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**Passive Protest: Investigating Middle Class  
Absenteeism during the Bristol Riots,  
October 1831**

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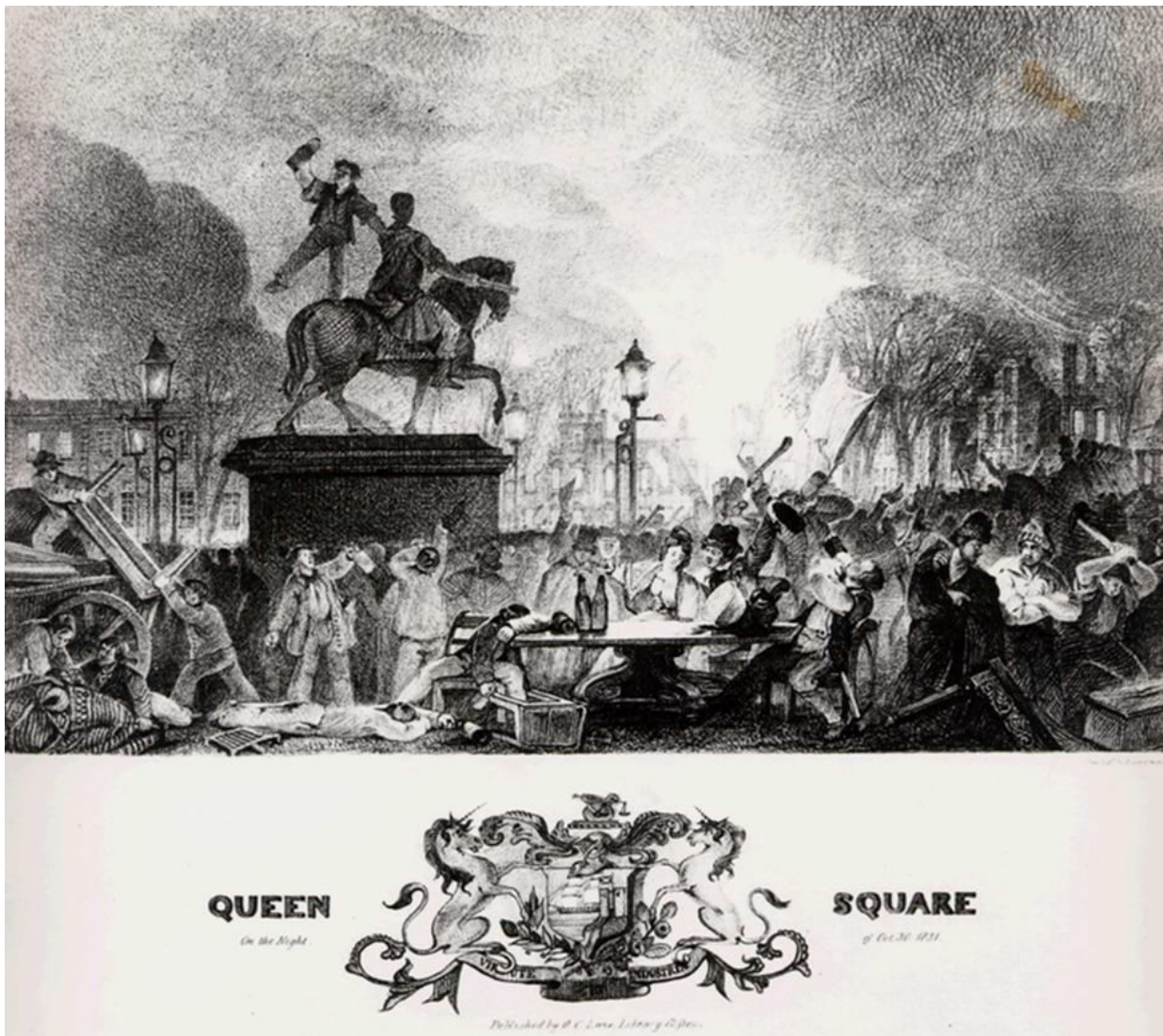
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Passive Protest: Investigating Middle Class Absenteeism  
during the Bristol Riots, October 1831



W. J. Müller, *Queen Square on the night of Sunday 30 Oct. 1831* (1831), Bristol Reference Library.

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“Whenever convulsions take place in a community, they will almost always be traceable to one cause, namely, an unnatural state of society, arising from misgovernment.”

- *George Price*, 1861.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G. Price, *A Popular History of Bristol from the Earliest Period to the Present Time... Impartially Written* (Bristol, 1861), p467.

# Introduction

On the 18th of October 1831, a group of sailors gathered on the deck of the *Earl of Liverpool*. The Corporation of Bristol had previously approached Christopher Claxton, a retired Royal Navy lieutenant, who consequently asked the sailors if they could 'pledge themselves to assist the magistrates in putting down rioting.'<sup>2</sup> Suddenly they were surrounded by members of the Bristol Political Union, who were boarding their ship. The Union proposed that Claxton was mad for insinuating a riot would occur, and encouraged the sailors to withdraw to the dockside. After considerable persuasion, the sailors signed a declaration that they, 'will not allow themselves to be made a cat's paw by the Corporation or their paid agents.'<sup>3</sup> When the Corporation of Bristol extended their call to defend the city to the public, the middle classes refused to act. Fourteen days following this declaration, the city lay in ruin. Claxton's house, like many others, had been burned to the ground. This moment of action from the Bristol Political Union, demonstrated that absenteeism of the middle classes did not stem from apathy, but that absenteeism formed a deliberate protest from the middle classes. This dissertation will be an investigation into middle class absenteeism, attempting to understand their motivations, and exploring what deeper meanings can be gained from their behaviour.

## *Summary of Events*

In advance of any significant analysis into the Bristol Riots, a simplified narrative of events is necessary. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 1831, although the government passed a Reform Bill, the Tory-dominated House of Lords rejected it. This Reform Bill was to resolve the injustices of 'rotten boroughs'; new industrialised cities like Manchester were vastly underrepresented as a consequence of historic constituency boundaries. Sir Charles Wetherell, an MP, was one of the most vocal opponents of the Reform Bill; his role as a Recorder for Bristol required a ceremonial visit to the city. Even though Bristol 'stood to gain comparatively little' from the

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<sup>2</sup> G. Amery, *City Under Fire: The Bristol Riots and Aftermath* (London, 1979), p25.

