

'Husbands should come here and have a good meal and go home in a good temper'

How Sarah cut out the booze at Wheatley

ON Saturday, Wheatley begins a week of celebrations to mark the 100th birthday of the opening of The Merry Bells, the village's first — and so far only — alcohol-free public house.

According to her eldest grandson, the late Major Alexander Miller, the founder of this unique establishment, Mrs Sarah Dorothy Miller, was not unknown to take a quiet tipple herself.

"But every time she went into the village she saw drunks slumped in the street and she thought a temperance hotel was the only way to help."

A ban on bull-baiting

The establishment that opened in November 1888 was one of a number of 19th century initiatives to try to clean up Wheatley.

Since the building of the new turnpike road from Oxford to London in 1775, trade had slumped. The village had become a refuge for rough quarry workers, highwaymen and students.

In fact, if you fancied a pint of beer and a punch-up, for the yobbos Wheatley was the equivalent of the European Football Championships.

The cleaners-up made a start by banning guns and dogs in 1834. Then they called a halt to bull-baiting and badger-baiting. Finally came the Merry Bells, a coffee house with "two large meeting rooms, a refreshment bar, a bathroom, cubicles, commercial and travellers rooms and stable accommodation for four horses".

At the opening of the building Mrs Miller did not mince her words. "If, instead of going home irritated after having spent money at the public houses, husbands came to that coffee house and had a good meal at a very low cost and went home in a very good temper, she thought their wives would not blame her for having

By **DON CHAPMAN**

the building erected. (Applause).

"She did not wish to say anything ill-natured about those who kept public houses, but she hoped they would some day try and find some other trade that would bring them in a great deal more and make them feel much happier (More Applause)".

To modern eyes, the report of her speech seems surprisingly sexist with its pervading inference that a woman's place was in the home and a man's was down the club. Only the bathroom was available to both sexes.

To the Victorian worthies of Wheatley who had helped stump up the cash it didn't seem like that. They were more in tune with the village's Congregational Minister, the Rev. Bird, who wound up the proceedings with a vote of thanks to Mrs Miller:

*A full and hearty welcome
They give to you and me,
Come here and sip your coffee,
Your cocoa and your tea;
Come here and get your dinner
From viands of the best;
Come here and read the papers;
Come here and take your rest.*

It would be wrong to imply The Merry Bells was the complete answer to the demon drink. It wasn't the effects of cocoa that the last stragglers from the outing from the Black Boy public house, Headington, were suffering from when they staggered home three days later in 1912.

Nonetheless, while Mrs Miller lived, it thrived and after her death it survived a succession of indifferent managers until a more competent management committee took charge.

In August 1970 they bought the place for £10,000 — a sum it took them six years to pay off — and gradually they have transformed it into a village community centre with a wide range of facilities from a child health clinic to a senior citizens coffee club.



Mrs Sarah Miller... she founded The Merry Bells

Best wishes to the world

The birthday celebrations begin on Saturday with a craft fair in the Merry Bells, and end on July 16 with a grand parade through the village followed by a centenary ball in the Primary School. In between there are a host of other attractions including the release of 1,000 balloons to carry Wheatley's best wishes to the rest of the world.

I'm not sure what Mrs Miller would make of the centenary brochure which includes photographs of all the village's hostelries as well as its other commercial establishments, clubs and other organisations.

But when they raise their glasses to her memory at the centenary ball I trust the beverage will be water — or, of course, coffee, cocoa or tea.