

# Big Ben and Westminster Palace

*A Reading A-Z Level Z1 Leveled Book*  
*Word Count: 1,676*

LEVELED BOOK • Z<sup>1</sup>

## Connections

### Writing

Research more about the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Write an essay about Guy Fawkes, explaining why he chose to commit treason and how he could have solved his problem differently.

### Social Studies

Choose two rulers from the book.  
Create a Venn diagram comparing them.  
Use information from the book as well as outside resources.

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## Focus Question

What makes Big Ben and Westminster Palace significant to England's history?

## Words to Know

adjacent	inherited
conspirators	majestic
credibility	medieval
demise	monarch
escorted	observe
iconic	rank

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

Title page: Westminster Hall, with its enormous wooden ceiling, in a historical drawing from 1808

Page 3: The Great Bell in the Elizabeth Tower

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Level Z1 Leveled Book  
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## Correlation

### LEVEL Z1

Fountas & Pinnell	W-X
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	60





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The bell is 2.7 meters (9 ft.) wide and a little over 2.2 meters (7.2 ft.) tall. An average-sized person could fit inside it many times over.

## Who or What Is Big Ben?

The name Big Ben is often used to refer to the historic clock tower at Westminster Palace, or to refer to the giant clock itself. *Big Ben* was first used, however, to name the enormous bell behind the clock faces at the top of the tower. The bronze bell in London, England, weighs over 13 metric tons (14.3 t.), or roughly the weight of two African elephants. But how did a bell become an **iconic** landmark?

In the 1830s, the British people were planning to rebuild the Palace of Westminster. Among their plans to rebuild, the government decided that a new tower shouldn't have just any old clock. They wanted the clock to be accurate to within one second each day, and they also wanted a chiming bell. The bell was cast in East London on April 10, 1858. Big Ben's journey through history had begun.

There are two most commonly accepted stories about how Big Ben acquired its name. In 1859, when the bell rang for the first time, Parliament called a special meeting to agree on the bell's name. Sir Benjamin Hall, a large man affectionately nicknamed Big Ben, gave a long speech. At the end of it, another member of Parliament suggested that the bell be named Big Ben. Sir Benjamin's name is inscribed on the bell, adding **credibility** to this story.

The other popular story centers on Benjamin Caunt, a big man and a heavyweight boxing champion of the time. Caunt was also nicknamed Big Ben, so some people believe that the bell was named for him.



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## United Kingdom



### The History of Westminster

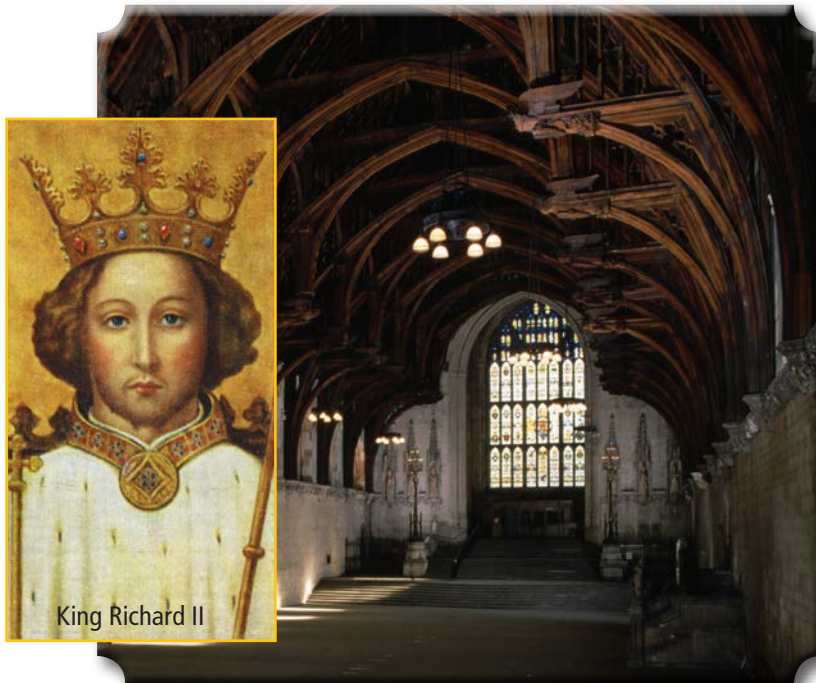
Most people have heard of London. The name itself can bring to mind big red buses, black taxicabs, fish and chips, and Buckingham Palace guards wearing enormous headgear. It's true that London offers all these things and more. As the capital city of what is now the United Kingdom (UK), London is home to Westminster Palace, which is the United Kingdom's seat of government—Parliament.



