

**Exploring Sailortown: Civic culture, slums and scandal in 19th century British ports****Inaugural lecture**

by

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*The cultural life of port towns has largely remained a hidden history. Conventional histories of ports have focused on their global and imperial networks. In this talk, Brad Beaven explores these liminal urban spaces and the communities and sailors who lived in them. He reveals an urban district that was unconventional and often cosmopolitan, and one which visitors found both exotic and dangerous.*

**Researching Urban History: Sent from Coventry**

I started my research career in the early 1990s, focusing on the nineteenth and early twentieth century urban history of Coventry ; the most land-locked city in England. The journey from Coventry to establishing the research group Port Towns and Urban Cultures is not an obvious one. Where the continuity lies in my research is in exploring working-class cultures in urban environments between 1850 and 1939. I'm particularly interested in how these cultures were shaped by concepts such as 'gender' and 'generation' and how working people engaged with their urban environment in a period which saw the emergence of civic pride and intensive nationalism and imperialism. These are themes that I continue to explore when trying to understand the complexities of popular leisure and imperialism which were the subjects of my two books. Although I've been researching these issues over the last twenty years, I would argue that there is no better time to explore the histories of working-class communities than today. While I was writing this talk, the historians of Warwick University produced a statement that appeared on social media about post-Brexit Britain and the various detrimental myths and skewed commentary that swirled around the referendum:

**Brexit Vote**

The xenophobia exploding around us makes skilful use of nostalgic myths about a 'lost' British greatness. It harks back to themes of empire, national glory, and 'taking

our country back'... If we are to resist the myths being peddled today, we need to engage seriously with the real past, instead of an imaginary history of unbroken glory and virtue somehow poisoned by 'migrants'. Politicians and commentators, none of them working class, conjure up the spectre of 'ordinary working class people', invariably defined as homogenously white and inherently racist.

Warwick Historians, *Open Democracy*, 19 December 2016.

History, then, has a part to play in debunking myths that can be damaging in society today. It can play a role in properly contextualising and understanding the past and present and can nurture informed and engaged citizens. The key features of Brexit were sensational press reports, anti-immigration campaigns and the impact on and responses in working-class communities. As we shall see, many of these issues were being played out in London's sailortown some 120 years ago.

The project that really drew my attention to the different urban cultures that port towns generated was my second book *Visions of Empire. Patriotism, Popular Culture and the City 1870-1939*. The book explored how people in three representative cities received and responded to empire. Leeds was a traditional working-class city with high Jewish immigration in the late nineteenth century; Coventry was a prosperous city with affluent bicycle and car workers while Portsmouth had strong naval and imperial traditions. To claim, as some historians have, that imperialism was effortlessly diffused through society and absorbed enthusiastically by the British regardless of class, gender and locale overlooks the importance of urban, social and cultural contexts. Indeed, it was the importance of local contexts that led me to embark on establishing the *Port Towns & Urban Cultures* research group as it became clear that contemporaries perceived that waterfront communities generated peculiar cultures which hitherto, have been relatively under-researched.

### **Historians and Port Towns**

So why have the cultural histories of port town communities and sailors ashore been such neglected subjects? After all, in Victorian England, contemporaries often recalled seeing sailors in the pubs, music halls and entertainment venues. The Victorian social researcher Charles Booth estimated that over 10,000 sailors were ashore in London at any one time.<sup>1</sup> Writing in the same period, the American writer Jack London attempted to blend into working-class communities by disguising himself as an American sailor living in the boarding houses in the East End. In the large international ports, then, sailors were very much part of the fabric of urban life.<sup>2</sup>

What I will argue today is that we need to re-connect sailors with the urban world and explore their relationships with the communities who resided in port towns. Sailors and working-class communities were often interdependent on one another. Moreover, for the social and cultural historian these communities provide a way of exploring class, gender, generation and race within transient working-communities. This fusion of urban and maritime culture also fostered a sense of ‘Otherness’ and a liminal quality in port town communities. These are all concepts that should excite the social and cultural historian, yet research in this area has been minimal.

