Renting Privately in Cambridge

If you’re considering renting privately in Cambridge, this guide is intended to help you by weighing up some of the pros and cons, provide you with some useful information and resources, and share some of our own student experiences.

This guide has been adapted from one prepared by Trinity Hall MCR - you can find the original here: [http://www.mcr.trinhall.cam.ac.uk/renting-privately-in-cambridge](http://www.mcr.trinhall.cam.ac.uk/renting-privately-in-cambridge)

The Pros

Independence - Living in the wider local community can help balance what can be the very academic-focused 'bubble' life of a Cambridge graduate student.

Extra Living Space - Renting an apartment or house usually means you get your own living room, kitchen and perhaps even a garden (in addition to your own room of course), all of which you can personalise to taste.

More Flexibility - In how and when you use your space. When renting privately, there is generally more freedom to invite people over, have parties or have guests stay over.

Location – You can choose a location to suit you – whether that’s closer to your faculty or college (Swirles Court is about a 15 minute cycle/45 minute walk from Clare and the centre of town), or perhaps in a quieter or more residential area.

Housemates - You can choose who you want to share your living space with.

Cost – Living out of college can be cheaper and particularly good value if you choose an unfurnished place in a location that’s not right in the centre of town.

The Cons

Cost – Renting privately isn’t necessarily cheaper than living in college - average private rent prices are more expensive. You should also be mindful that there are quite a few indirect costs of living outside of college. For example, if you rent a place through a real estate agency, you will have to pay a deposit (at least a full month’s rent + a deposit holding fee), a tenancy administration fee, check out charges, and probably end-of-tenancy cleaning fees too. For an example of agency fees, see [http://www.rah.co.uk/lettings/tenant-fees](http://www.rah.co.uk/lettings/tenant-fees)

Time and Effort - If you live out, you will have to arrange to pay your own bills (i.e. water, gas, electricity, internet, phone, TV licence, etc). This will require coordination with your housemates, for example to set up monthly direct debit payments. If you move into an unfurnished place, you will also need to factor in the time required to furnish your home.

Safety - Although Cambridge is generally a very safe place, it’s important to note that college-owned accommodation has more security measures, including porter’s lodges, gated entrances and CCTV.
Finding a House

By now we hope that you are developing a clearer sense on whether you would like to live in or out of Clare accommodation. Below is a list of websites for those of you who are considering living out. In addition to these resources, do be mindful that some of the best rental arrangements come about through word of mouth, so don’t be afraid to reach out to your friends and colleagues.

The University of Cambridge Accommodation Service – www.accommodation.cam.ac.uk
You will need your Cambridge Student ID to sign up (email the Clare Tutorial Office to confirm when you will receive this). It generally features houses that are tailored to the student experience. In addition, by using it you avoid agency fees. Advertisers are generally well vetted, but it is still essential that you inspect any prospective houses before you sign on the dotted line.

Gumtree – http://www.gumtree.com/flats-houses
Less regulated than the University’s Accommodation Service, but also with more variety. It is possible to find a gem, but you may have to wait patiently for something to come up.

Spare Room – www.spareroom.com
Subletting often gives you many of the benefits of living privately, with less responsibility for managing the property yourself. Often sub-letters value household harmony over getting market rent for the room and may thus offer some really good deals. However, you do enter the housemate lucky dip. Most have really good experiences. Some, not so much. Whilst sub-letters also advertise on the Accommodation Service and Gumtree, we recommend you start with Spare Room.

Commercial Websites. There are a variety of estate agencies in town that rent to students. Whilst there are additional costs associated with a commercial agent, houses are generally professionally cleaned and in full working order. In addition, the agents you deal with are experts at providing client-tailored rental experiences. A good place to start is with a price comparison website (the majority of major estate agents advertise on these). There are also Cambridge specific websites where you can find subletting opportunities as well as whole houses to rent.

Comparison websites: www.rightmove.co.uk; www.zoopla.co.uk;
Cambridge specific: http://www.brettward.co.uk/canb/index.html

Choosing Your Housemates

You can generally choose who you live with when renting privately. Living with friends or friendly people can make your house feel like a real ‘home’. Alternatively, you can live with housemates who you have little interaction with, which affords more privacy. The key factors to consider when evaluating housemates are: finance (can they pay rent on time every month?), hygiene, social and work habits (do you have different work/play
patterns?), partners (will you end up living with their partner too?) and student-status (non-students make the household pay council tax (although you will still be exempt); students may spend a lot of time at home). You might also want to consider choosing people who are going to have the same length of stay as you (if not longer than you). People coming and going constantly can be very disruptive and creates a lot of loose ends to tie up in terms of finances and time spent looking for new housemates.

