

A new film tells the story of prominent women in Westminster who entered Parliament in the early years

Their stories will now become part of a significant archive at Cambridge University

A new collaboration between women journalists and the Churchill Archives Centre in Cambridge has been recording the personal journeys and histories of some of the most well-known and long-lived women parliamentarians from all parties in Parliament today.

The interviews were conducted and produced by Jackie Ashley, Deborah McGurran and Boni Sones OBE in association with the Churchill Archives Centre.

It will be broadcast on the Lucy Cavendish YouTube channel in October 2025, where Jackie Ashley was a former President of the College.

It will be available to watch here; <https://youtu.be/YZ-pqL6xC2M>

Jackie Ashley said: “Working with the Churchill Archive Centre and Lucy Cavendish College we have been able to make an independent film that records an important social history of women in the UK Parliament in the early years, from the 1970s onwards. Women then only made up 3 per cent of the House of Commons. These are fascinating stories with a remarkable group of women from all parties.

“This 2 hour long video production allows you to hear them in their own words, without spin, talking about why and how they have made a difference to the lives of women and families in this country. Too often the presence of women in the House has been trivialised or reduced to sexist sound bites or negative headlines. I want to thank the Churchill Archives Centre and Lucy Cavendish College for helping us in our journey to make this film and to keep these interviews in the history books where they so rightly belong.”

We have interviewed names such as Margaret Beckett, Harriet Harman, and Margaret Hodge, now all Baronesses, and Baroness Helene Hayman, the first woman to breast feed in the Commons and Baroness Hilary Armstrong, the Chief Whip in Tony Blair’s government.

Some of the first Conservative women to make it into the Cabinet have also contributed, including Baroness Gillian Shephard, Baroness Virginia Bottomley and Dame Caroline Spelman, along with Baroness Anne Jenkin who formed Women2Win with Theresa May.

More recently the Liberal Democrat Peer Baroness Susan Kramer has spoken of her entry into politics in mid-life and how much she has enjoyed it.

All speak of the sexism they experienced and how social media has made the role of women in politics today more difficult, though they would still recommend it.

They describe their remarkable political journeys, covering some 50 years, beginning in the 1970s when Harold Wilson was Prime Minister, but including more recent

memories of meeting Margaret Thatcher and working with Theresa May, as well as working in Tony Blair's and Gordon Brown's governments and in the coalition government of David Cameron and Nick Clegg.

Some came from privileged backgrounds, others experienced public life for the first time and all remember how the attitudes to women at the time were often patronising and belittling. Yet whatever background they came from they broke through their own party's glass ceiling to make groundbreaking changes.

Here we quote their recollections of the start of their political journeys, with some entering Parliament when women were still not included in the Cabinet, to their achievements as women parliamentarians in more recent times. They speak of helping bring in the minimum wage, Sure Start, the 2010 Equality Act, important international environmental advances, flexible working and gay marriage.

These 13 interviews will be held at the Churchill Archives Centre, University of Cambridge which has the papers of Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, and individuals such as Florence Hillsborough, who the first conservative, female cabinet member and, on the labour side, Mary Agnes Hamilton and more recently Tessa Jowell and Patricia Hewitt.

Jackie Ashley and the Women's Parliamentary Radio team have written articles for the Guardian previously on women in Westminster and set up historic national audio archives of the podcast interviews they have conducted over the past 20 years. [Belittled women | Media | The Guardian](#) and [End of an era: 10 Labour women who changed the face of Westminster | Labour | The Guardian](#)

Allen Packwood the Director of the Churchill Archives Centre explained:

"Our archives have tended to reflect the establishment, the elite of the time. Certainly, in our early years, the number of male collections vastly outnumbered the female. That's something going forward we're very keen to put right.

"I think it's vitally important that if this is an archive that reflects public policy and government, that it reflects the changes that have taken place over time. One of those key changes, of course, is the increase in the number of women. We have, recently taken in the papers, of Patricia Hewitt, of Tessa Jowell, on the other side of the aisle of Baroness Trumpington. We are at the moment, engaging with a number of female parliamentarians in the hope that we can get them to also add their papers here and to think about their archives, even if they're not coming here.

