



The long read

The bells v the boutique hotel: the battle to save Britain's oldest factory

▲ A bell made by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in the church of St Magnus the Martyr. Photograph: Oli Scarff/Getty Images

Whitechapel Bell Foundry dates back to 1570, and was the factory in which Big Ben and the Liberty Bell were made. But it shut in 2017 and a fight for its future has been raging ever since

by [Hettie O'Brien](#)

May. 11th, 2021

On a November evening in 2019, Nigel Taylor, who had until recently been the longest-standing employee at the oldest factory in England, took a seat inside a council chamber in the shadow of Canary Wharf in [London](#). The room looked more like the setting of a US daytime TV court drama than a provincial government building in the East End, and it was packed with campaigners, councillors and property developers. Two fretful years had passed since the closure of the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, where Taylor had worked for 40 years. Raycliff Capital, a US venture capital firm, had recently acquired the foundry buildings, and a hearing was scheduled to rule whether they could be converted into a boutique hotel.

For many in attendance, these development plans were close to sacrilege. The Whitechapel Bell Foundry had been casting bronze bells – what some bellringers call “heavy metal” – since 1570. Big Ben was made there in 1858. The Liberty Bell was made there in 1752. Over the centuries, bells from Whitechapel had made their way all over the world. Some 500 Whitechapel



tower bells can be found in Australia, 600 in the US and at least 900 in Canada, according to its former owner Alan Hughes.

There's no mistaking the Whitechapel Bell Foundry when you come across it. Hemmed in on one side by traffic that speeds into the City of London, its sooty Georgian frontage stands out from surrounding coffee shops and tower blocks. If you had passed by the foundry's side gate before it shut in 2017, there's a chance you might have heard the clatter of wheels on concrete floors as bronze bells were transported to the drying ovens, or the sound of metal being hammered apart to be melted down and recast. Inside, bell makers, or "founders", wore aluminium suits that made them look like industrial astronauts and poured molten alloy into moulds made from London clay.

Raycliff Capital planned to turn the rear of the site into a boutique hotel with 103 rooms and a rooftop pool. At the front, the foundry's listed historic buildings would be reopened as a cafe and restaurant; above these, workspaces would be rented to "creatives". Next to the cafe, the company promised to build a miniature foundry behind a glass screen, where tourists could watch small handbells being cast.

A coalition of campaigners, including Nigel Taylor, had spent almost two-and-a-half years struggling to prove there was an alternative to the boutique hotel scheme. Minutes before the meeting started, campaigners arrived carrying bell-shaped placards and handbells they planned to toll in noisy defiance at Raycliff Capital's proposals. (Building security politely removed the bells as they entered the chamber.) Many of the campaigners were already familiar with the figures seated at the front. Taylor could see Alan Hughes, his old boss, the foundry's former owner. Next to Hughes sat Bippy Siegal, an American entrepreneur and the founder of Raycliff Capital, who wore a smart dark jacket and expensive-looking glasses.

The first campaigner to address the room was [Adam Lowe](#), an artist renowned for his masterful, high-tech reproductions of classic works of art. "We're offering a very clear alternative," Lowe said in a canorous upper-class accent. "It's possible to keep this site as a working foundry rather than a Soho House or Groucho-style club." (Raycliff owns a stake in Soho House, the global chain of private members' clubs.) The applause that followed was so loud that one council officer reminded the attendees that such displays of emotion were not permitted in the chamber, lest they influence the vote.



Campaigners marching to save the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in 2019. Photograph: Sam Mellish/In Pictures/Getty

Over the years, the fate of the foundry had become more than just a local story. The clash between the bells and the boutique hotel seemed to encapsulate decades of upheaval and anxiety, as global finance has reshaped London into a place where returns on investment often trump the interests of the people who live there. The redevelopment of England's oldest factory by an American private equity firm; a manufacturing business gutted of its machinery and transformed into a manicured lifestyle destination. If the story had been fiction, a reader might have felt the symbolism could be toned down a bit.

