

*King's Student
Perspectives
Classics
(3 year option)*

*Amber, 3rd year
June 2012*

I was always interested in literature and languages growing up, and enjoyed Latin and Greek when I started studying them at secondary school. I considered applying for English or Modern Languages at university, but eventually settled on Classics, and I'm very glad I did – I've really enjoyed the course.

I think one of the strengths of Classics as a subject is its breadth. The course encompasses language, literature, history, art, archaeology, philosophy, linguistics and more, so it gives

you the opportunity to explore several different areas of interest.



Amber in King's Hall

Why did you choose the Cambridge course?

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My Classics teacher recommended Cambridge to me. He thought I would enjoy the variety of the course and the fact that at Cambridge you get a chance to study texts and topics that are slightly 'off the beaten track'. I went to a Classics open day at Cambridge, where I had a tour of the faculty and attended lectures by academics (including two from King's). I got a good impression and was interested by the lectures, so I decided to apply.

Would you recommend King's for Classics?

King's is a great College for Classics because it has so many Classics Fellows (academics) and graduates, including three Professors, so whatever the topic, undergraduates have access to great teaching. The Classics community at King's is quite big, and very friendly. I've really appreciated getting to know classicists in the years above and below as well as in my own year, and the Fellows are friendly and approachable.

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Punting on the river Cam

The best thing about King's is the people. Despite looking so old and imposing, the college has a really relaxed and friendly atmosphere, and is a very pleasant place to live and work.

Was it easy to settle in?

I found King's to be a very welcoming environment. Freshers' Week and the first few weeks of my first term were very busy and hectic, but also good fun. I met a lot of people and made some good friends in my first term. However, a good thing about Cambridge is that even after first term it's easy to continue to meet people and make new friends, through societies, your subject, or college life.

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What societies did you join?

Although I signed up for lots of societies at the Freshers' Fair (where there are stands for each society and you can talk to members), I never went to most of them! I think I was too busy with meeting people and work, which starts up quite quickly once you arrive. However, whatever you're interested in (sport, music, politics, tiddlywinks...) there's bound to be a society for it.

I did, however, join King's Voices, King's mixed-voice choir. I used to sing in my school choir so was glad of the opportunity to continue with that. Every Monday we sing Evensong, an hour-long service consisting mostly of music.

Evensong also has Bible readings, and through King's Voices I got involved with reading in the Chapel, both in our Monday services and at other services. Reading in a building like the Chapel is a fantastic experience. In order to fill such a huge space, you have to really project your voice and enunciate every word. It's nerve-racking at first, but once you get used to it, it's great fun. There is also the opportunity to read in the televised Christmas service, Carols from King's, though I've not done this. Whether or not you're religious, the Chapel is a stunning and unique place. Spending time in the Chapel is wonderful, so I'm glad to have been involved with singing and reading there.



The Fellows gave us a special chance to go up to the roof of King's Chapel – there's an amazing view.

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How was first year?

I took a gap year (which I spent teaching English in Barcelona), and was a bit worried that I would find it hard to get back into studying and remember all my

Latin and Greek. I didn't do as much reading as I had planned during the year, but in the month or so before arriving at Cambridge I started looking at my set texts, which I think helped to remind me of the languages a bit. In the end it all came back to me quite easily.

In the first year of the three-year course (or second year of the four-year course), you're set an essay and a set of translations from Latin or Greek every week and left to get on with it, in between lectures,

language classes and any extra-curricular activities you might be doing. As well as this, you have a series of set texts to read in the original languages. It's a big workload, and you have to have some degree of self-motivation and resist the desire to leave it all until the last minute, but on the other hand, it's liberating to be able to work in your way and at your own pace.



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The style of work is very different to school. Whereas at school we spent a lot of class time going through the language of set texts, at Cambridge we were mostly left to do this on our own. A lot more of your time is devoted to essay-writing, and you're also expected to write essays on a wider range of subjects than at school – not only literature essays, but essays in history, philosophy, art and linguistics as well.

This can be daunting: I had never written an essay on any of these subjects before coming to Cambridge, and it's hard to tell what is expected. Luckily, supervisors tend to understand this, and I think the best tactic is just to give it a go. Your supervisors will tell you if and where you're going wrong. And the upside of having to work on all these new subjects is that you might discover one that you really love.

What do you think of supervisions?

