

The London Foundling Hospital

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Introduction

In 1739, Thomas Coram secured a royal charter for the Hospital for the Maintenance and Education of Exposed and Deserted Young Children, familiarly known as the Foundling Hospital. This London institution was an extraordinary venture, one that not only shaped English benevolence directed toward children for years to come, but also in many ways reshaped parenting, childhood, and authority in the eighteenth century. Captain Coram, as he was known for his long career in the sea trade, had become interested in the idea of a foundling hospital through his dismay at the terrible spectacle of impoverished babies and children seen on the streets of London, a dismay shared widely in the culture.¹ The Foundling Hospital took as its guiding principle that such children were best separated from their improvident mothers and raised in a rigidly controlled and documented institutional setting. Upon entry, the infant's age and gender were recorded on a form called a billet and then transferred into a volume called the General Register, where the child was identified by a number and a new name. From that point on the child was a "foundling" under the care of the institution, with every aspect of her/his life managed and documented in a series of registers. In this setting, child-rearing was reconceived as a masculinized form of recordkeeping, while the maternal and emotive elements of care were restructured as forms of labor assigned a specific monetary value. Perhaps even more significantly, the wrenching separation of infants from their mothers, so essential to the conception of the institution, was rendered not only palatable, but even desirable.

In October 2024, the Coram Foundation, which is the modern incarnation of the institution once known as the Foundling Hospital, digitized parts of its voluminous archive from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The original archive, housed in The London Archive, is enormous; its catalogue list alone runs more than 800 pages and it covers a span of time from the early eighteenth century to the mid twentieth century. The digital archive covers a mere 23 percent of this material, but its focus on the earlier period (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) and its extremely helpful historical apparatus make what was an unwieldy and dense archive available to modern readers in unprecedented ways. While the Coram Foundation today has come a long way from the institutional framework of the eighteenth century, it has maintained throughout

¹ This concern is dramatized in William Hogarth's famous 1751 print "Gin Lane," which shows a syphilitic and alcoholic mother dropping her baby off a bridge while reaching for a pinch of snuff. In the background, a young woman is buried while her child cries in front of the coffin. While this is intended as a study of the effects of gin, the central image is an improvident mother, suggesting the ways poverty and its effects on children were focused on women. Hogarth, not incidentally, was a strong supporter of the Foundling Hospital.

the centuries an abiding concern for the safety and care of children. Its commitment to the records of its past as well as its striving toward a better future have made this Element possible, even if the conclusions contained within it are very much my own.

This Element is designed to provide insight into some of the questions and issues made visible by the extraordinary set of documents newly accessible to the general public. By linking to specific records in this digital archive, I offer a close reading of the texts surrounding this venture – including the fragmentary words and instructions left by the mothers for their babies at the first stage of this institution (1741–56), the first fifteen years before the period known as the General Reception. By focusing on a relatively narrow period of the Hospital’s 200-year existence (it took in children well into the twentieth century), I hope to focus on the principles and practices that shaped the institution at its founding in the mid eighteenth century before the many sweeping changes in the national and international scenes that affected the Hospital over its centuries of existence. By doing so, I make visible the connection between this London organization and the broader dynamics of charity and benevolence across the British Empire toward people (in this case children) understood as worthy of care. The notion of “worthiness” called forth extraordinary acts of benevolence, but at the same time justified and rationalized systemic suffering on a massive scale for those who were not seen as meriting the label. The Foundling Hospital embodied both sides of this terrible equation.

My intention is not to write an institutional history; there are already several well-regarded full-length publications related to the Foundling Hospital, and I am indebted to their analysis. Most recently Helen Berry’s *Orphans of Empire* argues for the central place of the Foundling Hospital in Britain’s growing empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, situating the goals of this institution in the broader expansionist wars of this period. Ruth McClure’s *Coram’s Children* remains a definitive work on the history of the Foundling Hospital in eighteenth-century London. Alysa Levene has reprinted several of the key texts of the Foundling Hospital in *Narratives of the Poor in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (volume 3). There are also several institutional histories by people affiliated with the Foundling Hospital: Gillian Pugh’s *London’s Forgotten Children* as well as John Brownlow’s nineteenth-century *The History and Objects of the Foundling Hospital* are both full of details based on the authors’ long affiliation with the charity. Wonderful as these resources are, they lack the direct connection with the original materials for readers that an electronic book coupled with a digitized archive can offer. Because of the embedded links to the original documents made possible through the newly digitized archive and the incredible richness of those documents, students and

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others interested in the Foundling Hospital now have access in ways that were previously unimaginable. My goal here is to invite readers into a discussion of the material texts themselves through a close examination of the books, papers, and forms now made available to the general reader. Until very recently this work was limited to those with access to the material records. Now this conversation can expand in the most interesting ways thanks to the digital archive.