<sup>3</sup> William Henry Somerton, *A narrative of the Bristol riots, on the 29th, 30th, and 31st of October, 1831* (Bristol, 1831), p8.

introduction of the Reform Bill, the citizens strongly opposed his arrival.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, the magistrates of the city failed to raise a sufficient force to provide security. Calls to the public to enrol as 'special constables' were met with silence.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of October 1831, 'the overwhelming disapproval of Wetherell's claim to represent Bristol opinion was forceful and emphatic.'<sup>5</sup> A crowd had gathered; most likely in the tens of thousands, to receive Wetherell into the city. The boos and hisses soon descended into violence, 'the Mob began to pelt him with stones and clubs so very determined they seemed to be to destroy him - his friends immediately were obliged to unseat him and carry him off.'<sup>6</sup> In spite of Mayor Charles Pinney, a reformer himself, pleading for calm, in addition to the riot act being read, the violence continued.<sup>7</sup> After Bridewell was destroyed, the New Gaol, Bristol's recently developed prison, was targeted, the rioters 'determined once again to release all the prisoners and sack the building.'<sup>8</sup>

Even after two days of violence, the middle classes of Bristol were not willing to engage in the defence of the city. Pinney 'ordered notices to be read out in churches and chapels', asking for 'loyal members of the public to help.'<sup>9</sup> However only two hundred people heeded the call. One observer quoted the mayor, 'the best advice he could give was that each person should go home and take care of his own property.'<sup>10</sup>

On Monday, peace was finally restored by the middle classes of Bristol, alongside the military intervention in Queen Square. Most likely the attacks during the previous night on private houses demonstrated a threat to private property that the middle classes were unwilling to bear. As a result, nearly three thousand men formed the *posse comitatus*. Major Mackworth, a military official in Bristol, admitted that the military intervention was insufficient until 'the majority of the citizens had abandoned their passive protest.'<sup>11</sup> Following the restoration of peace, one hundred men were put on trial. Most were banished to Australia, while four were executed, including one middle class man.

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<sup>4</sup> S. Thomas, *The Bristol Riots* (Bristol, 1974), p2.

<sup>5</sup> J. Caple, *The Bristol Riots of 1831 and Social Reform in Britain* (New York, 1990), p16.

<sup>6</sup> C.M Macinnes, *Gateway of Empire* (Bristol, 1939), p365.

<sup>7</sup> H.G Brown and P.J. Harris, *Bristol England* (Bristol 1946), p161.

<sup>8</sup> Caple, *The Bristol Riots of 1831 and Social Reform in Britain*, p28.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, *The Bristol Riots*, p9.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas, *The Bristol Riots*, p9.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas, *The Bristol Riots*, p11.

### *Historiographical Outline*

Historians of the middle classes have not specifically commented on the Bristol Riots within their studies. However, this dissertation will attempt to challenge their conclusions that middle class values in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were conservative and they opposed instability. Dror Wahrman maintained that middle classes held distinctive 'political responsibility...loyalty to the crown... value as a bulwark against revolution.'<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Morris documented how the middle classes in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century inherited aristocratic values of 'gentlemanly and professional' behaviour during this period.<sup>13</sup> These conclusions have derived from their studies into responses in Britain to wider European revolutions. They have not paid succinct attention to middle class reactions to domestic disturbances.

More isolated studies of the Bristol Riots have examined the motivations of the crowd, but these have failed to grapple the wider impacts on social history. Histories of the Bristol Riots usually contribute to the debate as to why the riots occurred. Historians such as Susan Thomas and Jeremy Caple have contributed works solely concerned with the riots. Thomas distanced the riots from contemporary political unrest, arguing it was not a 'manifestation of the excitement generated by the House of Lords' rejection of the Reform Bill.'<sup>14</sup> Caple disagreed, arguing it was instead the 'tense relationship between reformers and local Tories which virtually ensured that the riots would occur.'<sup>15</sup> There are more narratively focused works such as Geoffrey Amery's book, *City Under Fire*, which provide a detailed overview, but lack insightful analysis. Whilst existing histories have made links between the riots and contemporary political history, all of the studies have failed to successfully place the riots within a wider social historiographical context, with a distinct lack of class analysis. This dissertation will seek to place the study of middle class absenteeism within a wider class context.

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<sup>12</sup> D. Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c.1780–1840* (Cambridge, 1995), p309.

<sup>13</sup> R.J Morris, *Class, Sect and Party, The Making of the British Middle Class: Leeds 1820-1850* (Manchester, 1990), p9.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas, *The Bristol Riots*, p1.

<sup>15</sup> Caple, *The Bristol Riots of 1831 and Social Reform in Britain*, p10.



This existing social negligence within Bristol Riot histories might be explained by the marginalisation of the event by social historians. As E.P Thompson argued, 'Bristol in 1831 exemplifies the persistence of older, backward-looking patterns of behaviour', lacking in 'politically conscious revolutionary action.'<sup>16</sup> The Bristol Riots consequently sat as an outlier to E.P Thompson's discussion of working class consciousness. The Bristol Riots has been understood as a spontaneous uprising for the working classes; a demonstration of sheer primal destruction overcoming underlying political intent. This perceived lack of mindfulness has placed it outside the interests of 'history from below' historians, like E.P Thompson, who wished to create a narrative of an economically aware working class. However, it has not been posed before that *middle class* understanding can be gained from the Bristol Riots.

This study is something entirely new; as Caple highlighted, 'no historian of this period has addressed the question of the mass refusal of individuals to act as "specials."'<sup>17</sup> The answer as to why this has not been studied is unclear. Overall, middle class studies perhaps have been 'less exciting', given the extent of socialist influence on 20<sup>th</sup> century social history, resulting in less moral clout to be gained through study.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of previous disinterest, this dissertation will seek to demonstrate that significant deeper understandings of social history can be understood from this behaviour.

### *Actors*

This dissertation will be referring to several groups within the riots as part of its analysis. Deeper analysis would be incomprehensible in the absence of accurate definitions and summaries of these groups. The 'middle classes' of Bristol were a fluid group, rich in property, wealth and political influence. Part of the 'new focus of social and economic power', the Reform Bill was in itself a representation of the middle classes flexing their political clout.<sup>19</sup> Although it would be impossible to use a quantitative definition based on wealth, the definition of the middle classes in Bristol will be based on their own consciousness and understanding of what middle class meant to them. The *Bristol Mercury* newspaper knew of

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<sup>16</sup> E.P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), p81.

<sup>17</sup> Caple, *The Bristol Riots of 1831 and Social Reform in Britain*, p12.

<sup>18</sup> Morris, *Class, Sect and Party*, p9.

<sup>19</sup> Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class*, p2.

‘the productive powers of the middle class’, while persistently throughout discourse a consciousness of the ‘respectable classes’ and the ‘lowest classes’ exists.<sup>20</sup> The Bristol Political Union, positioned as a politically vocal sect of Bristol’s middle class, provide a vehicle within which to analyse the deeper feelings and behaviours of the group as a whole. Entry fees were 6d, then 4d every month, consequently it was unlikely anyone ‘below the rank of artisan would join.’<sup>21</sup>

The modern conception of ‘working classes’ cannot accurately be used in analysis, as Bristol lacked a significant manufacturing industry. The trial records demonstrate the accused were casual labourers, dock workers, small workshop employees such as blacksmiths, and unemployed.<sup>22</sup> E.P Thompson helpfully used a less specific definition of the economically weak, as ‘classes are based on the differences in legitimate power.’<sup>23</sup> Such a definition acknowledges the separation of class, in the absence of any manufacturing industry or significant bourgeoisie and proletariat class relationship. For the purposes of this dissertation, the term ‘lower classes’ will be used to describe those living and working in the slums of the city.

