

Henry Cooper's fight for life

A BATTLING little boy by the name of Henry Cooper has defied all the odds to bring joy to his parents, who are now raising funds for the hospital which saved his life.

Henry – still weighing a mere 5lb 5oz at almost five months old – has faced a tougher fight than his boxer namesake ever did, surviving more than a dozen blood transfusions, collapsed lungs and a life-threatening blood disease.

He is still on a constant supply of oxygen, while his lungs recover from weeks of living on a ventilator.

For his parents, it has been the most terrifying roller-coaster ride, during which they thought they would lose him on more than one occasion. The couple have no idea why Nicki went into early labour.

Henry was born at Pembury Hospital 17 weeks prematurely, on December 27, along with his twin Archie. Each of the boys weighed just 1lb 2oz, making them among the tiniest tots ever to be born in Britain.

With two crash teams on hand and more than 20 doctors and nurses in the room, mum Nicki Cooper was warned: "It will be a miracle if the babies survive. It will be a miracle if they survive the birth, a miracle if they survive the transfer to the special care baby unit and a miracle if they survive intensive care. That's a lot of miracles."

Incredibly, both boys came into the world kicking – but, barely bigger than the palm of dad Kevin's hand, they were clearly very poorly.

The twins were transferred by Kent's only special neonatal ambulance to the Oliver Fisher Special Care Baby Unit at Medway Maritime Hospital, where, sadly, Archie lost his fight for life the following day.



Kevin and Nicki Cooper with baby Henry

However, Henry battled on under the watchful eye of the specialist team, eventually coming home to Downswood the day before his mum Nicki's birthday, on April 18.

During his 16 weeks in hospital, Henry endured a vast array of med-

ical treatments, including ventilation, various types of breathing support, X-rays and 12 blood transfusions. He fought off a series of infections and Nicki said: "His strength and resilience has been nothing short of incredible. It was a

real roller-coaster journey, but we cannot praise the unit enough for the care given during our time there."

Although the NHS pays for medication and staffing at the Oliver Fisher Unit, all the highly-specialised and sophisticated equipment is funded by donations.

The unit cares for about 1,000 sick and premature babies each year and Nicki and her family have decided to organise fund-raising activities to help the unit. The first will be a 5km run at Capstone Park, Gillingham, on August 28.

Running alongside Nicki will be her mum Sharon Terry, Kevin's mum Jeanette Cooper, from Forest Hill, Maidstone, Henry's auntie Elayne Fleming and cousins Faith, Paige and Summah, from Medway, along with many more friends.

Schoolteacher Nicki set an initial target of £1,000 and is already well over halfway there. However, now that Kevin's employers and colleagues at cloud service company Carrenza, in London, have agreed to make the unit the works' charity, they plan to set the target higher.

Nicki said: "We were fortunate that Pembury is one of the hospitals which fights to save babies born at 23 weeks; for many, 24 weeks is the cut-off point. But without the round-the-clock care and support from the Oliver Fisher Unit, things could have turned out very differently.

"We lost Archie, which is very sad, but neither twin should really have survived, so our glass is definitely half full."

Jane Shotliff

A story of miracle babies

AS well as setting up a Just Giving page, Nicki has created a website – miraclebabies.co.uk – to tell the story of Henry and Archie and to offer comfort and support to other families who might be in a similar situation.

The website has attracted more than 1,200 visitors – from as far away as China, Australia and New Zealand.

She said: "We were naively confident at the start, but after Archie died, it came home to us what a long way there was still to go."

Henry was a week old before his eyes opened and Nicki was at his bedside for 12 hours a day. She was finally able to hold him at four weeks old. However, he then developed sepsis, a potentially life-threatening blood disease, and his lung collapsed.

At 10 weeks old Henry still only weighed 1kg but he was able to leave intensive care for the high dependency unit and at 13 weeks, the family felt it was safe to finally go on a shopping trip to kit out the nursery for his homecoming.



Nicki said: "We can't really thank the amazing team at the Oliver Fisher Unit enough for ensuring we brought home a healthy, happy little boy at the end of our journey with them."

"It was quite emotional saying goodbye to all the wonderful staff on the unit, but very exciting to be coming home after such a long journey."

To read more about Henry's journey, visit www.miraclebabies.co.uk.

To donate, visit www.justgiving.com/CooperFundraising



Henry, above, finally comes home, and at the age of five months old weighed 5lb 5oz. Left, Henry shortly after he was born