"What the "Ground breakers" series of interviews does for us, is to take us into the digital age. As we look to the future, more and more people are going to be accessing our resources online, and we want our material to be used in the classroom at all sorts of different levels. I think audio visual material is a really good, engaging way of doing that. People want to see these individuals talking about their experiences. They want to hear it from them, in their own voice."

We have interviewed – (listed by date they came into Parliament): Helene Hayman (Lab), Margaret Beckett (Lab) Harriet Harman (Lab), Emma Nicholson (Cons), Gillian Shephard (Cons), Anne Jenkin (Cons), and Virginia Bottomley (Cons), Hilary Armstrong (Lab), Anne Campbell (Lab), Estelle Morris (Lab), Margaret Hodge (Lab), Caroline Spelman (Lab), and Susan Kramer (Lib Dem).

Key quotes on what Parliament was like when they were FIRST elected in order of their election as an MP:

Baroness Helene Hayman, Labour MP from 1974 to 1979 for Welwyn Hatfield – Baby of the House aged 25. Described as the “Julie Andrews” of politics. She became a life Peer in 1996. She was the first Lord Speaker of the House.

From the Baby of the House to Lord Speaker of the House of Lords

“I was the first woman to breast feed in the Commons, but my story is really about not having any maternity leave. In the long, hot summer of 1976 I was pregnant in that summer. That was when Michael Heseltine waved the mace and all pairing was stopped, so there was no opportunity for that. I once went home because Barbara Castle created such a fuss that Margaret Thatcher paired with me and that’s the only time, I ever really had a conversation with her. It was a very, very difficult time in politics.

When Ben my first child was born, nothing had been resolved, the government was on a complete knife edge, we were, winning votes by 1 or 2 or 3, mainly on House of Lords amendments on controversial legislation. There I was with a newborn baby. I wrote to Margaret Thatcher, actually, and said, listen, please can you help you know me. Terrible things were happening. People were dying because they were being brought in and brought down from Liverpool. And, you know, they were in ambulances in New Palace Yard, and they nodded them through for votes. It was it was a horrible time.

So, you know, I either had to leave a child I was breastfeeding at home and abandon him, or I had to abandon my policy, and that seemed stupid to me, so I picked up the baby, and I came to Parliament. But that was not because I was trying to make any great statement. It was about the fact that no one recognized that it would be a sensible thing to allow someone who’d had a baby to have a few weeks off before they came back to work.

I was once reported to the police by a fellow parliamentarian, for having the baby in one of the lady member’s rooms because he was a stranger. three weeks old, you know. The only thing I was ever told they had discussed, because the chief doorkeeper told me, was that if ever I tried to bring the baby into the chamber, how much force he was entitled to use to stop me entering the chamber.”

Baroness Margaret Beckett - Labour MP 1974 to 1979 then re-elected 1983, Derby South to 2024. First female Foreign Secretary 2006. Deputy Leader of the Labour Party from July 1992 to July 1994. Her team introduced the minimum wage. Life Peer since 2024.

Breaking barriers to assume high offices of state and reforms.

“When I first stood for Parliament, it was very difficult to get a seat for anybody. When I got elected for the first time the pattern was that women were all in marginals that was the norm. You only had to look around and you really knew whether we were all there or not so there was a strong sense of camaraderie amongst us. Most of those who came in with me in 74, like me, went out again in 79. Those who didn’t go out in 79 went out shortly afterwards. There wasn’t any kind of assumption that a woman MP would come back again. It was still harder.

Parliament was very male then but that was what I was used to. I’d been an engineer and apprentice and I’d worked running an electron microscope laboratory. I was used to being in a world totally dominated by men. Actually. Westminster, to me, was refreshingly, relaxing.

I was appointed foreign secretary of state in 2006 in Tony Blair's government, the first woman to hold that high office. When I became shadow chief secretary in 1989, I was the only other woman apart from Margaret Thatcher who had been shadow chief secretary. I suppose perhaps I was the second woman to hold one of the great offices of state. I have been fortunate. You find I do quote my husband Leo a bit. One of his observations was that, if you're hard working and you're good at what you do you will always be useful to a prime minister."

Baroness Harriet Harman Labour, MP for Camberwell and Peckham 1982 to 2024. In 2010 Leader of the Opposition, Chair of the Labour Party. Leader of House of Commons. Mother of the House. Women and Equalities, Justice, Solicitor General, Sec State social security. She introduced the 2010 Equality Act. Life Peer since 2024.

