

The Devon cult that canes tiny children to 'cleanse their sins': As social services launches an investigation, a mother's shocking testimony lifts the lid on the mysterious commune squatting on a farm

**'Vicki' has lifted the lid on the commune she escaped from in 2005
Then a vulnerable, single mother, she was ordered to beat her son
The commune is linked to the controversial US Twelve Tribes cult
Forty children were taken in to care at two German branches recently
The NSPCC has now raised concerns with Stentwood Farm in Devon**

By [DAVID JONES](#)

PUBLISHED: 22:25 GMT, 4 October 2013 | UPDATED: 23:18 GMT, 4 October 2013

The first mists of autumn have descended on the Blackdown Hills, and next weekend one of the alternative communities who have gravitated to this moody, legend-steeped part of the West Country will attempt to lighten the spirits by staging a seasonal festival.

The two-day event, at a rambling farmstead near the small Devon village of Dunkeswell, will feature such local traditions as circle-dancing and apple-pressing to make fresh juice, and it will end with a play — a homespun morality tale enacted by the group's 20-odd children.

To many villagers, news of this performance has come as a surprise. For although members of the Twelve Tribes, a controversial, US-based cult, began squatting at abandoned Stentwood Farm 14 years ago, and have built it into an impressive smallholding, with a quaint tea-room serving home-baked food, their children are so seldom permitted to leave the commune — hidden down a little-used lane — that few outsiders knew so many live there.



Harsh: Children in a German commune similar to the one being probed by social services in Devon

While their baggy-smocked parents greet passing hikers and cyclists with a cautious wave as they do their chores, and the chosen few are permitted to sell their locally-renowned bread and cakes at markets and pop festivals (at the same time trying to recruit converts), for their sons and daughters, contact with non-believers is severely restricted.

Dressed puritanically in bonnets and canvas trousers, they are not permitted to attend local schools, join sports teams or clubs, watch TV or use the internet, much less make friends beyond their closed community. Indeed, they are forbidden from playing any game involving imagination or fantasy.

To most parents, this controlled upbringing alone would be cause for concern. Yet it is not the darkest trial facing the Twelve Tribes children, as they have to conform to the cult's stultifying doctrine.

In recent weeks, via an undercover TV documentary screened in Germany (where similar communes have been raided) and later by personal accounts of former members — including a British mother who escaped the Devon commune with her son — details of the brutal discipline to which they are routinely subjected have started to emerge.

Supposedly to cleanse them of sin and prepare them for salvation when the world ends (the cult insists it will, within the next century or so), they are repeatedly ordered to bend over to be thrashed on their bare bottoms with a willow rod soaked in resin to make it more pliable.

And as these so-called 'correction' sessions are central to the cult's beliefs — a mishmash of Judaism and Christianity devised by its messianic leader Eugene Spriggs, a former carnival showman from Tennessee — the children are often thrashed several times a day.



Founder: The Twelve Tribes cult was formed by US man Gene Spriggs, who believes in strict corporal punishment

They are 'spanked' for even the most minor infraction, such as talking out of turn, and according to the former Devon member, Vicki (who wants her surname withheld) the thrashings are very painful, leaving ugly red and purple weals. The cult's aim, she says, is to break their children's resistance and it begins almost from the day they are born.

As babies, if they repeatedly drop their bottle, for example, or won't stop crying, parents are told to grasp their heads tightly and push them forwards and downwards — as if they were puppies being trained.

Or they might be swaddled tightly to restrict their movement. Then, when they reach an age where they are deemed capable of understanding instructions — which might be before their first birthday — the ritual beatings begin.

Eventually they become a meekly accepted part of a cult child's daily life, so that, by the time they reach their early teens, they are so totally conditioned to being hit that they not only accept their punishment but actually ask for it to be administered when they have misbehaved, fearing God will punish them if they don't atone for their sins.

'I want it to be clear we are not talking about the occasional smack for a naughty child here,' Vicki told me.

