

THE HOSPITAL FOR 'THE MAINTENANCE AND EDUCATION OF EXPOSED AND DESERTED YOUNG CHILDREN'

Some notes on the early years of the London Foundling Hospital

In the past few months, Frederick Meredith Descendants Facebook group DNA project founder, Paul Gallagher, and self-described 'bloodhound', the Facebook group's administrator, Gary Williams, have come upon a new line of investigation for the origins of our shared First Fleet ancestor. Paul's DNA research (assisted by John Harper), Gary's recent explorations into the London Foundling Hospital's internet archives (23% of which have now been digitised), and their use of AI, are search techniques early FMDG family historians could have only ever dreamed about. This article builds on the posts Gary and Paul have recently been contributing to Facebook and is merely a quick dip into the history of the Foundling Hospital, following the question they've now raised and the discussions that have followed: Could foundling number 16398 be who we've been looking for, all along?

In the early 18th century, British shipwright and sea captain, Thomas Coram, finally returned home to England. Arriving in London, and having been at sea since the age of 11, Coram was viewing the capital with fresh eyes. Now, after a career spent mostly in the American colonies, he was dismayed to see the condition of the very youngest of London's poor – at a time when around a thousand children were being abandoned annually on the streets of England's largest city.

Coram knew there was little avenue established for the wellbeing of children such as these. Certainly no welfare system as we know it today existed; the rising spectre of the English workhouse, a system which generally boasted a 95% mortality rate for children under the age of five, would soon become the symbol of England's Poor Laws of the 18th century.¹

The philanthropic captain became determined to right the wrongs of London's hitherto neglect of caring for its destitute children, particularly those who were illegitimate. Despite no initial high-society connections, and despite opposition concerned that such an institution could encourage immorality, for almost the next 20 years Coram slowly carved inroads into the English aristocracy. By 1741, having finally gathered the weight of support required to present petitions to his King, George II, requesting to establish a charity, "the hospital for maintenance and education of exposed and deserted young children", more commonly known as the Foundling Hospital, was ready to accept its first admissions.²

The name 'hospital' was a misnomer – the word alluding to 'hospitality', rather than what we understand the function of a hospital to be today.³ Despite wobbly beginnings, both the German-born composer George Frideric Handel and British artist William Hogarth are credited as particularly assisting with the fruition of Coram's eventual endeavours; Handel held annual benefit concerts in the Hospital's chapel (which continued after his death), while one of Hogarth's many moves of support as a founding governor - that of donating his masterpieces as prizes and as exhibition pieces, to enable the Hospital to establish Britain's first public gallery – launched similar benevolence amongst notable artists, sculptors and craftsmen which continued through to the 20th century.⁴ In the 1700s, the allure of such breathtaking compositions and fine art was too strong a pull for the cream of London society and the Hospital soon became "the place to be seen, and to be seen helping".⁵

One wonders what the foundlings, who could be ogled, fishbowl-like, by visitors as a type of "tourist attraction" at mealtimes and while singing in the chapel, made of their finely dressed observers. Their daily activities, cocooned within the insular environment of the Foundling Hospital, were a world away

from those of London's elite, for whom renting a pew or attending a church service at the Hospital on Sunday, had become an "incredibly fashionable" thing to do. The foundlings, many salvaged from the very lowest depths of the country's most desperate inhabitants, may have had no idea their simple lives figured as a "social highlight" in high-society calendars, as "something you did on the weekend".⁶ Combined with the altruism of the signatories on Coram's earliest petition to King George II, which included 21 'ladies of quality and distinction', a perfect storm of "art, music and philanthropy" propelled what today, now simply under the name 'Coram', remains the United Kingdom's oldest ongoing charity for children.⁷ (True to form, Coram's current patron in the modern day is Her Majesty Queen Camilla).

In the 18th century, the purpose and process for each foundling at the Hospital generally ran the same way; upon admission, they were to be billeted to a wet, then dry, nurse, most often in the English countryside up to around five years of age. They would then return to the Hospital (or, between 1759 and 1773, perhaps one of its branch hospitals), to be raised and educated, before being sent to begin life in the wider world as an apprentice, which most often happened around the age of 14.⁸

The children admitted to the Hospital were not 'foundlings' in the modern sense of children found abandoned. The first admissions, in 1741, were on a first come, first serve basis – initially accepting children who were unwanted or unable to be cared for up to two months of age. The next approach to admissions took the form of a lottery system, whereby coloured balls decided the fate of children brought on what was usually a monthly admission day. From mid-1756, thanks to government financial support, a period of 'general reception' began – but whereas certain standards had previously allowed admittance of children appearing to be in good health, now the Hospital was required to accept any child, as long as they were under the revised age of 12 months.⁹ The scheme was, lamented the Hospital Secretary John Brownlow, in a later memoir, a "wild and chimeral" plan, far removed from the original intention of Coram's charity, and – despite the fact no previous system had functioned perfectly – the resulting chaos spoke for itself.¹⁰ Of the 14,934 children admitted in the ensuing four years, only 4,400 survived to the age of being sent out as an apprentice. Tragically (and considering the elevated rates for child mortality generally during this time) the Hospital was not equipped to deal with an "army of infants", many of whom were now arriving in such an "emaciated and diseased" condition that they survived only hours after admission, if they were still alive at all. "Instead of being a protection to the living," bemoaned Brownlow, "the institution became, as it were, a charnel-house for the dead!"¹¹

