

## IMBER



Rex Sawyer  
KVNTA Meeting - 18<sup>th</sup> April 2011

For 18 years, Rex Sawyer was Headmaster of a Salisbury school as well as being a magistrate and councillor.

He told the story of how, in 1793, a frightened fox was making its way across the north western corner of Salisbury Plain pursued by the local hunt. It jumped under the cover of the well in Imber but fell 100 feet to the bottom of the well. The villagers managed to raise it partway in the bucket before it fell back again. On their second attempt, they succeeded in saving the fox which then escaped.

Warminster is the nearest town to Imber – 7 miles away:

*“Little Imber on the Down, 7 miles from any town”*

In the past the tracks were very poor indeed and hazardous to negotiate – there used to be piles of chalk dust along side of them known as Wiltshire Lanterns and the moon would illuminate them so that they gave a degree of guidance to travellers on the track.

In the past there was a 2<sup>nd</sup> pub called the Nags Head in Imber but this disappeared at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Imber Dock – a winterbourne, could cause a great deal of concern because it would overflow in inclement weather and there were buildings undermined and even people drowned in Imber as a result.

Imber is in a fold of the hills and surrounded by hills which is why the winterbourne responds in this way.

Despite its isolation, the inhabitants were very happy to live there.

1839 Matthew Dean was going back to Imber from Devizes Market and was robbed. He got back on his horse and chased the robbers over Chitterne Down. One robber fell off his horse and died and the rest were captured and taken to Devizes Prison and sentenced to 10 years transportation to Tasmania. They never returned. Subsequent to this, banks began to be widely used and no longer would farmers be travelling with large sums of money in their pockets. The descendants of some of the transportees visited the Imber area in recent times reporting on how their families had fared since then.



St. Giles Church occupies the site of an earlier building dating from the mid-12th century. The nave was rebuilt towards the end of the 13th century and was followed, circa 1400, by the addition of the north and south aisles, the tower and north porch. At this time the nave roof was

reconstructed. The chancel was rebuilt in 1849 at which time the north-east vestry was built.

The church was rich in fittings and furnishings which are now scattered among other churches in Wiltshire and Gloucestershire. However, some of the 13th and 15th century wall paintings survive.

The church served the inhabitants of Imber until the evacuation of the village in 1943. It was a place of safety on different occasions including when there were floods. Victorian restoration there gave a rather cluttered appearance. There was a fight in the church in 1646 between two ladies – Mary Gibb and Elizabeth Courtney - when one thrust a pin into the other! The resultant court case has not passed its judgement down to us.



The farmers were the people of influence in the village. Some, in particular, had lived for hundreds of years in Imber:

**The Deans** (Edward was the grandson of Matthew) and they lived at Imber Court – See what it looked like in 2006 on the right.

His brother Robert farmed at Seagram's farm and this still remains in Imber in skeletal form.

Another longstanding family – the Hoopers – lived in Browns Farm which has now completely disappeared.

Beneath those farmers was a pyramid of agricultural labourers – the top of the heap being the shepherds. At time they moved flocks of as many as a thousand sheep onto the downs and back into the village at night. The sheep and the cereals were interdependent as the dung of the sheep made the soil exceptionally fertile.



Thomas Carter was allowed as a child to ring the 8.00 a.m. bell for the church bell. Thomas won a family competition to inherit the fine cello of his grandfather and was later able to play it at church services.

Harry Reardon was the village snob (shoe maker). He was also the deacon of the Baptist chapel and was a strict teetotaler – but only on Sundays!

There were also dew pond makers at Imber – they walked many many miles to construct ponds using a mixture of puddle clay and chopped straw to create a membrane. They constructed a wooden fence around the pond so that sheep could get through to drink but larger animals such as ponies could not and could not destroy the delicate membrane.

Eliza Staples and her husband James lived at the Blacksmiths. James was the third generation of the Staples family to be blacksmith. After him, Albert Nash became blacksmith.

1909 the village had its own postman. Prior to that someone had to walk 7 miles across the plain with the incoming post. Then he spent the day in Imber in a tin hut doing odd jobs before going the 7 miles back again.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the National Post Office Reporter went to Imber to see its post office. He described the post office as a quaint cottage in the main street and possibly England's loneliest post office.



The Bell Inn still stands in skeletal form and Ushers, who had the licence, continued to renew it every year right into the 1960s in the hope that they would be able to open the inn again.

1859 the Church of England School had an average of 20 – 30 children whereas the chapel school had an average of around twice that.

