

History of Combe St. Nicholas

BY THE REV. G. DE Y. ALDRIDGE

COMBE—the hollow among the hills—has been from very ancient times the habitation of man. The earliest inhabitants who have left any trace behind them were the prehistoric folk who were attracted by the shelter of the combe and the bountiful spring which still provides the village with its water supply, who fashioned their weapons from the local flint and buried one of their chieftains in the large barrow above the combe known as Combe Beacon.

They were succeeded by the people who gave their name to the British Isles and the name of Combe to this place in which they settled,—a people who I am inclined to believe still live in Combe. It is probable that the tide of Saxon invasion—much spent by the time it reached the West—rolled round the hills and occupied the more profitable lowlands, and that Combe was conquered, not by force of arms, but by a process of peaceful penetration. So we have in Combe to-day a people exhibiting many of the characteristics of their far-off ancestors, and tending a dim half-forgotten memory of their wrongs. A ‘peculiar’ people, holding themselves aloof from their neighbours; a musical people, warm-hearted and generous, but intensely suspicious of strangers, and who until quite recent years carried on a perennial feud with the lowlanders, especially the men of Chard. For generations they have inter-married among themselves until almost the whole village is related, and though education and the motor-car have done something to modify conditions there is still a great gulf fixed between a Combe man and a foreigner.

In due course the Romans—or more probably Romano-British—discovered the amenities of Combe, and have left behind them at least three very significant traces of their life and occupation.¹ At Wadeford, in the parish, in a field owned by Mr. W. Lane, are the remains of what must have been an unusually fine villa, the residence of a man of wealth and culture. The site has never been thoroughly explored, but the remains which have been uncovered from time to time point to a house of the courtyard type. It was first discovered in 1810, when two fine mosaic pavements were unearthed, but these, being left exposed, soon perished through frost. In 1861 some excavations were made revealing five more pavements and a hypocaust. Other finds included tiles, painted wall plaster, roof slates, a bronze hand, a ring fibula, and coins. At Lower Wadeford evidences of Roman industry have been found at Mill Court showing that the mill was worked in those early times, while in 1858 five Constantinian coins were found in the churchyard, pointing perhaps to a very early association of this site with religious observances.

SAXON TIMES

In Saxon times Combe had its associations with royalty and was the residence, and one of the manors, of Aelfthryth, daughter of Ordgar, Earl of the Western Provinces, and widow of King Edgar. A letter is extant written by her to Archbishop Aelfric (995—1005) in which she says :

‘I Aelfthryth greet Archbishop Aelfric and Earl Aethelweard humbly, and I make known to you that I am witness that Archbishop Dunstan [960–988] assigned Taunton to Bishop Aethelwold [Bishop of Winchester 963–984] as his charters declared, and King Edgar then gave it up and commanded each of his thanes who had any land in that land that they should hold it with the bishop’s consent or give it up, and the king said that he had no land to give out as he durst not from fear of God have the headship himself and moreover had then surrendered Rushton into the bishop’s hands. And Wulfgyth then rode to me at Combe and sought me, and I then, because she was akin to me, and Aelfswith, because he was her brother, obtained from Bishop Aethelwold that they might enjoy

¹ *V.C.H. Som.* i, 333.

the land for their day, and that after their day the land should go to Taunton with meat and with men as it stood'.¹

Later the manor passed into the hands of one Azor, son of Torold, a courtier of Edward the Confessor, from whom it was purchased in 1070 by Bishop Giso (1061—1088) as a part of the endowment of his cathedral church at Wells.² Except for the duration of the Commonwealth it has remained the property of the cathedral ever since, though administered since 1839 by the Ecclesiastical Commission.

The Domesday Survey (1086) says of Combe: 'The same Bishop (Giso) holds Combe. Azor, son of Torold, held it in the time of King Edward and paid geld for 20 hides. There is land for 16 ploughs. Of this (land) there are in demesne 8 hides where are 3 ploughs and 12 serfs and (there are) 15 villeins and 13 Borders with 12 ploughs and 12 hides. There are 12 beasts and 18 swine and 315 sheep and 1 riding horse. There (are) 12 acres of meadow and half a league of pasture reckoning (inter) length and breadth, and 1 league of woodland reckoning length and breadth. It was worth 10 pounds. Now 18 pounds.'

