

It's the most famous clock in the world and it's over 160 years old. In 2017 work began to completely renovate the clock and the tower, and Big Ben will be back in service, as good as new, in 2021.

Every day, on British radio stations and on television, you can hear it. It gives the time before BBC radio news programmes, and on the BBC World Service. And you can hear it and see it every evening before ITV's "News at Ten". The chimes of Big Ben are recognised by almost everyone in Britain, and by millions of people all over the world.

If you have been to London, you have certainly seen "Big Ben." It's very difficult to miss, standing almost 100 metres high beside the Thames, next to the Houses of Parliament.

But have you actually seen "Big Ben"? Probably not!

The name "Big Ben" is generally used to refer to the big clock tower itself; but in reality, "Big Ben" is just the name of the biggest bell in the tower, the bell that chimes on the hour.

The famous clock tower was built in the 1850's, after the Houses of Parliament were burned down.

The new clock was to be the biggest in the world, and extremely accurate. Lots of people thought that this would be impossible; a very big clock, they thought, could not be very accurate.

In fact, they were wrong; and the clock has always kept time almost perfectly.

The original "Big Ben" bell weighed 16 tons, and was made in the North of England. However, after it had reached London, but before it had been put in place, it cracked! A new bell had to be made to replace it!

The original bell was therefore melted down (in London) and a new Big Ben was made, weighing "only" 13 tons! This bell was put in place in July 1859... but after two months it cracked. Experts decided that the hammer was too big; and after the bell was mended, and a smaller hammer was put in place, Big Ben began chiming again in 1862.

Since then, there have been several incidents. Once the clock stopped when a pot of paint got stuck between its hands! And in 1976, the clock stopped for 26 days, when a part of the mechanism broke.... after 114 years of service!

Between 1983 and 1985, the clock tower was completely cleaned and restored; but thirty years later, engineers decided that the tower and the clock were both in need of urgent repairs. Work began in 2017, and unless there are some unexpected problems, Big Ben will begin a new life in the year 2021.

BIG BEN'S SHINING FACES

At night, the clock faces are illuminated from inside. Originally, they were lit up by gas lamps; then, for most of the twentieth century, by electricity. Now the faces are illuminated with "green" low-energy light-bulbs. Of course, the green light bulbs produce white light: the faces are not literally green!

WORD GUIDE

to chime, a chime: the noise made by a bell - **to miss:** to not see - **actually:** really - **accu-rate:** precise, exact - **to weigh:** to have a weight of - **to crack:** to split - **to melt down:** to make something become liquid - **hammer:** object which is used to hit things with - **mend:** repair - **to get stuck:** to become fixed

