

Ella - Interviewing at Cambridge

*In this piece, Ella discusses her experience of interviewing for a history place at Selwyn College, Cambridge. Ella got an offer to study history at Selwyn College. She wrote to me to explain that she was excited and relieved that all the hard work had paid off. Her offer was A*AA.*



The first interview was with someone who was not a history fellow and was fairly general, asking me a few questions on my personal statement, including the academic books I had read (my views on them, most interesting concepts etc), my relevant work experience and also the history of my area and how I think it has changed over time. For example, I discussed the founding of Leeds and how the city centre has developed.

The second interview came after a half hour preparatory study. The study involve reading an extract from an historian's paper on 'power' throughout the centuries. The paper covered how power changes hands throughout time and the recent focus on the power of the lower classes and those that have been largely forgotten in documentation. It also discussed the issue of who decides what happens to historical sites. For example, are they preserved better if those who own them are wealthy?

I was interviewed by two professors. I was asked to relate the extract to periods I had studied in my school work. I was also asked to say which bits I agreed/disagreed with, and to pick out key quotes for debate. We then had a discussion about popular fiction and its use to historians, and to say whether I support it or not, considering both sides of the argument. This seemed to be a very common topic for discussion.

The second interviewer asked me to choose a topic studied in school at AS/A2 that was not discussed in the written work I had sent them. He asked me general questions about this, particularly thinking about counter-factual history in terms of causation eg. Why are some uprisings more successful than others? This was a relatively informal interview, sat on sofas in a library/office.

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The third interview was more formal because I was sat quite far away from the interviewers and there was little small talk upon entering the room. The basis for this discussion was the pieces of written work I had sent them previously. They asked me questions about why I picked the factors that I did for each essay, then asked me to expand upon each of these and perhaps consider the long term consequences of the events discussed. I assume this is the interview that varies most between candidates as it was so specific to my areas of interest.

After the interview I was thanked for my contributions and later received confirmation of my offer in the post.