

LEVELED BOOK • U

Big Ben and Westminster Palace



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Focus Question

How did Big Ben and Westminster Palace become iconic landmarks?

Words to Know

architect
belfry
chiming
coronation
executed
House of Commons

House of Lords
icon
Parliament
pendulum
residence
United Kingdom

Front and back cover: Big Ben and Westminster Palace are located on the Thames River.

Title page: Westminster Hall, the oldest building in Westminster, was built between 1097 and 1099.

Page 3: One of the largest of its kind, the wooden ceiling at Westminster Hall includes detailed carvings.

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World Landmarks
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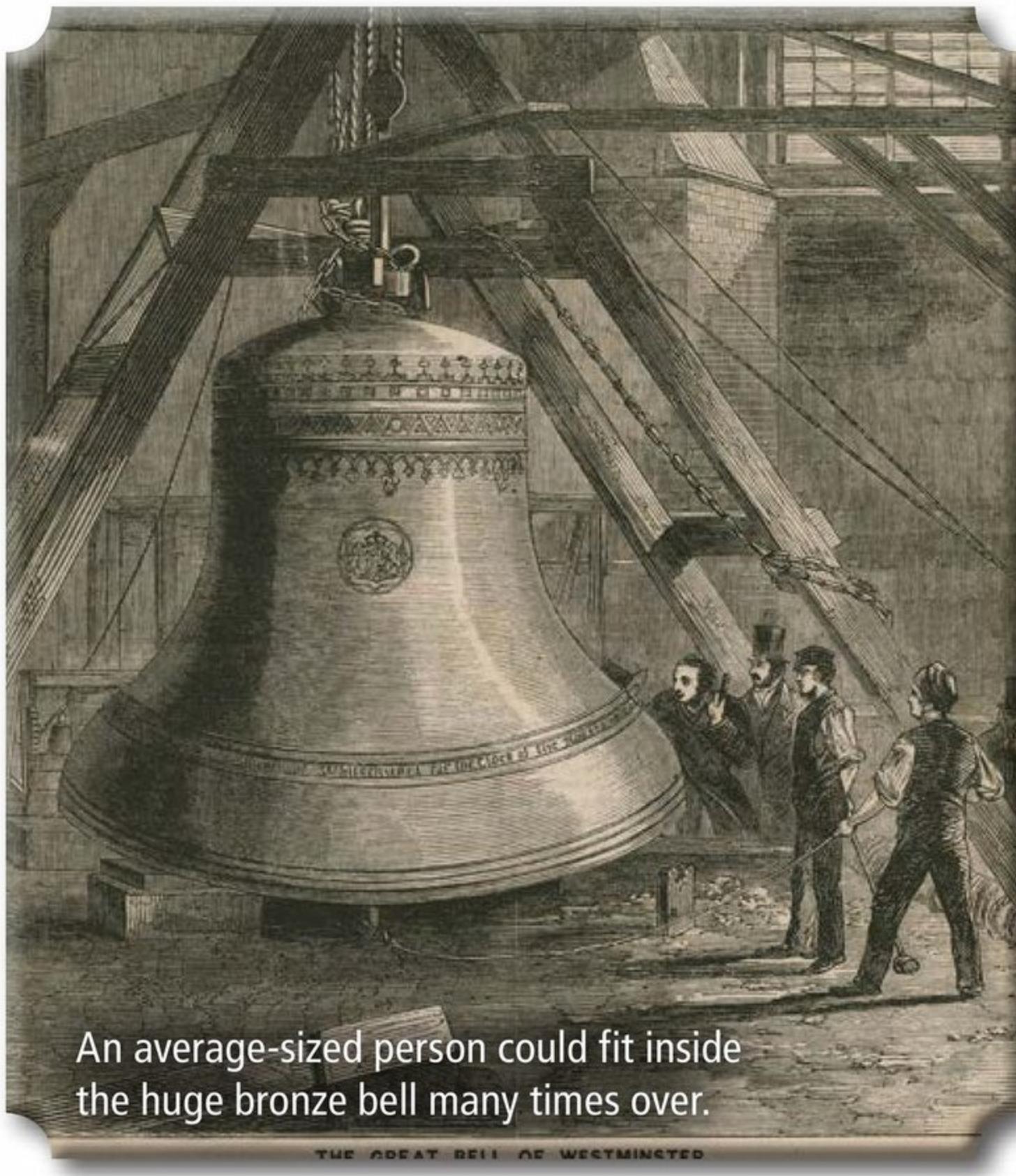
Correlation

