

Address given by The Rt Hon The Lord Hague of Richmond, CVO, Chancellor of the University of Oxford

26 April 2026, Keble Chapel

St Mark's Day is of central importance in the history of Keble. John Keble was born on St Mark's Day in 1792, and the foundation stone of the college bearing his name was laid on the same date, in 1868. It was a momentous day, as no Oxford college had been incorporated since Worcester in 1714, more than a hundred and fifty years earlier.

The first warden, Edward Stuart Talbot, was sworn in on St Mark's Day in 1870. The foundation stone of this chapel was laid on the same day three years later and it was opened three years after that, in 1876, on St Mark's Day. One hundred and fifty years later we honour that occasion and learn from it, celebrating it in line with the current custom of the college, on the first Sunday of Trinity term – the Sunday nearest to St Mark's Day.

This was always intended to be a different sort of college: more spacious than most, more frugal than any at the time, more accessible for undergraduates from poorer families. The students were forbidden to eat their meals in their rooms or to tip the college servants. They were expected to eat together and to have minimal other expenses. They could send a message elsewhere in Oxford by using a halfpenny college stamp, an innovation taken up by other colleges until the Postmaster General feared the undermining of the Royal Mail and suppressed this competitive threat.

Yet the threat uppermost in Oxford minds as this chapel was opened with a speech from the renowned Dr Pusey, the Regius Professor of Hebrew and great scholar of the Oxford Movement, was that it would be a hotbed of ritualism. Archbishop Tait was worried that Keble “would turn out a monkish institution and would breed young monks who would do a great deal of mischief in England”. Ritual, monasticism, confession and other aspects of High Church beliefs were regarded with suspicion by opponents at a time when priests could be, and sometimes were, imprisoned for “Catholic” flourishes like putting lighted candles on the altar.

But by the time of the chapel's opening, the Tractarians at the heart of the Oxford movement were already moving on. Spurred into action by John Keble's famous sermon of 1833, and publishing ninety tracts in eight years seeking to reconnect Anglicanism with its pre-Reformation Catholic roots, they faced crisis and controversy when Newman, their primary author, converted to Catholicism in 1845. A quarter of a century later, the founders of Keble were not looking for new controversy; they were aiming for a college suitable for "persons desirous of admission to the Christian ministry" but as part of university extension – the much-needed expansion of nineteenth century Oxford – and with the intention of opening up to less wealthy students.

The objectives of founding the college were not the same as those we would aim for today. The focus was overwhelmingly on the education of the clergy. Among the families of the students, a university sub-committee expected "there would be a sprinkling of wealthier men, who prefer for their sons a College where plain living and steady reading set the prevailing tone" and others "socially in no way inferior, who are kept aloof from us by the tone of indolent extravagance which is believed to prevail among us", "even more than it really does", they added defensively. And of course, the intended students would all be men.

Very often, however, the advances made by our predecessors were important and in the right direction, even though they would not be aligned with all our principles now. We will also be thought, one hundred and fifty years from now, to have pursued priorities, methods or values that will not seem right or complete to our descendants. We must be judged in the context of our own times, and the founders of Keble must be judged, and praised, in the context of theirs.

The creation of Keble showed the university could indeed expand. In time it would provide a home for the many new disciplines spawned by the revolution in knowledge that emerged in the nineteenth century and space for the university to expand its role beyond its confessional origins, as governments increasingly expected and demanded. And it was here at Keble in 1878, at a meeting of high church supporters chaired by Talbot, that it was resolved to create for the first time institutions specifically for "women desirous of availing themselves of the special advantages which Oxford offers for higher education". This soon led to the founding of Lady Margaret Hall, and the broad-church enthusiasts then responded by creating Somerville. St Anne's was also founded as a Society, in 1879.

While the motivation behind Keble was one version of one religion and widening the opportunity among young men to enter its service, it became part of much bigger changes on which we continue to build, welcoming talented individuals to Oxford irrespective of their background, religion or gender. This should help us to understand our predecessors, who can seem rather alien to us even at the relatively short distance, for Oxford, of one and a half centuries. Their beliefs and habits can seem so different to ours, often incomplete and on some issues downright wrong in our view today, but they often put in place – literally in this case – the bricks that add up to the great institution we are lucky to inhabit. They widened the boundaries of what could be achieved while being true to the beliefs of their own times, just as we strive to do today.

