

Barrack Road's "Oasis in a Wilderness" Closes Down

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ONE day fifty years ago a tall 17 year old choir boy walked into Christchurch Barracks with a Bible under his arm. He asked to see the Commanding Officer.

He was taken before a fierce bull-necked officer. He said: "Sir, I am sure that there is a spiritual need amongst your troops. I want to come into the barrack room and read the Bible to them."

He did. At first only a handful stayed to listen to him. By degrees that handful became dozens. That was how the Christchurch Soldiers' Home started.

The choirboy came from St. Johns, Boscombe, and his name was John Bast.

Later the troops asked if they could have somewhere of their own where they might meet for discussions and services. The late Brig.-Gen. the Hon. B. M. Ward became interested and a small tin hut was erected opposite the Barracks.

Gen Ward spoke to some of his friends, and they became interested. Amongst them was Miss J. Morrison who, with other ladies, used to come to the home to serve refreshments, organise parties and games, and help the soldiers with their problems.

Now the home is closed. There are no more soldiers at the Barracks and no more need for Miss Morrison and her helpers to continue with their magnificent work. But they have a hundred happy memories and thousands of friendships from grateful soldiers all over the world.

Spoke Of Memories.

Sitting in the lounge of her home in Southbourne Road, Miss Morrison, grey haired and charming, told me some of her memories of the home.

"We had meetings each evening," she said. "The home was always full up."

A coffee bar was started and the troops used to come over for their morning breaks.

The home was enlarged in 1907. "But when the 1914 war broke out it was totally inadequate, so we built another annexe," said Miss Morrison.

The main purpose of the home was the spiritual welfare of the troops. It was successful.

Miss Morrison's main helper over the years was Miss Mabel Clark, who lives next door to the home. "I first went there in 1915 when it was open all day long," declared Miss Clark. "We used to be very busy in those days."

Jolly Parties.

Her nicest memories, she says, are the quiet Sunday evening services and the jolly parties that were given each time a battery moved in or went away.

The home did a lot for the wives of the soldiers too. There was a regular meeting for them each week and a Sunday school for their children.

After the First World War the home found a scripture reader in the person of Mr. Alfred Toundrow of 14, Arthur Road. He was a regular soldier and during the war he visited the home. When he was demobbed he was engaged as the scripture reader. "It was really missionary work," explains Mr. Toundrow. "I used to visit the boys when they were ill, discuss their problems and help them with personal things."

Mr. Toundrow used to take the services there as well. "It was a real oasis in the wilderness," he said.

That sums it up. Thousands of soldiers have taken the shelter that the oasis has offered for forty-eight years. But the choirboy John Bast never lived to see what he had started. He died before his twentieth birthday, a few months after the home was first opened.