Historiography has often failed to reflect how these urban and maritime worlds co-existed in ports. Sailors only emerge in the history when they are aboard ships or fighting wars. I think there are a number of reasons for this. First is due to the way the sub-strands of the historical discipline; maritime, urban and labour history have evolved. If we take maritime history, the major centres in this area have emerged from economic history and business history departments. For example, the Centre for Port and Maritime History is run from Liverpool’s Management School while the world’s largest maritime history network – the International Congress of Maritime History is organised by the International Maritime Economic History Association. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that research produced in

these centres and presented at conferences have focused on a port's role as a hub of international commerce. Likewise urban historians have tended to concentrate on the port's infrastructures and their position as an important node in imperial urban networks. For social and cultural historians, sailors and their social networks on land are rarely explored. Their transient working-lives have proved unattractive for social historians who have preferred to explore more traditional and stable working-communities. Indeed, sailors make fleeting appearances in E.P. Thompson's seminal study *The Making of the English Working Class* and are cast as 'volatile' and rather unreliable members of the working community. The absence from the historical record of sailors ashore is remarked upon by Peter Marriott, in his recent book *Beyond the Tower* (2011)<sup>3</sup>, who acknowledges that the seafaring communities of London remain neglected by researchers. Where social historians have a found firmer footing is in their analysis of seafarers' workplace culture in the eighteenth century and their unionisation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, in the 1980s the ground breaking work of Marcus Rediker explored the notion that sailors at sea in the eighteenth century developed a class consciousness through collective self-activity and devised tactics of resistance and forms of self-organisation.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while social historians have explored the on-board working-culture of sailors on ships, few rarely cast their gaze to seafarers' activities ashore.

### **Sailortown: An Urban and Maritime space**

Ports commonly shared land-based maritime districts or 'sailortowns' that were associated with drink, sex and money lending services.<sup>5</sup> These localities were populated with cheap boarding houses, brothels and 'low' entertainment venues which were usually concentrated along one main thoroughfare. Sailortown's pubs and boarding houses also enabled sailors to tap into a maritime network of shipping news, job opportunities and local information which they relied upon to navigate themselves around their temporary urban

home. Often, cited as the scourge of the sailor, the Crimp would greet a disoriented sailor off the ship and organise his accommodation, food and entertainment, usually at an extortionate cost. Crimps were often feared individuals that had the potential to control sailors, prostitutes and landlords. In extreme cases Crimps would ‘Shanghai’ sailors, getting them drunk, forging their signatures for a voyage and collect their ‘blood money’ from the ship’s master. Violent Crimps, and the licentious behaviour of sailors ashore, gave sailortown a fearsome reputation. For example, London’s Ratcliffe Highway, Gothenburg’s Herring Street and Hamburg’s Hopfenstrasse acquired an international notoriety.<sup>6</sup> This transient and international workforce, which was concentrated in streets close to the waterfront, provoked fears that sailortowns operated beyond the moral boundaries of civic life.<sup>7</sup> One religious missionary of Portsmouth’s Queen Street claimed that ‘if you have penetrated into the dens of lust and violence which are closely packed within the slice of brick and mortar that lies between St George’s Street and Queen Street, your head will have been sickened.’ He added that the district had become ‘infamous from the Baltic to Japan’.<sup>8</sup>

Journalists, religious missionaries and civic elites deemed these districts unlike the rest of the city, these were liminal spaces where a ‘different’ type of people exhibited unconventional habits and customs. In both merchant and naval ports, social commentators observed an ‘Otherness’ within waterfront districts in British ports and beyond. A common characteristic was the sense that a maritime influence had become imprinted on the district’s architecture, urban space and upon the people themselves. For example, the religious missionary Rev Robert Dolling thought Portsmouth ‘a curious little island’ comprising four separate towns Kingston, [Old] Portsmouth, Southsea and Portsea. While he congratulated the Council for its new Town Hall and People’s Park, he observed that none of this civic progress had affected Portsea. In Portsea, he observed:

‘the streets are, most of them, very narrow and quaint, named after great admirals and sea-battles, with old world, red-tiled roofs, and interiors almost like cabins of ships...with far-off scent of the sea coming over the mud of the harbour, and every now and then the boom of a cannon, or the shrill of the siren’.<sup>9</sup>

The topography and the urban developments in Portsea rendered it isolated from the ‘civilising influences’ of the city’s civic fathers. In the early part of the nineteenth century, Portsea was defended by battlements that circled the town and separated it from Portsmouth’s civic and religious centres. By the 1890s, parks and military recreational grounds separated ‘sailortown’ from the town hall and the rest of Portsmouth. However, the waterfront was the intersection of maritime and urban space and was a site of cultural exchange. Thus, while Portsea was isolated from civic culture, its seaward facing side drew in international maritime influences such as foreign people, their traditions and foods, and exotic animals. As my colleague James Thomas has noted in *Georgian Portsmouth*, ‘English was just one of the many languages you could hear if you were to walk down the town’s High Street’.