LEVEL U	
Fountas & Pinnell	Q
Reading Recovery	40
DRA	40



Table of Contents

A British Icon	4
Why “Ben”?	6
London	7
A Plot to Destroy Parliament	8
The Great Fire of 1834	9
An Ambitious Rebuilding	10
Two Houses	12
Visiting Westminster Palace	13
Then and Now	14
A Much-Loved World Landmark	15
Glossary	16



An average-sized person could fit inside the huge bronze bell many times over.

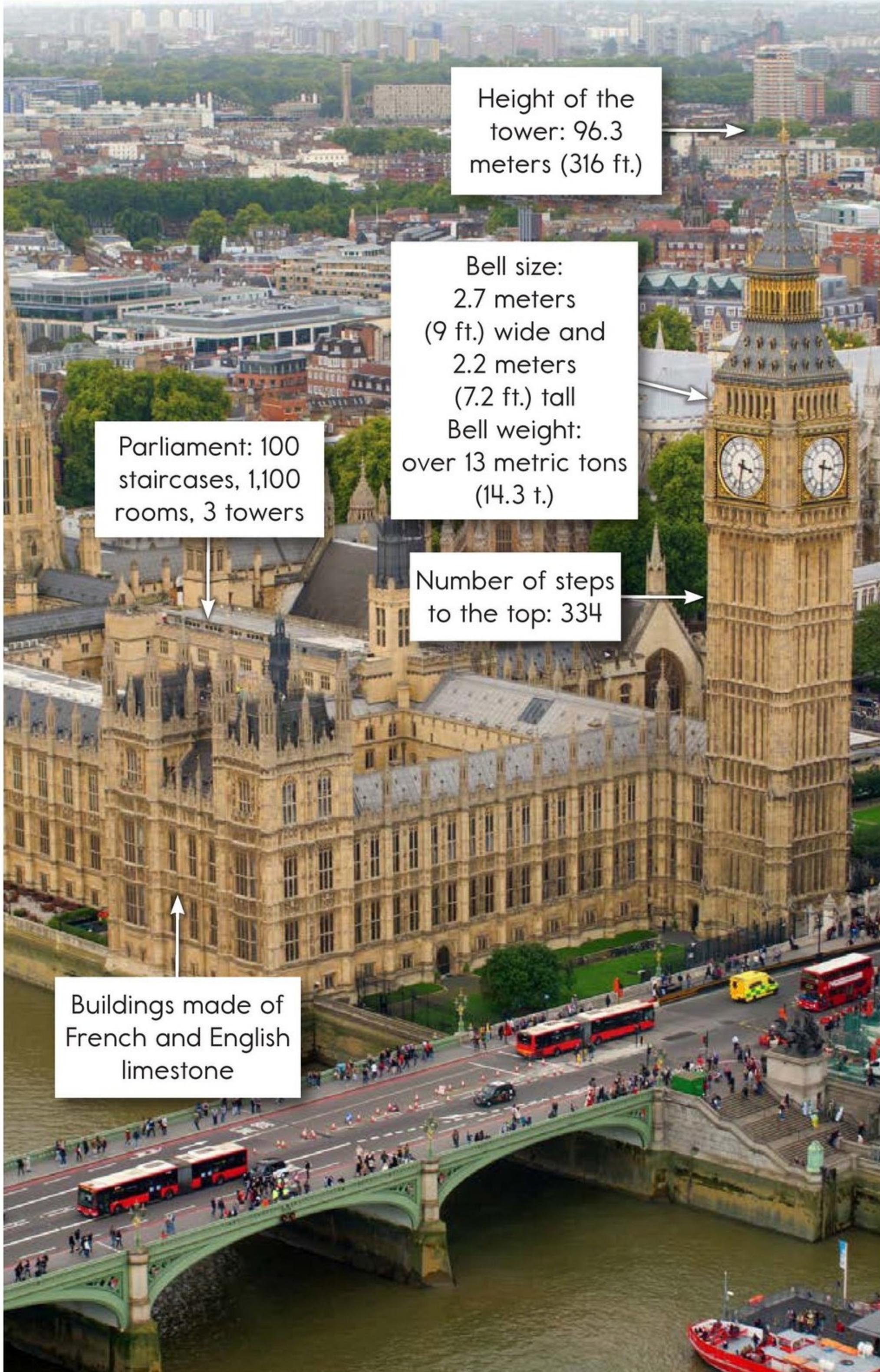
THE GREAT BELL OF WESTMINSTER

A British Icon

A little over 150 years ago, metal workers in East London made a bell that has become a British icon. Its name is Big Ben. It sits in a huge clock tower named the Elizabeth Tower in London, United Kingdom (UK). Measuring 2.7 meters (9 ft.) wide and 2.2 meters (7.2 ft.) tall, and weighing in at over 13 metric tons (14.3 t.), this bell was pulled about 61 meters (200 ft.) up to the belfry of the tower in 1858. It took thirty hours to get it there.

Today, the clock tower is one of the most photographed and most widely known landmarks in the world.

Westminster Palace and Big Ben



Why “Ben”?

When Big Ben first started marking time in 1859, the British **Parliament** decided that the bell needed a name. No one is sure of the true story, but it may have been named after a member of Parliament, Sir Benjamin Hall, whose nickname was Big Ben. At a meeting called specifically to choose the bell’s name, Sir Benjamin gave a long speech. In fact, his name is carved on the bell. According to another story, the bell might have been named after a large and famous heavyweight boxer of the time, Benjamin Caunt, who shared the nickname Big Ben.



Benjamin Hall



Benjamin Caunt

Historians say that in mid-nineteenth century England, anything very large and heavy was nicknamed Big Ben.

