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**‘Restored to its mother’: Reclaiming Children
at the London Foundling Hospital in the
Nineteenth century**

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**‘Restored to its mother’: Reclaiming Children at the
London Foundling Hospital in the Nineteenth century.**

History BA Dissertation, 2013

Student Number 0905468

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The Foundling Restored to its Mother, Emma Brownlow King (1858, London, Foundling Museum).

Introduction

In *The Foundling Restored to its Mother* a respectable lady reaches forward to embrace the infant child she has not seen for years. She had previously given her child up to the London Foundling Hospital and faced a very slim chance of ever seeing it again. Yet somehow she now stands within arm's reach of her 'long lost, but ever remembered child'.¹ While most children brought to the Foundling Hospital remained there until apprenticeship in their late teens, a minority would, as Brownlow King's painting shows, be 'restored' to a parent or relative.² Indeed, from the earliest admissions the Hospital encouraged mothers to leave a memento or 'token' which they could later identify in order to reclaim their child.³ This dissertation intends to explore the extent and circumstances of child reclamation at the London Foundling Hospital as a contribution to the history of the institution, but also the history of motherhood, illegitimacy and the working class family.

The London Foundling Hospital was set up by Captain Thomas Coram and established by royal charter in 1739. Dedicated to 'the maintenance and education of exposed and deserted young children' it took in 27,000 children until its closure in 1954.⁴ In the early nineteenth century single motherhood, child abandonment and illegitimacy were common social problems and key policy concerns.⁵ The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 reflected fears over the rising cost of parish relief. It reduced unwed mothers' rights and support to the extent that Pinchbeck and Hewitt claim it 'operated in such a way as not only to humiliate the

¹ Foundling Hospital Archive (hereafter FHA), Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/024, 1815, London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA).

² FHA, General Register 5, X041/004,X041/008, January 1778 – December 1880; Apprentice register No. 2, X041/005A, 1770 January – 1851 December, LMA.

³ 'Tokens' included scraps of material and small objects some of which are on display at the Foundling Museum, see <http://www.foundlingmuseum.org.uk/collections/the-foundling-hospital-collection/> 12.12.2012

⁴ 'Royal Charter establishing an Hospital', 1739 printed in F. H. Nichols and R. A. Wray, *The History of the Foundling Hospital* (Oxford, 1935) 329.

⁵ S. Garton, *Histories of Sexuality* (London, 2004) 106.

mother, but to stigmatise the child.⁶ These concerns affected how the Hospital operated, including the policy on admissions and reclamations. In 1763, following a brief but disastrous period of general admission, the Hospital introduced a policy of maternal petitioning that shifted focus towards the situation and rehabilitation of the mother.⁷ In 1801 the Governors decreed ‘that the principal object of the Hospital was the maintenance and support of illegitimate children.’⁸ The Hospital now only accepted children whose mothers had a chance of returning to work and respectable society once their illegitimate offspring were taken from them.⁹ Subsequently the women in question were largely the higher working classes or lower middle classes; domestic servants, workers in the clothing trades and women still living at home.¹⁰ For a minority of these women, something changed in their lives that allowed them to return to the Hospital and reclaim the child they had previously had to prove they were unable to care for. This dissertation will analyse how and why this was able to happen.

While the history of the Foundling Hospital has been well documented, the particular history of child reclamation has received only passing attention from academics.¹¹ Tanya Evans’ work on single motherhood, *Unfortunate Objects*, provides an outline of the reclamation process during the eighteenth century, and argues that it must be understood as evidence of maternal love.¹² More broadly, *Unfortunate Objects* asserts that despite the difficulties of their lives, unmarried mothers adeptly used a range of formal and informal networks to

⁶ I. Pinchbeck and M. Hewitt, *Children in English Society*, Vol. 2 (London, 1973) 583.

⁷ R. McClure, *Coram’s Children: The London Foundling Hospital in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, 1981) 143.

⁸ McClure, *Coram’s Children*, 251.

⁹ J. Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women, Unwed Mothers and the London Foundling Hospital* (London, 2012) 2-5.

¹⁰ J. Gillis, ‘Servants, Sexual Relations, and the Risks of Illegitimacy in London, 1801-1900’, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring, 1979) 146.

¹¹ For non-academic discussion see: Camp, A., ‘Reclaimed Foundlings’, *Family Tree Magazine*, Vol. 16, No. 8 (June 2000) 19-20.

¹² T. Evans, *Unfortunate Objects: Lone Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London* (Basingstoke, 2005) 130-131, 202.

support themselves and their offspring.¹³ Ruth McClure's important history, *Coram's Children*, briefly comments on changes to the regulations in the eighteenth century and suggests that the issue of respectability was an important factor in decisions.¹⁴ However, whether or not the General Committee did assess the 'respectability' of parents in reclamation cases is not explored. The topic of reclaimed children is also briefly discussed by Jessica Sheetz-Nguyen in *Victorian Women, Unwed Mothers and the London Foundling Hospital*. However Sheetz-Nguyen's assertion that during the span of her study reclaimed children rose from 0 – 15% is problematic.¹⁵ Further investigation of the statistics suggests that reclamation was not actually increasing exponentially in this period. Rather certain years featured a high percentage of children restored; whereas others featured no children claimed with the result that reclamation actually experienced a range of fifteen percentage points. Overall therefore, it is clear that no detailed and sustained account exists of history of reclaimed children, especially with regards to the nineteenth century.

Although bastardy has long been discussed by historians, the field has developed considerably since Peter Laslett's ground-breaking work in the 1970s.¹⁶ Demographic studies, such as those of Laslett and Richard Adair have provided historians with an important basis from which to examine other elements of the history of bastardy.¹⁷ However, there have been considerable recent attempts to move away from purely quantitative studies to an understanding of the 'lived experience of bastardy'.¹⁸ Furthermore, the idea of the 'bastard-prone sub-society', in which some women would repeatedly bear illegitimate

¹³ Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 45-6.

¹⁴ McClure, *Coram's Children*, 124, 247.

¹⁵ Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 184.

¹⁶ For example W. C. Hall, *The state and the child* (London, 1917); M. Hopkirk, *Nobody Wanted Sam* (London, 1949).

¹⁷ P. Laslett, K. Oosterveen and R. M. Smith (eds.), *Bastardy and its Comparative History* (London, 1980); R. Adair, *Courtship, Illegitimacy and Marriage in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 1996).

¹⁸ Levene *et al*, *Illegitimacy*, 2.

children has been criticised as less significant in understanding illegitimacy than Laslett suggests.¹⁹ This dissertation will focus on the lived experience of what Laslett describes as ‘sparrows...singletons who had one bastard only’. Laslett proposed the ‘courtship intensity hypothesis’, which analyses illegitimacy rates within the context of failed marriage attempts and the economic fortunes of those involved.²⁰ Indeed, a view of illegitimacy as the consequence of failed marriage is widely held among historians in the field who link it in varying ways to the economic circumstances.²¹ This hypothesis has been used by historians to understand illegitimacy among the working classes as a part of courtship and marriage rather than a product of ‘deviant minorities’.²² Indeed, Levene, Nutt and Williams in *Illegitimacy in Britain* estimate that by 1800, half of all first borns were conceived outside of marriage.²³

The family must be understood as a central concern of the nineteenth century and its history. Philip Aries argues in *Centuries of Childhood* that ‘the family occupied a tremendous place in our industrial societies and that it had perhaps never exercised so much influence over the human condition’.²⁴ Whilst ‘conservative historians of the past studied ‘the family’ as a secure, moral bastion of good,’ much modern work on the family now analyses the problems and variations of the nuclear unit.²⁵ It is within this context then, that an assessment of illegitimate children’s families will operate. One of the key debates within the history of the family regards parental neglect and abuse. Abandonment has been understood as evidence of

¹⁹P. Laslett, ‘The Bastard Prone Sub Society’ in Laslett *et al*, *Bastardy*, 217-218; Adair, *Courtship*, 7; G. N. Gandy, ‘Review: *Bastardy and Its Comparative History* by Peter Laslett; Karla Oosterveen; Richard M. Smith’, *Economic History Review*, Vol. 34, No. 1, (February, 1981) 183.

²⁰ P. Laslett, ‘Introduction: comparing illegitimacy over time and between cultures’ in Laslett *et al*, *Bastardy*, 53-64.

²¹ Adair, *Courtship*, 9; L. A. Tilly, J. W. Scott and M. Cohen, ‘Women’s work and European fertility patterns’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1976) 463-465.

²² Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 4-5.

²³ A. Levene, T. Nutt and S. Williams (eds.), *Illegitimacy in Britain, 1700-1920* (Basingstoke, 2005) 6.

²⁴ P. Aries *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. R. Baldick (Paris, 1960) 10.

²⁵ D. Hunt, *Parents and Children in History, The Psychology of Family Life in Early Modern France*, (New York, 1970) 27.

neglect by academics such as Lloyd deMause and Edward Shorter.²⁶ In *The Making of the Modern Family* Shorter sees the necessity of foundling hospitals as evidence itself of the lack of affection felt by mothers.²⁷ However this understanding of foundling institutions has been challenged by historians such as Valerie Fildes. In *Women as mothers in pre-industrial England*, Fildes argues that experiences of abandonment often involved a ‘heart–rending decision to relinquish a wanted and beloved child’.²⁸ This discussion of reclaimed children aims to contribute to this debate regarding the evidence of foundling institutions and parental love.

This dissertation will explain the process and nature of restoring children to their parents at the London Foundling Hospital in the nineteenth century. The extent of child restoration in the nineteenth century will be investigated to understand just how common it really was. The process and regulations regarding restorations will also be examined to understand under what conditions a child would be released and to whom. This discussion will examine what principles drove Committee decisions in light of the admissions changes in the nineteenth century thus ascertain just how far ‘respectability’ became the most important factor. Furthermore, the perspective of mothers, fathers and families of foundlings will be analysed, to ascertain what had changed in their lives in order for them to feel able to reclaim their child. Finally, it will ask the most poignant question; why did these parents reclaim their children, some after many years? This will include discussion of parental love and affection and a consideration of how child abandonment and reclamation may challenge traditional views of working class parenthood as a matter of survival over love.

²⁶ L. deMause, *The History of Childhood* (New York, 1974) i; E. Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (London, 1976) 170.

²⁷ E. Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (London, 1976) 172.

²⁸ Fildes ‘Maternal Feelings’, 139.

It is important to note that a lack of sources dominates the problems of understanding the history of childhood and the private lives of the working classes in the nineteenth century.²⁹ As the treasurer in *No Thoroughfare* notes, concerning the Foundling Hospital's records: "After the time that has elapsed, I am afraid it is the only information we have to offer you."³⁰ Although the Foundling Hospital Archive does not provide a voice for the many children under its care, it is a highly important and useful resource. The Foundling Hospital Archive includes the registers of children admitted and apprenticed, which allows an overview of numbers of reclaimed children. Moreover, the General Committee minutes, as the most detailed record of the managing Committee's decisions and regulations, will be used to further illuminate the institutional perspective on restoring children. Furthermore many of the letters, interview transcripts, reports and references involved in reclamation remain in the Archive. Much of this material was produced by mothers, fathers and families of foundlings and will therefore be used to understand their experiences. These papers are stored with the original petitions for admission of children and will provide more detailed evidence into how and why mothers and families reclaimed their children. This information is not separately listed in the Archive catalogue, which is perhaps why the issue has received scant historical attention up until now.

It is, however, important to recognise the potential problems of both the admission and reclamation petitions. Any transcripts of oral testimony included in an application were mediated through the Committee members who were recording it. This affects the language used: for example the phrase 'criminal conversation' is widely used in the place of sexual

²⁹ P. Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (New York, 1965) p. 104.

³⁰ W. Collins and C. Dickens, *No Thoroughfare* (London, c.1890) 27, available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1423> 16.04.2013. *No Thoroughfare* was based closely upon the actual London Foundling Hospital. See J. Bourne- Taylor, 'Received, a Blank Child: John Brownlow, Charles Dickens, and the London Foundling Hospital – Archives and Fictions', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (December 2001) 293-363.

intercourse and is undoubtedly not a phrase used by the mothers.³¹ It also raises the issue of editing by the Committee members. Similarly letters apparently written by mothers may have in fact been written by helpful employers, relatives or friends who wrote on their behalf, again presenting a mediating presence. Furthermore, the very nature of applying formally for the restoration of a child will affect the representation of the lives and emotions of the women in question. However the portrayal of women applying for children is, in itself, a useful and significant area of study, so these types of sources will remain highly useful.

From 1801 the Hospital focused on illegitimate children and started a more thorough petitioning process so this date will form the lower limit of research. The Archive is closed for privacy reasons from 1902 so this date will provide the upper limit. This dissertation will employ a similar methodology to that used by many historians of illegitimacy in undertaking both statistical analysis and a deeper textual analysis of personal letters and oral transcripts. Although there has been a strong trend within the history of parenthood to employ sociological and psychoanalytical techniques in attempting to understand parent child relationships this falls beyond the scope of this paper.³² Rather this argument aims to contribute to the social history of the working classes and plebeian motherhood and will engage with the practice of writing ‘history from below’.³³ In this dissertation, gender will be deployed, after the work of Joan Wallach Scott, as a ‘primary way of signifying relationships of power.’³⁴ In this way, the impact that gender had on mothers’ experiences and ability to reclaim a child will be better understood. In doing so however, this dissertation does not aim either to provide proof of a ‘happy ending’ for unmarried mothers, or to reduce their personal

³¹ Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 63.

³² A. S. Wohl, *The Victorian Family: Structure and Stresses* (London, 1978) 13.

³³ E.P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963).

³⁴ J. Wallach Scott, ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis’, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 91, No. 5. (Dec., 1986) 1067.

agency. Similarly this dissertation aims to engage with recent trends within the history of illegitimacy by including discussion of the fathers of illegitimate children.³⁵

The structure of the dissertation will therefore progress through the key research questions. Firstly, the process and regulations regarding restoration as well as the rate and quantity of restoration will be discussed. It will be demonstrated that the Committee was far more likely to reject reclamation applications in the nineteenth century and that therefore, the way in which reclamation rates have been previously understood underestimates the importance of reclamation. Chapter 2 will focus on understanding the conditions under which a child would be reclaimed by a parent. In this discussion, ideas of formal and informal support networks will be used, and illegitimacy will be understood within the context of marriage and courtship.³⁶ It will be demonstrated that for the majority of plebeian women, having a family was the key condition upon which they would reclaim a child. It will also argue that the Hospital's rules on who could reclaim a child focused not on a simple measure of respectability, but on a more complex idea of what was best for the child, which was ultimately a financial decision. Chapter 3 will then focus on why children were removed from the Hospital and will engage with the historiographical debate regarding parental love. It will argue that although socio-cultural ideas of motherhood and the family affected mothers' representations of themselves to the Foundling Hospital, overwhelmingly the Archive demonstrates the love and affection these parents felt for their children. Overall, the evidence of the reclamation of children from the London Foundling Hospital emphasises the family as a complex and varied network and its importance for nineteenth century plebeians.

³⁵ Levene *et al*, *Illegitimacy*, 4.

³⁶ Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 45-46; Levene *et al*, *Illegitimacy*, 8-10.

Chapter 1: Process and Rate

‘I am the miserable mother of a baby lately received under your care. I have a prayer to make to you.’³⁷

This chapter will provide the first line of enquiry into the reclamation of children from the London Foundling Hospital by examining the process and rate of reclamation. Firstly the process and regulations regarding reclamation will be discussed. Foundling reclamation was operating at a time before key legislation such as the 1891 Custody of Children Act and the 1926 Adoption Act. Both of these acts limited the rights of neglectful or abusive parents to claim their children.³⁸ Indeed, the Foundling Hospital has been described as having ‘pioneered institutional adoption as a means of effectively separating mother and child.’³⁹ Therefore the Committee was following no legal basis in their design and implementation of Hospital policy. Secondly, the extent of reclamation will be analysed. Reclamation has been dismissed by several historians as a minor element in the Hospital’s history with relatively low reclamation rates; however others have described it as a ‘substantial number’.⁴⁰ This chapter will provide a re-appraisal of the methods and extent of foundling restoration in the nineteenth century and will argue overall that it must be seen to be more significant than previous histories have understood.

³⁷ Collins and Dickens, *No Thoroughfare*, 2.

³⁸ M. Hopkirk, *Nobody Wanted Sam* (London, 1949) 141.

³⁹ B. Weisbrod, ‘How to Become a Good Foundling in Early Victorian London’, *Social History*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (May, 1985) 204.

