



End of an era as Whitechapel Bell Foundry closes

by Jayne Hall

Britain's oldest manufacturing business closes its doors in May after supplying bells to the horological trade for 450 years.

The Whitechapel Bell Foundry – makers of Big Ben and the American Liberty Bell – is to close in May after almost 450 years in business, marking the end of an era in bell making.

Based in a Grade II* listed building on Whitechapel Road, in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, it is the oldest manufacturing company in Great Britain, dating back to 1770. It is one of only two bell foundries left in the UK, the other being John Taylor & Co in Loughborough.

The building, which has been home to the company since 1739, has now been sold, but owners Alan and Kathryn Hughes are still looking for a buyer who could continue operation at another site.

Alan explained: 'We have made the decision to close with a heavy heart, but in

response to the changing realities of running a business of this kind.

'The Bell Foundry in Whitechapel has changed hands many times, but it has always been a family business. My own family has owned the foundry since 1904, but other families have run the foundry through its history.'

Alan says that discussions with company staff and other interested parties regarding the future direction, ownership and location of the company are on going. They will complete work on all projects that are presently in hand during the coming months but will not be entering into new contracts for the time being.

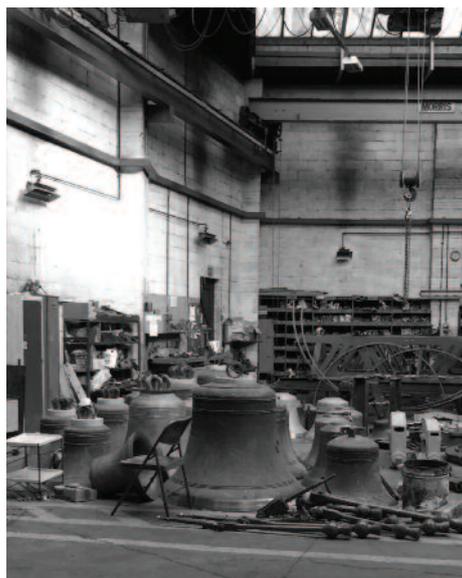
The foundry primarily makes church bells, although it also provides single tolling bells, carillon bells and handbells and offers a complete range of accessories such as framework, wheels, clappers, including assembly in Church towers. It was the manufacturer of Big Ben, which measures 9ft in diameter by 7.6ft high, and rings from the Elizabeth Tower in the Houses of Parliament. It also produced the Liberty Bell, the famous non-religious symbol of United States independence.

Over the centuries, business has had to adapt to meet changing needs. With new churches being built less frequently Whitechapel started to produce handbells and doorbells. It also responded to a surge in orders for table bells following the popularity of the BBC period drama *Downton Abbey*.

Alan explains that the large bell business has been generally unaffected by periods of financial depression, partly owing to the fact that from enquiry to



Top: The Whitechapel Bell Foundry in 1739. Above: A more modern shot of the Grade II* listed building, formerly a coaching inn called The Artichoke which was damaged in the Great Fire of London.



A final glimpse through the Foundry door. Photo courtesy of James Nye.

completion an order takes on average 11 years – but on one occasion this was greatly surpassed. An order was requested of Alan's grandfather in the 1890s, which his father quoted again for in the 1950s and he himself gave a quote for in the 1970s. The order was finally completed in 1998!

During World War II, the foundry was used as a munitions production line making casings for the Ministry of War. It was particularly busy afterwards, replacing bells lost or damaged by fire in bombing raids across London.

The foundry's long history spans the reign of 27 English monarchs and among royal visitors to the foundry were King George V and Queen Mary, who came to witness the casting of two bells for Westminster Abbey.

It also recently cast the Royal Jubilee Bells – eight bells which featured on the Thames Diamond Jubilee Pageant.

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