

King's Student Perspectives

History

Fiona, 3rd year
April 2013

What made you choose to study History?

This is often the first question I get asked when people hear that I am at university, and unfortunately I don't have a very exciting answer! At school, I always enjoyed and did well at essay subjects like History and English. I was just never that excited about maths or science lessons, and I never imagined studying those subjects for longer than I had to.

For my A Levels, I studied History, English Literature, French, German and General Studies, so when it came to choosing a subject to study at university, I only considered arts subjects. I went to lots of Open Days at various universities around the UK when I was in Year 12. It was the talks about studying History that I found really exciting and which made me want to learn more.

Even though I didn't always know I wanted to do History, I'm really glad I chose it. Even with a subject you think you know well, there's always more to find out. I studied Nazi Germany for seven years at school, and initially I was really keen to learn about any other period in history than this! However, I ended up writing an essay about Nazi Germany for one of my papers because there's a lot of recent research which is

really fascinating. There's a lot of material which you don't get the chance to come across at school, and can totally change your perception of something that happened in the past. The way students study History is also changing, with the university embracing new internet sites and online teaching aids, so it's not all about reading dusty old textbooks!

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And the choice of university and Cambridge college?

I went to a comprehensive school in South Wales, which doesn't send lots of students to Oxford or Cambridge, so I researched universities through the UCAS website. I looked at the different courses offered at various universities and the grades that they ask for. In the end, I picked the universities I wanted to visit on what might seem to be a fairly arbitrary basis: I knew that I wanted to move away from Cardiff so they had to be far away, and they had to have plenty of sports teams for me to carry on with sport at university as that is important to me. I had friends who chose universities based on course content and which modules were available, but I knew that I enjoy History, and for me the exact differences between courses were much less important than liking the look of where I'd be living and what was available outside the academic work.



Fiona

I visited lots of different universities before applying, and I thought that Cambridge was a beautiful place and also small enough that I wouldn't get lost! When I came for a Cambridge Open Day, I went to a talk about studying History here. Several lecturers spoke to us about the course and the material we could study here, and I was surprised at the different kinds of things I could choose to study. Some areas didn't interest me at all at first, but some lecturers were so enthusiastic about their

specialist areas that I couldn't help but be interested. Apart from anything else, the talk was really useful in terms of practical information, helping me to understand how the course would be structured, what kind of options were available, and even how to go about studying History at university level. I definitely recommend going to these sorts of talks on Open Days, because even simple information like how many lectures you'd expect to be given, and how

you'll be assessed, can help you decide whether it's the right subject or university for you.

Choosing a Cambridge college was initially quite confusing for me, as I wasn't familiar with the collegiate system and I didn't really understand it. I looked around about five or six different colleges, but I actually ended up applying to King's without having visited it, purely by looking at the prospectus and seeing that it was both pretty and in the centre!

I wouldn't advise anyone to worry about getting their college choice right. I don't know anybody who doesn't love the college they have ended up at, even if it

isn't the one they originally applied to (I should explain that Cambridge admits the applicants with the most potential for each subject across the whole university. When one college has a particularly strong set of applicants, students who just miss out on an offer may be better than applicants at another college and so are given a place there instead through the 'Winter Pool'). Every college has its pros and cons, and the quality of your teaching and social life won't suffer whichever college you choose: it is the friends you have that make your time here— although everybody swears that their college is the best!



Fiona (third from left behind the table) on the freshers' welcome desk in King's bar, meeting and helping new students on their first day.



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How was the application process for Cambridge?

I found the process quite daunting, because after applying through UCAS with a personal statement and predicted grades like you do for all universities, I had to submit an extra online application form called the SAQ specifically for Cambridge. The SAQ includes an optional additional personal statement (for if you want to say something about the course you're applying for at Cambridge specifically without other universities reading it) and required me to list the UMS marks I got in all the AS exams I'd taken so far, and my class sizes etc, so it was a lot more detailed than the standard UCAS application.

Cambridge was also the only university amongst my choices which asks candidates to come for an interview. I had no idea what to expect, and so I was absolutely terrified when I arrived at King's. I had two History interviews, each with two interviewers who were History specialists. So I was interviewed by four historians all together.

The interviews took place in King's itself and lasted around twenty minutes each. Before the interviews, I had been asked to submit two school essays, and I expected the interviewers to quiz me on the arguments I had made in these essays. Although one interview focused mainly on topics from my essays, the second interview was about more general questions in History,

asking me about my studies at school and challenging me to link ideas across different subjects and topics. For instance I had to think about links between Tudor England and Nazi Germany. The discussion was challenging and I came out thinking that I had done awfully, so I was really surprised to get an offer the next month!

Judging from my own experience, I think that the most important thing I did in the interviews themselves was to keep talking, making suggestions and explaining my ideas, because

even if the points I made were not always perfect or articulately explained, this showed the interviewers that I could think and wanted to find a way to respond to their questions and arguments, rather than sitting in silence, worrying that my idea might be wrong.

Ultimately, it is your understanding and thinking that the interviewers really get you to show them through the kinds of questions they ask so it is important to take a full part in the interview even if you are not 100% sure about a particular answer. The interviewers know that they are asking challenging questions and they just want you to do your best and discuss your ideas with them. It's also worth remembering that how you do in interviews is really about the things you've been working on long term in your studies and reading, not how articulately you manage to

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'perform' on the day of your interview. If you're very nervous, or don't know how to explain something, the interviewers ask you questions to help you get your ideas out.



King's Library, looking out over the back court

How is History at Cambridge different to school?

My school had quite a large sixth form, and there were usually over thirty students in each class, so we were generally given booklets with all the information in that we needed for the exams. Exams were then mostly about memorising the right information and writing it down in a coherent way to get good marks.

Studying History at Cambridge is very different! In my first week I was given an essay title and a reading list with about thirty books on it, and told to

go to the library to find (and read!) as many of those books as I could, then to use the information I found to answer the essay question.

Being expected to be so independent so early on was a massive shock to the system, but within a couple of weeks it becomes routine. In fact, before long it becomes quite a relief to be able to choose the most interesting-sounding books to read rather than ploughing through a standard booklet!

There's also a lot more flexibility in choosing the topics you want to study here than there was at school. Before I arrived at Cambridge, I choose the three papers (options) to study in my first year out of a list of around twenty. However, even within each paper, there are about twenty different topics you can study. So, for example, one of the

papers I chose was 'European History since 1890', but within that paper, I chose topics as diverse as 'Gender through the twentieth century', 'Stalinism', and '1968', while also choosing not to study topics I was less interested in, such as the Cold War. This was a really welcome change after being told exactly what we had to study at school – it's great to be able to pick and choose, and to read about things that you're actually interested in. Being genuinely interested in what you're doing makes it much easier to get your essays written!

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How does the History course work?

The History course here is called the 'Historical Tripos', but that's just Cambridge jargon for a History degree. It's split into a two-year 'Part I', followed by a one-year 'Part II' in your final year.

The good news is that in your first year you don't have any real exams, just mocks (which are called 'Prelims') in late April, at the start of Easter term. You'll definitely get a lot of stick from friends doing other subjects who resent the fact that we don't get proper exams during first year while they're all revising! The bad news, though, is that you then get examined on two years' worth of work at the end of your second year. This means A LOT of revision, but it does give you a chance to do well because you improve a lot over those two years: you can write better essays by the end of your second year than you could at the end of first year.



*The History Faculty (a few minutes' walk from King's)
Faculty lectures and seminars are with historians
from all colleges.*

Over the course of the first two years, you choose six papers to study from basically any period of British, European, or world history from ancient civilisation to the present day. You can choose whichever papers you like, as long as you study at least one British paper and at least one European paper, and at least one paper must be from the period before 1750.

Five of your papers will be examined at the end of second year. You'll have a three-hour exam for each paper to write three essays, so five exams to write fifteen essays in total, spread out over a period of about two weeks. This sounds daunting, but by the time you get to the exams there's no time to be scared, and writing essays is second nature by this point.

The sixth paper is called 'Themes and Sources'. You choose a topic to study for this paper from a list at the end of your first term. Themes and Sources is a bit different from the other papers, as it is taught in classes rather than lectures, and is assessed as a long essay written over the summer vacation and submitted in your second year. It is a good way to get used to using and finding primary sources, and it's nice to have one paper out of the way before the exams start.

In your third year, you study for 'Part II', which is what I'm doing now. You either choose two papers to study and write a 15,000 word dissertation, or you choose three papers to study and don't write a dissertation. This year, I am studying Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, and the Politics of Gender from 1790-1990, as well as writing a dissertation on World War I. If you choose to write a dissertation, you spend your first term working on this, and your second term writing weekly essays for supervisions. Your other paper is studied through classes and lectures, but no supervision.

There is only one compulsory paper in the third year which everyone must sit an exam in, called 'Historical Argument and Practice' (HAP). This is a wide-ranging paper, studied mainly through lectures, which expects you to bring together all your knowledge from the past three

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years of studying history. You write one essay in three hours on a broad topic such as religion or gender, using examples from across different periods of history, and from different countries. I personally don't like this paper, as I much prefer studying a specific period or place, but I know some people who really enjoy it, and it is a good way to show off what you've learnt during your time at Cambridge.

Are you glad that you opted for a dissertation this year?

At first, I wasn't sure whether or not to write a dissertation, as it seemed like a lot of hard work and I didn't have much experience with using primary sources. However I'm glad that I chose to write one in the end. It's a good way to spend time studying something that you're particularly interested in, and to research material which has hardly been studied before. It's also great preparation for further study

if you're considering doing a Masters or PhD later on. Writing a dissertation also has the definite advantage of avoiding an extra exam and cutting down on your revision.

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What do you do in an average week?

The average week of a History student at Cambridge varies a bit depending on the papers you have chosen and which year you are in. I am in my third year this year, and each week I have about four lectures and two classes, which is a lot less formal teaching than most sciences students and some arts students have. As well as reading for classes, I have to write one essay a week, which I then discuss during a 'supervision', which is a one-on-one session with an expert on the subject you are writing about in your essay. This can be pretty daunting at first, as you are discussing something you have only been reading about for a week with someone who has been studying it for about twenty years! But supervisors are (mostly)

friendly, and they won't slate you for writing an awful essay in your first few weeks – they are used to it, and have probably had worse essays than yours to read before!

You are expected to read about ten things for each essay, as well as keeping up with reading for classes.

This workload might not sound like very much at first, but you are expected to read about ten things for each essay, as well as keeping up with reading for classes, so for me the course takes up about forty hours a week, if not more. My top tip for dealing with the workload, which IS a lot more than you'll be used to

at school, is just to be organised. There is nothing worse than having to do an all-nighter in the library to get your essay done, so I highly recommend getting a diary and planning your time in advance. That way you have time to get your work done without missing out on doing fun things with your friends!

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Cambridge sounds like a lot of work – is there really time to do anything else?

YES, definitely, and I really recommend finding something to do as a break from studying. The workload can be intense, and spending all your time studying can be incredibly stressful. Getting involved in other things going on around Cambridge is a really great way to meet people from both inside and outside your college, and to keep your mind fresh.

I've always played loads of different sports, and the opportunity to carry on playing lacrosse was an important factor in my decision to apply to certain universities. I joined the Cambridge University Mixed Lacrosse Club in my first week here, and this year I am serving as Vice Captain. Joining the club was one of the best decisions I made, as it has given me the opportunity to meet lots of people from all of the different Cambridge colleges, rather than just seeing the same faces in King's every day, as well as making sure that I keep fit and healthy. I train four times a week with the team, including an early morning fitness session (which is as horrible as it sounds!), and we have a match every weekend against other universities.



*Cambridge University Mixed Lacrosse Team
(Fiona is on the left)*

The various College sports clubs are really friendly and informal, and you don't need to have any sort of skill or talent to join in.

The great thing about Cambridge is that the collegiate system means you don't have to be good at something to do it. Though I play lacrosse at a high standard for the university, I also play mixed netball for the King's team. Before coming to King's, I hadn't played netball for about five years and I'm still not very good, but college sport is a great way to hang out with people from different years and subjects, and they usually have fun socials too! The various College sports clubs are really friendly and informal, and you don't need to have any sort of skill or talent to join in.

There are also loads of talks, societies, and social events going on around Cambridge. I have friends who are involved in everything from show choirs to tea drinking societies, so you'll definitely find something you like, and other people who are as enthusiastic (or not!) as you are.

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More informally, colleges all put on loads of events. In King's, I go to 'formal hall' with my friends nearly every week, which is when you get dressed up and have a three-course meal served to you in King's Hall. The meal quite expensive compared to just eating the normal canteen food, but formal halls are a good way to catch up with friends and do something a bit special.



At Formal Hall in King's Hall

I also help write the King's Pub Quiz, which is held in the bar and is usually a good way to unwind, with questions ranging from maths equations to what Jordan's been up to lately.

There's also karaoke, live bands, film nights, or just spontaneous nights out which start with a quiet night in the bar with friends and end up as all-nighters.



King's snow couple, relaxing on a bench in Bodley's court during the recent cold spell.

King's is always fun in the snow, with snow fights and making snowmen – the snowmen my friends and I made this year made it to fame on the King's website! One of the advantages of living in King's is that you're never more than a minute away from friends, so there's always something to do. Life here definitely isn't dull!

The end of exams is also a big cause for celebration. Every year, during 'May Week', colleges hold their own balls, which usually have a black tie dress code and have fairground rides

and hog roasts in the grounds, which go on from early evening until about 5am. Tickets are really expensive for most of these events, but if you get a group of friends to go it's so much fun.

King's has an event called 'The King's Affair', which is known around Cambridge for being more relaxed than other May Balls, usually having a bouncy castle and is fancy dress rather than black tie. It's always a brilliant night. You can get involved in organising the King's Affair as well, which is great



Fiona with King's friends at Trinity College May Ball

to put on your CV and also an amazing experience. I was in charge of a budget of over £20,000 which is a good talking point in interviews – and if you're involved in the organisation you also get the chance to swap tickets with other May Ball committees to go to other College Balls for free.



Front court at the King's Affair – our annual all-night summer event.

What is Cambridge like as a place to live?

Cambridge is a small city, and it is dominated by all the old college buildings. I love it, as nothing is further than ten minutes away so I can never get lost, but it can feel a bit like a bubble sometimes. If you want to live in a big city with a buzzing nightlife, Cambridge might not be the place for you. Having said that, despite the contrast between city life at home in Cardiff and in Cambridge, I absolutely love living here. For me, Cambridge has always felt safe: I feel comfortable walking or cycling around by myself, and the porters and college staff will go out of their way to help you, whether it's replacing your lost keys or walking you

back to your accommodation at night. It's easy to start taking the surroundings for granted, as you walk past 800 year old buildings on your way to lectures every day, but when you come back to College after the holidays, you remember how beautiful the city is all over again, and it really is a wonderful experience to study at such an historic university.

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What about money?

It costs the same in tuition fees for me to study at Cambridge as it would to study at most other universities, even though Cambridge is one of the best universities in the world (Ok, I'm biased, but it also says so in league tables!). What's more, the means-tested Cambridge bursaries are some of the most generous in the country and available to every student who is eligible. The college system here also makes it comparatively cheap to live, as meals are subsidised in College, you don't have to pay rent during vacation periods when you're at home, and electricity and internet bills are included in the rent.

Cambridge is also really affordable as a city. It's so small that you rarely need to spend money on public transport, as you can walk or cycle just about everywhere. There's still the temptation of all the High Street shops, of course, but I've never found myself desperate for money while living here. Club entry and music venues aren't really expensive, and while some pubs and restaurants are expensive, there are plenty which are more suitable for a student budget.

I had a job before coming to Cambridge which I was annoyed to have to give up, because I couldn't see why I couldn't have a Saturday job as well as studying. But colleges prefer students not to spend uni time in a job, and they have bursaries and funds to give to students to help them out financially if needed. King's reimburses my expenses both for lacrosse kit and also for getting to away matches, so I'm not out of pocket. Vacations are long enough to get a temporary job or work

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Entertainment is mostly organised by students so it is very cheap or free of charge.

experience when you're back home, and there are a few opportunities to do specific work while at Cambridge. I work as a student ambassador for the University, helping out at Open Days and at access events to encourage people to apply to university, and I get paid for that. I also know a few people who volunteer for charities in Cambridge or who earn some money helping out in college libraries, so there are ways to help fund yourself while you're here or get some experience.

What have you found most difficult about studying at Cambridge?

The workload is definitely tough, and there have been weeks when I've struggled to get the work done. The problem with History is that the more you read, the more you become aware of how much more there is to read. There's no set finishing point to a History degree: it's just all about finding as much information as you can and using it to write a really well-informed essay. No matter how much you've read, your supervisor will always recommend extra reading as well, which can sometimes seem overwhelming.

It's also difficult sometimes to know what your supervisor expects from you, as different supervisors like you to write your essays in slightly

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different styles. So, sometimes you think you've written a really good essay, but your new supervisor then tells you that you should have structured it differently, or approached it differently, which can be a bit demoralising. But you become more confident and thick-skinned after a while, and you learn to adapt your style slightly without taking criticism personally. It's actually quite useful to work with

different supervisors and see different points of view on essay writing. And you learn to appreciate that getting 60% (a 2:I grade) is really good at Cambridge – nobody gets anywhere near 100% here.

What is your favourite thing about Cambridge?

There's loads of things I love about living and studying here. Everything's compact and easy to get to, it's a beautiful place to live, and there are lots of fun things that happen here, which you wouldn't get to experience anywhere else, like May Balls and eating dinner in a hall that looks like Hogwarts. At the same time, Cambridge is also a lot like other universities, in terms of going on nights out, fancy dress themed events, and (unfortunately!) attending lectures, so you don't miss out on anything your friends might be doing elsewhere.



Fancy dress: Fiona is second from left.

Fundamentally, the reason why most of these things are fun is because I'm here with a group of friends who make all the long hours studying worthwhile. King's is a really friendly college, where you can meet and hang out with people both across all the different subjects and across all the different year groups, which is quite unusual. I think part of the reason for this is that all of the King's accommodation is really close together, so you don't have to move miles away from College or choose a couple of people to live in a house with, so it's really sociable to live in King's across all three years. If you come to King's, you'll be part of a really friendly, sociable and tolerant group of people. Before I arrived, I was worried that everybody would have gone to private school and would be really intelligent, but as soon as I started talking to people I was completely comfortable. The friends I've made here are from all sorts of backgrounds and nobody cares where you come from

The friends I've made here are from all sorts of backgrounds and nobody cares where you come from or what grades you got at school.

or what grades you got at school. I still keep in touch with friends from back home too, fitting in a Skype session or phone call in between everything else going on, and it's really nice to introduce your friends from home to your friends at uni, and to show off your college to other people!

What next?

History isn't a vocational subject, like Medicine or Law, and during my third year I started getting a bit worried about getting a job after finishing my degree. After applying for various jobs and going to interviews, I'm now feeling much more confident. Employers value History as a worthwhile degree, especially the way it trains you to take in a lot of information

Employers value History as a worthwhile degree, especially the way it trains you to take in a lot of information quickly and understand or interpret it, which is really useful for business.

on the Careers website, which is really easy to use, and can be emailed out to you as well. Jobs posted here are from a really wide range of industries, like IT, education, charities, and marketing, and some of the companies use the Careers Service specifically to target Cambridge students, meaning that we can apply earlier than students at other universities, which can be a massive advantage.

There are talks specifically for History students, which give advice about how to get into industries like the media or advertising, and how to sell your skills to potential employers.

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or interpret it, which is really useful for business. I have friends who graduated in History and have gone into loads of different jobs, including advertising, working in libraries and archives, business management, and PR. I definitely don't regret studying History and I don't think it will stop me from finding a good job that I enjoy.

I signed up to the Cambridge Careers Service in my second year, and it is through this service that I found a summer job supervising international students at a summer school in Cambridge, which was a great way to earn money and get some practical experience before graduating. Summer jobs, internships, and graduate jobs are all posted

If, like me, you have

no idea what you want to do after you graduate, the Careers Service helps in other ways too. You can pick up information about how to write a good CV and cover letter, have a practice interview with the careers advisors, or just pop in for an informal chat about anything to do with careers. I've attended several job fairs organised by the Careers Service, where I chatted to representatives from companies in the charitable sector, as well as picking up lots of information leaflets and free stuff! They also organise talks specifically for History students, held in the History Faculty, which



Cambridge University Careers Service:
Help with arranging vacation work, jobs after graduation
and even subsequent jobs or career changes later in life.

Some of the companies use the Careers Service specifically to target Cambridge students.



Feedback and links with Cambridge graduates can be really valuable.

give advice about how to get into industries like the media or advertising, and how to sell your skills to potential employers. The idea of going into the real world is pretty scary after being at uni for 3 years, but the Careers Service do try to help you as much as they can, so you should definitely make the

The 'GradLink' service lets you chat to Cambridge graduates in loads of different professions to get their advice and honest opinion about the jobs they do.

most of it! Before I graduate, I'm going to do some practice interviews with the careers advisors, and use their 'GradLink' service, which lets you chat to Cambridge graduates in loads of different professions to get their advice and honest opinion about the jobs they do. Hopefully this will help me to make up my mind about what I want to do!

There's so much more to study than just what you're told to do at school!

What advice do you have for sixth formers?

Considering the Cambridge workload, my university experience would not have been nearly as good if I hadn't enjoyed learning about my subject, so my top tip to anyone considering their options would be to

make sure you'd be happy learning about something for the next three years. Don't pick a subject just because you think it looks good on your CV or because someone else thinks you should do it. If you enjoy History at school, definitely think about studying it at university because there's so much more to study than just what you're told to do at school!

A note to current King's History students

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



Picnic in the Fellows' Garden