Likewise London, the world’s largest port, was characterised by its distance from the more civilised West and cut off from civic or religious leadership. A district in isolation, it exuded an exotic but also edgy quality.

In 1900, Walter Besant noted that:

Its riverside is cut up with docks; in and about among the houses and the streets around the docks rise forests of masts; there is no seaport in the country, not even Portsmouth, which is charged and laden with the atmosphere of ocean and the suggestion of things far off as this port of London and its riverside.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, one author in *Household Words* invited readers to journey with him to London’s sailortown where

‘Jack’ is ‘alive,’ to my knowledge and experience ... he shows special and vigorous symptoms of vitality in Ratcliffe Highway. If it interests you at all to see him alive, and to see how he lives, we will explore, for some half hour or so, this very muddy, tarry, salt-water-smelling portion of the metropolis’.<sup>11</sup>

The physical ‘Otherness’ of Portsea and London, for example, was reinforced by a sailortown culture which, to nineteenth-century philanthropists and journalists, was an alien, primitive and an uncivilised phenomenon. Sailortown seemed a throwback to an earlier age and contravened the municipal schemes in civic enlightenment and citizenship that was the hallmark of places such as Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds. These philanthropists and journalists also sought to expose sensational scandals, a matter to which we will now turn.

### **Civic Scandal: Portsmouth’s Slum Priest**

It was this combination of danger and the exotic that attracted slum priests to Portsea to act as missionaries in the empire’s premier naval port. Portsmouth’s first slum priest was the flamboyant and controversial cleric, Father Robert Dolling who established St Agatha’s Sailors’ Mission in 1885.<sup>12</sup> Dolling had been apprenticed in priest slumdom through the university and religious settlements in London’s East End during the early 1880s. In these institutions, religious men could live among the poor and help evangelise the district. Indeed, such settlements were viewed as beacons of light amidst the heathen population and would prove a useful experience for those intent on missionary work in the empire. However, Dolling was also attracted to the homosocial aspect of settlement life as he desired to escape middle-class moral conventions and bond with fellow male missionaries and the ‘rough’ lads from the East End who he admired for their roughness, coarseness and physical strength. The settlements exposed men to a life of service and sin. Just as colonial missionaries, based in artificial homosocial environments, were tempted by the exotic natives and customs of the

indigenous peoples so too were their domestic equivalents. Drawing upon his experience of working in the East End, Dolling sought to replicate the religious settlement experiment in Portsmouth. Modelling himself on his African Missionary counterparts, Dolling set to work living among the poor and observing their ‘primitive’ behaviour. One biographer noted that ‘Truly from his watch-tower in that extraordinary ‘parsonage’ he was like an ecclesiastical Cecil Rhodes, planning ever-fresh developments’.<sup>13</sup> His descriptions of Portsea locals takes on an imperial narrative when he wrote of the heathen dances he witnessed while strolling through the district.

Two girls, their only clothing a pair of sailors’ trousers each, and two sailor lads, their only clothing the girls’ petticoats, were dancing a kind of breakdown up and down the street, all the neighbours looked on amused but unastonished, until one couple, the worse for drink toppled over.<sup>14</sup>