⁴⁰ A. Wilson, ‘Illegitimacy and its implications in mid-eighteenth century London’, *Continuity and Change*, Vol. 4, Issue 1 (May 1989) 109; Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 183; McClure, *Coram’s Children*, 247.

Process

The Foundling Hospital had very strict and specific rules regarding parental contact with their pupils. Once admitted, no further contact was allowed between parent and child until the child had at least reached the age of 21, or if all parties were agreeable, once they had been apprenticed in their late teens.⁴¹ The only way for parents to receive information on their offspring was for them to attend the Hospital on Monday mornings. Then, after producing the receipt they were given at admission they could be informed of their child's health and progress.⁴² Throughout the nineteenth century, in order to reclaim a child, parents or carers would once again be required to petition the Hospital. Parents would apply in writing or in person to the General Committee. They would then be required to undergo either further interviews or investigation and might have been asked to provide references or guarantors.⁴³ Alternatively, if a child was over fourteen and an appropriate trade or service position was available, a parent could apply to have the children apprenticed to them under the normal conditions which had been established for the apprenticing of foundlings. This was favoured by the Hospital as it ensured a settlement for the child and involved an investigation and report as to the suitability of the position and a formal indenture.

In 1819, the General Committee itself requested a report regarding the previous system of restoring children to their parents which was produced by the secretary Morris Lievesley:

The secretary begs to report that it was the early practice of the Hospital when parents reclaimed their children to restore them; first having been reimbursed the expense which the governors had incurred by maintaining them.

⁴¹ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/030 , 26.01.1850, p.48, 17.08.1850, p.187; X041/031, 28.03.1857, p.263, LMA.

⁴² FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/024, 23.11.1814, p.133; Receipts for children returned to Hospital, A/FH/A/11/003/001-002, 1759-1818, 1822-1879 , LMA.

⁴³ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/024, 30.09.1818, pp.56-60; X041/031 14.03.1857, pp.247-255;X041/034, 26.09.1874, pp.249-268, LMA.

For several years previous to the year 1800 it was the practice upon similar claims to apprentice the children to the parties claiming, taking two bonds of £40 each by way of collateral security.⁴⁴

Therefore, prior to the nineteenth century reclaiming children could prove a costly exercise. Indeed, before 1764, even if a parent came to reclaim a child who had died, they would still be required to pay the maintenance costs for the period in which the child was living.⁴⁵ From 1800 very few parents were made to pay anything to reclaim their child, with only three cases of bonds being taken between 1817 and 1824. In the case of John Gale, the family were required to pay his maintenance costs for the one month he was under the institution's care.⁴⁶ Two further cases required sureties of £40 and £200 respectively, the equivalent of £1,676.80 and £8,384 in modern currency.⁴⁷ Both cases had been previously refused: Elizabeth Page's mother on one previous occasion and Emma Adams' on two.⁴⁸ Therefore we can understand the use of these bonds as an assurance that the children would be properly cared for and maintained. It is also apparent however that this technique was phased out throughout the century, given that no further cases involving payment occur.

One of the most significant changes in reclamation policy in the nineteenth century was the introduction of a thorough test of the suitability of parents to care for their children. The Committee minutes state that parents were required to be 'of such character and in such condition to maintain them'.⁴⁹ In Evans' analysis of reclamation during the General Reception between the years 1756 and 1760 only two mothers were recorded as being rejected.⁵⁰ However a survey of Committee records for a sample of five years between 1850

⁴⁴ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/024, 30.06.1819, p.206, LMA.

⁴⁵ Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 194.

⁴⁶ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/024, 09.04.1817, p.194, LMA.

⁴⁷ Calculated using National Archives Currency Converter, available at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/> 12.04.2013.

⁴⁸ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/025, 11.02.1824, pp.170-174, 10.11.1824, pp.302-304; X041/024, 05.12.1819, p.286, 15.12.1819, p.290, 12.01.1820, pp.303-311, LMA.

⁴⁹ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/024, 30.06.1819, p.206, LMA.

⁵⁰ Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 196.

and 1855 has shown that six parents or carers had their petitions for restoration rejected.⁵¹ Given that significantly more children were admitted during the General Reception, it can be concluded that a higher proportion of applications to reclaim children were rejected in the nineteenth century than the eighteenth. Therefore the financial test of the eighteenth century had been replaced by a more thorough examination of the financial means and situation of those wishing to reclaim a child.

Rate

The only data published on reclamation rates in the nineteenth century from Sheetz-Nguyens, *Victorian Women* puts the figure at 3%.⁵² Sheetz-Nguyen also claims that reclamation rose from 0 to 15% during the nineteenth century.⁵³ The General Register of the Foundling Hospital shows that 126 children who were admitted between the years of 1801 and 1902 were later reclaimed by their parents.⁵⁴ By analysing the reclamation rate over the course of the century it is apparent that reclamation was not increasing exponentially but remained relatively stable.⁵⁵ Therefore discussion of both rates and policy is applicable to the entire nineteenth century.

This study has found that by taking a simple average it would appear that 3.07% of children admitted to the Hospital between the years of 1842 and 1892 were reclaimed by their parents, a figure much in line with previous scholarship.⁵⁶ However, as discussed, many parents had their petitions for reclaiming children rejected, and the sample has suggested that this may

⁵¹ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/030, 1849 December – 1856 April, LMA.

⁵² Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 183.

⁵³ Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 184.

⁵⁴ FHA, General Register No. 5, X041/004, 1778-1880; General Register No. 6, A/FH/A/09/002/006, 1881-1950, LMA.

⁵⁵ See Appendix A, Figure A2.

⁵⁶ See Appendix A, Table A1; FHA, General Register No. 5, X041/004, 1778-1880; General Register No. 6, A/FH/A/09/002/006, 1881-1950, LMA.

have been up to 50% of applicants.⁵⁷ This means that the estimated rate of *attempted* reclamations must be seen at 6.14% - double that previously discussed. Furthermore in order to calculate the most accurate rate of attempted reclamation the high mortality rates of children at the Foundling Hospital must be taken into account. Should a parent come forward to reclaim a child that was deceased, it was not recorded in the Committee minutes, given that no further action would be taken. Therefore, a wholly representative rate of attempted reclamations must take into account children who had died. If the number of deceased children who would have been reclaimed is estimated this can then be compared to the total admissions figure. The estimated rate of attempted reclamations is therefore 8.13%.⁵⁸ This rate is not intended as a statement of fact since the difficult nature of searching Committee minutes has meant that only a small sample has been taken. It does however demonstrate that restoration is more significant than has previously been historically recognised.

Furthermore the discrepancy between the actual rate of reclamation and the estimated attempted rate suggests that the General Committee did not necessarily view parental care as the best option for their wards, and would reject parents who did not fulfil their criteria. From 1801 it became Hospital policy to interview and investigate all petitions for admission and so the Committee was practised at thoroughly investigating plebeian lives. The high rejection rate may also be interpreted as reflecting an institutional and societal stigma against illegitimate parents. The ideology of the time believed that 'children begotten in sin would naturally inherit their parent's weakness.'⁵⁹ The Hospital guaranteed its wards an education, exposure to Christianity and a future trade through an apprenticeship, ensuring that they

⁵⁷ 6 out of 12 applications made between 1850 and 1855 were successful. FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/030, 1849 -1856, LMA.

⁵⁸ See Appendix A, Table A1.

⁵⁹ Pinchbeck *et al*, *Children*, 584.

would not once again become a 'burden to society'. Therefore the Committee had both the motivation and resources to apply a thorough test to parents hoping to reclaim a child.

The nineteenth century then saw some significant changes regarding the practice of restoring children to their parents. In line with the changes to admission policy, the new process of restoring children required parents to meet an institutional standard rather than simply prove their identity and pay a bond. The Committee's concern over the economic future of the foundlings meant apprenticing remained a common method of restoring an older child, but increasingly the formal petition and interview format characterised restorations. Successful reclamations only made up a small percentage of foundling futures and cannot be seen as representative of the majority of foundling experiences in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the fact that attempted reclamation rates are considerably higher than those previously discussed by historians underlines that this is an important topic. Furthermore it shows that had the Committee not imposed these conditions, reclamation would have removed a far greater number of children from the Hospital.

