

Take this Token transcript

Episode 1: Tokens of Love

Kathleen Palmer: A mother threads a pierced coin onto a ribbon and ties it around her baby's wrist. She gives her little boy a last kiss and then hands him over into what she hopes will be a better life.

Hello, I'm Kathleen Palmer, Curator of Exhibitions and Displays at London's Foundling Museum. *Take this Token* is a podcast about tiny objects steeped in history and emotion: the Foundling tokens.

Episode 1: Tokens of Love.

The Foundling Hospital was one of Britain's first children's homes established in 1739. In its early days, anyone giving a baby into its care would also leave a token. This might be a ring, a medal, a poem, a playing card, or even a hazelnut.

These precious, highly personal objects are on display today at the Foundling Museum. We've been talking to people with a connection to the museum, including artists, care experienced young creatives, historians and former pupils of the Foundling Hospital.

Each of them has chosen one token that speaks to them across a gap of over 250 years. In this podcast, they share what they know, what they feel and what they imagine. Imagination is a key word here because unlike a lot of museum collections, there's a limit to what we can say with certainty about most of the tokens. Anonymity and mystery are woven into their story.

We know that tokens had a practical purpose. They were a way for parents to prove their identity if one day they were able to return and claim their child from the Foundling Hospital. The baby's names were changed as soon as they arrived. There was a huge stigma around so-called illegitimacy in the eighteenth century so this was to protect unmarried mothers, as much as it was about giving their children a fresh start.

Tokens worked a bit like passwords. A mother returning for her child had to describe the object she left and give the date they were admitted. This proved who she was and meant hospital staff could identify her child.

It's important to remember that children growing up in the Foundling Hospital, never saw what their parents had left with them. The tokens were wrapped up in the admissions papers and locked safely away by hospital staff. For the Hospital, they were an administrative tool, but for many parents, they were a last act of love, protection or communication.

Skipping forward a hundred years to the nineteenth century, we find curious Hospital governors opening up the archives to put the tokens on display. This separated hundreds of token objects from their documentation. Most remain disconnected from the child they were left with, or with only fragments of a story. Despite – or maybe because of – the gaps and mysteries that surround them, the tokens are what many visitors to the Foundling museum respond to most strongly, the things they remember long after their visit.

Today, we begin at the heart of the matter – with love.

Sally Holloway: I think love tokens are very much still alive and well today because people still navigate their relationships through objects,

Kathleen Palmer: That's Sally Holloway, historian of love, courtship, marriage and romantic relationships in Georgian England. Tokens left with babies at the Foundling Hospital sometimes had an earlier life as love gifts exchanged by the child's parents, as Sally explains.

Sally Holloway: The token I have chosen is what is known as a “lucky bender” which has been made from a silver shilling. And it's got the edges bent upwards. So one side is bent towards the viewer and one side is bent away. And on the one side you can see a bust of Queen Anne in profile and then around the edge of the coin, it says “Anne by the grace of God” in Latin and underneath it's got the letter E and so that's important, 'cause it tells us that it was made at the Edinburgh Mint in 1707, following the Acts of Union between England and Scotland, leading to the creation of the kingdom of Great Britain.

So it's a politically important object as well as a socially and culturally and emotionally important object. And then if you turn the coin over the coin has been smoothed completely blank. And you can just see the

remains of a crown and over this has been carved the initials T R with a star in between. So this is probably the initials of the name that the mother who chose this token had chosen for her child, but then as soon as they arrived at the hospital, they would've been given a new name.

So it's a fascinating object because it kind of materialises the child's identity before they became a Foundling. I chose this token because it's an item in which we can see the hand of the maker very clearly.

So it's made from silver, easy to bend compared to certain other coins, and also had certain superstitious properties, as sort of a lucky material. A lot of lucky tokens were made from silver. I chose it because you can see how someone's bent it, you can see how someone smoothed it to a blank face. You can see how they've etched the initial T and R by hand and how they've applied quite a lot of force in punching these two holes through the coin as well. So it's an object which you can imagine someone holding in their hand, and very consciously choosing to imbue it with these particular meanings, to bring it into existence as a token of love.