1897 the War Department bought land on the east of the plain – the first time they had owned land on Salisbury Plain. When the 1<sup>st</sup> World War started, things became very

difficult for everyone because powerful shells were being fired right over the village and sometimes falling short. It was one of the most important training grounds in the whole of England. Troops were billeted at Imber Court in 1916.

Things more or less returned to normal after the First World War but from 1927 the War Office began buying up land and leasing it back to the farmers. By 1932 all of the farmland was owned by the War Office. Farmers could remain and rent land but no-one seemed to have noticed the clause giving the Government the Right of Presumption – to take back the land.

1942 there was one of the most serious training accidents of the war when because of the haziness of the sun, a pilot fired too low at a demonstration and killed a number of important spectators. 25 people were killed and 75 were injured – many seriously. The War Department therefore focused on Imber seeing its populace as far too vulnerable and the following year they were given 47 days to leave the village.

1<sup>st</sup> November 1943 the people were called to the school room to be given the news.

The army needed somewhere to practise the art of street fighting and Imber was ideally suited. Many villages around the plain were overcrowded with evacuees etc etc and there was nowhere for the Imber people to go locally. Two people – Bernie Wright and his fiancé – were determined to be married in St Giles and they achieved their wish just one day before the final evacuation was due.

Many of the poorer inhabitants finished up in the old workhouses – the only accommodation they could find.

William Walser was the vicar through all the inter-war years. He knew he would never get another parish. His wife had died in childbirth and his only surviving son, John was away at war and couldn't help.

Albert Nash, the blacksmith was devastated. His wife Martha, couldn't find him the day after the announcement that they had to go. She found him sobbing over the anvil and utterly heartbroken. He died some 6 weeks later and was brought back to be buried in St. Giles Church – the doctor having written “died of a broken heart” on his death certificate.

No-one was allowed to stay until Christmas and the village was deserted by mid December. The “spivs” came from London and took things away that they had no right to. Hundreds of rabbits descended on the village and ate all the produce etc. Various shooting parties and hunts were using the village with impunity – even though the villagers themselves were not allowed to go back.

Many were convinced that promises were given that they could go back after the war was over. Questions were raised in the House of Commons. April 13<sup>th</sup> 1948 the Times printed a statement from the Ministry of Defence saying there was no question of a pledge being given that the people could return.

The people did not give up however and continued to petition those with clout to do something.

Austin Underwood knew that 31<sup>st</sup> December 1960 was the ending of DORA – Defence of the Realm Act – and he arranged a walk into Imber in mid January the next year. This was quite a serious political risk that he was taking. There could have been open conflict; the weather could have been horrendous and no-one might turn up; someone might tread on an incendiary and be killed or wounded. None of these things happened and over 700 vehicles wound their way into the village of Imber led by Richard Hooper. When they returned they were told they must not leave the main highway because it was too dangerous. However, no-one took notice of that. Austin Underwood spoke to them for an hour and a half as did Sydney Dean. There was unanimous agreement that they would create an association to regain Imber. They arranged one for February and one for March. The rally in March was going to be a really big occasion but the Ministry of Defence had had enough and John Profumo, the Minister of State for War, sent Harold Macmillan a confidential memo in which he described Austin Underwood as a thoroughly evil man and recommended that an injunction should be taken out to prevent them going onto the Plain any more.

They were directed to go to Devizes Green and that money should be raised to hold an inquiry. This was precisely what they did. Noel Francis Baker, MP for Swindon promised to add his voice. They did get a public enquiry over two days at County Hall, Trowbridge but the decision came down in favour of the military. They did get two concessions – that one day a year, called “Imber Day” would be held in the Church when everyone could return and when two services would be held. For up to 50 days in each year, the village would be open also. This year Imber is open from Good Friday for 4 days.

1999 Betty Hooper died – and with her really died the end of the battle for the restoration of Imber. She was the custodian – the one who had kept together all the photographs and records relating to Imber.

A team of people, including Rex Sawyer, work at keeping St. Giles in good repair and open. The villagers had no compensation at all – because they did not own their properties.

Tyneham in Dorset (right) was also taken over in the same way as Imber.

Tottingham in Norfolk also is still in occupied territory (a woman there committed suicide rather than having to leave).





Imber is believed to have first been settled by the ancient Britons, probably for farming sheep, and several tracks have been found in and around the village dating back to Roman times.

Imber was well known by Saxon times; references have been found to it in a text from 967AD. It is listed in the Domesday Book as having a population of 50.

Imber's highest population figure was recorded in the census of 1851, when the total reached 442.

By the time the army took the village over, the population had dwindled to 152 and at the time of the evacuation there were 131 residents forced out.