

*The Woolfes of Wine Street: Middling Culture and Community in Bristol, 1600–1620**

Margaret Thomas, widow and inn manager, married the cutler Nicholas Woolfe in Bristol in 1605. For the next decade, the Woolfes oversaw the earliest years of the longest-running theatre in early modern England outside of London—the Wine Street tenement ‘comonlie called the playehouse’.¹ The immediate neighbourhood included an array of tradesmen with links to the city’s Common Council; the shops of the prominent local goldsmiths Humphrey Clovell and Richard Harsell; recently built standings for goldsmiths from all over the country; a bookseller and instrument-maker; and two inns that acted as hubs both for wider civic entertainment and official parish recreation. This micro-historical study takes the Woolfes and their neighbours as representatives of a particular urban ‘middling sort’: the large and diverse group of people who sat, financially and socially, between wage labourers and the gentry or landed elite; those citizens who worked for their living but who held economic, political and cultural capital within their community. The burgeoning of this social group from the 1550s onwards increased social mobility, helped create a boom in consumer goods, generated new artistic forms and produced some of the most famous names of the English Renaissance, from William Shakespeare to Nicholas Hilliard. Yet we have limited knowledge of the way in which the varied cultural experiences of middling individuals united the different aspects of their lives, from profession or trade to public office.²

This article seeks to understand more about the everyday lives of this crucial demographic through a holistic micro-history of one particular

* The research underpinning this article emerged from my work for the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project, ‘The Cultural Lives of the Middling Sort: Writing and Material Culture, 1560–1660’. I am grateful to the project team for their help, support and feedback.

1. Kew, The National Archives [hereafter TNA], C 2/328/28.

2. The UK Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project ‘The Cultural Lives of the Middling Sort: Writing and Material Culture, 1550–1650’ (PI: Catherine Richardson, CIs: Tara Hamling and Graeme Earl) explores precisely this question, looking at case-studies of people and communities in English towns and cities in a crucial period that falls earlier than the years spanned by most of the literature on the ‘middling sort’; most studies to date recognise the earlier emergence of this social group but focus on middling activity from around the 1660s onwards, and even Henry French’s study, beginning in 1600, sources its chief evidence (particularly for social and cultural behaviour) from the latter part of the seventeenth century: P. Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London, 1660–1730* (London, 1989); H. French, *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England* (Oxford, 2007); M. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (London, 1996); C. Shammass, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford, 1990); L. Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660–1760* (London, 1998). See the project website (2019–), at <https://www.middlingculture.com>.

community, grounding its members in a specific place and time and providing an earlier case-study than is generally available in the existing literature. It demonstrates how middling status was complicated and defined by neighbourhood, marriage, widowhood and inheritance. More widely, the group of Wine Street tradespeople, artisans and proprietors examined in this article lived in a location that was in large part distinguished by forms of 'play'—the elastic early modern term used here to refer to various forms of commercial recreation, from drama to inn-going to luxury shopping. I establish here how, in such urban environments, middling status can be distinctly recognised in the imbrication of play with cultural and commercial identity.

I begin by surveying Bristol's Wine Street and its inhabitants and contexts. This section provides a historiographical review of the category 'middling' and articulates its usefulness in describing prominent residents on such a culturally vibrant urban street. I also set out here how 'play' is a useful methodological lens when approaching non-elite urban activity, drawing on primary sources from Bristol and building on other case-studies of early modern performance, creativity and social status. The notion of commercial middling play leads into the article's second section, which centres on the Wine Street playhouse. I revise our understanding of the venue and its proprietors, offer new evidence for its physical structure, and characterise playhouse-management as a paradigm of urban middling activity. In doing so, I look beyond what has to date been a sole focus on the playhouse's male proprietor, Nicholas Woolfe, in order to approach the venue with his wife and co-proprietor, Margaret, and his son, Miles, in mind. When read together, the Woolfe family's probate material, attendant court cases, and the playhouse's Wine Street contexts present a picture of commercial play that is more complex than mere business opportunity. This section accordingly argues for a distinctly middling appetite for combining commercial and political interests with ostensibly 'elite' musical knowledge, family legacy, civic and community benefaction, and a vaguer but crucial 'artistic' conviction. I also show how women were key actors and leaders in such middling cultural activity, while recognising the gender dynamics—exemplified by the Woolfe marriage—that made their social status and autonomy precarious.

In the article's third section, I extend this notion of middling play to the playhouse's neighbourhood, focusing on inns and goldsmiths' shops. Both these locations, as the case-studies here reveal, linked leisure and cultural activity with social and political advancement. This section presents a snapshot of an urban middling network that was to an extent dependent on local leisure sites, and shows how the composition of a particular street could support middling individuals in negotiating parish and civic hierarchies. What emerges from this micro-study of Wine Street is a discrete urban locale, related to but distinct from the parish, that was especially well placed to facilitate social and economic

opportunities and creative development. The fourth and final section reflects on these findings and considers the broader lessons that can be learned from this case-study, underscoring the value of play to social status and identity across the early modern period.

I

In many ways, the social opportunities available to the residents of Wine Street were thanks to its location at the heart of Bristol, a rapidly expanding port settlement that was to replace Norwich as England's second city in around 1700.³ In 1600, the population is estimated to have been around 12,000.⁴ This was considerably less than London's 200,000 inhabitants but equal to York's and only 3,000 shy of Norwich. Bristol is therefore a key site for exploring urban development (and playhouses) outside of the capital. The city was also characterised by a substantial number of freemen, which Jonathan Barry estimates at about 20 per cent of the population, or half of Bristol's adult men.⁵ Indeed, while Bristol was ruled by an oligarchical elite of, for the most part, merchants, Barry emphasises the 'large middle ground of masters, apprentices, and journeymen' who, despite occupying lower offices, formed a substantial and politically important demographic.⁶ Although the city was largely defined by the authority of what David Harris Sacks terms its 'merchant capital', which developed rapidly during the early modern period and was central to the specific developments of its 'social and political order', the burgeoning of other forms of commerce and wealth creation also gave power to those who sat beneath them in the social and financial hierarchy.⁷ Moreover, Bristol's enactment of Poor Laws and their consequences resulted in clear divisions of social status related to taxation; an order from June 1605 used subsidy records to make the less well-off—those who fell below subsidy assessment—undertake manual labour within their parishes to mend the highways (and so actively and visibly 'perform' their lower status).⁸ This encoding of status emphasised the distance of those with middling means from those who were obliged to perform this duty.

Barry's extensive work on Bristol has shown how these non-merchant-elite middling individuals were sustained and commissioned

3. J. Barry, 'Bristol Pride: Civic Identity in Bristol, c.1640–1775', in M. Dresser and P. Ollerenshaw, eds, *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Tiverton, 1996), p. 25.

4. E.A. Wrigley, 'Urban Growth and Agricultural Change: England and the Continent in the Early Modern Period', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, xv (1985), p. 686.

5. J. Barry, 'Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century Bristol', in B. Reay, ed., *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (Beckenham, 1985), p. 59.

6. Barry, 'Popular Culture', p. 61.

7. D. Harris Sacks, *The Widening Gate: Bristol and the Atlantic Economy, 1450–1700* (Oxford, 1991), pp. xvi, 84.

8. Bristol Archives, C/CCP/1, p. 96. Nicholas Woolfe's subsidy assessment from 1602 puts him firmly within the tax-paying bracket: TNA, E 115/407/130.

by the city's wealthy patrons: 'the merchant elite of 1600 were investing heavily in rich furnishings and plate, and they were more likely than others to possess pictures and musical instruments'. Moreover, 'many of these cultural items were produced by local craftsmen, and reflected local tastes and methods'.⁹ The residents of Wine Street were therefore involved in two senses in the aesthetic developments of Bristol's material culture: they were the local craftsmen identified here by Barry—cutlers, instrument-makers and goldsmiths—but, as this article demonstrates, these non-elite figures also owned and engaged with pictures and musical instruments. Reading Wine Street as a coherent middling community can, in line with Barry's approach, undermine assumptions about exclusively 'elite' engagement with such cultural items.

The city's architecture, like its social fabric, was also shifting. Its centre was increasingly subdivided into small tenancies (with a number of leases held by the corporation), and houses had undergone major structural shifts—by about 1600, 'investment had ... been made in the building of houses of three storeys across the city'.¹⁰ In turn, some central areas of the city underwent a process of 'gentrification'; by the mid-sixteenth century, when 'overseas merchants, rich retailers such as grocers, mercers, and drapers, and small shopkeepers such as shoemakers and tailors dominated the city's center', these larger two- or three-storey shops in central Bristol were inhabited largely by those who 'were not poor, but nor were they members of the ruling or merchant elite'.¹¹ The combination of administrative reform, increasingly visible degrees of economic status, and architectural and residential shifts demarcates an era of major social change in the century following 1550 and marks an especially fertile period for Bristol's middling inhabitants.