To the campaigners, Raycliff's plans would be, at best, a hollow imitation of the very authenticity they had displaced. One described the plans to me as "obscene". To the developers, it seemed irrational for campaigners to take issue with a viable plan that would bring much-needed investment to the foundry, restoring the buildings and creating jobs in the local area.

Now all of these adversaries sat together in the same room for the first time, tense with anticipation. Finally, the council chair addressed the chamber, and asked each councillor to cast their vote: for the hotel, or against it.

The problem with bells, from the perspective of those who make them, is that they last too long. In Westminster Abbey, there are two bells that were cast by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry [in 1583](#), and there is still nothing wrong with them. It's difficult to think of something more basic or imperishable than a heavy piece of bronze. "If General Motors made cars



that lasted 400 years, I don't think General Motors would be anything like it is today," Alan Hughes told me.

"I think it has to be appreciated that nobody now actually *needs* bells," Hughes said. Church bells no longer keep time or organise the working day as they once did. One bell-maker told me that in the past two centuries, Britain has lost about 400 foundries. The only major historic foundry that survives is Taylor's of Loughborough – and even that has gone bankrupt once, before it was bought out of administration in 2009.

For a foundry in London, it was particularly difficult. Rents rose every year, as the city underwent a great reconfiguration, the sole purpose of which seemed to be to extract profit from every square inch. Demand for bells had grown so quiet that in the foundry's later years, creditors and accountants would ask Hughes why he was still holding on when there was no money to be made.



Alan Hughes in the foundry in 2012. Photograph: REX/Shutterstock

For Hughes, it had been a matter of family pride. His great-grandfather, Arthur Hughes, a bell founder and ringer who served as the Whitechapel Bell Foundry's general manager, had bought the business in 1904. The foundry had passed through a succession of Hughes men over the following century. After Arthur, there was Albert, and then William, Alan's father, who later partnered with Alan's uncle Douglas. And then the foundry was Alan's to run.

"It never occurred to me that I would ever work anywhere else," Hughes said. From the age of seven or eight, he would accompany his father on surveys of the foundry and see how the bells were made. He studied



metal foundry at the local polytechnic while working in the foundry shop. “Was it a profitable business venture?” Hughes asked rhetorically. “Well heck, no, it wasn’t. But there’s a damn sight more to life than making money.”

There was a brief period during and after the second world war when the business boomed. Soon after Britain declared war with Germany in 1939, the government gave the foundry a contract to produce casings for a device used to detect U-boats. After 1949, the firm began restoring bells in bombed churches, and its waiting list stretched to three years long. It was, according to Hughes, the foundry’s only period of consistent profitability in the 20th century.

As the century wore on, the foundry faced mounting challenges, not least the shrinking market for bells. By the 2010s, there was no obvious plan for who might succeed Hughes after he retired. Without a successor, and with mounting debts, the Hughes family did what they felt necessary. In June 2017, more than a century after his great-grandfather first became the manager of the business, Alan Hughes closed the Whitechapel Bell Foundry. When I asked him how that had felt, his voice grew tight. “I have always been brought up on the idea that you keep your feelings to yourself,” he said briskly. “I think very few people would know exactly how my wife and I felt.”

Nigel Taylor, who had worked at the foundry for more than half of his life, took a different view of events. Hughes had long emphasised that Whitechapel was a “family business”, but Taylor felt this overshadowed a more important selling point: the quality of Whitechapel’s bells. There were other things that irked Taylor, too. The foundry still charged prospective customers for quotes made after site visits; Taylor’s of Loughborough did them for free. It needed a new website, he thought. It needed to move with the times.

The first time Taylor saw a bell up close, he was 11 years old and still at primary school. One day, his class visited a church in the Oxfordshire village of Chinnor to make rubbings of its bells’ inscriptions – typically, bells are inscribed with a date; some feature memorials, biblical verses or poetry. Afterwards, Taylor and a friend decided to attend a silent practice at the church, where the clappers are tied so newcomers can learn how to handle a bell. “I got hooked straight away,” he told me. He soon started attending Sunday practice. (Despite the countless hours he has spent in churches, Taylor has never been religious.)