Chapter 2 : Changed Circumstances

‘And she must have satisfied them at the Foundling that she could provide for the child, or they would never have let her take him away.’⁶⁰

This chapter aims to investigate who was able to successfully reclaim a child from the Foundling Hospital and what had changed in their lives that allowed them to do this. The Committee required parents to be ‘of such character and in such condition to maintain them.’⁶¹ Previous histories have characterised the General Committee of the nineteenth century as having a ‘clandestine endeavour’ that focused upon the reputations of foundling mothers.⁶² Therefore the extent to which ideas of ‘respectability’ influenced their decision will be examined. The question of who could reclaim a child from the Foundling Hospital will be answered from the perspective of both the Hospital and the claimants. Unfortunately not all of the cases of reclamation contain additional information on the circumstances of the reclamation; however enough information is available to provide a detailed overview of common themes. Firstly, this chapter will pinpoint the relationship of the claimant. Then the circumstances of the mothers and relatives at the time of the claim will be considered, before the exact nature of Hospital policy is discussed. Overall, it will be argued that for the Hospital, economic circumstances had the biggest impact on the ability to reclaim a foundling. For mothers however, family support through marriage or kin, provided the crucial environment in which to reclaim a child.

⁶⁰ Collins and Dickens, *No Thoroughfare*, 16.

⁶¹ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/024, 30.06.1819, p.206, LMA.

⁶² Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 2.

Claimants

So who exactly was reclaiming children? Overwhelmingly children were claimed by their mother, with 87% of cases examined involving the child being restored to its mother.⁶³ However, cases in which mothers alone would claim children were quite rare. Only two cases were found where a child was returned to a lone mother who was living independently from her family.⁶⁴ The largest group of claimants was married couples; either mothers who had eventually married the biological father of their child, or a new partner.⁶⁵ As recent historiography has attempted to address the issue of the ‘absent father’, the fact that 26% of the sample was reclaimed by a biological father is important. It shows that the relationship between father and mother was more than just a brief sexual encounter. This must be seen to echo the ideas and findings of the ‘courtship intensity hypothesis.’⁶⁶ Relatives must also be understood to have played an important role in the reclamation process, as a significant number of children were released to a mother and her relatives, and in a few cases to relatives alone. Although within our survey no children were returned solely to their fathers, such cases did occur within the century, most commonly where the mother had died and through an apprenticeship.⁶⁷ Only one case appears within the survey of a child being released to an individual who is not a blood relation.⁶⁸ Overall therefore, the mother must be seen as the driving force behind reclamations.

⁶³ See Appendix B, Table B1.

⁶⁴ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/031, 20.03.1858, p.4; X041/034, 10.10.1874, p.276, LMA.

⁶⁵ Appendix B, Table B1.

⁶⁶ Laslett, ‘Introduction’ in Laslett *et al*, *Bastardy*, 53-64.

⁶⁷ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/025, 28.03.1821, p.94; X041/030, 13.03.1852, p.124, LMA.

⁶⁸ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/031, 07.06.1856, p.27, LMA.

Circumstances

Investigation must now turn to the circumstances of foundling mothers upon restoration. While being single was a pre-requisite to having a child admitted to the Hospital, nearly half of all women who successfully claimed children were married.⁶⁹ Many of the foundling mothers were successful in meeting someone new who was economically capable of supporting both mother and child. Jane Linstead the mother of John Long married an excise officer who earned a £110 a year, a comfortable lower middle class salary.⁷⁰ Amelia Wilson, the mother of Luke Armstrong, had also married a ‘very respectable medical practitioner’ who was ‘fully able and very willing to maintain the said child of his wife.’⁷¹ Some mothers ended up marrying the father of their child. Ann Jones did not see the father until she returned to her hometown of Llandisilio in Wales. She became re-acquainted with the father and, with the support of her family, they married and were able to reclaim their child.⁷² Ann Davies ‘accidentally’ met the father of her child on the streets of Brighton. Although he ‘expressed a desire to renew his acquaintance with her and stated his wish to marry her’, they were not yet financially secure enough to marry and so continued working, he as a mantle maker and she as a cook, until they were able to reclaim the child.⁷³ Furthermore Ann Rees adds that having her child put into the Foundling Hospital provided a ‘means of restoring her to society’ and thereby allowing her to continue work until the time was right to marry.⁷⁴ Therefore, the relationship between marriage, work and respectability must be understood as more complex than ‘bastard-bearing’ simply affecting marriage chances.

⁶⁹ See Appendix B, Table B1.

⁷⁰ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/028, 1818, LMA; J. Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-century England* (London, 1989) 118.

⁷¹ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/028, 10.04.1839, p.38, LMA.

⁷² FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/023, 1814, LMA.

⁷³ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/054, 1845, LMA.

⁷⁴ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/054, 1845, LMA.

The fact that so many women were able to wed after having illegitimate children suggests, as Levene, Nutt and Williams argue, that illegitimate births were ‘a normal part of ‘everyday’ plebeian life’.⁷⁵ The stigma of having an illegitimate child did not necessarily destroy any chance of marriage. However ‘respectability’ could prevent a young working class woman from obtaining a situation, which would reduce her economic stability. Among the working classes, women were often both expected and required to contribute savings to a marriage in order to ensure later financial security.⁷⁶ Therefore, losing the financial security of work would decrease the chances of a couple successfully marrying. The stigma of illegitimacy was then, as Anna Clark argues, mainly imposed upon the working classes by middle class employers as part of a broader shift to ‘control and improve’ the sexual behaviour of the lower classes.⁷⁷ While respectability and sexual reputation were important among plebeians, Clark argues they ‘drew the line between moral and immoral behaviour at different points’.⁷⁸ Therefore illegitimate children were largely accepted within the ‘alternative plebeian morality’ and were a part of ‘everyday life’ within working class relationships.⁷⁹ However marriage remained an important shield against the wider stigma of illegitimacy that existed within broader society. In this way, the Foundling Hospital allowed plebeian Londoners to return, materially at least, to the position they were in before pregnancy occurred. Reclamation occurred for these women once they were in the position they would have chosen to have children; married and financially stable.

As has already been highlighted, family must be understood to play a highly important role in restorations. Sheetz-Nguyen’s sample of general foundling mothers finds only 9.55% of

⁷⁵ Levene *et al*, *Illegitimacy*, 1-3.

⁷⁶ Perkin, *Women and Marriage*, 120.

⁷⁷ A. Clark, ‘Whores and Gossips: sexual Reputation in London, 1770-1825’, in A. Angerman *et al.* (eds.), *Current Issues in Women’s History* (London, 1989) 232; F. Barret-Ducroq, *Love in the Time of Victoria: sexuality class and gender in nineteenth century London*, trans. John Howe (London, 1991) 2.

⁷⁸ Clark, ‘Whores and Gossips’ 232.

⁷⁹ A. Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches, Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (London, 1995) 43.

mothers were living with parents whereas the sample of mothers who later reclaimed their children found 41.27% stated they were living with their parents at the time of admission, suggesting a large proportion of these women were from the lower middle classes.⁸⁰ Similarly, upon reclamation nearly 70% of women within the sample gave their situation as married or living with relatives.⁸¹ Families could provide the economic stability required to claim and care for a child and, as Davidoff and Hall have argued, did not necessarily constitute a traditional nuclear unit.⁸² One of the most common figures to assist would be a brother or uncle. Mary Ann Morris was supported by Mr Gilmore and Mr Benyon, relatives who agreed to act as guarantors and care for her child should she be unable to do so. Friends and relatives could also provide an apprenticeship for a child. Agnes Mackenzie successfully petitioned the Committee to have her child, Susan Woodgate, apprenticed to her brother, a bookbinder.⁸³

Families provided not only economic resources but a network of carers, an example of an informal network as proposed by Evans.⁸⁴ Despite being employed in a millinery establishment, Hannah Hepworth received support from her aunt and uncle, in both providing a guarantee to the Committee and a source of childcare for the child while she worked.⁸⁵ The difference between a single mother and a family caring for a child was also one of respectability. Letitia Hammerton lived with her brother and was supported by him in her application. The siblings planned to pass off the girl as their niece, although the child would be 'told the true relationship existing between them.'⁸⁶ In this domestic set-up Mr

⁸⁰ See Appendix B, Table B2; L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850* (London, 1987) 313; Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 93.

⁸¹ See Appendix B, Table B3.

⁸² Davidoff *et al*, *Family Fortunes*, 321.

⁸³ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/024, 23.06.1819, p.203, LMA.

⁸⁴ Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 13-16.

⁸⁵ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/067, 1858, LMA.

⁸⁶ FHA, Petitions: admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/091, 1882, LMA.