As with any micro-historical study, however, there are gaps in the evidence that make it impossible to comprehend entirely the cultural experiences of the individuals in focus. We do not know, for instance, the titles of the books that these goldsmiths, cutlers or instrument-makers owned or read, the exact nature of the plays that were on offer in Wine Street, or the materials that any of these residents may have written themselves: no account book, broadside or pamphlet survives that can be tied to any of these individuals. Barry offers some context, however, for the literary experiences of these men and women; he observes that the book trade grew in size from the 1630s but that throughout the whole period Bristol's inhabitants could buy printed matter from 'petty chapmen and hawkers in the streets, from grocers and other shopkeepers, and from the London booksellers who had stalls at the two annual fairs'.¹² In the 1620s, one Roger Royden, a

9. Barry, 'Popular Culture', p. 77.

10. R. Leech, *The Town House in Medieval and Early Modern Bristol* (Swindon, 2014), p. 28.

11. Sacks, *Widening Gate*, p. 149; Leech, *Town House*, p. 126.

12. Barry, 'Popular Culture', pp. 65, 68.

bookseller, was active on Wine Street.¹³ I am less confident in Barry's suggestion that shorter material would have been more appropriate for these shopkeepers, who 'could hardly concentrate on long and complex arguments' due to their long and busy hours.¹⁴ Indeed, Bristol founded a library in 1613 aimed precisely at this demographic, with books donated by the Bristol-born bishop Tobias Mathew 'for the use of the Aldermen and Shop-keepers'.¹⁵ Later catalogue work shows that this collection included 'a similar selection of books to those required by the students at Christ Church [Oxford]: a mixture of Church history, patristic texts, medieval writings, and classical works' alongside bibles, histories, polemics and sermons.¹⁶ We must therefore keep open the possibility that, on top of the rich network of play discussed here, there were abundant opportunities for many of these individuals to encounter a whole range of texts. More specifically, thanks to a handful of inventories and wills, to a variety of court cases (local and national), and to civic, guild and parish records, traces—and sometimes telling anecdotes—about those in the neighbourhood survive. The element of chance in the survival of cultural details—particularly those that record 'playing' activities such as performance, carding or bowling—can easily skew or limit our appreciation of individuals and communities. Yet there are, thankfully, an array (if by no means a thorough list) of such details for the area in question, which enable concrete connections between spaces and people and encourage informed speculation about what it was like to live, work and play (sometimes all at once) on early seventeenth-century Wine Street. In addition to textual material, the houses including and surrounding Nicholas Woolfe's playhouse can be understood in some depth thanks to surviving leases and plans and to Roger Leech's meticulous reconstruction work.¹⁷

Using this material, it is possible to focus in on the sites central to this study: numbers 6, 7, and 8 Christ Church–Wine Street—three properties that extended from the south wall of Christ Church, which stood at the corner of Wine Street and Broad Street—the meal market at the end of the street, and the surrounding inns. The three numbered tenements were owned and leased out by the church, and in the years covered by this article, Number 6 was occupied by the goldsmith Richard Harsell (from at least 1583), and then by his son Edward, Number 7 by the cutler Nicholas Woolfe (also from at least 1583), and Number 8 by the goldsmith Humphrey Clovell (from at least 1589). Numbers 6 and 7 Wine Street are recorded in a sale of 1588/9 to the feoffees of Christ

13. Bristol Archives, PXch/ChW/1/b, pp. 203, 209, 223.

14. Barry, 'Popular Culture', pp. 65, 68.

15. E.R. Norris Mathews, *Early Printed Books and Manuscripts in the City Reference Library, Bristol* (Bristol, 1899), p. viii.

16. R. Oates, *Moderate Radical: Tobie Matthew and the English Reformation* (Oxford, 2018), p. 175.

17. Leech, *Town House*.

Church, William Yate, Humphrey Andrewes and Thomas Faukett, in an indenture that describes the two properties—‘those two Tenementes with Thappurtenances scytuate lyinge and beinge in the said Cytye of Bristoll in a streate there Comenly called Winestreate’—and names the occupants: ‘Richard Harssell gouldsmythe and Nicholas wolfe Cutler’.¹⁸ These buildings, sitting at the entrance to Wine Street, were connected through their occupants to surrounding commercial institutions such as the White Hart inn and the meal market, with its annual goldsmiths’ standings. Indeed, the neighbours who occupied and surrounded these three key properties included the abovementioned Humphrey Clovell and Richard and Edward Harsell, prominent goldsmiths whose goods epitomised south-west metalwork of the period; Henry Yate, a soapmaker who went on to become mayor of Bristol (1631) and who bought and leased swathes of property across the city centre and at one point had charge of the playhouse; and Isacke Bryan, an instrument-maker whose family were resident in the vicinity of Wine Street’s local parish church, Christ Church.

As indicated above, these individuals fall into the broad category of the ‘middling sort’—a term employed by a historiographical tradition that seeks to understand the changes experienced by those above dependent status but ‘beneath’ (in contemporary expression) the landed gentry or titled nobility.¹⁹ Leech’s description of steadily renovated Wine Street houses and shops and the greater number of possessions detectable in inventories of their residents’ belongings, in combination with the evidence introduced in the rest of this study, place the Woolfes and their neighbours squarely in this category. They were members of a group that experienced across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries an ‘improvement in living standards’, a (gradual) growth in consumption alongside an ‘increased emphasis on domesticity and the adoption of more genteel lifestyles’, and a material culture ‘richer in every sense than their social inferiors’ with concomitant ‘material and aesthetic domestic distinctions’.²⁰ All the individuals in Wine Street under discussion here—chiefly in the middle to later stages of

18. Bristol Archives, J/OR/1/1, fo. 506.

19. Both French and Craig Muldrew have noted that the term is rarely employed by the individuals supposed to fall within this class during the period, and indeed its use outside of prescriptive literature is rare. Early modern classifications are perhaps more accurately identified by David Cressy as ‘gentry, professions, trades, yeomen, husbandmen, and dependent people’. These rankings do not preclude the existence of umbrella groupings, and those who sit in the middle of Cressy’s list (professions, trades, yeomen) can be said sometimes to coalesce into a discrete and active middling group. D. Cressy, *Society and Culture in Early Modern England* (London, 2003), pp. 35, 42. Cressy also points out that other crucial distinctions rested equally upon age and marital status.

20. K. Wrightson and D. Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525–1700* (New York, 1979), p. 37; M. Overton, J. Whittle, D. Dean and A. Hann, *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600–1750* (London, 2004), p. 80; T. Hamling and C. Richardson, *A Day at Home in Early Modern England: Material Culture and Domestic Life, 1500–1700* (New Haven, CT, 2017), p. 11.

their lives—needed to work to uphold and develop such standards of living and had to engage actively in their communities both socially and politically. They therefore, as we shall see, took minor roles in public office, such as churchwarden, or had responsibilities within the city corporation.²¹ Wine Street residents were thus well placed within a network of Bristol citizens of moderate to high moral and political standing; they exemplify Muldrew's conception of the early modern middling sort as those for whom such status was a 'process of continual achievement' through which individuals strove continuously to 'maintain access to the circulation of credit'.²²

The properties 6, 7 and 8 Christ Church–Wine Street were also focal spaces that conjoined public institutions and professional and domestic lives. The Woolfe playhouse was part of a larger tenement that was rented out for accommodation and other purposes to a range of individuals, and the Woolfes themselves lived (presumably in Nicholas's cutler 'shop') on the same street.²³ Inventories from Wine Street's goldsmiths demonstrate that they too lived and worked, as was usual for the period, in the same property.²⁴ The neighbourhood therefore encapsulates not only the social aspects of middling identity but its imbrication with household space. Indeed, Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson have crucially noted how domestic surroundings shaped economic and social status, pointing to a middling demographic marked out by 'the quality of their decorated and furnished spaces ... the number of goods they owned and the diversity of their material and form'.²⁵ The information on Wine Street brought together in this article, from household inventories to inn receipts, helps us to understand how the community-facing expressions of Bristolian middling activity combined with the lives of working households in the city—in both their characteristically 'multifunctional houses and spaces' and the concomitant 'penetration of work and leisure, domestic and commercial production' described by Hamling and Richardson.²⁶

These broader social changes were evident among the middling inhabitants of Wine Street from the mid- to the late sixteenth century, and, as I have noted, they thus represent an earlier example of middlingness than those found in many studies, which concentrate on the mid-seventeenth century and later.²⁷ Wine Street also allows us to

21. This is a distinction important to French: *Middle Sort of People*, p. 170.

22. C. Muldrew, 'Class and Credit: Social Identity, Wealth, and the Life Course in Early Modern England', in H. French and J. Barry, eds, *Identity and Agency in England, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke, 2004), p. 149; C. Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 1998), p. 151.

23. See text and notes at nn. 45–7 below.

24. *Bristol Probate Inventories, 1: 1542–1650*, ed. E. George and S. George, with assistance from P. Fleming, Bristol Record Society, liv (2002), pp. 62–4.

25. Hamling and Richardson, *A Day at Home*, p. 268.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

27. See n. 2 above.

examine the growth of commercial activity among this newly better-off sort of people. Carole Shammas has noted that ‘there seems to have been a sharp rise in the real amount of wealth put into consumer goods between the end of the sixteenth century and the later seventeenth century’, and Lorna Weatherill observes that, as a result of this increase, ‘some in the middle ranks had distinctly consumerist tastes and a need to assert their position in society in subtle ways’.²⁸ Wine Street’s residents and visitors provide an early example of the way in which commercial districts delimited and shaped acts of consumption and spending. The location’s attractiveness to visitors interested in such luxury goods as metalwork places it within the long history of shopping laid out by Bruno Blondé, Peter Stabel, Jon Stobart and Ilja Van Damme, acknowledging the complexity of retail spaces and the growth of ‘specialist retail areas’ in pre-modern towns.²⁹ In Wine Street, the sale of high-end or luxury items was spatially related to a burgeoning commercialised ‘play’ industry selling services, and thus provides valuable insight into the consumer tastes of those in the middle ranks of Elizabethan and Jacobean society.³⁰

This study of Bristol’s Wine Street thus moves away from the ‘middling’ village life studied by Keith Wrightson and David Levine, and from Henry French’s predominantly agrarian-adjacent townspeople. It speaks more closely to Phil Withington’s narrative about those urban environments that developed out of the ‘material opportunities of dissolution’ and steady ‘cultural refashioning’—of manners, taste, behaviour, and political and legal structures—that would eventually start to distinguish a prosperous and ‘polite’ middling sort from an ostensibly lower, ‘plebeian’ culture.³¹ Peter Earle’s observations about post-1660 London therefore apply equally well to the vibrant trading economy of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Bristol: ‘the growth of towns ... the expansion of inland and foreign trade, of industry and

28. Shammas, *Pre-industrial Consumer*, p. 112; Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture*, p. 14. Overton, Whittle, Dean, and Hann, *Production and Consumption*, have provided more texture to such accounts in their study of probate inventories in Kent and Cornwall; their research demonstrates the complex relationship between wealth and consumption of material goods, underscoring the increase in middling acquisitiveness across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and its relation to local economies, regional fashions, and the introduction of new goods.

