



Headstones in St. Giles, Churchyard, Imber

(Photo by Brian Robert Marshall)

Families' plea to visit Imber graves

A Warminster councillor says he is being denied access to his dead relatives in a churchyard at an abandoned village on Salisbury Plain. Cllr John Syme claimed the Army, which evacuated Imber in 1943, is not keeping the area open to the public for 50 days a year, as promised at a public inquiry in 1961.

A band of former Imber residents and their descendants return to the village to tend graves and attend an annual service at St Giles' Church.

Cllr Syme said: "People should be able to get to the gate of the church and look at the graves at the very least. I have a great uncle and aunt buried there, so it's an issue that's close to my heart. "There is still a great demand to visit the village. The last time I went to a service 250 people attended."

St Giles' church is slipping into disrepair, despite efforts by the Army to keep it watertight. Cllr Syme said that if there was more frequent access, more people would be prepared to help raise funds to conserve it. He hopes to continue the work of Austin Underwood, who fought to keep Imber open in the 60s and 70s.

He said: "The MoD says the area is closed because of public safety, but it is open on certain days, so why can't it be open more often?"

Westbury MP Andrew Murrison recently toured the village and is also worried about its future.

Dr Murrison said: "Because of the events in 1943 I think the Army has a moral imperative to ensure that people can access the site and I have now written a letter to defence minister Dr Lewis Moonie."

Karen Moseley, a spokesman for the Army, said: "Imber opens when the training area closes at Christmas, Easter and in August. "This year, there has been extra training because of foot-and-mouth. The Army couldn't use the Plain for months, so it is now playing catch-up."

(This is Wiltshire – Friday 14 December 2001)