It was probably at this time that Combe began to be known as Combe Episcopi, a title which gradually fell into disuse after the dedication of the Church to St. Nicholas in 1239. Though a document of 1316 says that Combe Episcopi in the hundred of Kingsbury then belonged to the Dean and Chapter of Wells, and as late as *temp.* Richard III Henry Bonner, owner of the ancient manor of Waterleston (now known as Weston) within the parish, dates from 'Waterleston and Combe Episcopi'.

THE PROVOST

Under Bishop Reginald (1174—1191) the manor of Combe was assigned to the Precentor of Wells,³ subject to the payment of five Prebends in the Cathedral. But some forty years later the manor had apparently much increased in value, for in 1217 Bishop Jocelyne formed ten prebends out of the previous five—each to receive 10 marcs. One of these was appointed by the

¹ Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus*, 717.

² Ecclesiastical Documents (Camden Society), p. 18.

³ Cal. Wells D. & C. MSS. i, 39.

Bishop to be Provost of Combe ; he had to pay the others, and he held, besides his own 10 marcs, the church of Combe.¹

In 1234 a further reorganization of the Cathedral revenues was effected, and the Provostship of Combe, consisting of Combe manor and church, was united with the Provostship of Wynesham, consisting of Wynesham manor and church. And the Provost of Combe, without cure of souls, was charged with the administration of fifteen prebends, retaining one for himself, and paying to each prebend 10 marcs.² These fifteen prebends of Combe still exist in Wells Cathedral. At the same time the vicarage of Combe was formed, with the chapelry of Waterleston (Weston). It was endowed with the lesser tithes to the value of 5 marcs, and a vicarage house assigned on the N. side of the road to Stanton (Whitestaunton), the right of presentation being vested in the Provost.

Bishop Jocelyne, who must have been an excellent man of business, further decreed in what manner and with what stock the Provost of Combe should transmit the manor to his successors : ‘ And he shall leave to his successor in the said Provostship 107 acres sowed with wheat at Combe, and 149 acres sowed with oats, and 78½ acres of fallow. And in the same place, of stock 40 oxen, or 5 shillings in lieu of each ox, if so be that so many oxen should not be found there, also 200 sheep, the price of each sheep 12 pence ’.³

King Edward III in the seventeenth year of his reign granted a charter of free-warren in the manor which continued in the Provostship until its abolition, and was then annexed to the deanery.⁴

Between 1502 and 1519 the Provostship seems to have been merged in the deanery, and on the latter date the dean for the first time presents the vicar of Combe. As late as 1810 Combe was a ‘ peculiar of the Dean ’.⁵

THE PARISH CHURCH (Plate III)

Good Bishop Jocelyne was also careful for the spiritual

¹ Cal. Wells D. & C. MSS. i, 54.

² Ibid. i, 243.

³ Collinson, ii, 475.

⁴ Cart. 17 Ed. III, n. 1.

⁵ *V.C.H. Som.* ii, 67.

welfare of Combe, and, although his mind must have been much occupied with the re-building of the western portion of Wells Cathedral, he took interest in the building of a fine church in Combe, replacing a smaller Norman church which had occupied the same site. And on 9th August 1239, he came to Combe, where, on his mandate and in his presence, the new church of Combe was dedicated in honour of Saint Nicholas by Stephen, Bishop of Waterford, just ten weeks before Bishop Jocelyne 'dedicated anew' his restored cathedral in Wells.¹

Why the new church in Combe was placed under the patronage of St. Nicholas is unknown, but possibly we have here a reminiscence of the great crusades against the paynim Turk. The famous Daubenay family of Barrington were zealous crusaders, and one of them still lies buried outside the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. May we conjecture that under his banner fought some of the men of Combe who brought back with them from the East many legends of the wonder-working Saint of Myra,—the protector of all who travel by sea, the guardian of boys and girls, and also, it is said, of thieves?

From this time the combe and church, placed under the protection of the Blessed Nicholas, came to be known officially as Combe St. Nicholas, but always among its inhabitants has persisted the old name of Combe.

