

## 'In Exile': The Women of Bedford College, University of London, are evacuated to Cambridge

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*'A College for Women...has been my dream from girlhood'*

Mrs Elisabeth Reid (1860) *College Lives*, p 5. Mrs Reid is considered the founder of Bedford College (1849-1985), the first college in Britain opened for the higher education of women.

*"A girl is hampered out of knowledge  
By being at a women's college;  
She finds the simple man run hence  
Should she betray her intelligence,  
Tells all his friends with jeers and mocking:  
'That little girl is a Blue- Stocking.'"*

*Bedford College Magazine in College Lives, p 29]*

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by Isobel Maddison

In the autumn of 1939 at the outbreak of the second world war, the women of Bedford College, University of London, considered themselves "in exile" when they were evacuated to the University of Cambridge. They were not to be diverted from their studies however, and were equally determined in their pursuit of alternative, if temporary, college rooms. By moving to the relative safety of Cambridge they demonstrated that even under siege the female academy was both stoic and persistent.

The evacuation was a complex affair, fraught with seemingly insurmountable practical difficulties particularly at a time of general confusion. Nevertheless, led by its Principal, Miss Geraldine Jebb, the evacuation was carried out as smoothly as possible, even if some of the students had particularly pressing accommodation needs: while Miss Gillian Wilkinson, for example, decided not to take her children with her to Cambridge, Miss Andrewes needed a house to rent for 'herself, mother and servants'.

'Springfield House' on Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge, had previously been Miss Jebb's home and it became the address of the college's new administrative headquarters. In addition, Bedford's 'Billeting Officers', Miss Cullis and Miss Crewdson, approached home owners and those with larger premises across the town in an attempt to secure rooms for the library, lectures and academic seminars. They were successful in their search: Fitzwilliam House on Trumpington Street was designated as the place for the 'arts' lectures and for the all-important staff common room. Lectures were also to be provided in Newnham College, while the science departments agreed to double up with their opposite numbers in the Cambridge university laboratories.

On 21<sup>st</sup> October 1939 The Cambridge University Journal carried the headline 'One Woman to Four Men this Term', as around 430 Bedford women arrived in Cambridge. They were received by a number of 'hostesses' and among these was Lady Edith MacAlister who was the owner of Barrmore, a house that later became one of the early buildings of Lucy Cavendish College. The 'Lucy' connection with the Bedford evacuation can also be traced through Mrs L. E. Duff who turned Strathaird House into a welcoming hostel for the Bedford women. Jessie Evans, one of the founding Fellows of Lucy Cavendish also housed two students, Lois and Jean, although with mixed feelings. In a letter to her husband, Dr Clifford Evans, Jessie writes that although Lois was a general pleasure, helping 'with all sorts of things in the garden and house,' Jean's 'interests' were 'quite different'; apparently they all centred 'round herself.'

That Lucy Cavendish College was granted university status in 1965 to provide the full privileges of college life to a later generation of women students seems particularly apt in this context. The college buildings are still recognisable from the early photographs, even if the dress of the women inhabiting them is somewhat different. Barrmore and Strathaird are today used for conferences, seminars, offices and academic events; they still also house students on their upper floors.

Accommodating the Bedford students was obviously of central importance to a swift and smooth transition to a new academic environment. Each of the Cambridge hostels were strictly regulated and, in spite of a Miss Moore's complaint in May 1944 about the 'bad' behaviour of the Bedford women in respect of straying tennis balls, Miss Jebb and her contemporaries did their best to ensure that the 'Laws of the Shelter' would be followed. The formal regulations for October 1940 are particularly clear in their attempt to create order in these, sometimes peripatetic, rooms:

Students are expected to give as little trouble as possible to the households in which they are billeted

Students should not invite visitors to their rooms

Students should not use wireless or gramophones or play musical instruments

Students should not have parties or do laundry work in their rooms

Students visiting in men's colleges in the evening must leave before 10pm.

Once fully established in their 'digs', the Bedford students were amused and bemused by some of the Cambridge traditions. The Dorothy Café became a favoured meeting place to discuss these puzzling customs as well as the demands of academic life. In fact, meetings at the café helped cement the dispersed Bedford population and kept up a sense of college unity. The original aim had been to create 'a college within a college', but the scattered accommodation and lectures halls made this difficult in practice. The sense of a collegiate community needed to be produced in other ways. Consequently, until 1941 the women maintained their own college publication, The Bedford College Union Magazine, where they recorded their impressions of Cambridge life through poetry, cartoons and essays about their 'Cambridge Odyssey'— as the London undergraduate K.R. Maslen was to call it in her article for the Spring edition in 1941.

In several Bedford magazines Cambridge 'types' are categorised — as 'The Silk Shirt Brigade' and 'The Occidental or Vacuous', for instance — and the results of a spoof questionnaire given to Cambridge librarians and tea room staff, titled Cambridge Looks at London, is indicative of the spirit and tone of many of the magazine features:

Question: "Do you deplore the fact that that there are now so many more women using the library"?

Answer: "Dear me, no. I am an Edwardian. Bless the dear creatures." And in any case, "sex does not exist for the Staff in library hours".

In the Bedford magazines humour predominates, although some of the students wrote that they missed London. Even if others conceded that 'it would be hard to see anything more beautiful than the [Cambridge] 'Backs' in Autumn,' some were homesick for the 'noise of Piccadilly Circus'. Others longed for 'warm buses and tube trains,' particularly since 'knees, fingers and ears' were freezing when cycling to Cambridge lectures. The return to London in 1940 was therefore welcomed by some, but heavy air raids followed and the homecoming was brief; the Bedford women returned to Cambridge, where they stayed until 1944.

That same summer, Anna Bidder the first President of Lucy Cavendish College received two letters from Bedford's Miss Crewdson and its Principal, Miss Jebb. Both express warmth and gratitude to Miss Bidder for her help in accommodating Bedford evacuees: 'what a great advantage it has been to live and work in such a pleasant atmosphere' and feel that we 'have had all the privileges of a resident college life'.

In the worst of the great air raids on London during the 10<sup>th</sup> May 1941 however, one third of Bedford's college buildings were destroyed and it was not until 1945 that plans were completed for a new college in the capital. The Bedford women remained in London, but

they were often nomadic. For several years they were forced to study in damaged buildings, sometimes without running water and basic facilities.

By 1949 parts of Bedford College had been restored and new buildings had been opened; the students finally returned to rooms that were their own. As Deaconess de Chazal (a Bedford student) tells us:

the scars of war were still evident in the college buildings and in rationing of food and clothes. We were shabby and poor.... But war was behind and peace in front. We were filled with hope.

The universities of Cambridge and London had collaborated and the female academy had survived.