The city of Bristol was managed and run by the ‘Corporation’, a contemporary city council. A ‘magistrate’ would represent each of Bristol’s twelve wards, and the group were ‘responsible for the maintenance of social order.’<sup>24</sup> Hence it was their responsibility to organise the policing of Bristol during the Riots. Policing in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was largely carried out by ‘special constables’, in essence an untrained militia loyal to the local government. Roles were almost exclusively limited to the middle class, ‘a magistrate would swear in the ‘respectable’ inhabitants as Special Constables and they ‘associated’ as a body to keep the peace.’<sup>25</sup> Equally important to discussion however, was their wider city management. Citizens were unhappy at the relative decline of Bristol and viewed their civil policies such as the building of the expensive dry dock and high import tariffs, as responsible.

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Political Mirror’, *Bristol Mercury*, 31 May 1831.

<sup>21</sup> A.P Hart, *The Bristol Riots of 1831 and the Mass Media* (Oxford, 1979), p49

<sup>22</sup> John Eagles and Thomas Brereton, *The Bristol Riots: Their Causes, Progress and Consequences – Primary Source Edition* (Nabu, 2013), p259.

<sup>23</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p11.

<sup>24</sup> S. Poole, ‘To be a Bristolian: Civic Identity and the Social Order, 1750-1850’, within eds. M. Dresser and P. Ollerenshaw, *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Redcliffe, 1996), p77.

<sup>25</sup> J. Stevenson, ‘Social Control and the Prevention of Riots in England, 1789 – 1829’, within eds. A.P. Donakgrodzki, *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain*, (London, 1977) p29.

## Economic Decline

Although discussion continues over the extent of the issue, it is commonly accepted that ‘the city languished in an economic trough’ in the lead up to the Bristol Riots.<sup>26</sup> Bristol’s weakening position was in spite of consistent growth: ultimately other cities benefited to a greater extent from the industrial revolution. The table below explains Bristol’s decline as a major port.

Vessels inwards			Vessels Outwards		
Year	Tons	Rank Order (In England)	Year	Tons	Rank Order (In England)
1709	19,800	2	1709	21,200	4
1751	30,400	5	1751	27,300	6
1791	79,000	4	1791	71,000	5
1841	75,000	8	1841	70,000	10

Table 1: Tonnage of foreign-going vessels clearing and entering Bristol, with their rank order amongst English ports.<sup>27</sup>

This data demonstrates a significant divergence in economic power away from Bristol, despite increases in trade volume. These economic problems created a lack of prosperity for Bristol’s citizens. The industrial revolution and its consequent population growth created ‘slums, overcrowding, and an appalling mortality rate... Bristol became an extremely unhealthy and disease-ridden city.’<sup>28</sup> . For historians of Bristol, this decline had an immediate link with the 1831 unrest. A.P Hart argued the riots were ‘doubtless a response to harsh social conditions.’<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Steve Poole reinforced the idea that Bristol was a ‘turbulent port containing all the ingredients for a riot.’<sup>30</sup> However, this dissertation is not seeking to highlight the rioter’s grievances. It is however, trying to seek to understand the motivations behind middle class absenteeism. These poor conditions resulted in anger towards the Corporation

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<sup>26</sup> Amery, *City Under Fire*, p23.

<sup>27</sup> 1709, 1751: London, British Library, Add. MS. 11, 256. 1791, 1841: London, Public Record Office, Customs 17/13. Cited in K. Morgan, ‘The Economic Development of Bristol, 1700-1850’, within eds. M. Dresser and P. Ollerenshaw, *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Redcliffe, 1996), p53.

<sup>28</sup> J.H Bettey, *Bristol Observed: Visitors’ Impressions of the City from Domesday to the Blitz* (Bristol, 1986), p105.

<sup>29</sup> Hart, *The Bristol Riots of 1831 and the Mass Media*, p98.

<sup>30</sup> Poole, ‘To be a Bristolian’, p77.

of Bristol. Histories of the Bristol Riots have documented the corrupt nature of the Corporation. Michael Brock has highlighted how 'the Corporation was self-elected and of the weakest kind.'<sup>31</sup> These complaints are important in the context of the dissertation; it will be demonstrated that middle class absenteeism was rooted within anger towards the Corporation. This relative economic decline was deemed as the responsibility of the magistrates.

### *Methodology*

This dissertation will use the methodology of the *Bristol Mercury* as representative of middle class thought. Unfortunately there are no specific archival records that demonstrate middle class attitudes, and hence the realm of 'public opinion' is used. The study of language has seen considerable growth since Gareth Stedman-Jones, as part of the 'linguistic turn', challenged the works of Thompson and heavy class readings of 19<sup>th</sup> century England. For Stedman-Jones, studies should focus on what people 'actually said or wrote, the terms in which they addressed each other or their opponents.'<sup>32</sup> The advantage of such study is that it decreases the imposition of political thought retroactively onto historical actors, and reframes debate into focusing on their own thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, Newspapers in Bristol were 'fiercely independent', and the *Bristol Mercury's* position as mouthpiece of middle class values and opinions provide a vehicle to demonstrate the justifications of their inaction.<sup>33</sup> Bush has argued that studies of the Bristol Riots are inherently problematic as all source material is 'definitely biased.'<sup>34</sup> Newspapers will particularly have this element. However, within this dissertation, opinion will be prioritised as valuable in imagining the beliefs and attitudes of the middle classes – their scathing dislike of the magistrates and their solidarity with the lower classes. Therefore, the largely politically motivated element of the source material will not be a limitation but a merit to discussion.

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<sup>31</sup> M. Brock, *The Great Reform Act* (London, 1973), p251.

<sup>32</sup> G. Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', within eds. G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983), p94.

<sup>33</sup> Hart, *The Bristol Riots of 1831 and the Mass Media*, p1.

<sup>34</sup> G. Bush, *Bristol and its Municipal Government: 1820-1851* (Bristol, 1976), p59.

A.P Hart has been the only historian of the Bristol Riots to extensively use newspapers as a source. However, his *raison d'être* was to study 'how the press operated and discuss the kind of effect it had on its audience.'<sup>35</sup> Hart's study contrasts with this dissertation, which uses the *Bristol Mercury* as a lens through which to understand middle class beliefs and attitudes. This is sufficient to demonstrate that this dissertation's methodology is both novel and justified.

