The Countess, Coram, and the Queen: how the Countess of Huntingdon helped the UK's oldest children's charity

Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon (1707-1791), is perhaps best known as an eighteenth-century peeress passionately interested in religion. In 1768 she founded Trevecca College as a theological college to train young men for ministry, and then seceded from the Church of England twelve years later, in 1782, to form her own religious denomination, the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion. She was good friends with the Wesleys and George Whitefield, and was a key figure in the Evangelical Revival[1]. The Cheshunt Foundation, based at Westminster College, Cambridge, holds a significant archive of her correspondence.

But before this, in the 1730s, the Countess played an important role in a different sphere: in the establishment of the UK's oldest charity dedicated to the wellbeing and support of children.

Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, by John Russell
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Thomas Coram, by William Hogarth
© Coram in the care of the Foundling Museum

It began when Thomas Coram (1668-1751), a wealthy sea captain and trader, returned to London from America in the 1720s, and was shocked by the number of destitute children or 'foundlings' abandoned on the streets. The shame associated with having a baby outside marriage in the eighteenth century was enormous, and many women felt forced by family and prevailing moral opinion to abandon their children. Others were so poor that they were unable to look after a new baby. Coram wanted to provide a home for these children, and to give them a place where they could be looked after, educated, and trained for employment: so he decided to build The Foundling Hospital, which continues as the children's charity Coram to this day.[2]

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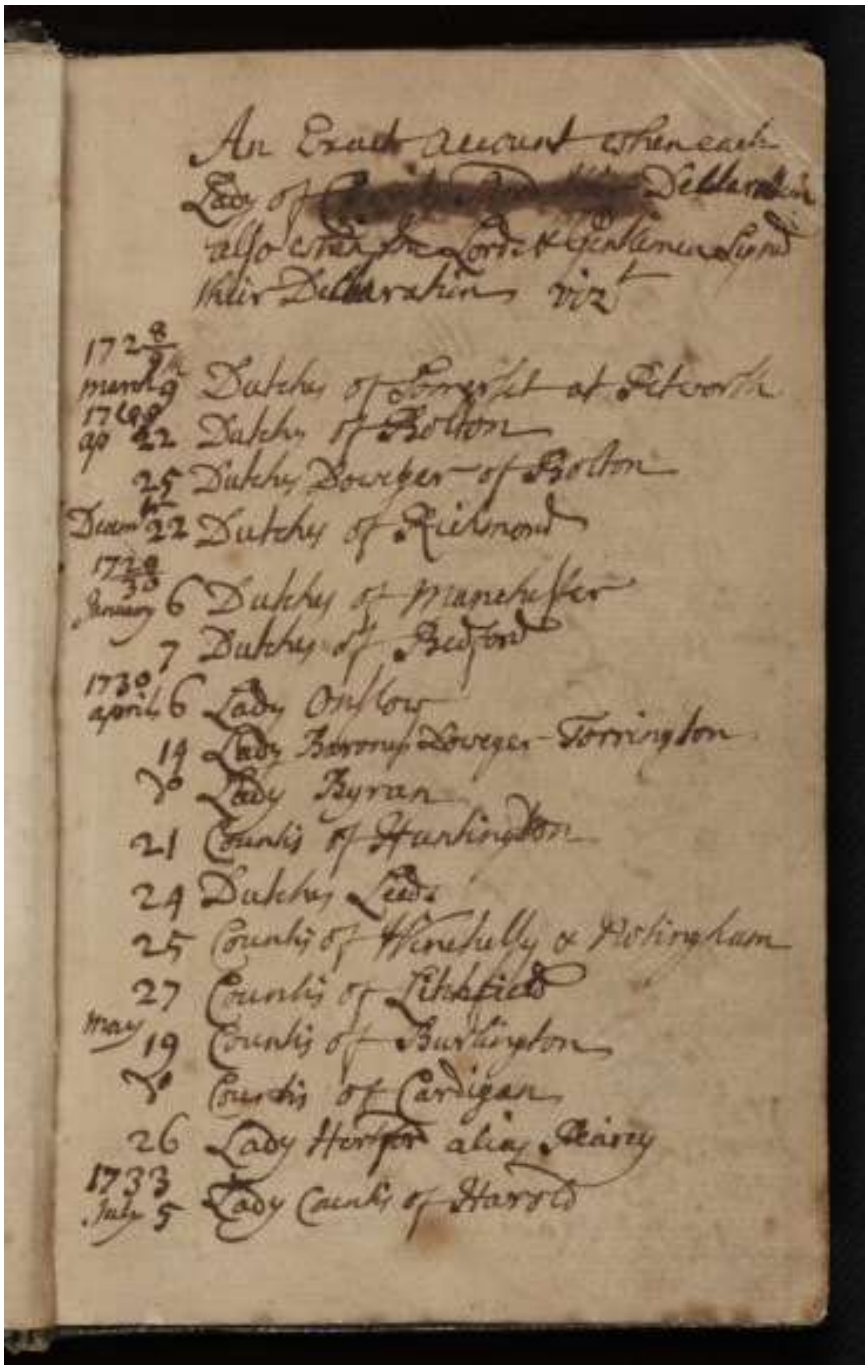
[1] See *Spiritual Pilgrim*, Edwin Welch; *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, Faith Cook; *Queen of the Methodists*, Boyd Stanley Schlenther