It is probable that at the same time as he dedicated the new church at Combe Bishop Jocelyne granted the charter for Combe Fair to be held on or about the Octave of the Feast of St. Nicholas (6th December). This fair was held for centuries on the Wednesday after 10th December in the streets opposite and adjacent to the church. It was a very important fair in bygone days, and was notable in that it was held in the early morning and most of the business was conducted by the light of lanterns. It finally expired about thirty-five years ago.

During the Middle Ages Combe prospered under the rule of its Provost, who had his courthouse in the field opposite the church.

¹ Regist. Joh de Brokensford.

LOCAL INDUSTRY

The wool trade flourished exceedingly in the west of England, and Combe not only produced much good wool but also occupied itself in carding, spinning and weaving it. Water-power was plentiful, and in later years in addition to the two grist mills there were also two cloth mills. The last of them, at Pudleigh, owned by the late Mr. F. Brown, manufactured the very heavy box cloth needed in the old coaching days, and was only closed down some thirty years ago. Tanning, malting and brewing were also carried on in the village, and, at one time, there was a tobacco factory in the hamlet of Willhayne which, tradition says, came to an untimely end owing to the owner being detected one night in the act of unloading a waggon-load of sea-weed he had brought from Lyme Regis !

During the course of the fifteenth century the church was again practically rebuilt in the Perpendicular style, the two chapels added, and the fine rood screen, with its two charming little turrets giving access to the rood loft, erected. The tower was also raised a stage at this period and four bells hung therein, one of which, the work of Roger Semson the famous bell-founder of Ash Priors, still remains. These were increased to five in 1760, and to the present ring of six by the gift of an additional bell by Mr. James Coate in 1906.

By a survey taken the 8th day of October in the sixteenth year of Queen Elizabeth the manor of Combe St. Nicholas, with the rectory, parcel of the revenues of the Dean of Wells, was rated at 6*l.* 4*s.* 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ *d.*

During the troublous days of the Commonwealth great changes came about in Combe ; the manor, taken from the Dean and Chapter, was sold by the government commissioners in 1650 to Nathaniel Smyth, of Littlecroft, in the county of Wilts, gentleman, and Arthur Mallack (a name which still exists in Combe), of London, gentleman.¹ Thomas Greenfield, who had been vicar since 1643 and who was an ardent Royalist, was deprived and was confined for some years in a hulk on the Thames from which he never returned.² In his place the

¹ Conveyance in church chest.

² Tradition.

Parliament sent as minister the Rev. Henry Blackaller, who is said to have resigned the living in 1662 in consequence of the Act of Uniformity, although he had sixteen children and nothing to keep them on. Henry Bonner, of Waterleston, was appointed Registrar and Justice for the parish and a summons of his issuing in 1652 will be found in the case in the church. Another of the Puritans who left Combe at the Restoration was Captain William Torrey, who sailed for America in 1662, and one of whose descendants was Dr. Torrey, the well-known evangelist.

After the Restoration the Royal Forest of Neroche, a considerable part of which was within this parish, was disafforested. The parishioners had certain rights of pasturage, etc., in the forest, and at the disafforestation the land was divided into three parts, one part going to the Crown, one to the lords of the manors, and one part to the commoners, Combe receiving in lieu of its common rights a grant of 162 acres.

A previous enclosure had been made in 1634, when Thomas Lumbard and others contracted with the Commissioners of the Crown for this 162 acres at the rate of £3 15s. 0d. per acre, amounting to £600. But shortly afterwards Henry Bonner the elder and some others of the parish, on behalf of the poor of the parish who were likely to be the greatest losers by the disafforestation and enclosure, petitioned that this contract might be set aside, which was done. Thereupon Henry Bonner the elder and some others of the parish were authorised by the parish, as trustees for the poor, to contract for the 162 acres at the rate of £3 15s. 0d. per acre, and to lease out the same to such of the parishioners as would give £3 15s. 0d. per acre for a fine, and a yearly rent of 1s. per acre if they bought for twenty-one years, or if they bought for three lives a yearly rent of 2s. per acre, the rents to be received by the churchwardens and overseers for the relief of the poor.

This arrangement was effected and Henry Bonner sold the land for sums making up the £600 payable to the king. It appears that Henry Bonner received from the purchasers £346 in part payment of the £600, and the remainder was to be paid so soon as he had received a conveyance under the Great Seal and was in a position to complete the leases. But before this

could be done the Civil War broke out and the hedges were pulled down and the land relapsed into forest.