29. B. Blondé, P. Stabel, J. Stobart and I. Van Damme, ‘Retail Circuits and Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: An Introduction,’ in *id.*, eds, *Buyers and Sellers: Retail Circuits and Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout, 2006), p. 17.

30. See also K. Newman, *Cultural Capitals: Early Modern London and Paris* (Princeton, NJ, 2009).

31. P. Withington, ‘Intoxicants and the Early Modern City’, in S. Hindle, A. Shepard and J. Walter, eds, *Remaking English Society: Social Relations and Social Change in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 253. Debate remains about the extent to which urban centres witnessed a shift in social relations and whether the so-called ‘middle’ developed in the early modern period or was already present in medieval towns and cities. Sylvia Thrupp explored the social mobility and company identities of merchants in fourteenth-century London in this regard in *The Merchant Class of Medieval London, 1300–1500* (London, 1948). Anthony Pollard suggests that the *mediocres* of fifteenth-century towns had their own distinct cultural identities in his *Late Medieval England, 1499–1509* (London, 2000).

the professions, had rapidly increased the numbers of those belonging to the urban middle station and made a nonsense of systems of social classifications based on a purely rural and agricultural society'.³²

An alternative term to fit the individuals under discussion here would be Richard Grassby's label, 'business community', drawn from a study in which he likewise links economic examination with social and cultural analysis in exploring non-aristocratic groupings. However, alongside the possible anachronism in the term, Grassby's definition of 'business' excludes the non-elite commerce that took place at Wine Street: he defines 'business' people as those who traded goods 'full-time,' held £500 equity, and possessed £1,000 working capital.³³ In contrast, an approach to these 'middling' individuals that acknowledges their specific urban environments is significantly more appropriate for exploring social status in early seventeenth-century Bristol, for four chief reasons. Firstly, it includes those, like the Woolfes, who represent a distinctly different form of business management, one not in goods but in 'play' (or, more broadly, the service industry). Secondly, it acknowledges that ownership and status were manifested in ways other than equity and capital—running key community spaces such as inns, managing innovative industries such as playhouses, or owning hubs of cultural and economic exchange such as goldsmiths' shops. In the third place, it recognises multiple occupations held simultaneously (being a practising cutler and running a playhouse), and, finally, it accommodates female business management and middling status by looking outside formal ownership or capital assessment. This approach also helps push back against Grassby's suggestion that those in the business community merely mimicked the cultural interests of aristocrats above them in the social order, rather than developing their own aesthetic identities—a viewpoint roundly rejected by the cultural analysis here and by other recent studies.³⁴ Wine Street's early seventeenth-century playhouse and its surroundings therefore offer a chance to approach both the socio-economic and the cultural activities of this community of men and women on their own terms and to consider their status through their lived experience.

Play is therefore central to the sections that follow, which demonstrate how commercial aesthetic pursuits shaped middling identities. Jessica Winston has surveyed the significance of 'literary play' for London lawyers in the mid-sixteenth century, arguing that it was 'not simply an aspect of social life' but a form that 'helped to raise the status of early modern legal men and the common law'.³⁵ I follow Winston's

32. Earle, *Making of the English Middle Class*, p. 4.

33. R. Grassby, *The Business Community of Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 10–11.

34. See, in particular, M. Galinou, 'Introduction', in ead., ed., *City Merchants and the Arts, 1670–1720* (London, 2004), and Hamling and Richardson, *A Day at Home*.

35. J. Winston, *Lawyers at Play: Literature, Law, and Politics at the Early Modern Inns of Court, 1558–1581* (Oxford, 2016), p. 12.

sense of the enabling social possibilities of play, even as I move away from literary specificity and the 'culture of letters' associated with the legal inns to accommodate a broader notion of play, as it applies to a group of non-'professionals': to a community of cutlers, goldsmiths, soapmakers, instrument-makers, and widows.³⁶ These individuals were bound not by institution, occupation or literary culture but by proximity and shared commercial sites, by the sense of 'play' *off* rather than on the page. Jennifer Bishop's and Mireille Galinou's work therefore offers parallels, thanks to their understanding of how the artistic and literary activities of traders and merchants were central to social and political identities.³⁷ Their studies have shown how staged drama and humanist forms of leisure linked trade with 'legitimate political action' and wider questions of social identity in a developing urban environment.³⁸ 'Play' in its broadest sense, as the remainder of the article demonstrates, underwrote middling identity and activity in the fast-developing locale of Wine Street.

II

Playhouse proprietors who were actively engaged in their civic communities exemplify how middling commercial activity was imbricated in the type of wider cultural identity-making recognised by Winston, Bishop and Galinou. For instance, George Tadlowe, a London haberdasher in the 1540s, was assessed only at a moderate £30 and £40 in goods in his lifetime,³⁹ yet Bishop has demonstrated how this man was prominently involved in 'the institutions of civic government' while also engaging widely with London's literary scene. Indeed, Bishop's exploration of Tadlowe locates his 'economic, social, and political status' in wider engagement with humanist activities and his work as a 'cultural patron' (culminating in his sponsorship of Thomas More's *Utopia* in its English translation).⁴⁰ Like Nicholas Woolfe, Tadlowe hosted plays in his dwelling house and tavern, the White Horse, which David Kathman identifies as an early example of a venue for commercial playing in England.⁴¹ He might therefore be styled as a Haberdasher at Play, in Winston's formulation, uniting the various elements of his business life, civic office and cultural experimentation in service of his political and social career. Although less prominent in the literary and political records, Woolfe is a strikingly

36. For the 'culture of letters', see Winston, *Lawyers at Play*, p. 18.

37. J. Bishop, 'Utopia and Civic Politics in Mid-Sixteenth-Century London', *Historical Journal*, liv (2011), pp. 933–53. M. Galinou, 'Introduction', in ead., ed., *City Merchants and the Arts, 1670–1720* (London, 2004).

38. Bishop, 'Utopia and Civic Politics', p. 950.

39. D. Kathman, 'The Rise of Commercial Playing in 1540s London', *Early Theatre*, xii (2009), pp. 15–38.

40. Bishop, 'Utopia and Civic Politics', pp. 938, 940.

41. Kathman, 'Rise of Commercial Playing'.

similar figure, and thanks to comparatively detailed information about his life (in large part due to his surviving will) and his property on Wine Street, we can understand in greater depth how and why a man of moderate means might invest in dramatic playing: not solely due to business opportunism but from a combination of commercial interest, charitable and community engagement, social and political networking, and musical or artistic interest.

Studies of the Woolfes' Wine Street playhouse have fallen almost entirely under the purview of theatre history, and even there it has had only cursory attention. Since the publication of the few records testifying to its existence in Mark Pilkington's Bristol edition of *Records of Early Modern Drama*, Siobhan Keenan has completed an up-to-date summary of the establishment and its possible performances, while Sarah Elizabeth Lowe's doctoral research examined it in the context of players and performances in the early modern south-west.⁴² John Astington has begun to point to the wider commercial vibrancy of Wine Street in an article that looks at 'feats of activity' (a phrase used for tumbling or acrobatics) performed in a venue known as the Rose in the 1630s;⁴³ but no such contextual work has yet been done for the period when Bristol's earliest known playhouse was in operation.

What we do know is that in 1589 Nicholas Woolfe requested permission to enlarge his tenement in Wine Street, and that by 1604/5 a property belonging to Nicholas Woolfe had begun to host players performing for a paying public, putting up 'certaine Comedyantes whome he suffered to act and playe within the said Roomes' for which both he and his wife Margaret 'tooke moneye'—all in the tenement identified by a complainant in a legal quarrel, Richard Cooke, as a 'Common Inne'.⁴⁴ The precise location of this property remains up for debate. Margaret Woolfe testified that her husband held only his dwelling place and 'one house with thappurtenances in wyne streete within the same citie comonlie called the playehouse'.⁴⁵ Her testimony distinguishes the playhouse from the known, named inns of the area, and she also does not 'name' the place by a sign or any other distinguishing title or feature beyond 'playehouse'; her phrasing indicates that the venue was popularly known by this word—which would be in keeping with Laurie Johnson's speculation about the naming of the Newington Butts

42. *Records of Early English Drama* [hereafter REED]: *Bristol*, ed. M.C. Pilkington (Toronto, ON, 1997); S. Keenan, *Travelling Players in Shakespeare's England* (Basingstoke, 2002); S.E. Lowe, 'Players and Performances in Early Modern Gloucester, Tewkesbury, and Bristol' (Univ. of Gloucestershire Ph.D. thesis, 2008).

43. J. Astington, 'Trade, Taverns, and Touring Players in Seventeenth-Century Bristol', *Theatre Notebook*, lxxi (2017), pp. 161–8.

44. Leech, *Town House*, p. 172; TNA, REQ 2/296/80. Cooke complained about a break in the terms of his tenancy and claimed that, Cooke having moved out, Woolfe rented out and used his rooms and neglected to return Cooke's money. TNA, C 2/328/28.

