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David Cameron's tale of Oxford college's trees is a myth, says academic

'I was hoping we had done with this chestnut,' says archivist of PM's claim that trees were planted 500 years in advance

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New College, Oxford. Trees to replace the dining hall's oak beams were not planted centuries before they were needed. Photograph: Graham Turner for the Guardian

In an attempt, during his conference speech, to emphasise the importance of long-term planning [David Cameron](#) relayed a nice anecdote about a "great hall in Oxford". In the 19th century, Cameron said, the hall's oak beams needed replacing, and they found "500

years before someone had thought ... those beams will need replacing one day" and planted some oak trees. "Just think about that," he urged his audience.

The great hall in Oxford Cameron was referring to appears to be that at New College and the story one that gained prominence when narrated by Stewart Brand on his TV series *How Buildings Learn*. It was subsequently deployed by others as a pleasant illustration of the value of foresight. The only problem is that the New College story appears to be false, or as the college's archivist Jennifer Thorp put it back in 2008, in an essay about the tale, a "myth".

She told the Guardian on Wednesday: "The New Buckinghamshire estates from which these trees were supposed to have come had not actually been acquired by us 500 years before the trees were needed. To have earmarked trees specifically for a chamber does not make any sense."

According to her 2008 paper, the land was acquired by the college in 1441, 70 years later than the first building of the hall, while the restoration was carried out in 1863-65. "I was hoping we had done with this particular chestnut," she told the Guardian.

If the prime minister was indeed referring to New College, his timing might also be said to leave something to be desired. The famous dining hall, said to be the oldest in both Oxford and Cambridge, is currently closed for refurbishment and is expected to remain so until September next year. In explaining the closure, which has nothing to do with the oak beams, the warden suggested that perhaps the college was not so hot on foresight as Cameron had indicated. Sir Curtis Price suggested that the catering facilities were "barely compliant" with regulations and that the refurbishments were "long-overdue".

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