August 2025

We write to congratulate you once more on being offered a place to read History and English at St Peter’s. We hope that you will find the next three years here stimulating and rewarding.

Now is the time that we begin to ensure that teaching arrangements are in place for the coming year; and in this connection, there is one important thing we must ask you to do, please, which is to make some choices about what you will study in the first year. The other purpose of this letter is, therefore, to explain how the first year of the degree works and the choices you need to make now. We fear that this will involve some exposure to Oxford University jargon!

The First Public Examination is known as the Preliminary Examination (Prelims for short). Prelims are taken at the end of the first year and, provided you achieve a pass mark, your performance is not classified (though distinctions are awarded) and does not count towards your final degree. This examination comprises four courses or ‘papers’, concerning which you must now make choices. More information about those choices can be found at <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/ba-history-and-english>.

As you will see from the landing page of this website, first-year History and English students study four courses or ‘papers’:

1. History of the British Isles;

2. EITHER a paper on historical methods, (Approaches to History or Historiography: Tacitus to Weber) OR an Optional Subject in History;

3. Introduction to English Language and Literature; and

4. An additional course in English (Early Medieval Literature (650 – 1350), Victorian Literature (1830 – 1910) or Modern Literature (1910 – present).)

You will receive more information from the English tutors about your English choices (3 and 4 in the list above). What follows here is some guidance on choices 1 and 2.

1. A period of **History of the British Isles** (BIP) will be studied in your first term (Michaelmas Term). You need to select one of the following periods (short descriptions of these periods can be found at <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/history-british-isles-first-year>):

I 300-1100

II 1000-1330

III 1330-1550

IV 1500-1700

V 1688-1848

VI 1830-1951.

**Some guidance on your BIP choice**. You may not have studied medieval or early modern history at advanced level at school. To give breadth to your historical development we **recommend** that you choose History of the British Isles I (300-1100) or II (1000-1330) for Prelims unless you have studied those periods recently at school. There are intellectual merits in studying the periods consecutively and, if you choose BIP I or II now, it remains possible to continue through one of the later periods for the Finals work in the second year. It makes sense, too, that as many first-year history undergraduates as possible at St Peter’s take one paper in common, since you will benefit of being able to talk to one another about common historical problems. The majority of the first-year students in History at St Peter’s will be taking History of the British Isles I or II, so choosing one of these will connect you more closely with your cohort.

2. **Historical Methods or Optional Subject**. You need to choose one of these alternatives now, and if you choose Historical Methods, let us know which method you wish to study. To take them separately:

2 (a). An **Optional Subject** based on the study of selected primary texts and documents. A list of the optional subjects can be consulted at <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/optional-subject#/>. All Optional Subject sources are in English (sometimes using translations). This paper will be studied in the summer term (Trinity Term), and you do not need to choose your optional subject until midway through your first year, allowing you time to explore possibilities and to discuss them with your tutors in Oxford. All you need to do now is choose between taking and Optional Subject or a Historical Methods paper, as below.

2 (b). **Approaches to History** is concerned with the ways in which the writing of history has been influenced by other disciplines, methods, and techniques. You will be required to show knowledge of at least two different ‘strands’ for Approaches from the seven set out below:

(i) Anthropology and History

(ii) Archaeology and History

(iii) Art and History

(iv) Economics and History

(v) History of Women, Gender and Sexuality

(vi) Sociology and History

(vii) Histories of Race

(viii) Environmental History

You can feel free to choose whichever two strands appeal the most, but it may help for you to know that ‘Sociology and History’ and ‘Histories of Race’ will all be taught in St Peter’s College, whereas teaching for the other strands will be taught by tutors in other colleges.

Formally speaking, you could do another paper on Historiography (‘Historiography: Tacitus to Weber’) instead of Approaches to History, but this is not recommended since it is not taught at St Peter’s.

If you choose Approaches to History, it is also necessary to specify which of the two ‘approaches’ you would like to take.

**Some guidance on your second choice**. Unless you are powerfully drawn to one of the **Approaches** options, we **recommend** that you take an **Optional Subject** in the summer term. This is simply because students tend to enjoy the challenge of papers which are focussed on a selection of primary sources.

To summarize: it would be helpful if you would now select two of your four papers: the period of History of the British Isles; and your choice of either Approaches (specifying two ‘Approaches’) or an Optional Subject (to be specified in due course during your first year in Oxford).

We would be grateful if you could respond by email as soon as possible, and by **29 August** at the latest to both [stephen.baxter@spc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:stephen.baxter@spc.ox.ac.uk) and [stephen.tuffnell@spc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:stephen.tuffnell@spc.ox.ac.uk). Once we have received your response we will send you introductory reading lists for the summer and start to arrange teaching. If you are in doubt, please do not worry, and do not hesitate to contact us by email for further advice.

We hope you enjoy the rest of the summer and look forward to meeting you again in the Autumn.

Yours sincerely,

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