45. TNA, C 2/328/28. See the final section of this article for more details on Woolfe's two rented Wine Street properties (one from Christ Church and one from the Bristol Corporation).

theatre in Southwark.⁴⁶ I thus concur with Keenan, Leech and Lowe in concluding that the likeliest spot is the tenement at number 7 Christ Church–Wine Street, recorded as being in Woolfe’s hands, the lease of which permitted him to ‘to New buylde the said Tenemente and everye parte thereof with thappurtenances within foure yeares nexte ensuinge the date hereof’, and included permission for ‘the rearinge up higher’ of the tenement.⁴⁷

Keenan is cautious about the exact plans or description of the playhouse, but by drawing on the details provided in the relevant legal cases, alongside comparable London examples, we can arrive at a plausible understanding of the space’s functions. Keenan points to the considerable ‘number of chambers’ described in testimony, while noting that the description of the tenement as a ‘dwelling house’ in later leases ‘does not preclude its earlier use as the playhouse’.⁴⁸ Indeed, the very term playhouse indicates not only the flexibility of the term ‘play’ but of the term ‘house’, which held a more capacious definition than ‘a freestanding structure’. Andy Kesson observes how “‘house” could refer to a space, indoor or outdoor, and not simply an individual building’.⁴⁹ As such, ‘playhouse’ could well have indicated a particular room or rooms within Woolfe’s tenement, and Cooke, complaining of the ‘woulfish intentes’ of the Woolfes, observed that players performed ‘within the said Roomes’.

Cooke’s phrasing echoes earlier Common Council legislation about playing in London, which aims to restrict those ‘repaying or Coming to ... houses vnder the pretence or Coullor of hering or eyeng of eny such Interlude or play to enter into eny Chamber or other Close or secrete place within ... houses duryng the tyme of ye seid play’.⁵⁰ Indeed, room-based playing can be traced in the more ‘canonical’ playhouses of Elizabethan London, not least in Richard Farrant’s successful plan to ‘pull downe one perticion and so make of too rooms one’ to create the first playhouse at the Blackfriars in 1576.⁵¹ The ‘playhouse’ at Wine Street may therefore have been a parallel space to the ‘close’ chambers and indoor room-conversions of early modern London.⁵² It clearly occupied, like Farrant’s space, a part of a larger building, with a main entrance off Wine Street itself. Woolfe explained how the property said to host the comedians had ‘very many Roomes’, with only one ‘vtter streete doore ... which is but one and the onlie way into all the

46. L. Johnson, *Shakespeare’s Lost Playhouse: Eleven Days at Newington Butts* (London, 2017).

47. Keenan, *Travelling Players*, p. 148.

48. *Ibid.*

49. A. Kesson, ‘Playhouses, Plays, and Theater History: Rethinking the 1580s’, *Shakespeare Studies*, xlv (2017), p. 27.

50. London Metropolitan Archives, COL/CA/01/01/016, Feb. 1569.

51. Washington, DC, Folger Shakespeare Library, MS L.b.446, 27 Aug. 1576.

52. See the relationship between ‘closeness’ and interrelated elements of proximity, secrecy, sound, and domestic visual culture, discussed in C. Richardson and T. Hamling, ‘Ways of Seeing Early Modern Decorative Textiles’, *Textile History*, xlvii (2016), pp. 4–26.

whole howse' and used 'in Common betweene' occupants 'for their seuerall entries into their seuerall and respective partes of the said whole howse'.⁵³ We can thus achieve a fuller picture of the Woolfe playhouse set-up that situates it at the intersection between domestic interior and the commercial streetlife of central Bristol; it demonstrates its status as a house of multiple occupancy that contemporaries associated with an 'inn', but in which performance and performers cohabited with other residents.

Although by profession Nicholas Woolfe was (like his nephew Isaac) a cutler, Cooke described him repeatedly in court as an 'innholder'.⁵⁴ Pilkington observes that he owned the White Hart and Lamb inns, 'yet chose to house his playhouse within rooms of a third property rather than in one of his own innyards (assuming they had yards). Clearly the notion of the innyard as a performance space did not capture Woolfe's imagination'.⁵⁵ We have seen, however, that the property in which the playhouse was located was itself referred to as a 'Common Inne', and the assumed distinctions between these tenements may well be misleading: there is no reason to expect inns to host performances in outside yards, especially given that London Corporation material shows how such properties frequently housed performance in 'close' rooms and chambers, in exactly the fashion described by Cooke. Moreover, the White Hart inn only came to Nicholas Woolfe following his marriage to Margaret. Woolfe's desire to open a venue in a series of rooms that would come to be known as the 'playhouse' therefore fits with his existing properties on and around Wine Street, situating it as part of a commercial portfolio of inns, shops, and various rooms for rent: *houses*, in the most elastic early modern sense of that term.

In turn, Margaret Woolfe's White Hart inn and Margaret herself are overlooked parts of the playhouse's narrative. Pilkington and Keenan have largely framed the playhouse as a one-man operation, but the contextual legal materials show the importance of Margaret to the interconnected commercial network around Christ Church. She married Nicholas in February 1605 following the death of her previous husband, Thomas Thomas, from whom she inherited significant amounts of 'plate' and 'one mesuage tenement or Inne within the Citty of Bristoll called the signe of the White Harte & sondrye other houses landes tenementes'.⁵⁶ Margaret continued to manage the White Hart herself 'to her greate profit and comoditie' for some time until Nicholas entreated her to move in with him. While the Wine Street playhouse was possibly already in operation by the time Margaret brought the White Hart into the marriage, the important

53. TNA, REQ 2/296/80.

54. TNA, REQ 2/296/80.

55. REED: *Bristol*, ed. Pilkington, p. xxxviii.

56. Bristol Archives, P/StP&J/R/1/1, n.p. TNA, C 3/328/28.

conjunction of personal and business collaboration in their union points to a network of overlapping, neighbouring business operations on and around Wine Street that mirror the relationship between the Theatre and the Curtain in Shoreditch.⁵⁷ Richard Cooke's testimony also explicitly identifies Margaret as the co-owner of and co-profiters from the playhouse itself, observing that he handed money for room rent directly to Margaret and *not* to Nicholas (a legal nicety emphasised in the suit) and that *both* 'the defendantes tooke money' from comedians performing in the rooms.⁵⁸ Margaret's financial capital going into the marriage and her management skills illustrate how middling status can be ascribed to women in spheres beyond independent widowhood or domestic production and consumption, and how the 'middling' marriage was often a coming together of individuals who had recognition in the community combined with property and goods. Margaret Woolfe therefore adds to the list of women at the centre of the developing urban leisure industries of early modern England.⁵⁹

The Woolfes' motivation for operating a multipurpose tenement that featured a 'stage' has been little explored beyond assumptions about financial reasons.⁶⁰ However, a consideration of the broader social place of such individuals and their operations moves us beyond a reductive economic explanation and shows, rather, how commercial incentives combined with middling cultural tastes. Certainly, there were financial incentives to open a playhouse in the bustling port city of Bristol for those with the means, connections and status to do so. Sally-Beth MacLean points out how much of a 'lure' Bristol was 'for entertainers on tour', noting the 'size and relative affluence of the potential audience for performance', which 'probably persuaded troupes to stay for longer and return more often to Bristol than to other locations in the region'.⁶¹ Indeed, performances are recorded at the Guildhall in Bristol for most decades of the sixteenth century, but after 1598 there is no explicit mention of the location where visiting

57. In 1585, the Curtain and the Theatre entered into a profit-sharing arrangement, with Burbage and Brayne at the Theatre taking the Curtain 'as an Esore to their playhouse' (TNA, C 24/226/11).

58. TNA, REQ 2/296/80.

59. Margaret's omission from the playhouse narrative matches many accounts of theatre in London, which have until lately overlooked female entrepreneurship in the playing industry. David Kathman has noted how three of the four major London playhouse inns (the Bel Savage, Cross Keys, and Bull) were owned, run, or leased by women ('Alice Layston at the Cross Keys', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, xxii [2009], p. 144), and Margaret Brayne demands a central role in ownership narratives of the Theatre and the Curtain in Shoreditch, for which she claimed half the profits (TNA, C 24/226/10).

60. See Yate's answer in TNA, C 2/328/28. Pilkington describes Nicholas as a 'cutler with no apparent theatre connections, ... an indication that it was a business opportunity as much as an artistic endeavour': *REED: Bristol*, p. xxxviii.