In another passage, Dolling complained that the absence of civic and religious influences had fostered a savage population. Indeed, he likened Portsea’s conditions to those of the East End and warned of the terrible dangers (meaning the Whitechapel murders) that might fall upon Portsmouth if nothing was done.<sup>15</sup> He claimed that among the Portsea boys ‘it is no uncommon thing to find one who eats raw meat and drinks blood’.<sup>16</sup> These descriptions of the native with their mysterious semi-naked dances, primitive rituals and implicit references to cannibalism glamorised Dolling’s mission and drew readers into an underworld which paralleled contemporary African expeditions. However, while Dolling’s accounts of Portsmouth produced sensational reports in the local and national press, it was his behaviour among the poor which escalated the scandalous newspaper reports. Dolling controversially built a parsonage in Portsmouth which was designed to allow an informal relationship between missionaries and sailors to flourish. In a move that contravened Victorian morality codes, Dolling horrified contemporaries by sleeping in the mission building which was

complete with a homeless shelter, gymnasium and boxing club. Living in close proximity to these sailors, Dolling rode roughshod over carefully constructed social boundaries and protocols of Victorian society. He undoubtedly forged a close relationship with the boys he trained and would invite the ‘slummiest’ boys into his room and would often accompany boys to low music halls.<sup>17</sup> In essence, the ‘Otherness’ of Portsmouth’s sailortown and Dolling’s conscious effort to liken it to the uncivilised outposts of the British Empire, enabled him to create an ‘undiluted homosocial environment’ on British soil. It also did not go unnoticed by commentators that Dolling’s religious education was secondary to his emphasis on physical fitness – almost ‘Muscular Christianity’ without the Christianity. Indeed, one biographer noted that many of the activities were free from religious influence. Moreover, his biographers consistently noted both his feminine and masculine qualities. One described Dolling as possessing ‘the sympathy and tenderness of the women with the strength and courage of the man’.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, another noted Dolling’s dual persona since he exhibited a ‘masculine strength’ with a ‘feminine’ character.<sup>19</sup>

The civic leaders’ tolerance of Dolling, however, evaporated when he described Portsmouth as a ‘sink of iniquity’ and accused one of the leading councillors of owning premises that was being used as a brothel. In response, in 1894, Leon Emanuel, the Mayor of Portsmouth, complained that a ‘serious stigma had been cast on the borough of Portsmouth’ and he criticised Dolling for living ‘not five minutes’ in Portsmouth and making ‘wicked’ allegations ‘without a shadow of foundation in fact’. In one speech defending Portsmouth’s good name, the Mayor made a clear reference to Dolling’s ambiguous sexuality. To a ‘knowing’ audience he joked about Dolling’s claim that sailors’ morality would improve through settling down to marry:

Now there was an old saying that people who lived in glass houses should not throw stones, and he would ask the rev. gentleman why he did not set the example and

marry. (Loud laughter and cheers). It was all very well to preach, but practice was a great deal better than precept.<sup>20</sup>

It was not long after this public meeting that Dolling left his post in Portsmouth to set up a similar mission in the East End where he spent his last days. Dolling's attempt to expose scandal, and then becoming the subject of scandal himself, indicated that the tolerance of unconventional behaviour had its limits. Moreover, Dolling's construction of an uncivilised sailor population justified his philanthropic project and Winchester College's considerable expenditure on his bespoke and morally transgressive parsonage.

The portrayal of the sailor as a fearsome character at sea who, when entering the urban world, became vulnerable and child-like was employed by many Victorian philanthropists. For example, Charles Booth was content to draw from popular stereotypes of Jack Tar ashore, suggesting that he was 'childlike in his guileless simplicity' and that his 'helplessness' was taken advantage of ashore by "'land sharks' – crimps and loose women'. It did, of course, suit philanthropists and religious missionaries to maintain that, when stepping ashore, sailors entered an alien environment and were unable to grasp the street-wise traditions of working-class neighbourhoods. In the London docks of the 1890s the missionary Frank Bullen described how the men stepped ashore, some of them with over £60 in their pockets and headed towards the most notorious pubs.

Into the gaping doors of that squalid "pub" they poured, filling the front bar to overflowing ... there was a perfect pandemonium of noise fighting and drunkenness ... I saw men's pockets being picked, saw snuff being dropped into beer for hocussing-purposes, saw sailor-men being held against the bulkheads of the bar, yea, even against the doorposts, by the throat while busy hands rifled their pockets. The whole place was one whirlpool of all kinds of villainy, naked and not ashamed.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps one of the most influential philanthropists was Agnes Weston who established naval sailor homes in Plymouth (1876) and Portsmouth (1881) which housed 900 and 700 men respectively. Agnes became known as ‘Mother’ to the sailors in her Sailors’ Rests and there is little doubt that she ran her homes in a paternalistic fashion. The following film was made to advertise the work of Agnes Weston’s homes and was produced in the 1970s. However, with its paternalistic message and the use of some glaring stereotypes of sailors and their associates, the script of this film could have been easily written in the 1870s!

