## Conference Banquet Speech

Hello, at the end of the meal we’re going to have some words from Karen White and Bob Dalesio. They’ll be talking about EPICS and its history. But before we start, I’m going to welcome you: Welcome!

And with that done I’ll give you a little history of Oxford, the University of Oxford, and St Hilda’s College.

## Oxford

Oxford is straightforward. It was founded in the 8th century, and its purpose is obvious from its name: in Old English it was *Oxenaforda* - a ford where oxen can cross. It’s also the confluence of the River Thames which flows on to London, and the River Cherwell that flows past this college. The Thames is also called the Isis as it flows through Oxford, which is one of the inspirations for the naming of the ISIS Neutron and Muon Source.

Shortly after 1066 and the Norman conquest of England, Oxford Castle was built. The ruins are visible as a mound near the city centre. No-one knows when the University of Oxford was founded. But shortly after the castle was built, in 1096, we have the first evidence of teaching at the university. We’re thus only about 70 years short of the millennial anniversary of the university.

## The University of Oxford (and Cambridge)

Being founded in the 11th century makes the University of Oxford the oldest university in the English-speaking world, and the second oldest university in continuous operation in the whole world. Only the University of Bologna in Italy is older, and only by 8 years.

The University of Oxford is a kind of federal organisation with very little power or authority. It’s the 36 individual colleges that have the money and power, though they cooperate closely. Especially for the more expensive subjects like the sciences.

Some of you will know that the University of Oxford traditionally has a rivalry with Cambridge. The University of Cambridge was founded in 1209 by scholars from Oxford who left after one of the many disputes between the academics and the townsfolk of Oxford. The so-called town and gown rivalry. In this instance it was because three scholars were accused of the death of a local woman. The church authorities would probably let them off and pardoned them, as usual, but the town authorities hanged the three without consulting the church.

Town and gown rivalry could get even bloodier. In 1355 two students from the University of Oxford complained about the quality of wine served to them in the Swindlestock Tavern, which stood on Carfax, in the centre of the town. One thing led to another, and three days later University halls and students' accommodation had been raided and the inhabitants murdered; there were some reports of clerics being scalped. Around 30 townsfolk were killed, as were up to 63 members of the university.

The king imposed an annual penance on the town: each year, on St Scholastica's Day (10 Feb), the mayor, bailiffs and sixty townspeople had to attend a Mass at the University Church for those killed; the town was also made to pay the university a fine of one penny for each scholar killed. The practice was dropped in 1825; in 1955—the 600th anniversary of the riots—in an act of conciliation the mayor was given an honorary degree, and the vice-chancellor was made an honorary freeman of the city.

Fortunately, the conflicts between the university and townsfolk are less violent and less long running these days!

Oxford traditions with less bloody histories, include parading Lord Mallard, a duck, in a chair around All Souls’ College at the start of each century while singing the Mallard Song. It should be noted that All Souls’ is often counted as the most prestigious of the colleges as it has no students but only fellows.

Each year there is a very slow race of all the colleges’ tortoises and students’ pet tortoises. Some colleges elect human students to take part in the race instead, with Balliol having a Comrade Tortoise. They still accuse their old enemies Trinity College of having stolen their last real tortoise, Rosa Luxemburg. Magdalen College, closest to here across the bridge, has the role filled by an elected student too. At each general meeting of the student committee that student, titled Oscar d’Tortoise, must eat lettuce. This is mandated by constitutional amendment, and there is a lettuce allowance of 60p per meeting.

## St. Hilda’s College

The history of St Hilda’s College, where we are this evening, is inextricably linked with the history of women students at Oxford. It wasn’t until 1875 that women were allowed to study and take exams at the University of Oxford. And it was in 1893 that St. Hilda’s was founded, as a women-only college. But women still weren’t allowed to graduate even then!

It wasn’t until 1920 that women were allowed to receive degrees after passing their exams. In 1927 the university unnecessarily restricted women to a maximum of 25% of students. And it wasn’t just morally unnecessary. The colleges were all single sex at that time, so it simply wasn’t possible to have as many as 25% women. It wasn’t until 1974 that the first Oxford colleges became mixed gender.

St. Hilda’s was the very last college to change from being single sex. It was in 2007 that they first allowed men to become students here, in a close-run vote.

And I’m almost at the end of this history lesson, with two more facts to go. What’s the nickname for a student of St Hilda’s College. Well, they’re obviously Hildebeasts! And the college’s motto of “Excellence and Equality” is reflected in the tables you’re at. They’re the only college with round tables in the dining hall. So that dinners can be more social. And with that I’ll let you get to yours socially!