

A temperance heaven

to borrow a phrase from our predecessor, Jackson's Oxford Journal, "a large and commodious building known as the Merry Bells Coffee House" celebrates its centenary at Wheatley next week.

Actually, it's not known as a coffee house anymore. Since 1970 it has been the village hall. But it was as a temperance hotel for travellers, and non-alcoholic club for working men and boys, that it was built for the village by Mrs Sarah Dorothy Miller. And Mrs Miller's grandson, Lt Col Sir John Miller of Shot-over House, remembers when it was still offering overnight accommodation to travellers.

It will be the parish church of St Mary's that will peal out "The Merry Bells's" as an overture to Sir John Miller's official opening of a centenary exhibition on Sunday, July 10. But at the opening of the new building in 1888, the celebration was in the form of a poem, devised in place of a speech by the Congregational Minister, the Rev E. Bird.

Wheatley Village Hall started life 100 years ago as a temperance hotel for travellers and non-alcoholic club for working men and boys. IAN SMITH looks at its history and the village's centenary celebration plans

It began: "The merry bells of Wheatley Are sounding out tonight, Filling the hearts of fathers And mothers with delight; Telling the pleasant tidings Of brighter days in store For village lads and lasses And just a thousand more."

Mrs Miller's intention in building the Merry Bells ("Where people could be quiet and merry in a rational way," she explained), according to the Jackson's

Oxford Journal reporter, was to "improve the social condition of the labourers of the village and the spread of the temperance principles among them".

The two-storey building provided two large meeting rooms, a refreshment "bar", a bathroom and cubicles,

commercial and travellers' rooms, and stables for four horses.

After a free tea for labourers and their wives from Wheatley, Littleworth, and the Shotover Estate, Mrs Miller drew laughter when she admitted that some people disapproved of coffee houses because they took a man away from his home and his wife — "which was all very well if the husbands would always stay at home..."

She thought it better that they should not "come to harm, or spend their money in public houses," but instead have a good meal at low cost before going home in good temper from the coffee house.

The club facilities provided by the Merry Bells were in some ways seen as an antidote

to the problems being experienced at another club at the other end of the village — where there were only two rooms, and the boys and the men tended to clash.

Members of the new club, the working men, would pay sixpence a month, while honorary members would have to pay two shillings a year.

Tea, coffee, cocoa, bread and butter and other "light necessities" were to be provided, and if there was a demand, then cheap suppers might also be introduced (a good meal for three-halfpence or two pence).

The Merry Bells was not to be a counter-attraction on Sundays either to church or chapel, although it would be open from 8.30 to 10.30 on Sunday evening "to enable

and boys to go there and read their Bibles or other books, or have some quiet conversation, and thus continue the good work of Sunday to the close of the day".

For travellers, a cubicle cost sixpence per night or half-a-crown a week, while there were better rooms for eighteen pence a night. Meeting rooms were available for only the expenses of lighting and cleaning.

The Merry Bells was bought by Wheatley as a village hall in 1970, for £10,000. But, with a considerable programme of modernisation and repair needed, as well as paying off the capital debt, the new management committee had an uphill struggle in fund-raising. The discovery of dry rot and rising damp added to the problems. The last instalment on the purchase price was not made until August, 1976.

Five years ago the stable block was renovated, and became the headquarters of the Royal Order of Ancient Buffalo as well as a meeting room. And since 1985 a

great deal of money has been spent on a new cavity wall, infilling of the cellar, removal of the stage, a new woodblock floor (salvaged from Wheatley Primary School when it was demolished in 1986), redecoration, damp-proofing, and the installation of a fire alarm.

The opening ceremony, continues throughout the week.

The programme ends on Saturday, July 16 with a grand parade through the village, and a centenary ball at the primary school in period costume.

A brochure has been published to celebrate the centenary, supported by local advertisers, and produced and edited by Wheatley-based public relations consultant Mr Vic Markham. As well as tracking down the original newspaper re-

ports of the opening of the Merry Bells, Mr Fred Anson has contributed to the brochure a collection of reminiscences from Wheatley inhabitants about village



Mrs Sarah Dorothy Miller, who built the Merry Bells 100 years ago as a temperance hotel and working men's club

Agreements on the building how range from the County Library's 21-year lease, to the Little Playgroup's one-year lease. The management committee expect to have an annual income of £13,000 from next year, on assured and casual lettings.

The centenary celebrations at the Merry Bells begin with a craft fair on Saturday, July 9, and a school fete at the primary school and exhibition by the Wheatley Art Society at the Cramphom Garden Centre.

Sir John Miller will start a balloon race shortly before an ecumenical evening church service at St Mary's.

Activities during the week at the Merry Bells include an exhibition by the Women's Institute, historical readings from the Wheatley Society, a karate exhibition, a teddy bears' picnic, a children's film show, and a ceilidh. The centenary exhibition, which includes a recorded play reading based on the newspaper report, of the 1888 life in times gone by, and Mr Bryan Clements and Mrs Marian Darking have collected old Wheatley photographs. The brochure is to be distributed free to every one of the 1,500 houses in Wheatley, and to all the commercial advertisers. The rest will be sold at £2 each



A group of redoubtable ladies (spot the one lonely man, the vicar, Mr Atherton), gathered outside the Merry Bells

both men