

*King's Student  
Perspectives  
Classics (three  
year course)*

*Jack, 2nd year*

*How did you get interested in  
Classics at Cambridge?*

*At school I had always been torn between mathematical and essay-based subject choices, and felt uncomfortable giving up subject areas I enjoyed in order to focus on others. It was the balance between analytical translation techniques and creative essay writing in my Latin lessons at school that first sparked an interest in Classics as a degree. After some research, Cambridge really stood out.*

*It was the breadth of the Classics course at Cambridge that appealed to me, as it offered an opportunity to concentrate on areas of particular interest while still covering a huge range of academic disciplines and topics. The faculty at Cambridge stressed this unique balance between subject diversity and specific interests, encouraging students in their first years (for both the 3 and 4 year courses) to explore diverse subjects ranging from Pre-Socratic philosophy to philology.*

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*Why  
did you choose King's?*

*King's has one of the larger intakes for Classics students compared to other Cambridge colleges and has both a rich history in classical scholarship and an exceptional group of current professors.*

*Having more people on the course was a major attraction and being able to discuss difficult topics*

*and sharing thoughts on essay questions with other classicists over the past two years has offered great insight. This community feel amongst King's classicists between different years and disciplines creates a truly relaxed and supportive environment. Moreover, having visited King's on an open day I decided there were few more inspiring places to live and work for three years.*



*Jack (on the left) showing the back of King's in the snow*

## What is it really like on the course?

*I had no idea about how high the levels of contact time would be in my first year. Taking intensive Greek – a course designed for those without A-level or equivalent Greek – meant I had six hours of contact time during the week including supervisions and language classes.*

*Although the workload was tough, continual contact with supervisors created a considerate dynamic where I felt at ease to speak openly about any difficulties with the work. I never feel like I am sending my essays to anonymous marking machines, even if I wished some essays were!*

*Supervisions are my favourite part of the Cambridge course and are what mark out the university as a class apart from other institutions. Writing an essay that you know will be discussed in a supervision*

*encourages you to really find the*

*examples behind the conviction and pursue logical lines of argument. Supervision techniques can vary depending on the supervisor, but the recurrent theme is about helping the student get to grips and feel more confident with a subject. Some supervisors spend the majority of the time talking while others continually propose questions. However, the end result is always a greater understanding on the topic at hand. It can feel at times as if you are being put on the spot, but likewise the supervisors do not expect you to conjure answers out of the air. As with the interview process,*

*supervisions are conversational in form; they are intended primarily to compliment the work you have achieved over the week, rather than purely critique it. No matter how well an essay has gone over the week, I always leave supervisions with far greater insight into the question.*

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## How much work do you have each week?

*In my first year a usual week consisted of one essay of around 2000 words, three or four translation exercises, and a practical criticism (a short essay analysing the language, structure and content of a passage of Latin or Greek). On top of this I had around 7-10 hours of lectures a week and two intensive Greek language classes, as I hadn't studied Greek at A-level. My second year is much the same in terms of weekly contact time and essay work, although I have fewer lectures to attend as a result of specialising in subject areas.*



*The Classics Faculty on the Sidgwick Site*

## How do the academic expectations at Cambridge differ to what you experienced at school?

*The greatest change in academic expectations is the personal responsibility that you have to take for your work. Although there is a great deal of contact time at Cambridge compared to other universities, there is still a large amount of work in Classics that is left entirely up to the student. This is mainly language work and personal reading of set texts. Despite the focus on essays during the week, you are expected to keep on top of your Greek and Latin language, especially in the run up to exams. This is one of the toughest requirements of the course as it lies behind the more patent responsibilities of essay deadlines and lectures.*



*Jack studying in King's library*



*At school, the entire year often builds up uniformly to the horizon of exams. This is very different to Cambridge, where exams have a tendency to creep up on the Classics student unaware. Your work during the first two terms is much more focused on supervision preparation than exams.*

*I think that it is important to look at the exams in Classics for the first*

*two years in a different light to exams at school. Supervisors, especially those at King's, want to discourage you from the regimented and highly structured form of A-level or equivalent learning. In a supervision it feels like you are discussing something just because it is interesting or helpful to your understanding. I found the exams to be a chance to showcase some of the hard work I'd done over the year, but the experience of working on each essay and translation as a whole and having discussions with supervisors was far more rewarding as an experience than seeing how I performed over four days in June.*



## *What about the social life?*

*Despite the admirable efforts of many ardent club-goers (sometimes myself included), Cambridge is not Ibiza – probably not even Watford (near my home). In spite of this unsurprising truth, there is always*



*something to do if you have the time, and Cambridge has a way of providing unique and varied ways to relax, from tea societies to mountaineering. In Classics the work load tends to remain relatively constant week to week and, thus, so does the time you have to relax. Of course, the nature of the course means that how much additional work or preparation you want to do is up to you. That said, a solitary year spent in the library is neither a prerequisite nor even guarantee for success, and finding the right balance to work and play, though difficult, is the often the difference between enjoying your degree rather than getting through it.*

*King's is without a doubt one of the most sociable colleges. With the majority of student accommodation in college or very close and a large bar, it requires*

