Joe Davey – 'A Higher Class of Men?' Sailors and Working-Class Communities in Bristol 1850-1914.

Supervisors: Brad Beaven, Karl Bell, Wendy Sims-Schouten

This thesis is a study of merchant sailors in Bristol between 1850-1914. There is a stereotypical perception of the sailor as being a drunken, promiscuous, violent nuisance on the streets of a port town. This perception has been fashioned through popular imagery and imagination but also through an historiography that has largely investigated sailors in maritime and nautical contexts and of sailors working in sailing vessels. This thesis seeks to balance this emphasis by situating sailors in urban contexts and within the culture of Bristol's working-class people. It takes a quantitative and qualitative approach to sailors, making use of the limited range of sources available for post slavery Bristol, to argue that sailors can be seen in a different light. It seeks to portray sailors in ways not normally associated with the stereotypical image and identity politics of sailors and in so doing reveals the reality of this subsection of labour within working-class life. This thesis, whilst recognising substantial differences between types of sailors and that conclusions drawn cannot be true for all sailors, argues that sailors as a subsection of the working-class had considerable agency in integrating themselves both spatially and culturally in working-class communities of the city. Naturally, many sailors continued to display behavioural traits of sailors but there were those who more closely aligned to working-class culture, rather than maritime culture, and to those who might be termed as a better class of working man. Through situating sailors in societal, familial, residential, employment, deviant and other cultural contexts, it will be argued that sailors were not the perceived breed apart but were an integrated presence in Bristol's wider working-class culture, a working-class culture that exuded certain values that transcended occupational differences.