

In our weekly feature reporter Sue Painter visits villages and hamlets across the Stroud area meeting the personalities at the heart of their communities...



4.10.02

C223625-SP53



C223625-SP27



C223625-SP13

■ **MUSIC MAKERS:** Above – British Piano Company director Chris Willcox (right) with action finisher Martin Beale.

■ **NEW BLOOD:** Left – Landlord Albert Skinner outside the village's Royal Oak Pub which he took over five weeks ago.

■ **GROWING:** Below – Woodchester Endowed Church of England (Aided) Primary School. Teacher Debbie Andrews and head teacher Norman Holland with Year Two pupils. School numbers are on the up and up.



Piano Works until the company ceased trading in 1982 and shortly afterwards three of its directors started manufacturing under the Woodchester name.

In 2000 the company joined forces with Whelpdale, Maxwell and Codd from Clapham to become one of just two factories still making pianos in the UK.

The British Piano Manufacturing Company currently turns out around a dozen instruments every week and employs 18 people.

Sales director Chris Willcox was in the music business in Paris for seven years before joining Bentley's in 1975. Since then he has been all over the world promoting pianos made in North Woodchester.

Chris's travels have taken him as far as Korea and Argentina and have even included a spell in Beirut in 1984 at the height of the civil war.

"I had to dive into doorways when the different factions started fighting with each other," he said.

"I remember going to the American Express office in West Beirut to change some money before flying on to Cyprus. When I turned on the TV that evening I heard it had been blown up."

Chris plays the piano himself, although he admits to being a bit rusty, and believes it is something most people can take up.

"A piano is something which is extremely pos-

itive," he said. "They harm nobody."

North Woodchester's peaceful surroundings enable Basil Hyatt to reflect on his remarkable life in poetry.

Basil, 88, has been recording his thoughts in verse since he was 12. His poems include several commemorating important events in the life of the Royal family and he has received many letters from the Queen thanking him for his work.

Basil's apprenticeship covered everything from carpentry and joinery to building science and engineering and he went on to use his skills in a variety of jobs all over Gloucestershire, including a spell lecturing at Stroud Technical College.

During the Second World War he served in the Civil Defence in Cheltenham and was in charge of 12 motorcyclists trained to carry important messages.

But Basil, whose strong Christian faith once led him to consider becoming a minister, is most proud of his conversion of an old bake house to create Chalford Seventh Day Adventist Church of which he is still a member.

"In 1922 I walked through a storm and my mother said 'God will take care of you'. The gutters were overflowing, but I did not have to dry any of my clothes," said Basil.

"I wanted to build a house for Him and more than 50 years ago I did just that."