

The first picture of the woman who forced her healthy son into a wheelchair ...

Fantasy life: Lisa Hayden-Johnson arrives at court in Exeter. She pretended her son had a life-threatening allergy which left him unable to eat

By any standards, it was a tear-jerking scene: a devoted mother presenting her desperately sick little boy to Camilla Parker Bowles at Westminster Abbey and helping him collect his Children of Courage medal.

Earlier that day, December 14, 2005, Lisa Hayden-Johnson took her five-year-old wheelchair-bound son to 10 Downing Street to have breakfast with Tony and Cherie Blair.

The merry-go-round continued when she appeared on GMTV, sitting on the sofa beside presenters Fiona Phillips and Andrew Castle, and telling the heart-breaking story of how her child had battled since birth with a life-threatening allergy which left him unable to eat.

Those who saw this heart-rending spectacle had no reason to suspect they were witnessing a woman who police would one day describe as 'Britain's most evil mother'.

No doubt they would have been astonished to know that every word that came from Hayden-Johnson's lips was a lie.

The truth? Her son was in perfect physical health. But Hayden-Johnson, who also faked her qualifications to get a job as a nurse, forced him into a wheelchair, fed him through a tube in his stomach and even allowed doctors, taken in by her deception, to perform unnecessary surgery on him.

Her lies proved to be lucrative, too. Aside from the thousands raised by local charities in Brixham, South Devon, where the family lived, Hayden-Johnson garnered an estimated

The family also enjoyed a European cruise paid for by well-wishers and a car from Motability. Her son's school spent thousands on adaptations for his wheelchair.

Last week, after a two-year investigation which has left Devon and Cornwall Police aghast at the level of her deception, the 35-year-old pleaded guilty to child cruelty and perverting the course of justice at Exeter Crown Court. She will be sentenced in January.

Today, the Mail can name her and publish her picture for the first time after a court order banning her identification expired last night.

Now, the hundreds of people who were moved by Hayden-Johnson's plight will no doubt be wondering how a seemingly devoted mother could treat her youngest child in such a despicable manner and, above all, how she managed to con so many people - including her own husband and her parents - for so long.

Former neighbour, and nurse, Kate Neate, who used to live opposite Hayden-Johnson in Brixham, told me this week of the double life the seemingly perfect mother was living.

The 45-year-old used to see her neighbour's son - who cannot be named for legal reasons - going to school in an electric wheelchair, but playing football and riding a bike when he got home.

'She would tell us that he was being fed through a tube but I would see him eating sweets and ice cream in the garden,' said Mrs Neate.

'I was suspicious about her from the start, but you don't like to question a mother's word. I think she got away with it because she told everyone she was a qualified nurse, and the child wasn't old enough to dispute the symptoms she was telling the doctors about. And she was very confrontational and intimidating. She could pick an argument with anyone.'

The story began when her baby son was born nine weeks prematurely in 2001. He weighed just 3lb 6oz and was placed in a special care baby unit where he was put on a ventilator.

When Hayden-Johnson tried breastfeeding, the baby would not keep anything down and so was given a nasogastric tube for feeding.

As the mother of a sick baby, Hayden-Johnson was lavished with attention by sympathetic medical staff, friends and relatives.

And when she took her baby home, it seems, she was reluctant to give that up. Even though the boy's early troubles were soon behind him, she began calling out ambulances in the night and telling doctors that her baby could not keep his food down.

So began the lies which spiralled into a fantasy existence lasting six years, during which time Hayden-Johnson managed to bamboozle doctors, insisting there was something wrong with her son, even when they could find no symptoms.

As the child began losing dangerous amounts of weight - because of lack of nutrition - they had no choice but to perform surgery to fit a feeding tube directly into his stomach when he was four years old.

He was seen by doctors at hospitals in Bristol before being sent to Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children for further investigations - which revealed nothing.

His mother, meanwhile, was telling anyone who would listen that he had cerebral palsy, cystic fibrosis, the throat disorder dysphagia and was allergic to nearly all food.

Her desire for attention, it seems, knew no bounds and Hayden-Johnson was soon trying to sell her story.

In one magazine article in 2004 she claimed that without his food pump her son would die, and that he had an allergy so rare that there were only six documented cases in the world.

She went on to describe the torment he suffered when he watched other members of his family eating normal meals. 'What choice did we have - make him sit with us at the dinner table, watching us eat, or get him to sit alone while we all ate together?' she said. 'Either of those seemed too cruel.'

Later she added: 'Guilt ate at me. I'd buy him a toy car every time I told him he couldn't have something to eat.'

And piling lie on lie, she described how her son had to face life without food.

'He can't eat at his friends' birthday parties or at family barbecues. He can't have a hotdog or an ice cream on the beach.'

Ending with the kind of saccharine statement she loved to use about her son, she said: 'When I look at him, I don't see a sick child. I see his cheeky smile and huge puppy-dog eyes.'

Back in Brixham, Hayden-Johnson soon became something of a local celebrity. Five years ago, when her son was three, she put out an appeal in her local paper asking for ideas on how to help the little boy move around with the heavy equipment required to pump milk into his stomach via a drip.

