

by Antonia Hoyle

SOPHIE ALDRIDGE smiles at the camera, a cocktail umbrella tucked playfully behind her ear. She wears an orange maxi skirt paired with a black and white crop top — the fashionable way to flaunt an enviably taut tummy.

At first glance, there is nothing particularly startling about the photo.

But you're sure to do a double-take when you learn that the 20-year-old was eight months pregnant at the time.

In fact, Sophie would have gasped in shock if someone had told her back then. For her total absence of a baby bump isn't the only surprising element of her story.

What's truly astounding is that she didn't realise she was expecting until the very moment 5lb 8oz Thomas was born last November.

'I know it might sound stupid to some people, but I had no idea I was pregnant,' she says. 'To give birth suddenly and without warning as I did was absolutely terrifying.'

'I didn't have *any* symptoms. I didn't get morning sickness. I was wearing my usual size ten clothes. I had regular periods throughout the pregnancy, and I didn't have any cravings.'

It seems inconceivable, doesn't it? Particularly the fact that she remained 9st throughout.

Although she didn't weigh herself regularly, Sophie doesn't believe she put on a single pound. Where on earth was little Thomas hiding?

To a cynical mind, it is all too far-fetched to believe. But the lack of bump bit is proved by the plethora of self-portraits — or 'selfies' — that Sophie took during the nine months. Not so much as a curve to her abdomen in any of them.

As for Sophie not knowing she was pregnant, this is something that sparks defensiveness. Which is understandable, perhaps, when you consider that since her story appeared in the Daily Mail on Wednesday, she has been labelled a fantasist, a liar and even a benefits scrounger.

Sophie, a support worker for adults with autism, retorts: 'People are saying I'm doing it for attention, and that Thomas is a burden to the taxpayer. But I was working full-time before my pregnancy, and I'm going back to work.'

'I really didn't have a clue I was expecting. I'm not stupid. If I had missed a period or had had

any sign at all, I would have gone straight to the doctor to have it checked out.'

Incredible as it seems, Sophie insists that her menstrual cycle was regular for the entire nine months — though experts question whether or not this is physically possible.

'You can't have periods during a pregnancy,' says independent midwife Nikki Khan.

'Pregnancy hormones can cause regular bleeding during the first trimester, which can be mistaken for periods. And light bleeding — spotting — can occur throughout the pregnancy.'

'But there is normally a cause for this, such as cervical erosion or a low lying placenta, and it should always be checked out.'

So can anyone *really* carry a baby to full term and not have a clue about it?

A widely cited study published in the British Medical Journal in 2002 found that up to one in 600 mothers-to-be don't realise they are pregnant until they give birth, or just before. However, a large-scale Serbian study in 2010 put the number at as few as one in every 7,225 pregnancies.

Even Sophie herself admits: 'No doctors have been able to explain it. They are baffled. To be honest, it's all been a bit of a blur.'

Four months on, she hasn't quite reconciled herself with her sudden and unexpected transition to motherhood. Still sleep deprived, her sentences are half-finished, her hot drinks half-drunk, and her attention distracted by the baby monitor at her side.

Strange to think that little over a year ago, Sophie was relishing the myriad freedoms of youth, with no plans to have children until she was 'at least 30'.

In addition to a sleek physique, Sophie's pictures capture this care-free spirit. At three months, she wears a pair of dungarees that flash her tiny 26-inch waist.

At five months, she's in a skin-tight boob tube most non-pregnant women would struggle to get over their knees. At six months, she's at a friend's wedding, quaffing champagne.

Throughout, she was living — as she still does — with her parents in their spacious three-bedroom end-of-terrace in Dover, Kent, and far too preoccupied with her own life to entertain the thought of nurturing someone else's.

HAVING left school in 2010 with six GCSEs, she had thrown herself into her job as a carer, which she loved, as heartily as she had her social life.

But as well as enjoying herself, she was quietly making plans for her future, and was considering an NVQ to further her career prospects.

Sophie is sketchy as to the father's identity. When pushed, she admits he works at a local hotel, is two years her senior and went to her school.

They had been dating for around six weeks when she fell pregnant last February.

'Normally, I would use contraception but you make mistakes when you're young,' she says.

