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**London’s Forgotten Children:**

**Thomas Coram and the Foundling Hospital**

Dame Gillian Pugh

The Foundling Hospital was not, of course, a hospital as we would know it today. My role was that I was for eight years the Chief Executive of Coram, the organisation that started life as the Foundling Hospital. When I left, there was a lot in my head that I thought I should write down before it disappeared, so I wrote a book, and that is what I am drawing on today.

The Foundling Museum is at 40 Brunswick Square and it is definitely worth a visit. Some of you will have read the book *Coram Boy* and perhaps even have seen the brilliant play. It was a children’s novel by Jamila Gavin about the Coram man that went about the country collecting unwanted children. It was a very, very powerful book and play.

We always say that Coram is the oldest children’s charity in the UK: certainly in England. Christ’s Hospital was set up at least 100 years before Coram, but was an educational charity. Perhaps the better known children’s charities of today, because Coram is still relatively small by comparison, are Barnardo’s, Action for Children and The Children’s Society. They were set up 150 years later.

Coram is a remarkable organisation, with a remarkable history, and I will talk about the life of Thomas Coram, the sea captain that set the organisation up, about how the Foundling Hospital originated and how it worked, and then move through the 19th and 20th centuries, to mention the charity Coram that still carries on the work of this amazing, far-sighted man, all these years later.

There is a brilliant picture by Hogarth of Thomas Coram. Just after I had been appointed, but before I took up the job, my cousin, who was in charge of the Tate Britain at that point, sent me a Christmas card saying, “You do realise, don’t you, that you are now responsible for the best English portrait of the 18th century?” which was a slightly scary sense of responsibility because, at that point, all the wonderful pictures that the organisation inherited from its early days were not open to the public because we could not afford the insurance for them. But it is a brilliant picture insofar as it moved portraiture forward: this was the first man who was not a member of the aristocracy painted. He is painted without a wig. In the distance there are ships, which is how he made his money. He is holding the seal. He has a charter. His feet are not touching the ground. He is impatient to be getting on. He always wore a red coat, whenever you see or hear of him. So it is a portrait of a man by one of the greatest painters of the 18th century, a man in a hurry and a man with a vision.

He was born in 1668 in Lyme Regis, and his mother died when he was only three. His father sent him to sea at the age of 11, which was not unusual in those days. He had very, very little, if any, formal education, and at the age of16 he was apprenticed to a shipwright. He plied the seas, back and forth, and gradually began to make a base for himself in New England, in America. He met and married Eunice, from a good Boston family, but they were never able to have children, which is perhaps in some way significant in terms of the feelings that led him to set up the Foundling Hospital.

He set up a shipbuilding business south of Boston, at a place called Taunton. I visited there and found a church built in his memory, with a stained glass window inscribed ‘To Thomas Coram’. It was very curious, being in the middle of America and finding copies of this and other pictures, as if he had left just yesterday.

He was energetic and very hard working, but he fell out with the local people, not for the first, nor indeed the last, time of his life. He was a very strong Anglican and had contempt for their rather wishy-washy Free Church religion. So he became rather cantankerous, and the local people got fed up with him and starting burning his ships. In the end he returned home and, although he continued to work for the settlement of other states in New England, he did not go back to live in America.

When he returned to London, he was dismayed to discover the numbers of babies he found dying or dead on the dung heaps of this great city. At that time illegitimacy was acknowledged amongst the aristocracy, but amongst the poor it was most definitely frowned on, and the workhouse, for a woman unmarried and with a child, was really the only option. There were the “deserving” single mothers and the “undeserving” single mothers and, similarly, the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor. Single mothers were seen very much as combining moral failings with lack of financial responsibility. Unmarried mothers were also a huge burden on the parish. If a baby died, the mother was likely to be held responsible for that baby’s murder and might well be executed herself. So, for the many young women – a lot of whom had been taken advantage of perhaps by the man of the house when they were in service – for many, many young women with unwanted babies, there really was no option but to leave the baby somewhere and hope that somebody discovered it, picked it up and found a home for it.