'I think every parent has the right to discipline their child as they see fit, and use the occasional smack if they wish, but this is something entirely different. This is systematic conditioning — a sort of aversion therapy of the most brutal kind.'



Correction: The cult claims the punishment sessions are designed to cleanse children of sin

In Germany, the child protection authorities clearly agree. Shocked by scenes in this month's TV documentary, immediately after it was screened they raided the cult's two Bavarian communes and took all 40 children into protective care, where they remain pending court proceedings.

Given that the law prevents German parents from striking their children at all, and the film showed a four-year-old boy being led to a punishment cellar and caned until he screamed for mercy — simply for refusing to admit he was 'tired' — they are likely to remain in foster care.

The NSPCC is sufficiently 'anxious' over claims that children are being similarly mistreated at Stentwood Farm that it has alerted Devon social services. This week a spokesman said it had launched a 'review' in conjunction with the police, and the Mail understands that they plan to inspect the commune.

However, the 2004 Children Act allows British parents more latitude than Germany's, permitting 'reasonable punishment', and as no action was taken when Vicki first made allegations of child abuse, after leaving the cult in 2005, she fears the beatings will continue with impunity.

In the light of the story she told me this week, this would beggar belief.

Like many of Twelve Tribes' 3,000 worldwide devotees, Vicki was vulnerable when she was enticed into its gentle embrace nine years ago. Then in her 20s, unemployed, and caring alone for her six-year-old son, she was a disillusioned Christian searching for fulfilment.

Attracted by the cult's website, which promised a new way of living that would restore the spiritual and communal values of Israel's original 12 tribes, she made visits from her home in Bournemouth to the Devon commune — always greeted with hugs and fruit in her room — and, in the summer of 2004, she was baptised.

Up to that point, she says, she had not been told about the beatings, and certainly not that she would have to thrash her son. Whenever guests came to stay, members made sure they couldn't hear the swishing of willow and muffled the children's cries.

But soon after her induction her allotted 'shepherd' — a bearded American named Lawrence Stern who remains among the commune's hierarchy — told her it was time to begin 'correcting' her boy.

'I can't remember what he was supposed to have done wrong, but he was only six and it was something very minor,' she recalls.



© Alamy
Beatings: Parents at Stentwood Farm are encouraged to physically discipline their children

'I was told he must touch the floor with his hands so his bottom was in the air. Because he was young and just starting to be disciplined, I was told "only" to hit him five times, and to explain to him beforehand why I was doing it: to cleanse his conscience. It's all supposed to be done very calmly, never in anger.

'But when you hit a child [with a stick] for the first time, they instinctively drop to the floor and curl up to protect themselves, so I went to Stern and said I was having difficulties.

'He just said that if my son wouldn't let me complete all five strokes I would have to keep going back to the beginning and starting again, even if I had got to number four, because a child who hadn't willingly accepted the discipline hadn't been cleansed.

'Eventually, my son stopped resisting, but I had to hit him a lot of times. He had stripe marks and bruises.'

Vicki says the willow rods would sometimes snap as a child was being beaten, but Stern's wife, Chassida, kept a stock of replacements.

Children weren't only beaten by their parents, she says. If they were being looked after by another adult in the group, that person was also permitted to 'correct' a child with the stick.

Today, living a new life in Yorkshire with her son (now in his teens and remarkably well-adjusted, she says) Vicki is clearly ashamed of her actions. But she was then so thoroughly 'brainwashed', she says, she was convinced she was 'saving him from Hell'.

Had she known the dark secrets she has since learned about the Twelve Tribes and its dubious leader, Spriggs — or Yoneq, as he prefers (all members have ancient Israelite names) — she might have been less gullible.

Now a wizened 76-year-old with a straggly grey beard and shoulder-length hair, Spriggs was a high-school guidance counsellor as well as a carnival front-man before dropping out and living as a hippy in California, where he formed his own church.