Hammerton should therefore not be seen as providing just the financial support for the child but also a respectable front to present to society. While historians have emphasised the high number of domestic servants who applied to the Hospital, lower middle class women were not entirely absent.⁸⁷ Indeed, it is clear that for some of the middle class petitioners to the Hospital, it was the issue of respectability that caused them to abandon their children in the first place, and therefore no change was required in their situation to allow them to care for them. John Gale was removed from the Hospital after only one month by his mother and grandmother due to his mother's 'disturbed' state of health and mind at being separated from her child.⁸⁸ Therefore, for some women it appears it was the support of a family, as well as a strong desire to have their child, which caused them to ignore the problems an illegitimate birth would inevitably cause them.

Although family was the most important factor in a mother's ability to reclaim her child, it was not the only method available to women who wished to reclaim their children. Some women were able to gain the economic independence necessary to support themselves and their child. Alice Clermont managed to find herself an employer sympathetic to her plight:

I am going as governess into a foreign family abroad where they will kindly allow me bring my child with me. It will henceforth be the first study of my life to provide for her myself and I am happily confident of being now able to do so.⁸⁹

The mother of Sophia Clifton worked as a housekeeper on a salary of £35 a year, but had been saving for several years in order to support her child, including taking out life insurance for herself.⁹⁰ For Elizabeth Sibley reclaiming her child was a difficult financial challenge, and one that took several years for her to complete. Nonetheless, through the support of her

⁸⁷ Gillis, 'Servants', 146.

⁸⁸ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/024, 09.04.1817, p.194, LMA.

⁸⁹ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/064, 1855, LMA.

⁹⁰ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/034, 10.10.1874, p.265.

employer, and her own careful financial planning, Elizabeth was able independently to reclaim her child.

Other mothers overcame the problems of ‘structured inequality’ to secure financial independence through utilising existing assets or inheritance.⁹¹ The mother of Elizabeth Page, Mary Ann Lewis, worked as a ‘Haberdasher , Hosier and Glover’ in Fleet Street and her petition included her own business card.⁹² Both Elizabeth Norton and Maria Mayers were able to reclaim children after successfully establishing themselves as landladies.⁹³ Certainly it must be understood, that some of these women had advantages their peers may not have had. Indeed, nearly 95% of women reclaiming foundlings were either living at home, or in professional or highly skilled employment.⁹⁴ This suggests that these women were of higher social status and had greater financial means. However Elizabeth Norton rose during the 14 years her son was in the Foundling Hospital from housemaid to housekeeper; to schoolmistress; milliner and finally landlady.⁹⁵ This not only reinforces ideas of single mothers as resourceful, adaptable and capable, but also challenges the idea of unitary working class. Single mothers were not a ‘sub culture’ but part of the socio-economic context in which they lived. Therefore, some must be understood to have had advantages that others did not and came from backgrounds that allowed them greater chances of reclaiming their children. In this way, single mothers’ experiences must be understood as varied, changeable and personal.

⁹¹ Davidoff , *Family Fortunes*, 272.

⁹² FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/031, 1822.

⁹³ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/044, 1835; A/FH/A/08/001/002/050, 1841, LMA.

⁹⁴ See Appendix B, Table B3.

⁹⁵ FHA, A/FH/A/08/001/002/050, 1841, LMA.

Policy

A range of situations must therefore be understood to have fulfilled the Hospital's criteria for reclamation. Sheetz-Nguyen has, perhaps unfairly, characterised the General Committee as preoccupied with their own 'calculus of respectability' by which they measured applicants worthiness.⁹⁶ Just what counted as 'respectable' is hard to gauge. Marriage certainly was not a guarantee of success as in a sample of cases that were rejected by the Committee half were married couples.⁹⁷ Ellen Cronin applied with her husband to have her child returned to her but the Committee deemed 'neither she nor her husband are in circumstances to afford proper maintenance for the said child'.⁹⁸ As those mothers who successfully reclaimed children were of a higher occupational class than the general foundling mother population, this could be seen as an element of Hospital policy. However rejections were not based on a simple survey of occupation but followed interviews, reports and references. Mr Weller applied to have his child restored to him and his new wife, but was refused as the Committee found that 'the result of the enquiries into the respectability and competency of Mr Weller is unsatisfactory.'⁹⁹ Therefore, while women of a higher occupational class should be understood to have a far better chance of fulfilling the Committee's requirements, to view the requirements as simply based on either a qualification of marriage or a 'respectable' profession is over-simplifying the process.

The main concern of the Committee must be understood as the welfare and future of the child. Mr and Mrs Holloway applied for the restoration of Rebecca Haynes, their granddaughter. However as the girl was already apprenticed and 'in good health and spirits,

⁹⁶ Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 11.

⁹⁷ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/030, LMA.

⁹⁸ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/030, 05.06.1852, p.200, LMA.

⁹⁹ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/030, 15.05.1852, p.179, LMA.

well cared for and not over worked' the Committee rejected the petition for reclamation.¹⁰⁰ The Committee saw no reason to disrupt the stable, and in their eyes suitable, future they had prepared for the foundling. Indeed, the Committee may have feared that parents would have used younger children to create additional sources of income, or siphoned wages from those with apprenticeships.¹⁰¹

Indeed, it can be argued that the financial situation of the applicant was the main criterion by which the Hospital decided if an applicant was able to care for the child. Mrs Storer's petition was rejected in 1852 although she was married to a boot and shoe maker.¹⁰² Although Mr Storer had an income, boot and shoe making was a saturated market in the nineteenth century and an unstable form of income. Mary Ann Lewis however, despite being single was able to reclaim her child as her guarantor informed the Committee: 'I consider she is fully competent, she has been in business above a year and has borne a respectable Character.'¹⁰³ Therefore although financially secure single women could reclaim children, the position of the Hospital must be understood as highly gendered, as even women who were financially independent required a male guarantor. However the very fact that it was a male financial guarantor rather than a husband that was required reinforces the idea that the main criteria for reclamation was proof of the financial ability to raise the child, rather than the necessity to meet societal or religious criteria.

Reclamation policy did not allow adoptions from strangers under any circumstances, even if they were of a high class or possessing great wealth as 'his excellency Joseph R. Ingesoll

¹⁰⁰ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/035, 19.10.1877, P.73, LMA.

¹⁰¹ C. Panter-Brick, 'Nobody's Children? A reconsideration', in C. Panter-Brick and M. T. Smith (eds.), *Abandoned Children* (Cambridge, 2000) 8; Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 183.

¹⁰² FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/030, 30.10.1852, P.273, LMA.

¹⁰³ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/031, 1822.

Esq.’ discovered when his application for an adoption was refused.¹⁰⁴ Similarly while the process for Ellen Jocelyn to be reclaimed by a friend of her mother’s called Madame Pian was certainly easier due to her status, it was the permission of the mother which proved crucial.¹⁰⁵ William Mossman applied in 1840 for the restoration of his twin daughters but was rejected:

‘the Committee cannot entertain any proposal for taking children out of this hospital of such tender years as these alluded to in his letter under any pretence whatever unless the mother (if alive) is a party to the proposal.’¹⁰⁶

Therefore although children remained under the guardianship of the Hospital, who took their role in determining the child’s future very seriously, the Committee policy saw custody of the child as ultimately lying with the mother. Therefore while women’s gender saw them discriminated against in terms of financial ability, they were seen as possessing overall rights to their child. Indeed, the very language of ‘restoring’ children to their mothers, suggests it was seen as natural and rightful place for them to be.

Furthermore the fact that the Hospital would accept cases they had previously rejected suggests that they were sensitive to the plight of these mothers, such as Maria Ward who, on her third application, was finally deemed to have arranged a suitable situation in which to raise her child.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, when Joseph Parsons was stolen from his nurse by his mother Mary Ann Simpson the Committee’s response was to order: ‘the strictest investigation ... made into all circumstances of the case with a view to the restoration of the child’.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, despite having broken Hospital rules and possibly the law, the Committee was willing to allow Joseph back to his mother as it was evident this was what she truly wanted. In this way,

¹⁰⁴ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/030, 25.06.1953, p.443, LMA.

¹⁰⁵ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/031, 07.06.1856, p.27, LMA.

¹⁰⁶ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/028, 19.08.1840, p.443, LMA.

¹⁰⁷ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, X041/024. 27.10.1819, p.211, 15.12.1819, p.290, 12.01.1820, p.303, LMA.

