

King's Student Perspectives Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic

Tom, 2nd year

How did you find out about the Cambridge Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic course, and what drew you to it?

I discovered Anglo-Saxon, Norse & Celtic (ASNC) while flicking through the Cambridge prospectus. It's one of the University's lesser-known degrees, so I hadn't seen it online before. The wonderful images of artefacts and the obscure topics in the

prospectus entry had

me instantly hooked, and I immediately wanted to find out more about the course. I had originally intended to study History at Cambridge, and to specialise in this period, but as soon as I saw ASNC I knew straight away that it was for me! After some further research, it was the small size of the faculty and the total freedom that the course offers from the first year that drew me to it.

Because of the size of the course, the application process is also less complicated than

more popular courses like History or English Literature – although that should be a consideration only once you've got your heart set on ASNC!

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What A level subjects did you study?

I went to school in rural Lincolnshire. In sixth form I studied for A levels in History, English Literature, Religious Studies, and Business & Economics, plus an AS level in Archaeology. These are the kind of areas that interviewers are keen to see an interest in, but there is a great deal of flexibility in what A levels you need for ASNC. Because few sixth

forms or colleges offer courses that cover the same ground as ASNC, there is no expectation that you should have completed specific A level subjects. Of course, studying historical, literary or linguistic A levels would always give you a good background for the kind of study skills you will need. Knowing how to treat historical sources and analyse literature is important knowledge that I gained from my studies at sixth form, but fret not if you have not learnt these skills!

Lecturers and supervisors in ASNC are well aware that students come from all kinds of educational and subject backgrounds, so teaching will be from the ground up. I had not studied any languages at GCSE or A level, but now I am more than comfortable with them. I think that the one exception to this rule is Latin. If you intend to take the Latin paper in ASNC and continue it on into the second year, then it would be handy to have taken it at A



Tom, ready for a Santa run



Tom (in the middle) with Emily and Björn

level. There are beginner classes, and these were very good – but it would be helpful to have a good amount of prior Latin knowledge. Other than that, jump into ASNC with both feet if you have a reasonable grounding in humanities and/or language subjects!

What do you think are the main advantages in studying Anglo-Saxon Norse and Celtic?

ASNC has one of the smallest undergraduate student bodies in the University, but this is certainly not a bad thing. Its size means that students receive a great deal of attention, since the ratio of students to teachers is very high. As a result, the quality of education that the department offers is really good. As you can read on the website, we are one of the University's highest performing departments! As a result, if you take advantage of the resources available, a good degree in ASNC is well within reach.

Another reason that students generally achieve very good degrees is that the ASNC course is also very flexible – rather than forcing papers on you that you might not be interested in, you have the ability to pick everything that you study. For me this is a great advantage, because it means that I always have the motivation to study hard, and I'm always excited to explore the areas I'm given to write on for my supervision essays.

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Was it easy to settle in at King's?

Like many people, I was a little apprehensive about going to university, and Cambridge in particular seemed a little intimidating when I was an applicant. I remember the feeling of travelling from home, wondering, and even worrying, what life at King's would be like. I found it to be extremely welcoming when I arrived, and all my concerns disappeared. Everyone was more than happy to chat, and after only a few days, King's felt like home.

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Freshers and their families on the first day

Cambridge does not stage the traditional 'freshers' week' like other universities, where new arrivals are left to find their feet on their own. Instead, the first week, both in the faculty and in the College, is structured and designed to give freshers a gentle push to introduce themselves and to interact with other students. Every student is given two 'college parents' who help you through your first days at King's, and they will ensure that you really feel like a part of college life. They were invaluable to me in the first few weeks – if I had a question about King's or just wanted a chat and a drink, I'd just have to give them a call. King's also has a high state school intake, and this meant that I did not feel out of place.

It is not a big problem studying a 'minority' course, since there are plenty of these in King's. You'll find that there

is always plenty to talk about, and that 'subject groups' are not common in college. The ASNC department is only a five-minute walk from college, so you will hardly feel detached from your fellow students!

What were the main things that struck you about the transition from A level to studying at Cambridge?

For me, the main shock of studying at Cambridge was the level of independence I was expected to work at. Rather than the multi-tasking that A levels require, study at Cambridge is very directed and weekly essay assignments require you to work in a very independent and focused manner.



The ASNC common room in the Faculty

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What are supervisions like?

Supervisions are extremely helpful, and they form the central part of your week in the first two years of ASNC. Essentially, they are an hour-long session where supervisors can discuss your week's essay with you, and address any of your

concerns. Supervisions are always very thorough, and it's rare that you walk away feeling that you haven't covered everything. They generally take a question and answer format, similar in some ways to an interview but much more relaxed (I've been offered coffee in my supervisions!). Because ASNC has so few students, supervisions are generally on a one-to-one basis, which means that you can really make good use of the whole hour. In the first week at Cambridge there will be a small 'mock' supervision, which will introduce you to the format that they follow – but they're not as scary as they sound!

The supervision essays you produce, and commentary on them, are key to your development throughout your three years at Cambridge, and constitute some of the most important resources for exam revision. Essay subjects are generally quite broad so as to encourage you to explore the whole of your set topic, and this is definitely doable. If you're uncomfortable with a topic or find it

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boring (though this is hardly ever the case!) then you can ask for a different essay title, and supervisors will be more than happy to oblige. The last thing they want is for students to struggle.

What do you enjoy doing when you're not working?

