

Serene are our valleys

NEWBEGINNINGS

Unemployment, drugs, lack of policing and poor facilities are made problems of the past for a Welsh housing estate, says Robert Miller

APART FROM a commanding view of the Rhondda valley from its mountain top perch, Penrhys had little to recommend it when Sir William Castell went on his first Seeing is Believing visit some 14 years ago.

But the president and chief executive of GE Healthcare, who at that time was head of Amersham (subsequently taken over by GE), came back for a second visit. This time he returned with other business leaders including Whitbread, the advertising agency J Walter Thompson and the then head of BA, Robert Ayling.

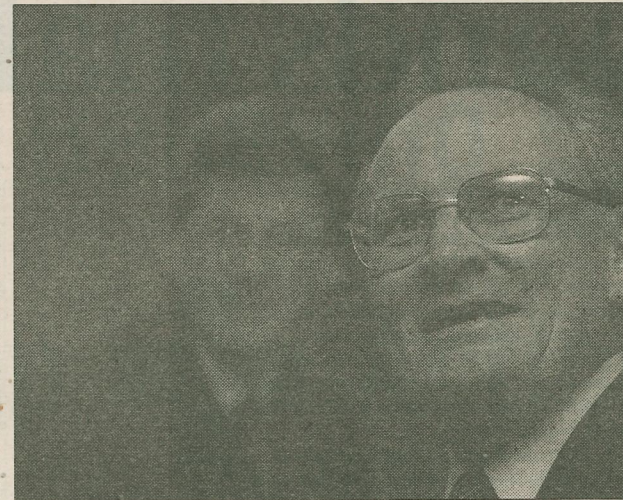
Their guide around the housing estate was the now retired Rev John Morgan. Sir William is unstinting in his praise for

the man universally acknowledged to have been the driving force behind the community's regeneration, albeit one that has seen the population shrink from 4,000 to around 1,500. Unemployment was running at 93 per cent and, says Sir William, who in 1998 became chairman of the Prince's Trust: "Residents felt isolated from modern life. It was economic dislocation. The first task was to restore people's self-belief."

It was at this point that Paul Rowson was appointed as director of the Penrhys project that became part of the Penrhys Partnership between business and local residents. "The situation was horrendous," he recalls, "and without John Morgan and the involvement of businesses, local and national, we would never have got off the ground."

Not that it was easy. Residents were "disenfranchised" if not downright hostile, says Mr Rowson. But with the help of the Rev Morgan, who had built a church on the estate, people were gradually won over. "John lived in the community with his family and was always ready to listen and help. He was never judgmental. He deserves the kudos for making it happen."

As a result of the Seeing is Believing visits, BA offered work placements at its two sites in Wales as did local businessman Bernard Jones with his Buy-As-You-View company. A doctor was



Unstinting devotion: Sir William Castell is a veteran of the Seeing is Believing programme. He first visited Penrhys more than 14 years ago

appointed for the first time and a grocery shop opened. Mr Rowson points out that these, and other basic amenities, are taken for granted in most places but in Penrhys they were hard-fought-for facilities.

The project also enlisted the help of architects, initially for free, to help convert derelict property into a community centre with residential flats above. Then came a National Lottery grant. "It was slow progress," says Mr Rowson. "We consulted with local residents on every step of the plans and there was often a great deal of tension because people felt so isolated – literally up a mountain with just one road in and out. This was a place that had almost total unemployment and a massive drug problem compounded by inadequate policing."

Mr Rowson, who is now a field director with Business in the Community, says that despite the population being under half of what it was, Penrhys has a "better balanced population and a more pleasant environment for people to live in. I like to think Seeing is Believing has played a small part in that process."

QUALITY OF LIFE

Few people are as well qualified to speak about Penrhys and the Seeing is Believing programme than Wayne Carter. He grew up in the village and joined the Penrhys Partnership in 1993 before becoming manager of the project itself. As Mr Carter sees it, the Penrhys Partnership has helped to end the feeling of isolation felt by many in the community by having clear-cut objectives and ones, moreover, that are "sustainable" rather than cosmetic or transitory.

"In the first phase," he explains, "the challenge was to provide better access to infrastructure services such as a post office, doctor's surgery and shops." Having succeeded, the partnership set about establishing education and training centres as well as organising youth activities and an arts centre, complete with recording studio, which were, and still are, run by local volunteers.

"At each stage we want to improve quality of life and provide more and better opportunities," says Mr Carter. The third phase of the Penrhys Partnership is underway. "We are talking with the villagers and to the local authorities who own the bulk of the housing stock about how we can improve the environment in which we live," he says. "We've had a feasibility study done and we are consulting with residents as to what they want, just as we've always done with everything we do in the partnership. This is about how the village might look, let's say in the year 2012."

Mr Carter is well aware that until the Seeing is Believing programme many saw the village, perched 1,400 feet above sea level, as beyond help. He can now point to concrete evidence that the community is flourishing and has a far better future than might have been expected back in 1993.