Westminster Palace wasn't always home to Parliament. From the middle of the eleventh century until the sixteenth century, Westminster Palace was the chosen home of the kings and queens of England. The original palace, including the existing Westminster Hall, was built between 1097 and 1099 during the reign of King William II. At the time, the palace was outside of London, but eventually the city grew to surround it. There are no existing documents to show the exact layout of the palace in its earliest days.



The Palace of Westminster and the Houses of Parliament as they looked in the sixteenth century



No records remain to show what the ceiling looked like in the time of King William II. The huge wooden ceiling that exists today was added in 1393 by King Richard II.

Westminster Palace became important as the center of government during the reign of King Henry III, from 1216 to 1272. Before that time, the government tended to be located wherever the royal leader was. King Henry VIII, who is famous for having had six wives and beheading large numbers of people, was the last **monarch** to live in Westminster Palace. After a fire in 1512, Henry VIII moved out and settled at Whitehall Palace. Over time, Westminster Palace became the permanent home of the Houses of Parliament.



King Henry VIII divorced two of his six wives and beheaded two others. He reigned from 1509 to 1547.

## Big Ben and Westminster Palace

- 1097–1099: Westminster Hall is constructed.
- 1393: The free-standing roof of Westminster Hall replaces the original.
- 1512: King Henry VIII, the last monarch to live at Westminster, moves out.
- 1605: Guy Fawkes attempts to blow up Parliament and kill King James.
- 1642: King Charles I is the last monarch to set foot inside the House of Commons.
- 1834: Fire destroys the Houses of Parliament. Westminster Hall is saved.
- 1940: World War II: nine months of bombing by Nazi Germany destroys many historic London buildings.
- 2012: The clock tower is officially renamed the Elizabeth Tower.



Throughout intense German bombing during WWII, Big Ben survived and continued to chime every fifteen minutes.

## Remember, Remember!

*An English folk verse 1870.*

<i>Remember, remember!</i>	<i>Should ever be forgot!</i>
<i>The fifth of November,</i>	<i>Guy Fawkes and</i>
<i>The Gunpowder</i>	<i>his companions</i>
<i>treason and plot;</i>	<i>Did the scheme contrive,</i>
<i>I know of no reason</i>	<i>To blow the King and</i>
<i>Why the Gunpowder</i>	<i>Parliament</i>
<i>treason</i>	<i>All up alive.</i>



### *The Fifth of November*

Nearly one hundred years after Henry VIII moved out, a plot developed that nearly caused the **demise** of Parliament and King James I. One day in 1604, Guy Fawkes and several other men gathered to discuss how and when to kill King James I. The previous monarch, Elizabeth I, had decided that England's official religion should be Anglican (Church of England) in spite of the fact that a good portion of the population belonged to the Catholic Church. The **conspirators** were Roman Catholic and wanted to be free to practice their religion.



Under Elizabeth, and now under James, the situation for Catholics was dreadful, and many of them were treated unfairly for their beliefs. The conspirators devised a plan to blow up the Houses of Parliament on a day when they knew King James would be present. That day was November 5, 1605.

First, the plotters rented a house **adjacent** to Parliament and began digging a tunnel. When they were able to rent a cellar directly beneath Parliament, the tunnel was dropped. Slowly, they smuggled barrels of gunpowder into the cellar. As an explosives expert, it was Guy Fawkes's task to light the fuse on the day and therefore commit treason by murdering the king.

Fawkes was caught in the cellar with thirty-six barrels of gunpowder the night before the plot was to reach its conclusion. He was arrested, imprisoned, and executed.

Every year, people all over the United Kingdom **observe** Guy Fawkes Day. They celebrate the survival of the king and the Houses of Parliament. To this day, the monarch's bodyguards perform a search of the cellars beneath Westminster Palace before the opening day of a Parliament session.

