Cambridge College for Women Over 25

By ELIZABETH NEUFFER

CAMBRIDGE, England NCNE again in fall in this ancient university town, fresh men, 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 "freshmen" may grove older than the graduate students and are as likely to swap baby-sitting schedules as guess of how they spent the vacations. They are part of a college known set 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 35-year-old mother of three studying theology and a 67-year-old former nurse pursuing art history. Grandmothers reading for degrees are not unknown, as are children, who scampers around the grounds of the college's three Victo rian buildings, while their teachers meet with teachers inside.

Lucy Cavendish's approach seems novel one within a 700-year-old university 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, archaeological and college librarian.

But Lucy Cavendish has never been anything remote 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 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 academia 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, who had to get back into academics," said Kate Fortey, one of the college's founders, who as its my last year as a professor.

The idea 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 returning or earning a degree for the first time. Currently, al most half of the 30 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 Ann Maddrell, who after 18 years of raising children and teaching 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 Car, 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 capable cheerful Martha Lawrence, the college's cur sar and acting vice president and a linguistic anthropologist.

Faculty members say the problems faced by mature students is confidence. Only 15 percent of mature students are as well, work harder and are more committed than young undergraduates. They've been down and out, the most of us have, and now they want a change; 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 seeking a family bond in Cambridge find themselves isolated. Others feel that younger college helps with study ing and taking any necessary. Still working to establish itself financially, Lucy Cavendish can only provide a limited amount of financial aid to them. And the college is more established in the United States than in Europe. In the United States, students were known to roll up their sleeves and do the dishes to paint a room, the "high flyer" usually reserved for teachers in a college dining hall is not so shy.

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 50 to attend. And it has elected Dame Anne Waterhouse, currently Britain's chief delegate to the United Nations in Geneva, to oversee its next president.