

# Mercury

AND WEST DERBYSHIRE NEWS

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35p

# IT'S FINALLY ALL OVER

By Will Kilner and  
Tim Cunningham

THE OWNERS of St Elphin's have slammed the door on 160 years of history by announcing the immediate closure of the private school.

On hearing the bombshell, tearful pupils rushed up the school stairs to challenge the motives of Kevin Burke, one of the owners, who had just broken the news to teachers on Tuesday evening.

The consortium of businessmen who own the Darley Dale school claim they cannot continue to sustain such significant financial losses.

But furious parents say the owners, who bought the site for £2.4 million last June, have closed the school without giving it enough time to recover.

With some students only weeks away from GCSE exams, parents are planning to club together to pay teachers until that time.

Jim Green, who has two children at the school, said: "The kids are sobbing their hearts out and the boarders have been told to pack. We are very bitter because they're messing with children's welfare."

"This school has been here for 160 years and somebody has just come along, shut the door and said that's it."

Steve Crystal, another parent, said: "It's appalling that they are prepared to wreck children's lives."

Principal Dr Deborah Mouat, who has been off sick all week, said: "I'm horrified they have taken this decision when I'm not actually there, when I'm off sick."

"I'm not really concerned about myself, I'm more concerned about the children. I'm very sad, there is a long history there with some very good staff."

The owners say pupils who are about to take public exams can continue to use the school facilities to minimise disruption.

A brief statement to parents said: "Over the last six months the owners have made a significant financial commitment to the school to allow it to continue to exist where otherwise it would have failed."

"But they cannot continue to sustain such significant losses and have now reached a final decision that the school must sadly close."

Rumours about the school's possible closure started to circulate when auxiliary staff were

Eddy:

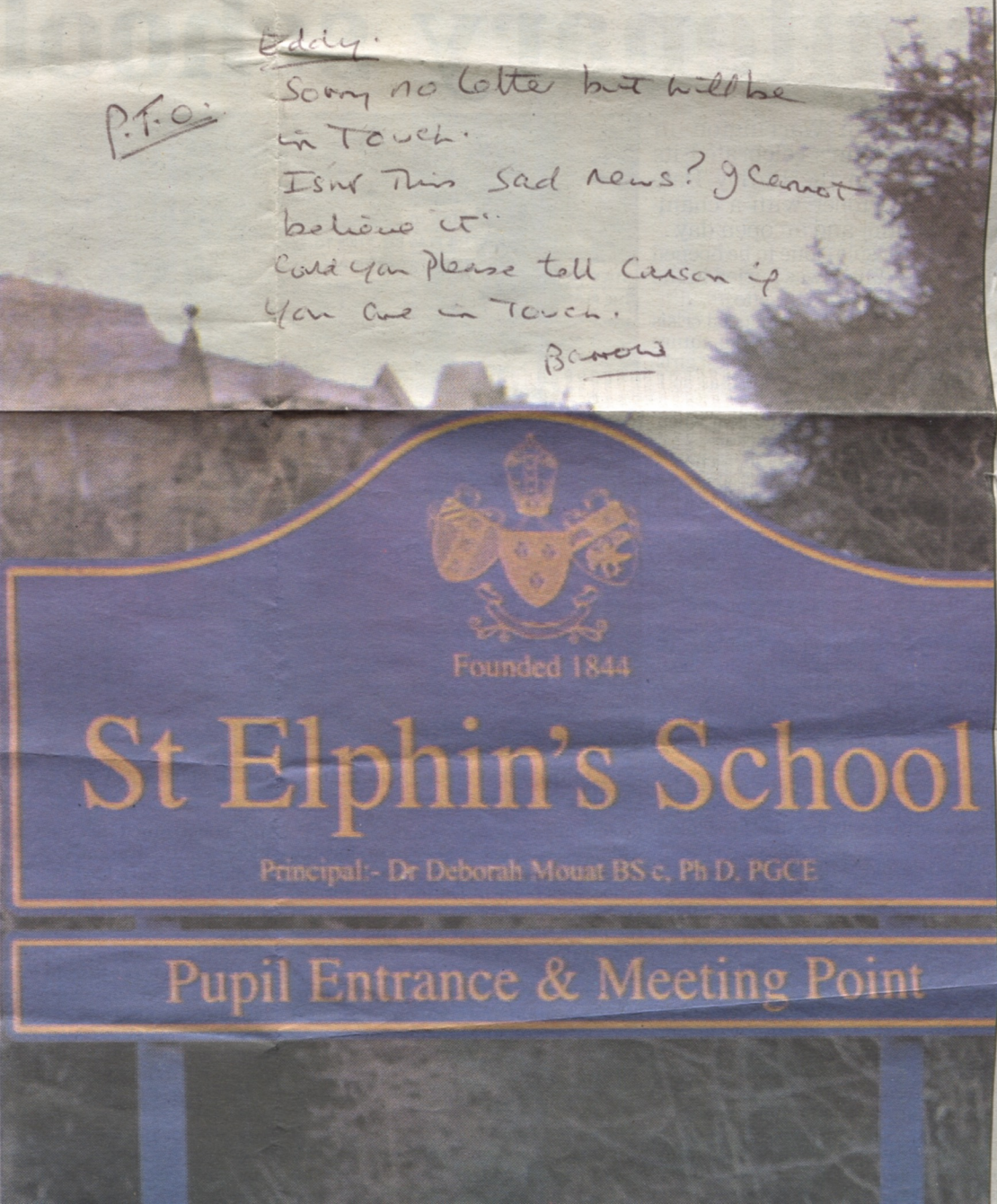
Sorry no letter but will be in touch.

P.T.O.:

Isn't this sad news? I cannot believe it.

Could you please tell Carson if you are in touch.

Barnes





Rumours about the school's possible closure started to circulate when auxiliary staff were not paid for a fortnight. Union bosses are considering legal action on behalf of their members.

Cllr Steve Hibbard, deputy mayor of Darley Dale, said: "The town council is very sorry the school has closed and has great sympathy for everybody involved. When I first came to Darley Dale, there were two private schools and we have lost both."

The site is owned by a company called St Elphin's Darley Dale Limited, which was created in August 2004 when it changed its name from House Park Limited.

Paul Elliot, from Knutsford, Cheshire, Kevin Burke, from Bletchley, Milton Keynes, and Momeilo Novakovic, from Bedford, are shareholders in the company.





PUPILS PLEA: St Elphin's pupils make a last ditch attempt to save their school in January of last year.

# Troubled times for centenary school

FOUNDED in Warrington in 1844, St Elphin's celebrated its centenary on the Darley Dale site last October with a champagne buffet and an open day.

A time capsule - due to be opened in the year 2104 - was buried in the grounds of the 44-acre-site.

After several years of financial crisis and abortive rescue bids the future looked bright for the second oldest girls' school in the country - but that optimism was to be short-lived.

This week it finally became clear when the owners announced it's closure.

This turbulent stage in the school's history started in April 2003 when the school went into administration with debts of £3 million.

From then on the Mercury chronicled the of events that led to the closure.

October 2003: a rescue bid to save the school was announced.

Plans for a lucrative housing development - which would mean building 100 houses in two parcels of land on school grounds - were submitted in outline to Derbyshire Dales District Council.

But the bid was opposed by over 100 local householders in the Darley Residents Action Group.

February 2004: the bid was refused by Derbyshire Dales District Council because it contravened the local plan which protects open spaces between Darley Dale and Matlock.

March 2004: a scaled-down version of the plan which would have a smaller impact was announced.

April 2004: £48,000 was raised by St Elphin's recovery fund - but the sum fell far short of the £3 million needed.

April 18 2004: the scaled-down planning application was turned down by Derbyshire Dales District Council by a vote of 13-4 against. St Elphin's was put



NO TO HOUSES: Campaigners protest against housing on the school site in February of last year.

up for sale.

Martin Hughes, spokesman for the school administration, said: "The school has been in Darley Dale for 100 years and never once has it knocked on the council's door for help and the one time it does that the door is shut in its face."

June 24 2004: the school was bought for £2.4 million by a company described as 'a group of local businessmen who wanted to remain anonymous'.

It was announced that new funds would be used to build up pupil numbers.

Principal Dr Deborah Mouat said: "I am very excited about the future for St Elphin's. At long last, I have been given control and my hands are no longer tied

and constrained as they have been under administration."

September 2004: boys were allowed to enrol at school, overturning 160 years of tradition in a bid to attract more students.

December 2004: planning inspector David Smith was called in to adjudicate over an appeal application to build on the school grounds.

The landowners argued that housing development was the only realistic way to safeguard the school's future.

Cllr John Evans, Mayor of Darley Dale, said: "This is opportunism and they are not the least bit interested in protecting the school."

January 2005: the latest appeal was refused.



## Trying week for principal

ST ELPHIN'S principal Dr Deborah Mouat took over as acting headteacher when the former head, Erica Taylor, was made redundant in March 2003.

She became principal of the prestigious school and has been at St Elphin's for five years.

It seems that this week will have been her last in charge and when confronted with rumours that staff had not been paid last week Dr Mouat said: "I have not heard those rumours. It's business as usual. I have just received my pay slip."

Last Friday, March 4, when confronted with a report that she and deputy head Rosemary Cuff had resigned from the school, Dr Mouat would neither confirm nor deny.

However on Monday Dr Mouat called in sick to St Elphin's and on Tuesday when contacted at home Dr Mouat said: "I have been in the bathroom for the past two days."

Yesterday, after the closure had been announced, Dr Mouat said: "I wasn't even told by the proprietors that the meeting was taking place."

"I am horrified that they have taken this decision when I am not actually there, when I am off sick."

"I am very sad because there is a long history there. There are some very good staff. It's horrific. It is absolutely awful for them. It's such an awful time."

Dr Mouat confirms that she will not be attending a parents' meeting scheduled for Wednesday night at Highfields School.



# Staff haven't been paid for a fortnight say Union bosses

UNION bosses are threatening legal action on behalf of St Elphin's staff who were not paid in the final fortnight before the school closed.

The GMB Union and UNISON say the school's auxiliary staff, who are supposed to be paid weekly, did not receive their wages on the last two pay days.

"We cannot allow this to go unchallenged because staff are not being

paid for work they have done," said Jeanette Darby, education steward for UNISON.

She added: "We are consulting our solicitors and we will start legal action very shortly.

"It's the people who are paid weekly - such as the kitchen staff and clerical admin staff - who are not being paid.

"We don't know what's going to hap-

pen with the staff who are paid monthly, but they could well follow in the same trend.

"It's very sad and worrying for the school children and staff, but this is a good demonstration of the problems that arise when people try to mix profit with the education of children.

"There are children there who are due to take exams in a couple of

weeks and no provision has been made for them."

Mel Beaumont, branch secretary for the GMB, said: "The auxiliary staff have worked for nothing for the last two weeks.

"The way my members have been treated is disgraceful."

He warned: "Don't write off the possibility of legal proceedings in pursuance of outstanding money."