



SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

Smack bang opposite Green Park, the deluxe new Eaton Square Upper School - the first co-ed school in central London to open in decades - celebrates its first day of school

JONATHAN WHILEY REPORTS



ABOVE: Group headmaster Sebastian Hepher
BELOW: 106 Piccadilly, location of the new school

All the tell-tale signs of the summer holidays are present when Sebastian Hepher shakes my hand authoritatively. Gift bags surround the headmaster's desk at Eaton Square School like presents amassing under a Christmas tree and the entire building is almost eerily quiet.

Much like any other summer, Sebastian is looking forward to a well-earned family break in France before the start of the new academic year. The difference this September? The small matter of opening a new school in the heart of Mayfair.

"For the past five or six years we have always wanted to open a senior school because there are not enough in London," says the 51-year old.

"There has been a crying need for another senior school in London. For Eaton Square, it was a question of when we could find a building or a site that had this D1 [non-residential] use, which is the critical thing.

"That happened a year and a half ago and after that it moved very quickly. In central London, co-education is very under-served, and so having an option made a lot of sense."

Eaton Square Upper School, for 11 to 18-year olds, opens this month. Located at 106 Piccadilly, its address is enviable for its views over Green Park and its history as a Grade I-listed property.

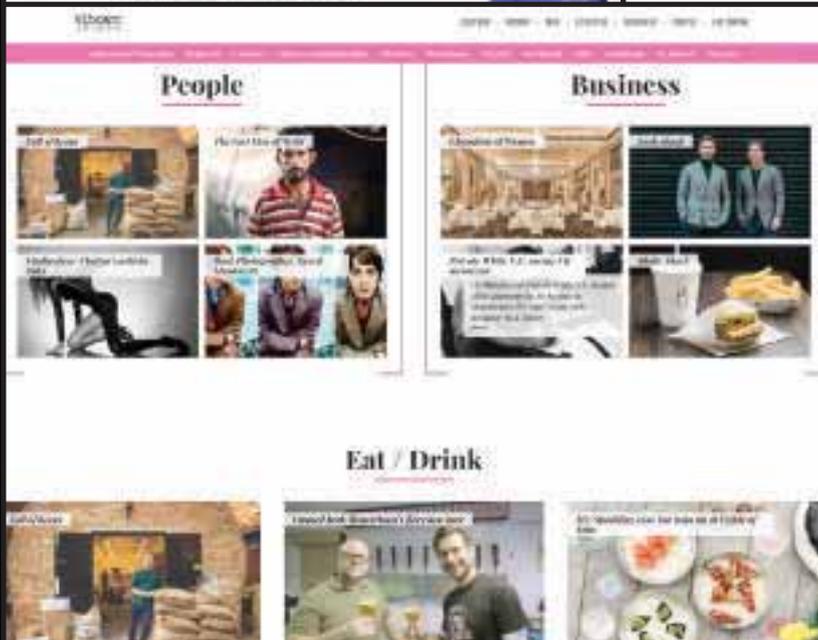
In 1764 it was home to Lord and Lady Coventry and in 1848, it became the residence for the French ambassador.



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Some 20 years later, it became the St James's Club – Ian Fleming was a regular in the 1940s – and latterly, it housed a fashion and language school.

“The history of the area is fantastic,” says Sebastian. “The richness of the area means there is so much they can get involved in, and being so central is a major plus.”

Phillip Williams is headmaster of the new school – 100 pupils and 21 teachers are on the books – with Sebastian overseeing both in a “group head” role. With the Ecclestone Square site, they can now educate pupils from nursery age until they are 18.

“Growing a school from scratch is an enormous privilege and a wonderful opportunity,” says Sebastian. “It’s also a challenge. Every boy and girl at the school could be setting traditions that could be acted out in 150 years.”

It’s co-ed status is a sign of the times. Sebastian acknowledges that historically “the independent sector thought it much better to educate separately”, but it’s an opinion that is no longer in vogue.

“It’s a natural reflection of life,” he says.

“I think it’s very good preparation for university and then what comes after that in terms of relationships and understanding each other.”

As a father of four – with two children having had a single sex education and two from a co-ed background – he believes there isn’t a “one size fits all” model.

“As I say to every parent here, whether you choose single sex or co-ed, it has to be entirely around your own child in terms of character and need,” he says.

The new school also operates an “open to all” policy with testing in year six and an interview with every pupil.

“This year we have tried to get a real mix of pupils; academically very strong or sporty or artistic. That is really what we want the school to be like.”

Sebastian wants to engage with the local community too; partnerships with local sports clubs are being established and there will be outdoor lessons in Green Park. “Every school needs to become part of its

community, so that the community feels attached to it and can benefit from it,” he says.

The message from the first assembly will be clear – pupils will be reminded that they will be the leaders for future generations.

Sebastian admits that he was far from the model pupil in his own school life and had “mixed reports”.

“Some of them were pretty awful,” he says. “I had detentions; I wound teachers up. I used to get sent to my primary headmistress on a regular basis because I was thrown out of country dancing quite a lot.”

A cricket report in year seven proved particularly memorable. “It said: ‘Sebastian moves between the stumps with the speed of a semi-articulated lorry.’ That one sticks in the mind.

Very slow to get going obviously.”

The new school, however, will hit the ground running. Even two months before the start of the new academic year and with France in his sights, Sebastian’s vision of what represents success is clear.

“It’s that they have tried their hardest to achieve all they can,” he says.

eatonsquareupper.school/



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ABOVE LEFT: The school canteen
BELOW: Assemblies will be held in the state-room