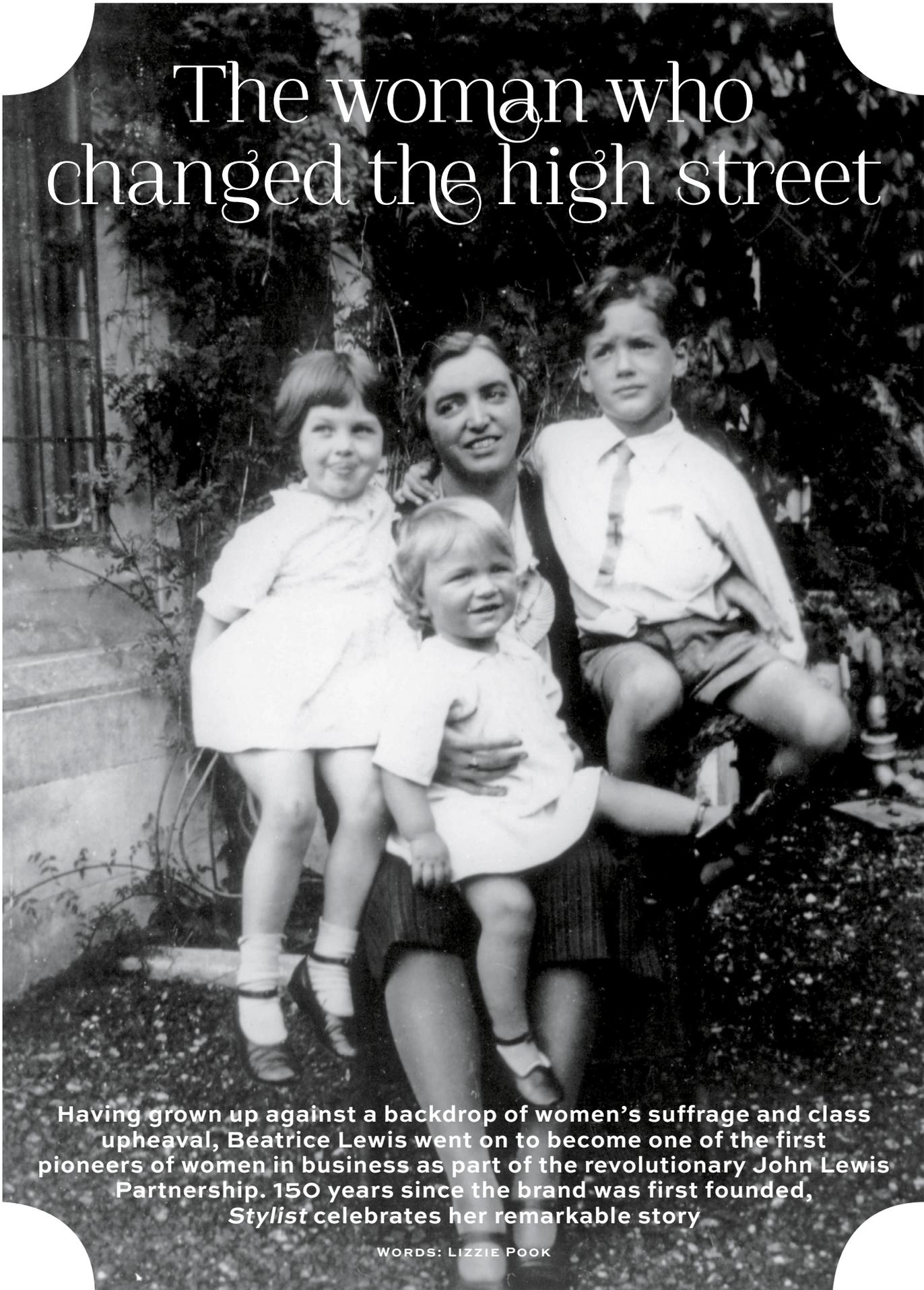


The woman who changed the high street



Having grown up against a backdrop of women's suffrage and class upheaval, Beatrice Lewis went on to become one of the first pioneers of women in business as part of the revolutionary John Lewis Partnership. 150 years since the brand was first founded, *Stylist* celebrates her remarkable story

WORDS: LIZZIE POOK

Imagine going to university, attending lectures, sitting exams, achieving brilliant results – yet not being awarded a degree. To make matters worse, imagine your male peers walking off with their scrolls and mortar boards, even if they had achieved poorer results than you, *just* because they were men. Imagine being told education would have a negative impact on your health. Yes, it sounds absurd, but this was the case for many British women at the turn of the 20th century, including Beatrice Lewis, a woman who not only pushed the boundaries when it came to women's education, but who – as one of the first women to make a mark in the higher echelons of retail – would go on to revolutionise the high street as part of the indomitable John Lewis Partnership, a company that changed the face of big business by giving all its employees shares and promising equal distribution of wealth and power.

