

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

How Sarah cut out the booze at Wheatley – by Don Chapman – Oxford Mail – Wednesday 6th July 1988

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 tippie 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 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.

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 hostelrys 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.

A temperance heaven

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.

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 local 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 Shotover 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.

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 both men 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), re-decoration, damp-proofing, and the installation of a fire.

Agreements on the building now 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 Cramphorn 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 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 reports of the opening of the Merry Bells, Mr Fred Anson has contributed to the brochure a collection of reminiscences from Wheatley inhabitants about village life in times gone by, and Mr Bryan Clements and Ms Marian Darkin have collected old Wheatley photographs.

The brochure is to be distributed free to every one of 1,500 homes in Wheatley, and to all the commercial advertisers. The rest will be sold at £2 each.