By the time he was a teenager, his interest in bells had become an obsession. He would cycle around the Oxfordshire countryside during the school holidays, knocking on vicars’ doors and asking to look at their belfries. He left school with three O levels in 1976, three years after the oil crisis and in the midst of a deepening recession, and after writing to Alan Hughes’s uncle,



Douglas, then the master bellfounder at Whitechapel, he secured a job there as a general labourer.

On a sunny Saturday earlier this year, I met Taylor outside the Whitechapel Bell Foundry. Walking through the city with him is like stepping on to an old parish map of London. Until 1900, the capital was mapped into districts that fell under the authority of particular churches, the bells of which would summon their parishioners to prayer. Most Londoners lived in audible distance of a belfry – hence the fable that all cockneys were born within the sound of the Bow bells. When Taylor describes the spaces around him, churches are his waypoints: during our walk, he named at least five, not as a matter of conversation, but as a means of navigating a private mental map.



The Whitechapel Bell Foundry in 2009. Photograph: Oli Scarff/Getty Images

Until the second half of the 20th century, Whitechapel was known to outsiders as the second-cheapest brown square on the Monopoly board, a relatively poor industrial area where the city tailed off into factories and docks. But by the time Taylor joined the foundry, several new economic trends were converging. The East End's tide of factories and workshops were receding to London's outer edges, and in 1986 Margaret Thatcher's government deregulated the stock exchange, strengthening the City of London's position as the financial capital of Europe. Manufacturing near the centre of the City was fast becoming an anachronism. Taylor would walk along the Whitechapel Road into the City to ring the bells at one of its many churches, his after-work hobby, and over the years, he watched as old buildings came down and glassy new ones shot up.

“All these years, I've been a rightwing Conservative,” he told me while we sipped coffee in a park near the foundry. Though Taylor insists he is still



“very much into private enterprise”, he takes issue with how wealth – in particular, global capital – has reshaped the city and subjected many of its smaller, less profitable businesses to tumultuous change. “In the last couple of years, I keep saying to people: ‘Of course, I’m not left wing, but ...’”

Depending on who you ask, the foundry’s end had either been fated for almost a century, or only became inevitable in its final few years. When Alan Hughes called a meeting with his staff in November 2016 and told them the business was going to close, it came as little surprise to Taylor. He had noticed that the business seemed to be winding down: the volume of work seemed to be shrinking; the state of the buildings was deteriorating; and the foundry was even declining to quote for some new jobs, Taylor said.

Seven months later, in June 2017, Taylor undertook the quiet ceremony he had long imagined: he walked around the foundry after the other workers had departed, shut off the lights and electricity for the last time, and inhaled one last breath of the building’s alchemical odour before stepping out on to the Whitechapel Road.

Bells are deceptively complex instruments. The sound of a bell is a trick of perception: a single note is the sum of more than 50 sounds, or tones. Of these, the human ear hears the five most powerful as the bell’s note. To make a bell sing, a foundry will cast it slightly too big and use a lathe to shave small amounts of metal from its inside surface. One founder described the difference between a good sound, when a bell’s different tones have been tuned to ring in harmony, and a bad sound, when the bell is either out of tune or untuned, as the difference between a “ding” and a “bonk”. Many founders can tell just from listening to a bell where it was cast. When I asked a founder from Taylor’s of Loughborough how they could tell, they said: “It’s the tone. The quality of the tone, and the way it sings. A good Taylor bell will open like a flower.”

Tuning a bell can be a fraught enterprise. In his first job in 2004, Benjamin Kipling, a bell tuner with a soft West-Country accent and an ebullient sense of humour, was tasked with tuning a set of bells for a church in Settle in Yorkshire. The bells had a hollow, clanging sound, so he got to work shaving off small amounts of metal. But the more he shaved off, the worse they sounded. “We couldn’t work out what the problem was, so it was a case of taking as much out as I dared,” Kipling recalled. This is where the danger lies: just as salt can’t be subtracted when it’s added to a recipe, metal can’t be added once it’s shaved off a bell.

