

Thomas Coram Foundation- A brief history of the Foundation and services on the Site

In the corner of Brunswick Square stands a statue of Captain Thomas Coram (1668 – 1751). Inscribed beneath it are the words “Pioneer in the Cause of Child Welfare”. The statue is located between two organisations, both of which carry the captain’s name- Coram Family and Coram’s Fields with seven acres of land between them.

Thomas Coram was born in Lyme Regis and went to sea before he was 12 years old. He sailed to the United States, where he established a shipyard in Massachusetts, and married a girl from Boston. Returning to England at the age of 52, Coram was shocked at the sight of abandoned babies and young children left to die on dung heaps in the streets of Georgian London. It was a huge social problem. Outside the aristocracy, illegitimate children and their mothers, were treated extremely harshly by society. Captain Coram felt incapable of dealing with such a problem on an individual basis. Instead, he started a twenty-year campaign to obtain a Royal Charter from the king to establish the first Foundling Hospital“ for the maintenance and education of exposed and deserted young children”.

The word “foundling” is defined in the Oxford dictionary as a “deserted child”. (The seal on the Royal Charter for the Foundling Hospital shows Moses in the bullrushes (Moses being one of the first known foundlings in recorded History). The word “hospital” now usually refers to a place where the sick are treated, but it may also be used to denote a “charitable institution for the education and maintenance of the young”. Such hospitals were common on the continent, usually supported by the Church and the state – the church wanted souls and the state wanted soldiers.

The charter for the Foundling Hospital was granted in 1739, when Captain Coram was seventy-one years old. The Hospital took in its first infants in March 1741 using temporary premises in Hatton Garden. These premises were vacated in 1745 when the west wing of the newly built Hospital was completed on the Bloomsbury site in Lamb’s Conduit Fields. One of the first governors of the hospital was William Hogarth, a friend of Captain Coram. In 1740, Hogarth donated a portrait he had painted of Captain Coram, and he then persuaded other artists to follow his example and donate paintings to the Foundling Hospital, making it effectively, London’s first art gallery. In recognition, these artists were all made governors of the hospital. It is said that the debates generated at the meetings of the artists/governors gave rise to the idea of public art exhibitions under the direction of a National Academy, out of which The Royal Academy developed. Another distinguished benefactor of the Hospital was Handel, who gave concerts in the chapel to raise money for the institution. These links with the Arts have continued through to the present day and in its museum, the Foundation retains many of the original paintings, as well as a substantial collection related to the life work of Handel.

The first two children taken in by the Foundling Hospital were baptised Thomas and Eunice Coram. Captain Thomas Coram was their godfather, a role he repeated for some twenty more foundlings. However following his long campaign to set up the hospital, Coram’s subsequent involvement with it was in fact, fairly nominal. Indeed, he died a relatively poor man in 1751. Nevertheless, his great achievement was to establish a tradition of rescuing some of the most needy children, educating and caring for them up to the age of fourteen, when the boys were sent out to the army and the girls to domestic service. Over a period of two hundred years, up to the Second World War, the Foundling Hospital took in over 27,000 children. The governors of the Foundling Hospital decided in 1926 that it should be moved to Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire, and sold the site to a

syndicate, whose intention was to transfer Covent Garden Market there. A Bill to authorise this transfer was introduced to Parliament, but in the event was never completed, as local people came together at the threat of the site's redevelopment and with the help of Lord Rothermere of the *Daily Mail* launched a vigorous campaign to save it. Lord Rothermere provided the funds to buy an option on the site. It then took a further ten years to raise a total of £500,000 to buy back the six and a half acres of Coram's Fields, which are now owned by the Coram's Fields Trust. A condition of this transaction was that the land should be held in perpetuity for the recreation and education of children. At the same time, the Foundling Hospital governors bought back the remaining part of the site, and the scope of their work was extended by Act of Parliament to include child welfare work. Under the guidance and direction of the Thomas Coram Foundation, the focus since the Second World War has shifted from residential care to adoption, fostering and specialist services for children leaving care.

The history of nursery provision on the site can be traced back to the inter-war period, when St Leonard's, a school in Scotland, set up a second charity from their Seniors' Beneficent Fund to support the founding of a nursery school in a needy party of London. The governors of the Foundling Hospital were persuaded to let part of the old hospice building, located on the site of the hospital for a peppercorn rent to house the school, and St Leonard's Nursery opened its doors in 1930 to eighty children. At that time there was great poverty as a result of the slump and unemployment. Records tell of a third of the children having to be bathed and dressed in school clothes on arrival. The intention was for St Leonard's to build a purpose-built nursery in the grounds of an existing rented building. However the Foundling Hospital governors decided to build a much bigger facility to house a residential nursery above this for children of the Foundling Hospital who were waiting to be fostered. There was also a school for training students in social work with young children.