Thomas Coram was very troubled indeed by this, but it was difficult to know what to do about it. There were foundling hospitals in Europe many of you will be familiar with. Interestingly, the Florence Hospital is the base for UNICEF, which always seems to me to be particularly appropriate. There were foundling hospitals in Europe, mostly linked to the Catholic Church and taking all comers, but there was a tremendous fear in England that to set up any kind of residential institution for the children of these mothers would encourage promiscuity. So Coram, bless him, spent 17 years walking the streets of London, trying hard to persuade people to support what he called his ‘darling project’.

He learnt quite a lot from the way in which women were running the foundling hospital in Paris and, rather in the way of some of today’s charities and the ‘ladies who lunch’, who set up appeal committees and then persuade their rich husbands and their friends to contribute, so Coram conceived the idea of pursuing what he called ‘ladies of quality and distinction’. There were two rather high profile cases amongst the aristocracy of illegitimate births and, gradually, the tide began to turn and there began to be some support, certainly amongst these ladies and their sisters and cousins, and then gradually their husbands, for the setting up of this first Foundling Hospital.

Interestingly, in London there was no formal link with the church. Although the European foundling hospitals were very much church-based, Coram was so disgusted at the self-righteous and unforgiving attitude of the church that he had nothing to do with it, and when you look at the first 172 governors, people that he tramped the streets for those many years wanting to get on his side and to sign his petition, if you look at who was on the governing body, there were no church people at all and, indeed, no women.

The subscription roll included Hogarth, who was involved from the very beginning, who actually designed the heading to the roll itself, and if you look at the document you can see that there are ships in the background. The document also shows children doing meaningful, helpful and useful things that will prepare them for their life when they leave the Foundling Hospital. It depicts a well-kept churchyard in the background and, of course, Coram seeking support for the charter, the appeal that he was to present to the King.

It took 17 years, a long time, but eventually he got to the point where King George II granted a Royal Charter, the Duke of Bedford became president, and the first charity to be based on public donations, as a joint stock company, was born. One of the difficulties was probably because the South Sea Bubble had recently burst and people were worried about putting money into unknown ventures.

The charter was granted in 1739. The governors took up a temporary building, just off what is now Lambs Conduit Street, to begin to take in the first babies. The architect was appointed and a plain, no-nonsense building was erected.

There were separate wings for the girls and the boys, with a chapel in the middle. The gate at the front can still be seen in Guildford Street today, as can the porticos. If you look at a map of London at the time, the Foundling Hospital was well beyond the boundaries of London. This was very much to be a home for children, a residential establishment and a school, in the countryside and beyond the smoke and squalor of London.

Babies, in fact, were not abandoned. In many of the European foundling hospitals, babies were posted through a hole in the wall, and some of you may remember, over the last 10 years, a debate in Germany about establishments where babies could be put in a hole in the wall and caught in a receptacle on the other side, and the mother could go off anonymously. But that was not how the governors wanted it to work in England.

The Foundling Hospital had many great benefactors. First of all was Hogarth. He was a founding governor of the Foundling Hospital, and was already a governor of St Bartholomew’s. Those of you who are familiar with that building will know the mural he painted all the way up the stairs to the Great Hall. He and his wife also had no children but they fostered children. At the time, fostering was called wet-nursing. The Hogarths fostered children for a number of years, and Mrs Hogarth was also an inspector of foster carers, or wet-nurses, and the concept of inspecting what was going on was really quite ahead of its time.