Before this shilling was used as a token with a Foundling, it might have been used for example, to buy a playbook or a shoulder of mutton, perhaps. That's something Joseph Addison talks about in this tale he wrote called 'The Adventures of a Shilling', which was published in 1710. And in it, the shilling comes to life and it tells its life story, and all of the various things it might have been spent on, and then eventually it's used as a token of love in a similar way to this token might have been. A milk maid bends the shilling, and gives it her sweetheart while saying "to my love and from my love". And then a couple go on to get married several days later.

So this might be the kind of ritual in which this shilling might have been involved, 'cause it's been bent in a very similar way. So a couple might come together and clasp hands and make these mutual promises of love, and pledge that as soon as the moment came, as soon as they were financially able, as soon as they were both in the right position, they would get married.

So the shilling could have a really important role in making a contract. It's the act of modifying it that holds the promise. But the key thing here is that it's in the future tense. They are saying "I *will* marry you", not "I

marry you now". And unless they then consummated it, it wasn't legally binding.

So many couples made these promises. They exchanged the coins, but if they're saying it in the future tense, like, "I'm going to marry you, but not right now", it wasn't enforceable legally. And so, you know, of course it's likely that this shilling would've been exchanged by a couple who pledged themselves to one another thinking, this is a promise of marriage. We will marry in the future and then perhaps the man would've then gone back on his promise and, and married somebody else.

And so many of the mothers of foundlings might have found themselves in this position when they thought they were going to marry, they thought they had some sort of secure, reliable, steady bond. And then they find themselves with child. You know, they might have entered into sexual activity, thinking their relationship was secure and then actually discovered that it's not.

And then all we have left of that relationship is this. If a couple had bound themselves together in this way, the expectation was still that they would refrain from sexual activity. So if she then tried to compel the contract and say, "Right now we have to get married - we've had a child", she would still be censured for engaging in sex before marriage. So you were pledged, but it wasn't secure, as so many of the mothers of foundlings found out.

And we can see some of the complexities, in Henry Fielding's novel *Tom Jones*, which was published in 1749 – so not that long after the hospital opened its doors. And in the novel, the servant, Jenny Jones tells of the broken promises of marriage that led to her ruin.

She says: "I was betrayed by the most solemn promises of marriage, nay in the eye of heaven, I was married." So she's saying, you know, they've made their oaths before God, but importantly, not in church and not legally, and not in a sense that you know, the law and the state recognize. So people did keep exchanging coins, 'cause it had been for centuries such an important part of these rituals and contracting marriage. But it was more because they were so symbolically important than because you could actually do anything legally.

But if you had a secure relationship and then a man deserted you, you could still sue him for breach of promise for damages, to your hurt

feelings and your destroyed reputation. And you could use a coin like this as evidence, but you couldn't compel him to marry you.

We can situate the coin amongst much wider collections of love tokens that courting couples were exchanging. The majority of tokens would've been given from men to women. So things like bunches of flowers, engraved coins, sweet meats and cakes and gingerbread, stay busks that women would've worn down the front of their corsets and a lot of the objects would've been engraved as well. And etched with people's initials and symbols of love, like hearts and flowers and birds and doves. And then women would've made gifts for men as well. They would've made them handkerchiefs, for example, and they might have exchanged gifts, like locks of hair as well that were particularly important. Hair didn't fade or decay over time, like everlasting love.

I think what makes the foundling tokens so poignant for me is partly that they're so small, they're small objects that people would've had on their person. Many of them are from the body. They're things like coins that you would've had in your pocket or benders like this that you could hold in your hand. And then some people also, as in the coin here, punched holes in it. So you could potentially thread a ribbon through it and wear it around your neck with it dangling quite close to the heart. So it's a tactile object that you're wearing against the skin. You're warming it with your body. The object is representing your heart, your emotional connection to another person, your feelings.

They're all things that are designed to touch and sort of run your finger over to remember a promise that had been made, or remember a bond that you would have, or to make a pledge in some way, a pledge to a child or a pledge to a suitor. So they're very personal. And you can imagine someone coming to the hospital with it in their pocket.

It's very interesting to think about, well, how did people take these small objects that were so everyday, but imbue them with so much meaning.

Kathleen Palmer: Imbued with meaning that's exactly what the tokens are. And that meaning comes both from the person who chose the token to leave with their child in the eighteenth century, and from any of us who engage with these objects imaginatively today.