Construction started in 1938. St Leonard's was poised to move into the new building in 1939, when war broke out. The nursery was immediately evacuated to Hertfordshire. Meanwhile the new building was requisitioned for use as a British restaurant. It was handed back after the war, but before St Leonard's could return, the new headteacher and teacher spent a term redecorating and cleaning the building in preparation. It was not what they were employed to do, but at that time, it was a case of everyone knuckling down and doing whatever jobs needed to be done.

St Leonard's ran a thriving nursery school, expanding, until by the 1960's, it was operating three different nursery groups, one part-time and two full-time, supported partly by Seniors' funding and partly by grants from the LCC. However financial difficulties for the Thomas Coram Foundation rose again in the early 1970's, as grants were cutback and budgets were slashed. In 1973, a proposal was put forward to merge St Leonard's with the Coram Foundation, to form a pre-school centre for 0-5 year olds on the Coram site. The Centre was to encourage the participation of parents and provide amenities for children and their families. When this, proposal was turned down by St Leonard's, the only option seemed to be closure. The outrage, which this threat raised, resulted in a campaign launched to save St Leonard's. Eventually after protracted negotiations, the ILEA stepped in to rescue two of the St Leonard's nursery groups. Taking a seven year lease on the space in the Coram building, while Coram took over the space occupied by the third nursery group to open the new Thomas Coram Children's Centre in 1974.

This came about as a collaboration of the Thomas Coram Foundation, the London Borough of Camden and the Area Health Authority. The Thomas Coram Research Unit, a research group of the Institute of Education, tasked with undertaking the research component was also based in the building. As a new and innovative centre in its time, the

aims set out twenty-five years ago sound uncannily similar to those associated with the Coram Community campus today, particularly those of the Early Childhood Centre and the Parents' Centre. Thus the earlier Centre undertook to:

- Provide care and education for part or all of the day for children living in a defined geographical area.
- Provide a social centre for parents, acting as a meeting place for mothers and fathers, to increase social contacts, discuss problems, and receive advice, treatment and mutual support.
- Provide opportunities for parent guidance about children's health and development and upbringing through child health visitor attachment as integral features of the scheme.
- Provide a stimulating and satisfying environment for young children by way of an educational establishment, which safeguards their health and well being and is educationally beneficial.
- Become a centre in child development and early childcare and education.

The Thomas Coram Children's Centre provided a free, year-round, full-day service for one hundred children. When once again financial difficulties began to bite in the early 1990's, coupled with the discovery that the building was suffering from structural problems, the Thomas Coram Foundation's threat of closure of the centre triggered another vigorous local campaign, led by parents with a 1,500 signature petition to the Queen. Sadly, at the time, the Foundation had no alternative but to close the Centre. The parents' action was, however, instrumental in setting up the Coram Community Nursery Association, a parent-run, day-care facility, part funded by the Thomas Coram Foundation, operating from a portakabin on the Coram site. This initiative was supported by the Foundation as an interim measure until decisions could be made about the future of the red brick building. In the meantime, St Leonard's Nursery, by then a statutory service funded by the London Borough of Camden, continued to function in the old building for several more years.

In the ensuing period, the future of the Coram site was uncertain. It was not until 1995 that the concept of a "campus" was mentioned. This was the outcome of a Coram Working Party set up to consider future plans, where the idea of bringing together a collection of projects and activities, all related to children and families, within the boundary of the site, was first proposed. At the time it was anticipated that a new and more imaginative name might be forthcoming, but in the event the notion of a "campus" has persisted. At its core is the provision of services for children and families incorporating care, education, development and support, together with creative arts, linking back to the early artistic heritage. The intention is that services will involve new ways of working together with parents, children, carers and professionals from a range of disciplines, to meet the needs of the child, with quality as the guiding principle. Integrated with these services will be research, evaluation and training.

It has required a huge effort in fundraising, planning and organisation to translate the campus idea into reality. Alongside the physical restoration of the building and its adaptation for its new users, the evolution of the campus has given birth to the New Coram Parents' Centre, funded by an SRB grant, and the Thomas Coram Early Childhood Centre formed from an amalgamation of the St Leonard's Nursery and the Coram Community Nursery Association. As the core services move into the new building and the existing services consolidate their positions as neighbours on the site, the identity of the campus will undoubtedly begin to take shape. By its very nature, it will have to evolve over time, as it responds to specific needs. The one certainty is that the future will be a challenge.

Written in 1998.