

## Winster's Italian Twin

The small town of MONTERUBBIANO is situated in the region called Le Marche, 'the Marches'. It lies on the calf of the Italian leg, halfway between the big maritime cities of Ancona and Pescara and about 125 miles north-east of Rome. Its name means 'Madder mount' – madder, the herbal dye, being *robbia* in Italian.

Monterubbiano is a typical Italian hill-town, perched 1500 feet above the coastal plain about five miles from the Adriatic Sea – well out of the way of marauding corsairs and malarial mosquitoes. Its character as a natural stronghold, blocked off on all sides except the east by the Apennine mountains, was further strengthened when it was fortified by the great warlord Francesco Sforza, founder of the dynasty which ruled Milan, in 1463; and much of this imposing defensive work of walls, gates and towers still survives.

But the town's history can be traced far back beyond the Renaissance, through medieval and Roman times. This was the region of the Piceni, the 'Woodpecker People', who held out against the expanding power of Rome until the third century BC. The woodpecker, *picus*, was a powerful totemic bird in ancient Italic myth and religion, and still adorns the regional flag.

The bird also gives its name to Monterubbiano's famous annual festival 'Sciò la pica', which attracts visitors from far and wide. It takes place at Pentecost, and may perhaps trace its origins back to the ancient sacrifice called the *uer sacrum*, particularly associated with the Piceni, in which the following year's first-born (not excluding children, according to some versions) were solemnly vowed to Mars. The milder version now practised is a sumptuous springtime festival featuring parades and processions of armed knights and ladies in medieval dress and culminating in a jousting competition between the town's four guilds, in which the riders aim their lances at a suspended silver ring. Also prominent are the *sbandiatori*, who practise the ancient art of flag-throwing – and who regularly visit Winster in Wakes Week.

Monterubbiano, which manages to compensate for its lack of leadmines with sun-drenched hillsides covered in vineyards, orchards and olive-groves, has been twinned with Winster since 1987.