

By James Murray

DOWN at Woodchester Village, a retirement community in a particularly scenic corner of the Cotswolds, the men and women who live there are busy raising a glass of white wine – from a neighbouring vineyard – to toast the success of a remarkable takeover.

In a masterstroke of pensioner power, they have just taken full control of the entire village of 72 golden Cotswold-stone houses and flats near Stroud, Gloucestershire, and all the community's other buildings, including the restaurant, library, roads and an adjoining field.

In triumphant mood Peter Wilson, 82, a key player in the buy-out, beams: "We've put ourselves in control of our own destiny, which is something to celebrate."

"It's given us all a spring in our step. We can do exactly what we want – if we all agree."

Five years ago the story looked very different. The firm running the village went into administration, some homes and buildings looked tatty and the number of people living there fell from a high of 100 to just 45.

Drastic action was needed and so Peter and other stalwarts of the community persuaded fellow householders and their families to raise £2million to secure the village's future.

Amazingly, the cash flowed in, a deal was done and now Woodchester Village is a not-for-profit mutual company – there's even £150,000 put by for emergencies.

The pensioners, who each owned the leasehold of their own properties before, now all have a vote in the management company, with unsalaried directors to run the village for them.

It means all the management fees are now ploughed into the village and the staff there, not going to company shareholders or executives.

Better still, they have paid off the money they raised to buy the village well ahead of schedule.

"We thought we would repay the £2million over 20 years but we've done it in five, which is incredible," says Peter. "It just shows you how much people care about our village."

Cleverly, they sold off a disused pub on their land along with an unkempt building site, allowing a developer to build four homes in this sought-after spot, a winding, steep-sided valley flanked by trees currently showing all the colours of autumn's rainbow.

NOW 78 people live there and only one property is up for sale, which – like all the others – will be sold on a leasehold arrangement. Sales of four other vacant properties are just going through, bringing more people into the friendly fold, and there's even a waiting list.

Such a turnaround in the financial fortunes of the community has come as a huge relief but what has been more striking is the impact of financial freedom on people's spirits.

Peter's artist wife Ann, also 82, has rarely been busier, producing lush panoramas and delicate animal paintings which adorn the walls of the corridors and some of the rooms of their home.

"There's so much beauty in the valley and all around that you never have to look very far to find



something to paint," she says, while taking a morning stroll with Peter around a brook which gently spills through the landscape. "I love the softness of the scenery, the calm and I particularly enjoy painting horses."

When a shower interrupts the walk we are joined by 83-year-old David Leach in the octagonal social centre, where people gather for morning coffee.

A prison governor for 32 years, David enjoys the freedom of the buyout and the rising number of people coming into the village, especially as he now has more

customers for the jams, jellies and chutney that he makes.

"They are selling like hotcakes," he says. "I'm working on a jelly made from the medlar fruit and quince jelly made from a fruit which is a sort of cross between a pear and an apple. There's such variety around here it's fantastic."

"After my wife Diana died I decided it was time for a change. My bungalow was too big for just me so Woodchester sounded ideal."

"I find it very relaxing and stimulating because there's always something to do and people here

We liked our village so much we bought it

Pensioners tell how they raised £2million to buy control of their Cotswold retirement community of 72 homes

have lots of energy and interests. I'm happy and content."

A glance at the activities board gives a taste of events on offer: a 1950s-style tea party, a fashion show, outings to the theatre, yoga lessons, balance classes, bingo, play readings, and plenty of visits to stately homes.

Trips to the Isles of Scilly and a round-Britain cruise are also being planned.

For the less adventurous there are regular talks, with many of the speakers living on site.

David Leach recently gave one on his years as a prison governor trying to steer young offenders away from a life of crime.

His next talk will be on the Great War as the Armistice centenary has encouraged him to delve deep into his family history.

His pal Alan Beard is fascinated by canals and has arranged several trips to nearby waterways, utilising the village's 15-seater minibus.

Howard Gawler, 75, lives in the village but like many others takes

an active part in the wider community, playing golf at a nearby course once a week.

A widower, he has an easygoing friendship with Jean Shine, 84, whose husband Alan has passed away.

Walking around the village in between showers, Jean said: "I lived in a bungalow fairly near here so I knew all about Woodchester."

"My husband had talked about selling the bungalow before he died because we thought we ought to downsize. In a way that made the decision to sell after he died easier because I had already talked it all through. I still drive and so I have a good social life outside the village as well. I've no regrets."

"But here there are staff around 24 hours a day, which is reassuring. I love the suppers, talks and trips."

John Flood, just turned 90, still sings in the local church choir and his good friend Eric Burleton was a prolific painter until his death at 94 a few weeks ago.

The village is wonderful for food

too. Two staff chefs will send meals to people's homes if they don't want to go to the restaurant but villagers often bring in their own food for them to cook.

A lobster night was quickly arranged when one of the villagers returned from a seaside holiday with 10 of the tasty delights in the boot of his car.

There is a laundry on site, a manager, and a receptionist but villagers are determined not to be seen as anything like a care home.

"People don't really come here to retire," says Peter Wilson. "They want to lead busy lives pursuing their interests and hobbies while making new friends and taking part in events."

The villagers elect unpaid directors who run the place through several boards. Most directors live there so any problems are dealt with promptly, but some are family members who live outside Woodchester.

Peter says there aren't many rules but those that exist are applied

reasonably. Anyone thinking of moving there has to be capable of independent living, but carers are allowed to visit people who need help, which the residents have to pay for.

Ground rents, home insurance, the weekly housekeeping, basic laundry and house and garden maintenance are covered in the annual services charge that comes in at just under £7,000.

DIFFICULT situations occasionally arise when some people have been unable to live independently.

In those cases relatives are encouraged to find them a place in a care home, where they'll get help that is more tailored to their needs.

Another rule is that leaseholders "will not disturb the quiet enjoyment of other residents".

A protocol for settling disputes

has only been used once in five years. "It was resolved amicably with people sitting down together and someone saying, 'come on, don't be so silly,'" recalls Peter.

The collective runs its own estate agency business, charging 1.75 per cent commission, and there is a one per cent charge for arranging new leaseholds.

Pets are allowed to live in Woodchester but, surprisingly, there are only eight dogs and three cats living there at the moment.

Studio flats sell for £120,000 and cosy four-bedroom houses for about £500,000, competitive prices in the market, so there is no shortage of people willing to sign up to become a Woodchester villager.

With a rough ratio of two to one in favour of women, it's unusual that there haven't been – to anyone's knowledge, that is – any romances among those who are single.

Which does make one wonder whether they are all just a bit too busy for love.

CONTROLLING INTEREST: Woodchester's destiny is in the hands of contented residents such as Howard Gawler and Jean Shine, main picture, and Peter Wilson and his wife Ann, inset below left