¹⁰⁸ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/033, 29.01.1870, p.393-4, LMA.

requirements for reclaiming children were considered on a case by case basis that was sensitive to the desires of parents, rather than following a prescribed formula or ‘calculus of respectability’.¹⁰⁹

Overall therefore it appears that family, interpreted in a broad sense, provided the crucial support women required to reclaim their children. Once their child was received into the Foundling Hospital, many single mothers of both the middle and working classes were able to marry, either the original father of their child or someone new. In this regard the Foundling Hospital was a formal tool used by foundling mothers so that they could continue the life cycle common to plebeian Londoners. In this way, illegitimacy should be understood as an ‘everyday’ problem for many of the working classes. Family networks could also constitute the support of relatives, or indeed even friends who helped provide economic security and care for a child. However it is also important that the experiences of plebeian women are not generalised. Despite the Hospital’s lack of faith in women’s economic security, some women were able to create financially independent lives for themselves, through inheritance, entrepreneurial activities and steady employment. Similarly, some lower middle class mothers required nothing more than the confidence to bear the stigma of illegitimacy in order to reclaim their offspring. Overall the Committee would not return a child unless the parents proved financially and morally able to care for it. Although ideas of character came into this decision, it was not a simple process of applicants fulfilling criteria of respectability, such as being married, but rather a case-by-case assessment.

¹⁰⁹ Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 11.

Chapter 3: The Beloved Child

‘Does any wretched mother ever come here, and look among those young faces, wondering which is the poor child she brought into this forlorn world, never through all its life to know her love, her kiss, her face, her voice, even her name!’¹¹⁰

This chapter will investigate one of the most fundamental questions regarding the restoration of children to their parents; why did parents return to collect their child? This analysis will focus on historiographical debates regarding the changing nature of childhood and parental love and affection. This analysis will rely heavily on parental testimony, such as letters from mothers as well as Committee minutes and reports. Although much of this communication with the Foundling Hospital was written with the express intention of reclaiming a child, an application process which will doubtless have affected how mothers chose to present themselves and their plight, the sentiment of many of the documents makes them a valid and useful source. This analysis does not aim to seek ‘happy endings,’ but rather to follow previous histories in ‘explore[ing] ... the ways in which emotion was constructed and articulated.’¹¹¹ Firstly, the historiographical debate within this area will be outlined. Then ideas of duty or obligation will be understood, in connection with contemporary ideas of motherhood and the family. Finally the nature and extent of affection and love in reclamation cases will be fully investigated, from the point of view of both the mother and other claimants. Ultimately, it will be demonstrated that the reclamation of a child should be seen as evidence of love and affection.

¹¹⁰C. Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (London, 1953) 18.

¹¹¹ Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 128.

By the nineteenth century, ideas of motherhood, childhood and the family had experienced a profound change.¹¹² Children were no longer seen as ‘small adults’ and a greater interest was being shown in their welfare and care.¹¹³ Edward Shorter has suggested that the existence of foundling institutions is evidence for parental detachment towards children.¹¹⁴ However several historians have argued that the material within the Foundling Archive is in fact a strong testament to parental love.¹¹⁵ As the work of Aries has demonstrated, it would be naïve to assume parent-child relationships have remained constant throughout history. Therefore an analysis of parental love and affection must be placed within the socio-cultural context of the period. Elizabeth Badinter has argued that ideas of motherhood significantly changed at the end of the eighteenth century, due in part to the socio-economic changes of the industrial revolution.¹¹⁶ By the nineteenth century the ideal of ‘separate spheres’ affected more than just individual women but also ‘social institutions, social relations and material reality’.¹¹⁷ It is within this socio-cultural context that reclamations were carried out and it is within this framework that parental relationships will be analysed.

The extent to which ideas of duty or obligation are present within reclamations is significant. Elizabeth Norton wrote: ‘Although I deem it my duty to withdraw him I do not desire to dissever him from the honourable guardianship he has so long enjoyed further than it is proper and desirable I should do so’.¹¹⁸ Elizabeth understood not only herself as having a duty to withdraw her son, but the role of the Hospital as that of a guardian, presumably until her son could be rightfully restored to her. The mother of Daniel Strange, Emma Painter

¹¹² Aries, *Centuries of Childhood*, 10; Hunt, *Parents and Children*, 5.

¹¹³ Shorter, *Making of the modern family*, 191-4.

¹¹⁴ Shorter, *Making of the Modern Family*, 172.

¹¹⁵ Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 131, Fildes, ‘Maternal Feelings’, 139; McClure, *Coram’s Children*, 247.

¹¹⁶ Badinter, *Myth of Motherhood*, 117-119.

¹¹⁷ E. Gordon and G. Nair, *Public Lives: Women Family and Society in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 2003) 2.

¹¹⁸ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/050, 1841, LMA.

phrased her reclamation within terms of it 'being within [her] power'.¹¹⁹ This again suggests that once possible, many felt it a mother's duty to withdraw her child from the Hospital. For Elizabeth Sibley reclaiming her child represented not just a chance to fulfil her motherly obligation but also to 'redeem' her sin of having a child outside marriage.¹²⁰ This understanding of her role and relationship to her child must be seen to be shaped by social factors and in particular civil and religious laws on illegitimacy and pre-marital sex. Despite this, social influences should not be overestimated as many mothers did not attempt to reclaim their children. Additionally, these pressures must be understood in contention with the socio-cultural stigma of having illegitimate children.

Overwhelmingly the sentiment of mothers' letters to the Hospital is that of love and affection. They repeatedly use phrases such as 'dear child' and 'dear little girl'.¹²¹ Mary Meadmore's mother, Elizabeth Cameron described her as her 'long lost, but ever remembered child.'¹²² The repetition and formulaic quality of many of these letters suggests socio-cultural ideas of motherhood did influence how foundling mothers saw themselves and their relationship to their offspring.¹²³ Mrs Cameron wrote to the Committee that her family was 'blessed with three fine children and ever since they could lisp their prayers I have taught them to lisp their little sister who was at school and I hoped would soon be with us'.¹²⁴ The intermingled imagery of family and religion presents a romanticised understanding of the separation between mother and child. While this should not be interpreted as a judgement on whether or not Mrs Cameron loved her daughter, it must be understood that social expectations framed this love.

¹¹⁹ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/026, 1817, LMA.

¹²⁰ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/076, 1867, LMA.

¹²¹ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/050, 1841;A/FH/A/08/001/002/056, 1847 LMA.

¹²² FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/024, 1815, LMA.

¹²³ Badinter, *Myth of Motherhood*, 117-119.

¹²⁴ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/024, 1815, LMA.

Not all mothers however understood their separation in such terms. For many mother's having their child in the Foundling Hospital was painful, difficult and would negatively affect their mental health. Letitia Hammerton's doctor was interviewed during her application and feared for her mental wellbeing:

It might have been better to have left the girl at the Hospital until her education was completed, but it is certain that the mother who he thinks is somewhat inclined to be hysterical would suffer if such a course was adopted.¹²⁵

Indeed, desperation to be with their child undoubtedly drove some women to remove them from the institution despite difficult circumstances. Agnes Campbell fought to reclaim her child, not knowing whether or not she would be able to afford passage back to her native Canada but was determined to reclaim her:

Sir you need not fear but that my child will be properly taken care of no ones loves her better than I do and your minds may rest more easy about her being with me than my mind will be leaving her with anyone else. And I cannot go home without her I shall stay in England until I shall die for it is more than I can bear.¹²⁶

It must be understood that the rhetoric of the desperate mother throwing herself upon the mercy of the Committee was common and perhaps expected of this type of petition. Overall however, the grief of separation, and indeed the determination of these mothers to be reunited with their children must be understood as significant evidence of maternal love.

Any discussion of parental love must not exclude fathers at the expense of mothers. Eunice Coram's father actually provided the impetus for her to be reclaimed. Her mother, Ann Jones nee Morgan told the Committee:

That father did not know of her pregnancy, until long after delivering... 2 years after admission of child. When Jones the father

¹²⁵ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/091, 1882, LMA.

¹²⁶ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/076, 1867, LMA.

knew that she had a child and had got the child into the Foundling he wished her to return and marry.¹²⁷

As we have seen, the impediments to marriage sometimes stalled what would have otherwise been successful partnerships. The father of Rebecca Watson claimed financial difficulties as the excuse for abandoning her mother, but that ‘he admits to being the father of the child and is most anxious to have it restored’.¹²⁸ In a few cases the inability of the father to care for an infant must be seen as a reason for their absence. Thomas Wayth was admitted after a recommendation from Lord Dunbar, as the son of a recently widowed soldier. His father was unable to care for him in his childhood, but returned to reclaim him as an apprentice in his weaving business once he had reached his late teens.¹²⁹ This challenges ideas of maternal love as a unique, untouchable force and emphasises the historical importance of fathers within the field of illegitimacy.