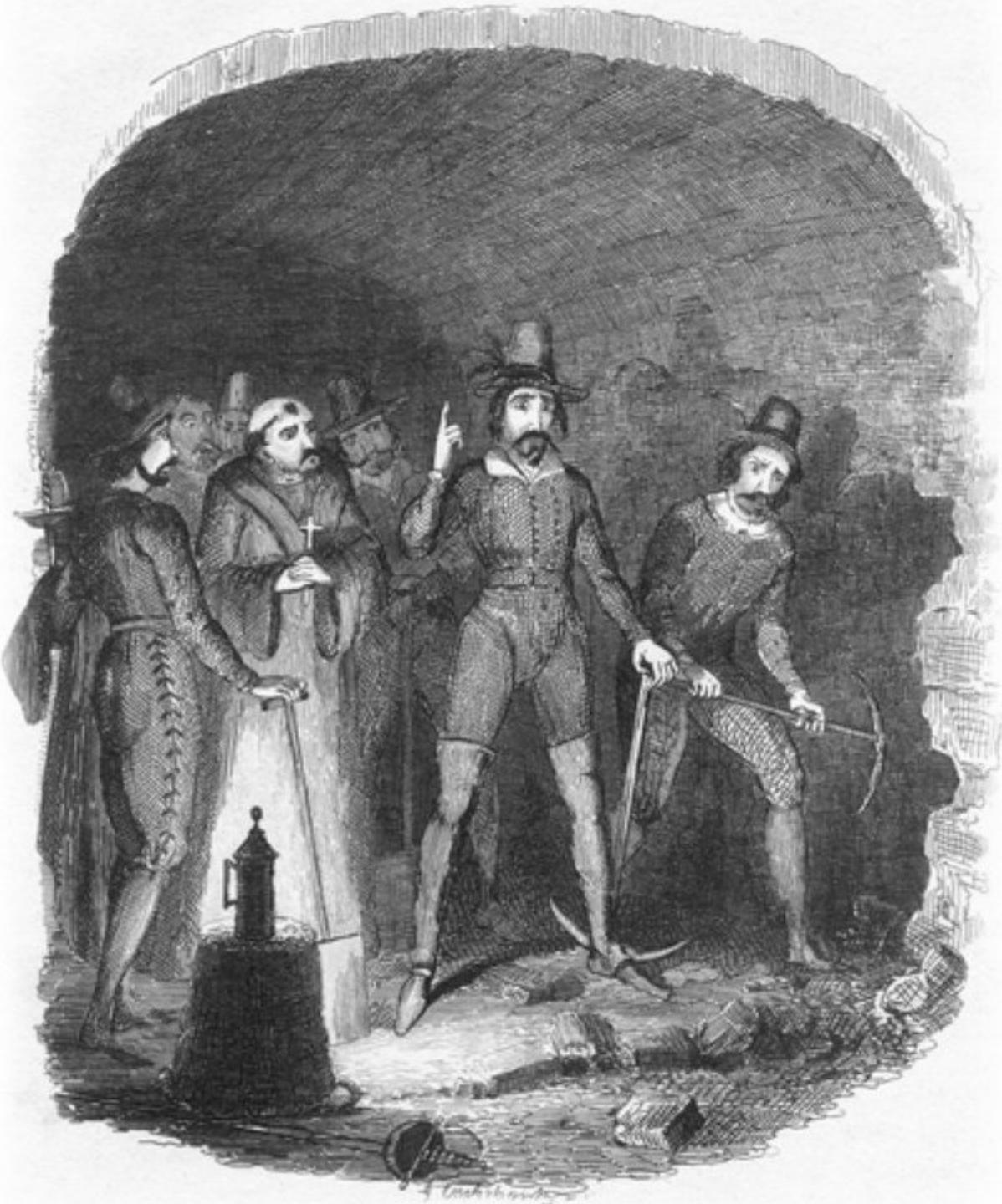
United Kingdom



London

Big Ben and the Palace of Westminster (also known as Parliament) stand on the banks of the River Thames, in London. The palace is the center of government for the United Kingdom, made up of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

The last king to live in the Palace of Westminster was Henry VIII. Henry moved out of the palace after a fire in 1512 and made nearby Whitehall Palace his **residence**.



Guy Fawkes (1570–1606), and several other men came up with the Gunpowder Plot, a plan to blow up Parliament and kill King James.

A Plot to Destroy Parliament

Nearly two hundred years after Henry VIII moved out of the palace, a man named Guy Fawkes and five others devised a plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament. Angry that they weren't allowed to practice their religion as they wished, they sneaked thirty-six barrels of gunpowder into the basement under the Houses of Parliament. Knowing the king would be there, they planned to blow up the building on November 5, 1605. Luckily for the king, the men were all caught, charged with trying to overthrow the government, and **executed**. To this day, people in the UK celebrate the king's survival on November 5 as Guy Fawkes Day or Bonfire Night.

The Great Fire of 1834

Over two hundred years after Guy Fawkes was captured, on October 16, 1834, two workmen were carrying out orders to burn a large quantity of sticks that people used as an early accounting system. They were told to burn these sticks inside some furnaces in the basement of Parliament. Visitors to Parliament that day noticed an unusual amount of heat rising from the floor and smoke escaping through the floorboards. The workmen continued to burn the sticks and put the furnaces out at 5:00 p.m.

An hour later, at 6:00 p.m., the Parliament was completely in flames. All the buildings in Westminster Palace were eventually destroyed except for Westminster Hall.



wowser!

- The Elizabeth Tower tilts about 0.45 meters (1.5 ft.) to one side.
- Each of Big Ben's dials is illuminated by 28 energy-efficient lightbulbs.
- The clock faces are cleaned every five years using soap and water.
- Big Ben chimes every quarter hour. The chimes can be heard 8 kilometers (5 mi.) away.



