NEIGHBOURS of the victim of last weekend's vicious shooting of a 61-year-old Mid Wales sheep farmer are too frightened to stay overnight in their lonely farms while the killer is still at large.

The police search for the murderer yesterday intensified as the desolate mountains around the victim's 300-acre farm were combed after police had ruled out Wednesday morning's reported sighting in Builth Wells.

Mr John Williams, of Brynamber, Llanddewi Brefi, near Tregaron, died at his home after being blasted with his own double-barrelled shotgun - which has so far not been found.

Mr Williams's closest neighbours, Mr Ilawyn Roberts and his wife, Elizabeth, are among farmers in the area who are refusing to stay in their homes overnight.

Mr Roberts said at dusk they got into their Land-Rover and travel the 10 miles to Tregaron to stay with his mother - returning to work on their 600-acre farm in the mornings.

One of the three men who discovered Mr Williams's body on Sunday afternoon, Mr Roberts, said he is now "very wary of strangers" and is keeping a shotgun by the door.

"We will be going back and forward to Tregaron until this man is caught. We stayed in the farm throughout last year's blizzard, but because this man is still about we do not want to stay here a night now," he said.

Police are keeping a round-the-clock watch on Mr Roberts's and Mr Williams's farmhouses, and 25-year-old WPC Mrs Julie Pritchard frequently rings the 200 farmers in the area to keep in touch and reassure them.

The head of Dyfed-Powys CID, Detective Chief Superintendent Pat Molloy confirmed yesterday that people living in the area were still quite terrified.

"The lifeline provided by WPC Pritchard has been a great comfort to a lot of people," he said.

"Our first priority is the protection of life - and only slightly second to that is the detection of crime."

Police are looking for 31-year-old Mr Richard Anthony Gamble, who is unemployed and of no fixed address. A spokesman said the man they want to interview knows the area "like the back of his hand," and has sometimes worked in the locality as a shepherd.

They are convinced he stayed at the Neuadd Arms Hotel, Llanwrtyd Wells, on Monday and Tuesday, and took the 11.50 train from Llanwrtyd to Builth Wells on Wednesday morning.

About 50 police, many of them armed, stopped and questioned motorists in both towns on Wednesday and interviewed people in cafes, pubs and restaurants.

But yesterday that operation was scaled down as the search continued in earnest on the mountains between Llanwrtyd and Llanddewi Brefi with teams of police marksmen and tracker dogs.

A two-seat helicopter, on loan from the West Wales Police, took off from the football pitch outside the murder incident room in Llanddewi's village hall, in a bid to aid the mountain search.

The pilot was accompanied by local policeman PC Owain Lake, who knows the area well. Mr Lake, a great friend of Mr Williams, said it was the first time he had ever flown in a helicopter and they planned to scan the drivers' roads and sheep trails in a 400-square-mile search.