She wasn't taking the Pill, so I ask if the couple were using condoms.

'I was... most of the time. There was probably a one-off. I was stupid. I've been brought up to know what's right and wrong — but people make mistakes. It's just one of those things.'

They separated in May, for reasons which Sophie refuses to discuss. 'There was no connection and it wasn't working out,' is all that she is prepared to say on the matter.

In the meantime, Sophie continued burning the candle at both ends — often juggling 12-hour days with her hectic social life.

With this, unfortunately, came drinking and smoking — both potentially damaging to an unborn child.

'Of course I wish I hadn't now,' she says. 'And, of course, I would never have done so had I known I was pregnant.'

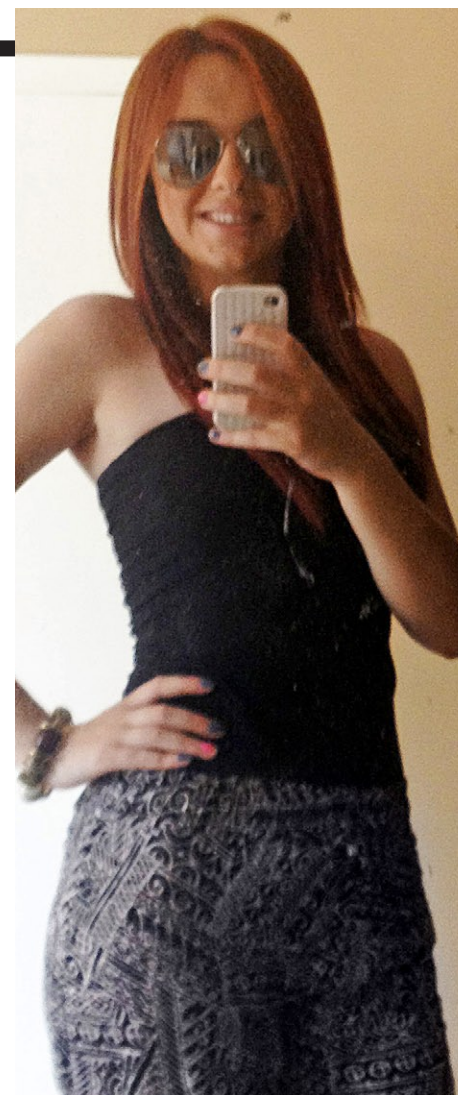
'At an all-day festival in July, I got through a crate — that's 24 bottles — of beer. I'd been smoking all day every day. I'd done none of the things pregnant women are supposed to do.'

'Of course, the first thing I worried when I found out I was in labour was that there would be something wrong with my baby.'

With good reason, given that foetal alcohol syndrome — damage to the fetus caused by excessive alcohol consumption — is one of the most prevalent intellectual disabilities in the Western World.

Miraculously, though, doctors say Thomas was not affected.

One theory put forward by sceptics is that Sophie was in deep denial over



FIVE MONTHS

her pregnancy — and simply refused to face up to the truth.

She insists this wasn't the case. It was just that she didn't experience any of the normal signs of pregnancy.

'My breasts didn't change size, my periods remained regular, and I didn't put on any weight. If I had had any suspicions, the first thing I would have done is to have got checked.'

Given that this baby was so obviously unplanned, would she have considered terminating the pregnancy had she had the opportunity? Again, she says no, saying simply: 'I don't brush off my responsibilities.'

When she started getting sporadic cramps at 3am on November 13, she put them down to a stomach bug.

'I couldn't sleep and kept going back to the toilet,' she says. 'I thought maybe it was something I ate. Next day, I had to call in sick.'

Her mum, Sylvia, a 48-year-old carer, suggested she take some paracetamol and have a bath. It didn't help.

At 6pm, Sylvia called the out-of-hours doctor service, 111. They told her to go to the chemist, where she picked up some Imodium. It didn't work.

'The cramps became more regular and got worse,' says Sophie. 'I was rolling around in pain.'

In despair, Sylvia took her daughter to Buckland Hospital in Dover at 10pm to see the on-call doctor.

'He prodded my stomach and asked if I could be pregnant,' says Sophie. 'I said no. He said I had a stomach bug, gave me some painkillers and sent me home at 10.30pm.'