This methodology might be challenged on the grounds that a single newspaper cannot be representative of the actions of an entire class within a city. However, the methodology used is justified by its similarity with other middle class histories. R.J Morris, for example, used the *Leeds Mercury* as demonstrative of the voice of the middle class in the 1820s and 1830s. It formed 'the effective opposition' to the 'Tory Anglican elite', represented by the Leeds Corporation.<sup>36</sup> Although the industry of Leeds was, unlike Bristol, based on manufacturing, it similarly had a 'Leeds Political Union' that pressured local politics. Its Political Union was correspondingly 'formed on the Birmingham model', much like Bristol's.<sup>37</sup> Morris' source material influenced his conclusions on class relations. Morris argued that class relations in Leeds ranged alternatively between 'conflict, consensus, deference and defiance.'<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, although using a single newspaper as a focus is limiting, this will be mitigated by introducing a breadth of sources. It will also reference trial material following the riots, and reference other newspapers where necessary. Therefore, the use of the media, and in particular, a single newspaper, as a lens within which to view class actions and behaviour, is warranted.

### *Outline*

This dissertation will argue that the middle classes were united in rejecting the magistrates' calls to defend the city, purposefully inflicting damage on their political reputation. Their inaction formed what has been described as the 'passive protest.' This consequently challenges contemporary and historiographical expectations of middle class behaviour, the Bristol Riots formed a symbol of middle class internal struggle, between safety and political

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<sup>35</sup> Hart, *The Bristol Riots of 1831 and the Mass Media*, p1.

<sup>36</sup> Morris, *Class, Sect and Party*, p123.

<sup>37</sup> Morris, *Class, Sect and Party*, p125.

<sup>38</sup> Morris, *Class, Sect and Party*, p119.

change. It simultaneously challenges the conclusions of Bristol Riot histories; by reframing debate around the middle classes, the responsibility of the riots falls to the magistrates, rather than a wider concern of reform.

The first chapter will assess the uniformity of absenteeism; it will argue that despite a single middle class rioter, there was an entirely separate experience for actors within the riot, based on class. The middle classes were absent from encouraging the riot, and from protecting the city. The second chapter will be concerned with the motivations behind middle class absenteeism. It will argue that angst towards the magistrates and the Corporation fuelled middle class disinterest in defending the city. This study demonstrates conflict within middle class values, as their affinity for safety and their dislike for the magistrates opposed one another. The third chapter will attempt to place the absenteeism within class histories, arguing that the Bristol Riots were an example of class unity. It was caused by the common political interests held by the lower and middle classes; both had political grievances with the magistrates.

## Unity

The middle classes were united in their absenteeism; they did not defend the city, while simultaneously not participating in the riot itself. This bubble of irresponsibility formed a passive protest towards the perceivably corrupt Corporation. The Bristol Political Union's actions verified this argument; they policed the inaction of their fellow citizens, ensuring there was a united front of absenteeism. Any deviations from class behaviour, such as Christopher Davis' drunken adventure during the riots, can be cast aside as spontaneous moments of passion, rather than politically significant action. The value of this study is implicit - to understand the motivations of the middle classes, the clarification of absentee expression needs to be firstly understood. The middle classes did not start the fire, but they watched the city burn.

Principally, the middle classes failed to join the lower classes in rioting in Bristol. Christopher Davis was the only convicted rioter from respectable circumstances. However, a case can be made that he was suffering from ill health. From the entirety of accounts, a complete separation of class experience in interacting with the riot can be demonstrated. The 'mischief' of Queen Square was solely propagated by those with lower incomes. The *Bristol Mercury* observed that the mass of people that greeted Wetherell was not bound by a particular class, 'the streets... were thronged with thousands of individuals... every person looked forward with apprehension to the result of the day's proceedings.'<sup>39</sup> However, it was the periphery members of society that sought to create chaos, 'boys and striplings... and women of abandoned character' were the propagators of missiles towards Wetherell's carriage.<sup>40</sup> These claims were verified by William Ody Hard, a sheriff for Bristol. He later admitted during Pinney's trial, when asked to describe the crowd, they were 'All classes... all sorts of persons, all classes, respectable, well dressed people round; the actual agents in the mischief were the lowest.'<sup>41</sup> In this manner, uniformity in middle class experience in merely observing, but not participating in the riot, can be imagined. However, one middle class rioter did participate. Christopher Davis, a 'retired tradesman of good circumstances', was previously a carter, and experienced a good standard of living.<sup>42</sup> He was arrested and charged for inciting the riot. This does not challenge the unity of the middle classes, however. He appeared somewhat delirious, and most likely drunk during the three days of rioting, shouting, 'Down with those churches, and mend the roads with them!'<sup>43</sup> The judge looked upon him as an exception, rather than a rule, when sentencing him to execution, 'You have filled a respectable situation in society, and occupied that rank, that you ought to have set an example of peace and good order.'<sup>44</sup> This expectation of refined behaviour from the judge demonstrates the marginal nature of Davis' actions. Davis does not therefore undermine the wider absenteeism from the middle classes and a divergence in class experience can still be maintained.

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<sup>39</sup> 'Public Entry of Sir Charles Wetherell', *Bristol Mercury*, 1 Nov. 1831.

<sup>40</sup> 'Late Dreadful Riots at Bristol', *Bristol Mercury*, 8 Nov. 1831.

<sup>41</sup> *Trial of Charles Pinney* (1833), p261. <https://archive.org/details/trialcharlespin00bencgoog> [accessed online 10/03/2016].

<sup>42</sup> Thomas, *The Bristol Riots*, p22.

<sup>43</sup> William Henry Somerton, *A narrative of the Bristol riots, on the 29th, 30th, and 31st of October, 1831* (Bristol, 1831), p78.

<sup>44</sup> William Henry Somerton, *A narrative of the Bristol riots, on the 29th, 30th, and 31st of October, 1831* (Bristol, 1831), p87.

Furthermore, inaction can be also be imagined within middle class negligence towards defending the city. Bristol's authorities persistently struggled to create any meaningful civil defence, as the middle classes refused to sign up as special constables. The middle classes did not heed calls for support during the riot, nor did they act once the riot started. Pinney admitted, in an authored piece in the *Bristol Mercury*, that he had been met with silence despite persistent calls for assistance: 'upon application [to Wards for men], their returns were insufficient.'<sup>45</sup> More specifically, St. Michael's Ward provided twenty-seven men; the hastiness with which seven of those names were written in pencil implies these were called up during the riots.<sup>46</sup> The *Bristol Mercury* commented that the constabulary force 'were inadequate to the preservation of the peace.'<sup>47</sup> Thomas Reynolds, a merchant of Bristol, was one of the few middle class volunteers at the second call. He echoed the claim that the volunteer numbers were vastly insufficient. They gathered at the mansion house, but their numbers were dismal, 'I thought there were very few constables... he [Pinney] told me that he had sent round to the different constables of the wards, to desire that they would furnish him with a number of constables, which they had not done.'<sup>48</sup> Most likely their numbers totalled around two hundred; vastly insufficient to stop an ongoing riot. In Bristol, the middle classes refused to stop the rioters from their destructive behaviour. They would not act formally, or informally, but rather watched quietly as the city magistrates drastically tried and failed to stop the destruction of the city.

