

# Take this Token transcript

## Episode 3: Tokens of Identity

**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.

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.

Episode 3: Tokens of Identity.

Today, we hear from two great champions of the Foundling Museum, our director, Caro Howell, and writer and artist Lemn Sissay, who also happens to be a trustee here, and we are talking about tokens and identity.

As you might have heard in the first episode, the original function of the Foundling tokens was all about identity. If you were a parent who had left your baby at the Hospital, and later you returned to claim your child, describing the token you left was how you proved who you were. Understandably, people often assume the tokens were a way for parents to communicate something about their identity to their children. And almost certainly that desire informed many parents' choice of token. For them, the token must have felt like a way to tell their child: 'This is who you are. This is who I am.'

But in fact, children at the Foundling Hospital never saw the tokens that were left with them. Caro explains more.

**Caro Howell:** I think what's interesting about the tokens is that they were never seen by the children. They had a very practical function. If a

mother returned to claim her child, that would be the moment that the admission billet would be opened and in the billet would be the token and that would be part of the matching of child to parent.

It's really interesting that when I meet people who go, 'Oh yes, I know the Foundling Hospital!', and they will talk about the tokens, nine times out of ten they will say, 'and those little objects that the mothers left with the babies that the babies had to remind them of...'

And you go, no, no, no, no. The children would never have seen these tokens. They would never have known the tokens existed. But so strong is that gesture of hope to be reunited. And that hope is based on love, the love for the child that you don't want to give up.

The token I've chosen looks to all intents and purposes, like a coin about the size of a 10p piece, with a punctured hole at the top. So I imagine it might have had a ribbon attached to it, or been able to be worn around the neck. And it's metal, silver in colour, and it has engraved on it in quite beautiful script: 'King's Experimental Philosophy, Duke's Court'. Kings was Dr Erasmus King and Duke's Court was his home and he used to give public lectures on experimental philosophy, which would've been quite theatrical and performative. And really introducing the latest scientific developments and enlightenment knowledge to a general public. And there was a real thirst for knowledge and understanding of developments in science and astronomy. And he used to do daytime courses for ladies, and he would sell tickets for these and advertise these in his wife's lace shop.

So it's an interesting token, because we think of the mothers who came to give their babies over to the care of the Foundling Hospital as struggling financially, probably living in poverty, very likely uneducated – this is the image that we have, which I think in a lot of cases was probably true. But as a token, it opens other possibilities of who these women could be.

Now, the mother could have just found it on the street. Or she could have been a woman who was interested in the latest scientific developments, she could have gone to courses led by Erasmus King. What hopes did she have for herself? What ambitions did she have for herself? Was she a woman who saw different avenues for herself? And that like so many women, pregnancy, the birth of a child, will often set your imagined life's course on a very different route.

And I think this token for me it's really a form of time travel. As a woman in the twenty-first century looking through this token at the possible lives of women 300 years ago and where I might have been. Would I have been the kind of woman who would've gone to one of King's philosophy lectures? You know, with this token, you can't help but think, what would the child have thought if they'd seen this as the trace of their mother? Would they have thought, like me, she was a woman with an inquiring mind, she was a woman who was interested in the world around her, worlds beyond this world? Her gaze was on further horizons. And maybe she got there. Maybe in giving me up, she found the place she was looking for. She went out, she explored new roads. She chartered new territories. She set new courses.

I think I would be inspired by that as this passing whisper of a clue as to who my mother might have been.

When the tokens were removed from the individual admission billets in the middle of the nineteenth century, nobody thought to make a note of which token belonged to which baby. So although work by amazing researchers has managed to identify some of the tokens with the babies, most of them are effectively orphaned. And this lack of knowledge, both in terms of who was the baby, but also this vast unknown landscape about the mother, the parents, their situation, how this came to be. I think not unsurprisingly the tokens continue to be the most extraordinary sort of wellspring of inspiration for artists of all disciplines – for musicians and writers and visual artists – because they are at one in the same time, so specific and so abstract. There is so much mystery around them.

**Kathleen Palmer:** Talking of creative responses, let's turn to Lemn Sissay. As a poet Lemn understands the power of words, the right words, more than most. His chosen token is a little piece of mother of pearl inscribed, 'James son of James Concannon, Gent. Late or now of Jamaica, 1757'.

**Lemn Sissay:** So it's really interesting that these tokens were used as an administrative tool for the institution to identify where the child is from. But for the mother, every letter that she has written on this token is emotionally charged. This is the only connection that that mother has with the child outside of the DNA between them.

There's so much in these eleven words. There are words used which tell us so much about the mother who wrote it and about the father whose name she includes in it.

A name is a keyhole into which, if you look, you will see a vast room: the first room of the house of family.

His name's James Concannon. So although she says from Jamaica, I don't know his race. I don't know if he's African Jamaican, there are lots of white Jamaicans and there are lots of Indian Jamaicans, etc. And Concannon is an Irish name as well. The mother will have given the child, the father's second name. His name is James, the son's name is James. She even says he may be dead and he may be alive.

If she's saying, he may be dead, that possibly means that he had said to her, 'I'm going to look after you'. If she's saying he may be dead, she's also offering him the opportunity to *be* dead. So it is absolutely infused, soaked, imbued with love, loss and connection. So nothing about these words is accidental.

I have a letter of my mother pleading for me back to a social worker whose name was Norman. Now, for the first 15 years of my life, I thought *my* name was Norman. I have a reply letter from the social worker to my mother, refusing me to her where he calls me Lemn. So there you have evidence of the first lie. The lie was that my social worker had already named me after himself, given me to foster parents and said, 'you can keep this child forever'. He was writing back to my mother using the name Lemn, *after* he had illegally named me Norman, because the name on my birth certificate is Lemn Sissay.

So I have proof of the lie in the writing. And that letter from my mother actually led me to find her. I have the equivalent of a token in my mother's handwriting, which I received when I was 15. And I have analysed that letter and I have gone back through that letter to the time when she was 21 years of age and I've followed her footsteps from there.

And I've seen through her writing where the stresses were in her life. As if I could see the imprint and the load that she was carrying based on the patterns inside that imprint. And then I followed her footsteps from that first shock of losing me to the moment that I walked up the steps to her

house and could hear her shuffling, her real footsteps, on the other side of the door.

So I know the value of a token.

**Kathleen:** Both Caro and Lemn are alive to the fact that the tokens are objects that can move us to tears. But they have words of advice.

**Caro:** I think there's something very powerful about being in a space where it is absolutely permitted to be overcome with emotion. I've never, *never* worked in a museum or gallery where it is so common for not just visitors, but staff to find themselves in tears. And that's as it should be. And I think that sense of intimacy and humanity in generosity is what makes this museum special.

But the one thing this museum and our story is not about is sentimentality. Sentimentality is an emotion which is unfocused and in a sense... easy. And I think the kind of love that we're talking about that is held within these collections is really the strongest, toughest, most powerful kind of love there is.

**Lemn:** People are often moved by the tokens. They bring people to tears quite often. But I want people to have a more immersive experience with the tokens. Sometimes our tears, although they are an expression of empathy, they can actually separate us from the power of a piece of work. Almost as if your own tears can blur the image.

So once you've had tears, which is okay, then dry your eyes, *dry your eyes*, and take a long, hard look at those tokens and see them again. And see the women behind them. The strength of those women. You know, one of the strongest things that a human being can do is to give away a child so that it can have a better life. And that should be seen as an act of heroism, heroine-ism, above all acts in society. But the woman who gives away her child for a better life is not seen as a heroine. She's often seen as a harlot, as uncaring, when in fact what she has done is one of the most caring, selfless acts any human being can do for another.

**Kathleen:** You can see the tokens chosen by Lemn and Caro, 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 season ticket for Vauxhall Gardens unlocks stories of pleasure, gossip and whale tallow. And we hear about the detective work involved in matching a child and token separated for centuries.

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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