

by Helena Frith Powell

EVER since I can remember, I've had a pot belly. When I was 12, I would stand in front of a mirror, point at my tummy and complain: 'Why is this here?' I was not a fat teenager. In fact, I was so skinny I would wear two pairs of trousers to make my legs look fatter. But I still had a protruding tummy.

It carried on into my 20s where, at university, I met a girl called Rachel who had one of those washboard stomachs. Amazingly, we're still friends. Looking at her flat stomach made me determined to change things.

So I began a life sentence of sit-ups and avoiding foods that seemed to 'sit' on my tummy, such as bread and cakes. It didn't really make any difference, but I kept going as the alternative would mean an even more protruding tummy. I would try to do sit-ups every day, in front of the TV or listening to the radio. This carried on until I got pregnant eight years ago.

One of the reasons I have three children is that when I was pregnant, I didn't have to hold in my stomach any more. I would wander around, proudly showing my bump, dreading the day I would have to start doing those sit-ups again.

After having the last of my three children three years ago, however, not only was the pot belly back with a vengeance, but it came with the addition of slightly looser skin. And a bump of flesh just above my caesarean scar to make me feel even more unattractive.

Then earlier this year, while I was staying in a hotel room with far too many mirrors, I caught sight of my profile. However hard I tried to pull in my tummy, it refused to move. I sat down on the toilet seat in despair. This was a mistake. Sitting down made it look even worse. The words 'Michelle won't' popped into my head.

Let me say straight away that I'm not overweight. I weigh just under eight and a half stone and I am 5ft 11in tall. But there was no denying there was a tyre around my waist — and it made me miserable. It was a turning point for me. I was getting old.

I know men will find women's obsession with their own bodies hard to fathom, but believe me, we are ruled by our figures far more than we would care to admit.

I think most women have a body part they would like to change. And however much people tell you it looks fine, you can't help but look in the mirror and focus on that flaw.

My tummy began to affect my confidence so much that I even considered buying those ugly Bridget Jones-style knickers, but they would have made me feel even less attractive.

There seemed to be no solution. I had the horrible realisation that, for the first time in my life, I looked better with clothes on than off.

AND then, while researching a book about anti-ageing hot trends, I met Dr Steven Victor, one of New York's leading cosmetic dermatologists, who told me he could get rid of my pot belly in less than an hour.

I'd always thought that going under the knife purely for vanity is insane. The downside is you could die and the upside is, at best, cosmetic.

I thought women who went in for plastic surgery were sad, vain, bored, rich or all of the above. When my husband told me he would be furious if I ever had any cosmetic work done, I thought: 'What a great man — he loves me just as I am, wrinkles and all.'

I was determined to grow old gracefully and adopt a relaxed approach to sagging skin. That is no longer the case. I have realised that ageing without resorting to cosmetic help is akin to giving up on your looks.

Perfect images stare out at us from magazines (often touched up, though that doesn't make us feel any better), but we can no longer dismiss them as just pretty young things.

Certainly not now that Twiggy has shown it is possible to look hot at 60 and Liz Hurley, 42, was voted the woman with the best body in England.

Other women play a big part in the pressure to look young, too. I have a friend whose son is at a posh prep school and who finds the most stressful

wear on the school run. As one of my fiftysomething friends put it: 'You can't relax for a minute. If you let yourself go, you're seen as a bad person, as someone who is lazy and just doesn't care.'

Increasingly, women of a certain age — I am only 39, but I feel the pressure keenly — think they are missing out if they have not made an appointment for that Botox injection or managed to squeeze into the latest skinny jeans.

It's almost as if, because it's all out there and readily available, you have a duty to do it. No one is more reviled in France than Brigitte Bardot, the woman who once had it all.

Some may say she has aged naturally but the majority of French women see her as an example of how not to age. 'She looks a mess,' says Nicole, a Parisian friend of mine. 'To be given the gift of such beauty and then to throw a way like that shows a total lack of respect for yourself.'

Maybe it's a sad reflection of our times that physical perfection is regarded as

even my aunt told me she can't bear people who look a mess because she sees their exterior as a reflection of what's going on inside. 'If they are a mess, then so are their brains,' she says.

According to the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons, cosmetic surgery procedures were up by a third in 2006 compared to 2005, a figure that will only increase as procedures become more effective and affordable.

As I approach 40, I have found myself at a crossroads. Should I age gracefully or take advantage of everything modern science has to offer?

Not surprisingly, when this New York surgeon told me he could get rid of my worst enemy in less than an hour, using a new liposuction procedure, I was tempted.

I have seen a traditional liposuction operation and found it to be one of the most gruesome things ever. The surgeon cut a semi hole with a scalpel just above the patient's hips on either side, into which he inserted a cannula, a 3mm

TATA TO MY TUM!

Helena believed plastic surgery was only for the vain. So what made her go under the knife to remove a spare tyre so small it was almost invisible?



