Keeping the Big Ben Silent Minute

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Observe the silent minute
when Big Ben strikes nine each evening

- A reminder on postcards issued in wartime by the Silent Minute Observance Council



Cleaning the Great Clock

The Westminster appeal

Big Ben was designed and built by skilled artisans who faithfully applied the ideals of Westminster (the minster in the West) but without realising how their Great Clock would become instrumental to the release of united prayer and the galvanising of resolution that would help to defeat the totalitarian onslaught.

Westminster became a centre of Christian influence in about AD 960, when Benedictine monks established a monastery (or a *minster*) West of London. Then in about 1040 King Edward the Confessor enlarged that abbey and built his royal palace nearby. There he bequeathed a system of servant-leadership for the management of England which became foundational to Britain along with the Commonwealth of nations and many other democratic countries.

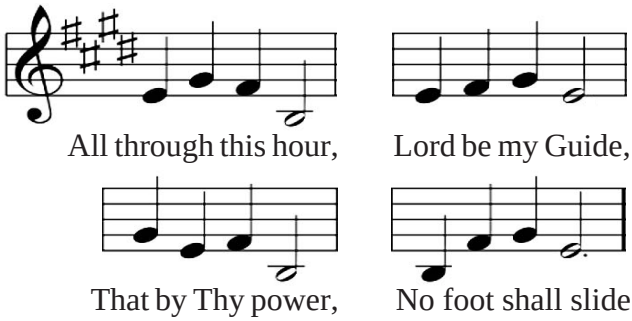
Work began on the new Palace of Westminster in 1840, as a renewed centre of wisdom for Britain and beyond. A great clock was required, which would strike its hour bell to within one second of accuracy - a proposal considered to be impossible by the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers - yet it was achieved. The name *Big Ben* was firstly used as a popular descriptor for the hour bell, but was eventually applied to the entire tower. The Great Clock soon became iconic or symbolic of Westminster, as did the clock's hourly striking, featuring the *Westminster Chime*, with its humbly-worded appeal which is displayed on a plaque in the clock room.

But the Great Clock's finest hour came during World War Two as millions of people kept the *Big Ben Silent Minute* each evening. Measured by the 60 seconds which elapse at the 9 pm chiming and striking, the one minute of silence helped people maintain their stance to defend Christian civilisation.

Seeking God's wisdom for community management

Appreciating the paramount necessity for divine blessings to be upon each citizen, nation and empire, the expert designer Augustus Pugin (1812-1852) arranged for the new Palace of Westminster to recognise Almighty God. Thus the floor tiles of its Central Lobby feature the Latin version of Psalm 127:1: *Except the Lord build the House their labour is but lost that build it.*

The importance of Christian wisdom extended to the Great Clock's design. Featuring many crosses, the clock tower is crowned by a golden cross and orb along with a spray of stars. Underneath each clock face is a prayer in Latin: *Lord, save our Queen Victoria the First.* A label on the clock frame states it was made *in the year of our Lord 1854*. Further, the Westminster Chime is linked to the prayerful words on a plaque mounted in the clock room:





They give a positive version of the warning to sinners in Deuteronomy 32:35 - *their foot shall slide in due time.* The words are also akin to Psalm 37:31 - *The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide*. The tune is probably based on a melody in the aria *I know that my redeemer liveth*, from *The Messiah*, that was composed by George Frederick Handel in 1741.

As a witness to the Westminster tradition, Big Ben reminds civic leaders and passers-by about the virtue of dependence upon Almighty God, and the need to integrate theologians, politicians, public servants and civic-minded people like cogwheels in the Great Clock, lubricated by grace - by which all things *should be done in a fitting and orderly way* (1 Corinthians 14:40).

Christian connections to the clock and its appeal remind us of the principles on which Western democracies are founded. This occurs especially as Big Ben provides a call to prayer for MPs along with administrators, and indeed to all who may enjoy hearing the Westminster Chime across the world - if we have learned enough of our heritage to understand why and for whom the bells toll.

