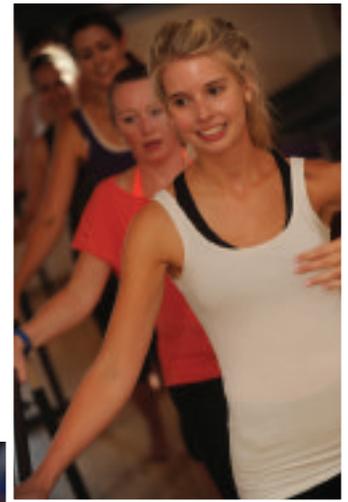




# *Raising the barre*

Lydia Fallon unleashes her inner ballerina at a BarreConcept class: blending ballet with Pilates, it's the latest fitness fusion taking Cambridge by storm.

Pictures by Warren Gunn



Instructor  
Michelle  
Bird



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hat girl hasn't once dreamed of becoming a prima ballerina? Beautiful flowers cover The Royal Opera House stage as you curtsy to your adoring audience. The standing ovation goes on and on, the applause gets louder and louder, until suddenly... you wake up.

See before I discovered boys, bars and teenage tantrums, this was a reoccurring dream. I had a wardrobe full of pretty pastel tutus, Darcy Bussell was my hero and I'd spend most weekends pirouetting around a dance studio till my head spun. But, several years (and several pounds) later, I feared those lycra-clad days were behind me; pink froufrou is just not such a good look for a grown-up.

But then I discovered BarreConcept. It's a new ballet-inspired fitness craze which has just touched down in Cambridge, there's no pink in sight and after one class I'm already hooked.

### super effective

A unique, high-intensity workout based around the ballet barre, it combines the precision of Pilates, the technique of ballet, the alignment of yoga and the strength of sports conditioning – to create a challenging but super-effective all-over body workout.

Even if you ditched your hair bun for Chelsea buns years ago, this is a workout which promises a long and lithe dancer's body, but without a tutu to be seen or a Tchaikovsky tune to be heard.

Turning up at Longstanton Village Hall for my Thursday night class, I was a bag of nerves: would everyone be wearing legwarmers and hot pants? Would the instructor carry a whip? Please God, don't let me fall flat on my face.

Of course I needn't have worried. Instructor Michelle Bird was warm, welcoming, and with her perfect posture and super-toned limbs, a walking, talking advert for the benefits of BarreConcept.

"It can improve your posture, balance, coordination, flexibility, strength and cardio – it's an all-round method and you just don't get all of that in many other classes," she explains. "I've had one client who's lost seven inches all over in just six weeks, which is phenomenal."

I run regularly and play for a netball team, so wasn't in too bad a shape. Or so I thought. Ten minutes into the class I was a sweaty, beetroot-coloured wreck, gasping for air and wondering why certain muscles felt like they hadn't been used in a very, very long time. I was in for a tough ride. . .

### at the barre

Michelle kicked things off with an aerobic warm-up in the centre of the room, designed to get our hearts pumping before we moved on to the barre. Scrambling for a spot behind someone who looked vaguely like they knew what they were doing, we started the barre section with a combination of ballet-inspired exercises apparently designed to give you a pert JLo-esque

bum and svelte, shapely legs. From pliés to pelvic thrusts, each one of the exercises tones, strengthens and stretches, and I could instantly feel the effects.

The leg lifts and kicks were a particular killer, and although I tried my best to look graceful (in my head I was channelling Margot Fonteyn and Ginger Rogers), I feared I was looking far more elephant than elegant. And just as my thighs were threatening to quit, Michelle introduced ball squeezes into the equation, which is basically when you do all the exercises while trying to grip a small bouncy ball between your legs – no mean feat!

### core blimey

Nearly ready to crumple into a heap by this point, it was time for the hand weights and Pilates core section – BarreConcept is an all-over body workout after all. A whirl of bicep curls, chest presses and oblique twists followed, and boy was I starting to feel the burn.

By the end of the class I was a hot, sweaty mess – though a perfectly postured and strangely invigorated one – but a mess none the less. BarreConcept takes all the best bits of other fitness fads, and puts them together in one amazing super-class, and I couldn't help but grin insanely the whole time, even during what felt like the hundredth scissor kick. I might even be tempted to put my body through it all again next week. Well, maybe.

Michelle Bird runs BarreConcept classes in Longstanton, Sutton and Cottenham. For more information and to book a class, visit her website at [bodymode.co.uk](http://bodymode.co.uk).