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## Future looking a little rosier

## Huntleigh explains changes

**MOST** local firms are going to beat the recession, says Beds CBI chairman Bruce Warman. And he forecasts that the number of jobless will stay low in the county.

But Mr Warman, who is personnel director at Vauxhall, is cautious about saying when he thinks the economy will turn the corner.

In a review of 1990 for the Beds group of CBI members, he says the eastern region tends to be more resilient than many other parts of the country.

"Collectively we seem to have an uncanny ability to ride out the worst of the storms, and fortunately this seems to have been proved true yet again," he writes.

Mr Warman adds that the county has seen its share of business failures and redundancies — a reference to the loss of

By DON SMITH

dozens of small firms and a couple of major names in building and furniture.

But, as he points out, the Beds unemployment rate remains one of the lowest in the country.

"There is an underlying feeling that with trading conditions widely tipped to ease in the coming year, things will come right again... eventually," says Mr Warman.

This view is close to that of the Chamber of Commerce. Its latest survey shows that while order books are thin for some firms there's a good deal of confidence about turnover and profits in 1991.

Mr Warman's review describes 1990 as a "momentous" year, notably for the events

in Eastern Europe and the Gulf. At home, membership of the ERM and the accession of John Major "were perhaps the dominant features of a politico-economic year which began with relative calm but increasingly floundered in a sea of uncertainty.

"Under the combined pressure of sustained high inflation and interest rates the economy creaked and groaned increasingly."

Striking a more positive note he says that training was a "dominant theme" among bosses in the region with the arrival of TECs — Training and Education Councils. And more weight was put on Business-Education links and teacher placements in industry.

Preparations for 1992 continued and many companies "began for the first time to evaluate and exploit the new trading opportunities offered by Eastern Europe".

ONE of the county's most successful firms gathered its staff together last week to say "thank you" and spell out future plans.

Workers from Huntleigh Technology, based in Dallow Road, Luton, went to the Putteridge Bury mansion for a day-long event staged by founder Rolf Schild and MD John Wootton.

It's a firm that has seen a good deal of growth at a time when others have been suffering. Over the past three years its Dallow Road workforce has grown from 120 to 200 and investment has gone into new manufacturing methods and computers.

Huntleigh group sales that stood at £10 million in 1987 have moved upwards, too, with the figure for the first six months of 1990 reaching £8.2 million and a record total predicted for the year's end.

More good news is that Huntleigh, which employs 400 people in all, exports 80 per cent of its output.

One of the changes explained at Putteridge was how the company is merging its two main operations — in Luton and Cardiff — under the name Huntleigh Healthcare.

They worked separately up to now, with Dallow Road turning out products that include special air-powered mattresses for hospitals and nursing homes. The Cardiff end makes ultrasound gear for foetal monitors and vascular diagnosis.

And the changes mean more work for Luton. A mezzanine floor is being put in to expand the factory and Cardiff's sales staff will be moving to Dallow Road.

"The launch of several key products in the healthcare sector has helped the company increase significantly its market share and profitability this year," said Mr Wootton.

### Small firm help

A NEW bid to help small firms develop high-tech products is getting under way in the county.

The plan is to set up joint efforts between people with good ideas and those with know-how in research and development.

The newly-launched Eastern Region Technology Centre, which has a branch in Luton, has come up with the scheme.

ERTC is one of the new government-backed computer networks that can call up data and advice needed by local companies. It's now in action at Putteridge Bury and one of its special targets is to help firms with R&D they can't afford.

The centre is setting up a "revolving fund" that will get projects started. Major employers in the county are



ERTC's Mike Anstee aims to help Graham Shorten (right) develop a pulse counter for doctors.

being asked to chip into the fund, with the DTI helping out by matching the money raised.

And a small firm at Round Green could be the first to take part. Shorten Technology Ltd, an electronics sub-contractor, has started work on an invention that could help doctors, nurses and ambulance crews.

It plans to make a hand-held pulse counter, which could be used anywhere on the body to give an instant pulse reading. "This could be of special help in accident cases, particularly where there's a risk of AIDS," said Graham Shorten, boss of the 15-man firm.

His company can't take on a research specialist to do the job. "This sort of project could sit in a drawer for a year or more if we had

to do it on our own," said Mr Shorten. "Help from ERTC would help it move forward sooner."

"They will pair us up with someone and we will control the project between us. Both parties would benefit from it, and at the end of the day the nation gains because we would end up with a British invention that could find a wide market."

Mr Shorten is due to

have further meetings in January with Mike Anstee, a research manager with the college who is running the local ERTC branch.

Mr Anstee said the fund — full name the "technology credit scheme" — would probably need between £20,000 and £40,000 from Beds sources, a sum that would be doubled by the DTI.

As new products started paying their way the firms involved would put money back into the scheme, helping it support other high-tech ventures.

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