

JENNIE LEE

PUBLIC ART COMMISSION

APPENDIX

INTRODUCTION

Milton Keynes City Council is embarking on an exciting project to commission an artwork in recognition of the life and work of Jennie Lee and to celebrate her significant achievements at national and local level.

In preparation for this, initial research in conjunction with the Open University, which Jennie led on establishing in Milton Keynes in 1969, has been undertaken to inform the Commission Brief. The Open University Archive holds the personal papers of Jennie, and assessing these is the first step in the research and development phase.

A Commission Brief will be shared widely in June 2025, seeking artists for the commission, with the expectation that timescales for Phase 1 will conclude in late Autumn 2025.

BACKGROUND / BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

Jennie (Janet) Lee was born in Lochgelly, Fife, on 3rd November 1904, to James Lee and Euphemia Grieg.

Her grandfather, Michael Lee, was deeply involved in local politics, establishing the Fifeshire Federation of the ILP (Independent Labour Party), later chaired by Jennie's father. The ILP became a large part of Lee family life, through which Jennie attended local meetings and met many political figures. She became deeply interested in the Socialist movement and attended the Socialist Sunday School.

Jennie attended Edinburgh University as a trainee teacher in 1922 and remained there for five years. She became involved in University politics, joining the University Labour Club. In 1927 Jennie graduated with an M.A., a teacher's diploma and a law (LLB) degree. She embarked on a career in teaching, whilst continuing her political activities.

Jennie became increasingly involved in the Scottish ILP circuit and was regularly invited to speak at meetings across Scotland. In 1929 she was nominated by the Labour Movement in Shotts as the ILP candidate for North Lanark and was successfully elected. At 24, she was to be the youngest member of the House of Commons.

In 1931 she was defeated in the Conservative landslide of the General Election and despite continued election campaigns in both North Lanark and Bristol, she would not return to the Commons until 1945 when she was elected M.P. for Cannock, Staffordshire, a position she retained until 1970. In the period between 1931–1945, Jennie kept busy writing articles for left-wing journals and newspapers and lecturing in America, Canada and Europe. She was also involved in the war effort, initially in the manufacture of barrage balloons as part of the Ministry of Aircraft Production under Lord Beaverbrook and then as the House of Commons representative for The

Daily Mirror. She also worked for Tribune, a newspaper for the Labour left, co-founded by Aneurin Bevan, Stafford Cripps and G.R. Strauss. The 'As I Please' column in the Tribune became Jennie's in 1945. In October 1934 Jennie married Aneurin 'Nye' Bevan (1897–1960).

Nye was M.P. for Ebbw Vale from 1929–1960 and in 1945 he became Minister for Health and Housing in Clement Atlee's government, where he established the National Health Service. Later appointed Minister for Labour in 1951, he resigned months later over the introduction of NHS charges. Bevan became deputy leader of the Party in 1959. He died in 1960.

Throughout Bevan's career, Jennie took a backseat in politics, instead supporting her husband in his work. She worked for her constituency of Cannock and, together with Nye, spent time on foreign affairs, travelling abroad and meeting international figures. In 1945 Jennie and Nye moved to Clivedon Place in London, but later bought Asheridge Farm in Chesham, Buckinghamshire, where they spent the majority of their married life.

Jennie became a member of the National Executive Committee from 1958–1970 and its chairman from 1967–1968. In 1964 Harold Wilson became Prime Minister and offered Jennie the new position of **Minister for the Arts**. During her period as Minister Jennie spent much time and energy **establishing the Open University**.

In 1970, Harold Wilson was defeated by Edward Heath. Jennie not only lost her ministerial position, but also her seat at Cannock, defeated by Patrick McCormack, the Conservative candidate. Jennie began to retire from political life. In late 1970, she was created a Life Peer and took as her title Baroness Lee of Asheridge, after her farm. She continued to attend the House of Lords until the mid-1980s. Her book 'My Life With Nye' was published in 1980 to critical acclaim. Jennie Lee died on 16th November 1988, aged 84.