For some of the middle classes, absenteeism was not sufficient as a form of protest. The Bristol Political Union, a middle class group, actively sought to prevent other people from joining the civil defence, demonstrating the civil protest element of their actions. They actively stated their opposition to the magistrates of the city. In advance of the riots, they criticised the magistrates' choice to seek assistance. One handbill demanded that if 'they feel themselves incompetent to preserve the public peace... they should resign their offices.'<sup>49</sup> As a result of their dislike for the magistrates, the Bristol Political Union disrupted a sailor's meeting discussing the possibility of protecting Wetherell. The Union 'swarmed around and

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<sup>45</sup> 'Council House', *Bristol Mercury*, 4 Nov. 1831.

<sup>46</sup> Bristol, BRO, Add. 32955/52, 'Bristol Riots: List of Special Constables for St. Michael's Ward'.

<sup>47</sup> 'Public Entry of Sir Charles Wetherell'.

<sup>48</sup> *Trial of Charles Pinney*, p88.

<sup>49</sup> University of Bristol Special Collections, *Bristol Political Union Handbill* (25 Oct. 1831), within *The Bristol Riots Volume 1*.



over the ships', squashing any chance of an agreement.<sup>50</sup> Their efforts to disrupt the city's defence were successful. The sailors released a statement that they 'will not allow themselves to be made a cat's paw by the Corporation or their paid agents.'<sup>51</sup> Arguably using the lens of absenteeism to view the sailor's meeting and its consequent interruption renews and reinvigorates its significance. It demonstrates the Bristol Political Union's hostility towards the Bristol magistrates; highlighting how civil conflict could be expressed beyond political or media pressure. Here, the middle classes were willing to wager the safety of the city on their frustration of the Corporation's corruption. Therefore, while the majority of the middle class were absent from any action during the riot, one small group actively discouraged others from joining the civil defence.

In conclusion, the middle classes were united in their expression of absenteeism despite calls to defend their city, and resisted any temptation to give in to any violent urges. In this way the middle classes had a unique experience during the riots, separate to the rioters themselves yet simultaneously against the authoritarian powers that governed the city. This unity can still be applied in spite of Christopher Davis' actions; his actions as a drunk present him as an anomaly amongst the thousands of middle class men and women who did nothing. The only actions that might be identified, was the decision from the Bristol Political Union to disrupt the meeting of the sailors; therefore acting to prevent others from acting. It is interesting that such unified behaviour occurred, in spite of the 'middle classes' being a heterogeneous group. This demonstrates that the reasons for acting in this manner were similar for the entire group, which emphasises the need to understand the motivations for their 'passive protest.'

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<sup>50</sup> Amery, *City Under Fire*, p26.

<sup>51</sup> William Henry Somerton, *A narrative of the Bristol riots, on the 29th, 30th, and 31st of October, 1831* (Bristol, 1831), p8.

## Justifications

Middle class absenteeism was motivated principally by a disdain for the Bristol Corporation. Tired of what they perceived to be decades of decline and corruption, they were quietly pleased to see the 'self-interested Corporation' scramble to find only inadequate protection for the city.<sup>52</sup> Sensing that signing up to be a special constable was somehow approving the city's leadership, the middle classes were silent to the magistrates' calls. There was also the lesser concern of reform, but this was outweighed by the angst towards the Corporation. By understanding the motivations of the middle classes inaction, an insight is given into the beliefs, priorities and attitudes of the middle classes in England. The dislike of the magistrates represented a distinctive anti-authoritarian view within the middle classes, contributing to a wider social history of the relationship between the middle class and civic security and challenging the argument that 'stability and harmony' was always their pursuit.<sup>53</sup>

Principally, the middle classes were incensed at the politicians that ran the city, in particular, the Corporation of Bristol. This is verified by the damning language used within middle class discourse. The *Bristol Mercury* was one amongst many vocal opponents, explaining how 'every class of society' considered the Corporation, 'unpopular.'<sup>54</sup> They made a direct link between the mass refusal of volunteers and the Corporation: 'Thousands have refused to enrol their names to protect the public peace, even in the present emergency, because they have no confidence in the Magistracy.'<sup>55</sup> The Bristol Political Union, the most vocal sect of the middle classes, were equally adamant in their scepticism of regional power. In a handbill, they argued, 'a magistrate cannot be expected to possess the public confidence, without which he will always be found incompetent to preserve the public peace.'<sup>56</sup> Additionally, more privately, when implored by the magistrates for support, W. Herapath, a senior member of the Union, deliberately condemned the magistrates to their fate, 'the magistrates alone must

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<sup>52</sup> J. Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century* (Bristol, 1887), p103.

<sup>53</sup> Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class*, p18.

<sup>54</sup> 'Editorial', *Bristol Mercury*, 15 Nov. 1831.

<sup>55</sup> 'Editorial', *Bristol Mercury*, 15 Nov. 1831.

<sup>56</sup> University of Bristol, *Bristol Political Union Handbill* (25 Oct. 1831), within *The Bristol Riots Volume 1*.

be accountable' for the safety of the city.<sup>57</sup> In both public and private spheres, the magistrates were persistently criticised by the middle classes.

Furthermore, the Bristol Political Union had to be eventually paid off by the magistrates themselves to defend the city. Herapath was complained at personally, as he had the men to stop the riot, but chose not to, 'Herapath... was asked whether he would get his union together, and try to save the town. He said he could not answer for it.'<sup>58</sup> It is interesting that he refused this opportunity to aid Bristol, but accepted the payments from the magistrates on the final day, for four hundred members to patrol the streets, at a rate of 3s 6d each.<sup>59</sup> This payment, in addition to their explicit dislike of the magistrates and persistent calls for their resignation, demonstrates that the Bristol Political Union only defended the city when they could extract resources from the magistrates. This was more likely to be a subtle attack on the Magistrates, rather than a selfish desire for resources; it was expensive to maintain membership of the Union, hence it was unlikely the members were in financial need. Furthermore, they examined themselves in spite of this payment as saviours of the city, as the wider political union movement claimed, 'the city is now under the protection of the members of the political union.'<sup>60</sup> This eradication of the magistrates' reputation as protectors of the city formed part of the Political Union's systematic lack of confidence in the Corporation. They ensured the Bristol Riots demonstrated the magistrates' lack of authority and control. In this manner, the Bristol Political Union tactically abstained, then deployed their manpower, to inflict maximum reputational damage to the magistrates.

Moreover, absenteeism as a form of protest can be imagined because the middle classes allowed public property to be destroyed, but stepped in once their own property was under threat. It was the magistrates' responsibility to protect public buildings. Bridewell, The New Gaol, the Mansion House; all were symbols of state authority.<sup>61</sup> Major Mackworth, observing the riot unfold, was surprisingly accurate with his prediction, 'the burning and plundering a

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<sup>57</sup> William Henry Somerton, *A narrative of the Bristol riots, on the 29th, 30th, and 31st of October, 1831* (Bristol, 1831), p8.

<sup>58</sup> 'Major Digby Mackworth's personal Narrative of the late Riots' *Royal Cornwall Gazette, Falmouth Packet & Plymouth Journal*, 26 Nov. 1831.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas, *The Bristol Riots*, p9.