By midnight, her pain was so bad that her mother called for an ambulance. The paramedics, who examined her stomach, drove her to William Harvey Hospital in Ashford, Kent. Her dad Derek, a 47-year-old cleaner, followed behind in his car.

On the journey, Sophie's waters broke and she had an all-consuming urge to empty her bowels.

That's when her mother clicked. 'I realised for the first time she must be pregnant,' she says. 'I was shocked, and my first thought was whether the baby was going to be born alive.'

The ambulance activated its sirens and speeded up to 90mph. Sophie was rushed into Accident and Emergency — there was no time to go to the maternity ward — and gave birth 15 minutes later in an empty cubicle in the department.

'Mum was telling me to push and Dad was squeezing my hand,' she says. 'Everything happened so quickly. I was panicked and confused.'

Midwives delivered her son at 1.35am and placed him on her chest.

'I felt a bond straight away. As I looked into his eyes, I felt an overwhelming rush of love.'

'As terrified as I was by the speed of events, the moment I saw him I just couldn't imagine my life without him.'



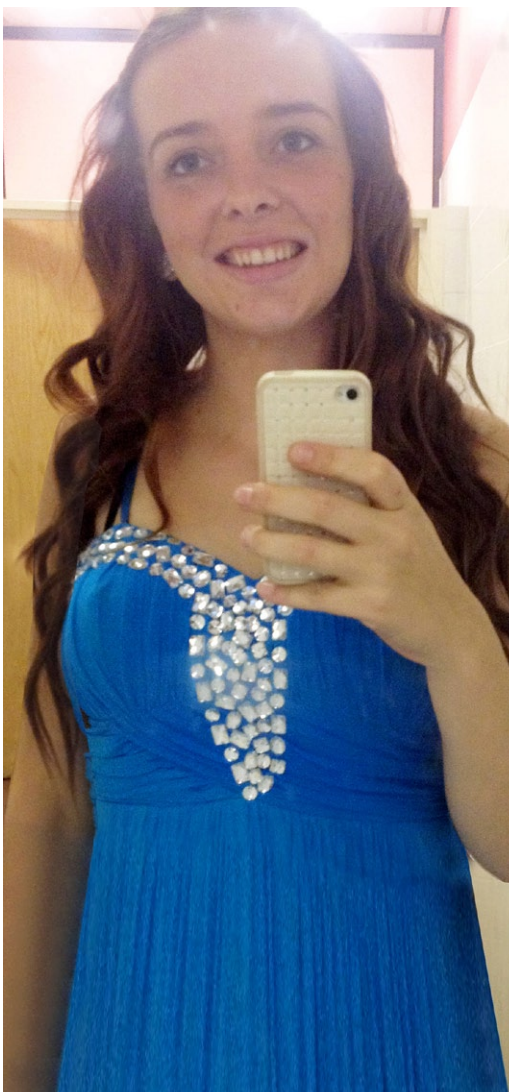
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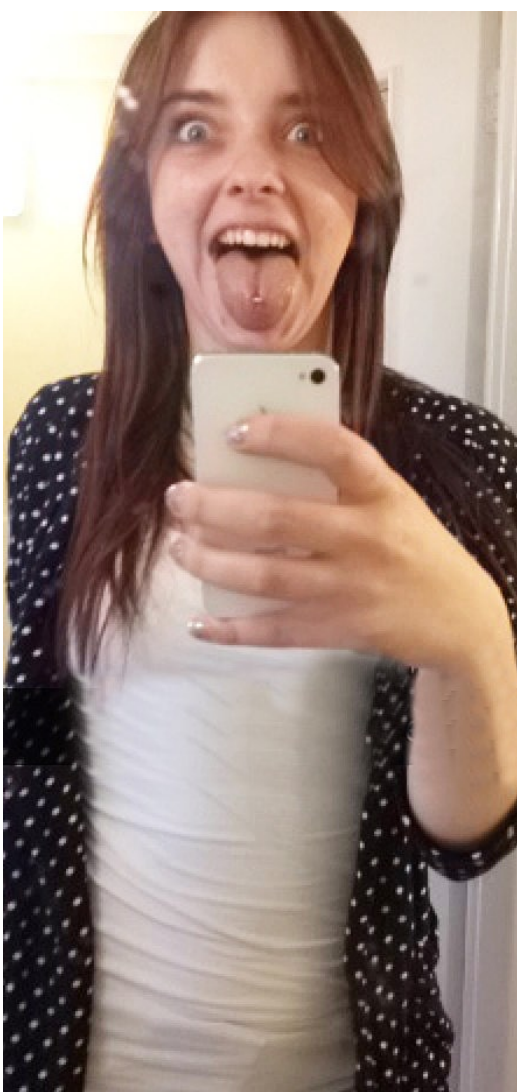
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SIX MONTHS