This thought was always with me when I was writing my biography of William Wilberforce, the great anti-slave trade campaigner. Although his lifelong work arose from his conversion to evangelical Christianity, in contrast to the high church beliefs of John Keble, he was in several ways a forefather of the views of Keble and the Tractarians. Three of his sons, including Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, became high church adherents, feeling that the personal piety and social action emphasised by their father needed a stronger institutional and historical foundation.

Their extraordinary father was one of the greatest examples of religious belief producing a vast and positive impact on society, but again sometimes in ways to which we find it hard to relate today. Born wealthy, he was told as a Cambridge undergraduate that he had no need to improve himself. He remembered that “As much pains were taken to make me idle as were ever taken to make anyone else studious”. It was only after his conversion in his mid-twenties that he was driven by his need to give account to God of how he would spend his life. From then on, he recorded how he had spent each day in quarter hour increments, something only lawyers do today, and not because they are giving an account to God. He was ruthlessly self-critical, usually including a column for time squandered, that could reach three quarters of an hour in a day. He was educated at Cambridge. I am confident, as the chancellor, that no one in Oxford would ever squander three quarters of an hour in a day. Actually I’m not so confident!

Wilberforce became a leading light of the Clapham Sect, made up of wealthy evangelicals who led one of the greatest varieties and volumes of charitable activity launched by any group of people in any age. In the 1790s, the Claphamites promoted charity schools in Ireland, founded an asylum for the deaf and dumb children of the poor, offered relief to the poor of the City of London, launched education initiatives in Africa and created a refuge for orphan girls. They founded the London Missionary Society, the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, the Church Missionary Society, the Religious Tract Society, the Society for Promoting the Religious Instruction of Youth, the Society for the Relief of the Industrious Poor, the British Naval Endeavour for the Orphans of Soldiers and Sailors, the Institution for the Protection of Young Girls, the Society for the Suppression of Vice, the Sunday School Union, the Society for Superseding the Necessity for Climbing Boys in Cleansing Chimneys, and – my favourite – the wonderfully named Friendly Female Society for the Relief of Poor, Infirm, Aged Widows, and Single Women of Good Character Who Have Seen Better Days. Try putting that above the door of a charity shop.

They also led, in London alone, the establishment of a cancer hospital, a fever hospital, two eye clinics and many other medical societies. Remember that these causes were not even their principal endeavour, which was, above all, to abolish the slave trade.

As with John Keble in the next generation, many people today would not agree with all of Wilberforce's views. His passion for ending the slave trade was not based on today's values of equality. For him it was a vital concern that slaves were denied access to religion and had no way to save their souls. We do not have to share exactly the religious motivations of these figures in our past to appreciate and value their immense achievements. Such achievements are all around us, and we are their very fortunate beneficiaries.

One hundred and fifty years on, whatever our religious beliefs, we can identify with so much of what the founders of this college and its chapel were aiming to achieve. In the extension of the university, to use the vocabulary of those days, they were ensuring that an Oxford education became more widely accessible. Today we continue to need new colleges to expand opportunity, and new scholarships, particularly for graduate students, for those who cannot afford an education in which they would excel.

The founders of Keble very deliberately built for community, to create a large family of young people who would study, eat and worship together. They tackled the prevailing habit of students dining with a small group and shunning many others. Today, we face the challenge of defeating loneliness and the habit of scrolling through screens. Our colleges, societies, sports and chapels, are all essential in that task.

Keble was founded with a strong competitive spirit. Why else was the very deliberate decision made to make the dining hall a few feet longer than the renowned hall of Christ Church? If you meet a Keble crew on the river this term, you will find that competitive spirit is as intensely expressed as ever, and it is a good thing.

Within a short time of its founding, Keble students would find themselves benefiting from the breadth of learning that the reform of universities and the emergence of new disciplines would bring. In the first twenty years of this college, out of 879 matriculands, 450 took holy orders. But after that, medicine, engineering, law and government service would become far more common. A great university became associated with a far wider range of specialisms. Today, in a scientific age increasingly dominated by artificial intelligence, we understand the rising importance of continuing to combine our pre-eminence in sciences, medical science and social sciences with a reaffirmation of the vital role of humanities.

The motives and ambitions of those gathered in here one hundred and fifty years ago are therefore highly relevant to us in 2026. Their achievements, their monuments, are reminders to us of what can be achieved with a guiding faith and a single-minded determination. We are grateful today for the drive, vision and beliefs of those who stood here in 1876. As so often in this university, when we touch the bricks with which they built, marvel at the scale on which they planned, recall the ambition with which they dreamed, we are inspired to redouble our own efforts to live up to their memory, and, like them, to build for the generations to come.