

# Cambridge College for Women Over 25

By ELIZABETH NEUFFER

**O**NCE again in fall in this ancient university town, freshmen, as they have for centuries, have "gone up" to a Cambridge college to gain one of Britain's most prestigious degrees.

But at Lucy Cavendish College, the "freshers" may prove older than the graduate students and are as likely to swap baby-sitting schedules as news of how they spent the vacation. They are part of a college known not for its architecture or wine cellar, but rather its unusual purpose: Lucy Cavendish College is Britain's only college for mature students who are women.

To qualify as an undergraduate at Lucy Cavendish you must be more than 25 years old. Among this year's students are a 53-year-old mother of three studying theology and a 42-year-old former nurse pursuing art history. Grandmothers reading for degrees are not unknown, nor are children, who scamper around the grounds of the college's three Victorian buildings while their mothers meet with teachers inside.

Lucy Cavendish's approach seems a novel one within a 700-year-old uni-

versity where tradition can be paramount. To much of the Cambridge community Lucy Cavendish remains a bit of a mystery; even local women's associations seem unaware of its existence. "The typical reaction is, 'Isn't that a girl's finishing school?'" says Harriet E. Crawford, archaeologist and college librarian.

But Lucy Cavendish has never been anything remotely like a girl's finishing school since it was first established in 1965 with only £3,000 pounds, with its first president conducting the day's business while sitting on an orange crate.

Before that it began as an informal dining society composed of Cambridge academics who, because they could not be affiliated with the then male-dominated colleges, lacked a place to meet and share ideas. But their thoughts soon turned to creating a college for women returning to academics after a break in their career, or indeed at university for the first time.

"We nearly all had a gap in our careers, usually from children, and had to get back into academics," said Kate Bertram, one of the college's former presidents. "We thought we could produce a college to help older women, much in the same position."

That aim became a firm reality last

year when Cambridge University granted Lucy Cavendish foundation status, making it a permanent part of the university. It has both graduate and undergraduate students, the latter either retraining or earning a degree for the first time. Currently, almost half of the 50 undergraduates are over 30 and have children.

"I decided to come back because I knew Lucy Cavendish was there, and for women in my position," said 43-year-old Anna Maddrell, who after 18 years of raising children and then working decided to earn a university degree when her marriage ended. Last year, she and her daughter Penelope, who studied modern languages at Clare College, both graduated with undergraduate degrees from Cambridge.

The chance to switch careers has also drawn many women to Lucy Cavendish, known, more informally, as Lucy Cav, or just Lucy. There is a former ship broker studying law and an English major studying to be a veterinarian. There was once a police-woman who studied to join the ministry, recounts the capably cheerful Marie Lawrence, the college's current acting vice president and a biological anthropologist.

The college is also a spot where women can gain additional profes-

sional qualifications. This year the British Gas Corporation decided to send two of its employees to Lucy Cavendish so that they could continue their studies, a program it plans to continue in the near future.

Many other Cambridge colleges also accept mature students, outstanding among them the coeducational Wolfson College, where mature students make up half the undergraduate body. Lucy Cavendish differs in that it is only for mature students. This, its students say, gives them the advantage of finding a community ready to share problems ranging from finding baby sitters to finding funding, to taking exams and to juggling the strict Cambridge residential requirements and visiting families elsewhere.

"They are totally aware of the problems that most of us face," says Frankie D. Dale, a former primary school teacher, now an archeology graduate student.

Faculty members say that one of the major problems faced by mature students is confidence. Otherwise, mature students as a rule work harder and are more conscientious than young undergraduates. "They're very determined to make the most of it and have terrific moti-



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Dr. Marie Lawrence, right, conducting a tutorial.

vation," says Dr. Lawrence.

Not all the students feel that enough is done by Lucy Cavendish to address the problems of being a mature student. Those living in the college and lacking a family based in Cambridge find themselves isolated. Others feel refresher courses to help with studying and exam taking are necessary. Still working to establish itself financially, Lucy Cavendish can only provide a limited amount of financial aid for its students.

Although the college is more established than it was in days when teachers and students were known to roll

up their sleeves and do the dishes or paint a room, the "high table" normally reserved for teachers in a college dining hall is noticeably absent.

As the only college for mature women in Britain, Lucy Cavendish has some sense of the milestone it has achieved for women and the work that still remains. It is hoping that the university in the future will allow more undergraduates than its current limit of 50 to attend. And it has elected Dame Anne Warburton, currently Britain's chief delegate to the United Nations in Geneva, to serve as its next president.