
NOTE

BIG BEN - NEW
DISCOVERIES PART 1:
PUNCH AND THE BELL

Chris McKay*

One of the things horological researchers must accept is that their task is never done and that fresh information will emerge in due course. After writing my book on Big Ben,¹ some new information appeared; fortunately not a lot and not contradictory to what I had already unearthed. It seemed to me good to share this with the readers of this journal as a cautionary tale for researchers and to update the record for Big Ben's history.

One source of information I totally overlooked was the *Punch* magazine, probably since my impression of the 1990s publication was one of humorous cartoons and witty stories. Not so for the real *Punch*, which first appeared in July 1841 with Mark Lemmon as editor and Ebenezer Landells as the wood engraver.² The tenor of the magazine was pointedly satirical; the Government and its ministers was first in the firing line followed by anything to do with the establishment, military, Church, gentry, Judiciary, Bank of England etc. Fashion, foreign dignitaries, wars, transport and London news all were given the *Punch* treatment. Contents included narrative, poems, letters and cartoons but all of these were very cutting, but without getting to the point of being unpleasant or coarse. Understanding old issues of *Punch* today is difficult, but if you know the background then the cartoons and words spring into life and tell a story. As well as searching *The Times* and the *Illustrated London News*, a researcher should also look into *Punch* to see what treasures it holds. The magazine

came out every Saturday and was quick to report topics of the day.

THE NAME OF THE BELL

Big Ben, the bell, of course came into *Punch's* firing line. The first time it makes its appearance in the magazine is in a long poem entitled 'The Song of the Bell', published in the 11 October 1856 issue. Denison, designer of the bell, and Warner, its founder, were mentioned along with the wrangles between Vulliamy, Whitehurst, Barry and Airy. The verse ends with the bell being dropped into the hold of the ship *Wave*, smashing the bottom; the ship had to be taken to a dry dock and was under repairs for two weeks.

The preceding 32-line stanza begins

What shall we call the Monster Bell,
That from Westminster tower
While its three lesser comrades tell
The quarters - strikes the hour?

and concludes

Better than such names no names at all:
Yet no ground for noble *Punch* discovers.
Let the Bell hang anonymous under the pall
Of smoke and sin that o'er Westminster
hovers

The first reference in *Punch* to the name Big Ben was on 8 November 1856, the appellation having first appeared in *The Times* on 22 October 1856 saying the bell was named after Sir Benjamin Hall, the First Commissioner of Works of the day. *Punch* mischievously suggested the clapper be named GLADSTONE, as 'without doubt, his is the loudest tongue in Parliament'.

On 29 November 1856, *Punch* printed a piece entitled 'Who Christened 'Big Ben?', which is interesting as it is undoubtedly the source of a popular myth that refuses to die. Benjamin Caunt, a prize fighter, is often quoted

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1. Chris McKay, *Big Ben: The Great Clock and the Bells at the Palace of Westminster* (OUP, 2010), reviewed in this journal Vol. 32/3 (September 2010), 431-2.
2. Many volumes of *Punch* are accessible online via <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=punch>



Fig. 1. Cartoon from *Punch* 29 November 1856 showing the fictitious characters Brown, Jones and Robinson arguing about the origin of the name of Big Ben. In the background is the entrance to the Crystal Palace, which they were about to visit. By then, this famous exhibition building had been transferred to Sydenham south of London. The three gentlemen had been conveyed there from Rotten Row, Hyde Park, in a mere few minutes using a balloon service. Amusingly, the author assumed that mode of local transport to be in operation in 1999, the year in which he set this episode.

as the real person the bell was named after, and it is here that it first makes its appearance.

The piece is presented in the form of a joint letter from three fictitious characters, Brown, Jones and Robinson, written in the distant future: the letter is dated 5 July 1999. The three friends ask the editor to clarify who the Great Bell of Westminster had been named after. Brown says the bell was named after Benjamin Hall First Commissioner of Works. Jones claims Benjamin Disraeli, listing Government posts he had held and calling him Duke of Jerusalem. Robinson asserts that Benjamin Caunt, a distinguished fighting man, was the one who gave his name to the bell. A cartoon (Fig. 1) shows the three men clad in garish attire of voluminous trousers, narrow waists topped with feathered hats. This must have been a parody of ladies' crinolines that *Punch* tilted at with weekly regularity.

Punch was no doubt complaining that the Bell had been named without any public discussion and when named, was called after a Government minister in a somewhat light-hearted manner.