AN EDUCATION

Born in Germany in 1890 as Sarah Beatrice Mary Hunter, little is known about Beatrice's upbringing or why she came to England. "We can assume she came from a middle class family," says John Lewis archivist Judy Faraday. "We do know she went on to become a formidable lady," she adds. "She was very confident and intellectually superior to a lot of people. When I've heard people talk about her, it was as if she was a little fierce. They were frightened to go near her." Beatrice became one of only a small group of women to read English at Oxford before the First World War. "It wasn't common for women to go to university then," says Dr Nicola Phillips, senior history lecturer at Kingston University. "There was a societal feeling that there were surplus unemployed women, but that they should take up 'feminine' professions, such as nursing, for

which you didn't need a degree. There was a lot of male resistance to women's higher education."

Those in the medical profession rallied against women's participation as well. "Towards the end of the 19th century, there had been all sorts of anxieties surrounding what was healthy for women to study," says Phillips. "Doctors thought too much brain work took energy away from women's reproductive



systems and would damage them physically." But Beatrice and her peers fought back. "Some of the women's colleges did research into the claims and their findings contradicted medical opinion, indicating they were actually healthier and less likely to have childless marriages than their less educated sisters."

Beatrice's university years (1909-1912) took place during a period of social upheaval – the women's suffrage movement was in full swing and suffragette Emily

"SOCIETY BELIEVED WOMEN SHOULD TAKE UP 'FEMININE' PROFESSIONS, LIKE NURSING"

Davison's tragic death at the feet of the king's horse took place soon after Beatrice left her studies. As well as fighting for their educational rights, women were becoming increasingly politicised. Political groups were

beginning to field female candidates in elections, and politics soon became firmly embedded in the mainstream.

Beatrice finished university in 1912, and after a short spell teaching – a common profession for educated women at the time – and fundraising for the Women's Emergency Corps in the US and Canada, she held secretarial posts in several ministries. She also got her driving licence

to enjoy working with women, and had a trio of unassailable secretaries who worked for him around the clock, even transcribing his dictations from outside the bathroom.

Beatrice was one of five female graduates whom Spedan recruited as buyers. She started as a shop-floor apprentice and was soon promoted to shoe buyer for the company, transforming the ailing department in her first year. It was a burgeoning, affluent industry. "Retail was a massive growth area in the Twenties," says Charlotte Wildman, lecturer in Modern British History at the University of Manchester. "Not only did you have the big department stores like John Lewis and Selfridges, you had the rise of high street shops like Woolworths and Marks & Spencer. They were considered covetable places for women to work. With the boom of the cosmetics industry and soaring profiles of brands like Chanel and Elizabeth Arden, there was a glamorous culture of retailing and it was seen as a respectable trade for unmarried women."

EQUAL MATCH

In 1923, after less than a year in the job, Beatrice married Spedan Lewis. "She impressed him with her tennis skills," says Faraday, "and she was also a great chess player" (another of his loves). She believed in his ideas of a Partnership [the idea to equally distribute wealth and power among those who worked for him] and wanted to be part of his experiment. She said in a letter she, "Wished he wasn't so rich but no doubt I shall get used to it." He found her intellectually challenging – she was one of the few people who could match him in intellectual discussions.

The couple would go on to have three children: John, who tragically died aged eight from meningitis, Jill, and Edward, who worked briefly in the Partnership after leaving university. Once married, Spedan made Beatrice director at Peter Jones Ltd (the department store also owned by the John Lewis Partnership). "This was unusual," says



which was very unusual for a woman at the time.