Supervisions can be quite intimidating at first, especially if they're one-on-one or with a particularly scary supervisor, but I soon got used to them. I find that supervisions not only help you learn material, but teach you to think creatively. Getting a chance to discuss Classics with supervisors who are often great academics is a real benefit.

In the first two years, you usually have two supervisions per week: an essay supervision, for which you have to do an essay of about 2,000 words; and a translation supervision, for which you have to do a set of translations from Latin or Greek (it alternates).

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Essay supervisions are an hour long, and the supervisor will change depending on the topic of the essay. You write an essay on a different area of Classics or a text each week. In your first year, you'll do essays on Latin and Greek literature, history, philosophy, art and archaeology, and linguistics. The preparation time really varies, but in general I found that reading and preparing for the essay took the most time. I normally did the actual writing in a day.

Essay supervisions can really vary in feel. Some supervisors talk a lot while some let you do all the talking; some are confrontational and critical while others are more relaxed. It really depends on the supervisor, and also on the topic. For example, philosophy and history supervisions tend to be more argumentative than literature ones in my experience. The essay is not usually the main focus. Supervisors might discuss it, but usually only as an introduction to talking about wider issues. Don't worry if you're completely stumped in a supervision: it's perfectly normal to be asked questions that you have to stop and think about for a minute.

I could feel myself improving over the course of the year.

Translation supervisions are two hours long, and you have one supervisor for each language throughout the year. You are set three or four passages of Latin or Greek to translate, and also a practical criticism (a short essay analysing a passage closely from a literary perspective). In the supervision, the supervisor goes over the translations and leads critical discussion about the passages. The

translations are quite challenging, but I found the supervisions really helpful. I could feel myself improving over the course of the year.

What is third year like?

Third year is quite different to the first two years. In first and second year (or second and third year of the four-year course), you can choose to study or drop history, art and archaeology, philosophy or linguistics, but Greek and Latin literature and translation are compulsory. In third year, you take four papers out of a choice of about twenty, in any areas you like. You can specialise completely in a particular topic (taking four papers in ancient history or in literature, for example), or you can pick papers from different areas. I did a paper on Sophocles, a paper on ancient philosophy, and an inter-

disciplinary course on gods and heroes in the ancient world. You can also choose to do a dissertation on a subject of your choice instead of an exam. Third year has fewer contact hours than the first two years so it isn't as busy, and in general I found it an easier year

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than second year. I found doing a dissertation rewarding but stressful. Since you choose your own title, it's easy to worry about whether you've done the right thing, but for most people everything comes together in the end. It's good to have free rein to choose your papers and be able to focus on your personal interests.

What is the work/social life balance like?

It can be quite difficult to balance academic work with a social life. In Classics, the amount of work you do is, to an extent, up to you. So there's a risk of either spending too much time socialising or doing extra-curricular activities and not getting your essays done, or of over-working, devoting every waking moment to work and missing out on a social life, which is no fun at all. You need to find a work/social life ratio that works for you, but it's certainly not impossible to have both. I feel I've worked

quite hard over my time here, but I've also had a lot of fun and I don't feel I've ever missed out socially because of my academic work.

One of the things I like about the collegiate system is the opportunity to meet people studying different subjects and in different years (as opposed to just the people who live in your accommodation or people on your course). In general, I know King's people in my year better than classicists from other colleges, though I think other people have different experiences.



Fancy dress for the King's Affair

Where do you live this year?

My room this year is a two-room set in Bodley's Court, by the river. I love it: it's really big, has a beautiful view, and is in a lovely old staircase. The only problem is that my showers are in another staircase! College kitchens in Bodley's tend to be very basic, but I don't mind as I eat in canteen a lot. Even when I don't I'm too busy (or lazy) to cook anything big so I eat a lot of easy foods like soup and eggs.

Canteen food is pretty good, and there's a vegetarian option for every meal which is handy for me.



Bodley's Court



Amber at her graduation

What will you be doing next year?

Next year I'm coming back to King's to do an MPhil in Classics – I'm really looking forward to it.

I know quite a few other classicists who are coming back to do the MPhil at Cambridge or continuing study elsewhere, but lots are leaving to go on to other things too: I know of people planning to do Law conversion courses, publishing and business internships, and take up teaching posts.

A note to current King's Classics students

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying Classics at King's for our prospective students to read, please email Kristy in the Admissions Office for further details:
undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk