

## Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament

When researching this I soon realised that the history of the whole of the Palace of Westminster must be included, not just that of the clock tower, which many call Big Ben, and the Houses of Parliament.

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I have included a number of illustrations and checked as far as practical that, in doing so, I am not breaching any copyrights. If you are aware of any such breaches please contact the author on [webmaster@huntsarts.org](mailto:webmaster@huntsarts.org) or through the links on our website at [www.huntsarts.org](http://www.huntsarts.org).

I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I did in preparing it.



If you visit the [Palace of Westminster](#) you cannot fail to be impressed by how British history is reflected in the murals, paintings, and statues that you see all around you, especially in the parliament buildings. Many of these will seem familiar as they are reproduced in publications that we are all familiar with. They depict events in our history that we regard as important, **even though some of these are now regarded as regrettable or even despicable**; nevertheless they happened, they are part of our collective history, they are recorded and so they should be.

### **Why a Palace?**

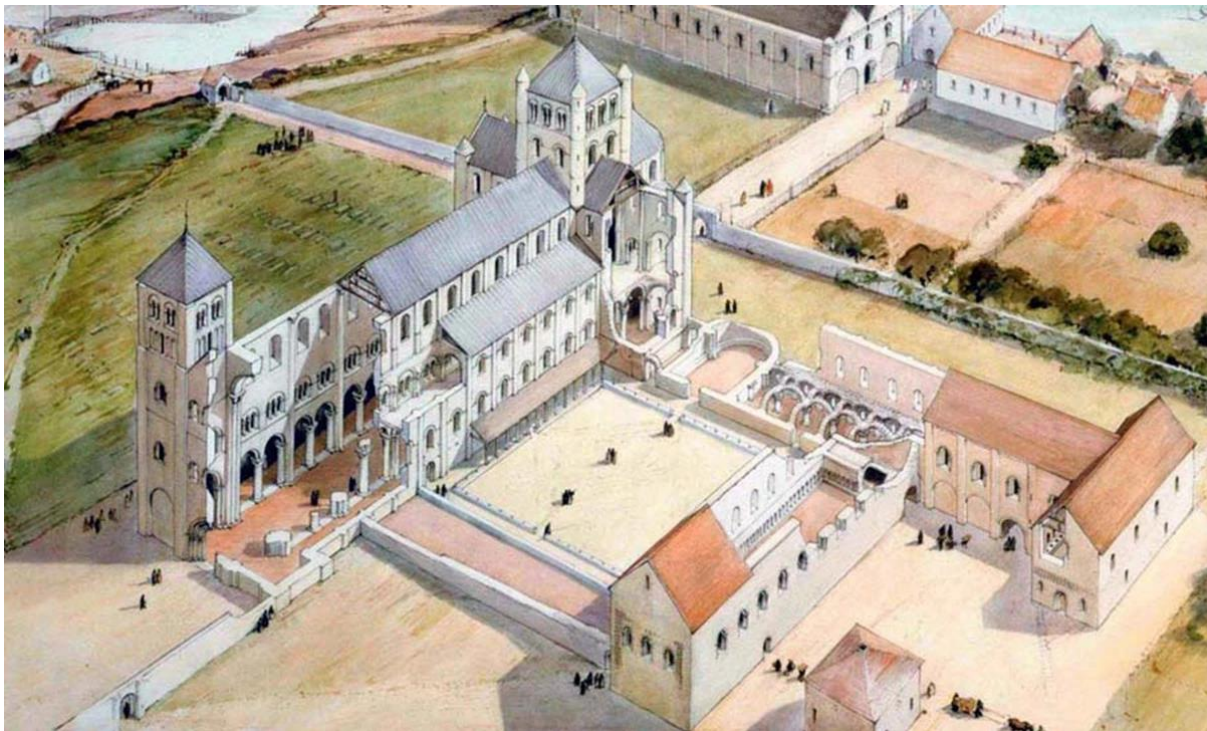
The Palace of Westminster is so named as it was originally the palace for the King and Queen of England. It must have been quite a des-res with the royal apartments

overlooking the river however, despite this, the Royal Family increasingly lived in [Windsor Castle](#) from 1102 onwards. The original residence in Westminster was built on the orders of [King Canute](#) and building commenced in 1016. The first 'Palace of Westminster' was built in 1045 on the orders of [Edward the Confessor](#) and Westminster Hall was built between 1097 and 1099 by order of [William Rufus](#), William the Conqueror's son and by then King William the Second of England.

As most Saxon buildings were made from wood, many have since disappeared. Where they were made from stone or brick they were built in the style of buildings of the time and Westminster Abbey was no exception.

## Why Westminster?

The Benedictine monks founded Westminster Abbey in 960 AD on the site of an earlier church. This church had become known as the 'West Minster' to distinguish it from [St Paul's Cathedral](#) (the East Minster) of the City of London. and the original church or abbey [looked like the one on this link](#).



## [How the original Westminster Abbey may have looked](#)

There are a few Saxon buildings that are still relatively unchanged and this link to [Anglo-Saxon architecture](#) gives some idea how many these buildings may have looked.

## Tudor Times



### The Palace of Westminster as it looked in Tudor times

The above diagram, although showing the Palace as of five hundred years ago, is still recognisable. The original parliament buildings were built over the Great and Little Cloisters between 1526 and 1529 and later became the House of Commons and the House of Lords, respectively.

As time marched on buildings in the Palace were modified to match the style of the times. This is a feature of all the buildings in the Palace of Westminster, **there were no Building Preservation Orders then!**

## Housing Records

After the Palace of Westminster became the seat of government it produced the enormous and copious records. We are indebted to the Normans for these records of life in Britain from the Norman Conquest onwards.

The buildings in the Palace of Westminster housed these records. The original buildings were probably wooden but were soon found to be too small for the growing store of records. Additionally, it was considered unsafe to store paper records in wooden buildings for reasons of security and preservation, not just from fire but also from damage by infestations of rodents and insects, **which just love to nest in paper!**

The main driver for this change was always lack of space in the centre of a large city. **Some things never change!**

## The Jewel Tower

This was originally built as a secure record store and although it has been remodelled many times, due to changes of use, it is still very much in the style of a Norman building.



### [The Jewel Tower](#)

As records became more voluminous and newer uses were found for the Palace of Westminster new buildings were needed to house not just the records but, amongst others, the House of Lords and then the House of Commons. This has continued until today as originals of Acts of Parliament are still stored in the Victoria Tower, the large tower at opposite end of the Parliament Buildings to the clock tower. This was exacerbated when in 1834 a major fire destroyed most of the Palace.

## The Fire of 1834



The Houses of Parliament before the fire of 1834.

A Royal Commission was appointed to study the rebuilding of the Palace and a heated public debate over the proposed styles followed. [The neo-classical style](#), such as used for the White House in the United States, was popular at the time however, the commissioners associated this with revolution and republicanism while [the Gothic style](#) was felt to embody conservative values. In June 1835 they announced the buildings style of the buildings should either be Gothic or Elizabethan.

They also decided the new design should incorporate the surviving Westminster Hall, the Undercroft Chapel, and the Cloisters of St Stephen's.

The commissioners organised a public competition to design a new Palace in either of these styles. There were ninety seven entries and the winning one was by [Charles Barry](#), a gifted architect who designed many buildings in London and elsewhere, including in Europe. Interestingly although Barry was better known for promoting [Italianate architecture](#) such as seen in Osborne House, (not designed by Barry), Queen Victoria's residence in the Isle of Wight, Barry chose to use the Victorian Gothic style for the Houses of Parliament.

Barry was assisted in his drawings for the competition by [Augustus Pugin](#), a gifted young architect who devoted himself entirely to Victorian Gothic architecture. There is still debate as to whom contributed the most to the design. Barry paid Pugin just £400 for all his work, which sounds like a bargain for Barry! This commission certainly did no harm to Pugin's career and he went on to be an extraordinarily successful architect.



[Charles Barry](#)



[Augustus Pugin](#)

More recently rebuilding was needed after the Second World war, when the [House of Commons was destroyed](#). This was again rebuilt in the gothic style to match the buildings around it. The architect was [Sir Giles Gilbert Scott](#), who amongst other achievements designed the original red telephone box!

Despite all this rebuilding some parts of the buildings from the earliest times have been retained. Some of these features can be seen in the videos linked from the end of this article.



[Sir Giles Gilbert Scott](#)

## [Big Ben](#)

Strictly speaking, the name refers to only the great hour bell, which weighs 15.1 tons,

but is commonly associated with the whole clock tower. The tower itself was formally known as St. Stephen's Tower until 2012, when it was renamed Elizabeth Tower to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. The hands of the clock are respectively 9 and 14 feet long and the clock tower rises about 320 feet.

The clock was designed [by Edmund Beckett Denison \(later Sir Edmund Beckett and Lord Grimthorpe\)](#) in association with [Sir George Airy](#) (then astronomer royal) and the clockmaker [Edward Dent](#). Denison's principal contribution was a novel gravity escapement that imparted unprecedented accuracy to the clock. In a pendulum clock an escape wheel is allowed to rotate through the pitch of one tooth for each double swing of the pendulum and to transmit an impulse to the pendulum to keep it swinging. The double three-legged gravity escapement designed by Denison keeps the impulse as uniform as possible and Big Ben is accurate to within two seconds per week. The pendulum is adjusted by adding pre-decimal pennies to the weight. Each penny causes Big Ben to gain 0.4 second per day.



Edmund Denison had a formidable reputation for his abrasive courtroom tactics. However, as portrait photography at the time would have required the subject to keep still for several minutes, perhaps we should not judge him too harshly on the basis of his expression in this photo.

## The Future

As we have seen, a lot of what we see in the Palace of Westminster are buildings designed to match the styles of the ones around them. For the current Parliament buildings Victorian Gothic was chosen as it blended with the Gothic style of Westminster Abbey and the modified Westminster Hall and yet Westminster Abbey was also remodelled over 700 years ago in the then popular Gothic style under the orders of Henry III.

So, this cycle continues and presumably will continue long into the future.

Robert Woodham

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## Further Information

1. Video - [Exploded views of the Palace of Westminster](#), this video ends by showing how the clock is maintained.
2. Videos - Dan Cruickshank explores the Palace of Westminster. Please note that these videos are quite long and get interrupted by adverts, click on 'Skip Ad' when this message appears on the bottom right of the screen.
  - [Part 1](#) - What happened after the fire of 1834 destroyed the Palace of Westminster,
  - [Part 2](#) - A tour of the Palace. Starting with the House of Commons, Dan moves to the high gothic style of the Speaker's House and Royal Apartment. Finally, it is on to the medieval Westminster Hall.
  - [Part 3](#) - Delving through the archives containing the Acts of Parliament, including the Emancipation of Slaves and the Anatomy Act that prevented body snatching. Then, with a swift change of tack, it is on to examine Augustus Pugin's legacy, which is seen everywhere from letter racks to flock wallpaper.
  - [Part 4](#) - Dan Cruickshank gets to the bottom of the Palace of Westminster, discovering how the plumbing and air conditioning work. There is also the WW2 bombing and Emily Wilding Davison's plight, which reveals how the Suffragettes won women the vote.
  - [Part 5](#) - The Westminster Clock Tower containing the bell called Big Ben. Apart from being part of one of Britain's iconic monuments, Dan explains what a Victorian achievement they really are. This is the final part.