There are a variety of ways you can find housemates: ask within your programme/department and college; Spare Room; or via the Clare MCR group on Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/groups/claremcr/?ref=br_rs). It’s also important to make sure you meet your prospective housemates before signing a contract with them (don’t just rely on email or Facebook)!

**General Advice**

As you can see, there is a bit extra to do to set up your private accommodation. However, the benefits can also be enormous. If you value a sense of normalcy, larger and more diverse living spaces, independence and living with friends then you may find living privately especially rewarding. Here are three more pointers that can really help make your time living out amazing:

1. Don’t be shy about money with your housemates.
2. Stay on good terms with your landlord. Be the bigger person, but fight your corner!
3. Make sure you have a bit of extra money on call for a deposit.

**Private Renting Hints and Tips**

For the uninitiated, negotiating the Cambridge rental market can seem pretty tough. The aim of this section is to offer practical advice on everything from doing a house inspection to finding the right linen for your bed.

**Important Criteria when Inspecting a House**

There are many things that are up to you, like location and the size of your bedroom. However, we think there are six commonly neglected essentials that are important for you to check in every house you visit.

1. The shower runs with good pressure and is consistently hot.
2. The walls are insulated and the windows are double or triple glazed.
3. There is no mould (make sure you check the cupboards).
4. The kitchen is well ventilated (e.g. fan above the stove, sufficient windows).
5. Washing and cooking facilities are both sufficient and functional.
6. The building is structurally sound (check for big cracks in the walls and ceiling). You don’t want to be held liable for a building that is months from being condemned!

**Move Quickly**
The Cambridge rental market is very active, especially in the months leading up to Michaelmas Term (which starts around the beginning of October). If you see something that you like, be prepared to secure it with a deposit almost straight away. There are great deals to be had, provided you are ready to capitalise at a moment’s notice!

**Endear Yourself to Your Prospective Landlord**

Good value properties are usually in high demand. When you speak with the landlord and inspect their house, it is always good to show that you will be a responsible tenant (e.g. arrive to the inspection on time) and will be friendly and easy to deal with. Also, do tell them of any ideas you might have about improving the house during your stay. For example, one potential tenant mentioned they’d like to tidy the overgrown garden – which allowed them to secure the house ahead of the three other groups who had already made offers.

**Utilities**

Once you’ve signed your tenancy agreement, it’s important your house is liveable. Check with your landlord to confirm the previous gas and electricity, and Internet suppliers. Cambridge Water supplies the water. You will have to call these suppliers to transfer the existing accounts to your name, and also provide up-to-date meter readings. Regarding gas and electricity, it is possible to change suppliers and there are a number of helpful price comparison websites to facilitate (e.g. [http://www.ukpower.co.uk/](http://www.ukpower.co.uk/)). Another thing to note is that energy prices can really add up, especially if you’re living in older houses (which are often poorly insulated) or if you’re using a lot of appliances. You generally get a discount for paying by direct debit.

**Managing Your Liability**

As well as setting up utilities, it’s important to document the state of your house as soon as you arrive. This will help you to secure the full return of your deposit at the end of your tenancy. Be as thorough as you can. It is often useful to take a comprehensive video of your property with commentary, as well as extensive photos. Make sure you also store the footage securely, and that it is backed up! You should also provide written commentary on any additional concerns that you inherited from the previous tenants. Finally, when maintenance issues arise, make sure you raise them with your landlord right away. Your landlord will appreciate this, and this way they won’t be surprised by any unexpected damage when they come to inspect your house (inspections can happen routinely, or just at the end of your tenancy).

**Your Deposit**

The landlord is required by law to put your deposit in the Government-backed Tenancy Deposit Scheme. This scheme ensures that if there are any disputes, your deposit is protected until there is resolution. At the end of your tenancy, you and your landlord will agree on how much of the deposit you will get back and your landlord must pay this to you
within 10 days. There is more information here: https://www.gov.uk/tenancy-deposit-protection.

TV Licence
If you wish to own a TV, you are required by law to pay for a UK TV licence. The cost is £145.50 per year for a standard colour TV. The fee helps to fund some TV channels (the BBC is fully funded by the licence fee, and other terrestrial channels receive some funding), as well as access to a range of online content. There is more information here: http://www.tvlicensing.co.uk/. Note you also have to log your desire not to have a TV through the same website. Make sure you do this at the beginning of your tenancy.