Hogarth was at a time of his life when he wanted to make his mark. He wanted not to be seen in the shadow of French painting. There was, at that time, no Royal Academy, and so there was nowhere for somebody like Hogarth, who wanted to display his work, to do so. The support that Hogarth and many of his contemporaries gave to the Foundling Hospital was not entirely one-way. Yes, he was an amazing fundraiser and gave three of his very best paintings to the Foundling Hospital, and they are still there in the Foundling Museum today. But this was also an opportunity for Hogarth to make his own way in the world, to be seen as an innovative painter, a leader amongst painters, and he encouraged many of his fellow artists to come to the annual dinner for artists, which took place on the 5th of November each year. Many people whose pictures are still hanging in the Foundling Museum, including Thomas Gainsborough and Sir Joshua Reynolds, are household names today. Reynolds went on to set up the Royal Academy in 1768.

Hogarth was particularly fond of the picture that he painted of Thomas Coram. He wrote in his autobiography: “The portrait that I painted with most pleasure and in which I particularly wished to excel was that of Captain Coram for the Foundling Hospital, and if I am so wretched an artist as my enemies assert, it is wonderful strange that this, which was one of the first I painted the size of life, should stand the test of 20 years’ competition and be generally thought the best portrait in the place, notwithstanding the best artists in the kingdom executed all their talents to vie with it.”

He clearly had a very soft spot for Coram and for the Foundling Hospital, and that is illustrated by an equally famous painting of the “March of the Guards to Finchley”. This was painted by Hogarth to commemorate the failure of the Jacobite Rebellion. It depicts soldiers in triumphant, if somewhat drunken, mode. He gave it to the King, George II, to celebrate this victory, but George II, who was no great lover of painting, nor of art generally, threw it back to him and said, in so many words, that he really wasn’t interested in a picture of his troops looking so unruly. The picture shows the beginnings of Hogarth the satirist. After the King rejected it, Hogarth put it up to lottery and the last 150 or so tickets were not sold, so he gave them to the Foundling Hospital and then somehow managed to engineer it that the Foundling Hospital won! So he gave it to the Foundling Hospital governors, saying, “Here you are – you can sell it if you want,” but, very sensibly, they did not sell it, and it remains one of the jewels in the crown of the current Foundling Hospital collection.

So, we have Hogarth the portrait painter, Hogarth the satirist, and the third main genre of Hogarth was his historical paintings, and there is a very fine painting of the world’s first celebrated foundling, Moses, who was found by the pharaoh’s daughter but was then given back to his birth mother, who was in the court, to look after, so there was a happy ending after he was found in the bulrushes.

Some of the key rooms of Coram’s Foundling Hospital were dismantled plaster-piece by plaster-piece and reconstructed in the building that is now 40 Brunswick Square, which, when I went, was my dusty old office, but is now the Foundling Museum. The wonderful centrepiece of this building is an extraordinary room called the Court Room, which was designed very precisely by Hogarth.

There are four history paintings. There are eight ‘roundels’, all painted out of the same canvas, all depicting hospitals. There is one by Gainsborough of Christ’s Hospital, which he painted when he was about 17, but there is also a painting of the Foundling Hospital by Richard Wilson, who was one of the very best known painters of the time, which is a rather more austere picture, but it was I think an attempt to show that here was a hospital that could hold its head up with any other hospitals.

There is an extraordinarily fine marble mantelpiece by Rysbrack, who is one of the top sculptors of his day, which shows children. In the background, it depicts navigation as a central theme, but the children are all doing meaningful and useful tasks. The whole purpose of the Foundling Hospital was not just to take children off the streets, but to make sure that they spent their lives wisely and did things that were going to be useful to society.

Another giant in this story was Handel. Just as Hogarth was trying to develop his own special place in England as a foremost painter and move away from French influences, so Handel, who of course was not English at all, was trying to make his own way in terms of his music and to move away particularly from Italian opera and operetta. He had already established a series of concerts, which were very popular, and in 1749 he wrote the *Music for the Royal Fireworks,* which was performed on the Thames. Early in 1750 he performed *The Messiah* for the first time in Dublin, which is probably now the most popular and the most sung of any piece of sacred music, and he performed it for the first time in England in the Foundling Hospital to raise money for the chapel.