On the day of the dedication service, a crowd assembled in the church at Settle to hear the new bells ring. Kipling was on his way there in the car, driving up with his boss to hear their work in action. They were about 15 minutes away when Kipling got a call from one of the bellringers. They sounded panicked. While the ringers were practising, there had been a



dreadful crack. When they got there, Kipling saw that the top half of one of the bells was still bolted to its headstock – but its lip, still in a ring, lay on the floor surrounded by scattered fragments of metal. The bell had disintegrated into hundreds of tiny shards. It had been shaved so thin that it could not withstand the impact of the clapper.



Nigel Taylor tapping an inscription into one of the Queen's jubilee bells in 2012. Photograph: Les Wilson/Rex/Shutterstock

Kipling was surprisingly good humoured in his recollection of it. “There’s no point shying away from my mistakes,” he said. He handed in his resignation. Not long afterwards, he received a call. It was Alan Hughes in Whitechapel. “He said: well, accidents happen. Do you want to come for an interview?”

In a busy year under Alan Hughes’s management, roughly 60 tonnes of metal would leave the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, cast into gleaming new bells. Alongside musical hand bells that could weigh as little as 200g, the foundry might cast 100 tower bells each year, each weighing about 250kg. Occasionally, something far heavier was made: Big Ben was the largest bell ever cast at Whitechapel, weighing 13.7 tonnes. A trolley drawn by 16 horses was needed to transport it from the foundry to the Houses of Parliament.

To make a bell, the foundry would heat copper and tin together in a furnace until they reached 1,100C. This molten alloy would be skimmed to remove



impurities before a team of six workmen poured it from a barrel suspended from a crane into a hole in the top of a bell-shaped mould. The moulds were made of two separate sections fastened together and dried in an oven: a “cope”, which sat on the outside, and a “core”, its inner section. Loam – a sloppy substance made from horse hair and clay – covered the inner and outer moulds, its fibrous texture allowing gases to escape as the molten bronze cools. Once they had been poured, bells were left to cool for several days, after which their moulds would be broken apart to reveal the new bells within.

“I’ll never forget the atmosphere, the smell of it all,” Kipling said of working at Whitechapel. He paused, searching for the right word to relate the scent of steaming molten bronze heated to more than 1,000 degrees, then poured on to a mixture of horse hair and clay. “Oooof,” he said. “Ahhhh.”

Two miles away from Whitechapel, just as Alan Hughes was preparing to close the foundry, a chartered accountant with horn-rimmed glasses was reading about the factory’s closure in his broadsheet copy of the Financial Times. A few weeks later, at lunchtime on Monday 13 March 2017, the accountant sat down in his office in Cowcross Street in Farringdon to send an email to the foundry’s owner. “This must be a very difficult and sad time for you,” he wrote in his message to Hughes, before proceeding with his offer. He wanted to buy the business, its assets and its premises.

This wouldn’t have been the first time Stephen Clarke had saved a factory from death. In 2011, Middleport Pottery in Stoke-on-Trent, the UK’s oldest continuously working china factory, nearly went bust. Where other investors might have seen a crockery factory with a gloomy future, Clarke saw potential. The charity that Clarke chairs, [Re-Form](#) (formerly the United Kingdom Historic Building Preservation Trust), specialises in restoring heritage buildings. But rather than turning them into museums, as conservation projects often do, the charity aims to keep their original businesses intact. Working with English Heritage, Re-Form devised a business model that would safeguard Middleport’s pottery factory, through a mixture of National Lottery funding and philanthropic donations. Today, Middleport’s distinctive blue Burleigh pottery is sold for high prices, and the factory is now the filming location for Channel 4’s [Great Pottery Throwdown](#), a spin-off of The Great British Bake Off, in which amateur potters compete in weekly challenges.



A worker at The Whitechapel Bell Foundry casting bells for the parish of Herne in Kent in 2011. Photograph: Peter Dazeley/Getty

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/may/11/whitechapel-bell-foundry-battle-save-britains-oldest-factory>



Clarke thought something similar could work for Whitechapel. “I was saying: hang on, why can’t we do another Middleport here?” he told me. He had spoken to Hughes some weeks prior to making his proposal. Hughes had told him that a sale had already been formally agreed, but didn’t say who the buyer was. He was insistent that Clarke keep the whole thing private, which Clarke promised to do.

