

Part-time force that cuts crime

The armed raiders who burst into a Birmingham Post Office waving shot-guns and coshing the post-mistress had not banked on the Harborne neighbourhood watch.

No sooner had the robbers dumped their getaway van after fleeing from the office in Harborne Circle than the village's network of reservist law enforcers sprung into action.

"Within hours we had put posters in shops and homes in Harborne with details of the crime and an appeal for information," said Mr Geoffrey Wood, the community watch chairman.

"The police had countless tip-offs from residents on our scheme, including one lady who had seen some men leaving a van to get in a car.

A new report claims community watch schemes foster neighbourly spirit and good relations with police, but do little to reduce crime. **TOM O'RIORDAN** reports on one of the Midlands' first such schemes

"A short time later some arrests were made and the men have since been in court.

Harborne — once dubbed Birmingham's Shangri La — was no stranger to burglars, car thieves, and muggers in 1984, when the scheme was set up.

Two years later residents claim it had led to a fall in crime — and even the fear of crime. Pensioners, it is said, have resumed venturing out at night.

"With rising crime and insufficient manpower, the West Mid-



Keeping an eye on things in Harborne. Mr Geoffrey Wood (on his bike), with his dog Suzie and his neighbourhood watch team, from left, Mr Cliff Hazeldine, Mrs Jackie Howell, Mr Philip Kenny, Mr George Pearsall, Mr Laurence Duffill, Mr Bob Howes and Mr John Hands.

lands police were looking to the American model of neighbourhood watch, and we were one of the first to be set up," said Mr Wood, who oversees some 800 residents involved.

Mr Wood, a 71-year-old retired security expert, is confident the crime rate has dropped.

"We don't want any nosy-parkering — we just want neighbours to carry out quiet observa-

tion and be ready to ring 999.

"I tell people that even when they get up in the middle of the night they should look out of the window and dial the police if they see anything suspicious.

"We have found that car thefts, burglaries and vandalism have gone down.

The group took umbrage at a report this week, by a police liaison committee, that watches

were jolly meeting places, but ineffective crime-busters.

The 16 men and women in charge of the Harborne scheme were quick to cite examples of residents helping to trap villains.

Mr Wood said the police were flooded with calls when two youths cruised round the Circle a few weeks ago.

"The car turned out to be stolen and we suspected they were

about to carry out a raid," he said.

Mr John Hands, aged 69, a retired maintenance engineer, of Moorpool Avenue, said one resident awoke to find two men lifting the back of a car while two accomplices got to work stealing the wheels.

He said: "The police were round in a shot, arresting the thieves, and even putting the wheels back on."

Mr Cliff Hazeldine, aged 55, a milkman of Ravenhurst Road, says his main value to the scheme is reporting when he sees something out of the ordinary at a house.

It does not have to be connected with crime.

Only yesterday he went to the rescue of an old lady.

He said: "I saw the door open and thought there was something odd. I went in and there she lay, on the floor screaming for help. She had bruised her eye and could not stand up.

The watch take their part-time policing very seriously.

Mr Wood wrote a letter of complaint to Granada Television when *Coronation Street* caricatured a neighbourhood watch man.

Ladywood police, who work with the Harborne watch, say it is one of the best in the area.

West Midlands police said the 500 Midland watches had not brought a big drop in burglaries.

"But they have helped reduce the fear of crime," said Det Sgt David Chapman, of the headquarters' crime prevention unit.