There is a bust of Handel by one of the foremost sculptors of the day, Roubiliac. Handel too became a governor of the Foundling Hospital and performed concerts there every year until a fortnight before he died, by which time he had given 10 years of concerts. We a ticket to the first performance of *The Messiah* in May 1750. The audience really had to squash in for these concerts, and so the it says, because of the high level of demand for tickets, “the gentlemen are desired to come without swords and the ladies without hoops.” During those 10 years, Handel raised £7,000 for the roof of the chapel, which is worth around a million pounds in today’s money. Music played a huge part in the life of the Foundling Hospital, and the chapel was absolutely central.

Having spent all this time setting up and raising money for the Foundling Hospital and assiduously attending every single meeting there was, Coram then fell out with people and was thrown out, as is so often the case with hero-innovators. He accused, probably rightly, one of the governors of having an affair with a matron of the hospital, and that was not the sort of thing that you were supposed to do. He was nothing if not completely full of integrity. He was thrown out, and he lived in poverty for years. The governors took pity on him in the end and raised money for him, and gave him a very good send-off at his funeral. He did live to be 82, and was buried in the chapel, and is now buried in St Andrew’s, Holborn.

I will read to you from his biography, to illustrate the sort of man he was:

*“He was a man of startling integrity, in an age of corruption, a man prepared to use his own limited resources to gain his objects, with little expectation of personal reward, apart from the satisfaction of having contributed to the public good. From a modest family background, without wealth or a patron, in an age when both were considered a necessity, he triumphed through his own energy, persistence and enterprise, combined with the rough charm of manner, made the more appealing on account of his patent honesty. Unfortunately, his fierce temper, together with his injudicious habit of responding in an intemperate manner, both verbally and in writing, to perceived or real injustices, made for difficulties throughout his life.”*

During his life he had exhibited the single-mindedness and the determination that is the hallmark of all innovators and pioneers, and he had certainly learnt the arts of patience, persistence and petitioning, attributes required by those leading charities, particularly today, but again, like many with the positive attributes, not perhaps an easy team player.

I will now give a brief overview of how the Foundling Hospital worked because, although it was called a hospital, it was in fact a children’s home and a school. When it was first open, there is a wonderful account of the wailing of the mothers as they brought their babies, wailing that they were going to lose them and, equally, wailing if they could not get them in because there was not enough room. Can you imagine what it must have been like to feel that you had no option but to give up your baby?

They were not abandoned. They were brought to the governors to make a decision. They had to be under two months old and they had to be free from disease. The governors were nothing if not incredibly meticulous in the records that they kept. There are 800 feet of shelving and eight tons of paper in the Foundling Hospital Archive in the London Metropolitan Archives. We recently had an exhibition called “Threads of Feeling”. When the babies were brought, the governors kept an absolutely meticulous record of what they looked like and what they brought with them and what they were dressed in. An historian from the University of Hertfordshire who was interested in how ordinary people dressed in the 18th century discovered a complete treasure trove of little snippets of material that were appended to the records of all the babies that were brought. This wonderful exhibition (there was a book made of it) showed some of the materials, which included a much wider range of materials, in terms of the backgrounds, that you might have expected.

There were always more children than there was room for, and for a quite long time children were taken by ballot. Women put their hands into a bag to take out a ball. If you had a white ball, you were in; if you had a black ball, you were not in; and if you had a red ball, you might get in if there was a reserve list. I think this is where the term blackballing comes from.

One of the most heart-rending parts of the Foundling Museum today is the display of the tokens that the mothers brought with them. There was always a hope, a vain hope, though the mothers did not know this, that they might be able to come and reclaim their children when their lives got a bit better, and – in addition to these little pieces of material – they would bring things and leave both notes and tokens to show that this was my child and I have left perhaps half an acorn or a button or the ale label or whatever.