<sup>60</sup> *National Political Union to the Inhabitants of London*, National Political Union, (London, 1831).

<sup>61</sup> Poole, 'To be a Bristolian', p85.

few private houses, which would inevitably follow the unchecked destruction of public property, would... rouse the inhabitants of Bristol to a sense of their common danger.'<sup>62</sup> The middle classes therefore were not willing to engage in the defence of Bristol over public property, but thought the riot has gone too far when private property, or, when their own wellbeing was on the line. The *Bristol Mercury* similarly shifted debates away from reform, in the hope of uniting the population, describing how the 'staunchest Tories' and the 'boldest reformers' will reconcile: 'A sense of common danger will make them friends.'<sup>63</sup> This verifies that the magistrates were of greater concern to the middle classes; the *Bristol Mercury* was more concerned about the immediate danger, that is, of the burning of private property, than point scoring on behalf of the reformers. It was this united front eventually made by the middle classes that fully expressed their *de facto* power as a group. Three thousand citizens eventually ended their passive protest to defend the city. This priority to defend private property expresses how the middle classes in Bristol did not deviate from existing historiographical expectations of affinity for economy.<sup>64</sup> Political protest persisted, but the values of individualism evidently remained.

To a lesser extent, the middle classes were motivated by reform. The issue of reform existed throughout middle class discourse on the Bristol Riots, but sources usually fell short of making the direct link between reform and inaction. Their support fell in line with historiographical expectations, given that middle class attitudes nationwide were typically pro-reform, as 'the "middle class" came to designate a middle way of moderate reform.'<sup>65</sup> The *Bristol Mercury* similarly cited the tangible link between the middle class and reform, 'the middle classes – are true to the cause which they consider to be peculiarly their own.'<sup>66</sup> Unsurprisingly, when the *Bristol Mercury* recounted the narrative of the riots, they observed that 'Here the most astounding cries were raised by the people... in derision of the Recorder, mixed with yells and groans' when the Town Clerk asked for calm 'with respect to reform.'<sup>67</sup> For the middle classes, reform was not the priority, but evidently its support exists within discourse. This contrasted to the direct and explicit attacks on the magistrates. Many histories of Bristol argue that

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<sup>62</sup> 'Major Digby Mackworth's personal Narrative of the late Riots'.

<sup>63</sup> 'Public Entry of Sir Charles Wetherell'.

<sup>64</sup> Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class*, p404.

<sup>65</sup> S. Gunn and R. Bell, *Middle Classes: Their Rise and Sprawl* (London, 2002), p12.

<sup>66</sup> 'Late Dreadful Riots at Bristol', *Bristol Mercury*, 8 November, 1831.

<sup>67</sup> 'Public Entry of Sir Charles Wetherell'.

reform was responsible for the riots; this dissertation challenges this argument. Buchanan cited the 'unreformed parliamentary representation' as responsible for the riots.<sup>68</sup> For Caple, 'Reform played a crucially important role in the riots of Bristol.'<sup>69</sup> Buchanan's and Caple's conclusions, like many other studies of Bristol, rely upon an exclusive focus on the rioters. This limited view is problematic. Middle class attitudes have been demonstrated to have been supportive of reform, but crucially, their absenteeism was motivated by a dislike of local government. Consequently, a more complex view can be imagined; the rioters were not the only actors involved in 1831, and the middle classes were more concerned about the local government in justifying their absenteeism.

Contrasting these middle class motivations with historiographical expectations also challenges existing arguments about middle class attitudes to authority. Arguably Bristol's relative economic decline throughout this period strengthened middle class anti-authoritarian thought. William Mackinnon, a gentleman raised in England, offered his introspective on the middle class, 'such a class is perhaps the greatest security for the preservation of civil liberty, and against the chance of a revolution, that can be found in any country.'<sup>70</sup> But in Bristol, only three years following, the middle classes took no effort to stop what has been considered a revolutionary act.<sup>71</sup> What this dissertation demonstrates is that middle class allegiance to the state was not immediately guaranteed, regardless of the potential danger to communal spaces. This challenges existing thought regarding the middle class: Wahrman discussed the formation of middle class values in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, of 'order, regularity and economy.'<sup>72</sup> While the ideal of economy was still maintained, given that aggression towards the magistrates stemmed from a mishandling of the economy, this desire for 'order' can be questioned. Repeatedly throughout the riots, the middle classes absconded order in favour of protesting against their political opponents. This challenge of Wahrman's ideas, validates that studies such as the middle class riots in Bristol, in addition to Morris' study of the middle classes in Leeds, have merit through localisation. They implicitly accept that the middle class experience was different in relation to their location, and hence vast

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<sup>68</sup> Buchanan, 'Brunel in Bristol', p221.

<sup>69</sup> Caple, *The Bristol Riots of 1831 and Social Reform in Britain*, p7.

<sup>70</sup> William Mackinnon, *On the Rise, Progress, and Present State of Public Opinion, in Great Britain, and Other Parts of the World*, (London, 1828), p6.

<sup>71</sup> G.D.H Cole and R. Postgate, *The Common People* (London, 1946), p248.

<sup>72</sup> Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class*, p404.

generalising studies lack accuracy. In this manner, this dissertation's study into the motivations behind middle class absenteeism have demonstrated unexpected anti-authoritarian behaviours from the middle class citizens in Bristol.

In summary, while there might have been small amounts of consideration for reform, the primary concern of the absentee middle classes was the dislike of the magistrates of the city. Hamburger has commented, 'the respectable persons, although innocent of violence, had vicarious gratification from seeing the mob at work.'<sup>73</sup> Although difficult to quantify, a consequence of respectable nature inherent within the middle classes, the evidence suggests they experienced pleasure as their political enemies struggled to keep control of the city. Angry at the 'disgraceful' decline of the city, and the 'venality' of their leadership, they absolved themselves in retribution towards the magistrates.<sup>74</sup> Typically middle class thought has been categorised as almost owning the reform bill, as it 'was placing the franchise as much as possible in the hands of the middle classes.'<sup>75</sup> However, this study has demonstrated that the people of Bristol placed local politics above their concern for a national reform bill. Their political discourse demonstrates that while reform was an active concern, the magistrates were the priority target of protest. Consequently the Bristol middle class identity was driven more by an affinity to the city, than by a concept of national participation. What is also observable is the shift from the middle classes to value anarchy over safety, in order to achieve their own political aims. The middle class 'permanent interest... to preserve the public tranquillity', was cast in doubt.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> J. Hamburger, *James Mill and the Art of Revolution* (London 1963), p175.

<sup>74</sup> H. Martineau, *The History of England during the thirty years' peace: 1816-1846* (London, 1849), p47.

<sup>75</sup> Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class*, p306.

<sup>76</sup> James Ridgway, *The Question of Reform Considered* (London, 1832), p11.