Council Tax
University students are exempt from paying Council Tax, but must lodge a waiver through https://www.gov.uk/council-tax. Part of this waiver requires written confirmation of your student status from College. You can easily get a letter confirming as much from the College Tutorial Office. Do end them an email in advance of when you need the letter because it can sometimes take up to 2 weeks to process your request.

Furniture for Your House
You may wish to buy additional furniture for your house (or all furnishings if you're in an unfurnished house). The cheapest options are almost always Freecycle (www.freecycle.org) and Gumtree (www.gumtree.com). However, many suppliers on these platforms require you to pick up the items yourself (although some sellers on Gumtree offer delivery), which can pose logistical problems. Alternatively, the British Heart Foundation in Cambridge offers discounted second-hand furniture with delivery (https://www.bhf.org.uk/shop/our-local-shops/furniture-and-electrical-shops). Another good alternative for large purchases is to order online, from sites like www.amazon.co.uk. Also, do make sure you factor in the extra cost and time of furnishing. It might take up to a month to furnish everything from light bulbs to sofas!

Smaller Furnishings
Primark (http://www.primarkonlineshop.net/primark-cambridge-store/) offers the cheapest linen in town, and you can purchase additional small furnishings from the big supermarkets (most also offer delivery). There are also lots of charity stores that may offer particularly good deals, many of which are located near the Grafton Centre (https://www.graftoncentre.co.uk/) and along Mill Road (e.g. the Salvation Army's charity store Sally Ann's, http://camsa.org.uk/). Otherwise, ordering online from Amazon etc. is again an option.

Good Buys
Do be sure to buy a first aid kit and a basic toolbox. Both will definitely come in handy throughout the year. If you’re living on a busy street, it could also be worthwhile to invest
in earplugs or even a white noise generator (e.g. the Marpac Dohm). If you think you might struggle to get through the dreary winter months, consider buying a happy lamp.

Get a letter of recommendation
Landlords will often ask for references before offering you a room to check that you’ve been a good tenant when you’ve rented previously. If you’re moving out of Clare accommodation, college will often provide a reference for you - just email staff at the Tutorial Office in advance.

Our Stories
Everyone’s renting experience is different. It can be useful to learn about others’ experiences to get a sense for the kinds of experiences they have had, and thus the kinds of experiences you might come to have. We have each been in Cambridge for at least one year and lived in both College and Private accommodation. We hope you find our experiences useful (but do also remember that they may be unrepresentative).

Ester’s Experience
After one year living in Memorial Court, I rented a private room in Hertford Street close to Magdalene Bridge. I took a gap year, therefore I was not able to live in college accommodation. I managed to find this solution thanks to the advice of a friend who lived in the same place a few months I moved in. She introduced me to the landlord who was a lovely and accommodating host. Despite the fact that the room was very small and with no desk, the rent price was really low in comparison to the average prices in such a central area. However, the living room was a very large space and it had a big table that made up for the lack of a desk. I lived there for 7 months and I shared the house with the landlord and another housemate from Clare Hall. We had one common bathroom on the first floor where the rooms are and a small loo on the ground floor. The big and well-furnished kitchen was also shared and we were allowed to use basically everything (from the cutlery to the kitchen robots). The common facilities were kept perfectly clean all the time and the landlord paid for the cleaning services once a week. The price, the location and the house itself were a perfect deal for a someone who was looking for something cheap but comfortable at the same time. Living in college is a difference experience and really makes you feel part of a larger community but this solution was in the end the perfect alternative and I can say I’m pretty happy about the time I spent there.

Nick’s Experience
Having worked in the real world for a couple of years before starting my PhD, I didn’t want to return to the world of shared kitchens and college furniture and I’ve stayed in the house I was living in before. I share with one other person and I really enjoy having our own living room, kitchen and bathroom. In particular I love having a garden, for barbeques, parties and growing strawberries.
I live on Cherry Hinton Road on the south side of Cambridge: 5 minutes to the cinema, the station and Mill Road, 10-15 minutes to Old Court. My house is managed by a letting agency, meaning that the landlord pays them to take care of the dealings with us. This has some advantages as the letting agency should always be available if you have any issues with the house, however they also charge for every change of contract etc, so it’s something else to consider. I would recommend living out to anyone he wants a bit more space or just finds the Cambridge bubble a bit stifling.