

Big Ben

Big Ben is the nickname for the great bell inside the clock tower at the Houses of Parliament (Westminster). The Palace of Westminster had to be rebuilt after it was destroyed by a fire in 1834. In 1844 they decided to include a tower and clock with the new buildings. A very large bell was needed for the clock!

The first one they made cracked. The metal from this first one was melted down and a new bell was cast in Whitechapel in 1858. The bell is called Big Ben.

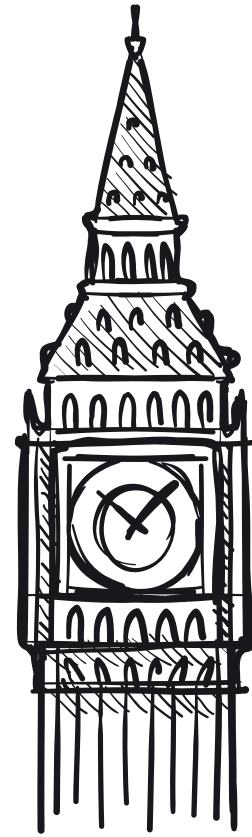
There is a story that the bell was named after a 19th century heavyweight boxing champion, Ben Caunt who was known as 'Big Ben'. However, the bell was more likely named after Sir Benjamin Hall, a Welsh engineer who oversaw the latter stages of the rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament. His name is inscribed inside the bell.

Big Ben first rang in May 1859. Then in September 1859 the bell cracked! The hammers that hit the bell were replaced for lighter ones and the bell was rotated so the new hammers would hit an undamaged section of the bell.

The tower the clock is in was simply called the Clock Tower. Then in 2012 it was renamed the Elizabeth Tower in honour of Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee.

The Elizabeth Tower is currently undergoing restoration work. You can find out more about the work, follow its progress and find lots of facts and photographs on the UK Parliament website here:

parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/building/palace/big-ben



- Each dial is seven metres in diameter.
- The minute hands are 4.2 metres long (14ft) and weigh about 100kg (220lbs, including counterweights).
- The numbers are approximately 60cm (23in) long.
- There are 312 pieces of glass in each clock dial.
- A special light above the clock faces is illuminated when parliament is in session.
- Big Ben's timekeeping is strictly regulated by a stack of coins placed on the huge pendulum.

Westminster Quarters

The tune Big Ben plays is called Westminster Quarters. Its original name was the Cambridge Quarters because the tune actually comes from Cambridge! It was first played in Great St Mary's Church in the centre of Cambridge.

The tune was written in 1793 for a new clock in St Mary the Greg in Cambridge but we do not know for certain who composed it. Dr Joseph Jowett was asked to write it but he may have been helped by Dr John Randall, a Professor of Music or by one of his pupils, William Crotch (a composer and organist).

The tune contains only 4 notes – G sharp, F sharp, E and B – and different parts of the tune are played at quarter past, half past and quarter to the hour in Westminster.

Westminster Quarters is a very popular tune for church bells and you can hear it all over the UK and even around the world including at the Peace Tower in Ottawa, Canada and the San Francisco Ferry Building clock tower in California, US.

- Big Ben has rarely stopped. Even after a bomb destroyed the Commons chamber during the Second World War, the clock tower survived and Big Ben continued to strike the hours.
- The chimes of Big Ben were first broadcast by the BBC on 31 December 1923, a tradition that continues to this day.
- The Latin words under the clockface read DOMINE SALVAM FAC REGINAM NOSTRAM VICTORIAM PRIMAM, which means "O Lord, keep safe our Queen Victoria the First".



quarter hour



half hour



quarter to the hour



the hour



the chime