My favourite activity when I'm not studying is socialising in the King's bar, which is essentially the common room for the college. There are always people in there looking to relax in the evening



King's bar

when lectures have finished. Quite a number of accommodation blocks lack a common room, so people will always head to the bar when they want to chill out. There is also a pool table, a quiz machine and table football if they are your kind of thing.

King's also has plenty of college societies (distinct from university-wide societies) to keep you entertained if you need to get away from your work. One of my favourite activities is kayaking down the river Cam, and King's is unique for its impressive collection of kayaks which are available for use free of charge. King's also has its own boat club if you have a penchant for rowing (or want to start), and there are plenty of other sporting societies if you don't. Many people in college also enjoy acting, and there are always performances to audition for.

There is certainly time to pursue your own interests and hobbies, but work and play do sometimes clash if you pay too much attention to the latter.



Kayak polo on the river in King's

What are the best and worst things about studying ASNC?

The best thing about studying ASNC is that it's an intellectually stimulating experience. The course is enjoyable in its own right – the system of lectures, translation classes and supervisions, along with the ready availability of relevant books, means that you can pursue the interests you have in mind when applying to the full. You'll never find yourself with nothing to do – and this is not necessarily a bad thing! ASNC material is interesting and it will always keep you on your toes, which makes for a challenging but enjoyable lifestyle.

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King's Avenue – a pretty walk back from the ASNC department

On the negative side, the small size of the course does mean that you'll be hard pressed to find people in College who are interested in or can relate to your specifically ASNC-related stories.

I am fortunate that there is another ASNC at King's in my year, but be prepared to feign interest in degree-level science and mathematics!

How did you prepare for your application?

I took a gap year, and it was a great opportunity to do some preparation for my application. Even if you're still at sixth form or college when you apply to Cambridge, it's a good idea to try to fit as much

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reading in as possible. Technically, you're not required to demonstrate any knowledge of ASNC material in your interview, but it's certainly indicative of a keen interest if you do. There is a reading list on the ASNC website with more books than you could need – I just read a book or two from each category, and that gave me a pretty good

grounding in the historical aspect of the course. This is

the only area that you can be feasibly expected to demonstrate knowledge of, however, and it is not expected of you to know any ancient languages (apart from Latin, if you did it at school)! Other than reading, I visited a few locations of interest prior to my interview which did come up, and they were very useful points of discussion. I would

recommend visiting Sutton Hoo in Suffolk if you're

interested in the more Germanic side of ASNC (See their website: <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo/>).

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The application and selection process for ASNC is simpler than for other courses, so as long as you demonstrate a rudimentary knowledge of the subject area and show that you're keen in your interview, that will certainly suffice.

With regard to the two essays that King's requires you to send in after you have

applied, try to select essays from different subjects that are either humanities or languages, and choose work that you feel relatively comfortable discussing.

How did you choose a College?

I first looked over all of the colleges to learn a little bit about them – it doesn't take long, and it's really quite interesting learning about the university and how it works. I then narrowed my choices down. I wanted a college that was in a central location, and embraced students from low-income backgrounds. This left a few choices, but I decided to pick King's because of its beauty, its history and its choir – aspects that attract a great deal of students. Everyone's criteria are different, of course, but many people choose to apply to King's for the same reasons as I did.



Bodley's court and the river from King's bridge

It is ultimately down to personal preference.

Choice of college is very important in my opinion, since colleges do more than simply provide accommodation. They have their own student unions and societies, and represent you as a student. Each college also has its own 'ethos', and some people develop a strong affiliation with their college. I

would definitely recommend King's, but I'm obviously biased! Some colleges are better for some than others, and it is ultimately down to personal preference.

How is second year different to first year?

Second year is essentially the same as first year, but with a little more work. The first year is often called 'preliminary', and is designed to familiarise you with the material and study skills that will be developed in the second and third years of the degree. In the second year, students generally carry on studying what they were examined on in the first year and also take two new papers, making a total of six. These papers can be borrowed from other courses taught at Cambridge, and you can also write a dissertation. This year, I've taken one paper from the English Literature tripos, and I'm writing a dissertation on Norse literature. Second year is a little tougher than first year, since you are expected to know all of the material from first year for the exams, as well as any new papers that you might pick up. This sounds quite a scary prospect, but you certainly get used to it, and I've heard rumours that the third year of ASNC is more relaxed in terms of workload! There's plenty of information about the ASNC tripos on the departmental website.

This year, I've taken one paper from the English Literature tripos.



Above: Balcony at the top of New Garden Hostel, looking over the garden; Below: Hostel from the front



Where in College do you live this year?

The system by which accommodation is distributed differs depending on which year you are in. After you have secured a place at King's, you get to select the accommodation block that you would most like to live in for the first year, and you can place your choices in order of preference. Most students are then allotted a random room in the block of their choice, or if specified, a room of a particular rent band. Rent bands are a gauge of how expensive a room is, with band 1 being the cheapest and band 6 the most expensive.

The main sites available to first years are the Keynes Building, a 60s accommodation block in the middle of College which has an ensuite bathroom in every room, and Spalding Hostel, which is a very quirky building where the rooms vary in size and amenities (making it hard to describe).

In second year, room selection works on a ballot system whereby every student is randomly allotted a place, with the students at the top of the ballot picking available rooms first. This is then reversed in third year to make the system fair.

This year I am living in New Garden Hostel, which is a popular block for second years situated in the Garden. Each room has a lovely ensuite, and the kitchen facilities are great. It's also nice to live in the middle of a beautiful garden, and this will be a welcome setting for those students like me, pining for the Lincolnshire countryside!

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A note to current King's Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic students

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying ASNC 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