

'The sect that made my family's life hell'.

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If a member of the **Exclusive Brethren** breaks the sect's rules, the punishment is severe. Women's Editor Christen Pears meets a woman whose family was cast out by the Brethren after her teenage boys went to a snooker club

BORN into the Christian sect, the **Exclusive Brethren**, Andrew and Christine Wallach were brought up to believe the outside world was full of evil. Radios, televisions, newspapers and computers were banned, and they were forbidden from socialising with 'worldly people'.

But they were also brought up to believe they were special, singled out by God. Andrew worked in a Brethren-owned pharmaceutical business, while Christine stayed at home and looked after the couple's seven children. They knew that if they were ever in trouble, other members of the fellowship would help them out.

It was a safe and secure existence, one which they had no reason to doubt, but it ended abruptly when their two teenage sons sneaked out to a snooker club in the Hertfordshire town where they lived. Two days later, the Wallachs were officially "shut up", ostracised by the rest of the community, eventually being cast out to live in the world they had been taught to fear.

Separated from their family, with no friends to fall back, no money and no jobs, they struggled to survive. Eight years on, they're still trying to come to terms with what happened.

"We had never had to look after ourselves before or make our own decisions. We knew nothing about the big, wide world and were on our own, completely vulnerable," says Christine.

Today, the couple live in Newton-le-Willows, in North Yorkshire, where they're renovating the terraced house that used to be the village shop and Post Office. The walls of the living room are covered in family

photographs, giving no hint of their painful past but it's always there, just below the surface. Often, as she talks, Christine begins to fiddle nervously with her nails. Once she cries, as she recalls her mother's death.

"I knew she'd been ill but they didn't tell my how ill and then I had a phone call saying that if I went to the hospital, I might be able to see her before she died.

"When I went in, my father was sitting across the bed. He said: 'You know she's dying of a broken heart, don't you?' and at the time, it seemed like he was saying it was my fault. Later, I found out it meant she had still been trying to clear my name."

The couple recently took part in a BBC Everyman documentary about the **Exclusive Brethren** and Christine is writing a book about her experiences, perhaps as a means of exorcising her ghosts.

Founded in the 19th Century, there are now thought to be around 15,000 members of the **Exclusive Brethren** in Britain, concentrated mainly in the South and Midlands. They are ruled by strictly dogmatic and powerful elders, and although they live in the community, they cut themselves off from outsiders to the extent of refusing even to eat with them.

Andrew and Christine had been in trouble before. Just after they were married, they were shut up because the elders thought Andrew was too ambitious. But nothing prepared them for what happened in 1994. Neil, 18, and Robert, 17, were not alone when they went to the snooker club but they were seen as the ringleaders. Their punishment was to be shut up, along with their parents, while their sisters moved out to live with friends and family.

Every time they met one of the Brethren on the street, they were blanked, even by their own daughters. "We were like ghosts," recalls Christine with a shudder.

In a bid to have the family re-admitted to the fold, the boys admitted they had been wrong and apologised, but to no avail.

"The elders put us under pressure to put the boys out, which is what Andrew's brother had done with his older son, but we didn't feel they could cope. It was our responsibility as parents to help them through, not abandon them."

The couple's decision to stand by their sons cost Andrew his job and the couple were cast out. Their five youngest children followed them but their eldest daughters decided to remain with the Brethren. For eight years, they weren't allowed to see them, they weren't even informed when they married or had children.

"That was so painful. I've cried buckets over the fact that we couldn't see our girls," says Christine.

There was a change when the elders contacted the family again after hearing about the Everyman documentary. They admitted they had been wrong to punish the family so severely and Christine and Andrew were allowed to see their daughters and grandchildren, although contact was restricted.

"They still weren't allowed to eat with us and it was a bit wooden. If we gave them a hug or a kiss, they weren't allowed to hug back. It was like hugging a statue."

As terrible as being cut off from their children was, the Wallachs had other pressing matters to think about.

"The Brethren are rich and they look after each other. If someone is out of a job, they find one for them. We were completely on our own and we hadn't realised how hard it would be. We were both over 50 and had only O-levels. No one would even give us an interview."

Andrew now works as a sales manager and Christine sells kitchenware but at first she found herself doing leaflet drops and selling telephone directories.

"We had a mortgage to pay, and I knew we couldn't rely on that. I then found a job selling books for Dorling Kindersley and that was my learning curve in the big, wide world. I didn't have any friends to sell to or to have parties, so I had to go round schools and hospitals. That's when I started meeting people and building a new life. Within five years, I had built up a really strong business and that's when I got myself re-vamped."

Women in the fellowship have to keep their hair long and wear headscarves as a sign of their subservience. Having her hair cut and starting to wear make-up was a huge step forward for Christine, and it marked the start of a new life.

"I had to do it, partly because I wanted to fit in socially with everyone else but also because I couldn't carry on being the same person. It has been really difficult for Andrew. Instead of being a subservient wife, I've become a person in my own right and he's had to adjust to that."

After they were first shut up, the Wallachs were desperate to return to the Brethren but they've finally accepted their new life and seem to be enjoying it. However, their readiness to talk to the media has re-opened old wounds.

"At first, they apologised for what they'd done to us and they have helped us out with some of our debts but now they now say they feel betrayed by what we've done. My biggest fear is that they will ban us from seeing our daughters.

"But we had to do it because we feel they need to see for themselves what damage they do to other people.

We don't think they have any awareness of what they put us through. The fact they've said sorry actually gets under my skin. It's so glib, considering the eight years of absolute misery we had."

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