## Consequences

There were wider outcomes that derived from middle class absenteeism, most notably an element of class unity. Class conflict is particularly of interest to social historians during this period of early industrialisation and political reform. E.P Thompson unsurprisingly criticised the 'moral complacency' of arguing class conflict did not exist in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially when 'the actual movements of the working people' are ignored.<sup>77</sup> Wahrman discussed how class conflict became the tangible expression of political debate; the Tories supporting the landed property owners, the Whigs advocates of the middle class.<sup>78</sup> This dissertation will reframe class conflict discussions with a greater middle class focus. Despite some physical scuffles between the middle and lower classes, middle class absenteeism momentarily created a shared political power in Bristol. This unity was not borne from sympathy, but instead inspired by a common mistrust of the city's magistrates; the lower classes had suffered from poor living conditions, while the middle classes viewed them as corrupt and self-serving. The Bristol Riots as a representation of unity is enhanced when it is contrasted against similar contemporary disturbances; where the middle classes openly criticized the lower classes for causing a disturbance.

Class unity inspired and motivated middle class absenteeism during the Bristol Riots. Steve Poole, a local historian of Bristol, has argued that 19<sup>th</sup> century Bristol was a city fractured by class: 'Social unity was an increasingly untenable illusion.'<sup>79</sup> However, this existing argument might be challenged through the lens of middle class discourse. Although the geographical separation of class has already been raised as the middle classes escaped the slums of Bristol, their use of language implies a degree of unity, through expressions of sympathy towards the lower classes. W.H Somerton, editor for the *Bristol Mercury*, specifically complained that the wider anti-reform movement had created a class divide; they have 'severed the last link which connected the labouring classes with their superiors.'<sup>80</sup> This demonstrated an aspiration for

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<sup>77</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p196.

<sup>78</sup> Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class*, p404.

<sup>79</sup> Poole, 'To be a Bristolian', p84.

<sup>80</sup> William Henry Somerton, *A narrative of the Bristol riots, on the 29th, 30th, and 31st of October, 1831* (Bristol, 1831), p1.

a stronger relationship of unity between the lower and middle classes. Their desire for class unity transformed into expressions of relative sympathy towards the lower classes that formed the crowds during the riots. In spite of the city being left in ruins, the *Bristol Mercury* called for calm justice, 'we place faith in the discrimination and sound sense of the Bristol juries, that the guilty will alone suffer, and that malice and private spite will have no influence on their verdicts.'<sup>81</sup> Their dislike of 'malice' and 'private spite' was an appeal for leniency; a very difficult attitude to maintain with so many homes in ruin - in total forty-seven middle class owned properties were destroyed.<sup>82</sup> This presence of class unity runs persistently throughout the middle class experience in Bristol. Class unity existed before the riots, which informed their decision to not defend the city. Their absenteeism consequently reinforced their views, culminating in an expression of sympathy for the lower classes caught up in the riots.

This element of class unity can be sourced within the common complaint of mismanagement of the city. In the second chapter, it was argued that the middle classes' main motivation to not defend the city was to hinder the Corporation. Both lower classes and middle classes were unhappy at the magistrates; by uniting in their opposition, through absenteeism and rioting, arguably class unity can be expressed. As the *Bristol Mercury* explained, 'every class of society' considered the Corporation, 'unpopular.'<sup>83</sup> As the Corporation had overseen the general relative decline of Bristol, the poor were angry at their 'cramped and insanitary living conditions.'<sup>84</sup> Class unity was reinforced by a declaration amongst 'merchants, bankers, traders and other inhabitants' following the riot, that they were 'firmly convinced that all this might have been prevented, had proper precautions been adopted.'<sup>85</sup> This declaration verified the view that the middle classes were united against the magistracy of the city, rather than turning on the lower classes for the destruction they caused. They did not seek to lay blame on the rioters, but instead on the mismanagement of the city. In the future, they hoped

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<sup>81</sup> 'Late Dreadful Riots at Bristol'.

<sup>82</sup> William Henry Somerton, *A narrative of the Bristol riots, on the 29th, 30th, and 31st of October, 1831* (Bristol, 1831), p37.

<sup>83</sup> 'Editorial', *Bristol Mercury*, 15 Nov 1831.

<sup>84</sup> Poole, 'To be a Bristolian', p85.

<sup>85</sup> William Henry Somerton, *A narrative of the Bristol riots, on the 29th, 30th, and 31st of October, 1831* (Bristol, 1831), p38.



to 'restore future tranquillity.' For the middle classes, harmony was the end desire, not class conflict.

This outcome of class unity is strengthened when viewed within the context of wider civil disturbances, which demonstrate that the Bristol Riots were idiosyncratic in their class unity. Histories of Chartism, a contemporary lower class social movement that held vast demonstrations, have highlighted the middle class condemnation of the lower class movement. John Saville has commented that during the Chartist Kennington Common demonstration, 'there was no doubt on which side the middle classes would stand.'<sup>86</sup> This disunity is reinforced by *The Economist*, a mouthpiece for middle class financial interests in London. They warned of the consequences of letting the lower classes protest, 'public confidence weakened, public securities depressed, the more timid and prudent among merchants, dealers and employers', which they identified as ironic because 'the working population' were the most susceptible to 'commercial panics and alarms.'<sup>87</sup> This highlights the calculated hostility inherent within middle class thought in London. They blamed the lower classes for causing economic fragility, which would force negative consequences on the nation. This contrasted with the class unity expressed by absenteeism in Bristol, the middle classes there comparatively blamed the magistrates for corruption and poor economic conditions, rather than the lower classes. Therefore, the class unity inherent within Bristol's middle class absenteeism is heightened when compared to similar circumstances in London, where the middle classes blamed the lower classes for disrupting the city.

However, it is of interest to assess the alternate evidence that demonstrates that middle class absenteeism contributed to a deeper class divide in Bristol. Although there were physical brawls between the middle classes and the rioters, these can be deemed marginal in comparison to the feelings of the middle classes as a whole. There were some further violent clashes between bystanders and the rioters. Captain Lewis, 'a native of the city', had served as an officer of the army, where he retired with comfortable pay. His income and stature placed him within the middle class. Lewis was approached by a rioter, 'on raising my arm to keep him from closing on me... I received a severe blow on my temple from one of his

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<sup>86</sup> J. Saville, *1848: The British State and the Chartist Movement* (Cambridge, 1987) p113.

<sup>87</sup> 'Public Credit and Public Order, The Only Guarantees For Commercial Prosperity, Full Employment and Good Wages', *The Economist*, 8 Apr. 1848.

companions.<sup>88</sup> This highlights the tensions that existed between some of the rioters and the middle classes; overall scenes of unrest spilled over into physical fractions between citizens. This presentation of violence was both received and imposed by the middle classes. In cleaning out Queen Square, 'Mr. Claxton's Negro servant threw one of the thrives clean out of an upstairs window.'<sup>89</sup> The violence between middle and lower classes highlights that the overall chaos of the riots exacerbated tensions between some citizens. However, it is important to highlight the marginality of these events. Captain Lewis suffered from an attack but it appeared to be an exceptional case. There were three thousand middle class citizens that ended their passive protest and joined the military in keeping the streets safe. This physical move in absence of a police force was likely to cause a few scuffles. The sheer size of the riots explains the sparse examples of violence. Therefore, although class conflict might be interpreted when the middle classes broke their passive protest, any physical scuffles seem to be marginal cases. It remains outweighed by their expressed sympathy for the rioters and dislike of the magistrates.

