

Tokens at Coram

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The word token has a number of synonyms although each has a slightly different sense depending on the context. For example, we have: souvenirs; keepsakes; symbols; memorials; mementos; epitaphs and, of course, photographs. Despite their subtle differences they seem to have one thing in common: that is, to save someone or some thing from oblivion. Although the Coram tokens served this purpose they also served others as well.

From what we learn from the Bright and Clark* pamphlet the mothers who left their children at the Foundling Hospital were not *required* to provide identifying tokens, but many chose to do so. There were probably two main reasons why they did. One was to signal the hope that, one day, they would be able to resume the care of their offspring. In other words, that only the force of circumstances had driven them to seek the help of the Hospital: they did not *wish* to part with their babies. The second purpose of the token was, perhaps, to leave something by which their children, if not recovered, might know that that had been their mother's hope: that they had not been casually abandoned. However, that interpretation depends upon the assumption that the children were told about the tokens or, indeed, that they were shown them when they were old enough. We do not know what actually happened either as a matter of policy or in individual cases.

The tokens may also be seen as a form of contract or undertaking, not least on the part of the Hospital that, in accepting a them, thereby accepted that they would return children to their mothers (and to the rightful mothers) if requested to do so; that in accepting a child they did not arrogate to themselves ultimate and final rights over that child's destiny.

Thus, the tokens may have been more than symbolic statements of lasting affection and hope. They may well have served practical purposes as well.

Most of these features of such tokens have now become unnecessary because child care has been placed in a framework of law that specifies the legal status of the parties involved, and a framework to which appeal can be made. Printed records are also available and there is the possibility of DNA identification. Yet tokens, keepsakes and mementos remain important both in bereavement and in separation from the living; and that is likely to be especially so for those vulnerable children who have rather fragile connections with their past. Not only do they want to know about that past but also to possess some tangible evidence that it did, or does, exist: the closely protected toy; a photograph; a letter or, perhaps, a gravestone that can be visited. We speak of 'keeping the past alive', and we treasure the objects that help us to do so. Children are no exception and nor, of course, are the parents from whom they have been separated. One only has to think of those whose children have been adopted or who have died. Of course, it is not the token in itself that is important but what it represents; and that representation can have a powerful emotional resonance. Even today the poignancy of the Coram tokens can move us by the enduring sadness that their simplicity conveys.

We all construct stories about our history and that of those around us, sometimes accurate, often fanciful but liable to gain embellishment in the telling. The knowledge that children whose pasts have been disrupted have about those past is liable to be fragmentary and confused. Nonetheless, they need to have a story to tell (both to others and to themselves) about what has happened to them. Souvenirs of one kind or another may provide something around which such an account can be woven. In short, we should not discount the possession of a token or a keepsake (whatever it might be called) as a point of anchorage, especially in the construction and maintenance of personal (and family) identities. Indeed, for some children they may be the only anchorage available and therefore

something that should never be underestimated or casually discarded.

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(700 words)

* Reference needed for the Bright & Clark pamphlet