

DON'T FORGET: London Meeting Lecture 19 November 2009

The Great Clock of Westminster by Chris McKay

In 2009 we are celebrating the Great Clock of Westminster's 150th birthday. Popularly dubbed 'Big Ben' (though this name of course refers to the great bell), the clock was sired in controversy, born to argument and grew up alongside contention. Today, if such a large Government project experienced the problems that the Great Clock went through, then a Public Enquiry would be called to adjudicate on who was to blame. But no such system then existed and we have to thank Edmund Beckett Denison for his great horological skill and single-minded doggedness in designing the clock and bells and seeing the making and installing through to completion in the face of opposition.

The Great Clock was the horological rocket science of the day. Compared to what might be found in a very large church of the 1850s the tower was three times as tall, the dials were at twice the diameter, the hour bell was probably



Sir Benjamin Hall, who oversaw the later stages of the rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament, including the installation of the 13.8-tonne hour bell in the clock tower, which was named after him.



Chris McKay, who modestly describes himself as a 'turret clock anorak', is today's acknowledged authority on Denison and the great clock. He first became fascinated with the clock when he was thirteen and is currently writing what promises to be 'the only complete and definitive history and description of the Great Clock'. In the background a portrait of Edmund Beckett Denison, later Lord Grimthorpe, who designed the mechanism.

ten times larger, and the required timekeeping accuracy in fair weather and foul was something like ten times better than a good clock could have produced on a good day. Add to this that the maker E.J. Dent was a newcomer to the field of turret clock making; and even worse in the eyes of the opponents, Denison its designer was a lawyer and amateur horologist. It is not surprising that the established horological world despised both Denison and Dent.

The lecture concentrates on the history of the Great Clock and bells, the characters involved, the design and making of the clock and the technical developments that came about to benefit British clockmaking.