

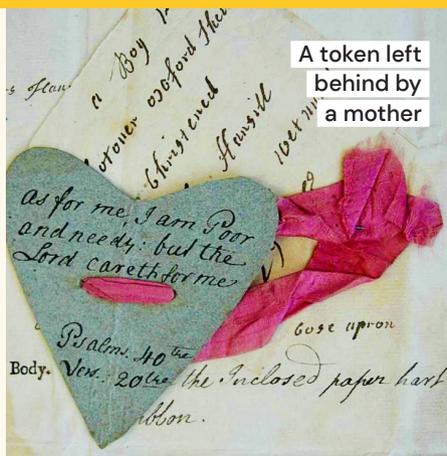
protect the identity of the mother. Babies would live with foster families outside London and return to the Hospital when they were five. Many would be trained for domestic or military service.

Staff at the Hospital kept meticulous records from the 1700s to the present day, which include letters from mothers seeking admission for their child and the tokens they left in the hope that they may in future be reunited. These tokens were often pieces of fabric from their clothing to identify the child.

The records, which also include entrance registers, medical records, nursery books and minutes of decisions made, amount to more than 800 linear feet of shelving and an estimated eight tons of paper.

THE PROJECT

'Voices Through Time: The Story of Care' is a four-year programme funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund that will reveal untold stories about the lives of children at the Foundling Hospital. The archive of records from Coram's Foundling Hospital is held at London Metropolitan Archives (LMA). Much of it is in a fragile condition, which means it's not easy for people to access them. The



“Babies of very poor parents were often left to die”

programme aims to digitise 25 per cent of the historic archive, approximately 112,000 pages of records.

The records will be scanned by staff and volunteers will then transcribe them to ensure the charity has a readable text alongside the images of the original records.

Once digitised and transcribed, these records will be made available on a dedicated website for anyone to use.

GET INVOLVED

u3a is collaborating with the Coram Charity to offer a special project exploring this fascinating history.

Coram's comprehensive archive means it's possible to trace the journey of a child from their admission to the Hospital until they left. Combining them with other public records such as birth, marriage, death, Census and Electoral Register records, it is possible to uncover the stories of the children, staff and mothers.

This autumn, u3a members will transcribe a unique set of scanned records from the archive, which they will then use to carry out further research. There is no need to travel to London for this project. A feast of information for those who love history, the project will start with letters penned by mothers who sought to place their babies in the Hospital's care.

To enrol, sign up using the online form at tinyurl.com/5y9dwh9. The deadline is 8 October. For more details or enquiries, email slp@u3a.org.uk.

● More details about the Foundling Hospital and the Voices Through Time project are available at coramstory.org.uk/corams-history

JOHN'S STORY

John Bowles was one of the first 30 children admitted to the Foundling Hospital on 25 March, 1741, although he was known only as child number five.

About a month old, he was dressed in a cloak marked with the letters 'I' and 'A', which would have been used to identify him if his mother should reclaim him.

Of the 30 children, only John and five others survived until old enough to be apprenticed. He was fostered with a family in Yorkshire

before returning to the Hospital in 1746. At age six, he would have been expected to work outside, such as digging or pumping water, to prepare him for his future life.

Food at the Hospital was meagre, consisting of porridge for breakfast, meat and potatoes for dinner and bread, sometimes with cheese, for supper.

On Charter Day, 17 October, the children were given a day off work and roast beef and plum pudding.

At age ten, John was apprenticed

to Stephen Beckingham, one of the Hospital's governors, most likely to work in the house or grounds. His master died four years later and it is not known what happened to John. He may have stayed on at the property, which was inherited by his master's son who was also a governor of the Hospital.

While John's life at the Hospital was quite harsh, he did well compared with children who lived on the streets or ended up in workhouses.