Killer brought reign of terror to the remote Wales he loved

A GROUP of Mid Wales villages once praised for their “togetherness” last night heaved a huge sigh of relief as the prison doors swung shut once more behind Richard Anthony Gambrell.

Life imprisonment for the man once described by a High Court judge as living in a fantasy world sees the lifting of a shadow of fear which has shrouded the desolate area for nearly a decade.

The brutal murder in Llandrindod of “gentle giant” John Hughes Williams — John Bryanmore as Gambrell’s victim was known to many — was the last in a series of incidents in which the wiry 14-year-old had managed to instil fear and terror into the occupants of the area.

Six-foot-tall Gambrell knew the hills around Tregaron like the back of his hand. Many locals likened him to the 16th-century crazed Twm Sion Cati who legend says lived near the site of the 20th century Lyn Brianne reservoir.

Like Twm, Gambrell had a spirit personality — he was a well-spoken and an educated young man but he was also as hard as nails and not afraid to use a gun.

But where Twm was regarded as the Robin Hood of Wales, robbing the rich to feed the poor, Gambrell seemed only too happy to rob birds and animals, and was a born criminal who rejected any clone ties with his fellow human beings.

Gambrell was not his real name.

His schooldays were spent at an exclusive school in Hampshire, close to the place where he was finally arrested for John Williams’s murder. But 12 years ago his life took a dramatic turn when he attacked his adoptive mother with a rolling pin and caused injuries which needed 500 stitches.

Gambrell was jailed for three years for the assault and since then has not bothered with his adoptive parents. It was being released from gaol that made him buy the gun and drive to the rural areas of Wales that he had grown to love.

He took a job as a shepherd at Coleg Blest, Rhandirmwyn, and worked there for a couple of years until 1977 when he broke into Brynamor and stole a double-barrel shotgun with which he was later to kill the farmer’s eldest son.

Armed with the gun, Gambrell made off into the hills and a couple of days later was approached by one of the policemen searching for him. From behind Gambrell threatened the officer with the warning, “You know what will happen if you come nearer,” and escaped once more into the hills.

Gambrell: How the net closed

Richard Gambrell kept one step ahead of the police during a three-week manhunt to find the killer of Mr John Williams.

He used his experience of the outdoors and the hills to elude the massive police search in the days after the killing.

After shooting his friend Mr Williams, he trundled across the hills to Lampeter Wells, where he stayed for two days in a hotel under a false name.

He read about his arrest in the newspaper and, after catching a train to nearby Llandrindod Wells, fled to the new Forest area of Hampshire, where he had spent his school days.

But the determination of Dyfed-Powys police Detective Chief Superintendent Pat Molloy to catch the killer meant the net was closing around Gambrell.

More than 600 officers from the Dyfed-Powys force combed the Tregaron area in the days after the shooting, and a force of 66 men searched the New Forest for Gambrell.