One should keep in mind that the Foundling Hospital was a place where conditions appear to have tried their best to be at odds with the desperate state of English orphanages or workhouses conjured up by countless novels and historical records of the time. As "one of the most fashionable charities" in London, the Hospital had attracted the support of the best advisors available in Georgian England, on subjects including breastfeeding, nutrition and medical practices. The foundlings "also had a far better diet than other children in the community, often eating meat, and eating fresh vegetables almost every day. Their accommodation was clean, they had good clothing, regular bedtimes and more opportunities for exercise." But perhaps few things were a match for mid-18th century London, where almost two thirds of children were dying before their fifth birthday, regardless of social standing – with mortality rates particularly high among illegitimate children.¹²

The arguably disastrous phase of general admission ended in 1760. From then, through to the final admissions in the mid-21st century, rightly or wrongly, the system whereby children were accepted into the Hospital was tinkered with and tailored as the Hospital's reputation and fortunes ebbed and flowed; sometimes, only war orphans were accepted, other times, children from workhouses or illegitimate children were specifically admitted. (Children were rarely claimed back – initially because parents, many of whom had relinquished their children due to poverty, were required to pay any incurred expenses while the child had been in the Hospital's care. When this requirement for recompense was abolished in 1763, the number of reclaimed children rose from 182 over the previous 20 years to 183 children in that year alone).¹³

From mid-1756, children were admitted only after their mother had undertaken an interview, provided references and been sufficiently assessed as “deserving”. At the same time, however, another system began running parallel to this admission process. With the cessation of government funding after the general admission scheme (parliament “frightened by the spirit of evil itself had raised”, suggested Brownlow) and consequential waning in public support, the Governors sought to raise funds via, as their Secretary put it, “an error of another kind”.¹⁴

So it was that until 1801, the Hospital's admission including an avenue for babies to be accepted on a “no questions asked” basis, so long as they were left with £100 attached.¹⁵ This was not the first time the admissions process had been open to misuse, but Brownlow would later mourn,

“It is a fact, much to be regretted, that for many years children were mysteriously received on payment of £100 without a knowledge of, or any clue being given to the parents from whom they sprung! The abuses which might, and no doubt did arise from this system, are so obvious as to need no comment.”¹⁶

This amount of money was no trifling sum, and what kind of people could afford to provide it? In the 18th century, even the best domestic servants, such as a skilled housekeeper or coachman, could expect to earn £15 and £26, respectively, for their yearly wage (with, say, lodging and meals included). Around £40 annually was what was required to keep a working class family with a roof over their heads; a middle class family was estimated to require no less than £100; a wealthy household no less than £500.¹⁷ While online Hospital transcriptions have occasionally missed noting that a child was accepted with £100, a quick look through the Hospital admissions index suggests there could have been fewer than 100 children received under this questionable ‘hundred pound pom’ scheme during the near half-century it was in operation.¹⁸

Among the admissions into the Hospital this way, according to a note pinned to the record attributed to him, was a 10-week-old infant by the name of William Rowland Richards, who was received on 7 February 1764.¹⁹ Subsequently, while the General Register, which recorded the progress of each child through the Foundling Hospital system during their life there, shows most foundlings were accepted by ‘Order of the General Committee’, the words beside the occasional child, such as this one, would record them to have been ‘Taken in by Order of the Treasurer’.²⁰

One wonders the circumstances of those who left him at the Hospital, particularly as there was still an alternate ‘free’ avenue for the same purpose; furthermore, when one considers the number of children surrendered by their parents – and then never able to be reclaimed – due to sheer poverty. A sum like £100 does not seem to be the kind of money an ‘exposed and deserted’ child would be

presented with; nor does it seem to be the kind of sum left with a child anyone would be planning to claim back.