The family were inundated with offers of help from readers, and a carpenter, Pete Cuthbert, and designer, David Langford, offered to build him a model Ferrari in which to house the food pump. When he was presented with the gift, Hayden-Johnson dressed herself up for yet more photoshoots and TV appearances.

'We're really overwhelmed,' she gushed on local television. 'There are a lot of very good people out there.'

But when the cameras were switched off, her self-important, confrontational manner began to grate with some of her neighbours - as did her boasts about the holidays the family had been given because of her son's illness.

Neighbour Mrs Neate recalls how on one occasion, Hayden-Johnson wrote to Simon Cowell telling him of her son's plight, and later discharged him from hospital - he often went in for tests - so she could use the free X Factor tickets sent to them in the post.

'They began having a very good standard of living,' says Mrs Neate.

'She also told me that she had sued medical staff and claimed damages. It's horrific to think that she used her son for her own gains like that.'

While this was going on, Hayden-Johnson lurched even further into her fantasy world, lying about her qualifications to find work as a phlebotomist - a blood nurse - at a medical centre in Torbay.

In fact, she had no qualifications at all. She had embarked on a nursing course at King's College in London while still living with her parents in Croydon as a teenager, but she dropped out after just a few months.

In the end, the lying spiralled out of control. Questioned by one suspicious doctor in Torbay Hospital about her son, Hayden-Johnson became aggressive and hysterical.

At the same time she was raising eyebrows at the clinic where she worked because of her over-bearing manner with patients.

Instead of admitting her lies, she simply told more, claiming this time that her son was diabetic and took blood-sugar samples at home which, when compared to tests done by professionals, were clearly inaccurate.

Three blood samples provided by Hayden-Johnson contained readings that seemed too high for even a genuine diabetic. When blood tests were done in hospital, the readings were normal.

Police believe that she may have laced her son's food and drink with huge amounts of sugar before taking the pin-prick test, but they cannot know for sure.

In 2007, when doctors suggested examining her son over three days in hospital, she panicked, no doubt realising she was about to be rumbled.

In May that year, in a desperate bid to cancel her son's hospital visit, she made up a story that she had been sexually assaulted by a mystery motorcyclist near her home.

She faked injuries by cutting herself and pouring bleach on her self-inflicted wounds, hoping to divert police attention away from the real crime.

But when police told her they were about to arrest a man for the crime, she panicked and confessed that she had made up the story.

She was arrested in October 2007 and, finally, her web of lies began to unravel. At the time, her husband was also arrested. But after questioning, police decided he had no idea about the massive deception and released him without charge.

When police officers searched Hayden-Johnson's home, they were still unprepared for what they found.

Her son's bedroom was described as being 'like a scene out of TV's Casualty'. Beside a specialist medical bed were boxes and boxes of unopened medication and pump feed - supposed to be used in his nasogastric tube, but unopened because her son didn't actually need it - as well as the green nurse's uniform she liked to wear at home.

Downstairs, they found homemade videos and family photographs showing the little boy running along the beach without his wheelchair or his tubes and eating roast dinners and burgers.

All of this raises disturbing questions about how Hayden-Johnson's husband could not have been aware something was not right. Yet police remain convinced that he was also a victim of her lies, and allowed his domineering wife - who he believed was medically qualified - to persuade him she knew what was best for their son.

According to investigator DC Mark Uren: 'She is a cruel, manipulative, evil mother who constantly lied to the medical professionals that her son was the sickest child in Britain.'

This is not a view shared by Hayden-Johnson's parents, Barry, an engineer, and Maureen. They told me this week that the allegations against their daughter were 'a tissue of lies'.

Certainly, it must be hard for the couple, who now live in Paignton, South Devon, to comprehend how the middle of their three daughters could have caused so much suffering to their grandson.

Her childhood in South London, was happy and stable. She attended a well-respected local comprehensive, Edenham High School in Croydon, left school at 16 with a handful of GCSEs and married young, at 19, to a supermarket manager.

After the birth of their daughter in 1998, the couple moved to Brixham in South Devon where their son was born at Torbay Hospital.

Just two years ago, Hayden-Johnson bragged about her 'perfect' life living by the sea.

'I have a fantastic life with my husband Chris and two children,' she wrote on her Friends Reunited webpage not long before she was arrested.

'We all moved to South Devon and I am now being a completely devoted mum and living off the man. Fantastic!' Behind closed doors, however, it is clear all was not well.

In the past few weeks, there has been little sign that Hayden-Johnson is sorry for her behaviour. Now estranged from her husband, she is living with a new boyfriend in a house in Torquay while she awaits sentencing.

Lawyers from the Crown Prosecution Service had spent months preparing themselves for a trial expected to last several weeks.

At the 11th hour last week, she changed her plea to guilty in the hope that the judge sentencing her will be lenient. After mitigation by defence barristers she will, in all likelihood, end up serving little more than a year.

But it is likely that the repercussions of her appalling behaviour will last a lifetime.

Now, her eight-year-old son is at home, the wheelchair and the tubes taken away. Quite how long the mental scars will take to heal, though, is anyone's guess.

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