After emailing Hughes his offer, Clarke waited a week. No response. He knew it would be more difficult for Re-Form to acquire the foundry once a sale had been completed, and he worried that time was running out. He wrote a letter to the Times, which was published on 21 March. It urged Hughes to halt whatever sale was in progress, making public what Hughes had wanted to remain private. “Opportunities to retain heritage buildings and their original businesses ... are exceedingly rare,” Clarke wrote. “Hence my open request to the owner to defer the current sale and auction for a few months.”

At 8am on the morning the letter was published, Hughes sent Clarke a furious message. “Imagine my amazement in seeing your letter in today’s edition of the Times newspaper,” wrote Hughes. “You could not have betrayed [my] confidence in a more spectacular or public manner.”

“I was incensed,” Hughes told me. When he had spoken to Clarke on the phone, Hughes had explained that a sale had already been agreed. Re-Form’s proposals were therefore “irrelevant” – Hughes had already signed on the dotted line three or four months earlier, and wasn’t planning to break that contract. Hughes promised Clarke that if the sale were to fall through, he would be in touch. “I was fairly sure it wouldn’t fall through,” he said.

Clarke’s letter soon came to Nigel Taylor’s attention. Once he read it, Taylor knew he needed to meet Clarke: here was someone who had saved another old factory, who might be a powerful ally. And Taylor knew something Clarke didn’t – the identity of the mystery buyer.

It hadn’t taken long to get to the bottom of it. Nigel Taylor’s wife, Julia, is a tax accountant who spends much of her working day trawling the website of [Companies House](#). Shortly after Hughes had informed his workers in November 2016 that the foundry would be closing, Julia and Nigel Taylor had undertaken some amateur sleuthing. They found that a new company, Whitechapel Bell Limited, had been incorporated that same month. Its registered address led back to the offices of an East End property developer: Vincent Goldstein.

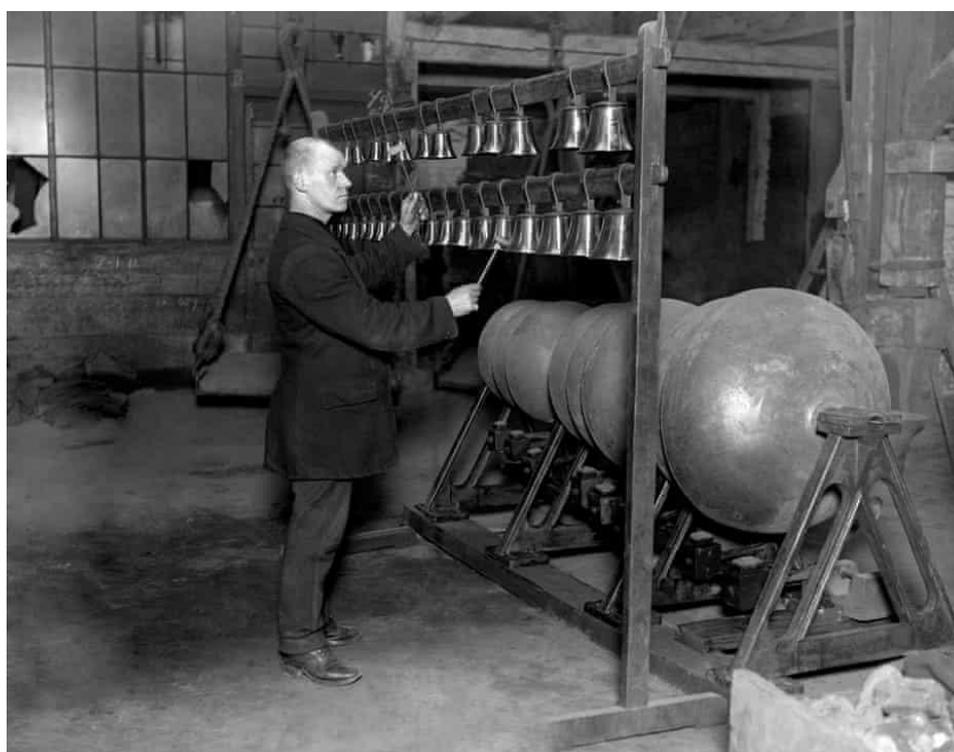
It emerged that in October 2016, Goldstein had agreed to pay Alan Hughes’s company £5.1m for the foundry. But it was never entirely clear what he intended to do with the place. His company is known for turning former industrial spaces into residential and commercial premises in east London. Given the meagre profits reaped from hammering out tower bells, and the



