

# Take this Token transcript

## Episode 2: Tokens of Protection

**Kathleen Palmer:** 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 2: Tokens of Protection.

The Foundling Hospital was one of Britain's first children's homes established in London in 1739. In its early days, anyone giving a baby into its care would also leave a token. This might be a ring, a metal, a poem, a playing card, or even a hazelnut. Many of these precious, highly personal objects are on display today at the Foundling Museum in Bloomsbury. We've been talking to people with a connection to the Museum. In this podcast, they take one token and share what they know, what they feel and what they imagine.

Today we're looking at one of the most powerful impulses for anyone leaving their child in someone else's care: protection.

**Indika:** you've given up a child, but you're still connected to them forever. And you're obviously still thinking about them. And the child will think of you.

**Kathleen Palmer:** Indika is a trainee on the Tracing Our Tales programme.

**Indika:** I've been a trainee at the Foundling Museum for a year and a half. I've done two art traineeships and the creative writing traineeship. I came back as a champion and helped teach the new trainees. And we've also done lots of workshops with children. My special connection to the Foundling Museum is that I've been in care and the Foundling Museum tells the story of care. I've chosen to talk about the hazelnut. And it's small and cute. If you put your finger and your thumb together, that's about the size of it. And it's brown, it's quite worn out, but it's got a

nice wooden texture, like those good quality tables that your grandparents have.

I chose this token because I felt connected to it as soon as I saw it. It reminds me of a memory I have when I was young. So I was walking home from school with my mum and my sisters, and it was autumn time and there were conkers on the tree. I remember being told about the conkers and my mum used to soak them in vinegar and she used to play with them. And that's why I was kind of drawn to the hazelnut. I always loved playing outside as a child. I used to make food for ants, with leaves and berries.

And I guess if I found a conker or a hazelnut outside, I would've made food for ants with nuts as well. So I imagined the story of the token was that the parent was desperate or didn't have much to give their child. And maybe on the way to the Hospital, they saw this hazelnut I know that hazelnuts were seen as protective things. And I think that's cute because you're giving a child something that's quite inexpensive but it has significant meaning – like you want that child to be protected forever on their journey in the Hospital. Also it's a hazelnut, it has a really hard shell. It kind of reminds me of a pregnant belly, protecting the baby inside.

When I saw the tokens for the first time, I felt amazed that you are still kind of the mothers who who gave their children to the Hospital were still connected to their children I think it's important that care leavers come to the museum because we need to know that the care system didn't just pop out out of nowhere. There is history to it. It's hundreds of years old, starting from the Foundlings, to us today.

**Kathleen Palmer** Even the humblest of objects can have great protective power, as Indika says. Picking up on this theme, here's Owen Davies.

**Owen Davies:** All the items in the collection clearly had some potency in one form or another, whether it was medical, magical, religious.

**Kathleen:** Owen been described as Britain's foremost academic expert on the history of magic.

**Owen:** To me, it's a fascinating insight into the human condition, and to understand popular religion you need to understand magic, and to understand magic you need to understand religion. Likewise, medicine and magic are very closely intertwined, as is religious healing as well. One of the tokens that particularly caught my eye here was the *mano fica*. And it's a roughly carved dark, probably wooden amulet, which represents an ancient symbol, which is where the thumb is inserted in between the index finger and the middle finger. The sign – what's called the fig sign – '*mano fica*' means 'fig hand'. And we do know that making that sign, putting your thumb between the index finger and the middle finger was done in popular culture. And it was done, as this amulet was created for, to protect against the evil eye. And it's fascinating 'cause here we have in the eighteenth century something which represents a tradition going back to the ancient world. We find Roman soldiers carrying these sorts of little amulets, often accompanied by phallic symbols as well. And this was understood as a phallic symbol as well as a protection against the evil eye. So it's kind of representing male and female sexual organs. And that link between sexual organs and protection it seems to be that really ancient link between sexual fertility and the idea of prosperity.

And what fascinates me about this is that there is no evidence that these *mano fica* black hand amulets were ever actually made in Britain. What this represents is clearly a trade in these amulets, across the Mediterranean into places like London, a hub of trade, but we also find examples these in eighteenth-century South America as well. It gets adopted as part of the slave trade, and becomes a kind of a cross-cultural item or amulet. For me it is so striking that this actually represents this extraordinary global story.

**Kathleen:** We often think of the eighteenth century as the period when rational thought defeated earlier superstitions. But not so as Owen's account of the *mano fica* token makes clear.

**Owen:** What's unique about this is we know, we can centre it at a time and a place, and amongst a certain group of people. We'll never know exactly what the *mano fica* in the collection meant to the woman who brought it with the child, and what they felt. We can but speculate. And *mano fica* is so associated with protection from evil eye and witchcraft that your first assumption's going to be that the woman – however she got it, through trade, whether her husband or partner was a sailor or

soldier had brought it back from travels abroad – that it was worn as protection and protection particularly for witchcraft.

I've done research on continued belief of witchcraft and fear of witchcraft in London through the eighteenth century, and it's *strong*. We don't see much of it because the Witchcraft Act of 1736 basically decriminalised the notion of witchcraft and said it was just a fraud. But witchcraft belief was strong in London and there are astrologer physicians and there are cunning folk practising in London. And it's just possible that she obtained it from one of these professionals.

