

Foundling Hospital Children in Wheathampstead

The Foundling Hospital, a children's home in London, was founded in 1739 by the philanthropic sea captain, Thomas Coram. It was established for the education and maintenance of children abandoned or left to die, children of very poor parents who could not care for them and of unmarried mothers.



The London Foundling Hospital

On 17 October 2024, the Foundling Hospital, now a group of charitable organisations named Coram, made available online for the first time part of its vast archive, meticulous record-keeping about the thousands of children who grew up at the Hospital during the period from 1739 to 1899. Too frail to be accessed by the public, the archive is now closed and over the past four years 405 volumes have been digitised and transcribed by 6,500 volunteers. The digital images and their transcripts are free to access online, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The digital archive includes the stories of ten Foundling Hospital children who were nursed in Wheathampstead by seven local women during the period of the 'General Reception' from 1756 to 1760. At that time the Government made a grant so that more babies could be received into the Hospital. This was

one of the most challenging periods in its history as the governors were obliged to accept thousands of babies brought to the Hospital door from across the country. In general, Foundling Hospital children had the advantage of a better standard of diet, hygiene and medical care than many people outside the institution. The Hospital also had a significantly lower infant mortality rate, but during these four years of General Reception, infant mortality rates in the Hospital rose to 81 per cent, with thousands of babies dying. Many were sick on arrival and infections such as ringworm and scabies, and epidemics of scarlet fever and measles, to which institutions were prone, spread rapidly.

From its early days the Hospital advertised for nursing mothers prepared to care for babies from the Foundling Hospital in counties near London, including Hertfordshire, as it was thought country air would benefit the children's health. The nurses took the foundlings into their homes and raised them alongside their own children, performing an early form of foster care. During the General Reception period, the number of foundlings in the care of country nurses increased from 422 in 1756 to 5,814 in 1760. Country nurses were essential and highly valued during these critical years.



The nurses were assessed for health and suitability and the governors received references relating to their 'exceeding good character'. Drawn largely from the rural labouring classes, they were often the wives of agricultural workers with

young families of their own. They were paid two shillings and sixpence a week, roughly equivalent to the income of a skilled tradesman, and some nurses fostered several foundlings at the same time. Women's work was usually poorly paid so nursing offered a significant salary while they were raising their own children. A premium of ten shillings was awarded if the foundlings survived infancy and nurses were given bonuses for demonstrating 'extraordinary care and trouble'. They were supervised by a network of local inspectors, some of them clergymen or gentry, who acted on behalf of the Hospital, reporting directly to the governors.

The Wheathampstead Militia Lists from 1758 to 1796 name all those eligible for military service, recording most inhabitants of the village prior to the advent of census returns in 1841. They show that six of the seven Wheathampstead nurses were members of labouring families living on Luton Lane, now Lower Luton Road.

Children who were placed out with nurses are recorded in the Nursery Books in the Foundling Hospital archive. Each child admitted to the Hospital was given a number and a new name so he or she could make a completely fresh start and so the birth mother could be assured of confidentiality at a time when illegitimacy bore a severe social stigma.

On 4 October 1757 the Hospital named a male child John Cascade, number 5891. He was four weeks old, dressed in a 'striped linnen gown' and had been christened before he was admitted. His nurse in Wheathampstead was Rachel Alice/Alice (née Bigg). Rachel was born in Wheathampstead and baptised at St Helen's in 1736. She married Joseph Alice/Alice from Bushey on Christmas Day 1754 and they had at least two children. John Cascade remained with Rachel in Wheathampstead until he was about seven.

During the General Reception six branch hospitals were established in various parts of the country to cope with the growing numbers of children. Ackworth Hospital in Yorkshire was considered the healthiest branch and on 29 September 1764 John Cascade set out on the six-day journey there. It must have been a bewildering experience for a small child, and over the years a number of foundlings ran away from the London and branch hospitals to return to their nurses, with whom they had formed a close attachment. After

his education, largely vocational at this time, John Cascade was apprenticed on 3 July 1769 to William Walker, a cutler of Wadsley Bridge, Ecclesfield, near Sheffield. He was taught a specific local trade and, after his apprenticeship, made a life for himself in Sheffield. His daughter, Sarah, was baptised at Sheffield Cathedral in 1783, when he was established as a cutler and he continued to live with his wife, Ann, in a town with a cutlery industry dating back centuries.

Nurse Keziah Adams, born in Wheathampstead on 18 June 1737 and baptised at St Helen's, was the daughter of John and Rachel Bigg, (she may have been related to Rachel Alce/Alice, née Bigg). She married Thomas Adams, a labourer from the village, on 23 November 1758 and over 18 years they had six children, their first son named Thomas after his father, born on 2 July 1759.

