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Religious sect takes over school

Exclusive - Jennifer Williams
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A NEW school run by a secretive religious 'cult' has opened in Heaton Mersey.

Mereside Education Trust is run by a Christian sect referred to in previous reports as a 'cult', which considers TV and radio evil. They have taken over the former site of St John Vianney Primary on Didsbury Road.

The private secondary school, which used to be based in Sale, is run by a group called the Exclusive Brethren.

Mereside only educates children from within the Brethren, who shun outsiders under rules dictated a century ago by radical preacher James Taylor.

Under Brethren rules, members are not allowed to watch TV, read newspapers or take out life insurance, and until recently the internet was also banned. Women must keep their hair uncut and wear blue headscarves.

And in one of their most controversial doctrines, members who leave are split from their families forever - and parents shun their own children.

But as far as its neighbours are concerned, the disturbance comes not from the way the school is run - but the school run itself.

One resident, who lives directly in front of the school gates, said: "I just wish they'd stop using the road as a car park. These people cause no offence and we don't object to them in any way."

Richard Hill, 36, said: "I think too much is made of cults and minor religions.

"Each to their own. The parents smile when they look over, there's no noise from the kids and I'd far rather have a school there than a housing development when the diocese sells up.

The father of two added: "That said, I wish they'd show a little more courtesy as far as the parking goes.

"They've opened up an in-and-out route but everyone just straddles the pavement... and there are lots of them."

Reg Haughton, a resident of four decades, said: "We don't have much to do with them and no one is particularly bothered who they are and what they do.

"It's live and let live as long as there's no disturbance. But the traffic has been pretty rough on quite a few occasions."

Mereside trustee Frances Richardson told the Express that the school has had little publicity surrounding its arrival because it has no interest in recruiting new pupils.

He said: "We already have an established clientele, as it were, with the pupils that have come across from Sale.

"We're just a small school - hardly any bigger than the one that was here before - and we're here on a temporary basis."

Former trustee Stephen Boyt confirmed that Mereside's ethos conforms to the teachings of James Taylor, but insisted the school provides a balanced education.

He said: "Mereside is just a normal independent school. I would say it is pretty much fully compliant with all aspects of the National Curriculum.

"The big difference is the ethos of the school - it is a very strong Christian ethos. We wouldn't call ourselves Taylorites but we would fully support the ministry of Jim Taylor."

And he denied the claims of former members that the Brethren are a secretive 'cult', adding: "I would say those criticisms are completely unfounded."

Mereside was forced to move on from their former site on Parkside Road in Sale - where they had been since 1995 - after having to repeatedly gain temporary retrospective planning permission for an unauthorised extension.

It is now leasing the Didsbury Road site from the Salford Diocese, which ran St John Vianney.

Martin Lochery, Director of Education at Salford Diocese, said it could be the first time the diocese has leased land to such a group. He said: "My guess is that it may have never happened before."

Children at the school of 58 pupils take GCSEs and gain broadly above average results. It is one of 37 Exclusive Brethren schools overseen by the Coventry-based Focus Learning Trust, which reached an agreement with the Government to be the first institution in the country to inspect its own schools.

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