

# Take this Token transcript

## Episode 8: Tokens of Travel

**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 8: Tokens of Travel

In this episode, we trace connections between babies left at the Foundling Hospital and global forces of war, trade and empire.

Here's Helen Berry, a historian.

**Helen Berry:** The token I've chosen is from the year 1757, and what we see in front of us is a little piece of mother of pearl - a couple of inches square, maybe four by five centimetres. So you can hold it in the palm of your hand. There's a little hole in it, and that hole would've been made so that a piece of ribbon or string could have been used to tie it around the neck or wrist of the baby. And inscribed on this little token is 'James, son of James Concannon, Gent., late or now of Jamaica, 1757'.

**Kathleen:** You might remember this object. It's the same mother of pearl plaque that Lemn Sissay chose in an earlier episode.

**Helen:** So someone has scratched on the token those words. It's not a very accomplished handwriting. It could have been the mother herself who wrote this. That in itself was a very remarkable thing in this period, particularly for a poorer woman to be able to write would've been quite unusual. But of course that could just be speculation. Someone else might have written this for her. But it's definitely identifiable as an eighteenth-century token, and it gives us intriguing insights into this particular baby.

These tokens invite us to think imaginatively about the origins about the woman, the mother who was about to give up her infant when she created this token. Really her last gift that she was sending to the Hospital with her child. She's very keen for us to know the name of her baby. James is written really clearly. And it was obviously the father's name. So she's making a clear connection between the identity of the father and the son.

She wants us to know that the father was a gentleman. What does that mean? Now, in this period, the term gentleman could be applied to people of many, many different occupations. It doesn't mean they were a member of the gentry, but maybe he was a man of certain standing. Maybe he had a profession. Maybe she respected and admired him.

We might wonder whether this was a betrothal gone wrong. It was very common for a couple engaged to be married, to sleep with one another on the promise that they would get married later on and legitimise any babies born as a result of that. But sometimes those engagements were interrupted. Perhaps a man was called away on active service. Maybe there was a disaster in the family. For one reason or another, the marriage never happened and the wife-to-be was left with the child. What was she going to do?

We know that she believed he had a connection with Jamaica. She describes the father as being 'late or now of Jamaica', meaning he'd been there in the past or he could actually have been there at the moment that she gave the baby up to the Foundling Hospital. At this time, there was an artilleryman called James Concannon. The name fits and associated with Jamaica. We simply can't say for certain, but I think this is a very tantalising glimpse for us into the fact that many relationships were made at a time when travel could separate couples very, very quickly. In particular, travel on a global scale across the oceans to the 'New World'.

So if a historian is looking at an object dated 1757, there is an immediate connection with truly global events at this time. The outbreak in 1756 of a war, which came to be called later on 'The Seven Years War' was something which had monumental consequences for the geopolitical history of the world. The outbreak of hostilities between the main imperial powers at this time – Britain, France, to some extent, Spain – involved a complex network of battles both on land and at sea over the right to control important trade and colonial territories. Many ordinary men and women found themselves caught up in the movement of people and goods in the violent struggles that resulted.

And at the front line of that was the military personnel who were sent out to fight in these conflicts. So the immediate assumption might be that James Concannon was a soldier, sent out to Jamaica to defend what had been an English and then British colonial territory from the days of Oliver Cromwell. He perhaps could have been a sailor either in the Royal Navy or the Merchant Navy, who also had an absolutely critical role to play in trying to secure and maintain the possession of a British colonial territory.

Jamaica was highly desirable for the imperial powers of Europe. It was a place where rich crops, sugar in particular, were grown on the back of forced African slave labour. It's also possible that James Concannon had some form of settlement in Jamaica, so he could have been involved in the plantations. We simply don't know without further evidence.

If we're holding this token in our hand, the first thing that we notice is that one side is duller than the other, and that's because the material that it's made from – mother of pearl – would've been from a precious shell. Mother of pearl was highly prized in the eighteenth century as an unusual material from which to make pearl buttons, the handles of small knives... It was a highly decorative, highly sought-after commodity, available only from shells that have been imported from much warmer seas around the Indian subcontinent. So the mother of pearl itself was present in London in the eighteenth century because of the global trade networks.