Foreverfit: Helena is delighted with her new look

Daily Mail, Thursday, April 12, 2007



BEFORE



AFTER

fat cells and then sucked them up through a tube. The surgeon spent almost an hour pounding away at the poor woman; the internal bruising must have been horrendous.

Several people have died having liposuction, including Stella Obasanjo, the wife of the Nigerian president, who went for an operation in a Marbella clinic in 2005 and never came out.

The differences with this procedure, called SmartLipo, are several. First, you get to stay awake to watch the fat leave your body, a very satisfying experience, meaning you don't risk death under a general anaesthetic.

Second, the cannula used is much smaller, between 1mm and 2mm, so the healing process is faster.

Third, the laser — which is used in the procedure to 'melt' the fat inside you — is then turned on your skin, making your body think it is being burned and causing it to tighten by encouraging your fibroblasts (a type of cell) to produce more collagen, which makes your skin tighter and plumper — in other words, younger.

I was slightly impulsive in making the decision to go under the laser there and then, while I was in New York researching the book (you can have the same treatment in Britain, where the exchange rate means it will cost about £2,000 for a stomach).

I didn't dare tell my husband what I was doing because I knew how he felt about cosmetic procedures. What I did tell him was that I was doing something connected to the book and I promised that it didn't involve general anaesthetic or scalpels. "Good," he told me. "You can't leave me with all these children."

But as I lay there on the operating bed two days later wearing green surgical knickers and a paper shower cap (not a good look) and the nurse prepared me for the procedure, I had a panic attack.

My tummy was covered in purple penmarks where Dr Victor was going to remove the fat. Was I going to leave my three children motherless for the sake of my pot belly?

This was as close to an operation (bar my Caesarean) as I had ever been and I didn't actually have to be there. Had I gone mad? But before I had time to rethink, we were under way.

First, I had some local anaesthetic where the laser went in (just above my hip) and Dr Victor injected a watery solution with painkillers so the part about to be treated didn't hurt. I was offered valium, but declined.

He got to work with the laser about

ten minutes after the liquid had gone in. Slowly, he manipulated it around my stomach. It was not an unpleasant experience. As he moved the laser across my stomach, I was somehow detached from it.

I could feel the laser moving inside me and sometimes there was a bit of resistance, but mostly it was just rather strange. Thankfully, there was no smell at all — not even a whiff of cordite. It was all rather peaceful and I almost dozed off.

The laser worked for 13 minutes, making my fat deposit a thing of the past and firing my fibroblasts into action. Then, the cannula was eased into the hole the laser went into and I watched as my fat (it looks just like melted butter) was sucked up a tube and into a plastic container.

This part wasn't strictly necessary as the fat would come out of its own accord, when I sweated or went to the toilet, but this way I would get quicker results.

I was told to rest on the first day, wear a type of surgical corset for a week and take no strenuous exercise for two weeks. But despite this advice I spent the afternoon shopping.

As a result, that evening I was tired, cold and shaky — totally my own fault for not following the nurse's orders.

But at no stage did my tummy feel uncomfortable. It was protected by a black corset that ended just below my breasts, which helps reduce swelling and make recovery quicker. You wear it for at least one week and up to two, depending on how you feel.

On the first night after the procedure, I took off the corset to have a shower. My tummy already looked flatter, although as my husband — who was in New York with me — helpfully pointed out that may have been the effect of the corset pushing it in.

I told him what I'd done only when I met him after the procedure. He took the news very calmly. Yes, he looked amazed, but luckily his main worry was that I might have to buy a new wardrobe of clothes.

WITH traditional liposuction, the total recovery time is eight weeks. But the tiny scars I had where the cannula went in dropped off after six days. By then, the swelling was going down and I could see a flatter tummy appearing.

The final results of the procedure are only really visible a few weeks after the operation, which is now.

I can confirm that as I write I am wearing low-cut jeans with a fairly short top — and that my tummy looks great. In fact, when I lie down, it's practically concave. So, obviously, I spend a lot of time lying down.

I'm so looking forward to seeing my university friend Rachel again and comparing stomachs — now that she's had four children and no liposuction. And I have bought a new bikini, something I haven't dared to wear for the past ten years. And it is seriously low-cut.

There are friends who see this sort of thing as egotistical, vain and rather pointless. Well, I used to be one of those people. But now I know how much difference to your general mood and well-being a procedure like this can make, I'm all for it.

I hated my pot belly. It was one thing I totally obsessed about my body. Other people may not have noticed it, but I did — all the time. If something makes you that miserable, it's worth changing.

Every time I look down at my belly I now feel happy instead of enraged, and that's got to be better for me.

So does it really matter whether what makes you look good is natural or not?

The surgeon told me this procedure was the equivalent of doing five million sit-ups. I don't know about you, but I just don't have the time or the motivation for all that.

OK, this might be the lazy girl's way out, but so what? It works and I am much happier as a result. I only wish I'd done it years ago.

■ FOR information on SmartLipo, contact Muriel McDanel on 07773 801025 or go to www.starcosmedical.com