The Jennie Lee Archive

Reference: GB 2315 GB/2315/JL

Dates of Creation: 1906–1995

Physical Description: 102 boxes

Accessing the archive is by contacting the University Archivist. Access to personal and/or sensitive information regarding individuals who may still be living may be restricted:

Ruth Cammies (she/her)

University Archivist

University Archive, Library Services

university-archive@open.ac.uk

open.ac.uk

The Open University

Walton Hall

Milton Keynes

United Kingdom

MK7 6AA

Acquisition, Scope and Content

The papers were passed to the OU Library by **Jennie's biographer Patricia Hollis** in September 1998, in accordance with Jennie Lee's bequest.

The papers cover almost the entire period of Jennie Lee's life, from her childhood until her death. The majority of the collection refers to her political career, including her time as an M.P., first for North Lanark and then for Cannock, and also her position as the first Minister for Arts. A smaller proportion of the papers deal with her more personal lifestyle, including relationships with family and friends and her marriage to **Aneurin Bevan**, as well as her education and teaching career. The collection also includes photographs and some audio material, as well as a small number of Aneurin Bevan's own papers.

Archive Arrangement

Patricia Hollis re-arranged a large proportion of the papers while they were in her custody, although some of the papers were maintained according to Jennie Lee's original order. Papers post-1970 were the least disrupted, as Jennie had become more organised during this period while writing her book 'My Life With Nye'.

Patricia Hollis also added some papers to the collection. This was largely official published material, such as background material for the Arts and The Open University and papers regarding the NEC and the Labour Party, as well as many of the Hansard publications. Some small personal items were added by Patricia Hollis, including some of the financial material, given to her during various interviews with friends and family, but the majority of the primary material was collected by Jennie Lee, in particular the correspondence and photographs. Most of Aneurin Bevan's papers were also collected by Jennie Lee.

Since their arrival at the Open University, Patricia Hollis' organisation has been largely retained, with individual folders grouped according to subject.

Papers that were clearly related to either Jennie's political or personal life were grouped together as such. Papers that were not so clearly defined, such as correspondence files, were grouped together as general papers. A separate section was given to papers regarding Jennie's early years, including her education and teaching career. Papers that clearly belonged to Aneurin Bevan have been separated and given a section within the collection, while papers that relate to Aneurin Bevan but are not necessarily his own papers have been kept with the rest of the collection. Papers that were not easily defined as Aneurin Bevan's own, including photographs of Aneurin Bevan, have also been kept with the main body of the papers.

The Finding aid for this archive was adapted for the Archives Hub in 2006.

Custodial History

The papers remained with Jennie Lee throughout her lifetime. On her death they were temporarily stored in the office of Arnold Goodman, until loaned to Patricia Hollis of Norwich, who kept them from 1988–1998 whilst she wrote her biography of Jennie Lee. Some material was added by Patricia Hollis during this period. The papers were then transferred to the Open University in 1998.

Related Material

Correspondence between Jennie Lee and Lord Beaverbrook, c.1935-1958, at House of Lords Record Office, Parliamentary Archives, ref. BBK C/37.

Correspondence between Jennie Lee and Charles Trevelyan, 1927–1955, at Newcastle-upon-Tyne University, Robinson Library, ref. CPT.

An **online exhibition** about the Jennie Lee archive collection, **is a good starting point** as it features narrative and digitised images of selected items. It is available on the Open University Digital Archive at: www.open.ac.uk/library/digital-archive/exhibition/177

This is split into the following themes, with multiple pages and images:

Early Life, Family and Career

Early Political Career

Outside Parliament

Post-War Politics

Jennie Lee MP

Jennie and Nye

Minister for the Arts

The Open University

Final Years: Baroness Jennie Lee

Personal Names:

Lee Baroness Jennie 1904–1988 MP

Bevan Aneurin 1897–1960 Statesman

Corporate Names:

Labour Party Great Britain

With thanks to Ruth Cammies, OU Archivist in the use and reproduction of this material.



Jennie Lee, 1937
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