

# Take this Token transcript

## Episode 6: Tokens of Mystery and Hope

**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 6: Tokens of Mystery and Hope.

What jewellery are you wearing right now? A watch, a ring, a necklace? These things are often precious in more ways than one. And in today's episode, we're thinking about the significance of jewellery left as tokens. First, we speak to Janette Bright, a historian who has done ingenious and painstaking research to match up some of the Foundling tokens with the children they were left with. She works in close partnership with Gillian Clark, who you might have heard discussing her historical detective work on an earlier episode.

**Janette Bright:** My name's Janette Bright and I first became aware of the tokens after watching a television program about Thomas Coram. As a textile artist, in a group that likes to do some research before we create contemporary work, I thought that there might be something in the tokens. So I decided to go along, have a look, and it was when the museum had really just opened. Very little had been studied with them. Because I've always done my family history, I'm quite interested in people's lives, but also these lives that come from nowhere, they have no ancestry. So I think part of it was remembering people that would

otherwise be forgotten. So I just got more and more involved and we got invited to help with exhibitions. And in the end, I decided that I wanted to just understand museums and art better, which is why I ended up on a degree course. Now I'm doing my PhD.

So the token that I've chosen is a ring, a piece of jewellery. It seems as if it would be the size to fit on a child's finger or perhaps on a grown woman's little finger. The front of the ring has a heart shaped – it's described as a ruby. To each side of that, there's another red stone and a little white stone. Behind those going around the ring, one side has a little padlock and a tiny little key.

So it's really quite a dainty little thing. Inside there's an inscription and my pronunciation isn't brilliant, my Latin: *qui me negligere me perdit*, which roughly translates to 'he who neglects me, loses me'.

Whether it was originally bought for the child or whether it's a love token between the parents, we don't know. But it's obviously some sort of symbol of love and that padlock is often thought of as a symbol of security.

So it has lots of meaning just in the ring itself. But as a historian, I particularly like this token because we actually have quite a lot of information about the child before she was admitted to the hospital and, and a little bit after. Now, frustratingly, it's just little glimpses.

**Kathleen:** Janette reminds us why there are so many missing connections between Foundling children and their tokens.

**Janette:** A billet is the form that was used for the admission. So every time a child was admitted to the Hospital, they filled in a form. And the tokens were wrapped inside and sealed with wax. So everything was kept very secret. And in the 1850s John Brownlow the Secretary – who was himself a former Foundling – he brought them to the governors and they decided to open them out and put some of them on display. We think to bring in visitors and gain a bit of empathy to support the Hospital. And that's when some of the tokens were taken out and at that time they weren't really interested in which child the token belonged to. So it's purely luck sometimes that we find a reference.

Sometimes we have metal objects that actually leave an imprint on the billets. And actually with this heart that I'm talking about, we are very

lucky because the token was actually described in the billet, in the admission record. That says that it's a ring with a heart ruby on one side, a small diamond on the other, a ruby and a lock and key in gold fastened into the ring. But it actually gives the date that the child was born, the date that the child was baptised. And it says that the child is called Harriet Littleton. And with the amazing use of genealogical websites, I was able to tap that in and actually come up with her parents' name, John and Harriet Littleton, which suggests that they were married.

So we actually get her date of birth, which was the 28th of September. She was baptised the 11th of October, a couple of weeks after, but it's then another month before the child actually comes in, 'cause the child was admitted exactly a month after the baptism and the records say seven weeks old. This one's particularly interesting because when it came in, there was an advert in *The Lady's Magazine or Universal Entertainer*, which actually said that a child had been bought with a ruby token on, as a mark so that it might be known later. When the children were admitted, the tokens that were taken in, they were supposed to be kept secret. That's why they put them inside the billets and hid them away. If someone else had known what the token was, they could claim the child, although we don't know if this ever happened.

But it's also so the governors know that they're handing over the right child. It was very important and the governor's actually saying their records that tokens will be kept with secrecy and with care.

It's very interesting that this ruby ring is mentioned in the newspaper. And I think it's to do with the fact that this child came in during the year of the lottery. They set up the lottery to show there was no partiality. There were some people who thought it wasn't right that people of wealth had the same access to the hospital as poor people – these lords and ladies were just getting rid of their illegitimate offspring and then carry on leading an immoral life. I think that's why – if they have found out about this ruby ring – it's almost to say, 'look, this person isn't poor'. It is an odd thing to hand over a ring because if the mother was poor, she could have sold it, kept going for a little bit longer.

I think often the tokens are the mother trying to say, 'this isn't an act of uncaring, it's an act of love'. And I think that's the other reason why some of the parents write down exactly the details of where they lived and what their name is, because they want to say, we are not ashamed of handing over the child. We're just desperate.

The children when they came in, they were given a new name, a new identity. But the other thing we know about Harriet Littleton is that she became Harriet Woodhall. Now, again, it's a bit odd that she's a Harriet when she comes in, she's a Harriet when she's in the Hospital.

We also know that the child didn't get apprenticed. So it suggests that she may have had some sort of disability. But she's discharged when she's 21.

As a historian, I have to write about what I've got evidence for. As an embroider I can be a bit creative with some of the stories that I pick up.

There is a burial in St. Brides Fleet Street of a lady of the right age with the right name, 56 years old in February 1809. So it could be that she lived as a single woman and if she didn't marry, perhaps she did have a business. Women in eighteenth-century London did go into business. So perhaps she set up a little shop. That's what I'd like to think. There was a lot more agency for single women. She had the time to do what she wanted, that's what I would've liked for her.