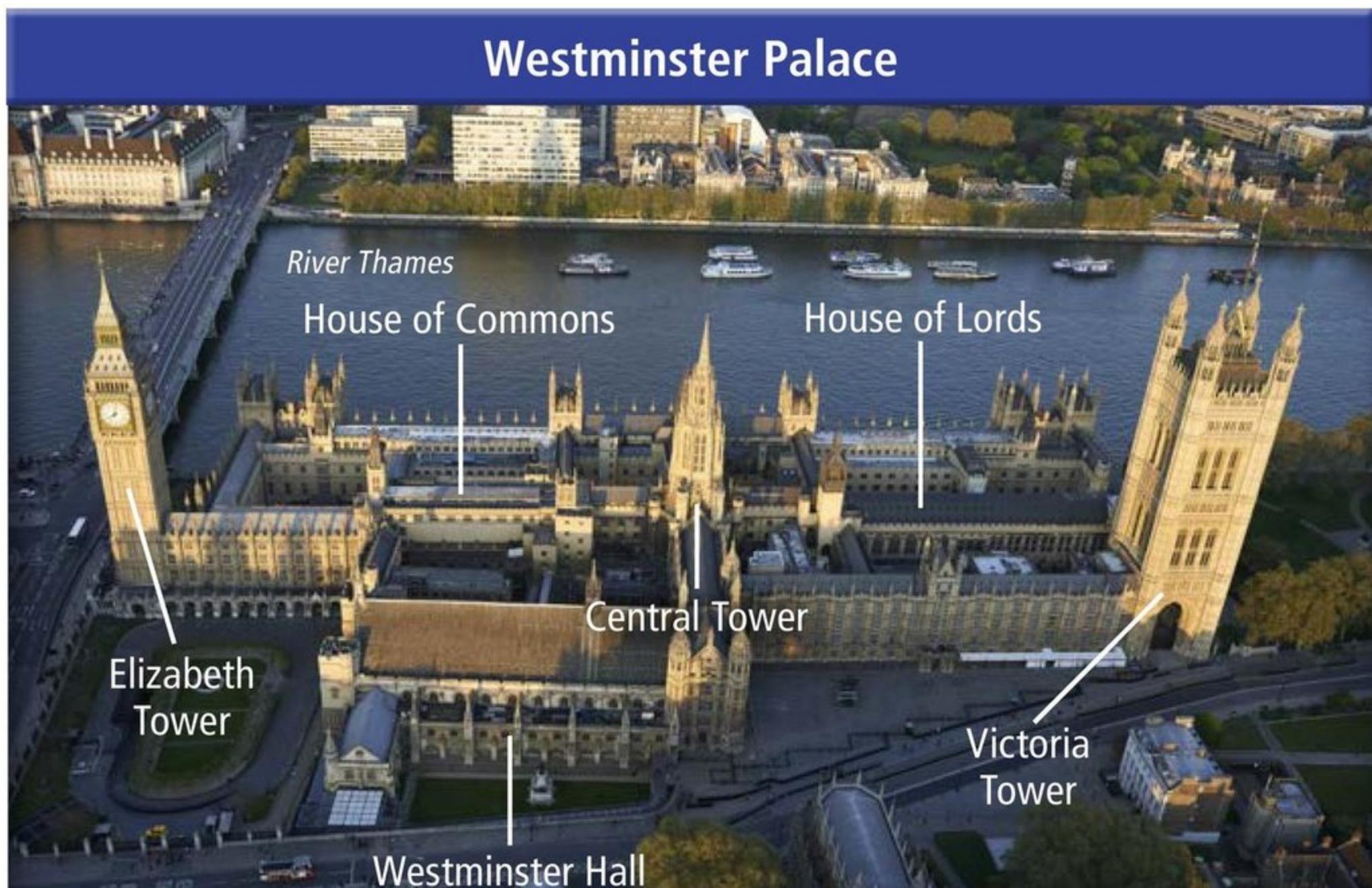
Several men rappel down a clock face in order to clean the clock in 2014.

An Ambitious Rebuilding

Six years after the Great Fire of 1834, a contest was held to find an **architect** to design a new Westminster Palace. The winner was Charles Barry. Building the structure was neither a quick nor a cheap task. It took thirty years and cost much more than what was estimated before the project was finally completed in 1870.

Charles Barry was helped by another architect, Augustus Pugin, who managed the design and decoration of the clock tower's four clock faces. Sadly, Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin did not live long enough to see their work completed. Pugin died in 1852 and Barry in 1860.

