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The battle for the Whitechapel Bell Foundry

By James Pickford

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Plans are afoot to turn the historic foundry into a hotel — but a group of cultural figures has another idea.



A bell at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, London © Charlie Bibby

On his walks through east London, Sir Antony Gormley would peek into the yard of the Whitechapel Bell Foundry to witness the “magical and mysterious” process of bell-casting, taking place “just as it has for hundreds of years”.

The foundry might have seemed to the sculptor like an eternal constant of the local landscape, as it had to countless others over the years. Yet the vulnerability of this ancient craft in the modern capital was exposed last year when the owners, the fourth-generation bell-founder Alan Hughes



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and his wife Kathryn, switched off the furnaces for the last time and sold the site that had been in continuous operation since the 1740s.

Gormley is one of a string of big-name British artists and cultural figures who are squaring up against plans to turn part of this historic London landmark into a hotel and restaurant, and are throwing their weight behind an alternative plan centred on the revival of foundry work at the site.

The story of the Whitechapel foundry's closure is one of gradual decline over 150 years, punctuated by occasional periods of demand. Financial pressures had built up over decades, Hughes says. With orders thinning to desperate levels in late 2016, "we literally couldn't pay the wages", he says. Bell founding has not ended in the UK — another historic company survives in Loughborough — but it is an industry in retreat.

The Whitechapel Bell Foundry had been in business in the borough since about 1570. Its bells included some of the best-known in the world, from the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, bells in Westminster Abbey and Big Ben (which cracked not long after being hung in 1859, producing the sound we hear today). One of the firm's oldest surviving bells, which still hangs and is rung in the tower of St Clement Danes in the Strand, was cast in 1588, when William Shakespeare walked London's streets.



The entrance to the foundry on Whitechapel High Street © Alamy

The Grade II -listed building on Whitechapel High Street is a historical gem. It typifies a set-up that could once be found across 18th-century London: a combined domestic living space and manufacturing facility in the heart of the capital. Developed piecemeal from the 1700s on the site of a former coaching inn called The Artichoke, the complex of buildings shows a form of commercial activity that straddles the pre-industrial era and the modern age of mass production.

Its historical value means it is unlikely to be razed to make way for a block of offices or luxury apartments. But it has generated sharply opposing views about what should be done with it, and how its preservation can be funded and sustained for future generations.

On one side is its new owner, a US entrepreneur and developer who wants to create a hotel at the 20th-century rear of the site while restoring the most important parts of the listed structure for public access. On the other is a partnership between a high-tech art fabrication business and a historical trust, which aims to reignite the furnaces and maintain the foundry as a working business and is backed by artists such as Gormley and the composer Michael Nyman, V&A director Tristram Hunt and Sir Charles Saumarez Smith, chief executive of the Royal Academy. As the hotel developer aims to submit a planning application later this year, both groups are sharpening their rhetoric to win over Tower Hamlets council as well as the wider public.



Bells being made at the foundry © Charlie Bibby

Raycliff, a US private investment group founded by entrepreneur Bippy Siegal, is the site's owner. An experienced financier and investor who has worked with Soho House, Siegal has a team of architects, planning consultants and a PR company working on the plan to preserve the oldest parts of the building's historic fabric, as well as to create a 95-room hotel, with studios for creative businesses and shops — including a store selling hand bells still produced elsewhere by Kathryn Hughes. Hotel guests and members of the public would be able to walk through a “grand public café space” in the 18th-century foundry buildings decorated with bells and bell-making equipment on the walls, or sit with a laptop and a coffee overlooking a glass-covered bell pit — the three-metre-deep clay-lined hole in the ground in which the Liberty Bell was cast. Hand bells will be tuned and polished on site, and potentially even cast there, retaining an element of bell work in the scheme.

Will Burges of 31/44 Architects says about £15m will be invested in the restoration of the existing buildings, a commitment that has won the qualified support of Historic England, the main statutory heritage body. “We welcome the heritage-led approach here,” it says.

Against this is ranged the red-blooded foundry scheme conceived by Factum Arte, a leading producer of sculptures and a pioneer in the use of digital scanning and 3D-printing techniques to create art as well as copy ancient treasures to a hitherto unimaginable degree of faithfulness. Its best-known project was a facsimile of the burial chamber of the boy-pharaoh Tutankhamun, designed to protect the original from further deterioration and now installed at the Valley of the Kings.

