

London's Big Ben to undergo a \$49 million repair job to improve safety.

BIG Ben's bells will stop ringing out across London this year as the old clock tower undergoes a \$49 million renovation.

The world's most famous clock, which continued to chime even through the Blitz in World War II, will fall silent for several months as experts work to repair the tower, stop water leakage, improve fire safety and install a lift in its 96m tower.

Scaffolding will hide most of its famous facade, and the hourly bell tolls, known as "bongs," will no longer be broadcast live to millions of people several times a day on the BBC.

Spokesman for the House of Commons Commission, which has responsibility for maintaining Big Ben, Liberal Democrat MP Tom Brake, said the work was designed to ensure there would be no "catastrophic failure" of the clock and its famous bell.

"Ben Ben is probably the most iconic symbol of London," he told News Corp this week. "The absence of the chimes of Big Ben is something that will reverberate around the world."

Big Ben is the nickname given to the great bell inside the clock tower built on the northern edge of the Palace of Westminster, on the banks of the River Thames.

Its chimes first rang out in 1859 but the original bell cracked and it wasn't until 1863 that the booming bongs became a regular part of London life.

The entire clock tower eventually became known as Big Ben, and it is now a UNESCO-listed world heritage site, and the most famous landmark in London.



Every day, thousands of tourists pose for selfies underneath its ornate tower and four-way clock faces, but from early next year, scaffolding will encase its walls, and the quarter-hour and hourly bells will fall silent.

Tours through the tower ceased this week and are not expected to restart for three years. Big Ben's silence will not last three years, but it will be some months before the reassuring bongs are heard once again on BBC radio and the world service, where they have been broadcast live to mark the hour since New Year's Eve 1923.



The clock needs to be shut down so the work can be undertaken but the bells could still be used on some occasions. "The bells can be struck so if there is a major national event that can still happen."

This could include important military anniversaries.

“But the regular chimes, the dong, dong, dong that people hear on the BBC’s 6 o’clock news, will no longer be heard.”



Workers suspended by ropes carry out cleaning and maintenance work on the clock face of Big Ben.

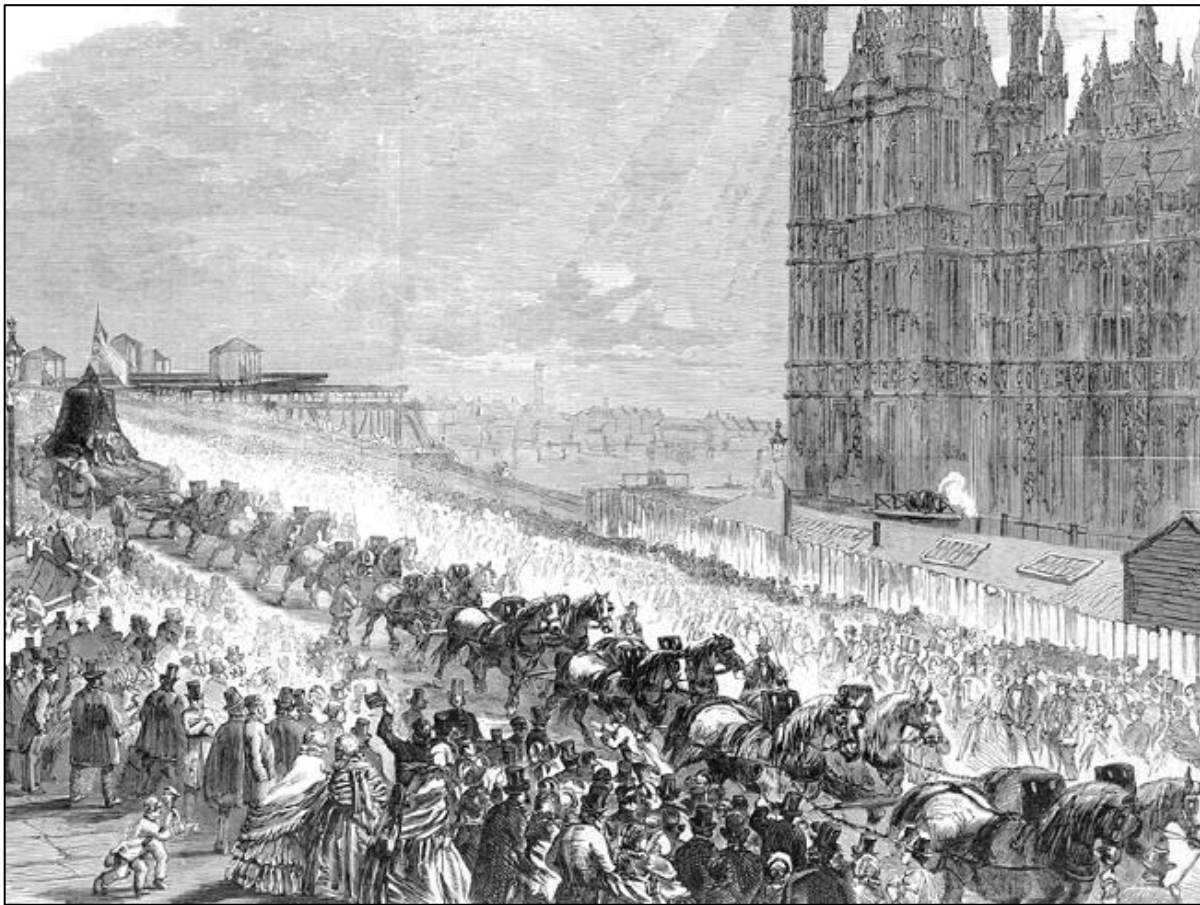
Big Ben has had a starring role in countless movies and TV shows — the clock chimes were used to communicate with fictional villains when Sean Connery played James Bond in *Thunderball* in 1965, while Owen Wilson and Jackie Chan hung off its clock face in a famous fight scene in *Shanghai Knights*.