Many parents’ love for their children was demonstrated by their persistence. The mothers of Francis Armstrong and Elizabeth Page both had to apply more than once before they were able to have their child returned.¹³⁰ In her second application Annie Frankland’s mother wrote ‘I am happy to inform you that I am married and beg that I may not be again refused the care of my dear child should she be still living.’¹³¹ In an extreme case, Emma Adams’ mother Maria Ward made three separate applications to the Committee, finding different guarantors on each occasion.¹³² Again, fathers must again not be excluded from this narrative. William Mossman was refused his children in their infancy having no mother to provide for them, but was successful in reclaiming them through an apprenticeship more than ten years

¹²⁷ It was an early practice of the Hospital to name children after the founder and his wife. FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/023, 1814.

¹²⁸ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/054, 1845, LMA.

¹²⁹ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/025, 21.03.1821, p.90, LMA.

¹³⁰ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/043, 1834; General Committee Minutes, X041/025, 11.02.1824, p.170-174, LMA.

¹³¹ FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/070, 1861, LMA.

¹³² FHA, Petitions: Admitted, X041/024. 27.10.1819, p.211, 15.12.1819, p.290, 12.01.1820, p.303, LMA.

later.¹³³ The persistence of these parents is another important demonstration of their love and affection.

Overall therefore parents reclaimed their children from the Foundling Hospital because they loved them and wanted to be a part of their lives. ‘Mother love’, as Badinter argues, should not be understood as an omnipotent force but an ‘uncertain, fragile, and imperfect human feeling.’¹³⁴ Most foundlings were not claimed, and it cannot be assumed that all parents wished above all else to have their child returned. Furthermore the way in which parents understood and articulated their relationship with their children was undoubtedly formed in conjunction with contemporary ideas of family and parenthood. However to understand ‘society’ or ‘culture’ as a dominating force reduces these parents’ agency in actively expressing their love for their children and reclaiming them. Overall, it is sufficient to understand that some foundling parents retained deep emotional commitments to their offspring that drove their desire to reclaim them. They expressed their love in a variety of forms, and suffered psychological trauma at separation. This understanding of parent-child relationships includes not just mothers, but fathers and other relatives too. Overall, Foundling reclamation must be understood as evidence of the shift over time towards a more caring, affectionate and child centred form of parenthood.

¹³³ FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/030, 13.03.1852, p.124, LMA.

¹³⁴ Badinter, *Myth of Motherhood*, xxiii.

Conclusion

‘And so my mother discovered me again, after having parted from me as an infant at the Foundling doors.’¹³⁵

Once a child was released by the Hospital they disappear from the official records, moving to new schools, starting new apprenticeships and possibly even changing their name. Indeed, most children at the Hospital were not reclaimed and the vast majority of foundlings grew up with no knowledge of their parents. Nonetheless, the reclamation of children from the London Foundling Hospital is an important part of the history of this institution. Mothers, who due to economic or societal pressures had given up their illegitimate children, have been shown to have both the ability and motivation to reclaim them. Analysing these cases has created a contribution to the history of not just the institution, but also to the histories of illegitimacy, motherhood and the family in the nineteenth century. Indeed, despite being ‘single’ mothers, what stands out is that reclamation is the history not of mothers, but also fathers, husbands and relatives, and above all of families.

It has been shown that although actual cases of reclamation remained low throughout the nineteenth century the rate of attempted reclamations must be seen as much higher. This shows that had the General Committee not imposed regulations on the restoration of children a far higher number would probably have left the Foundling Hospital. Therefore, those historians who have dismissed the importance of reclamation based on the statistical

¹³⁵ Collins and Dickens, *No Thoroughfare*, 13.

frequency, have to a large extent missed a significant area of interaction between children, the institution and families.

Overall, reclamation was determined by the ability of the claimant to care properly for the child, which was often determined by the financial security of the applicant. Mothers placed children into the Foundling Hospital because they could not keep them, either as it was financially untenable, or because the long term impact of bastardy upon their reputation would place them in a difficult position. Mothers reclaimed their children once they had achieved financial stability in their lives, most commonly through marriage or the support of family, but also through their own economic independence. Many of the women who successfully reclaimed children were of a higher occupational class than the general population of foundling mothers. However the General Committee based its decision to release a child on more than occupational class. Although the Hospital did utilise a vague and ill-defined concept of 'character', their overall approach was to ensure a stable future for the child on a case by case basis. While the Committee's policy did not trust a single woman to guarantee the child's financial future, their policy did not refuse reclamations on the basis of a woman's marital status and the Committee continued to see the mother as holding key rights to the custody of her child. In this way, their idea of respectability was not as rigid as the common prejudice against illegitimacy might suggest.

Despite the rhetoric of the destitute mother, the agency and ability of foundling mothers to transform their circumstances is significant. The importance of the support network for foundling mothers has been shown to be crucial and in particular the role of family. Family in this discussion, however, is intended to mean an extensive network, of mothers, brothers,

aunts and grandparents. Families provided not only financial support and in many cases a crucial male guarantor for the child, but also a system of care and assistance. Furthermore families provided an emotional support for mothers as well as a shield against the stigma of illegitimacy. In this way the Foundling Hospital must be understood as one of the formal support mechanisms mothers used to allow them to regain control of their lives. Rather than ruined women, these mothers had become successful members of family units. Indeed, paradoxically, reclamation must be seen as the successful outcome of the Hospital's 1801 shift in policy to focus on the 'rehabilitation' of the mother. In this way, while illegitimacy cannot be understood as an accepted part of society, it should be understood as 'normal' problem in 'everyday' plebeian life.¹³⁶

It is however vitally important that discussion of plebeian women does not unnecessarily generalise their experiences. As this dissertation has shown, although families and marriage were the most common methods of support for these women, a considerable number managed to build financially independent lives for themselves. In this way, while it is important to continue to write 'history from below', we must recognise that homogenising working class experiences is almost as unhelpful as failing to recognise their previous exclusion from the historical record.

Ultimately therefore, the reclamations from the London Foundling Hospital present a view of nineteenth century parenthood as characterised by love and affection. Certainly ideas of motherhood and familial duty affected reclamations and were the product of socio-cultural sensibilities towards the family and female roles. However, although this may have framed parental responses, it must not be seen as reducing the significant evidence that nineteenth

¹³⁶ Levene *et al*, *Illegitimacy*, 2.

century foundling parents cared deeply for their children. Working class parenthood was not in-fact a question of love or survival, but a balance of both, and the Foundling Hospital provides evidence of this love through the many cases of children being restored to their parents.