Equality for all, challenging misogyny and making Parliament more representative.

"Well, there's something about being in a very small minority, only 3%, is that you are an outsider. You're an outlier. You don't fit in, you're out of place.

Arriving young and pregnant in a male dominated House of Commons, I immediately was, not one of the in crowd. I was very much a small out crowd, but in that crowd of one, really.

Sometimes people were outright hostile, shouting across the chamber that I was a stupid cow. There was kind of outright, misogynist behaviour but above all, there was hostility to my agenda because my quest was not just to be in Parliament, but to put on the agenda of Parliament issues of concern to women. For instance, domestic violence, as much as another Labour MP Jo Richardson had done, and childcare.

In my first Prime Minister's Questions to Margaret Thatcher, I raised the question of childcare as we were coming up to the school holidays, and a lot of women were working, and school holidays are very difficult.

I was saying, what's the government going to do about school holiday provision? There was literally sort of jeering not only from the other side at the Tory side, but from our side as well, on the basis that I really didn't know what being in Parliament was about. This was not an issue for Parliament. This was not an issue for government, you know. And therefore, why was I raising it? You know, I'd got the wrong end of the stick about being there.

There was, an editorial in the Daily Mirror denouncing me for not knowing what questions I should be asking. There was hostility to my agenda, which was the reason I was there. This was really backed up, as I say, not just by fellow MPs, but by the media and the political lobby, who more or less had the exclusive reporting in Parliament at the time because Parliament wasn't broadcast. They were all men as well. They thought talking about, issues of childcare or maternity was just silly and irrelevant, and that it should be about the money supply and mining and not about those sorts of things."

Baroness Emma Nicholson, Conservative MP for Torridge and West Devon 1987, switched to LDs in 1995. Life Peer since 1997. LD European Parliament SE England, 1999 to 2009. In 2016 rejoined the Conservatives.

Breaking conventions, campaigning for Europe, fighting for international immunisation against Polio, and trying to protect Iraqi marshlands.

"I belong to the Conservative Party. I had an out rush and joined the Liberal Democrats for a while. Came back to the Conservative Party. I'm in the House of Lords. I've been fortunate in

that I've sat in five different parliamentary settings, including Brussels, Strasbourg and Commons and London and so on and so forth.

I have a lot of experience in Parliament, and I come from a very, very long line of Parliamentarian on all sides of the family but I am the first lady Parliamentarian. I stood for Parliament because having spent my childhood supporting all the men in the family and I mean very big family, so all sorts of uncles, cousins, brothers in law, fathers and everything I realized I didn't agree with them. If I was outdoor-knocking, I had to agree with them. So, I concluded when I was about 14 or 15, that I would wait until my father retired and not do anything before that.

Eventually, when my father did retire, he had a very, very long time of service in the House of Commons I decided to begin my parliamentary career. I informed my father and brother-in-law and cousins and all. They were absolutely horrified and told me not to dare to try for it, it wasn't right. Women shouldn't be in Parliament, still less a female member of the family.

So that was quite extraordinary. I wasn't expecting that, which was foolish of me."

Baroness Gillian Shephard Conservative. MP for SW Norfolk from 1987 to 2005. Served as Cabinet Minister, Education and Employment. Agriculture Fisheries and Food. Now Chair of the Conservative Association of Peers. One of two women promoted to John Major's government in 1992.

The Gang Labourers Act and fighting against modern day slavery.

"There's been so many changes since I got into Parliament in 1987. But it was when I was at the Treasury in 1990, I felt for the first time, anti-women prejudice.

It was when John Major became prime Minister, and at the same time I was made deputy to Chris Patten, the deputy chairman of the Conservative Party, people began to feel they were being competed against.

This was the first time I noticed comments from male MPs. However, this was as nothing compared with the welcome I got in the Treasury. A senior Treasury official, a man of enormous overweening importance, of course, but he was only one of 4 or 5 Treasury Knights, as we called them, came into my office and said, "yes, Mrs. Shephard, you are the first woman Treasury minister we've had but I want to explain to you how unimportant in the Treasury junior ministers are. Really, you're about signing things and all of the policy, to be honest, is done with us the senior officials and the Chancellor. I hope you enjoy your time here. By the way, there is no women ministers lavatory". So, I said, "I don't think that will worry me at all. I shall be very happy to use the Women's Treasury staff lavatory should I need it".

