

Julian's message shows just how English has changed

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

Norwich has had its share of famous people, but one of the very best known is a woman who was born as long ago as 1342. We are not sure when she died, but it was possibly exactly 600 years ago, in 1416.

She is variously known as Julian of Norwich, Dame Julian, Lady Julian, and Juliana, but we don't know what her real name was.

She was a mystic who chose to become an anchoress and lived walled up in a cell attached to St Julian's Church, just off King Street in Norwich; the name we use for her now is simply derived from the name of the church. She was probably a Norwich girl, and was possibly educated by nuns at nearby Carrow Abbey. Julian is famous for her religious work "Revelations of Divine Love", which is thought to be the first book written in English by a woman.

The Revelations were called "shewings" in her 14th-century English; and a look at the original text can tell us a lot about the extent to which languages can change over the centuries. The most famous passage in the Revelations goes: "But Jesus, that in this vision enformid me of all that me nedyth, answerid by this word, and seyde: Synne is behovabil, but al shal be wel, and



■ Candles are lit at the Julian Centre in Norwich.

Picture: STEVE ADAMS

al shal be wel, and al manner of thyng shal be wele."

"Behovable" meant necessary or useful; and "all that me nedyth" meant everything that I need.

The pronunciation of English has changed radically in the last 600 years, and if we could hear Julian reading from her book now, we would have some trouble understanding her. To reconstruct what she would have sounded like, we have to imagine her saying something like: "ahl shull bay well and ahl munner of thingg shull bay well". She would have

pronounced "thing" with the original hard g on the end, as people in Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham still do.

Mediaeval English often sounds more poetic to us than it would have done to Julian's contemporaries: essentially, the message she was reporting Jesus as communicating to her in her visions was that "everything is going to be all right". But even the citizens of 15th-century Norwich would have appreciated the beauty of the phrasing of: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well".