As was the case with other foundling hospitals for children, complete anonymity was promised to the mothers. In a way, the mothers were as important as the babies. The mothers were to be given a second chance to build their lives, having conveyed to the governors that this was a one-off mistake, and nobody was ever to know who the mother was. This was very tough for the children, as you can imagine. But the children were all christened. To begin with they were christened things like Thomas Coram or William Hogarth, and this began to get quite tricky. Children grew up and came back to claim that they were due some inheritance, so in later the names were rather more like John Smith and so on. The very first thing that happened was that the children were baptised and given new names.

There is a painting of a foundling being restored to its mother. In fact, foundlings were almost never restored to their mothers. Many mothers wrote, year after year after year, but usually received very dusty replies and the governors, on the whole, always thought that they could do better for these children than their mothers could.

One of the most enlightened decisions taken by this organisation, especially with what we know about child development from psychology and psychiatry today, was that the children were immediately sent out to the country to what were called wet-nurses, although today we would call them foster parents. This was probably the happiest time that these children would ever have. They were likely to have been living in simple homes, with birth children and other foster children, in the country, with probably quite a high level of poverty, but from all the accounts that I have read of children coming back into the Foundling Hospital and then on into life, this was very often, not always, but very often, a most happy and carefree time.

When they came into the Foundling Hospital at the age of five, and the gates clanged behind them and they did not come out of those gates again until they were 14 or 15, there was a second rejection. They would not have remembered the first one because they were only a month or two old, but they would have remembered getting on the Coram van that took them up to London and the gates clanging the second time, and because their foster parents were then busy looking after a new wave of foster children, they might not have seen them again.

The education in the Foundling Hospital was actually extremely good for its time and, undoubtedly, the children were better educated and cared for than they could ever conceivably have been had they stayed with their birth mothers. Coram was strongly of the view that girls needed to be educated as much as boys because they were the ones that would pass on their understanding and knowledge to the next generation. That was a very enlightened view in 1739, but the girls were indeed educated similarly. Children were educated to know their place in society, but they all learnt to read and write and do maths. Religious knowledge was very important. They were taught to know their place in society: the girls probably to go into service, and boys probably to go into the armed forces. Music was absolutely central, and was an important part of life in the Foundling Hospital. Everybody learnt to sing, and most children also learnt a musical instrument .

Some of the most famous doctors of the day were physicians that supported the work of the Foundling Hospital.

Dr William Cadogan, in a pamphlet written in the 1700s, argued very strongly that children should wear less layers of clothing and less tight swaddling clothes, and this was really revolutionary at the time. He also advocated frequent changes of clothing, which would “free children from stinks and sinus.” He denounced feeding solids to babies, way ahead of his time, and he encouraged breastfeeding, and the children going to the country. Sir Hans Sloan, who is well known as a collector and an inventor, was also physician to George II, and he too argued very strongly for breastfeeding and, in the fullness of time, was at the forefront of the argument to inoculate children against smallpox. Therefore, so far as education and health were concerned, these children were well cared for.

The uniforms were designed by Hogarth and did not change much over 200 years. Brown was a symbol of poverty and humility, to keep the children in their place, and they were made in a very tough serge. I gather that there were no underclothes worn. Even the school cufflink was engraved by Hogarth with the school crest.

A photograph of the boys’ dormitory and dining room shows it to be rather austere, but for its time perhaps that was not totally unremarkable. The girls did rather better. They were educated while they ate, and were surrounded by pictures which were intended to uplift them.

The diet was rather good, especially for 250 years ago. They had meat five times a week, though no fish or dairy produce. They had vegetables grown in the grounds of the Foundling Hospital and they had fruit; they drink tea, though not beer, although I understand that the children at Christ’s Hospital drank beer which, in those days, because of the fermentation process, was seen as being particularly healthy.

Music was a very important part of life. Many visitors would come to hear the children singing in chapel. People bought a box or bought a pew, and they would come on a Sunday, would listen to the children singing, and then pat them on the heads as they had their lunch. Lunch was probably rather better than usual on a Sunday so that the visitors could be impressed, and then they went to look at the pictures and dropped a few coins in the collecting bowl. So the public continued to be engaged in supporting this charity.

