

# Captain Thomas Coram: philanthropist who established the Foundling Hospital

This month's anniversary is the first in the series that does not commemorate an important event in medicine or the anniversary of some distinguished person in one or other of the caring professions. Captain Thomas Coram, who was born 350 years ago this year, is remembered as the moving spirit behind the establishment of the Foundling Hospital in London, the first institution in this country to care for sick and abandoned infants. The charity remains today as the Thomas Coram Foundation for Children, known as Coram, a memorial to a remarkable man.

Thomas Coram was born in 1668 in Lyme Regis, Devon, where his father was a merchant. The exact date of his birth is unknown, since no baptismal record exists of the event. Young Thomas's mother died when he was 11 years old and he was sent to sea as a cabin boy. His father re-married, moved to Hackney in London and Thomas was apprenticed to a Thames-side shipwright. In 1694, he went to Boston to establish a new shipyard in the British colony of Massachusetts, and here he spent the next 10 years, marrying a local girl. It was a long, happy but childless marriage.

On his return to England in 1704, he commanded merchant ships during the War of Spanish Succession, hence his title of Captain.

In 1712, Coram was elected to Trinity House, Deptford and the rest of his career was engaged in the promotion of the settlements of lands in the expanding American colonies, especially in Nova Scotia. He made his considerable living by building merchant ships and transporting naval stores. Coram settled in Rotherhithe, then in the country to the east of London, and pursued his business interests in town. During his travels to London, he regularly observed abandoned infants, many of them neonates, many dead, others dying, on the side of the road – the 'foundlings' – and

he determined to do something to mitigate this disgraceful state of affairs.

In 1722, inspired by the foundling hospitals which were being established in Europe for the care of abandoned children, Coram advocated the opening of a similar institution in the metropolis. He was opposed by those who believed that such an organization would merely encourage illegitimate births.

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The turning point in Coram's campaign came in 1729, with his 'ladies' petition', under the patronage of Queen Caroline, the wife of King George II, which was signed by a number of peeresses. By 1737, a committee of the Privy Council was charged with considering the matter and Coram was given the task of finding the first governors of the hospital. He recommended no less than 375 names, of men recognized for their influence and wealth. The list included 89 peers of the realm, 72 members of parliament and the Lord Mayor of London. In 1739, the Foundling Hospital charter was signed by the King.

Temporary quarters were found in Hatton Garden, which opened its doors to the children in 1741, and the new purpose-built hospital opened in 1745 in Lamb's Conduit Fields as a children's home for 'the education and maintenance of exposed and deserted young children'; the term 'hospital' being used in the more general sense of the 18th century of a 'place of hospitality'. Nevertheless, one of the priorities of the committee of the Foundling Hospital was the health of the children.

A further wing was added in 1752 so that the boys and girls could be separated. Rapidly, the hospital became London's most popular charity. George Frederick Handel had his 'Messiah' performed there to raise funds for the hospital. The artist, William Hogarth, a friend of Coram, designed the children's uniforms, set up a permanent exhibition of his works there, including a splendid full-length portrait of Coram himself, and encouraged other artists to exhibit at the hospital, including Sir Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough.

On reception, the babies were sent to wet nurses or foster parents in the country, their keep being paid for by the hospital. At the age of 4 or 5 years, they were returned to the hospital for schooling until the girls were old enough to be apprenticed, generally as servants, and the boys sent to work in a variety of trades.

In the 1920s, it was decided to move the hospital from central London to a healthier site in the country and a new Foundling Hospital opened in 1935 in Berkhamstead in Hertfordshire. In the 1950s, when both the law and custom moved away from institutional care of children to family adoption, the Berkhamstead building was sold to become a local school.

Today the Thomas Coram Foundation for Children, a major children's charity, occupies modern premises near the site of the original hospital. Next to it, a new building in similar style to the old institution houses the splendid Foundling Museum, with extensive memorabilia of the original hospital and a magnificent collection of paintings, which includes the Hogarth portrait of Thomas Coram. It certainly merits a visit.

Coram's wife died in 1740; he had laid little aside for his old age and in 1749 his friends raised a subscription for his maintenance. He died in his lodgings near Leicester Square in March 1751 and he was buried, in accordance with his wish, in the vault under the Foundling Hospital chapel in the area now named Coram's Fields. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*

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