61. S.-B. MacLean, 'At the End of the Road: An Overview of South West Touring Circuits', *Early Theatre*, vi (2003), p. 22.

players performed, prompting speculation that the Woolfe playhouse acted as an alternative venue.⁶²

Such performances are typically recorded as being 'for' the mayor and aldermen; one particular audit entry from 1587 indicates more fully who might have comprised an audience, recording a fee for the Lord of Leicester's players 'who plained in the yelde hall before them and others of the Common Counsell with divers Citizens'.⁶³ The entry indicates an elite and middling audience who may well also have been the primary visitors to Wine Street's various commercial operations. Indeed, the playhouse may even have made these civic performances redundant. MacLean's survey of the south-west identifies a gradual decline in payments to players, taking the south-western circuit from one of the most profitable to 'one of the least rewarding in the seventeenth century'.⁶⁴ The privatisation of performance through commercial venues such as the Woolfes' may have resulted in the decline of public payments recorded in town audits; the playhouse presented a commercial performance space that, while initially working alongside civic performance, could clearly operate free from any direct ties to City authority. While Bristol's civic payments to troupes did indeed decline in the seventeenth century, the playhouse continued to generate enough revenue to supply local charities with benefactions until 1625.⁶⁵

Bristol also has a broader history of play in this period, equally appealing to the 'middling' members of society who participated in and ran different types of entertainment. Keenan has argued that there is 'a strong possibility' that a children's company, founded with royal assent in 1615 under the authority of John Daniel (the poet Samuel Daniel's brother), performed at the playhouse.⁶⁶ That such a company was based in Bristol suggests that there were regular venues for performance, and the Woolfe playhouse is among the likeliest spots for the company to have fulfilled their licence to 'shewe and exercise publicly to their best commoditie aswell in and about our said Citie of Bristoll in such vsuall houses as themselves shall provide, as in other convenient places'.⁶⁷ Beyond 'Comedies histories Enterludes morrall'es Pastorall'es Stageplayes' and other dramatic performances, however, other forms of play were accessible in surrounding areas. The marsh was home to regular bearbaiting performances with similar audiences to those for travelling players; throughout the 1570s the Lord of Leicester's bearward was rewarded for 'shewing pastyme with his Beares before Mr Mayer and the Aldremen in the marshe'.⁶⁸ The marsh was a location

62. REED: *Bristol*, ed. Pilkington, p. xxxvii.

63. Bristol Archives, F/AU/1/13, p. 29.

64. MacLean, 'At the End of the Road', p. 25.

65. REED: *Bristol*, ed. Pilkington, p. xxxix; Keenan, *Travelling Players*, p. 147.

66. Keenan, *Travelling Players*, p. 150.

67. REED: *Bristol*, ed. Pilkington, p. 203.

68. Bristol Archives, F/AU/1/11, p. 153.

for archery practice, and John Robert, mayor in 1579, commissioned 'a pair of short Buttes to be made' there in 1579. By 1588 the audits record repairs to a 'butthouse' on the site, and by 1619 there was also a 'shooteing house in the marshe', perhaps signifying the archery site or perhaps a gunpowder-based equivalent.⁶⁹ The marsh was also home to a range of play-ful activities, including a bowling green, and pageant constructions for distinguished visitors, such as 'the vast mock sea and land battles provided for the entertainment of Elizabeth I in 1574 and Queen Anne in 1614'.⁷⁰ Central Bristol, like London, was home to numerous bowling alleys, and individuals such as Thomas Yewyns were charged in the diocesan court for keeping 'nyne hole playing every Sabbothe daye ... in Mr Seymors court'.⁷¹ Samuel Clovell, quite possibly the brother of Wine Street's Humphrey, was similarly charged 'ffor bowlinge at service and sermon tyme ... in their owne parishes' of St Nicholas.⁷²

Wine Street was a parallel but distinct recreational destination to the marsh or to such urban bowling alleys, which, like their London equivalents, most likely provided a range of different activities within their bounds for a range of different visitors. The audiences of mayor, aldermen and 'divers Citizens' recorded at the performances of visiting players to the city suggest that it was only a particularly middling and elite set of people who had access to dramatic play in Bristol.⁷³ While the term 'citizens' does not give a great deal of information on demographics, it at the very least implies those free of the city (and hence not, for instance, apprentices or young women). However, as with spaces like St Paul's playhouse in London (about whose audience we know very little), there is the possibility of a more popular audience for the Wine Street playhouse itself; like the Woolfe playhouse, St Paul's was a reasonably small indoor space, yet Reavley Gair speculates (on the basis of evidence in Richard Bancroft's visitation report from 1598) that entry could have been as relatively affordable as two pence.⁷⁴ Moreover, a later playbill from the 1630s advertises 'rare Activities of bodye' by boys, girls and others performed at the 'the rose in in winestreet [*sic*]' to a generalised public.⁷⁵ The bill raises questions about the different types of 'play' and the kinds of players who may have performed at Woolfe's earlier venue, perhaps aligning it with multi-purpose spaces such as London's Theatre or Curtain or the rooms at the Bel Savage or Bull, all of which hosted fencing and improvisational clowning alongside 'interludes' and 'comedies'.

69. Bristol Archives, F/AU/1/11, p. 291, F/AU/1/13, p. 92; F/AU/1/18, p. 344.

70. *REED: Bristol*, ed. Pilkington, p. xxxvi.

71. Bristol Archives, EP/J/9, fo. 42r.

72. *Ibid.*, fos 53v, 57v.

73. Bristol Archives, F/AU/1/13, p. 29.

74. R. Gair, *The Children of Paul's: The Story of a Theatre Company, 1553–1608* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 10.

75. Astington, 'Trade, Taverns, and Touring Players', p. 162.

While the exact types of play on offer at the playhouse remain largely a matter of speculation, the space—and Wine Street itself—can be more closely associated with musical performance. To date, scholars have emphasised Nicholas Woolfe's apparent lack of theatrical connections.⁷⁶ The lawsuits following his death make it clear, however, that he had some investment in music and musical instruments. Among the belongings that his son Miles inherited from his father's Wine Street leisure portfolio were 'two paire of virginalles', which Miles used while being taught for two years 'in the Arte or science of musicke'.⁷⁷ This small detail suggests that more was at stake in Woolfe's playhouse interests than mere financial opportunism. Indeed, Christopher Marsh has commented that 'evidence of music lessons in the middling ranks of society is difficult to find', but that such absence does not reflect 'a genuine lack of provision', and noted various examples of non-gentry individuals engaged in musical tuition.⁷⁸ Such tuition was sought for children for multiple reasons, including personal enjoyment, as a sign of cultivation, and in conjunction with contemporary advice to the gentry about good breeding and humanist virtue. The virginal was an instrument particularly associated with the gentry, but, as with other forms of supposedly aristocratic musical culture, it also became popular among the middling sort. Marsh observes, for instance, that Bristol had a particularly high level of ownership of virginals among non-gentry and tradespeople.⁷⁹ Nicholas and Miles Woolfe provide evidence not only of their possession but of training in the art of music.

Nicholas practised his trade of cutler and trained apprentices up to his death (after which his nephew Isaac took over his final apprentice, John Sutchecombe).⁸⁰ As a practising cutler but also a playhouse proprietor and innholder, Nicholas's interest in music demonstrates a conflation of personal and professional investment in the instrument. Such instruments may also have been a feature of the playhouse and its recreational surroundings. Despite the superior status of virginals and related musical instruments, they were not only available in halls or manor houses: 'there were numerous instances in which the instruments of the "better sort" were heard at theatres, inns, alehouses, marketplaces, churches, cathedrals and other places not associated exclusively with the gentry'.⁸¹ Bristol had a particularly large number of professional instrument-makers, and resident in the parish of Christ Church in these years was the family of one Isacke Bryan—a 'virginall maker' made free of the city in 1609 in a special act of redemption by

76. As noted above, n. 60. It is not clear, however, why this should distinguish him from other playhouse builders of the period, such as John Brayne or Philip Henslowe.

77. TNA, C 3/328/28.

78. C. Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 206.

79. Marsh, p. 181.

80. Bristol Archives, F/AU/1/18, p. 157.

81. Marsh, p. 168.

the City corporation.⁸² The parish accounts record Bryan living close to Wine Street (in Duke Lane, where Humphrey Clovell the goldsmith held the lease on a garden near the Old Market).⁸³ The rising prosperity of Bristol's middling sort in these years may well have increased the market for such instruments beyond the local gentry.

Miles's inheritance from his father included not only playhouse, property, instruments, and various items of plate, but a network of cultural associations and experiences that put playing—musical, dramatic, or otherwise—at the centre of his world. His father entrusted to two overseers—his 'good friendes' the Wine Street soapmaker and alderman Henry Yate and Joseph Rattle—his property and his son's upbringing, while simultaneously emphasising the centrality of the playhouse to his life and legacy.⁸⁴ Woolfe's relationship with Yate reveals the link between a Wine Street cutler and an alderman who would go on to become mayor of the city. Connections such as these, through and beyond the parish, explored in more detail in the later part of this article, doubtless helped set up the playhouse as a key destination for a corporation looking for a venue for visiting players, and perhaps helped to ingratiate the Woolfes and their enterprise with the political elite. Indeed, Nicholas's will provides a fascinating insight into middling attitudes towards cultural activity beyond trade and craft and suggests a more complicated approach to the status of play that goes beyond the purely commercial, while also indicating the political climate that allowed a playhouse to thrive in the neighbourhood for some twenty years.

