

A home counties mother tells **Richard Kerbaj** how her loving son became a jihadist who beheaded Christians and torched churches

When Sally

Evans opens her pantry door each morning, she sees a picture of a smiling face. Her eldest son, Thomas, painted it in green, pink and purple when he was a boy of four. It reminds her of him as a child.

Today she is tortured by the knowledge that her boy grew up to be not just a strapping 6ft 2in Manchester United fan but also a white jihadist who committed terrible atrocities. She believes he is "burning in hell" for his crimes.

His bedroom overlooks the back garden of her tidy semi-detached house on an estate in High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. A favourite black T-shirt lies in the wardrobe. It was in the wash on the day that he left to join al-Shabaab, the Islamist extremist group that has brought terror to east Africa.

Four months ago Evans, 57, a former teaching assistant, was watching television at home when she heard the news she had long feared. There was a picture on Twitter of her son's body. He had been killed by Kenyan soldiers while attacking a military base. Since then she has heard dreadful accounts of bloody atrocities he committed. And she has searched back through her memories of her son to try to work out how he became a monster.

Evans's Irish father ran a pub, the Oxford Arms, in Camden, north London. She married at 21 and a decade later in 1990 was thrilled to find herself pregnant for the first time.

In the hospital birthing suite, there was an emergency: the baby's heart stopped beating. He was saved by a caesarean. Evans recalled cradling her boy for the first time and whispering: "Tommy Evans, Tommy Evans — that's a rugby player's name."

When Thomas was almost two, the family moved to High Wycombe, a town with a surprisingly long history of deprivation. But Evans and her husband had jobs and their own house, and they had another son, Micheal.

Evans remembers Thomas being full of energy and "cute mischief", making mud pies in the garden, but also that he was a shy and gentle boy. At 10 he won a WH Smith drawing competition with an illustration of the hippogriff, his favourite Harry Potter creation.

Three years later his father left home. Thomas reassured his mother he would always be by her side and gave her cards on Mother's Day and Father's Day, saying you are "both to me and I love you".

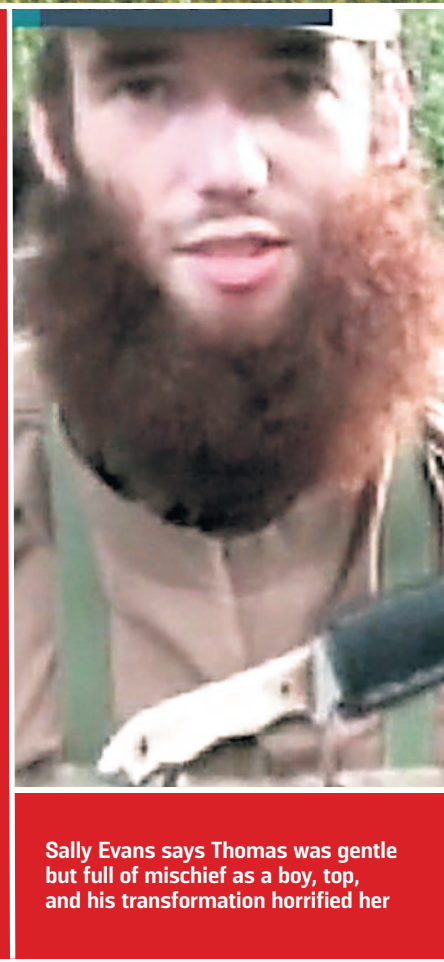
At 14, however, Thomas grew his hair to shoulder length and developed an interest in heavy metal music. He also began to dabble in underage drinking and smoking cannabis with schoolfriends.

"He was a happy drunk," Micheal recalled, and showed no sign of violence, although he took up boxing to keep fit and to defend himself.

To keep him out of trouble, Evans let him convert the family garage into a den — with a stereo, speakers and a table big enough to accommodate a hookah pipe and bottles of alcohol. It was better, she thought, to let his hair down at home than on the town.



I LOVED MY TERRORIST SON BUT I'M RELIEVED HE'S DEAD



Sally Evans says Thomas was gentle but full of mischief as a boy, top, and his transformation horrified her

IMAGINE DISCOVERING THE DEATH OF YOUR CHILD ON TWITTER AND BEING BOTH DEVASTATED AND RELIEVED AT ONCE

Thomas told Micheal he wanted to become an electrical engineer with the Royal Marines to "serve my country" and landed a local apprenticeship. He lost the job three years later after converting to Islam and expressing extremist views that offended his employer.

His transformation baffled his mother and brother. High Wycombe has a large Asian community; about 25% of its population of 120,000 is Muslim. Micheal says that as a teenager Thomas had been vocal about his dislike of "Pakis", as he called them. "It's difficult to reconcile how he was with how he became — he went almost from one extreme to another," said Micheal.

Evans believes that his conversion to Islam began when he made friends with some young Asian men at a gym. She initially hoped it would help him to cope with the split from a long-term girlfriend whom he still loved. But Thomas went on to change his name to Abdul Hakim, grew a long beard and stopped using the same pots and pans as his mother, saying they were "contaminated" with non-halal food.

"I respected his right to be a Muslim," Evans said, "but eventually he stopped respecting my right to be secular and repeatedly told his

brother and I we were destined for hell unless we converted to Islam."

He became noticeably radicalised after leaving a moderate mosque for the Muslim Education Centre on one of High Wycombe's sprawling housing estates.

