

Ardingly Residential Course – Summer 2016 (Review)

Four students of the Cathedral School absorbed the excitement of the Oxbridge university application process during their time at Ardingly College. As part of the Woodard schools organisation, the Cathedral School was kindly invited to Oxbridge Application Masterclasses, or Schola, held at Ardingly College in Sussex on 4th-5th July 2016. The experience was great in introducing the Oxbridge application process, to meeting and sharing with other schools – their teachers and their pupils - and was excellent in unravelling the mysteries of Oxbridge.

After meeting fellow Oxbridge applicants from other Woodard schools, we were thrown straight into a question and answer session with a panel of current Oxbridge students. There were students from a range of disciplines including PPE, Maths, Law, Land Economy and Natural Sciences to name but a few. This gave the students a chance to ask about interview styles and questions appropriate to certain courses and even used by particular Colleges. This was very helpful as it gave us even more information about the courses we are pursuing, and also unique insights into the everyday life of Oxbridge students.

Once we had grilled the panel of Oxbridge students we were lucky enough to have a presentation by Dr. Helen Thomas, the Admissions Tutor of St. Johns College, Cambridge. She focused primarily upon what to - and what *not* to - include in our personal statements. We had the opportunity to ask probing questions to try and ensure that our Personal Statements and applications were tailored for the standard of Oxbridge. This was very useful, and even more so since once of us hopes to apply to St. John's College itself!

We were then able to have one-on-one conversations with the Oxbridge students – and were able to choose the student who was in the middle of reading the degree we hope to study. The hard work for St. Olave's to collect such a diverse group of students was greatly appreciated and the advice we were given was just fantastic. We were able to ask questions about interviews, our courses, the benefits of Oxford over Cambridge - or vice versa - from people who have completed the process we are about to embark on. The Oxbridge students went above and beyond what was asked of them: they were happy to give us their email contacts, to read through our personal statements and to put us in touch with other students studying our course. Each Oxbridge student seemed so keen to help us achieve our goal. This was and is greatly appreciated by all of us – the feeling of having a generous, trusted port of call is so reassuring – and very much in keeping with a tremendous spirit of generosity from staff, other pupils and speakers alike, which characterised the whole experience.

The evening entailed a barbecue on the school grounds, which was not only delicious but also gave us a chance to get to know our peers more. It was lovely to get to meet like-minded people who share aspirations to become future leaders in their fields. The boarding was an experience. While many would have preferred to share a two-man room rather than a large dormitory, for one night it was fine! The latter part of the evening consisted of watching 'History Boys'. This was not my favourite film, and in honesty the reaction was mixed: some enjoyed the film while others were for perhaps a debate, or even more free time to get to know the other school-pupils.

We are happy to report that Ardingly pupils are very well fed! The catering was wonderful, providing for everyone while offering a vast array of choices. The full English breakfast put us all in good stead for the day ahead, which began with a discussion on the film. This was tough. Giving opinions and arguing with people we barely knew, all the time being observed by teachers from a number of schools was very challenging. However, the debate that followed from it was enjoyed by all, with all of our students contributing in some way or another. It prepared us for the mind-set of tutorials/supervisions, as well as giving us the confidence to raise our opinions amongst strangers.

The collaboration of the Woodard schools allowed a compilation of Oxbridge interview reports and personal statements to be collated. This was given to us for analysis and inspiration. The personal statement workshop saw us identify common factors that worked. The analysis of the statements, with the help of specialist Oxbridge teachers led by taught us the inspirational Mr Budds was really helpful. We particularly enjoyed the dos and don'ts of personal statement while still enforcing that it is to be a 'personal' statement as opposed to an 'interpersonal' statement! This was followed up with a quick session on interviews, delving into what sort of questions to expect and how to answer them. In most cases, these questions demanded that you should think 'outside the box'. For the Biological Natural Sciences, we were asked 'Is there such a thing as junk DNA' as well as 'Why do many animals have stripes?'

We covered these, and other questions in depth, and we were all given valuable starting points for working out how we might tackle them. In most cases, the ability to answer the questions depended on applying outside reading you had done, which is where the next session, 'Embracing the Super-curricular', came in. Here, we were encouraged to go beyond the syllabus and explore our chosen subject areas in greater depth and detail. This could range from books to online lectures to certain clubs and societies, all of which are necessary to convey your interest in a chosen topic – definitely a job for the summer!

Over the two days, I felt the content covered and topics explored at Ardingly will be vital in approaching the next few months. From personal statements to interviews to admissions tests, the information provided could not have been more relevant and will undoubtedly help and spur us along in our pursuit for an offer from Oxbridge.

Sam Brookes & Georgia Rundle

Cathedral School, Llandaff