

expressyourself

Get the life you want

Picture: JONATHAN BUCKMASTER Hair and make-up: SHERRIE WARWICK Styling: JERRY KHAN Clothes: NEW LOOK

Crime queen to pig farmer

Former drug dealer **TRACY MACKNESS** explains how a saddleback sow helped her to go straight

IF YOU met Tracy Mackness down at your local farmers' market you might buy a few of her award-winning sausages or chat about her rare-breed pigs. You probably wouldn't guess that pig farming saved her from a spiralling life of crime that landed her in prison for dealing drugs.

Now Tracy, 48, has laid bare the shocking life that led to a lengthy stretch in jail before she fought back to become a successful businesswoman. *Jail Bird: The Life And Crimes Of An Essex Bad Girl* is her no-holds-barred story with unflinching accounts of a decadent high life fuelled by drug crime and the harrowing prison stretches that followed.

"Doing the book upset me quite a lot," Tracy says. "It's quite shocking to see the life I led. I cringe at some of the things I've done."

That's because some of the things wouldn't be out of place in TV dramas such as *Bad Girls* or *EastEnders*.

Tracy, from Romford in Essex, enjoyed a pampered childhood with ponies, fancy clothes and foreign holidays. Then when she was 13 her father went to prison for cattle rustling and she stopped going to school.

'Everyone had money, not cards, cash. It was a full-on lifestyle'

Headstrong and unhappy, she refused to listen to anyone.

By 16 the rebellious teenager was looking for real excitement. One night Tracy was all dolled up at a disco when she met the larger-than-life Stella, who was almost twice her age.

"I'll never forget the first time I saw her, the excitement and glamour of it," Tracy says. "She was like a magnet with her pencil skirt with a slit up the leg, high heels and red lipstick. I wanted to be like her."

Tracy became Stella's protégé and plunged into the heady "loadsamoney" party scene of Eighties Essex.

Tracy didn't have loads of money but she was soon hanging around with people who did and who didn't mind splashing some on her.

"There were scrap metal dealers, car

dealers, builders and everyone had money," she says. "Not cards, cash. Holidays in Marbella, casinos, we were out all night. It was a full-on lifestyle."

Made up to the nines with the big hair and fishtail dresses of the era, Tracy was soon hooked on the high life.

"It turned my head," she says. "Once you have a taste of all that it's very difficult to give it up."

When they entered a nightclub Stella would do a little jig and hum their signature tune *There May Be Trouble Ahead*.

There was. To fund her lifestyle Tracy turned to shoplifting and cheque book fraud and looked for love among the bad boys and hard men.

"I look back and see I was running wild," she says.

Running wild soon involved taking drugs. At first it was speed in a nightclub when she was just 18. Later it was cocaine and it seemed such a short step from taking it to selling it.

"I sold cocaine to supplement the lifestyle I was living but only to people I knew," she says. "I didn't see myself then as a drug dealer."

The police did though. In early 1992 the good life screamed to a halt when Tracy appeared in court charged in connection with ecstasy tablets found at her flat and landed in London's Holloway prison on remand.

"For once in my life I was petrified," Tracy says. "I thought 'Oh my God I am actually going to prison, this is reality'. I felt sick."

In October 1992 she was found guilty of intent to supply and sentenced to three years in jail. She ended up in Cookham Wood prison in Kent where fellow prisoners included Moors murderer Myra Hindley. Unrepentant and bitter because she

felt she'd been unfairly convicted, Tracy left jail and fell straight back into her bad girl ways. Except now it was more serious.

"The man I was seeing was mixing with some heavy-duty people," she says. "When he was nicked I had to take his place. I was too afraid to say no because I was in too deep. I knew too much."

So Tracy became a drug debt collector known as The Queen and was eventually mixed up in a bid to import a ton of cannabis into the country by lorry as part of a £4million drug deal.

The police swooped and she was back in court, this time facing a serious stretch inside. Tracy pleaded not guilty and was still cocky about her chances.

"I still thought I might somehow walk away," she says.

Tracy, then 37, didn't walk away. In December 2002 she was found guilty of conspiracy to import class B drugs into the country and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

"I was stunned," she says. "All I could hear was my mum screaming and all my friends crying. I just wanted to die."

Prison nights are long, says Tracy. Long enough to lie on your bunk after the cell door clangs shut, working out how your life has come to this.

"I saw myself for what I was, a no-good drug dealer. A failure. I made a conscious decision that I had to do something with myself," she says.

Tracy found that something in an unlikely place, a pig pen on the East Sutton Park prison farm where she worked. She fell in love with a British saddleback sow called Biddy.

"There was a connection," says Tracy. "I just thought, 'I want to look after you'."

Tracy left prison in February 2007

with a clutch of qualifications in pig husbandry and the big ambition. She was going straight – as Tracy the pig farmer.

Six years later she runs the award-winning Giggly Pig Company, with a 700-pig farm and shop near Romford.

She lives in a mobile home on the farm with her four terriers, Sausage, Mash, Gravy and Chops.

"When I think of what I've achieved, I'm proud," she says. "I know everyone who used to be ashamed of me and disappointed in me is proud of me too."

'All I could hear was my mum screaming. I just wanted to die'

She never sees her old crowd. If she wants something she saves up for it and as for parties she doesn't even buy going-out clothes any more.

She's happy with honest graft and sticking to the rules.

"Now I won't even go out in the car without a seat belt on," she laughs.

* Name has been changed

● To order *Jail Bird: The Life And Crimes Of An Essex Bad Girl* by Tracy Mackness (Simon & Schuster) at £5.99 with free UK delivery please send a cheque or PO made payable to Express Bookshop to Jail Bird Offer, PO Box 200, Falmouth TR11 4WJ, call 01872 562310 or order online at expressbookshop.com

Interview by SHARON WRIGHT