Undoubtedly, in most commercial or naval ports there was a whole network of people ready to exploit the unwary and naïve sailor. However, missionaries positioned themselves as saving sailors from the ruthless exploitation of unscrupulous landmen and women and it was in their own interests to cement this stereotype into the popular consciousness.

### **Reporting Ratcliffe Highway: ‘The Toughest Street in World’.**

Even today, Ratcliffe Highway has featured in novels, television series and songs, and throughout all of these narratives the same message emerges; that the Highway was a lawless and murderous abyss.<sup>22</sup> It was the new Victorian sensational press of the 1860s, eager to increase its readership, which created this enduring image of a grotesque gothic underworld. Georgian and early Victorian sailortown had been tolerated and its licentious behaviour had attracted a cross-section of society from the plebeian ranks to aristocratic libertines. Indeed, it was the presence of well-to-do libertines and flâneurs that, to a degree, legitimised sailortown’s hedonism and excesses. In his fictional account Pierce Egan depicted Georgian sailortown pubs as places where ‘lascars, blacks, jack tars, coal heavers, dustmen and women of colour’ were all ‘jigging together’.<sup>23</sup> However, from the 1830s with the rise of a Victorian civic culture that sought to sanitise the worst excesses of Georgian England, sailortown was singled out as being awash with a volatile mix of a residuum population, criminal classes and foreign races. As late as the 1930s, writers noted that ‘the name of Ratcliff Highway became

a byword not only for poverty and misery, but for the coarse, the brutal, and the vicious'. The chronicler added that the Highway gained its reputation during the mid-nineteenth century as Ratcliffe's 'many taverns, dancing saloons and so-called boarding-houses harboured the lowest types of humanity of almost every nation'.<sup>24</sup> The underlying message in this narrative of Ratcliffe Highway was that sailortown's liminality, together with intensive urbanisation and cross-cultural character, had fostered a lawless and heathen district which civic and religious enlightenment had failed to reach. Indeed, what set Ratcliffe Highway (and port towns generally) apart from other slums was the apparent openness of the district's sex industry and the predatory nature of the prostitutes. One correspondent in the *East London Observer* claimed respectable women are

forced into the roadway to avoid the half a dozen caricatures of her sex, who, wildly drunk, are walking abreast, occupying the whole of the footway, and singing, or rather screeching, snatches of obscene songs at the very top of their voices.<sup>25</sup>

Not only did prostitutes allegedly dominate the pathways, they also took possession of the Highway itself. According to one newspaper report, prostitutes hired donkeys and traps to race through the Highway, intimidating passers-by 'in drunken hilarity in carts filled with screaming women and swearing sailors'.<sup>26</sup> To the 'respectable' residents of Ratcliffe Highway, prostitutes in particular openly mocked bourgeois gendered codes of behaviour by not only dominating the main thoroughfare, but also threatening and violently assaulting passers-by. No longer did newspapers describe prostitutes as the feminised 'lusty Moll and Megs' of the Georgian era but instead as monstrous creatures that were 'strong and masculine' who reportedly garrotted sailors in Ratcliffe Highway.

A similar transformation occurred in the way the sailors were reported – gone was the innocent Jack Tar ashore caricature and in its place, foreign sailors in particular acquired a

more menacing persona. For example, J. E. Ritchie writing in *Household Words* explained to his readers that the influx of foreign sailors ensured that danger lurked around every corner.

Jack is getting more lively all through Thames Street, and Tower Street, and is alarmingly vital when I emerge on Tower Hill. A row of foreign mariners pass me, seven abreast: swarthy, ear-ringed, black-bearded varlets in red shirts, light-blue trousers, and with sashes round their waists. Part of the crew of a Sardinian brig, probably. They have all their arms round each other's necks; yet I cannot help thinking that they look somewhat 'knifey,' 'stilettoey.' I hope I may be mistaken, but I am afraid that it would be odds, were you to put an indefinite quantity of rum into them, they would put a few inches of steel into you.<sup>27</sup>