Today, people can admire Barry and Pugin's work. Westminster has three towers on the site of the Houses of Parliament: the Elizabeth Tower, the Victoria Tower, and the Central Tower. For many years, the Victoria Tower was the largest square stone tower in the world. The Elizabeth Tower, which houses Big Ben, stands over 96 meters (316 ft.) tall. Workers used stone from England and France to build the tower and iron beams to support it. The base of the tower is almost 3 meters (10 ft.) underground. The 91.4-meter (300 ft.) Central Tower was designed as a chimney for smoke from fireplaces inside the palace.



In building size alone (not counting the surrounding gardens), the Palace of Westminster occupies 32,374 square meters (348,480 sq. ft.) of space in central London. There are 100 staircases and 1,100 rooms!



House of Commons



House of Lords

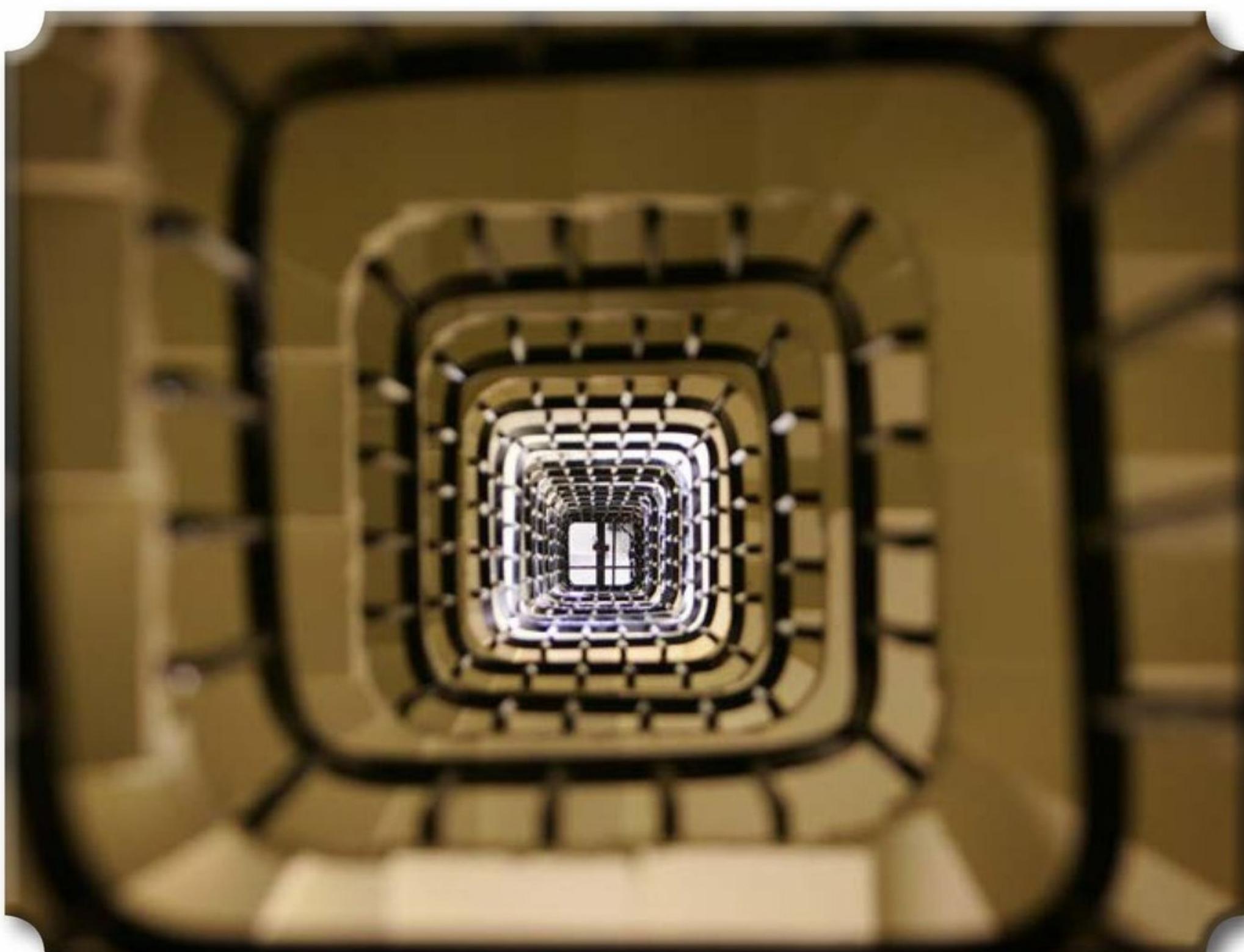
The House of Commons has 650 members. These politicians are elected by people in the United Kingdom. The number of members in the House of Lords varies. Its members are given a title by the monarch, or are bishops or archbishops of the Church of England.

