains') demonstrates the historic wealth of the village, and has parts dating back to the thirteenth century. The restored medieval rood screen is particularly impressive. Gravestones in the churchyard hold the names of old miners (eg 'Peake' from the Peak District, and many Welsh names).



Church lych gate. Photo: Paul Berry

14. Walk through the lych gate and turn right into Park Lane. Pass a line of houses that includes Suncrest, Roseberry Cottage, and Madeley. Behind them runs the river Umber which gets its name from the natural brown-red earth pigment of the hydrated oxides of iron and manganese formed by the decomposition of these minerals. It was quarried here (rather than mined) as it appeared close to the surface, and has the distinction of being the last mineral to be successfully worked in this area.

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Umber was extracted from at least 1873 on the south side of Combe Martin and at nearby Berrynarbor. The river water was used for washing the ore which would then be dried in a smelt mill, and the pigment extracted was used in the manufacture of paint. Umber's brown colour intensifies when it is heated, and you may have heard of the paint colour 'burnt umber' used by artists. The famous paint manufacturer Reeves once said he was never able to form a complete series of shades of colour until he had the umber pigment from nearby Berrynarbor.

15. The lane soon becomes an unsurfaced path. You will soon reach some steps to a path on the right leading to Water Lane and the village. You could take a short detour here to look at the river Umber. An old lime kiln can be seen to the left. Return to Park Lane and turn right, passing another old lime kiln behind the hedge on the right. In the woodland beyond the kiln, old mine workings are located.

16. Continue along Park Lane to a crossroads. Ignore the right turn to the sewage works, and continue uphill.

17. Pass through a gate signed to West Park. After 150 metres, follow the path that takes you to the right of a small coppice. After 200 metres, cross the stile on the right, and pause after a few metres to look across the valley towards Knap Down to see the long, narrow strip fields described earlier in the walk instructions.

The strip fields were used to grow food for the miners, but when this industry declined in the 1800s, market gardening became popular. The steep south-facing slopes were particularly suitable for growing soft fruit, and Combe Martin became well-known for its strawberries. There was even a jam factory in the village, operating from 1914 to 1925. Market gardening continued to be important up to the latter part of the twentieth century, with products sold throughout the county and beyond. The village still celebrates its 'Strawberry Fayre' on the bowling green on the first Saturday of June. Do you remember passing a farm called 'Strawberry Fields' earlier in the walk?



Old lime kiln. Photo: Paul Berry

18. Continue walking straight across the field until you come to an old lime kiln. Limestone was heated in kilns like this one to producing quick lime which was raked out of the bottom of the kiln. Water was then added to slake it and make it safe. The lime could then be used in agriculture (to improve soils) and in construction (lime wash and mortar).

Most kilns were located along the coastline to receive imported coal and limestone, so to find one inland here confirms that a local source of limestone was available. There are a number of outcrops of limestone between Combe Martin and Ilfracombe, and lime burning was first recorded in Combe Martin in 1746, with 18 kilns located around the village. Smoke produced from the kilns often brought a thick fog to the valley, which is perhaps why the village used to be described as a 'shammick of a town', meaning it was dirty and industrial.

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19. Continue across the field to pass through a gate and follow the path towards the caravan park. The path bends sharply to the right, and follows the zig-zag route through the wood.

20. The path emerges from the wood, crosses the river Umber, and then continues along Barton Gate Lane to meet up with King Street (High Street).

21. Turn left along King Street (High Street), passing Umber Close, to the junction with Cross Street. A corn mill known as Lower Mill once stood here on King Street, and was fed by a mill leat leading from the river. It may have been in operation during the twelfth century. From 1845, this building was used for a short time as a smelting mill built by the Combe Martin and North Devon Smelting Company to process silver ore, but closed around 1850, and since then has been used as Lovering's Garage. A second mill, Higher Mill, was sited near the Pack O' Cards public house elsewhere in the village.

22. Continue along Cross Street, passing the excellent small village museum (open in the summer months), and head towards the harbour. Here, shipbuilding, trading and fishing were thriving industries in the last century. Boats used to be pulled out for shelter on what is now the Lime Kiln Car Park where the walk began. Fishing for herring, cod, sole, bass, lobster and crabs continued here up until the 1960s.



Combe Martin beach. Photo: Paul Berry



Caves and adits on Combe Martin beach. Photo: Paul Berry

23. Conclude your walk by exploring the beach where the river Umber joins the sea. At low tide, you can walk around the headland to the east of the bay to see the caves created in the weaker slates and sandstones, a narrow shore platform, and some small sea stacks. There is also a small mining adit in the cliffs by the beach.

Tourism was slow to take off in Combe Martin due the impression of the village as an industrial 'shammick'. There was also the absence of a railway station - unlike nearby Ilfracombe - and road access was difficult. But by the end of the nineteenth century, two coaches a day were connecting to Ilfracombe, and two a week to Barnstaple. Bathing huts appeared on Newberry Beach by the early 1900s, and tourism continued to develop in the village throughout the twentieth century.

Answers to Curiosity Questions:

What is the speed limit for vessels travelling on a canal? *(4 mph)*

How many miles of navigable canals and rivers are there in the UK - 1,000? 3,200? 4,700? 10,400? *(4,700 miles)*

Which British city has the most canals? *(Birmingham has 35 miles of canals, said to be more than Venice)*

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