I’m very honoured to have been asked to unveil the Oxfordshire Blue Plaque to the great Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen, whose dates are 1899 to 1973, and who lived here for ten years, from 1925 to 1935, when the house was called “Waldencote”. I’d like just to say a few words, historical and literary, about Elizabeth Bowen.

At the age of 24, in 1923, Elizabeth Bowen, brought up partly in Dublin and Cork and partly in England, published her first book of stories, and married Alan Cameron. They spent their nearly 30 years of marriage partly in Ireland and partly in London. But ten years of their life, between 1925 and 1935, were spent in Oxford, here in Waldencote. They lived here because Alan was Secretary to the City of Oxford Education Committee. Though amicable companions, they led rather separate lives. Bowen had a passionate affair during her years here with the Wadham English don Humphry House, and she became close friends with some of Oxford’s leading writers and intellectuals. These included David Cecil, Maurice Bowra, John Sparrow, and Isaiah Berlin. In later years, long after Alan’s death, Bowen returned to Oxford to live, from 1960 to 1965, in White Lodge, adjacent to Isaiah and Aline Berlin in Headington House.

During her ten years at Waldencote, Elizabeth Bowen wrote and published three volumes of stories, including one of her best collections, *The Cat Jumps*, and four novels, *The Hotel*, *The Last September* – her wonderfully eloquent reminiscence of growing up in an Anglo-Irish Big House in Ireland during the Troubles – *Friends and Relations*, *To the North*, and *The House in Paris*, her brilliant evocation of a tragic love-affair involving two children’s lives. It was a great outpouring of writing, which included some of her finest work, and shows that this house, and her life in Oxford, were extremely congenial to her as a writer.
In all these books, and in all her work, there are dramatic, vivid and profound connections between people and places. Bowen is one of the most brilliant, haunting and sometimes alarming creators of the atmosphere of place. She is deeply interested in the relationship between emotions, morality, and the houses people live in, the spaces they inhabit, even their furniture. She loves to evoke particular, peculiar terrains – like a street she describes in a story called “A Queer Heart”: “This was one of those roads outside growing provincial cities that still keep their rural mystery. They seem to lead into something still not known. Traffic roars past one end, but the other end is in silence: you see a wood, a spire, a haughty manor gate, or your view ends with the turn of an old wall”. Not unlike this road.

While she was living here, one of the places she most intensely conjured up was the landscape around Bowen’s Court, for her 1929 novel *The Last September*, her second novel and in many people’s view her most eloquent and moving. In a much later introduction to the novel, she remembered what it felt like writing it, here, in her twenties:

“In most lives”, she says, “the years between twenty and twenty-eight are often important, packed with changes, decisive. When I sat in Old Headington, Oxford, writing *The Last September*, 1920 [the time of the novel’s setting] seemed a long time ago. By ... 1928 peace had settled on Ireland; trees were already branching inside the shells of large burned-out houses.... I myself was no longer a girl but a writer.... Also change had altered my sense of space – Ireland seemed immensely distant from Oxford, more like another world than another land. Here I was, living a life dreamed of when, like Lois [the young heroine of the novel], I drove the pony trap along endless lanes. Civilization (a word constantly on my 1928 lips) was now around me. I was in company with the articulate and the learned. Yet, onward from the start of *The Last September*, it was that other era that took command.... The writer, like a swimmer caught in an undertow, is borne in an unexpected direction.... To be a writer is to be captured – captured by some experience to which one may have hardly given a thought.” [MT, 124–5].
It is, I think, a wonderful description about how writing, and the imaginary transposition that takes place in the writer’s head from one place to another, can work.

This is not the first plaque to Elizabeth Bowen. After she and Alan left Old Headington they went to live at 2 Clarence Terrace, in Regent’s Park, and a blue plaque was put up to her there in March 2012. At the end of her life, she lived in a cottage in Hythe, Carbery, on Church Hill, where the Hythe Civic Society plaque describes her as “Elizabeth Bowen, Writer”. And in Cork, where her family house, Bowen’s Court, was sadly demolished in 1959, there is a plaque to her in the little church, St Colman’s, at Farahy, where she is buried, next to the empty space in the fields where Bowen’s Court once stood. It was unveiled by the Anglo-Irish historian Hubert Butler in 1979 and it reads, in words written by John Sparrow:

“She left in her writings a proof of her genius, a reflection of her personality and a history of her home.”

So I feel proud to follow in this tradition of commemoration of one of my favourite writers in the world, and I’m delighted that Oxfordshire is marking the connection of this great woman writer to this place.