

THE Merry Bells at Wheatley was built to persuade villagers and visitors to stay sober.

The founder of this unique building, 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 in desperate need of help.

So in 1888, she opened the Merry Bells as a temperance hotel for travellers and a non-alcoholic base for local working men and boys, with coffee, cocoa and tea the specialities.

The two-storey building had "two large meeting rooms, a refreshment bar, a bathroom, cubicles, commercial and travellers rooms and stable accommodation for four horses".

It appears to have been a male-dominated establishment, with only the bathroom available to both sexes.

At the opening ceremony, Mrs Miller did not mince her words. She was applauded when she said she thought wives would thank her if their husbands came home in a good temper after eating a low-cost meal at the Merry Bells instead of spending money in the pub.

There was more applause when she added that she didn't want to say anything ill-natured about pub landlords, but hoped they would find another trade "that would bring them in a great deal more and make them feel much happier".

The building was closed most of the day on Sundays to encourage villagers to attend church and chapel.

However, it did open from 8.30-10.30pm on Sunday evenings "to enable both men and boys to go there and read their Bibles or other books, or have some quiet conversation, and then 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 18 pence a night. Meeting rooms were available for just the cost of lighting and cleaning.

While Mrs Miller lived, the Merry Bells thrived and after her death, survived a succession of indifferent managers before being bought by the people of Wheatley in 1970 as a

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 necessaries" were to be provided,

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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 rind their Bibles or othei, books, or - have some quiet conversation, and thus continue the ■ good work of Sunday toijhe j- close of the day".

For travellers, a cubicle*-"

FOUNDER:

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



EVENTS: The senior citizens' coffee morning at the Merry Bells in 1974

She opened the Merry Bells as a temperance hotel for travellers and a non-alcoholic base for local working men and boys

village hall for £10,000. It took six years for the new management committee to pay off the debt as it carried out an extensive programme of modernisation and repair.

The centenary of the building was celebrated in 1988 with a week of activities, including a craft fair, fete, exhibitions, historical readings, a teddy bears' picnic, film show and ceilidh.

The week ended with a grand parade through the village and a centenary ball at the primary school.

Today, the Merry Bells continues to play an important role in village life.



SHORTFALL: The Merry Bells pictured in 1972 - just £615 had been raised towards its £4,000 appeal



100-UP: Members of Wheatley Women's Institute - left to right, Lillian Grover, Marion Wheeler and Pat Norton - pictured at the Merry Bells centenary celebrations in 1988