

The history of parliament

One of the most famous views in London is certainly that of the tall tower of Big Ben standing above the Palace of Westminster on Parliament Square in the City of Westminster. But the view is not as old as you might think for the Palace of Westminster is not the ancient place that it seems to be.



For hundreds of years a royal palace did stand beside the river Thames at Westminster - a place of business and entertainment for the King and his officials, where his court would meet and to which Kings called Parliament when they needed to debate some special problem or raise taxes. Only gradually did Westminster Palace become the permanent seat of Government in England and by the end of the 15th Century the King had moved to one of his other palaces. The Palace of Westminster became the home of politicians and civil servants.

A disastrous fire in 1834 burnt the medieval palace to the ground-the only part of that ancient palace that survives today is Westminster Hall-which was begun in the 11th Century.

All of the rest of the famous Houses of Parliament we see today were built by the renowned Victorian architect, Charles Barry, with the interiors lavishly decorated by Augustus Pugin, who followed the fashion of the time to build this new building in an old style Neo-Gothic. St Mary's Church is also built in the Neo-Gothic Style.

Did you know

Big Ben is not actually the name of the clock at Westminster at all. Big Ben is the name of the main hour bell hung in the tower - which is called St Stephen's tower, the clock is known as The Great Clock of the Palace of Westminster but 'Big Ben' is commonly used to describe the clock and tower!

The building of Big Ben

As part of his design for the new Palace the architect, Charles Barry, allowed for a 316 ft high tower (with 339 spiral steps) and the Astronomer Royal, Sir George Airy, drew up the specification for the clock with the following requirement:

'the first hour of the stroke bell should register the time, correct to within one second per day, and furthermore that it should telegraph its performance twice a day to Greenwich Observatory, where a record would be kept.'

It was thought by many that such accuracy was impossible but in 1851 Edmund Beckett Denison came up with a design and the clock was built by Messers E.J.Dent & Co.

The clock in the tower was once the biggest in the world, able to strike the first blow for each hour with an accuracy of one second. The clock mechanism was completed by 1854, but the tower was not fully constructed until four years later.

Big Ben

The name Big Ben was first given to the 16-ton hour bell, cast in 1856. Since the tower was not yet finished, the bell was mounted in New Palace Yard but the bell cracked under the striking hammer, and its metal was recast as the 13.8 ton bell which is in use today. The new bell was mounted in the tower in 1858 alongside four quarter-hour bells.

On September 7, 1859, the clock became fully operational.

Keeping accurate time

Big Ben is famous for its reliability. This is due to the skill of its designer, the lawyer and amateur horologist, Edmund Beckett Denison, later Lord Grimthorpe.

As the clock mechanism, created to Denison's specification by clockmaker Edward John Dent, was completed before the tower itself was finished, Denison had time to experiment and came up with a new mechanism called the double three-legged gravity escapement. This escapement provides the best separation between pendulum and clock mechanism. Together with an enclosed, wind-proof box sunk beneath the clockroom, the Great Clock's pendulum is well isolated from external factors like snow, ice and pigeons on the clock hands, and keeps remarkably accurate time.

The idiom of putting a penny on, with the meaning of slowing down, sprung from the method of fine-tuning the clock's pendulum by adding or subtracting penny coins. Even to this day, old pennies, phased out of British currency by the 1971 decimalisation, are used.

Although Big Ben and St Mary's clocks are in many ways different, they are also closely related - like a great uncle to a little nephew - and our little clock is important to us as part of our heritage. We are delighted that you have taken the time to learn more about our clock and hope that you will enjoy a visit to St Mary's.