The Big Ben Silent Minute

Throughout most of World War Two, Big Ben was instrumental to the daily release of united silent prayer and reflection which encouraged millions in their defence of liberty. The vision for a daily silent minute originated near Jerusalem in 1917, when Wellesley Tudor Pole (a soldier in the British army) pondered the idea of daily commemorating soldiers who died while on duty. The proposal remained dormant until April 1940, when he began advocating "a rallying point in time, for a few minutes every 24 hours, for thought, prayer and personal renewal of courage, resolution and faith".

In the dark days of May 1940 when all was nearly lost, a national day of prayer undergirded the astonishingly successful Dunkirk evacuation - which was described by Prime Minister Winston Churchill as "a miracle of deliverance". The value of prayer was realised, along with the idea for a daily silent minute:

Since many people in Britain and Europe listened to news broadcasts each evening, the BBC agreed to preface its 9 pm bulletin with a minute of silence - timed by the chiming and striking relayed "live" from the belfry of Big Ben.

In 1940 on Armistice Sunday (10th November) the first Big Ben Silent Minute made its appeal on BBC radio. Eventually, millions of people began setting aside one minute every evening for silent prayers, reflection and resolution. Additionally, the observance was kept in Australia, New Zealand and the US. After the Allied victory, a former Nazi official identified the Big Ben Silent Minute as a secret weapon which could not be resisted.

Then in 1959, House of Commons Speaker William Morrison at the centenary of Big Ben, described its war service, current role, and future influence:

> *... the bell gave forth a harsh roar of defiance, and thereafter, a long reverberating growl, menacing ultimate destruction to our enemies. Now Big Ben sounds down to us his mellow E natural, the voice of peace and goodwill. So may he sound to our children's children, generation after generation* (MacDonald, P., *Big Ben*, Sutton, 2004, p155).

Silent minute broadcasts became Sunday night only features in 1947 and they ended in the 1960s, though the BBC continued to relay the chiming and striking of Big Ben on Remembrance Day (11th November) and on New Year's Eve. But all who keep the silent minute as a daily discipline at 9 pm, continue a tradition established at the minster in the West, of which Big Ben is iconic.

Using the silent minute for Christian reflection and prayer

People who are overloaded with unrelenting activity may benefit greatly by setting aside one minute for silent prayer and reflection each evening at 9 pm. Strengthened by that daily opportunity, we may be refreshed by reflecting on Westminster's Christian tradition, and our linkage with those who keep the minute in the name of Christ today, as did millions during World War Two.

Because the daily silent minute may guide our thoughts toward Westminster and its theology, the discipline may enable Christians to reflect on how Big Ben could be interpreted as representing the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Like Monte Casino (the Benedictine mother house) with its motto taken from Job 14:7 - *Cut down, it grows again* - the witness at Westminster persists:

- Big Ben is almost in the same place as a clock tower which stood there from 1367 until 1707 - replacing the original that was built in 1288;
- The tower ascends with grandeur as part of the new Parliament which replaced the palatial buildings that burned down in 1512, and in 1834;
- The hour bell is a recasted version of the original which broke in 1857;
- Silenced and kept dark in the latter years of World War One, so as not to guide enemy airships, Big Ben chimed and was re-lit at the Armistice;
- Darkened in World War Two, the clock faces were re-lit at the war's end;
- The clock was rebuilt after a catastrophic component failure in 1976.

Participants in the silent minute might wish to pray the Lord's Prayer, or the petition linked to the Westminster Chime, or the request that has opened daily House of Commons proceedings since about the reign of King Charles II:



Lord, the God of righteousness and truth, grant to our Queen and her government, to Members of Parliament and all in positions of responsibility, the guidance of your Spirit. May they never lead the nation wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideals but laying aside all private interests and prejudices keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all mankind; so may your kingdom come and your name be hallowed. Amen.

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