Then, 40 years ago, reputedly declaring himself to be a reincarnation of the prophet Elijah, he decamped with 1,000 followers to Vermont and set up a commune, later sending missionaries to start 12 new ones in Europe, Australia and South America: each representing an original tribe of Israel.

They are run on the profits of a string of bakeries, delis and small factories, and it has been reported that the cult has a sizeable fortune, stashed in offshore accounts. Though it must be said that by comparison with other American religious cult leaders, Spriggs appears to live relatively modestly.

The scandal surrounding him concerns his private life. Along with homosexuality and racial equality (both of which go against Old Testament teaching, the cult claims) the greatest sin in the TT's eyes is adultery, which is punishable by banishment. According to former members, however, the rules abruptly changed when Spriggs discovered that his younger fourth wife, Marsha, had enjoyed illicit affairs with at least two young 'disciples'.

Perhaps fearing a mass defection, Spriggs ordered her transgressions to be covered up, it is claimed. When the truth emerged, in an email from one of Marsha's lovers, he forgave her.

All this is documented on anti-cult websites. Among followers, however, their prophet is beyond reproach, not least for his stance in the Twelve Tribes' greatest victory. It came in 1984 when, alerted to the child beatings and other alleged offences, state authorities raided the Vermont compound and took 114 children into care.

Quoting Proverbs 13:24 — from which derives the adage 'spare the rod, spoil the child' — Spriggs stood defiant, hiring a slick lawyer (who later joined the cult) to persuade a judge the state had acted unconstitutionally and order the children's release.

Since then, the U.S authorities have tolerated the cult's child-rearing methodology, which is now enshrined in a 147-page manual, littered with Biblical references which supposedly justify 'spanking', as the group call it.

Entitled 'Our Child Training Teachings', the parental handbook is adorned with happy family photographs, glossing over another uncomfortable truth: that many Twelve Tribes families have been torn apart by their views over whacking their children.

For Vicki, the iniquity of striking children in the name of religion dawned as she witnessed the fear of two of Stentwood Farm's youngest infants.

One was a four-year-old girl, whose 'sin' was to bundle up some rags (since dolls are banned) and pretend she was cradling a baby in her arms. The other, also four, was a boy who, though suffering from some form of autism, wasn't taken for professional help, for the Twelve Tribes only resort to that in the most desperate circumstances (in France one couple were jailed for failing to seek medical treatment for a child who died of a heart defect).

Instead, he was regarded as persistently naughty, and suffered the painful consequences. So after living amid this regime for six months, Vicki sunk into a deep depression, the cult-prescribed therapy for which was that she must 'roar like a lion'. It only lifted after she and her son fled the farm.

A few weeks later she gave a nine-hour statement to a police child protection officer, reporting not only the beatings, but circumcisions carried out without medical training and other apparent offences.

Social services were alerted, but to her disgust nothing was done. This week, a spokesman for Devon council told the Mail: 'They [the allegations] were looked into but we were unable to substantiate the concerns which were raised then.'

Now, he said, a fresh review had been launched and they would 'gather as much evidence as possible . . . from any possible source' and decide whether to begin a formal investigation.

But the commune's elders told me they had nothing to hide and would gladly open their doors to the authorities. Yet they were deeply discomfited by my arrival, demanding I leave the supposedly welcoming tea-room.

But before I left the farm, one of the elders — I believe he was Stern — told me: 'We do correct our kids when they are wrong, but we believe this promotes love, like the Bible says. We want to learn to love one another. We don't go out on the streets and tell other people how to live their lives. We're not closed about our methods but we aren't trying to shove them down people's throats to change society.'

Had I been permitted to meet the children, Vicki says they would probably have seemed deceptively well cared-for, having been cowed into an almost robotically tranquil state.

This may also explain why, even as they were being snatched from their parents, the German children seemed devoid of emotion.

So, next weekend, when they have the rare privilege of staging a play, villagers will doubtless be charmed by the seldom-seen tribal children — never suspecting how they might suffer once the curtain falls.

Additional reporting by Simon Trump