Keziah Adams's first foundling was about a month old when she was admitted into the Hospital on 25 July 1759. Some babies arrived with a token such as a coin, button or ribbon, or with a piece of fabric or a note attached to their clothing or wrists. These items were retained with their Billet entry, providing a means of identification and in the hope that the mother or parents would one day be able to reclaim their child.



A piece of fabric left by a mother

Only around three per cent of the 27,000 children admitted to the Foundling Hospital were ever reclaimed. Some mothers may have died in childbirth and others from poverty and disease in the intervening years. Many simply could not afford another mouth to feed.

The child received by Keziah Adams was named Elizabeth Botley by the Hospital and her number was 13526. She had been left with a handwritten note, which read:

Elizabeth Savage Raiss mus

Born July 9 1759 and Baptized July 17

Original names were not registered on Billet entries and this name was indecipherable. Elizabeth Botley was placed in Wheathampstead on 2 August 1759, a month after Keziah Adams had given birth to her first child. She remained with Keziah and her growing family until 24 August 1767, when she was sent to Ackworth Hospital to receive basic education before being apprenticed. Elizabeth's apprenticeship began on 3 December 1769 when she was 10, with John Lodge, a clothier in the parish of Almondbury in Yorkshire. Foundlings apprenticed from Ackworth tended to remain in the area and some can therefore be traced in later years. Like John Cascade, Elizabeth Botley made a life for herself in Yorkshire, marrying John Brook at All Hallows Church, Almondbury on 15 December 1783. Foundling girls were not taught to write and both she and her husband made their marks on their marriage certificate. Their son, William, dedicated on 21 September 1788 at the Baptist Church in Lindley, near Huddersfield, followed his mother into the textile trade and became a hand loom weaver.

In Wheathampstead in October 1759, soon after receiving Elizabeth Botley, Keziah accepted another child, number 13881. The Billet entry stated that she was six weeks old on arrival at the Hospital and, like many children during the General Reception, had travelled a great distance. A piece of plain woven fabric and a note were attached to her, probably written by a semi-literate acquaintance of her parents:

This child was born Augus the 2 at Namptwich in Cheshire and hit was baltized by the Revarant Mr Adarley of namptwich and hit comes by hits fathors and hits mothars consent and all frendes and hir name is called Ann Wood.

During the General Reception anyone could anonymously hand in a baby through a hatch in the wall at the Hospital, day or night. The names Wood and

Adarley were both common in Cheshire at the time so is not possible to trace this child or her parents with any certainty. Keziah received Mary Wood, named Ruth Adams by the Hospital, on 4 October 1759, but sadly she died on 6 June 1760, a common fate of countless foundlings, who were often frail and undernourished. Mary Wood's parents, having given their consent to her admittance to the Hospital, may never have found out what happened to her.

A child named Jane Dockwra, number 10931, arrived at the Hospital on 21 December 1758 and was cared for in Wheathampstead by nurse, Ann Cobram, and her husband, Joseph, who had two young children of their own. Their foundling died 'of fits' in 1759.

A similar fate befell Evan Sloane, number 5854, who was admitted on 30 September 1757. He was three weeks old and had been christened, but was 'clothed in rags'. Sent initially to Welwyn, he was moved on to nurse Susannah Hobbs in Wheathampstead on 20 April 1758. Her husband, William, worked as a labourer for Henry Sharp, the miller at Pickford Mill on the river Lea beyond Batford, and they had a son, born in 1756. Evan Sloane died in August 1758, just a few months after arriving in Luton Lane in Wheathampstead.

Nurse Susannah Hobbs was more fortunate with her other foundling, Sarah Blackerby, who arrived from the parish of St Martin-in-the-Fields on 6 July 1757, was christened by the Hospital on 16 July and numbered 5179. After her time with the Hobbs family, she was sent to Ackworth Hospital. From there, on 10 July 1768, when she 11, she was apprenticed in 'household business' until she was 21 to Thomas Coates, a farmer in Coneysthorpe, in the parish of Barton, in Yorkshire. When her apprenticeship was completed, Sarah had two sons, baptised in Barton in 1775 and 1776, and named George and John Blackerby. She seems to have been an unmarried mother.

Foundling Jonathan Bernard, number 10334, was born on 1 November 1758. He was sent to nurse Elizabeth Wilkinson, who lived in Luton Lane with her husband, William, a labourer, and their daughter, Sarah, born on 14 July 1758 and baptised at St Helen's. After his time in Wheathampstead, Jonathan was also sent to Ackworth Hospital and was then employed in husbandry by a farmer named Wosindin of Wragby in Yorkshire. The date of his indenture was 21 December 1768, when he was ten years old.

