

INVISIBLE INK

It might seem romantic to have your lover's name tattooed on your skin but, as celebrities from Johnny Depp to Jordan have discovered, erasing the mistakes of your past is a painful and expensive business

If you thought a tattoo was for life, think again. These days increasingly sophisticated techniques can erase the inky mistakes of the past and the very celebrities who fuelled the trend for self-adornment are now spearheading a tattoo-removal trend.

Take actress Megan Fox. She's decided to have her Marilyn Monroe tattoo removed on the grounds that Marilyn 'was a negative person'. An unconventional reason for disposing of a tattoo but when it comes to de-inking, she's not alone. Eva Longoria is said to have erased the date of her wedding to ex-husband Tony Parker; Kelly Osbourne got rid of her teen rebellion tattoos; and Peter Andre didn't want ex-wife Katie Price's name on his ring finger any more. Of course, really cool celebs were way ahead of the game. Johnny Depp endured hours of pain to have his 'Winona Forever' tattoo converted to 'Wino Forever' after he split from Winona Ryder, while Angelina Jolie covered ex-husband Billy Bob Thornton's name and with her children's birthplace coordinates.

In the old days, dermabrasion (sanding the skin to get rid of the tattoo) was pretty much the only non-surgical option, but such methods have been superseded by laser treatment, which heats the pigments until they break down and are absorbed by the body. But it doesn't happen overnight. It can take six months to see results and years to get rid of more complicated and colourful tattoos that require multiple lasers (different lasers break down different colours). Blue or black pigments are easiest to remove; white, yellow and red are trickier. And the darker your skin tone, the more likely that you'll be left with pigmentation. On average it takes eight to ten treatments, at four- to six-week intervals, at a cost of anything from £50 a session. And if you think the price hurts, wait until you feel the laser: some say it's like having an elastic band pinged against the skin, but others claim it's as painful as having the tattoo done in the first place.

Amanda Elbourn, a laser specialist at Court House Clinics on Wimpole Street, has seen a rise in demand for tattoo removal over the past

few years. 'Nothing surprises me any more,' she says. 'I've seen "Made in Hong Kong" stamped across someone's buttocks - the result of a drunken night out - that cost around £1,000 to remove, and people who've had Chinese symbols they thought meant one thing but mean something else entirely. You pay around £500 to get rid of one of them. But the most common is wanting an ex's name removed. I saw one woman who had her ex's name tattooed around her nipple (around £500 to erase), and a man who'd had his

undying love for his wife emblazoned across his chest but then didn't get married.' Ouch. Double ouch when you consider that it cost around £2,000 to get rid of.

Stuart Harrison has similar stories. His Oxford Skin Clinic uses a liquid injected into the skin to encourage the body to reject the ink and push it out through the epidermis, forming a scab. Four 15-minute treatments (£87 each) is the minimum needed for an area of around ten square centimetres, but it's apparently less

painful than lasering. 'It is often about erasing an ex's name,' he confirms, 'but we also see a lot of women who had tattoos done as teenagers and regret them now they're older.'

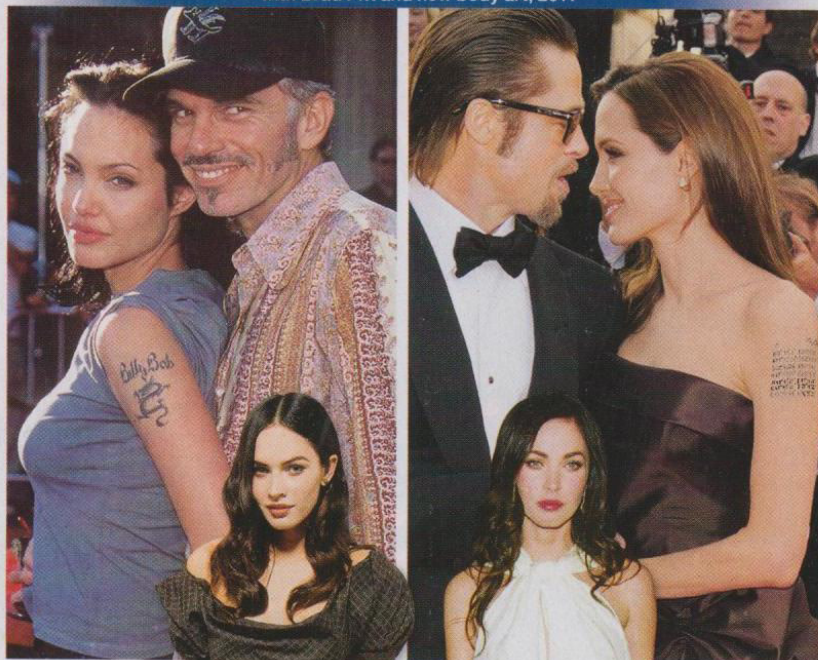
Writer Nicole Mowbray knows how they feel. At 16, she lied about her age (legally you have to be 18 to get a tattoo) and spent £20 on a multicoloured butterfly on her shoulder. Ten years later she paid nearly 100 times that to get rid of it. 'The novelty wore off within hours but I thought it would grow on me. It didn't. I despised it. It looked tacky and I felt marked out as a Brit abroad whenever I went on holiday.' Perhaps comedian Chris Addison has a point: he recently declared that no one should be allowed to get a tattoo until they're 50, when they're old enough to know how they want to define themselves.

Saira Hunjan, the needle-wielding artist that Kate Moss and Jude Law have entrusted with their bodies, wouldn't go that far, but she does agree that a tattoo shouldn't be taken lightly. 'You need to think of it as you would a bespoke suit, but one that you'll

wear every day for the rest of your life. It can't be an impulse buy,' she says. 'Do your research, find a design and an artist that's right for you. Every tattoo tells a story about who you were at that moment in your life, so you've got to make sure you're prepared to tell that story.'

As for names... 'The kiss of death,' says Saira. 'Have a symbol, or an initial, but never a name. I've covered up too many to think that's ever a good idea.' Maybe that's something certain people might like to bear in mind next time they fall in love. Yes, Katie Price - with that crude cross tattooed over your ex-husband Peter's name - we're talking to you. ES

Changeling: Angelina Jolie with Billy Bob Thornton and BB tattoo, 2000; with Brad Pitt and new body art, 2011



Transformer: Megan Fox with her Marilyn Monroe tattoo, in 2009 (left) and 2011 (right)