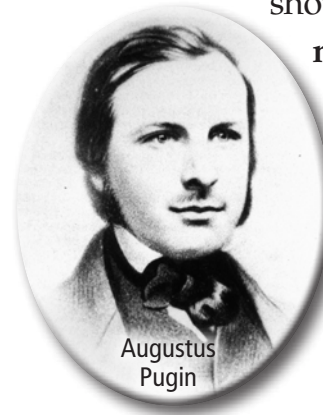
## *Fire and Reconstruction*

Over two hundred years after the Gunpowder Plot, an enormous fire in 1834 all but destroyed the Houses of Parliament. Six years later, a competition was held to choose an architect, and Charles Barry won. Barry confidently estimated that the palace would take six years to build, and construction began. Barry's estimate was quite wrong, however. It took thirty years to build the palace and cost much more than what was estimated.



Barry enlisted the help of another architect, Augustus Pugin, to produce some drawings and also to advise him on fittings and furniture. Arguments exist to this day about which architect should receive more credit for this

**majestic** building—Barry or Pugin. Sadly, in the end, neither architect had the opportunity to set eyes on the finished palace. Pugin died in 1852 and Barry in 1860, ten years before workers completed the palace.





House of Lords

House of Commons

Visitors can plan tours of the Houses of Parliament on Saturdays throughout the year or on weekdays when Parliament is in recess.

### Inside Westminster and Parliament

Today, the United Kingdom has two houses of Parliament: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The House of Commons has 650 members. These politicians are democratically elected by the British people. It is their responsibility to debate and vote on laws presented to them by other members.

The number of members in the House of Lords varies, and its members aren't elected. Instead, some are lords who have **inherited** titles, or are people who have been given a title by a monarch. Others are bishops and archbishops belonging to the Church of England. With approval from the Lords and the Commons, bills become laws, called *Acts of Parliament*.

*Houses of Parliament* refers to either the building or to the bodies of the government of the United Kingdom. The buildings that Barry and Pugin built nearly 150 years ago still stand on the banks of the Thames, but inside is the much more ancient Westminster Hall, or Great Hall, built over nine hundred years ago. Over the centuries, the hall has been used for feasts, banquets, and the ceremonies when a new king or queen is crowned, called *coronations*.

Westminster Hall has also been used for entertainment and political rallies, and even for tradespeople to set up stalls and stores to sell their goods. The Great Hall is famous for having the largest **medieval** wooden roof in Northern Europe.

### A Grand Affair

In April 1685, at the coronation of King James II and Queen Mary, 144 separate dishes were served in Westminster Hall. Not content with that, cooks served an additional thirty dishes created only for the king and queen's enjoyment, for a total of 174 dishes.

The coronation banquet of James II of England and his queen, Mary, was an elaborate event. James II reigned from 1685 to 1688.







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.

Some curious rules are in force inside the Houses of Parliament. For example, no English king or queen is allowed inside the House of Commons. The last monarch to set foot there was King Charles I, in 1642. No one, no matter what their **rank** in society, is allowed to wear a suit of armor inside the Houses of Parliament. According to a seven-hundred-year-old belief, no one is permitted to die within Westminster Palace. If someone starts to look unwell, he or she is supposed to be quickly **escorted** out of the building.



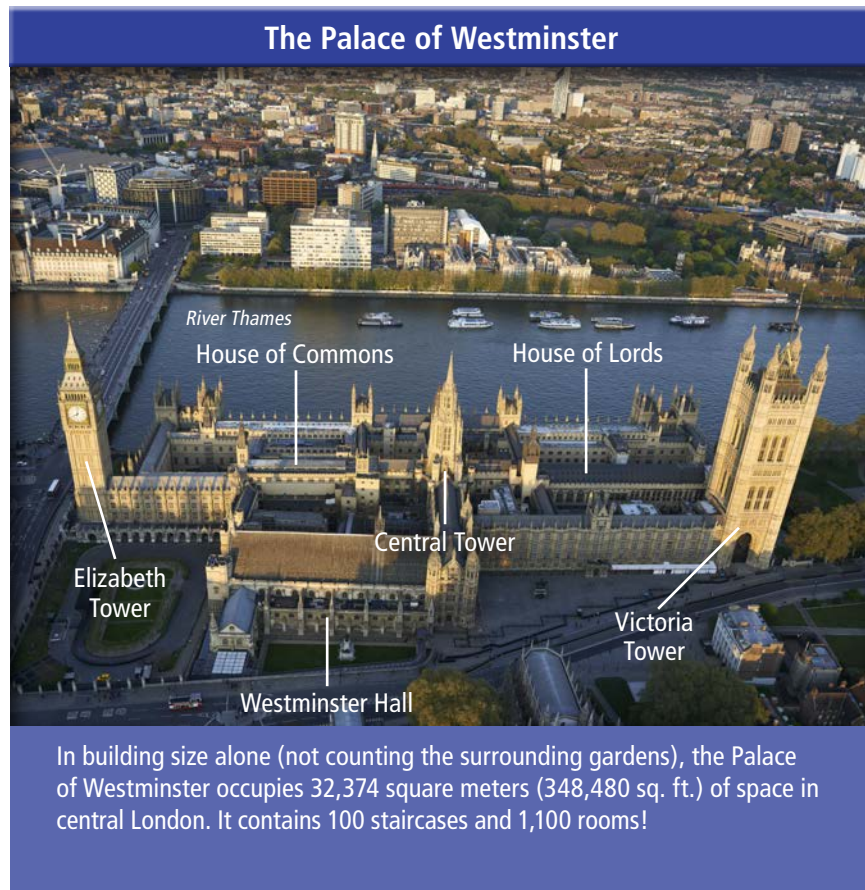
The grand entrance at the base of the Victoria Tower (left) is used for important state affairs and by the king or queen during the opening of Parliament after elections.