Nicholas Woolfe left charitable bequests to the poor of St Peter's, to the Company of Cutlers and Smiths 'for the maintenance of their hall', to the poor parishioners of Bristol's Newgate jail, to poor relief for the children of the city hospital, and to the almshouses of St John's and of St Michael's—all 'payable out of my ... Playhouse' and, crucially, conditional upon its theatrical continuance:

Provided always ... soe longe only as the same house shall continewe a playe house at that such players as doe resorte to the said Cittie or inhabite within the same doe vsually playe there and may be permitted and suffered quietly to playe there...⁸⁵

Not only does this phrasing confirm the notion that both visiting and resident troupes or 'players' performed there, but among the will's principal stipulations was the preservation of 'play' within the house. Woolfe used the legacy of the playhouse to bring together his craft status (with money set aside for the cutlers), his role within the community in providing bequests for a range of charitable institutions,

82. Bristol Archives, M/BCC/CCP/1/2, fo. 13r, Christ Church accounts 1612, Duke Street.

83. Ibid.

84. TNA, PROB 11/124.

85. TNA, PROB 11/124.

and his commitment to play performance both because of and beyond its commercial value. This suggests a pride in the playhouse itself that transcends purely financial motivation. The bequest of his entire property portfolio and lands to his son, Miles, further connects the lawsuit concerning Miles's rights, upbringing and inheritance to the playhouse itself, and helps connect Miles's education to Nicholas's intentions for the future safety of the playhouse. Miles is shown in the Christ Church parish records as being briefly in occupation of the Wine Street property before his untimely death in 1620, and through and beyond these years up to 1625 the property continued to pay revenues relating to Nicholas's charitable bequests, thereby confirming its continued operation as a playhouse.⁸⁶

While middling status was preserved for Miles (even if he did have to go through a court battle to wrest control away from his guardians and reassert his rights), Nicholas's widow Margaret was less well served (Miles being Nicholas's son from a previous marriage). Margaret's previous widowhood had left her with financial agency and an important place in the community, as the proprietor of the White Hart inn. Woolfe's will, however, distributed even the property she brought into the marriage (he allegedly made a deed of gift of her chattels, which was then immediately sold back to him) and bequeathed all his remaining goods to his other family, not leaving (in the words of her nephew Christopher Whitson in Chancery) to 'Margrett one penny in goodes or other wise sauinge onlie houseroome during her life insoemuch as shee became very poore and miserable and was enforced to crave relief of others'.⁸⁷

Margaret herself testified in Miles Woolfe's lawsuit that during their marriage her husband 'carried himselfe so harde and greedie vpon this defendantes meanes and estate', even though 'he were welthie and of good estate'.⁸⁸ Margaret's treatment provides a stark reminder that expressions of middling identity through culture (via plays, music, or dress and other forms of visible status and consumption) were deeply gendered—with Margaret painting an especially miserly picture of her late husband in terms of particular (female) forms of consumption.⁸⁹

86. REED: *Bristol*, ed. Pilkington, p. 224.

87. TNA, C 2/Jas1/W4/59.

88. TNA, C 3/328/28. Margaret claimed, to illustrate this behaviour, that during their marriage Nicholas never had made for her a single gown and even caused a new gown that her brother had 'in his charitie . . . bestowed vpon her to be cutt oute in peeces to make him the said nicholas wolfe dublett and hose'. Nicholas was not alive at this stage to rebut either of these statements, but his will goes some way to supporting them.

89. Overton, Whittle, Dean and Hann, in *Production and Consumption*, have shown how women's relationship to consumption altered in this period, particularly for the middling sort, but they have also indicated how the female experience of the domestic household differed starkly from men's—including economically. Hamling and Richardson's *A Day at Home* underscores the differences between a middling man and woman's daily routine. Even so, spaces like inns and playhouses were sites where female commercial management and involvement was widespread (see Kathman, 'Alice Layston at the Cross Keys', p. 144, and J. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300–1600* [Oxford, 1996]).

Margaret's wealth, status and appearance were contingent on her new husband's financial management, and the materials she brought into the marriage—in spite of Woolfe having 'promised to leaue her the said Margrett in better estate then he married her yf he fortun'd to dye before her'—were immediately repossessed as *male* middling property through a devious deed of gift. The playhouse served to benefit the charities in receipt of Nicholas's bequest, Miles and his overseers, and players performing there, but it provided no legacy for Margaret despite her instrumental place in the operation.

Inheritance is therefore a crucial part of the story of the Wine Street playhouse in the early seventeenth century. Nicholas Woolfe's bequests and requests—both charitable and familial—mark him as a man whose financial and cultural agency enabled him to enshrine 'play', in its elastic early modern sense, at the heart of both his local community and his son's education, while withholding any benefit from his wife. Hamling and Richardson have observed how 'patterns of bequeathal at death indicate strategies for the purchase, apportionment and distinction between goods, worked out in detail over a considerable length of time, as an explicit part of the establishment of familial status through household things'.⁹⁰ Woolfe's sense of respectable, planned and profitable play suggests that these observations can be extended from the domestic sphere to wider commercial and recreational concerns, positioning 'play' as an expression of middling identity in this particular urban environment—one that perhaps sat at odds with other, domestic, expressions of identity, from Woolfe's wife's clothing to his matrimonial duties.

III

Middling involvement in urban play was not limited to the commercial playhouse; it was, rather, a more fundamental feature of neighbourhood experience, trade and personal interaction. The links between play and social identity extended in Wine Street to the goldsmith's shop and the inn, and in turn to the complex layers of property ownership associated with these sites. These prominent locations within the neighbourhood were places where professional skill and commercial success intersected with political agency to form a particularly 'middling' community. Moreover, these overlaps show that Bristol's commercial playing scene developed out of the cultural, political and financial opportunities available to a group of local residents.

The goldsmiths' shop and the inn were key elements of urban social status, community and enterprise. Withington has shown how urban inns, taverns and alehouses were 'inextricable from modern

90. Hamling and Richardson, *A Day at Home*, p. 269.

rituals of consumption and company among the wider populace', and Karen Newman's work suggests that goldsmiths' shops might, like the playhouse or the drinking venue, act as a key site for the intersection of material, sexual, cultural and economic exchange and the promise of social mobility.⁹¹ Indeed, Withington's approach to urban social history provides a blueprint for understanding how a 'moderately prosperous milieu' (like the geographically concentrated middling community examined here) might align 'companies' in drinking spaces or goldsmiths' shops with business matters and civic advancement.⁹² These places united with the playhouse to sharpen and shape social identity. Such observations are confirmed by examining the property ownership and rental structures relating to the inns and surrounding buildings, and by considering the ways they link Wine Street proprietors with parish and civic authorities.

Sixteenth-century London offers useful analogues to Wine Street when mapping out the relationship between playhouses and neighbouring locations where recreational spending (of time, money and cultural capital) took place. The two earliest successful long-term commercial children's playing venues in London—the First Blackfriars playhouse and St Paul's—were similarly embedded in entertainment districts that promised visitors a multitude of recreational offerings. Henry Chettle explained in 1593 that 'While Plays are used, half the day is by most youths that have liberty spent upon them, or at least the greatest company drawn to the places where they frequent'.⁹³ That is to say, young people often hung out in the broader precinct or place surrounding a playhouse. Indeed, from the 1550s into the following century the Blackfriars was home to tennis courts, dancing and fencing schools, and high-end artisanal goods and European technologies.⁹⁴ St Paul's, too, offered abundant cultural activities, from touring the damaged steeple of the cathedral to other forms of commercialised leisure; in Thomas Dekker's words (from 1609, but reflecting on the wider history of the area), one could dally in 'Sempsters shops, the new Tobacco-office, or amongst the Booke-sellers', and he informed potential visitors that 'there you may spend your legs ... a whole after-noon: conuerse, plot, laugh, and talke any thing'.⁹⁵ Dekker's 'spend your legs' conflates walking on the street with spending money, indicating perfectly how areas like Blackfriars and St Paul's brought together recreational pastimes such as browsing, gossiping, shopping

91. Withington, 'Intoxicants', p. 181. K. Newman, "'Goldsmith's Ware": Equivalence in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, lxxi (2008), p. 106.

92. Withington, 'Intoxicants', p. 155. See also P. Withington, 'Company and Sociability in Early Modern England', *Social History*, xxxii (2007), pp. 291–307.

93. Henry Chettle, *Kind-Harts Dream* (London, 1590), sig. C3r.

94. C. Highley, 'Theatre, Church, and Neighbourhood in the Early Modern Blackfriars', in M. Smuts, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Age of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 616–32; I. Smith, *Shakespeare's Blackfriars Playhouse: Its History and Its Design* (New York, 1964).

95. Thomas Dekker, *Guls Horn Booke* (London, 1609), sig. D2r.

and playing within a delimited, and commercialised, urban locale. Wine Street provides a valuable example of an area where one might 'spend one's legs' outside of London, representing a similar development of urban space: the street demonstrates how middling craftspeople transformed a neighbourhood into an area for commercial, consumerist play, and in turn for the negotiation of social, cultural and economic capital.

The first example of such activity lies in goldsmiths' craft, interaction, and selling. Neighbouring the Wine Street playhouse on either side were the goldsmiths Humphrey Clovell and Richard Harsell (and thereafter Edward his son, also a goldsmith). Harsell was a member of a small dynasty of Bristolian goldsmiths: he became a burgess in 1580 and trained at least three apprentices. Richard himself had been trained by James Insall, who had moved to Christ Church parish by 1592, and Richard in turn trained his own sons, Edward and Robert junior. The elder Harsell's work survives, recognisable from the maidenhead with quatrefoil mark and his name, R HARSELL, on some surviving work, including pewter spoons.⁹⁶ Humphrey Clovell was trained by another prominent goldsmith of the area, Paul Freling, and in turn is known, according to Timothy Kent, for training the 'prolific goldsmith family of Corsleys'—a major producer of south-western metalwork in the seventeenth century. Indeed, his apprentice, John Corsley, became his son-in-law in 1592, and once he had received his freedom of the city, he seemingly leaned on Clovell and his Wine Street shop and residence. A Chancery case from 1606, after Corsley had been married to Clovell's daughter for nearly fifteen years, found him 'lyinge in Pryson in Newgate in London vpon sundry accounts of debt'. According to the defendant William Walton, Corsley was freed upon significant loans that he then neglected to pay back, instead running to 'go and laie in the North partes of this lande where this defendente should not touch him'. When Corsley stayed in Bristol, Walton believed he 'lived ... vnder his ffather in lawe Mr Clovell goldsmith'.⁹⁷ Given the continued careers of the Corsley family, his connections with Clovell cannot have done him any harm, even during this period of debt and avoidance.

Clovell's probate inventory, taken at his death in 1627 by his neighbour (next-door-but-one) and fellow goldsmith, Edward Harsell, helps us reconstruct his property's layout and its belongings. For Leech, Clovell's goods perfectly encapsulate the life of a reasonably well-to-do goldsmith who was 'not part of the city's elite'; his house, moreover, had an open hall that had not yet been ceiled—another indication, for Leech, of his distance from elite status.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, his considerable

96. For source detail for each of these figures, see T. Kent, *West Country Silver Spoons and their Makers, 1550–1750* (London, 1992).