He left the room. I must say, I was taken aback. I've never forgotten it. Of course one wouldn't. But you know. How amazingly small minded I thought. How can you, a towering figure possibly stoop to say something like that? How extraordinary. So, I did find, in the Treasury for the first time that sort of approach."

Baroness Anne Jenkin Conservative Peer since January 2011. Set up Women2Win with former PM Theresa May in 2005. First stood for Parliament in 1987 for Glasgow Provan. Currently co-chair of W2W.

Getting more Conservative women into Parliament and setting up W2W.

"I came into Parliament as a secretary and before that I had worked in Conservative Central Office as a secretary. In those days, there were masses of women working in Parliament clicking, clacking away at typewriters.

So, after the 2005 election, when we made no progress with the A list system of selecting women, I was asked to go on woman's hour, because I was in the cuttings and I remember sitting in the green room in advance of the interview with Jenny Murray, which was quite intimidating in itself.

I remember her very beautiful nails but felt quite nervous. The researcher came into the green room, and I think there was a comedian on after me. And she said to this other person, "you're on after a piece about women in the Conservative Party, so that won't take long". And they sniggered and I felt extremely uncomfortable.

When I got into the actual studio, I mentioned this, because I was embarrassed. I was embarrassed for our party. I was embarrassed for women. I was embarrassed, it was a shameful experience. So that really got me going, I think. And it really evolved from that. So, we launched Women to Win in November 2005, just two weeks ahead of David Cameron becoming leader of the Conservative Party.

I think at that stage we didn't know. As I say, we thought we were a ginger group. We thought we were there to rattle the cage, to make the Conservative Party listen."

Baroness Virginia Bottomley, first elected as a Conservative MP in 1984 to 2005 SW Surrey. Became a member of the House of Lords in 2005. Sec of State Dept of Health in 1992 to 1995. One of only two women promoted into John Major's government.

Being a woman in the Cabinet and steering through health service reforms in the face of opposition.

"The media painted me as an English rose figure, but I can be an absolute battle axe. So, this English rose picture, I mean, whatever I look like I'm a tough old boot. And my daughter used to say, mum, they don't know whether you're a battle axe or a bimbo. I think you're both.

But I was really protected by Peter and his conservative colleagues. Of course, I remember Keith Joseph, a wonderful man, who made me a Tory, used to come up to me and say things like "that's a nice dress you're wearing, Virginia". He meant it politely and I would say, well, that's a nice tie you're wearing. You had to learn not to be mean, but to use humour.

I say this to people, as women, as a head-hunter, you get awful, patronizing comments but the thing is, you know, don't get mad, get ahead.

Another ridiculous story when I was first the MP in Southwest Surrey, I was asked to give away the prizes at a school prize day. A posh girls school. It was a school that had a male chairman of the governors. The tradition was the head girl's father thanks the visiting speaker. And it had a headmaster. So, they introduce me and say "Oh, we're so pleased Mrs. Peter Bottomley is here to give away our prizes. Mrs. Bottomley is married to Peter Bottomley, the transport minister. I eventually managed to say, and how fortunate we were in this country, that Mrs. Denis Thatcher was our Prime Minister, to which, you know, the house collapses. But I always say to women don't get nasty, get witty. That was a good response."

Baroness Hilary Armstrong, Labour MP for NW Durham from 1987 to 2010. Served as Chief Whip under Tony Blair. Minister for Cabinet Office and Social Exclusion Minister when she

worked on Sure Start. Life Peerage in 2010. PPS to John Smith during his time as Labour Leader.

Fighting for social justice and the excluded in society and reforms to tuition fees

“I was elected in 1987 and I come from the Northeast of England. I was secretary of the local Labour party in Sunderland where the chair of the constituency was an old councillor who just used to say, “but women don't want to be members of Parliament that's why we don't have any, they're too busy doing other things”.

It was that sort of thing that spurred us all on to make sure that we would become, if possible, members of parliament. Clearly, the Abortion Act had been passed in 1967, so that was well entrenched, as it were, by the time I became a member of Parliament in 1987. However, there were attempts to roll back and there was cross-party, organization among women and in those parliaments to make sure that we didn't roll back.