I often refer to the Enlightenment as 'the so-called Enlightenment'. And obviously there is an enlightenment, so to speak, in terms of intellectual thinking, but for the common people nothing really changes from the seventeenth century and the age of the witch trials and into the eighteenth century. The only thing that changes is you can't go around prosecuting witches. And yet so much misfortune, health misfortune, misfortune in terms of agricultural or trade, was still commonly interpreted in terms of witchcraft. Because if the physicians can't actually do anything for you, you start searching for other alternatives and witchcraft – if you get someone like a professional or cunning person to identify it as a witchcraft – you can do something about it for once. 'Cause you could do something to the witch. Or you can get a charm, to protect you against witchcraft. So the *mano fica* doesn't in its essence have any medical properties. It's the very fact that you've attributed your illness or bad luck to someone else. And then you do something with that relationship.

When you look at it, it really does represent a long tradition, a venerable tradition, of what I call popular agency. By purchasing these, whether from a religious perspective, medical perspective or a magical perspective, it's in their control. It's something they've done. It's something they have. It's something they can give away. It's something they can take back. And that is a kind of a fundamental sense of the ways in which magic, religion and medicine operate.

We do know from records of people quite high up in society in the mid eighteenth century going to cunning folk, who still think their misfortune in business even, or trade was attributed to witchcraft. And astrology was rife and we have records of an American tradesman in the late eighteenth century coming over for trade purposes, then going visiting a

London astrologer to find out how their business is going to go. So, London is a vibrant magical culture.

Health and medicine in the eighteenth century, it's a very different world to health and medicine today in many respects. But underlying that, we do see continuities in the way in which people resort to alternative forms of therapy or medicine, that doesn't go away. And there is a vibrant alternative therapy world out there for personal healing. Objects like we see in the Collection, like coral necklaces, there's hundreds of people selling those on the internet for medical purposes today. For exactly the same purposes as people were purchasing them in eighteenth-century London. So there are connections there about the fundamental way in which people make their own decisions about how to treat their own ways in which they're feeling.

And so of the tokens, is it about the mothers passing on a protection to their children? Or is it because these have such emotional value because they're worn that giving them over is the most powerful feeling sense you can give when you're handing over your child? Is it the emotional power or is it the protective power? And I suspect it's both. We'll never know, but it raises these profound human issues of relations between child and mother, but also then between material aspects of what they imbue into the items that they hand over.

**Kathleen:** The little black hand amulet it also spoke to Lydia Carmichael. Lydia is one of the last generation brought up in the Foundling Hospital before its closure in 1954. She came into the Museum to share her unique perspective as a former residential pupil.

**Lydia Carmichael:** My name is Lydia Carmichael. My birth mother gave me to the Foundling Hospital when I was two months old. Then I was fostered with a family in the country until I was five years of age. When I was then taken up to the big school in Berkhamsted where I was a boarder for 10 years.

The token I have chosen is a black hand amulet. The moment I saw it close-up, it somehow resonated with me. I immediately imagined this young mother realising she was pregnant, in the future she would have to give her baby up, how lonely she must have been. I've thought about that a lot. It was almost as if I was going through her pregnancy. Then in my mind, I could see when the baby was handed to her. Having had babies myself, I was really quite upset because I think the joy this young

mother felt, but also the horror knowing she'd have to give her baby up. I don't know how long she was able to keep this baby, but I do think I realised just how devastated she would be when she took that baby to the Foundling Hospital. She obviously hoped that in the future, she could claim her baby, so she left this token there. And I think it's quite extraordinary because as far as I can understand, the token is a token that means she hoped this child would be well protected from any evils that might come in the child's life.

Now, I would just love to think that all our mothers felt that way. I'm sure they did, but this really is the main reason I chose this token above all others.

**Kathleen:** The Foundling Hospital had moved on from the token system long before Lydia was a pupil. But the idea of a chosen object still has a powerful appeal.

**Lydia:** Many times I have been asked as a Foundling child brought up in the Foundling Hospital, did my birth mother leave a token? So I've had to explain to everybody that it was only the eighteenth-century mothers. But looking at all those tokens, it was really quite overwhelming, terribly, terribly sad. It would've been rather than nice if my birth mother had been able to leave a token for me because they're so poignant and so emotional.

I still think there must have been some sort of connection. Even though my mother died at a young age and nobody ever came to claim me, I think it would've been rather lovely to have been able to see and maybe hold the token that my birth mother left for me. I feel now as if I've got a connection. Years ago, I didn't, but I think that is what the Foundling *Museum* has brought to all of us ex-Foundling children – because it's brought to life, certainly to me, these children from a couple of centuries ago. They're like my great, great ancestors.

**Kathleen:** You can see the hazelnut and the hand amulet chosen by Indika, Owen and Lydia, 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](http://foundlingmuseum.org.uk), or find us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

In the next episode, writer and artist Lemn Sissay and museum director Caro Howell imagine the impossible choices made by women leaving their babies at the Foundling Hospital, as they explore tokens and identity.

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.

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