Two Houses

The British Parliament is made up of two separate houses. The British people elect members of the **House of Commons** to debate and vote on possible laws. Members of the **House of Lords** are not elected. Some have titles, such as Lord and Lady, and others are important members of the Church of England. With approval from the Lords and the Commons, new laws are made and become the law of the land. These laws are called *Acts of Parliament*.

Visiting Westminster Palace

Anyone can visit Parliament and take tours, watch debates, and even have afternoon tea. United Kingdom residents can climb the 344 steps to the top of the Elizabeth Tower, where they get an amazing view of London. They can also view Big Ben and visit a special room where they can see exactly how the giant clock works. The clock was designed to mark time to within one second a month. The **pendulum** is adjusted using a stack of old British pennies. Adding or subtracting a penny changes the time by two-fifths of a second.

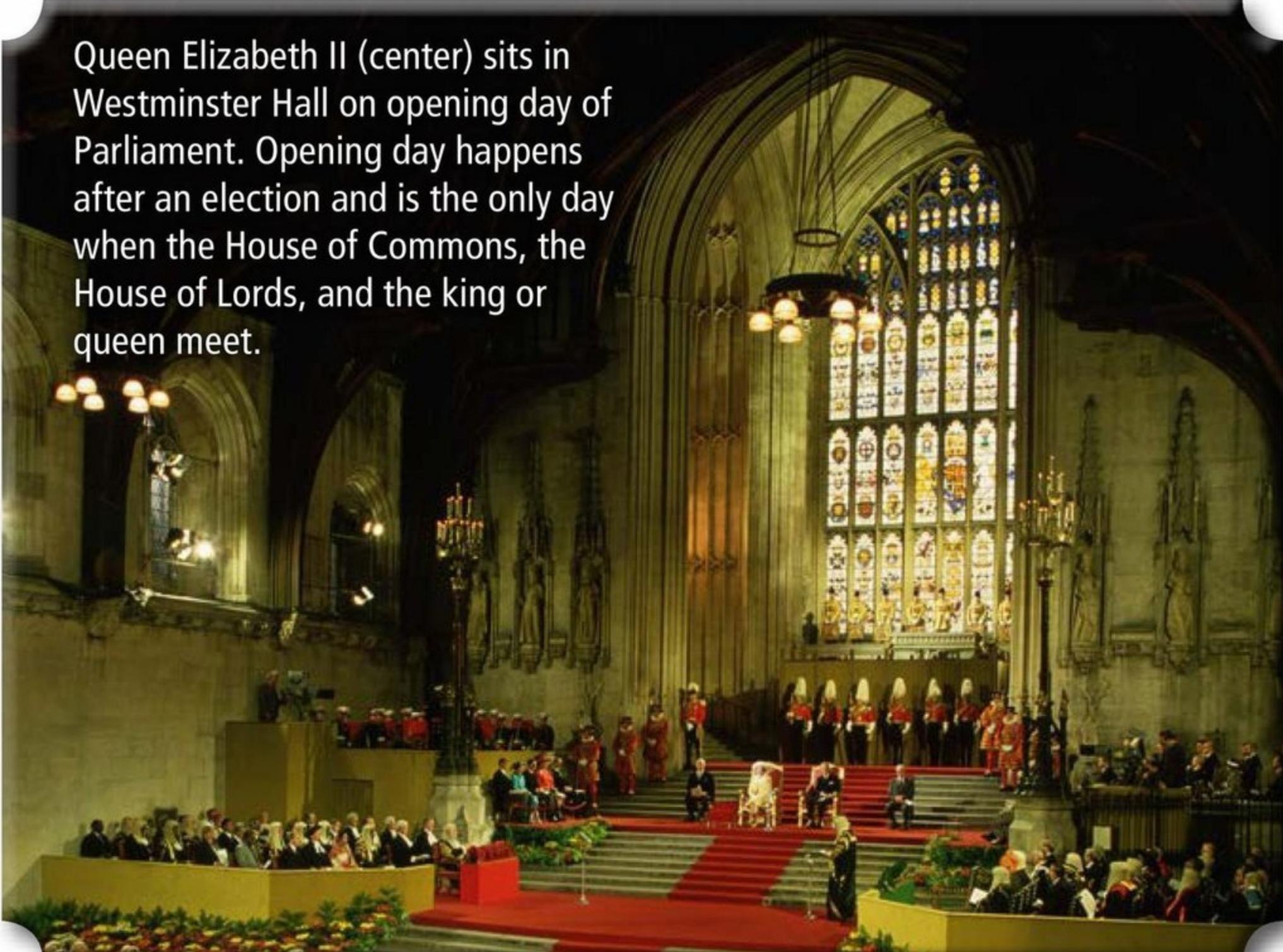


After an exhausting climb up a spiral staircase, visitors to the Elizabeth Tower get a behind-the-scenes look at how the clock works.

Then and Now

Over the centuries, Westminster has held many events, including huge feasts and parties. Many of these events happened when a new king or queen was being crowned. At King Richard III's **coronation** in 1483, workers served huge amounts of food to three thousand people.

Queen Elizabeth II (center) sits in Westminster Hall on opening day of Parliament. Opening day happens after an election and is the only day when the House of Commons, the House of Lords, and the king or queen meet.



Parliament has some old rules that are still around today. Since 1642, no English king or queen has been permitted to go inside the House of Commons. Also, no one may wear a suit of armor inside the Palace of Westminster. This law dates back seven hundred years.



Since 2000, millions of people gather each year along the Thames on New Year's Eve for a brilliant fireworks display.

A Much-Loved World Landmark