Half of my constituency was very Roman Catholic, the other half quite Methodist, and lots of others in between, as it were. In my selection conference with the Labour Party, I was asked, “how do you justify the foetus in the womb being treated worse than a convicted murderer?”. I was the last to be interviewed in the selection all the previous five would be men and they'd not been asked any questions like that. But the regional organizer immediately jumps in, and she said, “you don't need to answer that because none of the others have been asked it?”. I knew if I didn't, I was toast. So, I did answer it. That symbolized if you like, a very deep ingrained, anxiety about abortion. And I clearly supported the right of women to choose. So, I would always have that as an issue going through my Commons career.”

Anne Campbell Labour MP for Cambridge 1992 to 2005. In 2003 resigned as PPS to Patrician Hewitt to vote against the Iraq war. Voted with government on third reading of the tuition fees bill. The first MP to have a website and set up Scientists for Labour.

Using technology to help with social issues and benefit mothers

“When I first came into Parliament it was a pretty hostile environment, actually. It felt more like a public school than almost anything else. I mean, there was tobacco smoke everywhere, but that was one of the things I remember because I suffered, slightly from asthma. Tobacco smoke I found extremely irritating. But almost everywhere you went there was a smell of the smoke.

There were only 30 women MPs, I think when I got elected in 92. One of the things that is worth saying is that I hadn't in my professional life, worked very much with other women before because I'm a mathematician and a scientist.

I think one of the things that I did try to change was the importance of science to the economy. The person who listened to me after we got into government was Gordon Brown, who took it up, in a wonderful way but at that time, the real concern of most labour MPs was the decline of the shipping yards, the motor manufacturing industry, you know, the old manufacturing industries which had sustained the northern towns, and the mining. It was slightly irritating to have this newcomer from Cambridge standing up and saying, “we've got all this wonderful high-tech stuff which is going to save the world eventually”. It was a bit of a struggle sometimes, I have to say.

I was the first MP to have a website, yes. But I remember Dennis Skinner saying to me, “if we didn't have people like you in Parliament, we wouldn't be in power, you can't rely on the old manufacturing, anymore”. That gave me quite a boost.”

Baroness Estelle Morris Labour MP for Birmingham Yardley from 1992 to 2005. Sec State for Education from 2001 to 2002. Resigned saying she was not up to the job. First former Comprehensive School teacher to hold that position. May 2005 created a Life Peer.

Winning a marginal seat and helping some of the students she taught get a start in life

“Birmingham Yardley was a Conservative held seat. It was a strange seat because the conservatives were thought to be losing it, but it was the Liberal Democrats that people anticipated would win it. It was a three-way marginal.

It was really hard work to win it. Put it this way, when the Labour Party had the selection conference for the candidate in Yardley, there weren't hundreds queuing up to take it on. So, it was it was a tough thing from the start, but I very much enjoyed it. We only won by 162 votes. That was hard work. And every election was hard work because it was a Liberal Democrat challenge rather than a Conservative challenge. In the subsequent elections, when we got to the House of Commons, I think I had an advantage because my dad had been an MP, so it wasn't the first time in the building.

When you look further in the parliamentary Labour Party to see who had come in on the basis of having won a safe seat, they were men, not women. That really struck me at the time. At the time I thought, oh gosh, it wasn't just me in Yardley, but it was throughout the country where I did feel at that era, because this was before women shortlists, that women there very, very often had marginal seats and no children.

I know that changed now. I think we were the last intake, perhaps to whom that was the case.”

Baroness Margaret Hodge - Labour MP for Barking from 1994 to 2024. Was leader of Islington Council from 1982 to 1992. Chair Public Admin Committee from 2010 to 2015. Spoke out against antisemitism in the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn. Life Peer since 2024.

Fighting the BNP and introducing with others Sure Start and Flexible working.

“The 1997 intake of Labour women did change Parliament. I think all the positive action, the all women shortlist was absolutely central in bringing more women into Parliament. And before anybody says that brought in women of a lesser calibre and capability that is such rubbish.