Background of the Foundling Hospital

The Foundling Hospital addressed the seemingly intractable problem of widespread poverty by separating children from parents – usually mothers – who were presumed to be morally suspect through the simple fact of their inability to support their offspring.² One of the earliest institutions in England to focus specifically on infants rather than poverty more generally, the Foundling Hospital was an attempt to turn society’s “unwanted” babies into respectable, hardworking laborers at the bottom of the social scale through a massive, decades-long commitment to each child admitted to the Hospital. The children were offered a limited education and modest upbringing that was designed to make them especially effective as a menial labor force, with household service for girls and farm labor or maritime service for boys.

The Hospital building was a visible (and rather grand) monument to the largess of those willing to support the reinvention of such “unwanted” babies into worthy citizens. By framing the separation of babies from their mothers at the heart of the charity into an act of generosity, the Foundling Hospital celebrated the rewards of Christian benevolence, as the site in London was both the point of separation of children from their mothers and also a site of leisure, pleasure, and even celebration for the elite benefactors who subsidized its work.

This benevolence-minded group was loosely divided among the Governors, as the refined men named to the board of the Hospital were known, and benefactors, the individuals and families whose cumulative financial donations allowed for the ongoing existence of the Hospital. Together, they were embodied in the figure of the avuncular Thomas Coram, who, while he had a complicated relationship to the institution he had founded in his lifetime, came

² Despite this presumption, the records of the Hospital seem to suggest the problem was far more about entrenched poverty, military conscription, and other circumstances than individual choices. See, for example, Alysa Levene, “The Origins of the Children of the London Foundling Hospital, 1741–1760: A Reconsideration,” which points out that “a significant proportion of foundlings in this period were legitimately born” (202) while her book *Childcare, Health, and Mortality at the London Foundling Hospital 1741–1800* puts the number at 30 percent (32), as does Helen Berry (54).



Figure 1 Thomas Coram, in the foreground an infant in a basket, in the background the Foundling Hospital. Line engraving by J. Brooke, 1751, after B. Nebot, 1741.

Source: Wellcome Collection.

to represent the humane and generous intentions of this (largely) masculine space (see Figure 1).³ While the figure of the kindly old man featured prominently in the documents and images associated with the Foundling Hospital, care in the Hospital was overseen by gentlemen in grand spaces distinct from those

³ Much has been written about Thomas Coram and his relationship to the Foundling Hospital, from the effusive 1751 essay “Private Virtue and Publick Spirit Display’d . . . The Character of Capt. Thomas Coram” to John Brownlow’s nineteenth-century hagiography *The History and Objects of the Foundling Hospital, with a Memoir of the Founder*, 6–37. A good account of the difficulties of his final years with the Hospital is included in McClure’s *Coram’s Children*, 52–58.

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directly involving the children, while the hands-on work was hired out to wet nurses, matrons, laundresses, maids, and cooks with little formal control over the broader processes of the Hospital.

With the reception of the first set of infants in March 1741, the institution reimagined parenthood on a completely different scale than that of a more typical British family unit.⁴ The management of the children was systematized and overseen rather than valued as a set of intimate relationships, and the Governors structured parenting as a set of activities and exchanges that could be enacted through forms, committees, and financial incentives. Through the hiring out of the maternal function, the Foundling Hospital family was reinvented such that parenting was broken into a set of discrete paid tasks and child-rearing was overseen by committee. From the moment the infant arrived at the Hospital, the erasure of the biological parent(s) began; on the reception day the child was stripped of any marks of personal history or prior connection (including tokens left by parents, which were sealed away), and the institution assumed a guardianship role that was about management and training rather than nurture. Infants were sent to the countryside to be raised by a paid nurse up to about age four or five, and when the child returned to the hospital, all ties to that nurse were supposed to end. At that point a regimented, surveilled life in the institution was intended to produce a worker who could be put under apprenticeship as soon as possible (sometimes as young as age nine or ten). As well-meaning as these structures were intended to be, to the modern reader they can be astonishing in their systemic violence and casual cruelty.

