

A visit to the Foundling Museum.

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The Foundling Museum is located at 40, Brunswick Square, London WC1, in a refurbished building, next to the site of the original Foundling Hospital. The Foundling Hospital was founded as “The Coram Hospital for the Maintenance and Education of Exposed and Deserted Children” by Captain Thomas Coram. The museum holds the Foundling Collection, which relates the history of the Hospital, with stories and moving images of the lives of the 27,000 foundlings that the hospital cared for from 1739 to 1954. The beautifully restored Georgian period rooms and staircase with their collections of art convey the feeling of the period.

Coram was a shipbuilder who made his fortune in the North American colonies in the 1720s and 1730s. He returned to England, a childless man. Horrified by the sight of the numerous abandoned and homeless children, he petitioned for and obtained the land for the hospital. The original 56 acres of Lamb’s Conduit Fields was purchased from the Earl of Salisbury. There was a west wing for the boys and an east wing for the girls. The hospital chapel was opened in 1753, between the two wings and was partly financed by concerts given by the composer George Frederick Handel, who was one of the elected Governors of the Hospital. The hospital/orphanage quickly became popular with poor mothers – so much so that, eventually, these mothers had to petition to have their children accepted. Touchingly, they left mementoes in the hope that their children would have some remembrance of them. Sadly, for many of these children, there was no loving family home. They were well fed and housed in the hospital; they were taught to read the Anglican Catechism; they were trained in skills to prepare them for a life of manual labour – agricultural or manufacturing work or the royal navy for boys, domestic service for girls. At age 10 years the boys were apprenticed and the girls at age 11 years.

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The hospital had its own doctors. The physicians, Richard Mead, Robert Nesbitt and Hans Sloane (the President of the Royal Society and founder of the Chelsea Physic Garden) were members of the original General Committee, who were elected as Governors to run the hospital. Inoculation against smallpox was enforced on all new admissions by Dr. Richard Conyers, another Governor.

The Foundling Hospital was a private charity and initially, all children admitted had to be healthy and under two months old. From 1756 to 1760, the hospital received a direct grant from Parliament and accepted all children who were presented. From 1801, children had to be illegitimate or the children of fathers killed in military service and were under the age of one year. Mothers had to give two character references and “preference was given to mothers who had been the victims of male

deception, such as a false promise of marriage”.

The hospital was demolished in 1926 when the hospital, due to financial difficulties, sold the land to a developer; only the outlying buildings and the Georgian colonnades remain. The colonnades are part of Coram’s Fields; London’s first public children’s playground that opened in July 1936 on seven acres of the original hospital site. It is still a playground and park for children living in or visiting London. No adult can enter Coram’s Fields without a child. The playground has a full range of after school and holiday activities as well as events for the under-5s and there is a community nursery for children aged 2 to 4 years.

The Hospital Governors bought back the northern part of the original site; the original infirmary, laundry, swimming baths and number 40, Brunswick Square. Although the London headquarters remained at 40, Brunswick Square, the Hospital itself moved to a purpose built building at Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire in 1935 and remained there until the institution finally closed in 1954. The Hospital then became the “Thomas Coram Foundation for Children”.

The state now provided for abandoned or illegitimate children. The 1946 National Health Service Act and the 1948 National Assistance Act made local authorities responsible for provision of help to unmarried mothers. The 1948 Children Act made the Home Office responsible for child welfare and local authorities had to provide specialised social workers to protect vulnerable children.

The Foundling Museum was established as an independent organisation in 1998 by the childcare charity, ”Thomas Coram Foundation for Children”, now known as “Coram”. The museum has the original eighteenth century manuscript of the Messiah by Handel and a portrait of Thomas Coram by William Hogarth. Hogarth was a benefactor of the Hospital. The museum holds concerts as well as special events for children of all ages, and there is a foundling community choir.

It is well worth a visit, if only to reflect on past attempts to help unwanted children and the children of unmarried mothers at a time when child poverty was a serious problem and there was no state assistance. As author Jamila Gavin says, in the foreword to her children’s novel “Coram Boy”:

“It was entirely a matter of luck if a child was kindly and lovingly reared, and it was to redress this that Captain Thomas Coram opened his hospital in 1741. It was people like him who gradually changed the whole perception of child care and touched the conscience of the nation”.

Useful websites:

www.foundlingmuseum.org.uk

www.coram.org.uk

www.coramfields.org

www.ich.ucl.ac.uk

www.medicalmuseums.org