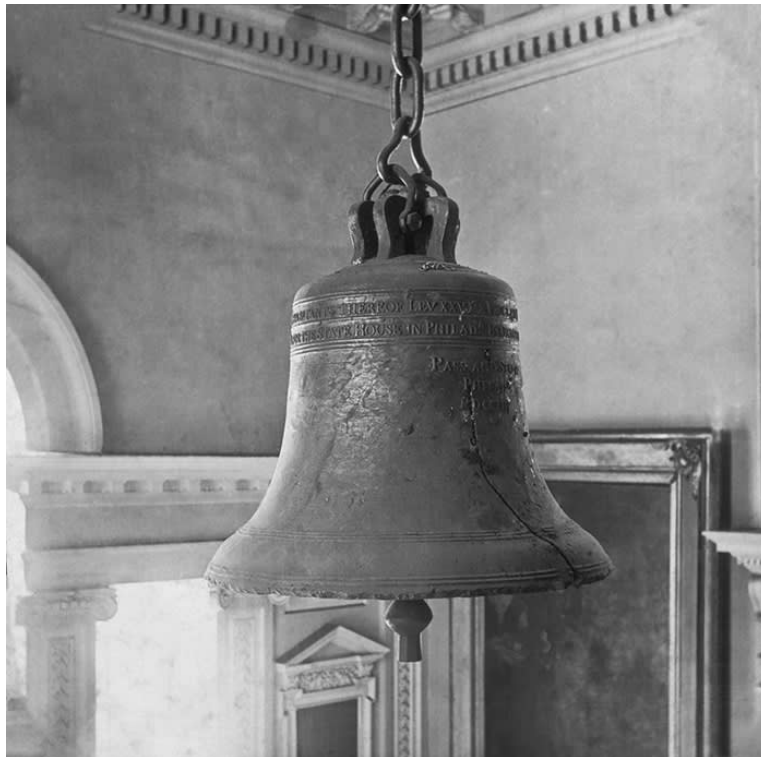


Pouring molten metal at the bell foundry © Charlie Bibby

Factum's partner in the Whitechapel proposal is the UK Historic Building Preservation Trust, an industrial heritage charity founded 20 years ago by the Prince of Wales that proved its mettle in the £9m regeneration of Middleport Pottery, a historic industrial site in Stoke-on-Trent once facing closure but now revived as a thriving working pottery, tourist attraction and creative business centre. "We will adopt a similar approach at Whitechapel . . . a foundry business fit again for the 21st century that does not require ongoing subsidy," says Stephen Clarke, a trustee.

Its pitch for the Whitechapel site would see the location become once again a maker of bells but also an archive of bell-making and a training centre that would unite the old craft skills with cutting-edge technologies. It would also produce work for the fine art market, helping to sustain the business at times of fluctuating demand.

The idea of reviving bell-making on the site is a crucial part of its attraction for supporters such as Saumarez Smith, who say Historic England is too narrowly focused on bricks and mortar. "My view is that the historical fabric of the building is meaningless without its use," he says. "As an 18th-century building it's not of architectural significance. What's important is its role as an example of industrial heritage."



The Philadelphia Liberty Bell, which was made at the foundry © Getty

Ahead of the site's sale last year, historian Dan Cruickshank and other supporters handed over a petition signed by more than 10,000 people at Downing Street, calling for the site's elevation to Grade I-listed status and for the sale to be deferred. Michael Nyman, the celebrated composer born in east London, "within the sound of the Bow Bells" (cast at the foundry in 1956), has offered to help stage an event featuring bell-related music. "The emotional reaction from the artist community has been absolutely extraordinary," says Adam Lowe, Factum's founder.

The principal flaw of the artist-led plan, as its detractors point out, is that they do not own the building and face an unwilling seller. The most recent figures from Land Registry show Raycliff paid £7.9m for the site (which changed hands at least once after being sold by the Hugheses) — far higher than the market rate for an industrial-use building. However, Clarke insists the trust has donors waiting in the wings.

If getting planning permission for the hotel and restaurant is critical to the Raycliff scheme, preventing it is just as vital to the Factum/UKHBPT plan. The Gentle Author, the east London writer and historian who prefers to remain anonymous, believes the council has shown itself to be sensitive to the argument for historical use in the past, three times refusing permission for development of the London Fruit and Wool Exchange in Spitalfields, only for the decision to be reversed by then London mayor Boris Johnson. The Gentle Author says the art-based plan also does more to help local council Tower Hamlets's push for specialised and creative employment. "What the Factum Arte option can provide is a high element of training and apprenticeships, which is what Tower Hamlets say they want."

As the battle lines between the American developer and the British arts establishment are being drawn ahead of the planning process, though, some are worried about the prospects of a protracted conflict. The fabric of the building is already suffering from years of low investment — "poverty is a great way of preserving the past", says Hughes. He supports the Raycliff plan, and is fearful of the effects of a drawn-out dispute. "Nothing would be more tragic than if somehow they were able to do nothing more than block progress while the buildings deteriorated around them."

- James Pickford