97. TNA, C 3/341/56

98. Leech, *Town House*, pp. 112, 92.

range of personal possessions and domestic items firmly situate Clovell as a middling resident of the city: he owned various stools, cushions, carpets, cooking equipment, a Bible and a chronicle, and ‘wainescott, stayne clothes & pictures about the hall’—a key marker of middling domestic interiors, indicating further engagement with consumer culture.⁹⁹ Moreover, his shop was fixed in (presumably the front of) the property, containing at his death numerous instruments and fixtures relating to his trade.

The place of Clovell’s well-furnished if structurally old-fashioned residence and shop within the centre of the city in Wine Street informs our understanding of his place in Bristol culture beyond the limited details available through inventory evidence. For instance, Clovell not only knew Harsell well enough for the latter’s son, Edward (who occupied his father’s property on Wine Street in the 1620s) to produce his inventory, but also knew his direct neighbour Woolfe well enough to stand for him in the diocesan court over the cryptic matter of ‘abusing the channel’.¹⁰⁰ The Harsells’ workshop also points to further interpersonal connections between Bristol’s goldsmith trade and the Woolfe playhouse; it is possible that the Thomas Thomas apprenticed to Richard Harsell in 1580 was the same Thomas Thomas who was the first husband of Margaret Woolfe. The trade of goldsmithery in Bristol can therefore help define and texture our understanding of middling urban experiences beyond the immediate craft itself. The growing network of individuals plying their trades here expanded beyond local limitations, too, particularly for goldsmiths: in the mid-1570s, Bristol corporation had converted some of the space further down the street into a meal market, which was adapted and let out each year as ‘standings’ for goldsmiths from all over the country during St James’s fair. The standings were a substantial piece of civic infrastructure, requiring regular spending each year.¹⁰¹ The location of the Harsell and Clovell shops thus connected them to senior figures of the London-managed goldsmith network that help us contextualise and appreciate Clovell’s seemingly modest property and inventory.

The success of the goldsmiths on Wine Street and its probable reputation as a destination where one could buy anything from gilt rings to bowls and spoons (as found at Clovell’s stand in 1599)¹⁰² suggest that the area was a key urban shopping location—with corresponding advantages for the location of a playhouse. Blondé, Stabel, Stobart and Van Damme have noted how ‘each street had its own micro-geography of retail spaces’, which ‘reflected the place-specific development of retail

99. *Bristol Probate Inventories*, I, ed. George and George, pp. 62–4; Hamling and Richardson, *A Day in the Life*, pp. 43, 268.

100. Bristol Archives, EP/J/11, fos 182r, 189r, 195v; perhaps related to sewer cleaning.

101. Bristol Archives, F/AU/1/11, p. 200; F/AU/1/13, p. 34.

102. London, Goldsmiths’ Hall, Court Books, N, pp. 181–2.

circuits and spaces, and gave each street its own particular character'.¹⁰³ Scholars have characterised the areas around London playhouses in similar terms, particularly those venues in 'exempt' areas outside Corporation jurisdiction, such as St Paul's and Blackfriars. Mary Bly's work on London's liberties, for instance, recognises the combination of material, ideological and human forces that 'shaped each liberty into a unique space in the early modern imagination'; Sarah Dustagheer observes how city drama 'developed in relation to the specific playhouse locations in which it was performed'.¹⁰⁴ These observations can be extended to Wine Street, which brought together a distinctive retail environment with an area for play. The goldsmiths' shops and standings added to the leisurely character of the area, providing a mixture of practical and high-end goods. Derek Keene noted how 'from sixteenth-century London there is good evidence for the pleasure that wealthy and cultivated men and women gained from shopping in person', and Claire Walsh has shown how shopping was a 'multi-faceted activity' that interrelated 'with other aspects of social and business life'.¹⁰⁵

Indeed, the wider significance of the goldsmiths' outputs, in particular rings and spoons, situate Wine Street as a retail centre of cross-cultural significance for middling individuals and part of the nexus of social and cultural exchange identified by Karen Newman.¹⁰⁶ Not only did such shops offer, on occasion, high-end metalwork, they also allow us to capture what Beverley Lemire has recognised as the 'multi-purpose uses of ... metals', which had 'complex functions' and sometimes 'convoluted routes of exchange'.¹⁰⁷ Specific examples of metallic exchanges can be pinpointed in Bristol. The city's soapmakers, for instance, began in the seventeenth century to put rings down as deposits or forfeits for their observance of pricing agreements. In 1612, members agreed on a price to which they 'sete ... handes and Possites', including Humphrey Reade's (of Christ Church parish) signet ring; in 1615, Henry Yate of Wine Street (the soapmaker and overseer and witness the previous year of Nicholas Woolfe's will) simply laid down £3 6*d* 'in Gould'.¹⁰⁸ Tracking the varied circulation of metalwork in this

103. Blondé, Stabel, Stobart and Van Damme, 'Retail Circuits and Practices', p. 17.

104. M. Bly, 'Playing the Tourist in Early Modern London: Selling the Liberties Onstage', *PMLA*, cxxii (2007), p. 65; S. Dustagheer, *Shakespeare's Two Playhouses: Repertory and Theatre Space at the Globe and the Blackfriars, 1599–1613* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 78.

105. D. Keene, 'Sites of Desire: Shops, Selds, and Wardrobes in London and other English Cities, 1100–1550', in Blondé, Stabel, Stobart and Van Damme, eds, *Buyers and Sellers*, pp. 125–54, at 141; C. Walsh, 'The Social Relations of Shopping in Early-Modern England', *ibid.*, pp. 331–51, at 332.

106. Newman, *Cultural Capitals*.

107. B. Lemire, 'Plebeian Commercial Circuits and Everyday Material Exchange in England, c.1600–1900', in Blondé, Stabel, Stobart and Van Damme, eds, *Buyers and Sellers*, pp. 245–66, at 248.

108. *Proceedings, Minutes and Enrolments of the Company of Soapmakers, 1562–1642*, ed. H.E. Matthews, Bristol Record Society, x (1940), pp. 95, 103–4, 110. In another form of metallic exchange, Yate was given 22 shillings in gold as a token of love from Woolfe in his will: TNA, PROB 11/124.

way suggests a broader cultural role for material objects such as jewels, and in turn shows how the outputs of craftspeople like the Harsells and Clovell issued into a community where jewellery's practical and decorative uses combined to furnish men and women of the town with status symbols that represented a combination of social, cultural and economic currency.

The circulation of goldsmiths' goods was not restricted to their crafted outputs, but extended to the property relations between individuals, revealing how tradespeople, including the possible goldsmith Thomas Thomas and the cutler Nicholas Woolfe, occupied positions as innholders at the same time as they pursued their craft. Such innholders held a crucial position in parish life, not only because their establishments represented places for the middling sort to drink, eat and socialise and where visitors could stay, but because they were sites where political administration and conviviality united. These were sites in which recreational drinking (or what Withington would term the 'culture of intoxication') helped determine and negotiate 'civic patronage, income, and regulatory power'.¹⁰⁹ A look at the intersections between socialising, parish organisation, and more elite civic participation demonstrates how the playhouse, and Wine Street more broadly, was well situated to host visiting players to the city and to act as a useful meeting point for those with political agency.

Inns as well as taverns were drinking establishments for the better off, with alehouses serving the least well off in society. The lines between them, however, were porous, as Mark Hailwood's study of the alehouse makes clear.¹¹⁰ Indeed, the various statuses of the drinking establishments central to the parish life of Christ Church are not entirely certain: the White Hart, for instance, was a subdivided tenement.¹¹¹ The location of the Rose, the most frequented venue in the parish records, is also uncertain and so is its exact status or function. Nonetheless, these venues brought together the individuals described above, from goldsmiths to cutlers to soapmakers.

Humphrey Clovell (1590, 1595), Thomas Thomas (1594), and Henry Yate (1608, 1628) were all churchwardens of Christ Church. Alongside this group, another soapmaker, Humphrey Reade (whom we met above pawning a ring for business), was also churchwarden in 1611. A number of years are missing from the accounts in the early 1600s, leaving it open to speculation whether Nicholas Woolfe ever occupied such a position. Nonetheless, the surviving accounts record these Wine Street figures as present in the usual business of running the parish, including

109. Withington, 'Intoxicants', p. 173.

110. M. Hailwood, *Alehouses and Good Fellowship in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, 2014).

111. R. Leech, *The Topography of Medieval and Early Modern Bristol, 1: Property Holdings in the Early Walled Town and Marsh Suburb North of the Avon*, Bristol Record Society, xlviii (1997), p. 48. Easter books for 1594 list twenty individuals resident at the property: Bristol Archives, P.Xch/ChW/2/1-41.

repairing the fabric of the church and steeple, managing and recording births, deaths, and marriages, and keeping the accounts themselves. French's focus on the parish as the focal point and generator of middling identity emphasises the role of such figures in 'the administrative reality of its government'.¹¹² Indeed, not only did the processing of poor relief inscribe both financial and moral authority on those managing the parish (and require financial overheads and outlays on the part of churchwardens), it also instituted a collective identity predicated on group socialisation: Thomas Thomas recorded 3s 2d spent at the Rose in 1594 'beinge there about busyness of the church', and in the following year Clovell spent 2s 6d there on the account day, illustrating how these public spaces combined administration and socialising. Thomas Thomas also recorded 10s spent during his tenure at the White Hart—his own inn (later part of the Woolfe portfolio)—'after the parishioners had walked the bounds of the parishe'.¹¹³ These individuals tie together Wine Street's recreational spaces with local governance, social status and identity.