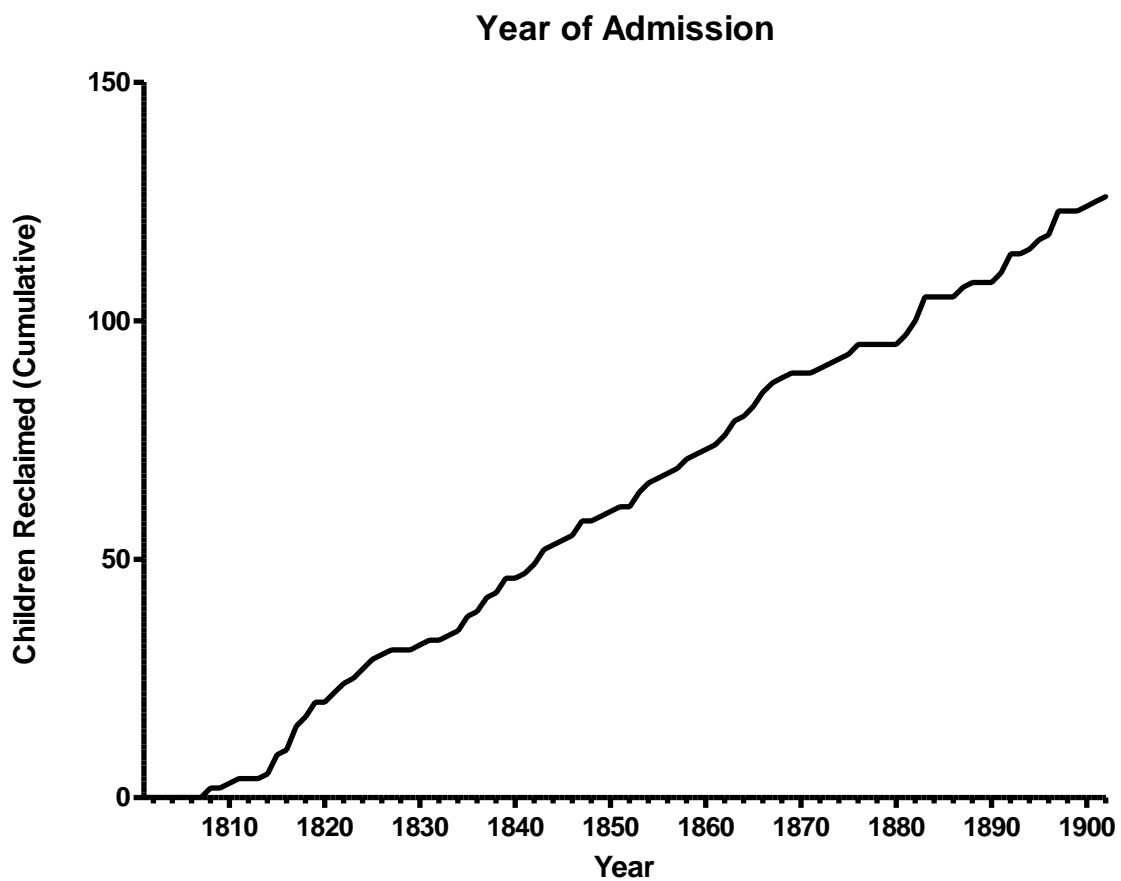
Appendix A

Table A1. Actual vs. estimated cases of child restoration, 1842-1892.

| | Actual number of reclamations | Estimated attempted number of reclamations | Estimated attempted number of reclamations (including deceased children) |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|--|--|
| N | 67 | 134 | 177 |
| % of foundlings reclaimed | 3.07 | 6.14 | 8.13 |

Sources: FHA, General Register No. 5, X041/004, 1778-1880; General Register No. 6, A/FH/A/09/002/006, 1881-1950, LMA; Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 185-186.

Figure A2. Children claimed by year of admission, 1801-1902.



Source: FHA, General Register No. 5, X041/004, 1778-1880; General Register No. 6, A/FH/A/09/002/006, 1881-1950, LMA.

Appendix B

Table B1: Persons claiming children, 1842-1892.

| Claimant | N (21) |
|-----------------------------------|--------|
| Mother | 2 |
| Mother and Father ¹³⁷ | 6 |
| Mother and Husband ¹³⁸ | 4 |
| Mother and Relative | 6 |
| Relative | 2 |
| Other | 1 |

Sources: FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/028-034, 1839 Feb –1877 Jun, LMA.

FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/051-106, 1842-1892, LMA.

Table B2: Mothers' occupations upon admission of child, 1842-1892.

| Class | Occupation | N (63) | Occupation % |
|---------|--|--------|--------------|
| Class 1 | Family business, living with parents | 26 | 41.27 |
| Class 2 | Professionals: Governess, schoolmistress | 2 | 3.17 |
| Class 3 | Highly skilled: Housekeeper, cook, embroiderer, milliner, dressmaker, lady's maid, nurse | 20 | 31.75 |
| Class 4 | Skilled: General servant | 14 | 22.22 |
| Class 5 | Labourer: Laundry maid | 1 | 1.59 |
| Class 6 | Unemployed | 0 | 0 |

Source: FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/051-106, 1842-1892, LMA; classes taken from Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 93.

Table B3: Mothers' occupations upon reclamation of child, 1842-1892.

| Class | Occupation | N (19) | Occupation % |
|---------|--|--------|--------------|
| Class 1 | Married, living with relatives, elite | 13 | 68.42 |
| Class 2 | Governess, schoolmistress | 1 | 5.26 |
| Class 3 | Housekeeper, cook, embroiderer, milliner, dressmaker, lady's maid, nurse | 4 | 21.05 |
| Class 4 | General servant | 0 | 0 |
| Class 5 | Laundry maid | 1 | 5.26 |
| Class 6 | Pauper | 0 | 0 |

Source: FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/028-034, 1839 Feb –1877 Jun, LMA.FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/051-106, 1842-1892, LMA.

¹³⁷ Father denotes biological father of child.

¹³⁸ Husband denotes legal partner of mother but not biological father of child.

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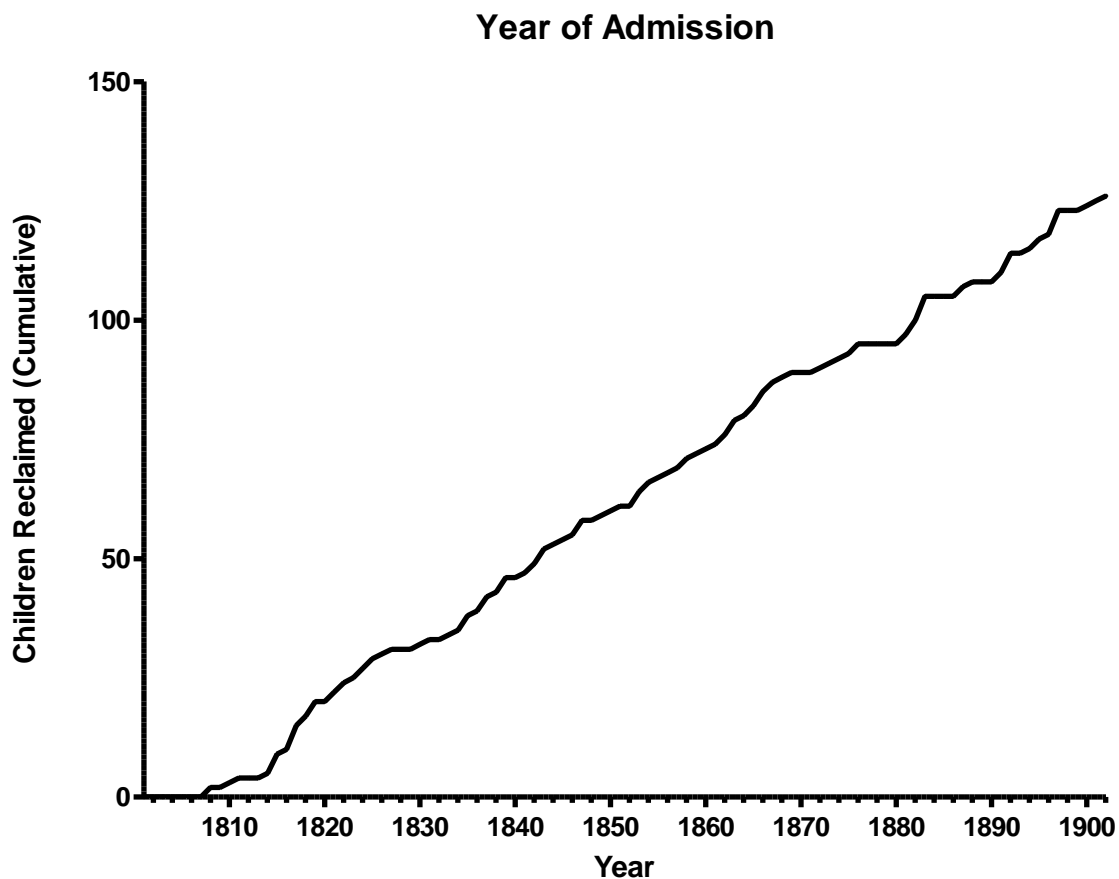
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Figure A2. Children claimed by year of admission, 1801-1902.



Source: FHA, General Register No. 5, X041/004, 1778-1880; General Register No. 6, A/FH/A/09/002/006, 1881-1950, LMA.

Appendix B

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| Mother and Husband ¹⁴⁰ | 4 |
| Mother and Relative | 6 |
| Relative | 2 |
| Other | 1 |

Sources: FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/028-034, 1839 Feb –1877 Jun, LMA.

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¹⁴⁰ Husband denotes legal partner of mother but not biological father of child.

| | | | |
|---------|--------------|---|------|
| | | | |
| Class 5 | Laundry maid | 1 | 5.26 |
| Class 6 | Pauper | 0 | 0 |

Source: FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/028-034, 1839 Feb –1877 Jun, LMA.FHA, Petitions: Admitted, A/FH/A/08/001/002/051-106, 1842-1892, LMA.

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