

THE peaceful village of North Woodchester was once home to some of the grandest members of Romano British society.

A magnificent villa covering 26 acres was built there during the reign of Hadrian (AD 117-138) and there are theories that it was owned by a high-ranking Roman officer or even the governor of the province.

Nothing of the villa remains above ground today but more than 200 years ago Woodchester was put on the map by the discovery of a 50ft square mosaic, the Orpheus Pavement, lying beneath the graveyard of the then parish church.

The intricate floor, the largest to be found in Northern Europe, shows Orpheus charming the beasts with his lyre. It has been excavated and put on display to the public several times with hundreds of people beating a path to the village to see it for themselves.

During the 1970s the Bristol-based Woodward brothers created an exact replica of the Orpheus Pavement but the lack of a suitable space has, as yet, prevented it from being put on permanent display.

Woodchester's first parish church, which dated back to the early Norman period, was closed in the 1860s and only parts of it now remain. It was replaced by a new building in the middle of the village which was apparently designed to match or exceed the Roman Catholic religious centre that flourished in neighbouring South Woodchester at the time.

Woodchester's rector is the Rev Stephen Bowen who arrived in the village in 1997 after serving as a curate in Gloucester. Previously he worked for Granada TV Rental.

During his time at St Mary's the father-of-two has sought to bring more people into the church. He has allowed the building to be used for concerts and has set up a youth group whose activities have included sleeping in the church to raise money for the homeless.

Stephen believes it is the people of both North and South Woodchester who make the church. They include the Tuesday Gang which meets every week to keep the graveyard neat and tidy and the church's dedicated team of bell ringers.

"Woodchester people are very friendly and I think the village is in a lovely setting," he said.

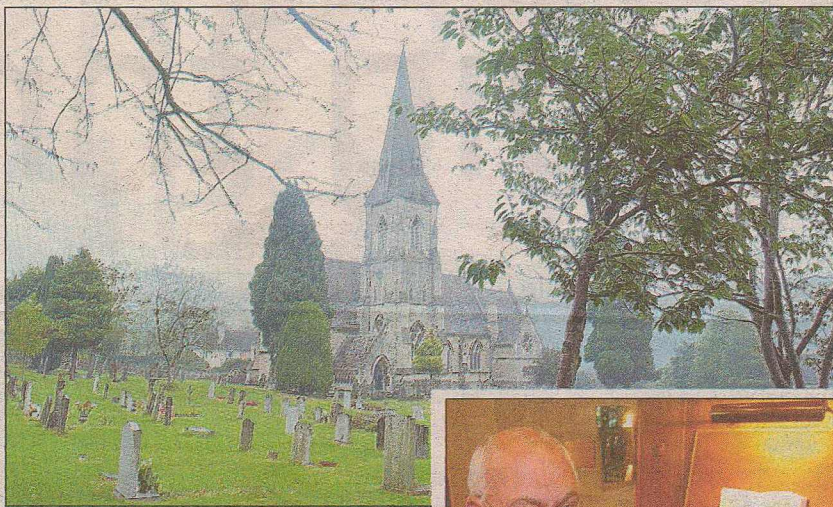
Another familiar face at the church is the organist Peter Merriott-White. Peter recently played the first verse of every hymn in the hymnbook used at St Mary's, to raise money for repairs to the organ.

Alongside his work at the church, Peter serves the community in his role as clerk of Woodchester Parish Council. He took over from the late Bill Brunt who retired in 2000 after 45 years in the post.

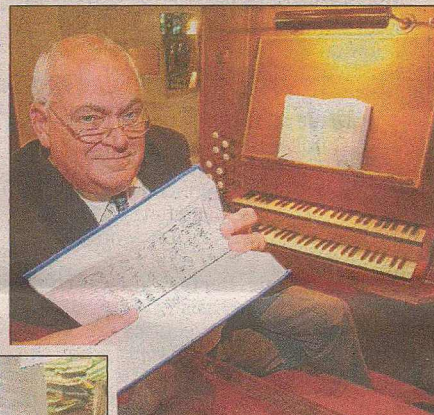
Previously, Peter worked for British Telecom for 40 years and ended up as a health and safety manager. Peter has lived in North Woodchester for 10 years but has spent most of his life in the Stroud valleys.

"I think Woodchester is a charming village, it's exactly how a village should be – it's got its own community," he said.

Woodchester Endowed Primary School dates back to 1835 and in the early years its buildings were scattered between the northern and southern



■ **DUAL PURPOSE:** (above) St Mary's Church, North Woodchester, is used for concerts and other events as well as for worship. Organist Peter Merriott-White (right) recently boosted the church's repair fund when he played a verse from every hymn in the church's hymnbook in a sponsored event.



Picture: Paul Nichols C223095-PN74

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■ **VILLAGE EYE:** Above – Tony Lait who sells and repairs spectacles at the village post office. Right – Basil Hyatt and letters of thanks from Royalty for his poems.



C223625-SP59

parts of the village.

It was brought together on its current site in North Woodchester in 1885 using money from the Says and Bridges endowment for the education of children in the parish.

Head teacher Norman Holland has been at the helm for 20 years and during that time has seen numbers grow from 62 to its current roll of 170. "We are very healthy – very oversubscribed," said Mr Holland.

"We have six classrooms and have been pressing for a seventh for a long time.

"Whenever anybody comes they always say what a lovely atmosphere the school has and this was borne out in our recent Ofsted report."

Woodchester primary has links with schools of a similar size in Italy, France, Missouri and the Gambia with which it regularly exchanges information.

Teacher exchanges have been organised with the European schools and pupils regularly keep in contact with their overseas friends using e-mail.

The children also enjoy a range of after-school activities including a choir, rugby lessons and a gardening club which has been run by learning support worker Cathy Puttock for eight years.

In the past the school garden has been awarded first prize by judges from

Stroud in Bloom.

There is more to North Woodchester Post Office than meets the eye. For when postmaster Tony Lait is not selling stamps and pints of milk he is mending customers' spectacles.

Tony was the director of an optical company in Gloucester before he took on the post office 12 years ago. Now he combines the two and attracts customers from as far afield as Gloucester and Tetbury.

He and his wife Margaret also run a greetings card franchise supplying 80 small shops.

"Today village shops face a great deal of competition and you have to do whatever you can," said Tony. "I decided that after 34 years in the optical business I wanted to do something different and I enjoy being here in the post office."

"We get lots of people coming in for a natter and it's a sort of meeting place for people – as well as a lifeline for some."

Other hubs of the community include the village's 17th Century inn The Royal Oak which was taken over five weeks ago by Ali and Albert Skinner.

North Woodchester is home to several businesses, including the British Piano Manufacturing Company. Pianos have been made in the village since 1911 and are now sold all over the world.

The factory was known as the Bentley

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