In this child's case, it seems highly possible he corresponds with a William Rowland Richards, who is recorded as being baptised exactly 10 weeks earlier at St. James's Church, Clerkenwell, Islington, Middlesex – a stone's throw from the Foundling Hospital in Bloomsbury – on 29 November 1763, having been born 24 November 1763. There, his parents are recorded as John and Elizabeth Richards.²¹

Nonetheless, perhaps in lieu of the 'no questions asked' policy for children such as this, those received with £100 were exempt from their mother having to present them in person, so the admission record at the Foundling Hospital for this baby boy offers no parent names and there is no clue in his file as to who brought him to the gates.²² There is only a neatly written note pinned to the record,

Sir,

*you will be pleasd to receive
this Child with One Hundred-
Pounds agreeable to the order of
of the hourse Taking care to
provide what is needfull By
the name of William Rowland
Richards.*²³

According to the digitised files, the infant named on the note was given the foundling number 16398, and, like all foundlings, a brand new name. Whether a child arrived at the Hospital baptised or not (and some children arrived with church records signed by Ministers, or with their names embroidered on their clothing, engraved on tokens or in attached notes) each foundling was renamed by Hospital staff and rebaptised, under the premise it would "protect the anonymity of the birth mothers". The children "were deliberately cut off from their past", so that both they, and their parents, would presumably be free to move on in life, unburdened by the stigma of whatever had led them to the Hospital in the first place.²⁴

So, foundling number 16398 needed a new identity – and he was very quickly given one. The Hospital renamed him 'Frederick Meredith'.

Like all foundlings, this 10-week-old child had no concept of what this supposed act of benevolence would mean for him, nor his parents, nor any potential future family trying to trace him. If available digitised accounts represent the total sum, then the name 'William Rowland Richards' appears in the files of foundling Frederick Meredith only once – written on the note presented with him as a baby, pinned to his single-page admission record. Unlike other children reclaimed from the Foundling Hospital by their parents, he would never again know what his real name had been, nor would his parents, or whoever dropped him off, be notified of his new identity.²⁵

The tradition of naming a child with the name or names of supporters of the Hospital was not unusual in the earliest days, and while it is unknown how prevalent the practice still was by the 1760s, a cursory investigation of the available digitised records in the Foundling archives show, for example, parliamentarian Sir William Meredith (along with Cholmondeley relatives, on his mother's side) in

attendance at meetings in the 1760s. This would not be the only time the 'Meredith' surname was used in naming Foundling Hospital children.²⁶

Unfortunately, the currently available digitised records show a gap in baptisms at the Hospital between January 1762 and March 1770, and without further research it is not known if, when and where these may have taken place.²⁷ Nonetheless, the available digitised records suggest the newly named Frederick's life proceeded through the Hospital system as expected. Following convention, he was immediately billeted out to a wet nurse named Sarah Freebody, in the market town of Enfield, followed by another nurse (presumably a dry nurse) in 1768. During a brief return to the Hospital in April 1768, he was perhaps an unwillingly participant in the Hospital's smallpox inoculation program, at the time conducted by Hospital physician William Watson, who had undertaken a revolutionary quantitative smallpox study using control groups of foundlings in 1767.²⁸ Frederick finally returned for good (possibly to a branch Hospital at this time) when six-years-old, in late 1769, to begin his education and work. For this, he was given a uniform and shoes, while all children were taught to read, boys were also taught to write (although these specific lessons appear to have been paused in the years Frederick was present).²⁹ Boys were occupied with work such as spinning, gardening and training in skills like weaving, tailoring or shoemaking, while all children learnt to darn and knit. Prayers, church, and a dash of 'free play' in surrounding fields were also part of the weekly routine.³⁰ In March 1773, at only nine-years-old, the digitised records conclude with Frederick being sent out on his apprenticeship to John Brasier, a baker in Piccadilly in the parish of St. James, Westminster, with whom he was expected to stay until the age of 21³¹. As the digitised general records do not include any further information about foundling number 16398, it's supposed Frederick never returned to live at the Foundling Hospital.

And so, the digitised records show the child who began life as William Rowland Richards had become foundling number 16398, and was now finally returned to the wider world as Frederick Meredith. Like more than 27,000 children who would be registered among the foundlings taken in by Thomas Coram and his successors for two centuries, the identity of his former self – a helpless baby, no less, unable to cling onto its name or any remnant of the details of its birth, whether it wanted to or not – had been wiped from the record of history.

Or had it?

What became of this Frederick Meredith, foundling and apprentice baker? Was he a man who, by sheer coincidence, shared a birth year, name and sometime occupation with another man, whose descendants would one day be relentlessly seeking answers to his provenance on the other side of the world? (Every genealogist knows the disappointment of leads that seem too good to be true, only to discover they're a case of *almost, but not quite*). Or, was there more at play behind the scenes, that one day would reveal this Frederick Meredith to be exactly the man his descendants were looking for?

Time constraints and access to resources have determined the depth of research undertaken for this particular story and it must now be drawn to a close. And perhaps, whoever once handed over a baby boy to the mercies of the London Foundling Hospital in the late winter of 1764 had hoped he would be renamed, and that would be the end of the story, too. But perhaps – just *perhaps* – this part of his story, more than 250 years later, could be about to get the ending it deserves.

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