

THE LOVE LONDON GUIDE N. 013

Big Ben

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Here is the detail most people get wrong on their first visit: the name "Big Ben" belongs to the bell, not the tower and not the clock. The Great Bell weighs around 13.7 tonnes, cracked within two months of its first chime in 1859, and that crack is exactly why its voice sounds the way it does. In this, Guide 013 in The Love London Guide series, we untangle the bell, the clock, and the tower that holds them both.

What "Big Ben" Actually Refers To

Big Ben is the nickname of the Great Bell hung inside the tower at the north end of the Palace of Westminster, home of the UK Parliament. The tower itself was simply called the Clock Tower for more than 150 years. It was renamed the Elizabeth Tower in 2012 to mark the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II, echoing the Victoria Tower at the building's opposite end.

Where the name "Big Ben" came from is still debated. It is commonly said to honour Sir Benjamin Hall, the

First Commissioner of Works whose name is inscribed on the bell, though a rival story credits a heavyweight boxer of the day named Benjamin Caunt. Either way, the nickname stuck to the bell first and then, in everyday speech, spread to the whole tower.

The Clock and How It Keeps Time

The Great Clock started working on 31 May 1859. Its accuracy owes much to the double three-legged gravity escapement, a mechanism devised by the lawyer and amateur horologist Edmund Beckett Denison (later Lord Grimthorpe), working alongside the Astronomer Royal George Airy and the clockmaking firm of Edward John Dent. The design isolates the pendulum from the force of the hands, so wind pressure on the large exterior dials does not disturb the beat.

Fine-tuning is famously low-tech. The clock's speed is adjusted by adding or removing old pre-decimal penny coins from a small tray on the pendulum. Adding one penny speeds the clock by roughly two-fifths of a second per day; a keeper removes or adds coins to bring it back to time. Each of the four dials is about seven metres across, and the tower stands close to 96 metres tall.

The Crack That Gave It Its Voice

The current Great Bell is actually the second. The first, cast in 1856, cracked during testing. The replacement was cast at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in 1858 and first chimed in July 1859 - then it, too, cracked, within about two months. Rather than recast it again, the solution was to turn the bell a quarter-turn so the hammer struck a sound spot, and to fit a lighter hammer. The crack was left in place, and the slightly imperfect note you hear today is the direct result.

The Chimes and the Light

The quarter-hour melody is the Westminster Quarters (also called the Cambridge Quarters), played on four smaller quarter bells, with Big Ben itself striking the hours. The tune is traditionally paired with the words "All through this hour, Lord be my guide, and by Thy power, no foot shall slide." Those hour strikes are broadcast live before certain news bulletins on BBC Radio 4, one of the longest-running sounds in British broadcasting.

Look up at the very top after dark and you may see the Ayrton Light, a lantern that is lit whenever either House of Parliament is sitting into the evening. It was installed in the 1880s, reportedly so Queen Victoria could see from Buckingham Palace whether her Members were still at work.

The 2017-2022 Restoration

For much of the period between 2017 and 2022 the bongs fell largely silent while the tower underwent its most extensive conservation to date. The clock was dismantled and overhauled, stonework repaired, and the dials restored to their original Prussian blue, which cleaning revealed beneath layers of later black paint. The full peal returned in November 2022. If you want to go up, Elizabeth Tower tours are bookable through Visit London and the UK Parliament tours service - note there are 334 stone steps and no lift.

Seeing It on Foot

The best free views are from Westminster Bridge, Parliament Square, and the South Bank across the river. A short walk away sits Westminster Abbey, where English monarchs have been crowned since 1066. Clock enthusiasts often pair the visit with a trip downriver to the Royal Observatory at Royal Museums Greenwich, the historic home of Greenwich Mean Time against which Big Ben's accuracy has long been measured.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: "Big Ben" is the tower. It is the Great Bell. The structure is the Elizabeth Tower, known as the Clock Tower until 2012.

Myth: The clock has never stopped. It has halted several times - through heavy snow, maintenance, and a major mechanism failure in 1976 - before being restarted.

Myth: It is kept on time by computer. Timekeeping is still corrected by hand, by stacking or removing old penny coins on the pendulum.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can you go inside Big Ben?

You can climb the Elizabeth Tower on a guided tour booked in advance through UK Parliament. The route involves 334 steps and has no lift, so a reasonable level of fitness is needed. The Great Bell and Great Clock are the highlights.

Why did Big Ben go quiet for several years?

A conservation and repair programme ran from 2017 to 2022. The bells were largely stilled to protect workers' hearing and allow the clock mechanism to be fully overhauled, with the chimes returning in November 2022.

Why does the bell sound slightly imperfect?

The bell cracked within about two months of first chiming in 1859. It was turned so the hammer strikes a different point and fitted with a lighter hammer, and the surviving crack gives Big Ben its distinctive, slightly off-pure tone.

Official websites mentioned

BBC: bbc.co.uk

Westminster Abbey: westminster-abbey.org

Royal Museums Greenwich: rmg.co.uk