

# Take this Token transcript

## Episode 4: Tokens of History

**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 4: Tokens of History

Functional, decorative, sentimental, or superstitious – as well as being objects with deeply personal meaning, the tokens can also give us extraordinary insights into London life in the eighteenth century. Many of them are items that ordinary people would've carried in their pockets and used or worn every day. They're little passports to other times and other lives. Today we time travel with two historians, David Coke and Gillian Clark. David has chosen a token that gets us into the most fashionable party venue in town.

**David Coke:** This is one of the Foundling tokens. They're all rather small as this is. But this is a rather special one because it was created from one of the season tickets to Vauxhall Gardens.

Vauxhall Gardens was a pleasure garden in eighteenth-century London, where you would go of an evening to listen to music and to meet people and to enjoy yourself. So you would show one of these at the entrance as you went in and you'd be let in for free for all the season.

Jonathan Tyers, who was the proprietor of Vauxhall Gardens, was having great problems with forged tickets. So he produced these metal tickets as season tickets. And you'd clip it to your watch chain and then it would live in your waist coat pocket all the time you had your watch there. And if you had a season tickets people would say, 'oh, what's that you've got on your watch chain?' 'Oh, that's my season ticket for Vauxhall Gardens. Haven't you got one?' So then everybody else would want one as well, which was quite clever of Jonathan Tyers.

And then when you went to Vauxhall Gardens in the evening, you would fish it out and show it to the attendant at the gate. So they tend to be slightly worn, which this one is. You can't see some of the detail on it, but on the face of this token is a representation of Arion and the dolphin, from classical myth whereby a chap who had been thrown off a ship, because he was a prisoner. But because he was such a great musician, he was saved from the sea by a dolphin who picked him up and took him back to land.

Of course Vauxhall Gardens was very interested in musicians. It was the place to go. Everybody went there. Everybody talked about the music that was being played. Everybody had heard about it. Everybody wanted to go there. And to go to Vauxhall Gardens of an evening, you would cross the river, not usually by a bridge, because there was only one bridge at that time, which was London Bridge. You would cross the river by a little ferry boat, so rowing boat. And that was all part of the excitement and all part of the separation from the world of every day, the world of work, the world of stress and worry to another world the other side of the river, which was all pleasure and relaxation and lovely evenings and listening to the nightingales and listening to the music and watching other people and just having a wonderful time. So the trip to Vauxhall was actually part of the evening's experience.

And this ticket of course was part of that. This is what you'd have to have to get into Vauxhall Gardens in the evening, and to listen to the music, to enjoy the refreshments and to meet your friends and to see the other people who were there. And some of the other people were celebrities of the day, they were great beauties, or they were the duke of this or the princess of that. And you could then have a good week of gossip with your friends about who you saw at Vauxhall Gardens. And what they were wearing and who they were with and what they ate for their supper. So Vauxhall was a great supplier of gossip and information about what was going on in London.

What might not have been quite so nice is just the general aroma, partly of stale people, but also partly because Vauxhall Gardens was a night-time entertainment, and it was illuminated, but of course not by electricity in those days, this was by oil lamps and the oil that fuelled the lamps was whale oil. You can't get that now, but if you've ever smelled burning whale oil, it's not a very good smell. And that would've been probably the overriding smell at Vauxhall Gardens. So this little token really represents an evening at Vauxhall Gardens.

It is said that the Vauxhall season tickets were designed by William Hogarth. Now Hogarth was an artist who was involved in a lot of money-making projects at the time, he was also involved in charities. He was involved at the Foundling Hospital, of course, but he was also involved at Vauxhall Gardens because he had a house in Lambeth near Vauxhall Gardens, and advised Jonathan Tyers on how Vauxhall Gardens would appeal most to the visiting public. And it's entirely possible that Hogarth in fact, was the designer of these tickets. There is a certain romance to that as well, that an artist as famous as Hogarth would design something as small as a season ticket. And of course, Hogarth was trained by a silver chaser, so he would've known what he was doing and how to design something of this sort to make it look as smart and as appealing as possible.

The back is plain, except for an engraved name. And there you have the name of Mr. Arnold on the back with a number. So Mr. Arnold was the man who bought this season ticket in 1737, which was when they were produced. These were the first season tickets at Vauxhall Gardens. And he would've paid a guinea for this ticket. And he would probably have visited Vauxhall Gardens a number of times during the season,

Mr. Arnold must have been relatively wealthy in order to afford a guinea to buy the ticket in the first place. We don't actually know who Mr. Arnold was, but he would've been a wealthy person, maybe a fashionable person as well, maybe even from the minor aristocracy.

There are all sorts of reasons why something like this might have become a Foundling token. Maybe somebody found it. Maybe it was given away by Mr. Arnold to one of his servants. Maybe Mr. Arnold himself kept it and later passed it on to a girlfriend who had had an unwanted child. I like to think maybe that it was an illegitimate child of Mr. Arnold, who was at the Foundling Hospital, who actually had this as his token or her token. I think is an extraordinary story that it tells.