Her relationship with the John Lewis Partnership began in 1922, when she was recommended to Spedan Lewis (son of founder, John, who would bequeath the entire business to his son when he died in 1928) by her Oxford college after he asked them

to help him recruit female graduates. Spedan's drive to create a sense of fairness and equality at work by placing more women in senior roles within the company was considered revolutionary – he was known

Faraday, "because even though the partnership encouraged women to continue working after they were married, society would look down upon those who did return to work because it was assumed that their husbands couldn't financially support them." It paid off though, and in 1929 Beatrice was made deputy chairman of the Partnership – a position she held for the next two decades. "It was extremely rare for women to progress into management roles in retail," says Wildman. "Women would typically become retail workers in their late teens or early 20s but would give up work when they married – so the higher levels of business would be dominated by men."

Beatrice, and indeed many other women who had previously been marginalised in the business sphere, were becoming increasingly empowered. Margaret Bondfield, for example, was a public figurehead for women's rights at the time. After the 1929 general election [known as the 'flapper election' due to all the extra women who could now vote], she became the first

woman to gain a place in the British cabinet as the new Minister of Labour. It was a time, says Krista Cowman, Professor of History at the University of Lincoln, of political and social emancipation for women. "It was a great era of organisations. The Women's Institute and Women's Citizens Association were key outlets for women interested in politics."

Against this backdrop, Beatrice began making her views on women's employment more vocal. During a speech at Oxford, she said: "It seems to me that women when working have tried to turn themselves into second-rate men rather than first-rate women." She campaigned hard for equal pay and lamented society's views of married women at work: "There's a difficulty in training women for specialised jobs



BEATRICE WITH HER HUSBAND, SPEDAN LEWIS, IN 1948

because just as they become proficient they are apt to leave the team through marriage."

Lewis was a strong character, keen to support women's rights. She sat on the

appointments board of London and Oxford Universities and was an executive committee member of the Women's Employment Federation. Her stance made a mark and, in the years that followed, more women started to hold positions of power across the UK. By the Fifties, legal reforms meant women teachers and civil servants should receive equal pay. Beatrice, alongside a small group of other pioneering women, had forged a path for women to go on to be business owners, chairwomen and CEOs – indeed today 60% of all retail employees are women and John

Lewis itself has over 90,000 partners (the name they use for employees).

After World War Two Beatrice continued to prove invaluable to both the business and morale of the workforce. She revived the Partnership's famed Dramatic Society and in 1947, produced the first post-war Partnership Review. Such was her stronghold in the Partnership that Spedan reportedly wanted her to take over the business completely. But sadly, Beatrice fell ill and in 1953 aged 63, she died of cancer before that could happen. True to her esoteric, out-of-the-ordinary form, she chose to be buried at sea. A permanent memorial to Beatrice, in the form an oak tree was created at Leckford where her and her husband lived. But she left behind a legacy far more significant than this – she showed that women could take on senior roles in business and thrive. She ensured other women were entitled to positions of power in the workplace regardless of their marital status. In short, she changed the high-street – and the lives of working women – forever.



FEMALE PIONEERS IN BUSINESS

Beatrice Lewis wasn't the only woman revolutionising the workplace in the early 20th century



LADY MARGARET RHONDDA (1883–1958)

Rhondda became 'the foremost woman of business in the British Empire' after inheriting her father's shipping and mining company. She founded The Six Point Group in 1921, fighting for occupational, moral, economic, political, social and legal rights for women.



DAME CAROLINE HARRIET HASLETT (1895–1957)

Haslett was the first secretary of the Women's Engineering Society as well as the first director of the Electoral Association for Women. She fought for a more open dialogue about electricity in homes and how its use could liberate women from household drudgery.



MARION JEAN LYON (1885–1940)

Lyon was the first woman to run a major advertising department in the UK (one of the most highly paid roles in Fleet Street at the time) and campaigned to "widen the scope of advertising vision" and get female voices heard in an exceptionally male environment.



LILIAN BAYLIS (1874–1937)

Baylis was a theatrical pioneer who played a key part in shaping Britain's arts world. After taking over the management of Royal Victoria Hall in 1920, she renamed it The Old Vic and in 1925, she reopened the derelict Sadler's Wells which nurtured talent that would later create The Royal Ballet and National Theatre.



ROSALIE (ROSE) SELFRIDGE (1860–1918)

Rose was department store magnate Harry Selfridge's partner in both life and business. She helped run Harry's flagship Oxford Street store and used her own personal wealth to develop property in Chicago. She later opened a convalescent hospital for American soldiers in Dorset.