Late Victorian social investigators placed their categorisation of Ratcliffe Highway within dominant discourses of racial hierarchies while alerting readers to the dangers of heathen and exotic cultures. Alongside, sensation seeking reporters, religious missionaries wrote extensively about their intrepid missions into the heathen parts of sailortown. Like their journalist counterparts, missionaries were not averse to sensationalising their journeys into sailortown. As late as the 1920s, Rev. George Mitchell warned readers that in Limehouse 'English girls were caught up in the meshes of Chinese sorceries and their gambling dens where 'Oriental Black Magic' was performed. In one account, while in disguise, he attended the abode of 'one of London's chief exponents of Black Magic:

Here nightly séances were held, and the spirits invoked to incarnate the coloured devotee of the black art. Amazement followed the repeated exhibitions of the satanic phenomenon. I was myself a witness to the pagan rites of this cult, and I vouch for the reality of the incarnation of this expert by disembodied demons ... A gurgle at the throat would indicate possession, and the transformation was sudden as it was terrible.

The eyes of the possessed would become stony and vacant – the voice changed according to what spirit had been invoked ...<sup>28</sup>

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then, the press had whipped-up shocking stories of London's sailortown which underscored the criminal, racial and heathen character of these districts. However, while these reports reveal the urban elites' deep anxiety about Ratcliffe Highway, they do not move us beyond a Victorian gothic caricature of sailortown.

### **Mapping sailortown urban space: A work in progress**

My current research explores the socio-cultural life of Sailortowns through mapping the spatial distribution of those who lived in, worked from, and visited ports. We can ask questions about why different places in the city or different cities appear to behave in different ways. Through mapping census material, crime statistics, newspaper reports and personal testimonies we can geo-locate key actors such as sailors, their families and the people and businesses that serviced sailortown communities to explore how urban space helped forge a popular culture that was markedly different to the rest of a port's municipality. Already, through the preliminary research conducted, a very different sailortown emerges from the lurid descriptions found in journalists' 'gas light wanderings' around the streets of Ratcliffe Highway.

The 1891 Census shows us that sailors should not be cast as a homogenous group and that they had different living arrangements, locations and nationalities. Contrary to the sensational press reports that few British sailors lived in the district, 59% were British, 30% foreign and 11% were registered as of unknown origin. The district also housed a significant 'stable' sailor community as 40% were found to be living with family. Undoubtedly, however, the transient sailortown community was based in Ratcliffe Highway itself as, of 202 sailors living there, 188 were listed as temporary lodgers and the majority of these men were foreign seamen. In addition to this, the Highway's lawless reputation was sealed by the

numerous entertainment venues cited there - in just a half a mile stretch, Ratcliffe Highway hosted at least 27 public houses, 15 of which were licensed for music and dancing.<sup>29</sup>

Interspersed between these licensed premises were the numerous beer and gin shops and 'low' drinking dens. Public houses such as the Prussian Eagle, Paddy's Goose and the Jolly Sailor had fearsome reputations.<sup>30</sup> As did Wilton's Music Hall that stood on the corner of Ratcliffe Highway. Here the proprietor had built 'a special gallery for sailors and their women'.<sup>31</sup>

What, then, of the lawlessness stereotype of sailortown? A district in which English residents lived in fear of their lives from the marauding foreign sailor. An insight into the relations between English residents of sailortown and foreign sailors is captured by interviews conducted with local police officers for the Royal Commission on Alien Immigration. This Commission led, for the first time, to the introduction of immigration controls and registration in 1905. Members of the Commission were keen to confirm the foreign sailors' role in the districts' murderous reputation and were somewhat surprised that Superintendent J. Mulvaney, who intimately knew the Highway, stubbornly resisted their assumptions about the district. It is worth examining some of the questions and answers:

**8349.** Is there any strong feeling growing up between the aliens and the British subject? The feeling has shown itself in isolated cases in the streets I have observed, by carmen shouting at the foreigners when they see them, and that sort of thing; but not to any extent.

**8555.** This district has become, in fact, a foreign colony?—It has practically.

**8356.** With regard to this question of breaches of the peace, you say you do not apprehend any immediate breach of the peace?—No.

**8357.** What breaches of the peace have there been ... as showing the feeling of the British against the alien immigrant? -- I think two or three years ago, in 1899, there was a little disturbance in Cornwall Street, but nothing of any moment.