People who live in the United Kingdom, as well as visitors, are familiar with the **chiming** of Big Ben. The bell rings every fifteen minutes. The chimes are heard live on TV at midnight every New Year's Eve, and each November 11 the entire country stops for two minutes of silence. On that day, Big Ben rings at 11:00 a.m. to honor those who have lost their lives in wars.

Since the time it was built, the palace has been popular with visitors to London. Today, thirteen million people visit the city each year. Westminster Palace, the Elizabeth Tower, and Big Ben are the most famous symbols of Britain.

Glossary

architect (<i>n.</i>)	a person who designs buildings (p. 10)
belfry (<i>n.</i>)	the section of a bell tower where one or more bells hang (p. 4)
chiming (<i>n.</i>)	the ringing sound of a bell or clock (p. 15)
coronation (<i>n.</i>)	the ceremony in which a new king or queen is crowned (p. 14)
executed (<i>v.</i>)	killed, especially as punishment for committing a crime (p. 8)
House of Commons (<i>n.</i>)	the part of the lawmaking body of the government of the United Kingdom whose members are elected; the lower house (p. 12)
House of Lords (<i>n.</i>)	the part of the lawmaking body of the government of the United Kingdom whose members are appointed; the upper house (p. 12)
icon (<i>n.</i>)	an important or recognizable symbol (p. 4)
Parliament (<i>n.</i>)	the lawmaking body of the government of the United Kingdom, consisting of the House of Commons and the House of Lords (p. 6)
pendulum (<i>n.</i>)	a weight that hangs from a nonmoving point and swings from side to side (p. 13)
residence (<i>n.</i>)	the place where a person lives (p. 7)
United Kingdom (<i>n.</i>)	a country and political union in western Europe that includes England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland (p. 4)

Big Ben and Westminster Palace

A Reading A-Z Level U Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,086

Connections

Writing and Art

Pretend you visited Big Ben. Write a postcard to your teacher, including at least five facts from the book. Draw a picture of the landmark on the front of your card.

Social Studies

Research the two houses of the British Parliament. How are they alike? How are they different? Write a report comparing the two.



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