Initially at the temporary Hatton Garden house and then later at the grander Foundling Hospital site in Lamb's Conduit Field in Bloomsbury, from March 1741 to June 1756, infants were admitted every few months on what was called "reception day," advertised in local papers and made known to the general public based on the financial and logistical calculations of the General Committee. Roughly twenty children usually were accepted out of the many who were presented; upon their admission, the new infants were sent off within days to be raised in the countryside for several years, until they returned as young children to the institution to be trained in menial work.⁵ Through the mid

⁴ For a more detailed history of this idea see Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (part 4) and Phillipe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (part 3) for a deeper history of what in the eighteenth century was a social and economic unit of parents and children with certain expectations of privacy bounded by intimate relations of love and obligation.

⁵ According to McClure, the number of children admitted on any given reception day was significantly lower than the number presented for admission. See also Berry 55 and 58. Subcommittee minutes include an extensive tally of the difference between the number of children admitted from January 1749/50 to December 1755 and the number of children brought to the Hospital but turned away on each reception day (Sub-Committee Minutes, Volume 2, pages 75–76).

1750s, up to 150 children lived at the Hospital at any one time, while the much larger group of babies nursing in the country lived in individual families (McClure 76).⁶ Typically between the ages of ten or twelve years old the children were apprenticed out on behalf of the Foundling Hospital and eventually “discharged” into adulthood (for boys at age twenty-four and for girls at age twenty-one or at marriage). The logistical planning for the institution was thus dizzying; infants admitted on reception days were sent within days to the countryside for up to five years (but often less) before returning either to the central London location or later to one of the several branch hospitals. Planning had to account for certain levels of mortality and was adjusted around various criteria: numbers of wet nurses available in the countryside; spaces for children as young as three or four years old in the dormitories; opportunities for apprenticeships for children as young as nine or ten years old; the possible return of children of all ages for various reasons – illness, unsuitability, and always the unexpected. Admissions thus varied significantly from year to year, and even from month to month.

This system was in place until June 1756, when the private charity received state funding from Parliament. From 1756 to 1760, the period known as the General Reception was in force. State funding mandated that all infants had to be accepted, not the carefully controlled numbers the Hospital had managed up to that point, and the age of admission was increased from under two months to up to a year.⁷ Demand was staggering; admissions went from a monthly or bimonthly schedule to nearly daily, and the need was so extraordinary that satellite institutions were hastily opened (Berry 90–91, 95). Parliament became increasingly troubled by the alarming mortality statistics that emerged in the years this policy was in place; by the time Parliament withdrew funding in 1760 almost 15,000 babies had been admitted, with roughly 10,400 dying in infancy (Berry 95; McClure 102).⁸

After a period of retrenchment, in 1763, a new strategy for limiting entry was established in which mothers had to explain why they couldn’t care for their children and justify what they would do instead. This significant shift in emphasis from the child to parent lasted through 1801 and marked an entirely

⁶ Berry states, for example, that by 1756 (just before the General Reception), there were “612 children under the care of the Hospital, 189 in London, with a further 422 at nurse in the countryside” (92).

⁷ For more on this period see McClure, chapters 7 and 8 in *Coram’s Children; The Foundling Museum: An Introduction* 21–22; Berry 92–97. A sense of the magnitude of difference is captured in the Sub-Committee Minutes for October 1756, which lay out how many infants were admitted after state money was granted: rather than the 20 admitted roughly monthly before the General Reception period, in the five-day period of June 2–5 alone 195 babies were admitted (Sub-Committee Minutes, Volume 2, page 100).

⁸ For more detailed statistics, see McClure, appendix 3, 261.

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new approach to addressing what had been the case all along; there were simply not enough resources for the number of infants needing care.

For all its benevolent intentions, the processes established by the Foundling Hospital involved the repeated separation of children from their parents or parental figures. As Helen Berry points out, “Coram’s legacy was not only to save orphans, but effectively to create them” since many (if not most) of the children given over to the Hospital’s care had at least one surviving parent (Berry 277). This was certainly more convenient from the perspective of the institution, but the toll on individual lives was surely devastating, and modern accounts of former residents of the institution speak movingly of the pain of these various separations.⁹ From committee minutes to billets, parental petitions to baptismal records, the archive makes visible what is said and what cannot ever be expressed and brings forward extraordinary artifacts from a defining moment in modern child-rearing practice.