Big Ben was also “destroyed” by aliens in a *Dr Who* episode, and it features on the label of Britain’s ubiquitous HP sauce.

The origins of its nickname — it was originally called the Great Bell — are a little hazy but the most likely theory suggests it was named for the Sir Benjamin Hall, who became London’s first Commissioner for Works in 1855.

Steve Jaggs, Keeper of the Clock, said: “This historic clock is loved by so many people. It is both an honour and a great responsibility to keep it in good working order for public enjoyment.”

“Every day our team of highly skilled clock mechanics cares for the Victorian masterpiece but in order to keep the clock ticking, we must now take the time to thoroughly inspect and restore it.”



An image from the Illustrated London News of 1858 shows the team of pack horses hauling the bell, later nicknamed Big Ben, to the tower of the Houses of Parliament. Parliament lists the reasons for those problems as “weather, workmen, breakages and birds.”

The clock has had occasional shutdowns, in 1934, 1956 and 2007, when work was needed to restore problems with its mechanics.

It has occasionally lost accurate time but broke down only once, in 1976, and was silenced for 26 days over nine months as repairs were carried out. Metal fatigue in its chiming mechanism was to blame. So accurate is the clock, to within one second, that the rare occasions it runs late generates big headlines across Britain.

In 1949, a flock of starlings perched on its 4.2m long minute hand, slowing it by more than four seconds. Its glass clock face was shattered in air raids during the Blitz but it continued to chime through World War II, albeit with the clock face illumination turned off.

The UK Parliament has set aside £29 million (AUS\$49.4 million) to spend on the renovation.



The ornate clock tower, renamed the Elizabeth Tower in honour of Queen Elizabeth's jubilee year in 2012, has a steep spiral staircase with 334 steps, and while a lift will be installed as part of the renovations, the journey up the staircase is considered part of the rite of passage of visiting Big Ben.

Only about 12,000 people get to tour it inside each year, as tours have to be organised through a Member of Parliament.

Being inside the tower when the clock strikes is considered an extraordinary experience, as the tolling of the bell reverberates through the body, despite all visitors being issued with ear protection.