

# BIG BEN IS CRACKED

## *But His Chimes Still Mean Sanity*

**H**AVE you heard Big Ben to-day? Then all is well. England's clocks are still keeping time and London's King of Clocks still checks the watches round the world.

When war came last September, everyone waited to hear the sound of high flying planes and the crash of falling bombs. Instead, Ben's mellow E below middle C came clear, sententious, reassuring, over the air.

Ben is not a clock. He's a bell, and he's cracked, for all his hourly reiteration that they are still keeping sane and safe and sound, over there.

He was born at Whitechapel on April 10, 1858. When the Houses of Parliament were begun in 1840, the clock tower at the north end was planned to house the largest bell in all England. But they disagreed over Ben, and he was not cast (at Stockton-on-Tees) until 1856. He was then eight feet high, nine and a-half feet round, and 15 tons in weight. When they were testing him, they hit him too hard, and Ben, who had been the marvel of all who beheld him while he waited on display at the foot of the tower, was ignominiously cracked. He was then called St. Stephen, but the public found for him a less holy name in the Christian name of Sir Benjamin Hall, First Commissioner of Works at the time. A Mr. Denison, later Lord Grimthorpe, who had actually been responsible for making Ben, was unfortunately forgotten. All Denison's scientific knowledge went into making Ben, and the clock became known as the best mechanical clock in the world. It is still marvellously accurate and Greenwich checks its time twice daily.

### The Hanging of Ben

As St. Stephen had failed to stay whole, and the public refused to regard him as holy, the bell was recast (at Whitechapel) in 1858, and in October of that year was called Ben, and hung in his lofty home, 200 feet above the ground. He now weighed thirteen and a-half tons, and during that November was tested, with hammers weighing from four to seven hundredweight each. All seemed to be well. The clock was built in, one of the largest in the world and one of the most accurate. But alas, again the main bell cracked, and they had to file the fissure wider to prevent vibration. It's still there. The hammer now in use weighs only four hundredweight.

### Some Figures

The dials of the clock face are 23 feet in diameter, and their centres are 180 feet from the ground. The diameter of the bell is nine feet, and it is



eight and three-quarter inches thick. The hour figures are two feet long and the minute spaces one square foot. The minute hands are copper tubes, weighing two hundred-weight each. The hour hands are nine feet long. The driving weights are nearly two and a-half tons and the pendulum weighs 680 pounds.

Inside Ben's tower is a tiny microphone, quite the smallest item of the lot. It carries Ben's strokes all round the world, so that here in New Zealand they can be heard before their sound reaches the ears of most Londoners.

### Big Ben's Family

Ben has a family, four of them, whose work it is to sound the quarter chimes. Among them they weigh eight tons.

Scarcely without rest since 1858, they have sounded the quarters on G sharp, F sharp, E, and B, with Big Ben coming in on E an octave lower, night and day. During the last war both chiming and striking were stopped, but this time England and the Dominions are to continue to hear them.

### On The Air With A Message

Ben first went on the air in 1923, and since then has repeated every hour his message (inscribed on the bell):

*All through this hour, Lord, be my guide  
And by Thy power, no foot shall slide.*

The quarter chimes were first known as The Cambridge Quarters, because the mechanism to play them was first set up in St. Mary's Church at Cambridge, near the end of the eighteenth century (1793-4), and the music for them was written in Cambridge.

### Crotch's Crotchets

A certain young man called Crotch borrowed a phrase from Handel's introduction to an air from *The Messiah* ("I Know that My Redeemer Liveth") and built his set of chimes round it. Or so the story goes. It may not be true, but the phrase is easily recognisable. Crotch's tune is mostly crotchets, with a minimum of minims, as you will see by the reproduction on this page.

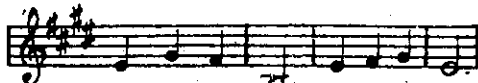
By the time the bells were erected at Cambridge, Crotch was a Professor of Music at Oxford. Later he became the first Principal of the newly-formed Royal Academy of Music in London (1882) and is remembered now as a famous composer of church music. His chimes came to London to greet him again in 1845, and joined Ben in 1858. The Royal Exchange copied them, with a slightly different sequence of groups.

You may be hearing Ben and his lesser brethren as you read this. If you are, London still stands beside the Thames, and millions of people like yourself, in every odd corner of the earth, will be glad that Ben still chimes.

First Quarter Chimes



Second Quarter Chimes



Third Quarter Chimes



Fourth Quarter (Hour) Chimes