When they reached around 15 years of age, they were given a leaving certificate and were sent out. The boys were usually apprenticed to a trade or went into the Army, and the girls went into service. This, again was very enlightened for the time. The governors took a paternal interest in them and there was quite a lot of aftercare. If, for example, a girl went into service and her mistress was particularly cruel and unkind and the girl could not cope and ran away, the Foundling Hospital governors did continue to take an interest in their charges until into their early twenties.

There was one rather unhappy period of the Foundling Hospital’s life in its early days. There were always far more children than could be accommodated, so they fought Government funding. The condition of the Government giving money was that the hospital had to be open to all comers. This was the period of when “the Coram man” went round collecting unwanted babies from all over the country. Many of them died on the way. The babies who did make the journey arrived in an appalling shape, and many of them later died.

As part of the response to this “general reception” as it was called, six branch hospitals were built, including one at Ackworth, which is still a secondary school run by the Society of Friends. Others were in Shrewsbury, Aylesbury, Westerham, Chester, and Barnett. About 2,500 children were very successfully apprenticed, often into the textile trade, over the period that this system operated as part of the Foundling Hospital.

Interestingly though, just as charities today who get a grant from Government and have to do whatever it is the grant is for, so it was in those days. In the end, the governors decided that they would rather be free to do their own work and run an institution that was of a high enough quality to satisfy them, so they said refused any further Government funding. But it was one of the first examples of the Government understanding that, as well as fighting the French and restoring law and order, it did have some vestigial duty to look after abandoned children.

There was not a great deal of change over the next 100 years. This was an age of the great philanthropists and parliamentary reformers – Shaftsbury, Robert Peel, and others – and many charities, such as Barnardo’s, were founded in the latter half of the 19th Century. The Foundling Hospital became increasingly burdened by too much demand and not enough money, and the governors sold off large leases to much of their land: Guildford Street, Bernard Street and Great Coram Street. They also sold off what became Brunswick Square and Mecklenburgh Square. As a result, for a while they had money to do what they wanted, and for the remainder of the 19th Century the Foundling Hospital continued to operate as it had been since 1739. One of the major innovations was that a boys’ band was set up, and for many of them their passport to the outside world was a career in music through the music they had learned, and maybe later going on to play in army bands.

Charles Dickens live in Doughty Street, which is very close to the Foundling Hospital, and he made a number of visits there, which featured in his essay *Received a Blank Child*, which refers to a form that you filled in, where it said “Received” and then there was a space for the name of the child. All children had such a form filled in. Dickens also wrote about it in 1853. Oliver Twist was of course a foundling, and the nice Mr Brownlow in *Oliver Twist* was named, we think, after the only foundling who became a very senior official in the Foundling Hospital, John Brownlow, who served the Foundling Hospital for 58 years – he was there man and boy. Dickens was very interested in foundlings: Tattycoram in *Little Dorrit* grew up in the Foundling Hospital, and he ran his own charity for fallen women.Charles Dickens had such a wonderful way of writing and describing things. Here is an excerpt:

*“We found perhaps 100 tiny boys and girls seated in hollow squares on the floor, like flower borders in a garden, their teachers walking to and fro on the paths between them, sowing little seeds of alphabet and multiplication table, broadcast between them. The sudden appearance of the secretary and matron whom we accompanied laid waste to this little garden as if by magic. The young shoots started up with a shrill “Hooray!” turning round and shooting out of their arms and legs at the two officials, with a very pleasant familiarity.”*

Then, after a nice description of one small child trying on Dickens’ hat, where he says “…with which an infant extinguished himself, to his great terror, evidently believing that he was lost to the world forever!” he wrote:

*“The party then proceeded to the end of the room to watch the band, which executed some difficult music with precision and spirit, and then Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” as lively as a band of blacksmiths in Belper, accompanied by children beating drums, blowing dumb horns and trumpets, and flourishing wooden swords.”*

Royal patronage was extraordinarily important to the Foundling Hospital, as indeed it is to charities today. The King and the Queen were regular visitors during the period of its history. The Duke of Connaught, who was the King’s brother, was President of the Foundling Hospital.

