

UK manufacturing

Battle over Britain's historic bell foundry far from over

Campaigners for a full revival of East End site await ministerial decision



The Whitechapel Bell Foundry © Richard Gardner/Shutterstock

James Pickford in London DECEMBER 25 2019

A white-hot sliver of molten bronze slides down a channel into a ceramic mould, its 1,000C-plus heat warming the faces of surrounding visitors. A short while later, the mould's rough surface is hacked away to reveal the unmistakable structure of a bell.

This display of the ancient craft of bell-making, held in December at the high-tech manufacturing arm of University College London in the former Olympic Park in Stratford, is part of a long-term campaign to save one of the UK's oldest manufacturing companies.

UCL is among a group of institutions and individuals battling to revive the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, as a full-scale bell manufacturer in the heart of London as well as an art foundry and a crucible of skills for a high value manufacturing economy.

The centuries-old business forged Big Ben and the original Liberty Bell in Pennsylvania and was run for four generations by the Hughes family. But in 2017 [they sold off](#) the premises occupied by the business since 1747, citing the declining market for large bells, and moved the business elsewhere in a slimmed-down form.

The campaign for the site's revival is being led by the UK Historic Building Preservation Trust, a heritage group that saved the Middleport potteries in Stoke with a £9m redevelopment, and Factum Arte, an international business making sculptures for artists and copies of ancient sites such Tutankhamun's tomb.

But their alternative plan for a bell-making renaissance faces formidable obstacles — not least the fact that the building’s new owners already have their own [well-developed scheme](#). The buyer, US investment group Raycliff, founded by the New York-based entrepreneur Bippy Siegal, aims to convert the Grade II listed building and its adjoining site into a boutique hotel, café and studios for creative businesses.



The site of the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, earmarked for development by Raycliff © Raycliff

In November, planning permission for the hotel scheme was voted through at a heated public meeting of Tower Hamlets council’s development committee, attended by supporters from the rival camps, where the decision swung in Raycliff’s favour after the chairman exercised the casting vote. The Raycliff plan also has the support of Historic England, the statutory body, which has pointed to its inclusion of a small bell production unit, where hand bells made by the Hughes family under the Whitechapel Bell trademark will be cast, finished and sold.

A spokesman for Raycliff said that critics of the hotel scheme had often ignored the fact that the plan will reunite the building’s original bell-making business with its old premises. “The new owners recognise the significance of bringing back the original tenants and giving them a new home — in their old home,” the spokesman said.

The vote was a big setback for the campaign for an alternative, but its hopes have not been entirely extinguished. Robert Jenrick, housing secretary, made an unexpected move earlier this month by asking Tower Hamlets council to temporarily suspend its decision while he considered whether or not to “call in” the decision. Following the Conservatives’ election victory, Mr Jenrick is back in his job. He is likely to weigh both the historic importance of the site and the effect of the hotel scheme before his decision is expected early in the new year.

New voices are also being added to the list of well-known figures who have lent their [support to the campaign](#), which already includes former Turner Prize winning artist Antony Gormley,

Charles Saumarez Smith, former chief executive of the Royal Academy, and Tristram Hunt, head of the Victoria and Albert Museum.



Campaigners ring hand bells in protest ahead of a planning meeting at Tower Hamlets council to decide the future of the foundry site © Yui Mok/PA
Rory Stewart, the former Conservative minister who is [now running](#) as an independent candidate to be the next Mayor of London, has also thrown his weight behind the campaign, telling supporters gathered outside the foundry site on Whitechapel Road: “Anyone with any imagination seeing the possibilities of bell making, training . . . and a digital future could not possibly turn this down.”

He said the council’s decision was a “failure of planning imagination” and pointed to support from members of Whitechapel’s Bangladeshi community, as well as cultural figures and artists, for a full-strength foundry scheme. “In all the culture wars, right against left, and all the other wars of identity in London, this project is a very powerful symbol of identities coming together.”

At the [UCL event](#), Peter Scully, technical director at UCL’s Bartlett Manufacturing and Design Exchange, said the bell had been made with a modern technique called “ceramic shell casting” — used by aerospace companies for making the high-precision exit blades on jet turbines — rather than the more labour-intensive, traditional technique of loam casting.



Big Ben and one of the surrounding bells in the Houses of Parliament © Victoria Jones/AFP/Getty

The former is a highly adaptable technique — and crucially repeatable — that gives technicians and students a window into advanced skills in areas such as 3D printing, computer-controlled milling, harmonics and metallurgy.

The plan to revive the Whitechapel Bell Foundry would provide a link between the ancient craft of bell-making and these technologies. Mr Scully said: “This is heritage going back 500 years. It’s an enormous opportunity for us to take that forward with all the disruptive technology that’s being used here.”

He also points to the cleanliness of modern manufacturing. The diesel oil that previously fuelled the furnaces of the bell foundry would be abandoned in favour of electrically powered furnaces using renewable sources, and electrostatic air filters used to scrub clean the fumes created in casting. “There’s no need to associate this with a filthy out-of-town industry,” he said.



King George V with Queen Mary, right, and Princess Mary, left, during a visit to the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in 1919 © PA

Nonetheless, Raycliff’s plan has advanced in the face of these arguments. Its announcement that it would continue bell-making on the site, as well as carrying out fine art foundry work, came in

February during the course of consultation on the scheme.

Such efforts allow the hotel scheme to argue its corner as a preserver of the site's unique industrial heritage. Mr Jenrick's move, however, suggests arguments over the Whitechapel foundry's future are far from concluded.

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