Moreover, while individuals such as Clovell and Thomas concentrated their focus on the parish, they were joined by the likes of Abel Kitchen and John Woodwarde, who acted as churchwardens in the 1600s and were both city aldermen. Alderman Henry Yate, too, went on to become mayor in 1631, after his two stints as churchwarden. These figures connect the middling level administration of the parish with the political elites of the city, and the personal networks generated both through parish politics and through city life—with Yate acting as overseer of Woolfe's will—demonstrate how Wine Street helped facilitate social connections within and beyond the parish. Yate himself, according to Miles Woolfe, ran the playhouse, or at the very least administered its profits, in the years after Nicholas's death and during Miles's minority.¹¹⁴

Property on Wine Street itself represented a similar conjunction of city and parish identity. A great number of the tenements on Wine Street were owned by Bristol's corporation, and their yearly rental is recorded in the mayoral audits written up by the Chamberlain. The parish itself rented a number of these properties, including leases for five shops attached to Christ Church, for which it paid the city rent. Moreover, the parish owned a number of properties, including Woolfe's playhouse tenement, meaning that the street was largely split into leases issued by the city and leases issued by the parish.¹¹⁵ The playhouse property, along

112. French, *Middle Sort of People*, p. 89.

113. Bristol Archives, P.Xch.ChW.1.a, fos 315r, 319r, 316v.

114. TNA, C 3/328/28.

115. Woolfe leased two properties on this street: the one recorded in leases as belonging to the parish, and the tenement he and his heirs are recorded as renting throughout the Chamberlain's audits. These two properties match Margaret's testimony about Nicholas possessing one house and the property known as the playhouse on Wine Street at his death.

with Harsell's and Clovell's tenements, was sold in an indenture of 1588 by George Salterne to the feoffees, one of whom was Henry Yate's father, William (himself the possessor of a number of tenements and new-built properties on the street).¹¹⁶ The layered rentals and subleases that characterised the centre of the city and the overlapping parish and civic administration capture the complexity of Wine Street as a site of urban interaction between elite individuals and middling interests; regular civic spending on areas such as the Wine Street meal market 'that in the ffeyre the way mowght be large to go into the goldsmythes standinges' reveal the commercial investment of Bristol's political elite in the area.¹¹⁷ The street saw the attendance of mayors and aldermen at plays, their management of the street's rental and commercial potential, and the interaction between civic elites and local tradespeople such as Clovell, the Harsells and the Woolfes. This paints a picture of a porous middling identity, bound up with the various iterations of political and administrative power both enacted by and enacted upon its residents.

In the Wine Street neighbourhood, then, middling status extended into the upper echelons of urban politics, where aldermen like the soapmaker Henry Yate could own several tenements and temporarily manage a playhouse. But it also encompassed individuals like Clovell, a goldsmith living in and working out of his tenement, but active in his vibrant local community and closely connected with the street's recreational operations. It further illustrates the contingent status of middling identity for widows such as Margaret Thomas/Woolfe. The Chamberlain's audits record numerous widows leasing property on Wine Street for some years, and we have seen how Margaret herself managed the White Hart inn. The area therefore encapsulates varying middling expressions of identity across different areas of life, from politics to commerce to play, these factors coming together to create a place of especially concentrated urban middling opportunity.

IV

The divide between elite, middling and popular cultures is rarely clear-cut, and Marsh and Hailwood have illustrated how these three ostensibly distinct categories frequently overlapped. The playhouse on Wine Street represents a perfect example of a space founded on middling capital and connections that fostered such overlaps, catering to Bristol's mayors and aldermen while offering public performances. This study of that space and its contexts has explored the processes involved in constructing and running such a theatrical venue, particularly outside of London, in order to determine the social, financial and aesthetic factors that made such a venture viable.

116. Bristol Archives, J/OR/1/1 fo. 506r.

117. Bristol Archives, F/AU/1/11, p. 163.

The bustling, commodity-filled, merchant-led port city of Bristol is by no means representative when it comes to assessing either playhouse management or middling status in England more broadly. Yet this focus on Wine Street has presented some important lessons for understanding the cultural lives of middling people in urban spaces, both methodologically and materially. Such a case-study necessitates recognising how those with the requisite credit—financial and social—negotiated and collaborated across one stretch of a city street. These wider contexts of the playhouse reveal a particular middling cultural expression at work across various institutions, from the inn to the goldsmith's shop. It was in this very particular location that people of modest to considerable means, with degrees of local and civic authority, connected across the realms of politics, property and play to foster a retail location for middle to high-end offerings and a vibrant leisure industry.

That the commercial, cultural and political lives of these individuals were closely related and fundamentally shaped their social status is perhaps not surprising, as past studies of the middling sort have shown. However, centring on connected forms of play within a small geographical concentration opens up a new way to understand what a holistic 'cultural' approach can mean for enquiries into social status. Using *play* as a lens helps to shift the focus of analysis away from the statistics or the archival details of individuals, households or businesses towards their shared, communal, multipurpose sites of activity. Situating the Woolfes as middling archetypes in this way demonstrates how commercial play accommodated female business management (albeit within other lifestyle confines) and accounts for the place of artistic or sentimental value in decisions about commerce, legacy and community. Beyond the cynicism (explicit or implicit) often ascribed to the subjects of status and identity-making studies—particularly those that emphasise ambition or social mobility—the Woolfes remind us that there were multiple, sometimes paradoxical, factors at work in the investment of time, money and emotion in social and cultural expression. Certainly, financial status is one defining factor that differentiates the middling sort from, say, those dependent upon poor relief. Likewise, administrative responsibility conferred status and authority upon those with the means and respectability to acquire positions of office. Yet Nicholas Woolfe complicates a predominantly financial and social picture of middling identity by placing a playhouse at the centre of his will. His emphasis on continued play at the theatre and his son's musical tuition on the virginals celebrate forms of cultural expression beyond business, even as they coincide with commercial success. His will and its controversies, along with his wife Margaret's complicated marital and business life, similarly point to the fluid boundaries of middling experience, particularly those generational and

gender differences that cannot be separated from the lived experience of a male householder.

This microhistory of Wine Street's leisure industry therefore provides a unique angle on the construction and expression of middling identity that looks beyond the parish as the defining boundary. French sees the parish as the 'power base, primary social resource, and central reference point for 'middling' identity',¹¹⁸ and while this article confirms its importance as an organising community even within the urban landscape, the more expansive consideration of related forms of cultural expression open up new points of reference. Individuals significant in the parish hierarchy connected lesser-middling citizens to the elite power base of the mayor and aldermen, many of whom worked and drank with Wine Street residents in local establishments. Moreover, taking the playhouse as the starting point for this enquiry into middling cultural identity situates it within the wider play-scape of Bristol, and therefore indicates how such a leisure venue brought together those interested in various forms of cultural 'play' beyond the bounds of the parish. Wine Street also brought together national expressions of the goldsmiths' trade within one market, meaning that particular south-western approaches to metalwork would sit side by side with goods produced by goldsmiths from London and other English areas. Wine Street therefore suggests one way in which early modern citizens might recognise a concentrated 'middling' community: a place to shop for medium- to high-end goods, engage in varied forms of play and music, and socialise with the political elite both from within the city and beyond. In this, the area presents similarities with London's own leisure hotspots, such as Blackfriars, St Paul's, or Shoreditch: it was to these vibrant commercial hubs, featuring playhouses, that individuals flocked to spend their legs, time, and money.

Finally, this study helps to refine our understanding of 'playhouses' more broadly. Explorations such as Keenan's have emphasised the provincial nature of Bristol's Woolfe playhouse, marking it as an 'innovative' outlier.¹¹⁹ Yet it aligns with the playhouses familiar in London from the 1540s and 1550s. By looking beyond direct references to dramatic activity, and considering the wider information about the tenement supplied in court cases, I have explored the similarity of the playhouse to converted spaces in London, like Farrant's Blackfriars, or the city inns, such as the Bel Savage, Bull, Bell, Cross Keys, or Boar's Head. These parallels not only make sense of the multi-room nature of the building, which provided accommodation as well as playing space for comedians, but also make more plausible its multifunctional nature as a play-space, resonating with the playbill advertising feats of activity in a different venue on the street in the 1630s. Such an understanding

118. French, *Middle Sort of People*, p. 24

119. Keenan, *Travelling Players*, p. 151.

allows a greater appreciation of the diversity of playing places available in and beyond London that fall under the flexible term ‘playhouse’—both syllables of which are especially fluid early modern words. Like London playing spaces, it remains possible that the Woolfe playhouse catered to a diverse audience, bringing civic performances before the mayor and aldermen while simultaneously advertising public play for which Margaret and Nicholas ‘tooke moneye’.¹²⁰

Wine Street bears witness to those processes often characterised as signs of an emergent middling sort or even a middle class—increased consumption, recreational shopping, and emerging ideas of gentility. These are usually identified as later seventeenth-century phenomena, but this study shows that they were prevalent from at least the 1570s in Bristol, where they reached a point of particular development by the 1600s. The Wine Street ‘middling’ leisure industry provides a useful lens for analysing how goldsmiths, cutlers, soapmakers, instrument-makers and inn-holding widows, with various degrees of local political and financial agency, helped a neighbourhood develop into a commercial recreational destination for diverse visitors. The behaviour of these individuals indicates how specifically *play*-ful cultural activity, combined with commercial retailing and services, though often driven by non-financial motivations, supplied key markers of middling identity and social status in the period.

University of Roehampton, UK

CALLAN DAVIES^{ORCID}

120. TNA, REQ 2/296/80.