large sum he paid for the buildings, it seemed likely that Goldstein would apply for a change of use, perhaps transforming the foundry into flats. (Goldstein declined to be interviewed for this article but sent me a short statement confirming the details of the sale.)

On a cloudy Tuesday in early May 2017, Taylor and Benjamin Kipling arrived at Clarke's office in Farringdon. For both employees, even more important than saving the bricks and mortar of the Whitechapel Bell Foundry was the survival of what happened inside it. The three of them started to draw up plans for keeping the foundry open. If Alan Hughes wouldn't sell it to Re-Form, then Clarke thought Goldstein might be persuaded to part with it for a "fair price".

Clarke and Taylor called their strategy Project Phoenix, and were supported by some of Britain's most famous heritage enthusiasts, who had been horrified by the news of the sale in Clarke's letter to the Times. In April 2017, a group of campaigners led by the TV historian Dan Cruickshank and Charles Saumarez Smith, the former chief executive of the Royal Academy of Arts, had [delivered a petition](#) to 10 Downing Street, calling on the culture secretary to support Re-Form's proposals. The petition had received more than 10,000 signatures in three weeks. If the Hughes family were expecting the closure to go smoothly, this didn't bode well.



A photo dated 1919 of a worker at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry. Photograph: PA

But Clarke and Taylor knew that even with this support, and potential lottery funding, the market for large tower bells wouldn't sustain a business in the long term. The efflorescence of Christianity in Africa and east Asia



could perhaps supply a trickle of future customers, but the foundry would need another line of work if it was to survive.

Three months after Project Phoenix's first meeting, Samaurez Smith introduced Clarke to Adam Lowe, the artist and forger, who was based in Spain. Lowe's company in Madrid, Factum Arte, is known as the place where artists come to have their artworks made. When I spoke to Lowe over Zoom, he described himself as a "simple maker", although the things he makes are hardly simple. If you've ever visited an exhibition by Marina Abramović, Anish Kapoor or Jenny Holzer, there's a good chance that Lowe was involved. His team has woven tapestries for Grayson Perry, made giant golf balls from marble and cast an olive tree in bronze.

Before Lowe met Clarke, he had never given much thought to bells. But the more he learned about them, the more interesting they seemed. It didn't take long for him to get involved with Project Phoenix. The plan was that Whitechapel would reopen as a multipurpose foundry that made tower bells (Taylor's speciality), and artists' commissions (Lowe's speciality). To drum up interest in the project, Lowe proceeded to ask every artist he knew if they would be interested in making a bell. "They all said yes!" he told me effusively. "The idea, for any of these artists, of making a bell, is a dream."

By June 2017, Project Phoenix seemed to be taking flight. They had a plan for the future of the foundry. They knew who it was being sold to. Now, the challenge was to buy it back.

By the time the foundry closed its doors in June 2017, Clarke, Taylor and even Alan Hughes were unaware that Goldstein no longer owned the foundry. Just six months after agreeing to buy the buildings from Hughes, Goldstein had sold them on to another buyer. Raycliff Capital, Bippy Siegal's venture capital firm, completed the deal with Goldstein in April 2017, Siegal told me by email. The Hughes family might have thought that £5.1m was a fair price, but Goldstein had flipped the foundry to the US venture capital firm for £7.9m, making a £2.8m profit in the process. (Goldstein told me that he had hoped "to restore part of the Foundry and to sympathetically redevelop the rest of the site" but "concluded that this vision was best delivered by a more experienced Investor and operator".)