**8365.** I think you hold the opinion that immorality is certainly increasing among the alien population?— No, I would not say that immorality is increasing among them. I think their morality compares favourably with any other section of the community.<sup>32</sup>

This exchange is even more remarkable given that, during this period, right-wing groups, such as the British Brothers League, staged anti-immigration demonstrations in the East End in an attempt to foster xenophobic feeling. Certainly, the inter-dependency between sailors

and locals in sailortown and the foreign sailors' transitory status may have proved a significant factor in off-setting racial tensions that occurred in other parts of the East End. Moreover, the long-established tradition of public houses and dancing saloons displaying national flags and staging foreign musical entertainment gave Ratcliffe Highway an exotic character that had become deep-rooted in the immediate vicinity.

Rev. Harry Jones, was another resident of Ratcliffe Highway who also offered a very different account of the district. Jones dismissed Charles Dickens's sensational accounts of the opium dens in the district that appear in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. He claimed to know the two competing opium den owners, 'Lascar Sal' and 'John Chinaman' who Dickens drew inspiration from for his violent underworld. Jones noted that

that the affronts or insults which a visitor is assumed to be exposed to in the worst courts exist only in the imagination of those who know nothing about the matter, or they are invited by the visitor himself. If he sniffs about censoriously, and asks impertinent questions, or gives himself airs in any way, he is likely to meet with a rebuff which the offended party does not know how to convey in the shape of polished sarcasm.<sup>33</sup>

Unlike his sensationalism-seeking missionary counterparts, Jones attempted to convey the people of Ratcliffe Highway on their own terms. Of the locals generally in Ratcliffe Highway, Jones was struck by their 'civility, not servility', in that there was little deference but instead a 'frankness and pleasantness of manner'. He noted that even when visiting a 'dying harlot', her house was clean, neat and respectable – a state of affairs that was the antithesis of the Victorian association of cleanliness and godliness.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the nightly rampaging prostitutes of Ratcliffe Highway were conveyed rather differently by Jones who stated that 'I have never been the subject of any remarks or incivility by harlots or their dissolute companions' and observed that 'as they lounge about corners of the streets they are

engaged in knitting'.<sup>35</sup> He also noted that there was an 'illegitimate sort of faithfulness' recognised between women and sailors – associations that would have not been tolerated in more traditional working-class communities. Henry Mayhew, the investigative journalist, confirmed these informal arrangements when one prostitute told him that 'I know very many sailors – six, eight, then oh! More than that. They are my husbands. I am not married, of course not, but they do think me their wife whilst they are on shore'. She added that she looked after their money as 'it [is] very bad for [a] sailor to keep his money himself; he will fall into bad hands'.<sup>36</sup>

In revealing these alternative views of the people of Ratcliffe Highway, we must be careful not to see sailortown through rose tinted glasses. After all, this was the era of Social Darwinism and scientific racism was institutionalised in both working-class and employer organisations. For example, seaman unions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries campaigned bitterly against 'racially inferior' sailors undercutting the wages of their British counterparts. However, in spite of these dominant values, once we uncover testimonies from those people living among the inhabitants of sailortown we see a different picture emerge from the persistently violent, xenophobic and lawless district depicted by sensationalist journalists and social investigators. This was a community in which a fusion of urban and maritime traditions had fostered an interdependency between local inhabitants and transient sailors, where the foreign and the exotic were woven into the social fabric of the district. To outsiders, the tolerance of excess and of prostitution, which would have been frowned upon in more traditional working-class communities, gave sailortown an edginess and Otherness that was not replicated in land-locked areas. But in other ways, sailortowns resembled more traditional working communities, fiercely independent, self-sufficient and suspicious of authority.

Exploring the histories of port towns allows us to gain insights into transient communities that existed on the margins of civic society. These urban districts attracted sensational news stories that demonised Ratcliffe Highway as a murderous and immoral abyss which prompted calls for better policing, social reform and immigration controls. However, in many respects, these communities exhibited the traits of traditional nineteenth century working-class culture; a self-imposed independence from authority and a propensity for self-sufficiency. However, due to their dependence on maritime industries, sailortowns embraced a greater tolerance for unconventional morality and the transitory foreign sailor. What nineteenth century Portsea and Ratcliffe Highway also show us is that working-class communities were often misunderstood or misrepresented through missionary work and sensational press reports. These communities were heterogeneous, complex continually evolving and neither inherently racist nor xenophobic. It's one of the many reasons we should continue to properly contextualise and understand past working-class communities while keeping one eye on the present.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London. Second Series: Industry* (London, 1903), 359-365.

