

THE BIG BEN OF LONDON

Debasish Das



1 The Big Ben is one such building that truly encapsulates the spirit of the city. Whether it is an important event taking place in London, or a reference to the Royalty or the Government of UK, the symbol of the Big Ben is included in the imagery. So, while Haiti (1968) and Gibraltar (2015) included it in its Churchill issues, Nicaragua in their Margaret Thatcher stamp (1995) and Mongolia in its Royal Wedding issue of Prince William & Catherine Middleton (2011). Or even when Niger wanted to show global cooperation in Covid vaccination (2021).



2 When the tower was being constructed in 1844, designs for its clock were submitted by three firms: Vulliamy, Whitehurst of Derby and E.J. Dent of the Strand, London. In order to decide the best firm, the Astronomer Royal in 1851 engaged the famous horologist Sir Edmund Beckett Denison (1816-1905). By that time, Whitehurst had died and the designs of Vulliamy was rejected, and E.J. Dent was chosen on the condition that the designs were to be made by Denison and executed by Dent. The design criteria were to keep the accuracy below one minute per week and the first strike of the hourly gong was to commence within a second of true time. By the time the clock was manufactured and installed in the tower in 1859, E.J. Dent had died, and it was his son who saw the project fulfilled.

3 The tower is 40 square feet, and the clock dials are 23 feet in diameter and 180 feet above the ground. The 9-foot long hour hands are of gun-metal while the 14-foot long minute hands are of hollow copper tubes. Its pendulum is of two-second sweep and 13-foot long. This was the clock where Denison invented the double three-legged gravity escapement.



4 Its giant bell weighing 13 tons and 11 cwt, is called the Big Ben II because the original bell cracked after few weeks of operation. The replacement bell too developed a crack due to inhomogeneous casting, so was so turned that the hammer struck a different point of the bell.



5 Four smaller bells are employed to play the Westminster or Cambridge chimes. It is said that this specific melody requiring four bells was composed in 1780 by William Crotch (1775-1847) for a new clock in St Mary the Great, the University Church in Cambridge. It is also credited to Crotch's music professor Dr John Randall (1715-1799) or professor Dr Joseph Jowett. The chime was adopted by Denison for the Big Ben and since then it is one of the most commonly used chimes in tower clocks. During the WWII, the Big Ben's chimes were used by BBC to precede its news bulletins – sending out a reassurance that London still stood undefeated



6 The lights just above the clock face called the Ayrton lights installed in 1885 are still lit whenever the Parliament sits after dark. Can you see the lights lit in the Dominican MS (1980)?