

ON MOST weekdays, Toolleen is a quiet, serene, tranquil little place — sometimes sadly so.

It had such ambitions once.

Old maps of the town show about a hundred little half-acre housing allotments. There are now only 10 or 11 houses in the town itself.

And across a little creek stands the strangely quiet school, guarded by a solid 1909 school bell. To ring it is somehow irreverent. It would disturb the spiders which live inside.

Beneath the bell is a plaque announcing that it covers a time capsule placed in the ground in 1984 and which is not to be opened until 2034.

Inside the silent classroom, old books and papers are strewn over the floor. Vandals have tried to light a fire in the middle of the floor.

On the blackboard, a chalked message says: "Welcome to the first day of the school year. My name is Mrs Hayward, what is yours?"

The school was closed more than two years ago and the handful of pupils went to other district schools. At least one family moved out of Toolleen.

It's easy to hear the laughing ghosts of generations in the overgrown school yard but there is an air of unease.

Toolleen is still a pretty, restful little place, plonked on a crossroads half-way to many places.

But some locals sadly comment that being half-way to anywhere puts them on the back-end of everywhere: they are at the extreme end of a federal electorate, the edge of a state electorate, the tail end of the shire, off the education map altogether, and even though a policeman is just 15 kms away on the other side of the Campaspe River, Toolleen is in the wrong police district so people have to make STD phone calls to Rushworth police.

Yet ...

There is a contented air to this little town which, as well as its few houses, has a beaut pub, a general store post office, and one of the most beautiful football grounds in the state.

While other little hamlets might

T O O L E E N



● ABOVE: Suzanne Munro — more and more travellers are stopping at the restored pub.

be gnashing their teeth and wailing about decline, Toolleen seems to have a more solid farming base and lower expectation.

Perhaps that comes from the original reason for the layout of the town.

Although there has been a pub on the crossroad since the 1860s, the town blocks themselves were surveyed as part of the 1893 Settlement Act.

Victoria was in depression after the shocking banking collapse, and the State Government felt that giving people little plots of land out in the country at least gave them a chance to try to feed themselves.

Toolleen was considered a suitable site for one of these subsistence settlements and by the turn of the century 50 to 60 people had taken up the little lots.

They gathered around the hotel, which was rebuilt to a Beebe design in 1905 and called The Plough Inn.

Before this Settlement Act, it seems Toolleen's importance was as a little spot on the edge of the goldfields traffic.

The Plough Inn was owned by the Spiers family, probably the same J. Spiers who was Waranga Shire president in 1909 and presented the then prospering little school with its impressive bell.

The pub now is run by Col and Suzanne Munro who have performed wonders on the building: stripping back all the painted brickwork, restoring the verandah and given it a delicate, aged air. They are about to start work on the inside.

Although most of the pub trade is the district's farming community, more and more travellers are stopping in, arrested by the pub's restored exterior.

The Munros have been there for only five months but already have fallen for their new community.

"We really like it. We heard about the hotel being for sale, and about the local footy club and knew it was a pretty area, so we bought it," Suzanne says.

Knowing about the footy club is vital: the Mount Pleasant Football Club is the social glue for Toolleen.