<sup>2</sup> J. London, *The People of the Abyss* (London, 1903).

<sup>3</sup> P. Marriott, *Beyond the Tower: A History of the East End of London* (Yale, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> M. Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (Cambridge, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> S. Hugill, *Sailortown* (London, 1967), xviii.

<sup>6</sup> Hugill, *Sailortown*, 140; Note on terminology; while recent commentators favour the use of 'seafarer', contemporaries such as Charles Booth and census enumerators consistently employed the term seamen or sailors. See L. Moon, "'Sailorhoods'": sailors and sailortown in the port of Portsmouth c. 1850-1900, (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Portsmouth 2016), 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> K. Bell, 'Civic spirits? Ghost lore and civic narratives in nineteenth century Portsmouth', *Cultural and Social History*, 11: 1, 2015, 51-68; B. Beaven, B 'The Resilience of Sailortown Culture in English Naval Ports, c.1820-1900', *Urban History*, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0963926815000140>.

<sup>8</sup> R.N. Shutte, *The Mission of the Good Shepherd*, (Portsea, 1866), 2.

<sup>9</sup> R. R. Dolling, *Ten Years in a Portsmouth Slum* (London, 1896, 1903 edn), 11.

<sup>10</sup> W. Besant *East London* (London, 1903), 41

<sup>11</sup> *Household Words*, 6 December 1851, 254.

<sup>12</sup> *Hampshire Telegraph*, 15 October 1892.

<sup>13</sup> C.E. Osborne, *The Life of Father Dolling*, (London, 1903), 85.

<sup>14</sup> Dolling, *Ten Years in a Portsmouth Slum*, p.18.

<sup>15</sup> Osborne, *The Life of Father Dolling*, 126.

<sup>16</sup> Osborne, *The Life of Father Dolling*, 126.

<sup>17</sup> S. Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, 2004) 256; Clayton, *Father Dolling*, p.42.

<sup>18</sup> J. Clayton, *Father Dolling: A Memoir* (London, 1902) 134.

<sup>19</sup> Osborne, *The Life of Father Dolling*, 178.

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- <sup>20</sup> *Hampshire Telegraph*, 24 February 1894.
- <sup>21</sup> F. Bullen, *Christ in Sailor Town*, (London, 1901) 12-13.
- <sup>22</sup> Flanders, *The Invention of Murder. How the Victorians Revelled in Death and Detection and Invented Modern Crime*, (London, 2011) 1.
- <sup>23</sup> P. Egan, *Tom & Jerry. Life in London* (1869), 321.
- <sup>24</sup> *The Copartnership Herald*, Vol. II, no. 24, February 1933.
- <sup>25</sup> *East London Observer*, 10 October 1857.
- <sup>26</sup> *East London Observer*, 10 October 1857.
- <sup>27</sup> *Household Words*, 6 December 1881, 255.
- <sup>28</sup> G. Mitchell, *Down in Limehouse* (London, 1925), 23.
- <sup>29</sup> Hugill, *Sailortown*, 115.
- <sup>30</sup> F.W. Robinson, 'A night in the Highway', *Belgravia: a London Magazine*, 28, 151, 1879.
- <sup>31</sup> Hugill, *Sailortown*, 118.
- <sup>32</sup> British Parliamentary Papers, Royal Commission on Alien Immigration, vol II, 1903, 281
- <sup>33</sup> H. Jones, *East and West London. Being Notes of Common Life and Pastoral Work in the Saint James's Westminster and in Saint George's-in-the-East* (Smith, Elder & Co, London, 1875), 241.
- <sup>34</sup> Jones, *East and West*, 239.
- <sup>35</sup> Jones, *East and West*, 219
- <sup>36</sup> Quoted in V. Burton, 'The work and home life of seafarers, with special reference to the port of Southampton, 1870-1921', (unpublished PhD thesis, London School of Economics 1988), 285.