[2] The Coram website and Foundling Museum website give more information about Thomas Coram and the history of the charity and children's homes which he set up. See http://www.coram.org.uk

Foundling hospitals, which provided shelter, care, nursing, and later training, for children, had been known in Italy and France for several hundred years[3]. In both cases they were administered by religious orders (taken over by the French state after the Revolution) – but nothing along these lines existed in post-Reformation England.

To set up something similar in London, Coram realised he needed a Royal Charter, granted to him by the king – George II – to create a legally independent corporation, to lay out the aims of the Foundling Hospital as a charitable organisation, and to make safe its privileges.

Thomas Coram was a self-made man of humble origins. In order to petition George II for a Royal Charter, he needed the backing of influential members of the nobility and gentry. But when he approached earls and dukes for support, they declined to sign his petition to the king, perhaps from fear that to support the welfare of foundlings would imply they condoned both lust and illegitimacy[4].



Thomas Coram's notebook showing the list of ladies
© Coram

Faced with lack of support from the men, Thomas Coram decided on a novel solution: he asked noble women to sign a petition to support his proposals for a foundling hospital, instead.

Coram's own notebook records how 21 "ladies of Quality and Distinction" agreed to support his cause between 1729 and 1735: and 10th on the list on this page you can see 'Countess of Huntingdon', who pledged her support on April 21st 1730.

[3] For an overview of foundling hospitals in Paris and in Europe, please see Ball and Campsie, and Obladen.
[4] Einberg, "Elegant Revolutionaries".

Then aged 24 and married for nearly two years, Selina Hastings had recently had her second son, George, who was born in March 1730. Was she thinking, when she signed a petition for a foundation to keep foundlings safe and well, clothed and fed, of her own children? Her biographers would suggest it was possible: Kirby emphatically describes Selina and her husband Theophilus as "a devoted couple";[5] Schlenther and Welch both say the Countess was a loving wife and doting mother,[6] and Cook cites several of the Countess's letters where she describes her husband and children as 'my jewels' and 'my best of loves'.[7]

The Countess of Huntingdon, with her family, painted by Andrea Soldi (1703-1770), reproduced with the permission of the Trustees of the Cheshunt Foundation

This affectionate portrait of the Hastings family – included by the Foundling Hospital in their much-lauded 2018 exhibition of portraits of the 21 ladies who signed Coram's petition – shows the Countess aged about 35, with the two youngest of her seven children, and probably dates from the early 1740s – ten years after her signature. Her daughter Selina, on the right, was born in 1737, and Henry, holding his mother's hand, was born in 1739.

Or perhaps the Countess considered it her earnest Christian duty to look after the poor, the innocent, and the unfortunate. Selina certainly wasn't afraid to stand up for her beliefs: in what Welch describes as the "most lively escapade of Lady Huntingdon", the Countess and a group of noble ladies barred access to the gallery of the House of Lords during a debate on the controversial Convention of El Pardo in 1737, so that members of Parliament from the Commons

[5] *The Elect Lady*, p13
[6] Schlenther, *Queen of the Methodists*, particularly Chapter 2; Welch, *Spiritual Pilgrim*
[7] Cook, *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, pp22, 24

could not access it. The women remained there disrupting the debate until the House rose.[8] Although her biographers agree she was of a serious turn of mind, Schlenther describes her as "one of the most colourful figures upon the ever-changing canvas of eighteenth-century religion".[9] Certainly, she was happy to support Coram publicly.