Upon the Restoration the lessees applied to the Bonners to perfect their leases to them, and to receive the residues of their fines, but it appears that, though the letters patent were afterwards obtained the Bonners refused to carry out their contract, and Henry Bonner the younger upon the death of his father took possession of the land.

The churchwardens and overseers of Combe thereupon filed an information in the courts praying that the poor of the parish might have the benefit of the said letters patent, and that Henry Bonner the son, and John Brown, the defendants in the suit, might be compelled to execute the agreement. The defendants put in their answer and the matter was referred to commissioners. Finally the court ordered that Henry Bonner the younger, upon payment of certain monies to him, should convey the land to trustees in trust for the poor of the parish, and that the trustees should with all convenient speed complete the original leases, such leases to commence from 3rd August 1668, at a yearly rent of 2s. per acre for the poor of the parish.¹

This land, with the addition of 16 acres added to it when the common was enclosed in 1818, continued in possession of the parish until 1917, when the land was sold for £2,730, which was invested for the benefit of the poor of the parish. The charity is administered by feoffees, and the present income is about £135 per annum.

Combe of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seems to have been happy in that it possesses but little history during that period. The vestry met regularly each month, appointed its officers—churchwardens, overseers, way-wardens, constable, clerk and sexton—cared for the church, the highways and the poorhouse, relieved the destitute and provided that all persons so relieved wore a badge on the right sleeve bearing a large P together with the initial letter of the parish cut in red or blue cloth, according to law, apprenticed the poor children at the age of eight or nine until they were twenty-one, and prosecuted, often at considerable expense, those who deserted their families.

¹ Commissioners' Report 1819-1837: 'Combe St. Nicholas, The Forest Charity.'

In 1748 the vestry even turned its attention to the education of the poor, for at a parish meeting held 19th October that year it was agreed 'that the Church House Chamber . . . shall be fitted up in a proper order at the pish expense. Also shall allow James Thorne a sallary of Twenty Shillings a year to commence at Michaelmas last past and be paid Quarterly by the Overseers, the sd. sallary to be paid in Consideration of his Teaching four poor children to read or two to write, the Children to be nominated by the Minister, Churchwardens and Overseers, for the time being in Conjunction.'

It would appear, however, that the schoolmaster did not appreciate his good fortune for at a parish meeting on 30th September 1756, 'it is ordered that James Thorne, the present School Master, have a Quarter of a year from this time to settle his affairs within this Parish, and at the end of said Quarter of a year he is to quit the School unless his behaviour shall be such as to be approved of by the Majority of the Parishioners present at the end of the time, and to undertake no Deputy office for the future'.

Apparently James Thorne mended his ways, for his quarterly salary of 5s. continued to be paid regularly until 1763, when that volume of overseers' accounts closes. How long the school was maintained is somewhat uncertain, as in 1812 the following item appears in the overseers' accounts: 'Jno Pope as agreed to last Easter for instructing the Poor Chd. to read on Sundays £1 11s. 6d.'

So late as 1760 the parishioners were still liable for personal service on the highways when called upon by the way-wardens. In that year, however, the way-wardens were authorised to excuse from the Statute Service or Labour at the following rates by the year, to wit—

	£	s.	d.
A Day Labourer	0	3	0
A Man and Horse	0	6	0
A Plough	1	10	0

The vestry had made an order in 1750 'that the Constable, Churchwardens and Overseers forthwith take an Inventory of all such persons' goods as are Relieved by the pish', and the following is the inventory of the contents of a house in 1752:

‘ May ye 3, 1752. A count of Eliz. pons goods a bed and bedsted bolster on blancked and cwilt a bras croock bras skilot a cobard a tabell bord 2 barrells a Sidbord a Braik (?) 2 back croocks a setell to Puter Dishes a small kitell a shit.’

About this time a change comes over the administration of the relief of the poor of the parish. Up to 1752 destitute persons were admitted into the ‘ Church House ’, and ended their days in reasonable comfort under the shadow of the church and on the charity of her sons. But after this time the claims of Christian charity seem to have been lost sight of, the relief of the poor has become a burden, the ‘ Church House ’ is now called ‘ The Poor House ’, or the ‘ Parish House ’, the poor are set to work as ordered by the law, and finally in 1769 we have the establishment of a ‘ Workhouse ’ in Combe.

