

# Inquiry reveals culture of violence

Police launch investigation into independent school following accusations of assaults on former pupils. **Graeme Paton** reports

One of the last private schools in the UK to ban the cane has been criticised after an independent inquiry found evidence of repeated "criminal" assaults on pupils.

Children at St James boys' school, in Twickenham west London, are said to have been beaten with blackboard rubbers, punched in the face and had cricket balls "violently" thrown at them by teachers.

A file detailing the assaults which happened in the late 1970s and early 1980s has now been passed to the Metropolitan police.

A police spokesman said its officers were already investigating one allegation of abuse by a 40-year-old former pupil at St James and the inquiry report would be considered.

"There is currently a joint investigation with the police, social services, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and education welfare. Current staff at the school are co-operating fully with the enquiry," said a spokeswoman.

St James, along with a girls school, was set up by the School of Economic Science, a little-known sect which emphasises female subservience, meditation and the teaching of eastern philosophy.

The schools, which charge £9,135-a-year, list Emily Watson, the award-winning actress, among their former pupils.

An exams league table of the

top 500 private schools last year placed the girls' school 55th and the boys 352nd.

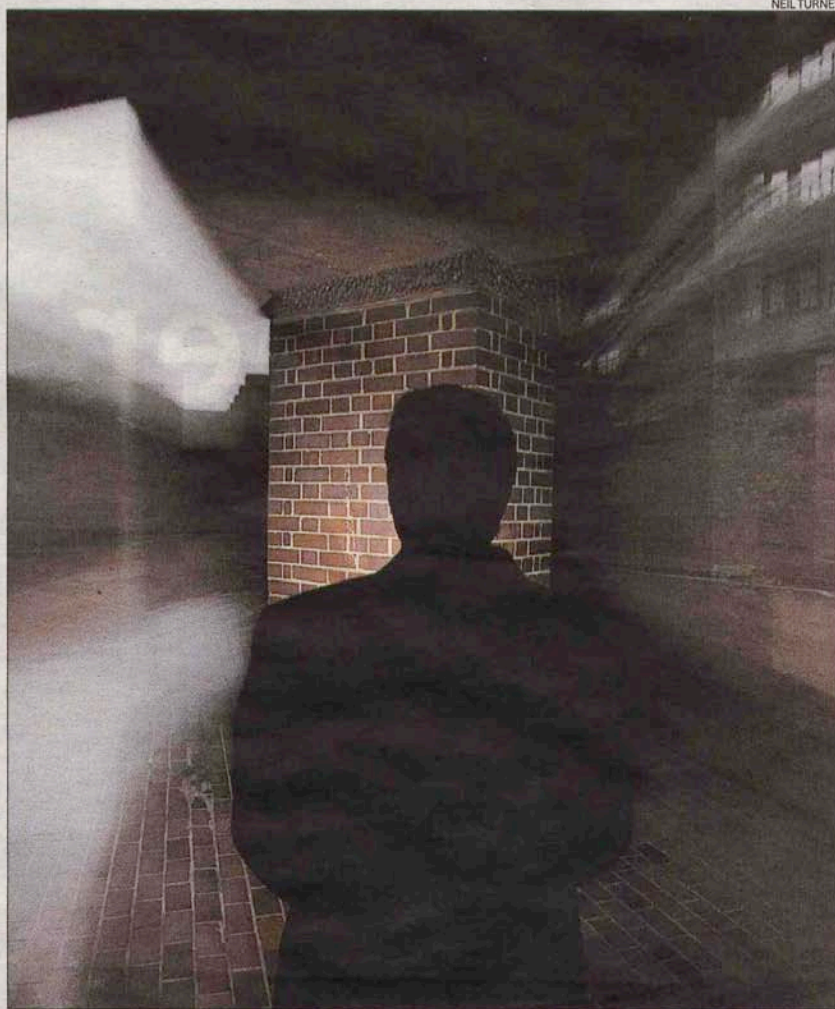
The inquiry, carried out by James Townend, QC, was ordered by school governors following claims of abuse by teachers between 1975 and 1985. They acted after former pupils posted allegations on a website. Two more schools run by the sect, St Vedast boys' and St Vedast girls', which merged with the St James's schools in 1985 were also involved.

Mr Townend, who said that the inquiry did not have any bearing on the current schools, interviewed former teachers and pupils as part of the four-month investigation.

His report, released this week, said only headmasters had used the cane, normally within the law, although at St James boys' there was evidence of excessive force. However, in one incident, two classes were caned on their way to a swimming lesson as a "collective punishment" which the then head later acknowledged was an "over-reaction".

The school only stopped caning in 1996 when it was outlawed in all schools, although most of the private sector dropped corporal punishment after it was banned in state schools 10 years earlier.

Prior to 1985, teachers in all schools were allowed to mete out physical punishment such as a



Look back in anger: this former pupil, now in his mid-30s says that 'kicking, punching and verbal abuse were uniform' at St James school. He has asked to remain anonymous

slap to the hands or ordering press-ups.

However Mr Townend said, at St James and St Vedast boys' schools, punishments went much further.

"A small number of teachers had no proper control of their tempers," he said.

"As a result I am satisfied that several boys were subjected to rough handling. They were criminally assaulted by being punched in the face or stomach, cuffed violently about the head, had blackboard rubbers thrown at them causing injury in some cases, had cricket balls thrown at them violently when they were not looking at the thrower and were struck with the end of a gym rope.

"Other students were kicked,

struck from behind, slapped about the face, thrown across a classroom. Whatever the provocation, nothing could justify this mistreatment. It was clearly unreasonable and criminal."

Mr Townend did not name the teachers but said they would be identified in a confidential report to governors. The governors were criticised for failing to exercise proper control over the school.

Mr Townend said the cane was never used at the girls schools although pupils complained of verbal humiliation and occasionally being struck.

There was no evidence of sexual assault at any of the schools, which taught children aged four to 18.

In a statement, governors of the two St James's schools said: "The

disciplinary policy was not sufficiently supervised during those early years.

"Some physical punishments, that were lawful at the time, were too harsh and too frequent; some acts went beyond lawful physical punishment and were wholly unacceptable. That this could have happened at the schools, even a long time ago, is deeply regretted."

One former pupil, now in his mid-30s, who asked not to be identified, said: "Kicking, punching and verbal abuse were uniform, even for things that happened outside school. Once, a group of boys met some girls from the sister school at the weekend and were beaten for it on Monday."

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