Bez: I can't imagine how much pain that father was going through, knowing that he can't do anything else, that this is out of his hands, that he's powerless

Kathleen Palmer: That's Bez, a trainee at the Foundling Museum. For him, a little pen knife handle symbolizes a father's love for his son.

Bez: This is my second traineeship, helping to help others at the traineeship. And the token I've chosen to talk about today is the pen knife handle. 'Cause it speaks to me and relates to me as a father. It's a nice yellowish colour. It has a floral design on it. It was one of the few tokens that I imagine a father would've given to their kid. I think as a dad, you probably look at your kids as a mini version of yourself.

So I would imagine a fisherman who perhaps had a pocket knife to cut fishing net lines. He would've given a miniature version of it to his son, to remind him of the heritage of where he came from and how his family used to make their money. Because as we know, a lot of people's heritage is in their grand, grand grandfathers' careers and what they used to do.

So I'm sure it was important to them for the kid to know where he came from.

The token I've chosen connects with me because I'm a father myself. At the same time, I've been through the care system and I've felt some of the difficulties that lots of people feel when they go through the care system. It's hard to see a father leaving their child at the Hospital. To take the hardest, the riskiest, the most unknown options to make sure your kids are alright, is something that's, that's really touching.

It's signified by the most smallest, tiniest thing in life. It could something that's been given to you as a present. And it could just be a piece of cloth that's woven by your mother. It can be so meaningful and can hold so much value, 'cause that's the only thing that can trace you back. And you also see how strong the love was, cause that's the only thing that gave value to that token was the love of the parent that left that token. Being a father myself that touched me quite a lot, having that connection.

Katheen: Thinking about the Foundling tokens through our own experiences and identities is a way of bringing them to life. Do *you* own any meaningful objects? Anything that feels a bit like a token?

Sally Holloway: I have received a love token. One item that my partner's given me, which I've kept, is when we were on holiday many years ago, and he went to the local flower market and came back with some flowers for me and I kept them and I dried one and now, more than 15 years later, and it's still there.

The flower would've been dead and discarded and rotten if I hadn't've preserved it in that moment. So it's interesting, I think, how we take these transient things and preserve them. And the act of preserving it and changing it is what makes it a meaningful object. So that's sort of how emotional objects are created, both then and now really.

Bez: One of the objects I value quite a lot, and I see as on par as some of the tokens in the museum, is a pocket watch that my dad had. I kind of remember as a little kid always seeing it in his pocket and taking it with him everywhere. And even though I don't use it, I look after it. And since my dad passing away I always kind of felt like it was a piece of him that kind of remained behind. There was a poem that was really dear to my dad, and that's stayed with me as well. That's why it is quite interesting and beautiful to see that tokens don't necessarily have to be physical objects. That connection that you have with people who loved you can be – whether in the shape of memories, if it's the shape of physical item – it'll never be out of your mind. It shapes who you are and it builds your character.

If I was to leave behind something that represents a token or represents my love to somebody that I hold dear to myself, such as my son or my daughter, it has to be something that lasts a very long time. I think I would like to leave a timepiece for my kids to have, and remember me by. But I think the most important things are the memories that believe behind. And as we move into the digital world, the pictures, the movies, all the little experiences that you have together, all these learning experiences that they have with you, these are the tokens that they're going to have as they grow. So as you have more of these tokens, more of these memories, you build up a repertoire that cannot be represented by physical objects.

Kathleen Palmer: You can see Bez and Sally's tokens, along with many others, on display at the Foundling Museum, Brunswick Square in Bloomsbury, London.

The museum is open Tuesday to Saturday from 10 till 5 and Sunday, 11 till 5. For more information, visit Foundlingmuseum.org.uk, or find us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. In the next episode, a former Foundling Hospital pupil puts herself into the shoes of an eighteenth-century mother, as we look at tokens of protection, learning about eighteenth-century magic, ancient hand gestures, and a precious hazelnut.

You've been listening to *Take this Token*, a Foundling Museum podcast, with me, Kathleen Palmer, written and produced by Minnie Scott with Louis Mealing. Music by Ben Jacob.

Take this Token is supported by the Artisa Foundation.