**Kathleen:** I love Jeanette's call to imagine untold lives as we look at the tokens. And as we do that, perhaps it's impossible not to hope for some stories of reunion amid all the separation and loss. Here's jewellery designer and maker Alex Monroe.

**Alex Monroe:** It's almost an impossible task to choose your favourite token. They've all got different things. So some of them, I love 'cause they're really pretty. I mean, they're beautiful. Other ones are really quirky and interesting.

The one I've chosen, I've chosen for a very specific reason. It sort of seems to me to talk a lot about what tokens are and what they mean. But the thing that absolutely fascinates me about the Sir Isaac Newton token is that you've got two halves.

It's a white metal, so I'm, I'm presuming it's a silver alloy or pewter or something like that. But it's quite a large coin with Isaac Newton's face on it.

It's very bashed around and it's been cut in half. But talking from jeweller's point of view, it's been cut in half in a funny way. They didn't have the same tools that I have. It's had holes punched down the middle

of it. And then it's been scratched along the line of holes that were punched, and then it's been bent to and fro until it's broken. You can see these little teeth marks down the gap between the two halves. In jewellery, we don't say 'sawn', we say 'pierced'. If it had have been pierced, you'd have a smooth line there. There are two holes at the top of each half to put your ribbon or your string through to tie it around your neck.

They're punched out. So I don't think the person had a drill. And they've also used this same scratching or engraving technique to engrave the letter E on each half. And I thought it was an Elizabeth, 'cause that feels like the right sort of name for that period. And I would also assume that perhaps if you had a daughter, they might share your same name. So I'm imagining that perhaps mother and daughter were called Elizabeth.

What's weird is that if you flip the coin over on the tail side, the Es are mirror images of each other. And it's just too bizarre, why have a mirror image of an E on the back? And it just slightly adds to the mystery to me. It looks very much scratched rather than stamped or cleanly engraved. So this is a very homemade object.

Now, the way that I look at it is that people would part company with their child on the thought that one day they were going to be able to reclaim the child. People have obviously thought about something that was unique and thought about something that would need to match up. So, you might have a lock and key, and the lock might go with the baby and the key would stay with the mother, 'cause only that key would fit.

It would be indisputable proof that the baby was yours if you possessed that half a coin.

Now there's one token there, that Sir Isaac Newton token, where we have both halves. And maybe it's me just being a terrible optimist, but I just love the idea that actually within all that hope there was some success and that whoever cut this coin in half went off and something good happened to them.

They wore the other half of the coin against their skin for years and years. And then they came back and they reclaimed. I mean, I don't think that that can be proved, but I can't think of another way as to how come they have both halves of the token there. So I've chosen this token because it symbolises the triumph of hope.

If I was writing a book or making a film, the story I'd have is a not completely destitute woman, a woman who had coinage and had enough money to destroy coinage, and they had a kindly partner in this desperate business that she was about to embark in. I don't think this was her lover. I think this was someone she knew who was willing to help her. And they did this to this coin. And then the terrifying and awful event of actually having to leave your baby. But with determination and with friendship and support, she went off and got a job and earned some money and saved some money. 'Cause I think if you wanted to reclaim your child, you'd had to pay all the costs.

And then in my little film, in my mind's eye, she comes back and says 'I left a baby here and I want to claim the baby'. And she presented this thing that she'd worn. And it would've been taken – she didn't need the jewellery anymore, she didn't need the memory – because the two halves, the mother and the daughter, were rejoined.

The coin was whole again and it's fulfilled its purpose. For me, it's a portal that can zoom me back to that time and a place, to that story, which I've just made up, but it's what I choose to believe. Who wouldn't want a time machine and we'll go back and hope that it is as beautiful as that story.

**Kathleen:** Alex is so sensitive to the emotional power of jewellery. But when we asked him if he had anything token-like in his life, he gave a very curious answer.

**Alex:** So I I've spent my life making jewellery. I do not own a piece of jewellery. I got married and we did the rings and I took it off behind my back and put it in my trouser pocket and I haven't seen the ring since. I think my wife's probably got it somewhere safe. But I don't have anything like that at all for myself, not one thing.

**Kathleen:** But at the same time he sees the jewellery he makes as carriers of other people's emotion.

**Alex:** I don't think that I create things that resonate emotionally. I see my job when I'm making jewellery is to make something that somebody else will want to put some significance, connection or importance on. Some of the things that's that jewellery holds are just massively important,

I just think these tokens are brilliant. It's just like everything that jewellery should be. And it's such a good antidote to the established view of what jewellery is, which is mostly about how grand and wealthy people were.

**Kathleen:** We also asked Janette if she had anything in her life that feels like a token.

**Janette:** I do have an object that feels a bit token-like. I've been married to my husband a very long time and we knew each other as teenagers. He mends tractors for a living. And he was going on a trip and he gave me a key that could start any tractor you like. It's probably of completely insignificant value. But I still have it in a box, 40-odd years later. I think it's that idea of the insignificant that becomes really significant. And I think with the tokens, they may actually mean a lot more than we'll ever know.

**Kathleen:** You can see the ruby ring Janette chose – though unfortunately not her tractor key – and the halved Isaac Newton medallion that spoke to Alex on display at the Foundling Museum, Brunswick Square in Bloomsbury, London, along with many other tokens.

The Museum is open Tuesday to Saturday from 10 till 5 and Sunday, 11 till 5. For more information, visit [foundingmuseum.org.uk](http://foundingmuseum.org.uk), or find us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

In the next episode, we find out what tokens can tell us about Georgian style and what eighteenth-century women kept in their pockets with historians Serena Dyer and Ariane Fennetaux.

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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