Ringing the changes: engaging the next generation



A visiting school child tests a bell. Credit: Loughborough Bellfoundry Trust.

Our support is helping to connect the global history of an at-risk craft with new audiences and young people keen to build a career in heritage.

Since 1859, Loughborough Bellfoundry has cast more than 25,000 bells for buildings in more than 100 countries. In 2020, we awarded £3.45million to Taylor & Co. to restore and maintain the foundry, then open its doors to a broader community – from new apprentices and volunteers to local families and schools.

Planning a programme that chimes with visitors

One key aspect was a diverse calendar of engagement events, offering everything from heritage skills opportunities to creative inspiration.

The programme has included a Kids in Museums takeover day, hand bell designing sessions and casting tours, sharing restoration skills and setting up a photography group.

Kate Pinnock is a consultant who supported the project. She works with many heritage organisations assembling funding applications and activity plans.

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A workshop about the power of rust, taking place during the restoration of the building. Credit: Loughborough Bellfoundry Trust.

“One thing the Foundry did very well is integrate the restoration of the site into its public programme. Simple workshops like photography can engage visitors with the heritage while also documenting the ongoing works – which is valuable from an archive and archaeological perspective.

“Kira and the Foundry team have offered sessions inspired by everything from STEM subjects to music. There are so many different disciplines that can be relevant and capture the imagination.”

Attracting new voices to the team

As part of the project, Taylor and Co. connected with local organisations, including universities and colleges, to promote valuable apprenticeship and volunteering opportunities. Kira Mills, a masters degree student studying Museum and Heritage Development nearby, joined the Foundry as a volunteer, before becoming a full-time member of the team, working in the archive and across the public programme.



Kira Mills, from Loughborough Bellfoundry Trust.

She says that the unique nature of the skills and knowledge on offer at the Foundry – as well as a sense of connection to the area for those studying locally – has been attractive to her and other young people with an interest in heritage.

“When I first started, a member of our archive team found a file relating to the village that I grew up in. You’re seeing pictures of places you recognise that were taken 100 years ago. Finding that connection to the heritage, that you might not have realised you had, potentially when you’re a long way from home, has been really important for some of the young people who’ve joined us.”

Navigating change together

The restoration, the public programme and the many new faces on the team have been transformational. There has been a significant broadening of the Foundry’s audience – from predominantly men, often retired, with a specialist or professional interest, to more than half of the programme’s participants being women. Although it’s the expertise of long-serving colleagues that’s making these changes possible.



A tour group take part in a 'Meet the Master Bellfounder' session. Credit: Loughborough Bellfoundry Trust.

Kira says: “I think it's important to celebrate the people that already practice those skills within your organisation just as much as promoting and bringing in new people. What I've found is that maintaining relationships with the people who have essentially set this place up is so important. It's not just about more and more and more, it's about elevating what's already there and growing from that.”

Reflecting on the progress made, Kate is optimistic for the Foundry’s future. “One of the big aims of the project was to engage younger people. One key reason is that bell ringers are aging, so the more we can get younger generations interested in bells, the better. The broad engagement with this project has demonstrated that there's a life ahead for bell ringing, bells and the production of bells. That’s been a really successful part of the Foundry’s project.”

Discover more projects that we’ve supported that connect local communities to their industrial heritage.



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A behind the scenes tour of the newly renovated Boston Lodge. Credit: Chris Parry.



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Participants in the New to Nature programme including future Game Changer, Lisa Manning.



Britain’s last major bell foundry saved