



## Will the bells ring out again at London's Big Ben foundry?

**Campaigners hope to block plan for luxury hotel development and reopen historic site as a working factory**

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It is part of the nation's heritage and a powerful symbol of parliamentary democracy, signalling the passing of each hour for more than a century and a half. When Big Ben was brought to the Palace of Westminster on a trolley drawn by 16 horses in 1858, cheering crowds gathered on the streets to salute the giant bell's passage.

Now the place it came from, the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in the East End of London, where master craftsmen cast some of history's most notable bells, is the subject of a public inquiry starting next week over plans to turn the historic site into a luxury hotel.

Robert Jenrick, the secretary of state for housing, communities and local government, "called in" the proposal after Tower Hamlets council approved the site's redevelopment despite opposition from community groups and members of the public.

The foundry's fourth generation owners, Alan and Kathryn Hughes, sold up in 2017 after running the business for 45 years. A sub-sale meant the site ended up in the hands of developers Raycliff Whitechapel LLP. Under the company's proposals, the Grade II\* listed

building at the front of the site will be preserved and a 103-bedroom hotel with rooftop pool will be built at the rear.

The developers' scheme was backed by Historic England, which said the proposal had "the makings of a successful heritage regeneration scheme, and would provide a sustainable future for this important group of listed buildings".

But an alternative proposal has been put forward by Re-Form Heritage (formerly the UK Historic Building Preservation Trust) and the Factum Foundation to keep the entire site as a viable bell foundry. "We are convinced that with new management and new technology this can continue as a successful business," said Stephen Clarke, a trustee of Re-Form Heritage. "The intangible heritage asset here is the activity of the foundry rather than the fabric of the building."

Their proposal envisages forming a bridge between traditional craftsmanship and digital technology to "re-energise and rethink bell making" as an artform, said Adam Law of the Factum Foundation. It is discussing potential projects with artists Grayson Perry, Anish Kapoor and Antony Gormley.



The Queen and Prince Philip visit Whitechapel Bell Foundry in 2009. The foundry has been producing bells since 1570.  
Photograph: WPA/Getty Images

A bell foundry has been in existence in Whitechapel since the 16th century, and at its current site since the 1740s. Among the bells cast were the clock bell at St Paul's cathedral in 1716 and the famous Bow Bells at St-Mary-le-Bow in 1738. To be born within the sound of Bow Bells - which reached considerably further in the days before motor vehicles - is the traditional definition of a Cockney. The foundry also made the bells immortalised in the nursery rhyme: "Oranges and lemons say the bells of St Clements."

In 1752, the foundry cast the famous Liberty Bell, a symbol of American independence commissioned by the state of Pennsylvania, inscribed with the words "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof".

More than a century later, Big Ben was the largest single bell, at 13.7 tons, made by the foundry. It chimed for the first time on 11 July 1859, continuing apart from occasional breakdowns and repairs until it was silenced for major renovations three years ago. Its famous bongs are due to restart next year.

Nigel Taylor, who worked at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry for 40 years until its closure in 2017, and who would be re-employed under the Re-Form/Factum proposal, said: "The techniques used during the period I was employed at the foundry were modifications of ancient

techniques.” When the foundry closed, “a vast amount of industrial history was lost”, he added.

The inquiry is expected to last two weeks initially. A report will be submitted to the secretary of state, who will decide the outcome.

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