The Caunt myth refuses to die and appears in guide books, popular literature and even the

parliamentary web site and in display material in the Clock Tower. No references have ever been published but it must be to *Punch* that credit is given for giving birth to the misconception.

Searching for when the myth re-surfaced I went through the standard books that give the history of Big Ben. It is interesting to note that Edmund Beckett Denison in his books never mentions 'Big Ben' or its naming, it is always 'The Great Bell'. This must say something about his contempt for the name.

The earliest reference found is in Peter Ferriday's book of 1957 on Lord Grimthorpe. On page 41 he talks about famous boxers, one of whom was called Big Ben, and then states 'It would not be at all unlikely that the workmen at Warners named the bell after one of them'. Ferriday does not name Big Ben as Benjamin Caunt so it looks like he was not aware of the *Punch* article and had picked up some oral tradition in his researches.

THE CRACKING OF BIG BEN

Other references appeared in *Punch*, but they had a field day on 7 November 1857 to tell, again in the form of poetry, how the bell cracked under testing. The opening is inspired on the nursery rhyme 'Who killed cock Robin':

THE CRACKING OF BIG BEN

WHO cracked the Bell?

"I," says JOHN BULL,

"Because I'm a fool:

And I cracked the Bell."

O BULL, you'r a Booby. You'd got a fine Bell,

A thing that did credit to HALL and to WARNER,

And stupidly eager for toll and for knell,

You stick up your Bell to be banged in a corner.

And why so impatient, and why could you not

Till the Bell was in place condescend just to tarry?

You've cracked it, – in two senses sent it to pot,

And the tower must be dumb, to the fury of BARRY.

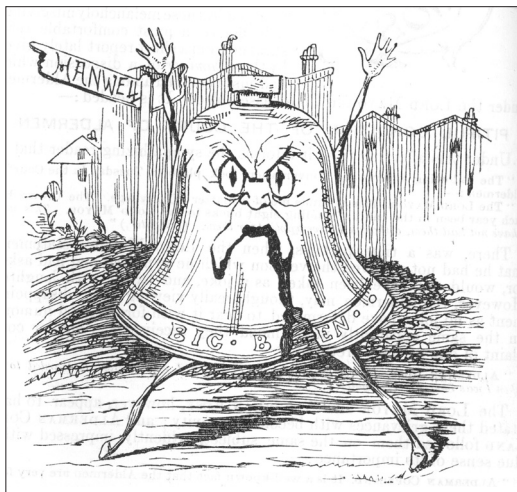


Fig. 2. Cartoon from *Punch* 7 November 1857. Two weeks earlier, during testing ‘a cracked and uncertain sound’ was heard, and close examination revealed that indeed the bell had cracked. Recriminations started immediately as to who was responsible: the designer, the founders, those looking after the bell in the Palace Yard. The bell was taken to the newly-appointed bellfounders of Mears in Whitechapel, where it was broken up and recast into the second Big Ben. It is that bell which has sounded out across London ever since.

You can't make a statue, no more could
old Rome,
Who vaunted that “others might model
the brasses”
(See *Virgil*, lib. vi., where each schoolboy's
at home,
And everyone else, except ignorant asses).

But when *alii* had *mollius* practised their
skill,
Not even the Romans, so clumsy and
conky,
Went pounding the *æra spirantia*, until
The “breath” came through cracks, as you've
done, you old donkey.

Along with the poem is a cartoon (Fig. 2) of the bell personified with a long face, arms, legs and of course, a crack. In the background a sign points enigmatically to Hanwell. The most likely explanation is that the Middlesex County Lunatic Asylum was in Hanwell; its building was completed in 1831. ‘Cracked’ is a slang term to indicate madness, so poor Ben was to be consigned by *Punch* to an asylum as was indicated by a note at the bottom of the page:

A BELL FOR BEDLAM Poor Big Ben is cracked. His case is hopeless, and he ought to be sent to an Asylum.

On 21 November 1857 a typical *Punch* little riddle appeared:

What is the resemblance between BIG BEN and the Ministry... because there is a split in it.

A nice ditty was printed on 28 November 1857.

POOR Mr. WARNER
Is put in the corner
For making a bad Big Ben;
And now it appears
That the good Mr. MEARS
Is to make us a new Bell. When?

On 24 September 1859 *Punch* printed a poem ‘The Lament of the Westminster Clock-works’, which lampooned Barry & Denison for spoiling the broth concerning the over-heavy hands of the Great Clock.