We don't know how the mother of this infant came to have this piece of mother of pearl, quite a large piece, in her possession. Maybe it was a treasured item. Maybe the father of her baby had given it to her as a love token. Or maybe it was something to do with her occupation, because women were engaged in making buttons at this time. We don't

know, but it must have been a treasured possession of hers, and now she was giving it up with her infant.

I chose this token because it's a small example of how the lives of people were connected, both in the British Isles and overseas, with the history of the global imperial expansion of Britain's empire during the course of the eighteenth century. The father had simply disappeared and the mother she had no way of contacting him. This is the age before technology made it possible to communicate frequently with people overseas, and many just disappeared who wanted to hide from the force of the law or who wanted to change their circumstances, or who simply were called away on active service.

The lives of many, many poor working people were deeply implicated in the project of building and sustaining Britain's empire, not to mention those who suffered directly the atrocities of the African slave trade. This is an evocative token that makes us think hard about the global connections between the Foundling Hospital and Britain's imperial power at this time.

**Kathleen:** In this series, we've focused on *objects* left as tokens, but in many cases, a token was a scrap of fabric or a piece of ribbon. John Styles is an expert on these textile tokens and what they can tell us about fashion, manufacturing and global trade.

**John Styles:** I came to this because I was interested in the choices of ordinary people in the eighteenth century as buyers and consumers of fashion. British museums have lots and lots of clothes dating from the eighteenth century, but they're almost all the really expensive, fashionable clothes worn by duchesses and members of the royal family, in other words, the clothing of the elite. But the clothing of very poor people has entirely disappeared. I first came across the Foundling Hospital textile tokens because of one of my students who alerted me to the fact that these things existed. And it was a wonderful treasure trove for a historian working on the clothing of ordinary people.

Let's look closely at one token: a child's cap. Now, in the eighteenth century, most people wore some sort of headgear. And so babies wore these little caps, which were often made out of linen like this one. Not only is the linen a superior and therefore quite expensive linen. It's also decorated with lace, which was often very expensive. The amount of lace is not very great, but still it must have cost the mother quite a lot of

money for someone who was probably facing destitution. And it shows how much mothers were concerned to give their babies something special, in the sense of being respectable, giving them what they needed in terms of their health, their wellbeing, but also making sure they looked presentable and, in some senses, almost fashionable.

A lot of the tokens that were textiles that were left with the babies were often things that were not worn-out, cheap, everyday items, but were rather special little luxuries.

This is a token. And what the token was meant to do was to identify the baby in case it was retrieved. We're talking about tiny, tiny babies, very young infants. So if the mother came back three, four, five years later, saying 'I want to take back my baby and I'm now in the position where I can support my child', how would they recognise their baby? So what you wanted in terms of a token, was something that was recognisable. So many of the textiles like this cap are distinctive. The cap itself represents the child, but it was left at the hospital with a piece of paper. You can see it says number 1103, 'This cap is desired to be kept as a token born June 14th, 1753'. These details have been written on a piece of paper that's been cut in the shape of a heart. So the token represents not only the child, it represents as well the mother's love for that child, a continuing bond of affection.

Why are so many of the tokens textiles? Well, in the eighteenth century, poor people had a much more limited range of material things than we have now. For young women, the principal material things that they accumulated tended to be clothing. Imagine the situation: many of these young women would've been servants or working women in London, maybe in their late teens or twenties. They almost all either lived with their employers as servants or lived in furnished lodgings, so insofar as they were able to accumulate material things, they accumulated clothing. And clothing was important because it was a sign of respectability. If you wanted to be a servant in a wealthy household, you had to be clothed respectably. Clothing was also important in terms of securing a marriage, for which the long-term financial viability of these women's lives was essential.

Now we know that most baby clothes were made out of the discarded clothing of their mothers. So the clothing that the babies wore reflected the clothing that the mothers wore. And given that the token at the Foundling Hospital had to be distinctive, very often it would be elements

of the more fashionable, more colourful, more decorated pieces of textile that the mothers wore for their special clothes. It would be pieces cut from those garments that were used as tokens.