Two men who had worshipped there were jailed in 2009 for their part in the so-called transatlantic liquid bomb plot, although the centre says they were no longer attending the prayer hall at the time of their arrest and denies that Thomas was radicalised there.

In 2011 Thomas told his mother he wanted to live in an Islamic country. He claimed to have met a girl who lived in Kenya but Evans now believes it was a cover story for becoming a jihadist.

On the eve of his planned departure she put on a headscarf and prayed with him in the hope of feeling more connected to him. The next day he was stopped by counterterrorism officials at Heathrow attempting to board a plane for Kenya. But four months later he was able to travel to Egypt after telling Evans he was going to study Arabic there.

She continues to question why his name was not flagged up again by the police at Heathrow. Several

weeks after he arrived in Egypt, she was visited at home by British government officials who told her he had made an unsuccessful attempt to get into Kenya from Egypt.

On January 19, 2012, Evans's phone rang. It was Thomas. He told her he was in Somalia and had joined al-Shabaab. "I asked him how he got there and he said, 'In a car, hiding, covered with a blanket.'"

There were more shocks to come. In her diary entry on Christmas Eve 2012 she wrote: "Thomas rung. We chatted about everyday things and then he dropped a bombshell. He's married a young girl last Thursday. She's either 13 or 14, doesn't speak any English but he's very happy."

"He gave her family an old cow so he could marry her. But at least he's happy. I wish I could say the same, but I can't. I'm heartbroken for him and for this young girl. She's so young — although I know that's their culture — but still doesn't make it right."

Evans became convinced that he had developed a violent streak when she spoke to him after the 2013 Westgate shopping mall attack in Kenya when al-Shabaab gunmen killed more than 60 people.

"Not a good phone call," she wrote in her diary. "We rowed about that shopping mall siege in Kenya. Selfishly, I'm relieved he wasn't involved, but very angry with him because he thinks it's OK to murder innocent men, women and children out shopping."

Thomas would sometimes inform his mother that he was going on a "training mission", leaving her in a state of panic until he called again. If he were to die in battle, he said, someone would call her to notify her of his "martyrdom".

In January this year she was called by Sudea, his wife, who did not speak any English. Evans called Sudea back with a translator on hand. She was relieved to discover Thomas was fine, but angry that Sudea was calling to ask for money.

"No, I'm not sending money — I can't," Evans told the translator. "I'll be in trouble with the police for supporting terrorism. Can't she ask al-Shabaab to support her?"

During the phone call she discovered that Sudea's parents were living in Sweden and obtained a number for her mother, Mariam.

When she rang, Mariam told her that she had been shot in the face by an al-Shabaab militant after opposing her daughter's marriage

THOMAS DROPPED A BOMBSHELL. HE'S MARRIED A YOUNG GIRL LAST THURSDAY. SHE'S EITHER 13 OR 14

to Thomas. Evans told her through a translator: "I'm so sorry that my son is in her life, in her daughter's life. Tell her how sorry I am."

"These kids, they're brainwashed," Mariam replied. "Thomas has been brainwashed just as my daughter has been brainwashed. You are my sister and we are both victims of this situation."

After a day of gardening on June 14, Evans had settled down for the night in the living room to watch television when the phone rang. It was a journalist inquiring about whether she had seen the "rumours" circulating on Twitter about Thomas's death. Micheal checked for her and found a photo on Twitter that clearly showed her son's body. He and his group of 10 al-Shabaab fighters had been killed by the Kenyan army while attacking a military base.

For four years Evans had clung to the hope that her son would one day be rehabilitated and return to the UK. But she was horrified to learn of the atrocities he had committed, which included beheading Christians and setting fire to churches and villages. His death, she reflected, meant that he could hurt nobody else — and he would be "burning in hell" for his crimes.

Witness accounts obtained by Channel 4 linked Thomas to attacks last year in the Lamu region of southeast Kenya, where more than 90 people were murdered.

One witness, Mama Miriam, described how a "white man" had killed a captive but spared the life of a baby. "The attackers tied the man's hands and then the white man slaughtered the man from behind using his big knife. Then the white man took the small baby and looked to see if it was a boy or a girl. The white man said, 'She's a girl, let's not kill her.'"

Samuel, another witness, said Thomas was targeting Christians and would ask for their names to identify their religious heritage before slaughtering those who were non-Muslim.

"My friend was asked, 'What's your name?' in English by the white man," said Samuel. "My friend answered 'Kamau' and the white man cut his throat and another attacker shot him."

Micheal feels a mixture of bewilderment and guilt about his brother's behaviour. "I just can't understand how someone of my own flesh and blood could have done it," he said. "And no matter what anyone says — 'You know it's not your fault', or whatever — you always have some kind of guilt."

Evans called Sudea to find out how she was coping after Thomas's death. She was shocked when the translator told her: "She says, 'I'm happy he died a martyr fighting for what he believes in and I believe he is in paradise.'"

Evans said she will forever miss Thomas, the young boy she remembered, but she is glad the person he became — Abdul Hakim — is dead. As she explained at an event organised by the Quilliam Foundation, the counterextremism think tank: "Imagine discovering the death of your child on Twitter and being both devastated and relieved at the same time."

"Devastated because the child you brought into this world was killed after being brainwashed into pursuing a murderous cause. But relieved because the death of your child meant that he could no longer harm innocent people."

My Son the Jihadist, produced by Richard Kerbaj, will be broadcast on Channel 4 on October 22 at 9pm @richardkerbaj

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