

Original in newspaper box.

No Intoxicating
Drink To Be Taken
Into This Hall

The Merry Bells

isn't quite what it was—but Mrs Miller would have approved

By Janet
Walters

WHEATLEY was quite a sink of iniquity in the last century — drunks frequented the numerous pubs and gamblers flourished in the "most bull-baiting and cockfightingest of villages."

It gained such a reputation that the Rev. Edward Elton described it as "a refuge for all the worst characters in the neighbourhood."

But the idler who stumbled into the Merry Bells and asked for a pint had quite a shock when the stern-faced woman behind the bar pointed to the notice on the wall and handed him a lemonade.

For Mrs. Dorothy Miller, of Shotover House, decided to stop the rot and built a temperance hotel to serve as a social centre for the village.

The Merry Bells has had its ups and downs since then, but it has always remained the hub of village life.

Now the management committee, which finally bought the building for the village in 1970, has launched an appeal for £4,000 to renovate the old hotel and pay off loans.

It has already transformed the large hall used for dances and social gatherings.

"And next," says Col. Derek Hall-Dare, secretary of the committee, "we want to instal modern lavatories, equip a new kitchen, move the branch library to another room, and eventually redecorate the



Miss Ellen Gunn: she remembers Mrs Miller's fund-raising activities

whole building."

The appeal committee has sent out 1,180 letters to every house in the village asking for help.

And when everything is finished, Mrs. Miller might not recognise the place but she is sure to approve.

Mrs. Ellen Gunn, a native of Wheatley, is 91 now, but she remembers Mrs. Miller driving round the village in her carriage asking for subscriptions to build the Merry Bells. "Wages were very low

then and I'm afraid the most we could offer was about 3d. But we were right with her though, we were concerned about the village too."

Major A. A. Miller, of Shotover House, added: "My grandmother was not a strict teetotaler, but everytime she went into the village she saw drunks slumped in the street and she thought a temperance hotel was the only way to help."

The rot really started in Wheatley in 1775 when the new London-Oxford turnpike by-passed the village and trade slumped. It became a haven for the rough quarry workers, villains of the road and local undergraduates who liked robust diversions.

Pictures:

Peter

Farr

Great efforts were made to reform it. Guns and dogs were banned in 1834 to try and stop poaching, and bull-baiting and badger-baiting were eventually stopped.

Then the Merry Bells was built in 1888 as a temperance hotel. It offered cheap rooms and meals for travellers, with stabling for their horses, and soon became a popular coffee house and meeting place for villagers.

The library, reading room and billiard room were also available to lure

the young men away from the pubs, and church services were held there by a resident lay preacher.

Miss Gunn's broiler Frank, now 80, says villagers also went there to take a bath. "They only charged us 1d." And Miss Gunn used to pop in for a cup of tea and a gossip. "They had a shop there once, and the sponge cakes were delicious."

Local organisations met there—from the "Sons of Temperance" to "The Pig Club"—and the place thrived until Mrs. Miller's death.

To the rescue

Then, says Major Miller, the Merry Bells had a chequered career, with a succession of managers running it and a brief but unsuccessful try by the Y.M.C.A. There were more difficulties in the 1930s, with rows in the village about its handling.

But Dr. Sillar came to the rescue, and according to Major Miller, pulled the village together and formed the Merry Bells management committee.

It has flourished ever since, and now houses the parish council, the branch library, the child clinic, Registrar of Births and Deaths, the playgroup, political meetings, bingo and a variety of village activities.

And if you plan to go to the next dance at the Merry Bells, don't worry about the woman with the notice and the lemonade. It now has a music, singing and dancing licence, and a licensed bar, for special occasions.



1 und-raiser, 1888-style: Mrs Dorothy Miller, who built the Merry Bells. This portrait of her hangs a Shotover House