‘ Feby 7th, 1769. At a public pish Meeting this day held, pursuant to a Notice given in the parish Church Sunday last, ordered that the poor house be converted into a Workhouse, and an Advertisement entered on the Sherborn Mercury purporting that a fit person with a wife is wanting to superintend the same.’

Six months later further alterations were necessary. ‘ Sept. 1st, 1769, at a vestry this day held Ordd. That the windows be glaz’d and leaded viz. Worhouse, the kitchen ffloor immediately levelled, and Curry Mallett Stone prepared for the kitchen workshop and passage and drains to be made for keep do. dry, that the oven be made and 2 Furnaces put up immediately. As also a Grate for burning Coals, and all other necessarys fit for the Reception of the poor, to be procured by ye overseers as soon as possible.’

Six months later again and the workhouse was once more causing anxiety to the vestry, for on ‘ 1770, March 25th, Tis agreed as the present Governor of our Workhouse (William Northover) does not turn out agreeable to our Expectation we hereby unanimously agree to discharge him from his Office as Governor of the same and accordingly he is hereby discharged when he has made a fair Settlement of his accompts ’.

From the overseers’ accounts, carefully rendered each month, it is possible to get some idea of life in the Combe Workhouse at this time. The inmates food consisted chiefly of Beef at

2½*d.* a pound, or veal at 1½*d.* a pound, though occasionally pork was purchased at 4*s.* 6*d.* a score, and once only, a leg of mutton for 3*s.* They were further supplied with wheat at 4*s.* a bushel, from which presumably they baked their own bread, cheese at 15*s.* per 100 lbs., potatoes at 1*s.* 6*d.* a bag, and pease at 4*s.* 6*d.* a bushel, while one curious entry is for 'Salt, oatmeal and combs 3*s.*'. Once or twice in thirty years a hogshead of cyder was purchased for £1, but for the most part a veil is drawn over the drink with which the poor washed down this good fare. Tea and cocoa were of course unknown to them, and there is no mention of either butter or sugar. There was a garden in which they grew chiefly cabbage, bought at 4*d.* per hundred plants; carrots they were able to buy at 7*d.* for six bundles. They ate their meals from wooden dishes, which cost 2*d.* each, seated on 'stules' purchased at 6*d.* apiece. For firing they had faggot wood at £1 1*s.* per hundred, furze at 3*s.* 6*d.* a load, and turf from Longlie or the forest at 6*s.* a load. Clothing was not expensive—a pair of breeches 3*s.* 6*d.*, shoes 4*s.* a pair, 'stockens' 3 pairs for 2*s.* 8*d.*, a shift 3*s.* 6*d.*, a pair of gloves 1*s.* 2*d.*, lincey 1*s.* 2*d.* a yard, Brean 1*s.* 2*d.* a yard, barras 9*d.* a yard. Two 'bed bords' cost 2*s.* 8*d.*, and blankets 1*s.* 4*d.* a yard. The inmates, in common with the poor of the parish, were attended by a doctor who received for his good offices and medicines £6 6*s.* a year ('midwifery and broken bones excepted') and when they passed beyond his skill they were 'layed out' for 6*d.*, and finally buried in a coffin which cost 6*s.*, in a grave for the digging of which 1*s.* was paid.

During the latter part of the eighteenth century small-pox ravaged Combe, claiming many victims, but it was not until 1812 that definite steps were taken to combat the evil. 7th May 1812: 'At a public parish meeting held at the Poor House (agreeable to notice given) for the purpose of considering of the expediency of an inoculation of the poor of the parish of Combe St. Nicholas. It was the unanimous opinion of the Gentleman payers and inhabitants of the said parish, "That a general vaccination of the poor is far preferable to inoculation".'

'Resolved therefore that such general vaccination be administered to all the children of the poor who shall claim and be admitted to receive it by the parish officers. Resolved that

Mr. W. Spicer be chosen to administer the same which he agrees to perform at four shillings and sixpence each person.'