The support of 21 women for Thomas Coram was echoed by Queen Caroline (1683-1737), the clever, liberal, influential wife of George II.

Caroline of Brandenburg-Ansbach, in the style of Michael Dahl (1656-1743), reproduced with permission of Warwickshire County Council

Although the Queen did not sign Coram's Ladies' Petition, every single one of the 21 women who did so was one of Queen Caroline's Ladies of the Bedchamber.[10] Caroline, like the Countess of Huntingdon, was a devoted mother, and had eight surviving children; and she herself had been orphaned aged 13.[11] Coram's website further points out that "We know Caroline was interested in the Foundling Hospital because she commissioned a pamphlet about the running of a similar institution for lone children in Paris",[12] though she died before it was published.

Maybe the Countess of Huntingdon signed Coram's petition as a reflection of her love for her own children and husband, or because she felt it was her moral or Christian duty, or because she supported the Queen's interest in the cause, or for another reason. But what makes their willingness to sign, and their signature, braver than we might first appreciate is that the Countess of Huntingdon, and the other twenty-one ladies on Coram's list, were putting their names on a petition that their fathers, or husbands, or their peers, had refused to sign: and the Countess, like every other married woman of the eighteenth century, was financially dependent on her husband, with the exception of her dowry. Furthermore, her husband could divorce her – but she was not allowed to sue for divorce.[13] Far more than today, women were dependent on the goodwill of their husbands, and in signing

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[8] Welch, *Spiritual Pilgrim*, p27; Einberg, "Elegant Revolutionaries"; *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montague*, ed R Halsband, Oxford 1966, p136. The Convention of El Pardo was a negotiation between the British and Spanish over land in North America, and was only carried in the Commons by a small majority.

[9] Schlenther, *Queen of the Methodists*, p1.

[10] "Ladies of Distinction", at https://coramstory.org.uk/explore/content/article/ladies-of-distinction/

[11] Crampton, "Caroline of Ansbach: the Georgian Queen who brought the Enlightenment to Britain".

[12] "Ladies of Distinction", at https://coramstory.org.uk/explore/content/article/ladies-of-distinction/

[13] See Begiato, "Sex and the Marital Relationship in the Eighteenth Century"; and Freda, "Women and Parliamentary Divorce in England".

Coram's petition, the Countess made a statement of her beliefs which could have had profound implications for her future if her husband had disagreed with her stance and chosen to challenge it.

But it was the voices of these 21 women, with their weight of privilege – and their role as fashionable ladies, serving an influential queen, at the heart of the English court – which gave Coram's petition a powerful, honourable, upright chorus of backers who helped his Foundling Hospital become a well-regarded, respectable, and popular cause. And, as Elizabeth Einberg describes it, once the "wives and dowagers at the pinnacle of society would highlight the Christian, virtuous and humanitarian aspects of such an endeavour", then finally the men agreed to support Coram's cause. The Ladies' Petition was "the crucial catalyst"[14] which led to 170 wealthy men signing the eventual 1739 Charter.

The earliest image of the Foundling Hospital, London
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Thomas Coram got his Charter, and the Foundling Hospital opened in 1739. It still exists today, as a charitable body looking after children and their wellbeing.

The emotions behind the actions of Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, and her 20 companions are, at this historical remove, guesswork and supposition. But it seems possible that Countess signing this petition was not merely the abstract action of a generous benefactor, or a virtuous humanitarian, but also a personal response from a loving wife and a loving mother. She lent her voice to support Thomas Coram's intention of looking after foundlings, and through that, to provide hope for the women who felt forced to abandon their babies. In doing so, the Countess allied herself to a community of women who helped effect change at a time when even rich and influential women had far less power and agency.

Helen Weller, Archivist for the Cheshunt Foundation
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Further Information
The work which Thomas Coram began at the Foundling Hospital in 1739 is still carried out by the charity Coram, a charity group of specialist organisations, supporting hundreds of thousands of children, young people and families every year. You can find more information about them and their work on their website, https://coram.org.uk

[14] Einberg, "Elegant Revolutionaries", p15

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