**Kathleen:** Now let's turn away from the lights and music of Vauxhall. As Gillian Clark tells us the story of one Foundling child and her token. Gillian has been researching the Foundling tokens for many years, in close collaboration with Jeanette Bright, who you'll hear from in another episode. They've worked tirelessly to trace links between the tokens and the children they were left with. Here she gives us insights into her process of historical detective work.

Just a note that we recorded Gillian's interview remotely. Bear with the sound quality though - it's worth it.

**Gillian Clark:** One token I would like to tell you about, and that's the biggest and heaviest one in the collection. So it's very easy to pick out. I always think of it looking like a, a ginger nut, because it's brass and it's round and it's about that size. So it's a circular big heavy disc. And it has on it some wording that's been moulded in when the disc was created. It's not something that's been engraved in. It's actually molded and raised and it says Saint Ethelburga and Saint Swithin. And at the bottom it says number 38. Saint Ethelburga, she lived in the six hundreds. Saint Swithin, he was the Bishop of Winchester and he lived in the eight hundreds. So no connection between those two that I can see, but there are City of London parishes. Saint Ethelburga is up near Liverpool Street. Saint Swithin is down near Cannon Street. So they're the opposite corners of the square mile of the City of London.

And one other thing about this token is that it has four pairs of tiny holes: top, bottom, right and left. And they're clearly designed to stitch that token to something. Because it's heavy, we know it can't be a cotton or a linen. It's got to be something solid. And I think it was to go on somebody's coat, whether you wanted wool material to take the weight of this token. And one of the other research volunteers, Tuz Morrison, suggested that it was a badge to mark out the right or permission to beg in those two parishes in London.

All poor relief came from the parish in which you lived. And so it would've been the church wardens, the overseers of the poor, who would've decided who got benefits. So to make sure that the right people got the benefit, they would wear a badge. They would be badging the poor. The stigma of poverty was made clear that everyone to see. And it was a very, very strong statement.

One of the things that we've been doing is we're trying to match the tokens to the child that brought them in. And this particular one we've made a spectacular match. And that was the reason that I wanted to talk about this one.

In March 1760 a little girl was admitted to the Foundling Hospital.

It was this particular time, when it was generally known that the Hospital was going to cease automatic acceptance of children. And so there was an absolute rush of women to get their children in. If you were poor and you had a sick child and you knew that the Foundling Hospital could give them a clean bed, there was medical care there, if they died, they'd get a proper funeral, and you couldn't afford those things, of course you were keen to get them in. The Hospital offered a chance for that child.

I don't think that the parents abandoned their child lightly. In my mind, there's no element of getting rid of them for any reason. And I think with the tokens the parents are giving something of themselves to that child. They didn't know that the tokens were going to be wrapped up and put away for 200 years. They probably thought that would belong to the child. They would've wanted to be giving something that they'd handled or used. And they were poor, they'd had to reach into the household and find something that perhaps had been lying around, perhaps that was grandad's poverty badge. We can't get back to get inside that story.

We don't know her name. We don't know her mother's name, her parents' name. The mother didn't leave any information whatsoever. We don't know which parish she came from, but she came in and was admitted and the admissions officer will have completed her admission form, her billet. And that's a pre-printed form on which he has the capacity to fill in the details about that child. There would've been the date she came in and then on the top right would be the number which each child was given, starting with one in 1741 and going right up to this little girl who was number 16,086.

And then the admissions officer will have put the billet down, put her token down in the middle of it, and folded it into a little packet and put some sealing wax on it and then on the outside, he would've written the date she came in and 16086. Then he would've handed that to the secretary to put away in his strong room, his vault, and the little girl was ready to move into the Hospital.

She was given the name Rachel Porter. And she went to a wet nurse in Sevenoaks. So she goes off screen. Now we lose sight of her, but we are following the billet.

So then we have to sort of move forward a hundred years to 1860. When the Hospital Governors thought there's nobody going to come back, and why don't we open those packets and see what's in them.

So they opened all the tokens and they took out all the metal and the heavy ones and they put them in an exhibition.

Unfortunately, when they did that, they lost the, the link with the billet. All that little girl's details separated from the token. But, another hundred years on, when I went to see bill number 16,086 in the archive, I could see that what had happened was that very heavy token pressed down onto the billet so that all the raised writing on the token is there to see on the billet. So we know with absolute certainty that that token came from that little girl who became Rachel Porter. There is a detective element, and it's exciting every time.

**Kathleen:** Research continues into the tokens and the children they were left with.

You can see the tokens chosen by David and Gillian, 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 Yomi Şode and folk musician Sam Lee, imagine the different kinds of care involved in choosing, making, giving and looking after a token.

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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