Peter Scott, a senior bell-hanger for the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, at the church of St Magnus the Martyr in 2009. Photograph: Oli Scarff/Getty Images



But the Hughes family had their own reasons for selling to Goldstein. The business was steeped in debt. Hughes had previously watched as two family firms entered administration: the initial shock of the announcement, the consequences for employees and suppliers, the drawn-out period when vultures began to circle. Goldstein had agreed a non-refundable downpayment on the foundry buildings before the sale had completed, which allowed Hughes to pay creditors, offer staff redundancy packages and wind down the business over six months while avoiding the pain of administration.

When I asked Hughes about the profit Goldstein had turned, he insisted he didn't mind. People who cared about making money don't work as bell founders, he said. Still, it's difficult not to think that Goldstein outfoxed Hughes. "He's the winner," Nigel Taylor told me. "He bought the foundry, sold it [for] a profit ... walked away with the money, and left all this chaos behind. So he's the winner."

When they found out that Bippy Siegal was the foundry's new owner, Project Phoenix embarked on an energetic campaign. In June 2018, Clarke, Lowe and Taylor published their proposals in a document titled *Saved by the Bell: The Resurrection of the Whitechapel Bell Foundry*, and a coalition of heritage enthusiasts, metallurgy experts, local residents and members of the nearby East London Mosque campaigned to keep the foundry open as a working factory. Along the way, they roped in a few famous names, such as Rory Stewart, Stephen Fry and Tristram Hunt to endorse the cause.

Much of the campaign's momentum has been driven by Whitechapel residents. Tower Hamlets councillor Puru Miah told me that he finds it "mind-boggling" that anyone would choose to build a boutique hotel over reopening a multi-purpose foundry. To him, a foundry of the kind that Re-Form was proposing could provide rare opportunities for skilled employment and apprenticeships in the borough – rather than just more gig-economy jobs for companies like Uber and Deliveroo. Yet one of the selling points of Raycliff's scheme is that it, too, would provide jobs: the company plans to offer 185 full-time positions and eight new apprenticeships. (Raycliff says these will be in bell founding, although the exact details aren't yet clear.) When I asked Miah about this, he scoffed. "An apprenticeship in what? Making beds? Hoovering carpets? Serving drinks at a bar? Are you telling me those are sustainable jobs?"

That the foundry was never publicly marketed for sale angers Clarke. His irritation rests on the finer-grained details of UK planning rules. These specify that when a development will substantially harm a historic building, planning officers should refuse to grant it approval, unless one of two criteria is met: the development creates significant public benefits, or the site is unusable, no other alternatives exist, and charity or grant funding isn't



possible. Yet the bell foundry had never been put on the public market; had it been, Clarke argues that Re-Form would have had the chance to show that an alternative existed.

Siegal promised that Raycliff's scheme would sensitively restore the site's buildings. After a public consultation process, in September 2018, Raycliff amended its hotel and cafe scheme, promising to provide affordable workspaces for small creative businesses. It also introduced a small bell foundry, which would be run by two metal founding companies that would cast small hand bells embellished with the Whitechapel Bell Foundry logo. (Re-Form argues that it amounts to little more than window-dressing, occupying 85 sq metres compared with the foundry's current 707 – and Raycliff would not be obliged to maintain the foundry in the long term if it didn't turn a profit.)

For Miah and many other locals, the battle isn't just about jobs – it's also about symbolism. "You only have to go to the top of the mosque and look around to see how the City of London is creeping in," says Sufia Alam, the head of the East London Mosque's Maryam Women's centre. The Mosque is a near neighbour of the foundry, and has fiercely opposed Raycliff's plans. They are situated at the intersection of Whitechapel and the City; to the west, a horizon of towering office blocks and private apartments creeps closer every year. Alam worries that Raycliff's development will be "just another wall in our face".

