

PILTON FESTIVAL - A SHORT HISTORY

by NOEL HARLEY

Details of early versions of the Festival are not written in any documents to be found now. It is believed that a Charter was granted in 1344 by Edward III for a Market and Fair in Pilton to be held annually in July, which would certainly have been accompanied by entertainment, feasting and carousing. Oral tradition recalls dancing on what was a green triangle where Dark Lane joins Bellaire and Northfield Lane still taking place shortly before World War 2.

The modern Festival was inaugurated in 1982 by the then Vicar, the Rev Anthony Geering, 1,100 years after the establishment of Pilton as a Burgh by King Athelstan. A whole series of events were planned for a month from Midsummer's Day. The programme began with a concert in the Church by local artistes. The first weekend saw a 3 day Flower Festival in the church on the theme "Enter his gates with praise", an exhibition in the Bluecoat School entitled "Pilton Past and Present" including many items related to industries and works in Pilton and photographs from personal collections, all loaned by local residents. Many a face was recalled from years ago. The grand culmination was the Mediaeval Market and Pageant, with a mediaeval period as its theme. The market spread up Pilton Street and extended under the arch into Church Path. It was rich with costumed entertainers and traders, and blessed with a warm and sunny day. The Pageant in the afternoon depicted events from the history of Pilton, as seen by the mythical Green Man (played by Anthony Geering). The participants assembled in Pilton Park and made their way through the Street into the grounds of Pilton House. It included Celtic residents of the hill fort on Roborough, Vikings, King Athelstan and knights, lepers from St Margarets Hospital, monks, Puritans and many more. A packed day finished off with Country Dancing on a wonderfully balmy evening in the playground at the Bluecoat School to the music of Hayseed and Axolotl with accompanying lamb roast.

The next Festivals were held in 1984, 1987, 1989, 1991 and 1993, in various forms. In 1995 the Festival included the usual street market, some entertainers, and a Pageant based on a new principle, that instead of trying to depict a new theme every year, a street play would be repeated perpetually, featuring an encounter between the Pilton Prior and the Green Man, explaining the apparent incongruity of the Green Man carving in the Church. An innovation in 1996 was a costumed procession from the Barnstaple Museum in the Square through the High Street back to Pilton. The Festival has continued to evolve, with the Pageant becoming a more complex performance, and eventually Pilton Street became so congested that it became necessary to expand the venue to allow visitors a reasonable chance to watch. An arrangement was therefore negotiated to extend into the grounds of Pilton House and Rotary Gardens, reverting to the arrangements of 1982.