Nurse Elizabeth Gattard/Gathard and her husband, William, a labourer in Bower Heath, a hamlet of Wheathampstead, cared for Mark Hadham, foundling number 11173. He also went to Ackworth Hospital and at the age of 10, was apprenticed in husbandry to William Dove, a farmer from Newton-on-Ouse in north Yorkshire. Children apprenticed in country districts had the advantage of growing up away from the grime and disease of London. Elizabeth's Gattard/Gathard's other founding, Sarah Nuttall, number 8463, was less fortunate. She arrived in Wheathampstead on 11 May 1758 and died a month later on 3 June.

Elizabeth Cook of Wheathampstead nursed Jonathan Deal, foundling 10758, admitted to the Hospital on 7 December 1758. He had not been christened but was better dressed than many babies, with a cap, gown of flowered cotton, a waistcoat and two flannel blankets bound with white silk. He was sent immediately to Wheathampstead on 9 December 1758. He returned to the London Foundling Hospital for his education and was then apprenticed in 'household business', to James Sperinck of Castle Street, Marylebone, an apothecary and chemist, on 26 April 1769, at the age of 11.

As the Foundling Hospital children joined the families of their nurses, local inspectors, who selected nurses from their area, were a vital part of the country nursing service. They monitored the children's care, supervised their medical attention and organised their transport back to London or to branch hospitals. Mr Law, probably William Law of Redbourn, the inspector in charge of the nurses at Wheathampstead, would also have arranged the funerals of foundlings who died. He had responsibility for many nurses, including more than a dozen in each of the villages of Harpenden, Redbourn and Kimpton. The correspondence of inspectors shows that any form of neglect or maltreatment resulted in a child's immediate removal from the nurse's home. Records show that fewer than five per cent of children were removed in this way, suggesting that nurses predominantly met the standards of care expected by the Foundling Hospital governors.

As six of the seven Wheathampstead nurses lived on Luton Lane, they must have known one another and shared problems and experiences. At a time when Sir Benet Garrard was baronet at Lamer and Octavian Reynolds was the rector, these seven local women from the labouring community stepped up to

care for Foundling Hospital babies alongside their own children. The Foundling Hospital Archive online, in conjunction with the Militia Lists, give a snapshot of their lives and those of their foundlings that would have been impossible to access from the vast quantity of original Foundling Hospital documents. The otherwise forgotten stories of these nurses add a new dimension to the history of eighteenth-century Wheathampstead, highlighting the significant role played by these ordinary women at a desperate time for the children in their care and a period of crisis at the Hospital. Perhaps more significantly, these stories put local history in the context of a wider world, featuring the conditions and tragedies of poverty in the capital and across the country, while the charitable roles and decisions made by governors, staff, record-keepers and local inspectors of the Foundling Hospital enabled the nurses in Wheathampstead to help secure a future life for some of the foundlings.

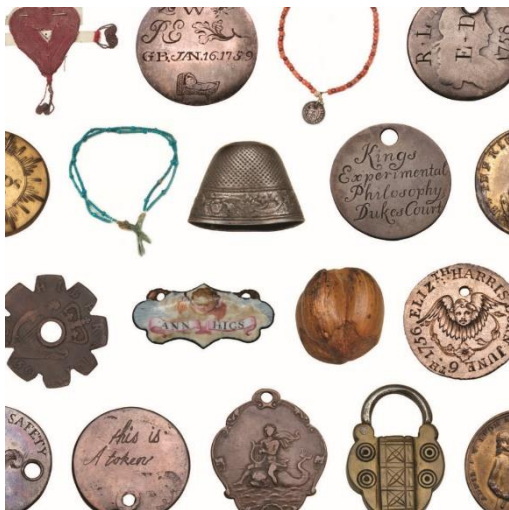
After the four disastrous years of the General Reception, when children were accepted into the Hospital indiscriminately and thousands died, the Parliamentary grant scheme was terminated. A limited number of infants were then accepted each year and the governors tried to admit only those whose cases were judged 'deserving'. Over the next two centuries the Foundling Hospital successfully provided children with life chances they would not otherwise have received, providing nursing, clothing, medical care and education.

The main building of the Foundling Hospital in Bloomsbury was demolished in the 1920s and the institution moved out of London. The administrative building, situated in the grounds of the old hospital at 40 Brunswick Square, was constructed in the 1930s. In 1954 the charity was renamed the Thomas Coram Foundation for Children. Now known as Coram, it is a vibrant group of charities and organisations helping more than a million children every year. Their work includes adoption and fostering, child and family support, children's right and legal advice, and education and skills for the future.



The Foundling Hospital Museum, Brunswick Square

The Foundling Museum in Bloomsbury opened in 2004 and tells the story of the Hospital, displays some of the poignant tokens left by mothers of foundlings, and incorporates many architectural features of the original eighteenth-century building.



Sources:

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