Nine long verses ‘Big Ben – An Ode’ and a cartoon of a broken bell (Fig. 3) were presented to the readers on 15 October 1859 on the discovery that Big Ben the second, then safely installed in the tower, was cracked. It starts

A VOICE ran through the town,
Sad as the airy tongue which spread
[...]
Whisp'ring the awful fact,
“Big Ben is cracked!”

and the penultimate stanza runs:

Where the crack came and how –
Whether in rim or bow –
If in his frame congenitally hid,
Whether the hammer fell,
Not wisely but too well,
Hitting him harder than folks thought it did,
Nobody seems to know – or no one likes to tell,
Was't that they braced him up too tight?
Was't that his metal was too slight?
Alas, we know not – we but know the fact.
Big Ben is cracked!

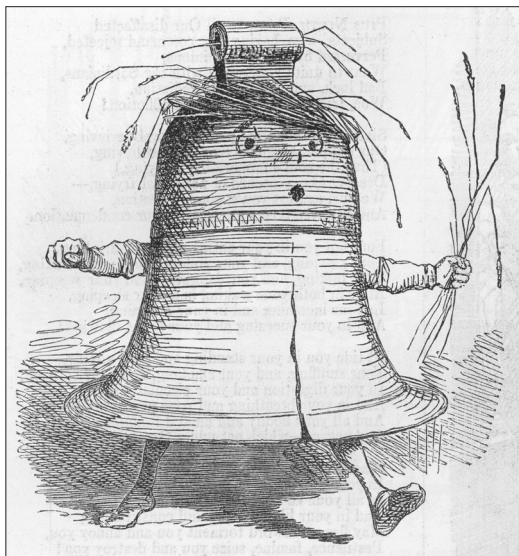


Fig. 3. Cartoon from *Punch* 15 October 1859. A crack had also appeared in the second Big Ben, which had been cast in London to replace the first one that had cracked two years earlier. This time it was not deemed necessary to recast the bell.

More verse followed on 24 December 1859, this time it was quite good and was a parody of ‘Oranges and Lemons’.

THE BELLS OF BIG BEN

Big Ben’s case looks scaly, say the bells of
Old Bailey;
His voice is quite gone, say the bells of
St. John;
He’s chock full of holes, peal the bells of
All Souls;
Must go to the forge, chime the bells of
St. George;
Even my voice is sweeter; sneer the bells
of St. Peter;
He ain’t worth two fardings, snarl the bells
of St. Martin’s;
Case of too many cooks, say, growl the
bells of St. Luke’s;
Don’t know what they’re about, howls St.
Botolph Without;
MEARS, DENISON Chides, say the bells of
St. Brides;
Well, d’ye think MEARS is wrong? asks St.
Mary’s ding-dong;
I don’t, if you do, says the belfry at Kew;
It’s a great waste of tin, tolls St. Botolph
Within;

And the cash must come from us, growl
the bells of St. Thomas;
Aye, every shilling, add the bells of St.
Helen;
And we’re not over-rich, groan the bells of
Shoreditch;
It makes one feel ranc’rous, say the bells
of St. Pancras;
Yes that’s for sartin, again rings St. Martin;
But what’s to be done, once more peals
St. John;
Bang’d if I know, tolls the big bell of Bow.

More followed but one, though humorous, may have contained a significant grain of truth. On 26 December 1863 *Punch* published ‘Il Faut Souffrir pour être BELL’. The hour was then struck on ‘Big Ben’, the bell having been reinstated after it had been turned.

People who profess to know something about music (but must not for that reason be thought musical professors) have been complaining that Big Ben is not quite “true” in tone since he was cracked. Well, so long as Ben keeps true to time, we will not quarrel with his tone: and for want of truth in that respect we shall console ourselves by thinking that “Si non e vero, e Ben trovato.”

This is very interesting and indicates that some people had detected a change in the tone of Big Ben. This was most probably the prominent beat note, the doublet measured at 3.7Hz that gives all the character to the bell today. As I pointed out in my book, Denison would probably have condemned the bell if it had this note when it was cast. Mears, in a letter of 1863 in the Parliamentary archives, speaks of the tone being ‘uninjured’, a curious turn of words that might have been chosen to say the bell was substantially good and avoid all the problems of having the bell recast. I have little doubt that the beat note arose as a direct result of the bell being cracked. It is curious how this strident note makes Big Ben so distinctive. There have been various attempts to have Ben recast, but his cracked tone is loved by more of the public both at home and world-wide than is hated by the bell purists.