We cared about issues that matter for women. So, you know, you'd never have the childcare strategy, you've never had a sure start. You'd never have had, improvements in maternity leave, maternity pay. There's one improvement I would look back on that I think really transformed women's lives in the community. That was the right to request flexible working. So, the bunch of us who thought it was really important, we were ministers and again, we work collaboratively. There were some women in number Ten as well, two women who were working with Tony at that time, who we were all absolute determined to get this right to request a flexible working. Tony then Gordon Brown was very resistant to it because they thought that the business community would, hate it.

But with this sustained pressure from Parliament, from government, from the officials supporting it, and the political officials supporting Tony in number Ten eventually we won. We brought it in. I honestly think that in terms of women balancing their lives between work and their care and responsibilities, it's been the most important change that we effected, which

has really helped women both stay in the workplace and carry out their caring responsibilities.

I think it's been more successful than I ever thought. And now, of course, it's spread. You know, men do it, everybody does it. It doesn't have a negative impact on businesses, because if you know, you commit yourself more, you work harder."

Caroline Spelman Dame Conservative. MP Meriden 1997 to 2019. Sec of State Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 2010 to 2012 in David Cameron's government. Second Church Estates Commissioner 2015 to 2019. Speaking up for the European Union in the Brexit campaign.

Using her role as Agricultural Minister to put on the international agenda sustainable development goals

"Nobody in my family, had ever been a parliamentarian. The way of working is very different from anything else that I'd experienced. I mean, it's not 9 to 5. I'd had full time jobs I'd had part time jobs, but I think it's a very different style of working.

When I came into Parliament in 1997 the Conservatives had been defeated. One of my male colleagues said it was how he imagined the aftermath of the First World War. You know, when so many people had been lost in battle that, you know, it was a regrouping of the remnant of the army at Westminster.

Misogyny well, that was one aspect of it. I don't think it was so much, just men, you know, who were resistant to the idea of changing the hours. I think parliamentarians that have got used to the long hours culture and the overnight sittings quite liked it. I think that was where some of the resistance came from changing to an earlier finish.

The misogyny took, you know, some quite harsh forms. I remember the very day that I was signing up, you have to sign your name and then you swear in. And somebody who should be behind nameless was standing behind me and said, "you know, what do you even think you're doing here? You should be at home looking after your children". I was pretty taken aback by that because I had never really encountered that in the workplace that I had been in before I came into Parliament.

With social media abuse I think it's not just politics. I think there is misogyny directed towards women. If I speak to other women at the top of their professions who are in the public eye, they will say they too attract, incredible abuse, via social media. I think we need to get a grip of this because these are things that you can't write to people because they would be libellous."

Baroness Susan Kramer. Former Liberal Democrat MP for Richmond Park from 2005 to 2010. Stood for European Parliament and London Mayor. Treasury spokes from 2015 to 2019. Was front bench Treasury Spokes in Nick Clegg's coalition government.

Improving transport in London, supporting electric vehicles and working with others on new gay marriage laws.

"I got involved in politics in this country after returning from living in the States. I contacted all local political parties and only one came back to me. The Liberal Democrats knocked on my door, and I had had a sense that that's where I was going to be in politics. I'm very, you

know, focused on community activism. I've always had a very strong environmental streak, which I'd exercised while I was in the United States.

You are a public figure. When I was an MP, when I sat down on the bus, invariably someone would sit next to me with a set of queries. My husband, when he was alive, said that when we went out to dinner, people would bring their chairs and sit down at our table with us to question us. If we went to the theatre, people would wait until the intermission to then come and ask a series of questions. When my husband died, people brought casework to the funeral because they thought, I won't be holding a surgery that week and that their issue was so important it needed to be drawn immediately to my attention. I can tell you it shocked the vicar.

What is so frustrating about it is that you have other people who hold back from approaching you because they feel you must be busy, and so they shouldn't possibly disturb you with their problem. But you want to say yours is exactly the problem I want to deal with, you know, because you've got a real problem. So, it's a very frustrating.

"I suppose as a minister, I was able to come in, prevent the destruction of the program that we had in place to support the development of electric vehicles and electric transport, it relied on a system of grants. But, I mean, mine were not earth shattering, life changing achievements. I recognize that, and, so, I mean, I have great admiration for one of my colleagues, Lynne Featherstone, without whom equal marriage would not have happened. Now, I mean, now there is something to go away and put on your tombstone."

END.