SEVEN MONTHS



EIGHT MONTHS



Besotted: Sophie with Thomas, who's now five months old and perfectly healthy

Picture: MURRAY SANDERS

Is this proof you can be size 10 and 9 months pregnant without knowing it?

That's Sophie's story. And she's sticking to it

The next morning, her brother Andrew, 26, phoned Thomas's dad. 'He was as shocked as I was,' reports Sophie. 'He didn't say sorry. He knew we were both to blame. He came to see us in hospital. He'd bought vests and a teddy.' Her boss — an understanding woman by the sounds of it — also visited them. 'I'd only started my new job four weeks earlier, but she said I could take as much time off as I needed.'

By the time Sophie left hospital two days later, friends and family

had clubbed together to buy her a cot, buggy, baby clothes and a Moses basket: 'Until then, I didn't have so much as a nappy to my name,' she says. Thomas was given his own room and the family attempted to restore a semblance of normality. Unsurprisingly, Sophie — who says she didn't want to breastfeed because she didn't know if she would be 'any good' at it — struggled to adapt. 'It was hard work,' she says. 'I love my sleep — and getting up for a

baby at 3am was incredibly difficult. 'But I had no choice. And I never felt sad, because that would mean wishing Thomas wasn't here.' Sylvia, who has three other grandchildren aged six, five and three, adds: 'If she hadn't bonded with Thomas, I would have intervened and taken him on myself. As it is, I'm proud of the way she's coped.' Thomas's father sees his baby for three hours, three times a week. 'There's no chance of us getting back together but we are civil for

our son's sake,' says Sophie. He pays child maintenance, but having forfeited her £1,200 a-month salary she is existing on £700 a month in maternity pay and child tax credits until she returns to work in September. 'Theirs is a loving household, but not one with money to spare. I wonder whether Sylvia feels any animosity towards the young man who impregnated her daughter and gave her with an extra mouth to feed? Apparently not. 'As long as Sophie's all right, I'm

not worried,' says Sylvia. 'I told her that she should have used contraception, but it was a bit late for a pep talk. If you play with fire, you're going to get burnt. 'Besides, I had my first baby at 20. I've been a single mother of three children, and I got through it.' Sylvia married her first husband at 20 and had Sophie's elder three half-siblings in quick succession, but the couple divorced while the children were still infants. She met Derek shortly after her divorce, and they married seven years ago. 'I was worried Sophie wouldn't want her baby. It could have gone either way. I'm glad she's at home so I can look after her. I can tell when she's getting stressed and take over. We're a close family and are coping as a team.' As for the surprise arrival himself, save for a spot of jaundice, Thomas has had no health problems. In an age in which many pregnant women expect to be treated like sacred vessels, does Sophie feel smug for flouting the rules and getting away with it? 'I don't feel smug but I'm obviously happy,' she says. 'Perhaps we're too fussy about pregnancy.'

AND in a pronouncement which will infuriate any woman who has gone through the usual discomforts of pregnancy — including morning sickness, a huge bump and swollen ankles — she suggests that these symptoms can be all in the mind. 'Not that she's prepared to put her aptitude for an invisible pregnancy to the test again anytime soon. 'I don't want lots of children or a boyfriend. I'd be quite happy with Thomas. It will be just the two of us for the next ten years.' She is clearly besotted. 'He has smiled from the age of two months, and laughed from three. His eyes follow me around the room and his babbles make me so happy. 'I've had to grow up quickly, but now things have settled down I wouldn't change him for the world.'