The long-drawn agony of the war with France seems to have left Combe in comparative peace; occasionally the overseers had to pay for a substitute for a man in the militia whose family would otherwise have been chargeable to the parish, or to relieve a soldier's wife or widow, but otherwise we find little reference in the parish records to the struggle which was convulsing all Europe. But Combe proved its loyalty in forming a strong company of volunteers ready to assist in repelling the anticipated invasion of the dreaded Napoleon. The following is the Muster Roll of Combe Volunteers, 1798-99:

Captain—John Cooke; *Lieutenant*—Jos. Winter; *Ensign*—Wm. Walter; *Sergeants*—Thos. Buckland, John Gawler, Jas. Sellick, Peter Hurford; *Corporals*—Christr. Lucas, Robt. Hayes, Richard Summers; *Drums, etc.*—Robt. Summers, Wm. Coat, Jacob Norris, Wm. Rogers, James Tucker; *Privates*—Amos Ashford, Wm. Aplin, Richard Balch, Joseph Berry, John Bull, Henry Coat, Thos. Coles, Phil. Collins, Robt. Diment, John England, Phineas England, John Fowler, Richard Fowler, Jos. Fowler, John Gothard, Abram Hawkins, George Hart, John Hayes, Wm. Hayes, Jacob Hayes, James Hewitt, Wm. Hewitt, John Hill, Thos. Hillard, John Hurford, Thos. Hussey, Chas. Hussey, John Jewell, John Lindly, John Lintern, John Long, Wm. Long, Benjamin Long, Sam Lucas, Robt. Mallock, Isaac Manning, Robt. Manning, John Manning, Thos. Major, James Pavey, John Pearce, Jacob Player, Edward Player, George Pilton, John Pope, John Poole, John Richards, John Russell, Chas. Russell, Wm. Snook, Richard Symmonds, Giles Symmonds, John Summers, Wm. Summers, James Sparks, Wm. Sparks, Chas. Serle, Wm. Trump, John Trump, James Tucker, James Vicary, Richard Walter, Jos. Walter, George Webber, John Wright, James Welch, Robt. Webb, John Werfield, Samuel Wyatt, George Willmott, Richard Davey, Samuel Jackson, Wm. Hill, John Brown, Robt. Phillips, George Butler, Wm. Jacobs.¹

The history of Combe in the nineteenth century may be briefly summarized. In 1844 the church suffered a heavy loss through the theft of its ancient communion plate. In 1845 the present church clock was purchased second-hand from Mr. John Baker, of South Petherton, for £36, and has faithfully discharged its duties ever since. The stonework of the

¹ War Office Muster Rolls.

windows in the aisles of the church were restored in 1854, and the present coloured glass was inserted in them in 1855 by Mr. Toms, of Wellington, at a cost of £43. The s. side of the churchyard was enlarged in 1856, when the labour of levelling it amounted to £22 10s. In 1860 a loan was raised for the restoration of the church and the lengthening of the aisles to their present dimensions, the work being completed in 1863. A new organ, the gift of Mrs. Hamilton, wife of the then vicar, was placed in the church in 1865, and rebuilt in 1910 at a cost of £125. In 1865 the road leading past the vicarage to Combe Wood was closed and made the property of the vicarage, a new road being provided in lieu from the schools through the glebe lands to Combe Wood. In 1874 the drainage of the village was considered and the making of a sewer was begun in 1877, the work being finally completed in 1882 at a cost of about £400. The front part of the churchyard, where formerly the workhouse and other buildings had stood, was consecrated in 1875. In 1884 the water supply was laid down, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners giving the spring and £150 towards the cost of the scheme, and the remainder—about £38—being provided by subscriptions and a balance left over from the sewer loan. In 1885 the waterworks were handed over to the Chard Union Sanitary Authority. The Wesleyan Chapel was built in 1891 and further enlarged in 1897. In 1912 the parish hall was erected, chiefly through the efforts of the late Mr. R. Buston, at a cost of £400, another room being added to it in 1926. The call of King and Country in the Great War was readily responded to in Combe, and in the church will be found the names of 153 men who joined the colours from the parish and served in Belgium, France, Italy, Salonica, Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia and India. Of them, alas, twenty-five returned no more to Combe.