Overall, middle class absenteeism in the Bristol Riots contributes to existing studies of class conflict, demonstrating that class unity was present in Bristol in 1831. This class unity was motivated by a common political enemy, the Bristol magistrates, who were viewed by middle and lower classes as corrupt. Their sympathies were expressed in middle class discourse, contrast with a lack of sympathy from the London middle class during the Kennington Common demonstration to emphasise the uniqueness of this behaviour. To stimulate debate, alternative evidence can be raised which highlighted class conflict, but this can be seen as a marginal experience; small scuffles were trivial in comparison to the size of the crowd.

While this study contributes evidence towards a shared class experience, it also demonstrates that different cities had differing experiences of class relations. This opposes existing interpretations of class unity, which tend to use singular explanations of Britain's experience. Social historians such as E.P Thompson have supposedly focused on 'the working class in England', but in reality they dwell on the vast industrial cities of Manchester and Leeds – locations with a defined relationship between proletariat and bourgeoisie. Similarly,

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<sup>88</sup> William Henry Somerton, *A narrative of the Bristol riots, on the 29th, 30th, and 31st of October, 1831* (Bristol, 1831), p42.

<sup>89</sup> Latimer, *Annals of Bristol*, p170.

Wahrman's comments derived from studies into the more elite political spheres of England. Once again, the absenteeism during the Bristol Riots challenges existing historiography, by demonstrating a unique divergence from the typical narrative between the powerful and the powerless. Bristol's resistance to this narrative has been proposed from a common dislike of the local government. Though equally, the distinct lack of a manufacturing industry, which arguably caused Thompson to shy from Bristol's history to begin with, frustrates the existing expectations of 'lower class' and 'middle class' behaviour.

## Conclusion

The Bristol Riots demonstrated the middle classes' potential for abandoning the safety of the community in favour of personal grievances and political protest. This dissertation has explored the expressions of this absenteeism, revealing that the middle classes formed a united front in ignoring calls to defend the city. The specific motivations underlying their absenteeism have been explained; to the largest extent, the middle classes justified their actions through their anger towards Bristol's magistrates as a 'self-selecting, secretive, inaccessible and extravagant Corporation.'<sup>90</sup> The wider implications for this inaction were then investigated, with attention drawn to the class unity created as a result of the common dislike of the magistrates.

After the riots, chroniclers immediately searched for a mystical scapegoat. They 'gave leading roles to outsiders; not only colliers but "agents", "emissaries" and "tall men in long cloaks and fur caps".'<sup>91</sup> This explicitly denied agency from Bristol's lower classes, and perhaps influenced the wider rejection of deeper meaning from the Bristol Riots from working classes histories. Through studying the inaction of the middle classes, the source of Bristol's civil disruption was revealed to be the Bristol magistrates. A stronger relationship between citizenry and local government most likely would have caused the riots to have never occurred, as 'their own

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<sup>90</sup> Poole, 'To be a Bristolian', p76.

<sup>91</sup> Poole, 'To be a Bristolian', p86.

mistaken policy' was 'incapable of meeting the emergency.'<sup>92</sup> Through this study of the middle class, the Bristol Riots can be reevaluated away from a spontaneous, primal desire for destruction, and towards a more complex example of citizen protest, motivated by a perceivably cowardly, indecisive local government.

With this lack of agency in mind, it is important that future study of the Bristol Riots makes a conscious link between the rioters and social history. Too much of existing study has operated within a social vacuum, linking only the riots to a wider concern of contemporary political reform. While this is important, it is equally important to ask the question of what the Bristol Riots can contribute to the histories of social relations in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This dissertation has sought to do this by making a link between the Bristol Riots and wider middle class identities and beliefs, but also by devoting significant study into asking what the Bristol Riots can contribute to studies of class relations. R.J Morris used Leeds as a 'social history laboratory within which the nineteenth-century British middle class could be traced.'<sup>93</sup> Future study should be expected to treat the Bristol Riots in the same way. More specifically to this dissertation, future study should consider the opponents to middle class absenteeism. Francis Jarman, a Londoner, released a pamphlet following the riots that criticised the actions of the middle classes. For Jarman, they wanted to 'murder' Wetherell and that they 'resembled', 'French Jacobins.'<sup>94</sup> This dissertation needed to be concise; the non-local, contemporary critics of Bristol remain unexplored.

Bristol Riot histories more recently have entered contemporary historical themes; Steve Poole approached the Bristol Riots in an attempt to chart spatial history; commenting on 'Queen Square's projection as a popular political forum.'<sup>95</sup> This demonstrates that in spite of a lack of recent study, the Bristol Riots can remain relevant.

While the idea of the Bristol Riots as a social history laboratory has been attractive, some limitations within this dissertation need to be highlighted. The middle classes have been treated as heterogeneous in their beliefs and motivations. Morris would have found particular

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<sup>92</sup> 'Public Entry of Sir Charles Wetherell'.

<sup>93</sup> T. Koditschek, 'Review of Class, Sect, and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class: Leeds, 1820-1850', *The American Historical Review*, 96, 5, (Dec. 1991), p1540-1541.

<sup>94</sup> Francis Jarman, *A hint from Bristol, or, what should honest men do now? Containing some remarks on Reform, the King's will, and Political Unions* (London, 1831), p13.

<sup>95</sup> S. Poole, *Till our liberties be secure': Popular Sovereignty and Public Space in Bristol, 1780-1850* (Cambridge, 1999), p49.

issue with this, as he split the middle classes into a 'bourgeoisie – petite bourgeoisie division.'<sup>96</sup> This was not problematic for assessments of the *actions* of the middle class during the first chapter, as there was sufficient evidence to demonstrate they physically did not collectively defend the city. However, conclusions that concerned the beliefs of the entire middle class in Bristol in the second and third chapters have been based on deduction. Most sources have operated within the realm of 'public opinion'; although sources might be united, for example in pointing blame at the magistrates, this dissertation cannot fully confirm that it was the opinion by every middle class Bristolian. Naturally as a result of the respectable nature of the middle classes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, every historical study that examines the middle classes in a similar way will inherently have this limitation. To mitigate this issue, in addition to raising the physical inaction of the middle classes, a breath of sources, sometimes from private spheres, have been used.

This dissertation has challenged existing expectations of early 19<sup>th</sup> century middle class citizens in England; demonstrating that they were not consistently the authoritarian conservatives that Morris and Wahrman imagined. In Bristol, middle class absenteeism formed a political protest.

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<sup>96</sup> Morris, *Class, Sect and Party*, p11.

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