

Facing the world



Henry Ekpe



Artist Mark Gilbert



Main picture: 'Henry E and Jerry' by Mark Gilbert

Below left: Henry de Lotbiniere
Below right: Sue Morgan-Elphick

MARK GILBERT
GEOFF FARRANTER



My face is my fortune," sang the coy maid in the nursery rhyme. But for all too many people their face becomes their misfortune as others eye them askance.

Each year, a million people attend casualty with facial injuries. Two thousand people annually contract mouth cancer. A similar number are born with facial deformities and 15,000 develop abnormalities during childhood. Saving Faces, a new charity set up by Ian Hutchison, consultant oral and facial surgeon at the St Bartholomew's and Royal London Hospitals Trust, aims to raise funds for the prevention and treatment of oral and facial diseases.

Pop success by teen beauties Daphne and Celeste for a song called *U.G.L.Y* points to society's intolerance of deviations from the facial norm: "When looks were handed out you were last in line/Your face looks like where the sun don't shine/Did you fall off a building and land on your head/Or did a truck run over your face instead... You're Ugly!" All good fun, say the duo, but no joke for someone such as barrister Henry de Lotbiniere (bottom left). Twelve years of operations to remove cancerous tumours have saved Mr de Lotbiniere's life but left him with a flesh-covered lump where one eye used to be and a crater instead of half his forehead. "I feel passionately that it is important to face the world and say that I am the same person that I ever was, even though my face is altered," he says.

An exhibition of paintings by hospital artist-in-residence Mark Gilbert records the faces of sufferers from maxillo-facial disease before, during and after treatment. In his pictures the depth of each person's humanity transcends the map of the face. Sometimes treatment corrects the condition completely. Sometimes sufferers have to learn to live with it.

Sue Morgan-Elphick (bottom right) is a pretty young woman who underwent extensive surgical treatment to correct growth distortions during childhood. A year's orthodontic treatment and many hours of invasive surgery, which left her face held together with six titanium plates, gave Sue "the real me again. I now face the world with a spring in my step".

Henry Ekpe, a psychiatric nurse from Nigeria, underwent five operations to remove what was considered a benign facial tumour. He saved up to visit Ian Hutchison for reconstructive surgery. Mr Hutchison discovered that the tumour was in fact an osteosarcoma which, having invaded the right eye, nose and temple in two places, was advancing into the brain. In a gruelling 23-hour operation, the surgical team removed the whole right side of Henry Ekpe's skull and face and replaced it with bone from his rib and muscle and skin from his back. In 1996, the tumour recurred on the other side of his face and more of the jaw had to be removed. Today Henry Ekpe - "an absolutely terrific guy" says Ian Hutchinson - works as a charge nurse in a psychiatric ward, is married with a young child, Jerry, and about to start a master's degree in nursing at Brunel University.

Beauty is, as they say, only skin deep.

VICTORIA NEUMARK