## The Towers of Westminster

The Victoria Tower, at the southern end of the Palace of Westminster, was named for Queen Victoria, who reigned from 1837–1901. It is the tallest tower, standing at 98.5 meters (323 ft.). Completed in 1860, it was for many years the largest square stone tower in the world. The tower was designed to house all original documents of Parliament, and it still does. Very few people are given access.

The 91.4-meter (300 ft.) Central Tower was designed as a chimney for smoke from fireplaces inside the palace. Unlike the other two towers, its shape is octagonal, and it has a spire.

The Elizabeth Tower, at the north end, is the most famous tower because it houses Big Ben. It stands 96.31 meters (316 ft.) tall and until recently was simply known as the Clock Tower. It was renamed the Elizabeth Tower in 2012 to celebrate Queen Elizabeth II's sixtieth anniversary as queen of England. The tower tilts to one side because of some digging that was carried out in a nearby street, but fortunately it isn't in danger of falling.



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

### Big Ben: An Icon

Big Ben has become one of the best-known landmarks in the United Kingdom, with millions of visitors seeing it each year. The Elizabeth Tower is one of the most photographed sights in London and has appeared in many movies. Citizens of the United Kingdom can make appointments to tour the tower. Once there, visitors make a difficult 334-step climb to the top. There were no elevators when the tower was built. From 62 meters (203 ft.) above the ground, guests enjoy a spectacular view of London, explore the behind-the-scenes tour of the giant clocks and their mechanisms, and get a close-up view of Big Ben itself.

People from around the world are welcome to visit the Houses of Parliament. They can take a tour, watch debates, and even have afternoon tea there.



## Indestructible?

The world over, Big Ben and the Palace of Westminster are among the most recognizable symbols of Britain. The structure has housed monarchs and politicians and withstood destructive fires and intense bombing, yet it proudly stands today as a national monument.

United Kingdom residents and visitors are familiar with the chiming of Big Ben's bell. It is broadcast live on some TV channels at midnight every New Year's Eve, and the entire country stops to observe two minutes of silence each year on November 11, when Big Ben rings at 11:00 a.m. in remembrance of those who have lost their lives in wars.

Every quarter of an hour, Big Ben reminds us of its presence. Perhaps it always will.



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

## Glossary

<b>adjacent</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	nearby; sharing a border (p. 11)
<b>conspirators</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	people involved in a secret plan to do something illegal or harmful (p. 10)
<b>credibility</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the quality of being true or believable; trustworthiness (p. 5)
<b>demise</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the end or failure of something; death (p. 10)
<b>escorted</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	went with someone or something, often to provide protection (p. 15)
<b>iconic</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	of or relating to an important symbol; famous and recognizable (p. 4)
<b>inherited</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	received money, property, or a title upon the death of someone (p. 13)
<b>majestic</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	grand, dignified, or impressive (p. 12)
<b>medieval</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	of or relating to the Middle Ages, the time period in European history from AD 500 to 1500 (p. 14)
<b>monarch</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a ruler of a kingdom or empire, such as a king or queen (p. 8)
<b>observe</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	to celebrate or acknowledge a special time, custom, or ceremony (p. 11)
<b>rank</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the position of someone or something within a group (p. 15)