Raycliff submitted its planning application in December 2018, and the decisive hearing, at which Tower Hamlets councillors cast their votes on the plans, took place the following November. The vote was split: three in favour, three against. The council chair held the deciding vote – and he cast it in favour of Raycliff's scheme.

"It was like watching the execution of an innocent man where everyone agreed that – bearing in mind the lack of evidence – the most prudent option was to execute him anyway because the noose was ready," one popular local website [said of the result](#). (In an email, Bippy Siegal told me that Raycliff has worked closely with the local community throughout the planning process. The company "chose to undertake two major comprehensive consultations because we wanted to seek the views from as many people as possible on our vision to restore the listed building and deliver a scheme to benefit the local community.")



The courtyard of the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in 2011. Photograph: Peter Dazeley/Getty

But after the council had voted, something unexpected happened. Campaigners had written to Robert Jenrick, the secretary of state for communities and local government, urging him to halt planning approval. On Tuesday 3 December, 18 days after the vote, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government sent a letter to Tower Hamlets council suspending planning approval until a public inquiry had taken place. “I was astonished,” one campaigner told me.

The rancour between Raycliff and Re-Form erupted in a war of words at the inquiry, which took place in October 2020. Raycliff’s legal agreement to build a miniature foundry was “about as much use as a chocolate teapot”, Re-Form’s lawyer wrote. Raycliff’s lawyer shot back, condemning the “propaganda” and “desperation” of their opponents. This 10-day sprint of hearings might have become an adversarial standoff, but it was held at the height of the second wave of the pandemic, and took place entirely over Zoom, with furtive WhatsApp messages exchanged off-screen.

The final decision about the future of the Whitechapel Bell Foundry now rests with the secretary of state, and is expected in the coming week. If the government rules in Raycliff’s favour, Clarke insists that Re-Form and Factum will continue with their plans to launch a new bell foundry in London – just not in Whitechapel. They have already trademarked the name “the London Bell Foundry”, and will soon be casting a bell at a foundry in Gloucestershire in collaboration with Grayson Perry.

Despite the campaign’s vociferous fight against Raycliff’s scheme, it’s hard not to think that it began too late. Even if Jenrick were to block the redevelopment plans, Siegal would still own the foundry, and Re-Form would have to find a way of buying it. Clarke told the inquiry that he offered to buy the foundry for £4m. That is far lower than the £7.9m that Siegal paid, and is based on the value of the site as a working foundry rather than the speculative gains associated with a boutique hotel.



Most of the time, speculation wins, particularly in central London. Raycliff is simply doing what investors always do: finding ways to make money. The more pertinent question, for many of the campaigners, is why the Hughes family didn't sell the site to someone who would keep it open as a working foundry. "If you own a historic company and you make a big thing out of that, [don't] you have a moral responsibility to [ensure] its perpetuity?" Nigel Taylor said when we met in Whitechapel.



The butcher's shop that lasted 300 years (give or take)

To Hughes, the thing that mattered most was not the foundry itself, but the people who occupied it. "The foundry was the people. And that has gone. And what you're left with is an empty building," Hughes told me. He insists that the business never closed: the family trademarked the Whitechapel Bell Foundry brand and licensed it to the Westley Group, a large metallurgy company in Stoke-on-Trent that makes tower bells with the Whitechapel logo. In other words, you can still buy a Whitechapel Bell – it will just no longer be made in Whitechapel. Hughes is the owner of a logo, but not a foundry. (Taylor is now a freelance bell consultant, and has made designs for the Westley Group. The world of bells is not a large one.)

If the Raycliff scheme gets the go-ahead, bells with the Whitechapel logo will be made on site in the miniature foundry. A digital rendering of this bijoux space looks just how you might imagine venture capitalists would design a factory floor: orderly and sterile, with exposed brickwork and health-and-safety placards prominent on the walls. The image shows two craftsmen attending to an uncharacteristically clean casting pit, while smiling visitors watch on from behind a glazed screen.

Follow the Long Read on Twitter at [@gdnlongread](https://twitter.com/gdnlongread), listen to our podcasts [here](#) and sign up to the long read weekly email [here](#).