There were times of fun, and exercise was seen to be good for the children. They had decorations at Christmas time; there were trips to the circus. But the absolute highlight of the year was the summer camp, where the children camped under canvas for up to six weeks. You can imagine what fun this was to children who grew up in such a regimented space. Boys and girls were alwas kept completely separate. The boys had their band and the girls their sewing, singing and cooking.

By the beginning of the 20th century there were severe financial difficulties. The governors had run out of money and, added to that, London had encroached upon and then encompassed the whole of the estate, the railways of King’s Cross and St Pancras being close by. The governors then sold the Foundling Hospital estate. They did later buy back the headquarters of what is now Coram and Coram’s fields, as a playing area for London. They took temporary premises at Redhill. Then a permanent base at Berkhamsted for the Foundling Hospital School, which was built on very similar lines to the original Foundling Hospital, with a boys’ wing and a girls’ wing and a chapel in the middle. They had a gym and a swimming pool, all very *avant garde* in those days. It was in 1935, 200 years after the setting up of the Foundling Hospital, that they moved out to Berkhamsted.

After the Second World War it became pretty evident, as it had been for a long time, but the governors closed their ears to this, that large institutional care was not very good for children. It may look after their health needs and it may look after their education, but emotionally these children were completely untouched; there were no cuddles. One person wrote a very moving autobiography and she called her book *No Goodnight Kiss*. It is very difficult for those of us that grew up in happy families to imagine what it is like not to know where you came from and not even to have the warmth of an adoptive family. The journalist Kate Adie, who was adopted, wrote a book in which she uses case studies, including some from the Foundling Hospital, about what it feels like not to know who your family are. But these children were wilfully, and with the very best of intentions, kept from knowing who their family were.

Eventually, after the War, the children increasingly went back to their foster parents in the holidays, and in the end the school became Ashlyns School and was sold to Hertfordshire County Council. Form the beginning until that period, 27,000 children had been cared for by the Foundling Hospital and had been brought up by them. In1954 the organisation finally changed its name to Thomas Coram Foundation for Children. The children had been very well cared for, but given little emotional support, and there was no getting away from the massive stigma and shame of illegitimacy. Although it was called the Foundling Hospital, it was never about foundlings. These were not abandoned children. These were children who, because they were illegitimate, had to be given away by their mothers because it was the only way that they could see of getting their life back together. But had they called it the Home for Illegitimate Children, nobody would have given it a penny. Things have changed today and at least that stigma no longer exists.

Coram today, still based at the top of Brunswick Square, is a vibrant, innovative charity, working with the most disadvantaged children, providing a very good adoption service, probably the best in the country.

Today, no Prime Minister seems to be satisfied without launching their own adoption white papers. I think the trouble with politicians and adoption is that it may be the best outcome for many children in care but it is not easy and it is not right for everybody. It would be disastrous if it were assumed that any child that could not live its their own parents was easily going to settle into a new family.

There is still a very strong emphasis on music therapy and art therapy, and a lot of working building resilience and helping children create an inner strength that helps them to cope with challenges and emotional difficulties, plus some very good work with young children and with young people leaving care, who have spent a life in care, who need to be given support when going into the outside world.

The main work of this wonderful organisation carries on under the name of Coram. Many people know of Coram’s Fields, which is in the grounds of the Foundling Hospital, where you are only allowed entry as an adult if you are accompanied by a child. Because it is very close to Great Ormond Street Hospital, many people who have had difficult times with children in the hospital have spoken about how wonderful it is to have that open space.

Although there are no longer children abandoned on the streets, there remain many children who are unable to live with their families for all sorts of reasons, and still a whole sense of loss and shame and bewilderment. Therefore organisations such as Coram are still, unfortunately, needed as much today as they were in 1739.

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