

Imber village won't be forgotten



This Is Wiltshire: Some 2,000 people joined the protest march organised by Austin Underwood at Imber on January 22, 1961

By Lewis Cowen

The village of Imber, evacuated during the Second World War for military training and never returned to its villagers, is still remembered more than 66 years later.

People from as far afield as Salisbury and Warminster attended a special event at West Lavington village hall on Saturday to mark the 50th anniversary of a protest march that attracted more than 2,000 people to converge on Imber.

The protest won a public inquiry into the situation but it found in favour of the Army and a half a century later only St Giles Church remains as an original building.

Ruth Underwood, the daughter of Amesbury councillor Austin Underwood who started the campaign, organised the all-day event at West Lavington.

She said: "I am delighted with how many people came along. It shows that people are still unwilling to forget Imber.

"I was only three when my father organised the protest but I was there. I don't remember any of it, but I was brought up to believe that Imber should be returned to the people who lived there for generations."

Although none of the surviving Imber residents was able to make it to the event, several of those who were at the protest march attended.

George Phillips, 83, a former Erlestoke parish councillor, was assistant secretary of the organisation Mr Underwood set up following the successful protest march.

He said: "I don't think Austin realised how successful it was going to be. The Defence of the Realm Act, which barred anyone from going to the village, had ended and he just announced he would be walking from Gore Cross to Imber on the afternoon of January 22 1961 and would welcome anyone coming along with him.

"I don't think he was expecting the 400 cars and 2,000 people who turned up."

The story of Imber still inspires writers of folk songs today. On Saturday Tristan Cork sang The Ballad of Albie Nash, the village blacksmith who died of a broken heart when he heard the news.

Local band Browfort performed their song Forever Imber and Miss Underwood, a professional folk singer, sang her own song, Song of the Open Downs, which she composed while walking to Imber in August 2001 .

(This is Wiltshire – 29 January, 2011)