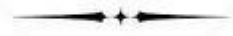


Imber



Village deserted in World War II so troops could practise for D-Day is now home to colonies of rare native bees

- Hamlet of Imber on Salisbury Plain was commandeered by the army for troops to practise ahead of D-Day landings during World War II
- Village has remained property of Ministry Of Defence for the last 70 years
- It is now being used to help reintroduce the endangered British black bee

By [SUZANNAH HILLS](#)

An abandoned village that was commandeered by the army during the war has its first new residents in 70 years - colonies of rare native honey bees.

The deserted village of Imber on Salisbury Plain has been picked as the ideal location for a project aimed at boosting the population of the endangered British black bee.

About 95 per cent of bees in the UK are non-native and were introduced here in the 1920s after a disease virtually wiped out the indigenous honey bee.



Fresh start: Bee keeper Chris Wilkes is pictured in front of what is left of the deserted village of Imber on the Salisbury Plain where he hopes to build new colonies of British black bees



Abandoned: The village, pictured around 1900, was commandeered by the army so soldiers could practice ahead of the D-Day landings during WWII



New home: The deserted village of Imber, near Warminster, Wiltshire, is now surrounded by nectar-rich wildflowers which make the spot ideal to introduce new colonies of the endangered British black bee

Despite this, the bee population has been drastically decreasing in the UK and around the world primarily because of man-made problems.

Change in climate and agricultural practices such as misuse of pesticides is one of the reasons for the decline combined with the loss of their natural habitat.

Most crops - about 70 per cent - require pollination to develop fruits, nuts, and seeds.

If the bee population continues to dwindle, we could face a food epidemic on a global scale.

Beekeeper Chris Wilkes now hops to reverse that trend by reintroducing Britain's native bee.



Boosting numbers: It is hoped the project will help boost the dwindling population of the British black bee



Conservation effort: Chris Wilkes has received permission from the MoD to set up 14 colonies of British black bees near St Giles church in Imber to help prevent the species from going extinct



Military site: The area surrounding Imber village is off limits for more than 300 days a year while the army practice drills

And he chose Imber as the perfect spot to introduce 14 colonies of British black bees that won't be interfered with by competing foreign flying insects.

The isolated hamlet is five miles from the nearest colony of common bees and is surrounded by a wealth of untapped, nectar-rich wildflowers on the vast Plain.

This will give the British black bees a chance to thrive and breed a pure strain of the species. If it is a success, the project could be repeated in other areas of the country.

British black bees are much darker than their golden-coloured cousins that originate from southern Europe and have thicker and longer hair.

They are able to easily survive British winters unlike the non-native varieties that are vulnerable to prolonged harsh and cold weather, such as last winter.

Imber, near Warminster, Wiltshire, was one of several villages in Britain to be taken over by the army in World War II so troops could practise for D-Day.

The 200 residents were compensated and rehoused. Out of the 56 buildings that made up the hamlet only 14 remain standing today.

Beekeeper Chris Wilkes, from Salisbury, has been given special permission by the MoD to set up 14 colonies of black bees behind St Giles church.

Mr Wilkes, a 61-year-old retired army major, said: 'Imber is a very isolated area with not a lot of feral bee colonies about, in fact there isn't one in a four or five mile radius.

'The area is very rich in wild flowers. Eighteen of the 22 top nectar producing plants in the UK are right here, including clover, sainfoin, viper's bugloss, knapweed and melilot. There is also no interference from the public.

'It is very difficult to breed pure lines of bees because it only takes a few feral ones to give you a mongrel breed.

'But Imber gives us a great chance to breed a pure strain of British black bees.'

The native honeybees are extinct in all but a handful of remote areas of Britain thanks to the mystery virus known as the Isle of Wight Disease which devastated the native population in the early 20th century.

Beekeepers were forced to bring in colonies from southern Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

Mr Wilkes said: 'Black bees make up about four per cent of the bee population of Britain.

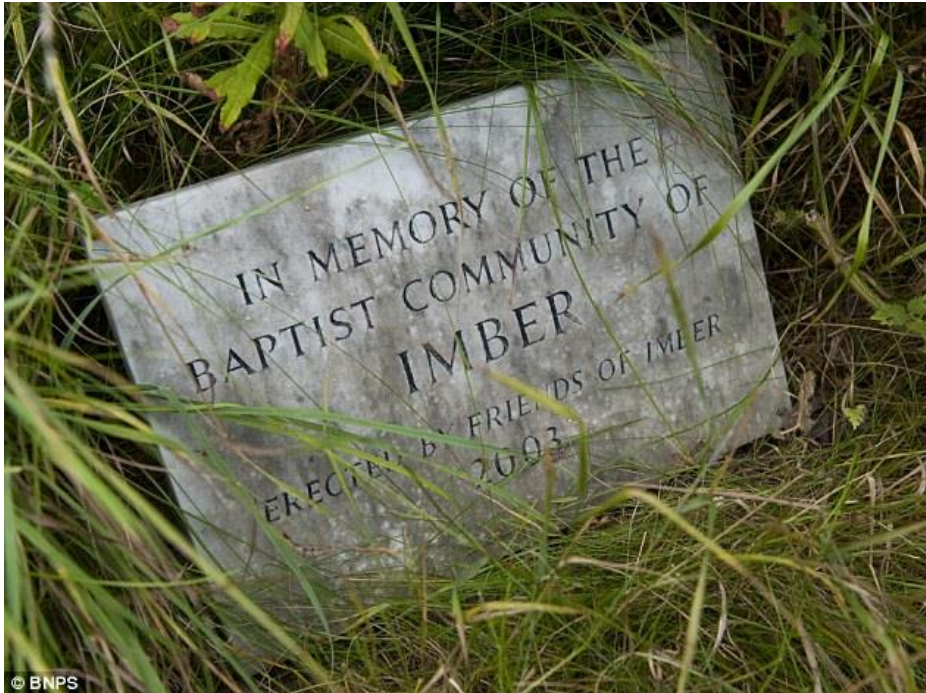
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'It is a shame because they are ideal for the British climate because they survive our winters very well.

'It is the native bee and the one that has been selected by nature to be the best type for this country.

'Southern European bees need a lot of feeding up in August and September to get them through the winter but they really struggle when you have harsher, prolonged winters.

'A lot of bees did die out last winter which means there is a reduction this year in honey production and fruits that depend on being pollinated by bees.'



Memorial: A memorial stone in the old Baptist cemetery in Imber to remember the 200-strong community who were forced to move when the army needed to use the area for D-Day preparations during World War II



Growing crisis: Black bees now only make up four per cent of the bee population in Britain



Local produce: The British bee is better equipped to deal with winters in the UK than their southern European cousins which die in the cold weather causing a reduced honey production

THE LOST VILLAGE OF IMBER

Imber was evacuated in December 1943 by the military for training U.S. soldiers preparing for the D-Day invasion. Villagers were told at the time they would be allowed to return within six months.

However, despite public appeals, their hopes were never realised and to this day it remains completely empty.



The village is located on Salisbury Plain and is owned by the Ministry of Defence (MOD).

It is now surrounded by a high explosive 'impact area' in the Salisbury Plain military training zone.

But a 700-year-old church, St Giles, still stands in the village as does a manor house called Imber Court as well as a farmhouse, a farm and cottages.

The village also has four council house style blocks which were built in 1938.

In 1943, there was also a Baptist Chapel which was demolished in the late 1970s.

The government began buying land on Salisbury Plain in the late 19th Century to use it for maneuvers.

And in the 1920s, it began to purchase farms around Imber as well as the village's land.

By the time of the Second World War, the government owned almost all of the land in and around the village.

On November 1, 1943, the people of the village were called to a meeting in the schoolroom and given just 47 days' notice to leave their homes.

Despite some villagers being upset at having to leave, many showed no resistance, seeing it as their duty to contribute to the war effort.

Following the war, the village was still used for training soldiers - especially those who were serving in Northern Ireland.

In the 1970s a number of distinctive-looking houses were built to aid army training on the site.

(Daily Mail – 19 August, 2013)

