A very warm welcome to you all. The College is, as ever, hugely grateful for your friendship, support and encouragement. And this is a significant year for you. I hesitate to remind you, but it’s now some 50 years since each of you matriculated. 50 years has passed in your lives, but 50 years has also past in the life of Wadham.

So how much has the College changed in those years? In some ways it has changed a great deal. In others not at all. And that is how it should be. Great institutions must move with the times, but they also have to preserve, across time, their fundamental, their foundational values.

Fortunately, we at Wadham, know a great deal about our foundational values. Let me explain.

We all know the poignant story of Nicholas and Dorothy Wadham, of their childlessness, and of Nicholas’ desire, in the place of children, to found a College in Oxford.

But we know more than that. For on 16 of October, as he lay dying, Nicholas sent for his nephew, John Wyndham. Because this was such a momentous encounter, John Wyndham made a memorandum of the meeting, recording the scene as he and Dorothy stood at the bedside.

And there were two things that Nicholas wanted to make very clear- the two foundational principles of our college. That within its walls, scholars should be free to profess what they liked. And that, having been brought unto learning, they should be put out into the world.
In the early 1600s these were radical notions indeed. And they served the College well, as in the middle of that century, that brilliant group of polymaths assembled here, Christopher Wren, John Wilkins and Robert Hook, to form the Oxford Philosophical Club.

Maths, astronomy, architecture, the workings of the human body, these men who contributed so much to the development of modern scientific method famously went on the found the Royal Society.

And they were joined by Robert Blake, Cromwell’s Admiral, the founder of the British Navy, who defeated at sea so many of the monarchs and dukes of Old Europe and who was regarded by Nelson himself as his hero, as the greatest naval figure in British history.

They were all nurtured by Wadham College and, to our immense pride, their ideas and their lives helped to pave the way for the Enlightenment, which broke out over Europe a few years later.

And so I would say, even as everything seems to change, this is something that doesn't change. For our attachment to Enlightenment values remains firm and fast. Especially today. Perhaps more than ever today.

And an important part of this is that our students understand what a university is. And what it is for. So that they don't crave safety and freedom from challenge and don't become lost in the dead end of identity politics and no-platforming.
So that they expect to be called upon to defend their views, to submit to intellectual scrutiny, to avoid orthodoxy of any stripe or colour.

So that they understand, with George Orwell, that the whole point of free speech is the freedom to say things that other people don't want to hear.

Of course there have been changes since your time and some great ones. And perhaps the greatest change of all to Wadham has been the admission of women. Which has, finally, made our College whole.

Indeed we mark the contribution of women here in this very Hall with our wonderful new portraits, reflecting our College in the 21st Century. It is impossible now to imagine this place without women and, of course, we don’t want to.

As many of you know, we are expanding the pool of candidates for places here in other ways. Following that titan, Maurice Bowra, who was no respecter of social background, we have intensified our efforts to attract young people from the widest variety of communities, particularly those who have not traditionally sent their young people to Oxbridge.

This College does not believe that intellectual ability and scholarly commitment are functions of birth or wealth. We believe that brilliance is to be found everywhere and sometimes in the most unexpected places. And we are determined to find it.

Does this policy work?
Well, we do not believe it is a coincidence that our most diverse of student bodies also happens to be one of the most consistently high achieving in Oxford.

And to mark the importance of this work to our future, there will be other changes. The back quad will see a new undergraduate centre and a new centre for our access and outreach work. These will be unashamedly 21st Century buildings, reflecting the College’s confidence in its own future and in the promise of the modern world.

This policy, this outlook, builds on the work of Bowra and it places our College on the right side of history. Of course in everything, we need your support- and we are deeply grateful for it.