*very little effort to meet with friends and have an enjoyable evening. In addition, the bar is often venue to weekly events from pub quizzes and karaoke to music performances, all hosted and organised by students at the college. There are countless intra-college societies, sports teams and clubs to join and become a part of, all of which are characterised by the most important quality of student life at King's: the incredibly friendly nature of all the students.*

*My favourite way to spend any free time is playing sports. I have weekly commitments to a university*

*sports team (Cambridge Eton Fives) for whom I have about four hours of practise each week and spend Saturdays travelling for fixtures. On top of that, King's has great sports facilities in and around the college, and I often have time to play squash, tennis or football during the week with friends from King's.*

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*Painted, during a "Mingle"*

## *Where are you living this year?*

*My room this year is in New Garden Hostel. New Garden is just over the river, looks out over the fellows' garden and is a popular choice for second year undergraduates. I'm really pleased with my room choice for this year and enjoy boasting about my domestic amenities, which include an en suite bathroom and a balcony with views over the fellows' garden.*

*Compared to first year in the Keynes building, this year I live five minutes closer to my lecture site but five minutes further from the bar, and consequently find myself walking considerably more.*



*New Garden Hostel*

*The interview felt as if both myself and the interviewer were working together towards answers, through conversation not interrogation.*

## *The application process*

*The crux of the application process for Classics is a set of interviews, both at the college you have applied to and at one other. The prospect of interviews with leading academics was a daunting one for me. However, all the interviewers understand how anxious candidates can be and are incredibly accommodating. At King's my interviews were relaxed and informal; the interview is like a Cambridge supervision and I was encouraged to both speak about topics I was comfortable with and to get to grips with more unfamiliar ones.*

*I was worried that the interviews would focus on how much I already knew about Latin, Greek and the Classical world yet, while it is important to show a passion for the subject, the interviewers really wanted to focus on how I worked through questions and developed my responses. Apprehensive about a barrage of specific questions that I imagined might be met with muted silence, I was pleased to find that instead the interview was incredibly relaxed and it felt as if both myself and the interviewer were working together towards answers, through conversation not interrogation.*

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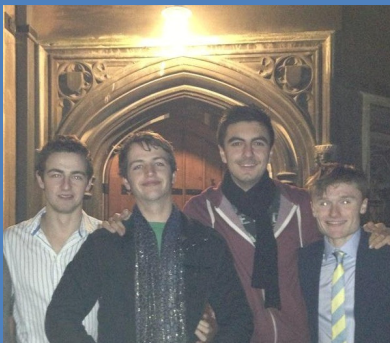
## How did you prepare for the interviews?

*I highlighted a few topics that particularly interested me and did some research around them. Despite the breadth of Classics all the various topics are strongly interrelated, so any specific area that I had researched or especially enjoyed was easily worked into answers in the interviews. In general, however, I refrained from heavy preparation or learning answers by rote – the interviewers mainly want to ascertain your capacity to learn rather than gauge what you already know. My main advice would be to refrain from trying to learn every emperor since Augustus or reading through the dictionary. Instead, pick a few subjects that generally interest you, whether they are related to subjects on your course at school or completely different.*

## How did you find the first few days?

*Despite the grand and imposing, though equally beautiful, surroundings of the chapel and hall I was initially confronted with, all the freshers were made to feel completely at home in college in the first few days. Everyone who had just arrived was eager to make friends; and everybody in the second year was eager to organise events to make that happen. Not only does the college family system introduce you to other freshers, but it can be the start of great*

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*friendships between years – one of the admirable differences between sixth form and university. In addition, freshers' week is a chance to sign up to tons of clubs and societies both in college and across the University. Almost everybody signs up to more things than they would ever be able to keep up, but it's still a great chance to meet new people.*

*I began to feel that I had built up a solid group of friends about two weeks in – even if remembering all their names remained a trial! However, one of the unique sides of Cambridge life, which comes*

*as a result of living in student accommodation throughout the length of your course, is never limiting how far you can 'settle in'. Every term I've managed to meet new people and some of my best friends were those that I met at the beginning of my second year. Although freshers' week is the first and easiest occasion to socialise on a big scale, it is far from the last.*





## What aspects of studying Classics are the most difficult?

*The most difficult and demanding aspect of the course is balancing the set texts that you are expected to read in the original language with weekly essays on different subjects such as philosophy, history or archaeology. There is a fine balance between the reading up on vocab, grammar and set texts to further your linguistic capabilities whilst still coping with the pressures of essay topics. However, it is the essay topics that make Classics so appealing to me. The breadth of the course means that I can be studying the Aeneid one week and Pompeian frescoes the next – all with academics who are leading in their field. The essay/supervision structure for these interesting topics pushes you into becoming expert in a particular topic in a week. Although this can seem a daunting task at first, each week ends with a feeling of incredible accomplishment.*

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*The hardest thing at the beginning, was being unsure about what each supervisor expected in terms of work: I was unsure if I should be spending two hours or half an hour on a translation, or how many words my essays should be. However, the short and intense terms at Cambridge meant that this didn't last long - I quickly came to understand the various expectations of supervisors. Becoming familiar with these expectations enabled me to really plan my working week and get the most out of the time I did spend working. Thus this year, although*

*the work load is very similar, my techniques and organisation have progressed and I feel far more at ease with the demands of the course.*

### **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](mailto:undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk)