



BALLIOL
COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Open Day 2020 Welcome to Balliol's Classics Department

It is a great pity that we are not able to welcome you to Balliol College in person, but what we will try to do here is to say most of the things we would try to talk about on a real Open Day with students in the room.

Balliol is one of the very largest colleges for Classics, and we are very proud of this. We have four permanent tutors in Classics, including Ancient Philosophy, and this is very rare: most colleges have one literature tutor, and several do not have a Fellow in Ancient Philosophy. This is a tribute to the value the College puts on Classics. Adrian Kelly is an expert in Greek literature, particularly Homer and tragedy; Matthew Robinson is an expert in Latin literature, specialising in Virgil and Ovid; Alexander Bown is our new Ancient Philosophy tutor, and he specialises in Greek Philosophy, especially Epicureanism. I am Rosalind Thomas, and I am the tutor for ancient history: I specialise mainly in Greek history, cultural history and have written on literacy and on Herodotus. We like to think that we are at the cutting edge in terms of academic scholarship, while also writing on many of the very central topics in the Classics degree: this makes for enjoyable teaching, and we hope you would enjoy the tutorials (on which more below) as much as we do.

We also take somewhat more students per year than most Colleges, a reflection of our size. We take students for Literae Humaniores (Classics) I and II (for students without any ancient languages yet), and also for the 3-year degree of Classical Archaeology and Ancient History (CAAH) and Ancient and Modern History (AMH). We often take students for Classics and Modern Languages and for Classics and Oriental Studies. At any one time, then, there are usually about 8 or 9 students per year studying the ancient world in some way or other, and we tend to take 7 or 8 students to study Classics alone, each year; there are then one or two CAAH or AMH students. This means that there is a wonderful critical mass in College - about 35 students at any one time in this general field. When you are thinking of which college to apply for, this is of course very relevant: we do have a lot of places, and a big community to welcome you.

The College is a very friendly place, and the different year groups in Classics itself mix together and get to know each other. There is a student society called the 'Skoliasts' which is a formal affair each term, and there are of course many other opportunities to get to know your peers and predecessors. Because of the long tradition of Classical studies in the College, we have some generous funds to help you make serious visits to sites in Italy, Greece, Turkey or any 'lands of classical interest'. And the library holdings are extraordinarily good. You are thus very well provided for, and in addition to the College library you also have the Bodleian - the Lower Reading Room - and the Sackler Library which houses more of the ancient history and archaeological works.

For the details of the different degrees, we can refer you to the resumés on the Faculty website: but essentially, the Literae Humaniores degree starts with a serious language component and is of course famous for training students to be able to read a great deal of the literature, history and philosophy in the original, not dependent on translations. For Mods, a sort of 'Part 1', alongside various literary and cultural topics there are intensive language courses, both for Beginners (Classics II) and for students who have done Latin or Greek A level, or both (Classics IA, IB or IC). We add to these in College, with a dedicated language teacher to take care of this vital aspect of the course. For 'Greats' or the second part, which lasts two years and a term, you then go on to study a wide range of literature, history or philosophy courses, and there is a great deal of choice. People tend to specialise a little, and say, either study a lot of history, or a lot of literature or a lot of philosophy, or mainly two out of the three; but many retain a mix of all three. Papers (courses) range from Early Greek Hexameter Poetry to the Persian Empire, Religions in the Roman World, or Knowledge and Scepticism in Hellenistic Philosophy. This is one of the most distinctive features of the Lit. Hum. Degree: it allows - indeed encourages - the study of all aspects of this culture: not simply the literature, not only ancient history or archaeology, not only the philosophy, but you study the society, and its many aspects, in the round. In the course of this, you attain the skills of literary analysis and historical thinking, and the ability to discuss abstract, philosophical questions in a rigorous way. The degree is also exceptional in that it allows students to study modern philosophy alongside the ancient: when reading Plato or Aristotle, you will be able to draw on the tools and techniques that are available to philosophers discussing the same questions today.

People often want to know the differences between the Classics degrees and the Classical Archaeology and Ancient History degree. The central difference is that the CAAH degree is entirely concerned with archaeology and history and the study of the two together - time on an excavation is part of the degree. There is virtually no study of the literature as literature: thus it is not a 'Classical Civilization' degree of the kind offered by many universities, and I should stress this; if you love the literature and wish to carry on studying that, then go for the Classics degree. On the other hand many of the history and archaeology courses are available to both CAAH and Classics students. CAAH does not require an ancient language or any study of an ancient language, but it does have some (now) thriving courses for students who wish to take up or study the languages further. Do ask more about this on the Open Day if you'd like.

Finally, I would like to say a little about the tutorial system. Oxford prides itself on retaining the tutorial system, in which students write an essay on a topic before they meet the tutor to talk about it: and they meet usually in pairs, one tutor and two students. The tutorial then goes on to discuss the essays the students have already written, offer critique, feedback and then carry on the subject into further avenues. It is an immensely satisfying way of teaching and studying, and you get a lot of attention.

As for Admissions, do ask about this on the virtual Open Day. I will say here, though, that for Classics, students have a language test beforehand, sat in school:

Latin or Greek, if they are studying these for A level, and a Language Aptitude Test if they are doing neither, or if they have a GCSE in either Latin or Greek. We advise you to prepare for this; details of the test, together with past papers and solutions, can be found on the University's admissions website. Otherwise, the interviews aim mainly to talk to people about their school work, what they have read, and to ascertain their potential for going further at university. You will have two interviews, so that all of us get to meet you and, if one interview is somewhat less than ideal, you get a second chance. Do not believe any of the 'urban myths' about peculiar tricks at interview!

Rosalind Thomas (Professor)