And that's true irrespective of whether the tokens that we now see in the Foundling Hospital collection were actually left by the mothers or were those sorts of tokens that were cut by the nurses and clerks at the Hospital, when there wasn't a token from the mother that they needed some sort of token to identify the child. Then it would appear the nurses or the clerk would snip a small piece of textile off the baby's clothing. And what they tend to do is to choose the item of clothing which was the most visually distinctive. Printed linen or printed textiles, often quite colourful, quite distinctive patterns, again which they'd expect a mother to remember if she was to come back and reclaim the baby.

Although I should stress that quite a lot of mothers also seem to have used these printed fabrics, which were very popular in mid-eighteenth-century London. They would often snip distinctive parts of the pattern things, which had a particular meaning for them, and they too would use that as a token. So, you get acorns and flowers and buds, which are powerfully suggestive of the mother's hope that the child is going to grow and flower and flourish. The token carried tremendous emotional meaning and power for the mothers as they gave up their babies.

So on the one hand, there's this very personal individual, powerfully emotional aspect to the textile tokens, but on the other hand, we're talking about the fashionable clothing of young London women in the middle of the eighteenth century. And it was acquired commercially through shops, through markets. And London, of course, was one of the great intercontinental commercial centres of the eighteenth-century world. It was a great port. Goods came to London from every part of the world and among those goods, textiles were probably the most prominent manufactured commodities. So what this means is that the textile tokens are evidence of a huge trade which extended across the world.

Many of the tokens were decorated not by having colours and patterns woven into them, but by having colours and patterns printed on them, usually with wooden printing blocks. And most of this printing was done around London, but it actually derived from India. In the later seventeenth century, huge quantities of Indian textiles had begun to be imported by the English East India Company, and many of these carried

these printed patterns. This posed such a threat to English textile manufacturers, that in the end, the English government faced with riots by weavers and so on banned the import of these textiles from India.

If we look closely at the textiles on which these patterns were printed, we also see evidence of international trade because neither the cotton nor the linen in the fabric originated in England. The linen largely came from Ireland or places on the shores of the Baltic Sea. Places that are now modern Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. And the cotton, which was spun in Lancashire, came almost all from the West Indies – from Barbados, Jamaica, Antigua – where it was produced on plantations by enslaved African workers.

The silk, which makes up silk ribbons, which are so common among the Foundling textiles, came from very distant parts of the world. Bengal, from parts of India, a lot of it came from territories that are now Syria, Iran, Lebanon. So again, a way of demonstrating the mother's powerful affection for their baby, but which at the same time is evidence of how these mothers strove to be fashionable and how they relied on international, intercontinental trade relationships.

What's impossible to know is whether working people in London actually realised that these materials came from these distant, distant places. 'Cause a lot of the actual manufacturing was done locally, so there was nothing necessarily connecting the thing you were buying and wearing with those huge international connections. But I think we have to remember that in the world as it is today, which is far more globalised, for many of us it's possible to live a life never really thinking hard about where our things come from.

**Kathleen:** The textile tokens are part of the Foundling Hospital Archive, which belongs to Coram and is held at the London Metropolitan Archives. You can see the mother of pearl token Helen chose on display at the Foundling Museum, Brunswick Square in Bloomsbury, London, along with many other tokens, including examples of textile tokens.

This is the last in the series of *Take this Token, Stories from the Foundling Museum*.

**Caro Howell:** 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 three hundred years ago.

**David Coke:** There are all sorts of possible stories why this season ticket might become a Foundling Hospital token.

**Indika:** You're giving something quite inexpensive but which has significant meaning, like you want that child to be protected forever.

**Lemn Sissay:** You know one of the strongest things 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, above all acts in society.

**Sally Holloway:** The object is representing your heart, your emotional connection to another person, your feelings.

**Yomi Şode:** And the irony being that the token must have been one of the lightest things to hold while it has such a weight to it that it's calling for care.

**Kathleen:** Why not come and explore the tokens for yourself?

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.

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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