

Project summary

Raycliff purchased the former Whitechapel Bell Foundry in 2017, following the Hughes family's decision to close their business on the current site and move it elsewhere. Bell making uses and workshops will be reintroduced on the Grade II* listed Old Foundry site, alongside artists' studios/maker space, workspace for small creative businesses, and café/bar use with interpretation and display space that will be open to anyone. A 100-bed hotel and other workspace is proposed on a non-historic site at the rear, part of which dates from 1979/80, the remaining part already has planning permission for a 34-bed hotel and office and residential uses.

Why the Whitechapel Bell business relocated

Demand for bells has been steadily declining for decades and was insufficient to sustain across the whole site in Whitechapel. The building needs substantial investment (running into millions) to carry out the necessary upgrades and urgent repairs to facilitate any use. Even if it was upgraded, the profits from the bell business were insufficient to cover the costs associated with the day to day operations, obtain the insurances and environmental permits required – and maintain this for any length of time. The location was also not best suited for the demands of the business. It was becoming increasingly difficult to operate a heavy industrial use in a residential context. The Hughes family (who owned the site for 100 years and continue to own Whitechapel Bell Foundry Ltd) delayed the difficult decision to sell for many years and tried their best to make the business work. However, the only realistic option was to sell the site and relocate their business. In doing this, they are able to continue production on a smaller scale and protect the legacy and skills of traditional UK bell making.

The future of bell making on site

An informal partnership has been formed with the Hughes's to explore how an element of bell making could be best reintroduced on the site in a viable and sustainable way. Exciting discussions are also underway with another active UK bell producing foundry with historic links to the Whitechapel Bell Foundry. Details are still being developed and we hope to make these available soon but are likely to include publicly accessible and viewable workshop areas. The team is also examining the possibility of introducing an electric furnace on site, which could produce some bells on site (subject to the environmental impacts). It is important that this activity does not create additional pressure or undue competition for the UK bell industry, so linking up to these established foundries is an important and necessary part of our approach.

Other partnerships being explored

Discussions are on-going with a number of other local and strategic partners to deliver a scheme within the Old Foundry that is authentic and relevant to Whitechapel and meets specific needs identified in Tower Hamlets. Alongside the bell making uses and potential for new public programmes associated with this, significant parts of the historic building will be widely accessible to the public for the first time. The team is also reviewing how best to bring forward artists' studios and space for creative businesses to meet the strong demand identified in this area. There may be potential for education and artistic programmes to be developed in conjunction with these uses. This has already started – Raycliff is hosting the Whitechapel Gallery's 'Nocturnal Creatures' event on the former bell foundry site on 21 July: a free festival open to all, bringing together performance, video, sculpture and sound. Raycliff is optimistic that other similar events can be hosted in the future.

Physical change to the listed building

A light touch, heritage-led approach is proposed with minimal intervention to the listed building. The main change is focused on a new stair core in a part of the building adapted in the 1960s, which will significantly aid the current poor circulation. This will barely be perceptible from the external street views. Modern partitions and other detracting elements will be removed inside the building. The roof will also be repaired and sensitively adapted where necessary. The hotel and new building elements will be on the rear site (currently occupied by the 1980s building and a car park).

What happened to the foundry equipment?

A schedule of important listed foundry items was agreed between the Hughes's, London Borough of Tower Hamlets and Historic England at the time of the sale. These remain within the building and will be retained in situ in the new scheme. Raycliff also bought many bells and other equipment that were available at auction – these will be reinstated in the spaces in the Old Foundry. Through the partnership with the Hughes's, there is an opportunity to bring back original mouldings, dies and casts, as well as the original artefacts that were in the small museum space that was housed in the foundry.

What are the other key principles for the new design on the non-historic site?

A six-storey brick building is proposed in place of 1980s building behind the Old Foundry. The form is a characterful expression of the existing Old Foundry site and also takes its cues from the surrounding townscape setting. A new glazed link building is inserted in between the old and new fabric to provide a visual break and also be reminiscent of the tightknit yards, lanes and alleyways that used to exist in this area of London. A four and a five-storey building will also replace the consented schemes for a hotel and office/residential development on a very similar height and mass to the approved.

Former employees and new jobs created

There were 23 staff employed by Whitechapel Bell Foundry Ltd at the time of the site sale in November 2016. Of these 23, only five were directly employed in the moulding and casting of bells and only two employees lived locally. Most of the staff with specialist skills are now employed elsewhere in the bell industry, with many working closer to their homes, whilst seven members of the staff chose to retire. In contrast, the proposal will generate a significant number of new jobs, including reintroducing skilled labour jobs alongside service sector jobs associated with the hotel. Raycliff is fully committed to delivering local employment during construction and in the end uses as part of this, in accordance with London Borough of Tower Hamlets policies. We are also looking at how apprenticeships in the bell industry can be developed to ensure the traditions and specialist skill set prospers and can be passed on to the next generation.

Are Whitechapel Bells still made?

Yes. The Hughes's still own Whitechapel Bell Foundry Ltd which continues as a company, and which crucially retains ownership of all pattern equipment and tooling for the manufacture of tower bells, musical handbells, clock bells and small presentation bells, as well as the company's extensive archives. The Westley Group, based in Stoke on Trent, continues the manufacture of Whitechapel tower bells under licence, and Bells of Whitechapel Ltd continue the production and maintenance of musical handbells and small bells under a similar agreement. The archives are being conserved at the London Metropolitan Archives at the expense of Whitechapel Bell Foundry Ltd to allow public access to the collection.

Consultation undertaken on the proposals

There have been a number of positive meetings with officers at London Borough of Tower Hamlets, Historic England, and a wider range of other key statutory amenity societies and groups. These discussions are on-going, as the design and ideas evolve. They will continue to help shape the development prior to its submission as a planning and listed building application. A public consultation has also taken place in June 2018. Feedback is currently being reviewed and is also being fed into the design process.

Relationship with UKHBPT

Meetings have been held with the charity UKHBPT. They have no ownership rights. Nonetheless, they have some interesting and ambitious ideas – the principles are not vastly different to Raycliff's plans for the Old Foundry, except, Raycliff is working with the Whitechapel Bell Foundry Ltd owners and linked companies in the UK bell industry. It is also forming other local partnerships relevant to Whitechapel and Tower Hamlets.

Fundamentally, any future plan must be viable and sustainable and be able to carry out the significant works that are required to repair the building, as well as maintain and invest in its upkeep indefinitely. Aside from the fact that UKHBPT has no legal right to implement its plans, it has not supplied any financial information on how it would hope to support its suggested ideas, apart from through sponsorship and donations. This is not a sustainable business model to purchase the land, undertake the vital building maintenance and buy the equipment required. Neither would it provide any guarantee that this important building and the uses presented could be maintained in the long term without ongoing subsidy. This could jeopardise the building's future. Taylor's Bell Foundry in Loughborough recently failed in its bid for a Heritage Lottery Fund grant, highlighting the challenge of raising sufficient funding through public and charitable means for a similar project.

More information

If you would like to ask a question that is not covered, or would generally like to be kept informed about the development of the proposals, please email [**info@thebellfoundry.co.uk**](mailto:info@thebellfoundry.co.uk) or call **0800 298 7040**.