My focus in the pages that follow is on the first decade and a half of this institution, from the first reception day in March 1741 to the start of the General Reception period in June 1756. This early moment set in place the philosophical principles and practices that structured the daily activities of the institution, and its records reveal both the genuine good intentions of its benefactors as well as the fundamental mismatch between their assumptions and the realities of the parents and children entering its spaces. I argue that recurring throughout these records is a striking shift toward the masculinizing of the care of infants. Over and over in the reports and forms we see a confidence in the ability of men to take over what was traditionally the nurturing work of women, with devastating effects.

The Archive

Until relatively recently the extraordinary records of this institution have largely been mined by scholars for historically specific kinds of questions: *What were the geographic and socioeconomic family origins of the foundlings? How many children were born out of wedlock in London?* Even questions quite distant from the mission of the Hospital such as *what did the clothing of everyday Britons look like?* can be answered from the voluminous and detailed records of the institution.¹⁰ Other studies incorporate the Foundling Hospital into larger

⁹ See, for example, Justine Cowan’s account of her mother’s experience in the twentieth century with the Foundling Hospital in *The Secret Life of Dorothy Soames*.

¹⁰ See Alysa Levene’s “The Origins of the Children of the Foundling Hospital, 1741–1760: A Reconsideration” for information on the foundlings in the first decade of the Hospital; Tanya Evans, “*Unfortunate Objects*”: *Lone Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London* for information about the parents of these foundlings; Kate Gibson, “Fostering the Foundlings” on the country nurses and their relationship to the children; and John Styles, *The Dress of the People*, for details about fashions and fabrics of eighteenth-century working-class Britons.

projects, among them Donna Andrew's *Philanthropy and Police*, which examines the Foundling Hospital in the broader context of philanthropy and power in the eighteenth century and Cheryl Nixon, who focuses on the orphan both in fiction and in life in her *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, situating the Foundling Hospital in a larger transatlantic cultural investment in parentless children.

Janette Bright and Gillian Clark have done extraordinary archival work recovering the link between individual token objects and specific billets.¹¹ John Ramsland, Frances Miley, and Andrew Read use the institutional history to think structurally about the affective and lived experience of foundlings and their birth parents in all kinds of ways. Some fascinating projects are in development, and the next few years promise to be quite fruitful.¹²

Indeed, what makes the entire archive so fascinating and so much more important than simply a record of a single eighteenth-century institution is the intersection of the bureaucratic impulse and the individualized archive of children's lives, or the contending forces of systematization and insistence on particularity. In that sense this archive is similar to the French police archives in the classic work of Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, with the tension between the larger structural limits of the archive and the intensely private and personalized individual records. As such, archives speak to important ethical and logistical questions in the broader field of archive studies. The explorations of various scholars in this expansive field are instructive; in addition to challenging our notions of literacy more broadly, they offer insights into ways of reading and interpreting such often overlooked materials, as well as asking us to think more carefully about what gets preserved and from whose perspective.

Joanna Brooks's *Why We Left* offers a model for using nontraditional sources and the argument that different kinds of sources can offer fascinating insights if we approach them flexibly and with sensitivity; while her book focuses on folk ballads, it is her interpretive subtlety and her use of Indigenous studies theories to unpack such settler colonial sources that is so useful in our context. Indeed, the theoretical and structural challenges that scholars of Indigenous and African American studies have tackled have much to offer this study, where literacy and alienation from archives is such an essential part of our analysis. Saidiya

¹¹ See "The Foundling Hospital and Its Token System" (Clark and Bright) and *An Introduction to the Tokens at the Foundling Museum* (Bright and Clark). Their ongoing work is also visible on the website of the Foundling Museum: <https://foundlingmuseum.org.uk/our-art-and-objects/what-youll-see>.

¹² On June 23–24, 2023, The Foundling Hospital History Online Conference, sponsored by the Foundling Museum, included an array of scholars such as Kate Gibson, Claudia Soares, Claire Phillips, Beck Price, and Kristen Renzi, as well as moving conversations with former foundlings and descendants of foundlings (<https://lfhconference23.wixsite.com/site/programme>).