

# When a doctor sold herbs to keep the plague at bay

By *GRAHAM ANDREWS*

## **SWINGING the clock back hundreds of years in Pilton is done with zest and authenticity.**

In the most ancient corner of Barnstaple, month-long celebrations to mark Pilton's 1,100 years of recorded history include events certain to have won the approval of King Alfred the Great, the man who started it all, around AD 882.

Colourful banners, each one depicting the name, hobby or trade of the householder, festoon the streets. So do hanging baskets and flower tubs, embellished by an atmosphere of quiet excitement that seem to say "This is Pilton's moment."

The festival is a community effort.

Families searched, attics, drawers, cupboards and dark corners for old clothing, coins, curios, mementoes and anything with a historical connection for a two-day exhibition at Bluecoat School entitled "Pilton past and present".

More than 1,000 people filed through and on the second day 300 turned up for a service of re-dedication in the parish church.

Pilton couple **Esther** and **William Norman**, married 43 years ago, became bride and groom for the second time in their special role of leading the "newly-re-weds".

### **Ideas machine**

High spots of a medieval fair included bear baiting, a St George and the Dragon pageant with 15 youngsters supporting the monster, a Noah's Ark and animals, hot dogs served by local doctor **Howard Bluett**, suitably attired as a friar, and offerings of herbs to "keep the plague at bay" by another doctor, **Patrick Brighten**.

The vicar, the **Rev. Anthony Geering**, donned shepherd's costume and confessed afterwards: "My own children thought I was crazy but I found it all immensely enjoyable."

Although Pilton Church has initiated and sponsored many of the 20 or so events, the ideas machine has been a 30-strong committee.

Town and district councillor **Margaret Reed**, although herself not on the committee, has lived in the

quaint corner of town for nearly 30 years.

She says: "People are rallying and warming to this festival as I never expected. I am delighted to see the residents bringing the place together as a community. There is certainly more interest than there was 20 years ago and this is reflected in the way shops and homes have been brightened up."

The vicar, too, can smile with satisfaction at the way his flock have responded to the milestone year.

"The festival has really taken off," he says. "Many people often feel inhibited about supporting events that do not directly involve them, but this time there is a great feeling of unity throughout the area."

After the Queen's Silver Jubilee, The Royal Wedding and the birth of the new Prince William of Wales, Pilton folk are evidently still in the mood for flag waving and merriment.

As **Mrs. Hilda Chapple**, who has lived at 101 Pilton Street for 60 years, declares: "We are having a wonderful time. If anyone thinks that the community spirit is lost, they had better come to Pilton!"

## **Other attractions**

Attractions still geared to woo the crowd include three days of Bradiford revelry beginning on Saturday, a talk by naturalist **Trevor Beer** on the wildlife of the Bradiford valley, a civic service on Sunday to mark the foundation of St. Margaret's Hospital, Pilton, a men v ladies cricket match and a medieval market and pageant to bring celebrations to a climax.

One of the centres of attraction of the pageant will be Pilton's newest baby, carried by his or her mother, to symbolise the future.

Its name is still not known, of course. Indeed it may be born any day now in readiness for its important role at the end of July.