

Big Ben and the Elizabeth Tower

Available exclusively in parliamentary shops and online (<http://www.shop.parliament.uk/>) for £7.50



This is a small book about a big subject but its authors remain almost anonymous. That is a pity. They have much to be proud of and deserve recognition. Read the small print on the inside back cover to see who they are: perhaps too many to be on the front cover but clearly writers who have great affection and respect for their subject.

Although only a little book, *Big Ben and the Elizabeth Tower* is full to the brim of fascinating, yet accessible, information about Big Ben and its four smaller companions, about the engineering and design work that went into their making and the design and construction of the Clock Tower itself, renamed the Elizabeth Tower on the Queen's diamond jubilee in 2012. In addition there are pen portraits of the men (yes, all men) who were responsible for the project that led to the building of the Tower and the installation of the clock and the bells.

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I have an interest to declare: Edmund Beckett Denison, Lord Grimthorpe, my great-great-great-uncle, was the irascible, self-important and litigious designer of the clock and Big Ben. His name is engraved on the clock mechanism just by the chiming train in the Clock Room. I have inherited his self-importance but none of his intellectual and practical prowess.

Like all those mentioned in this book – Barry, Pugin, Airey, Dent, Vulliamy, Ayrton – Grimthorpe was a Renaissance man. Both despite and because of their vision,

determination and egos this wonderful clock, its chiming bells and the world-famous building that houses them, were created by the power of their brains to translate thought onto paper. These great men and their builders, engineers and bell founders produced a thing of pleasing beauty – tower, clock and bells – which, seen and heard throughout the world as one time-keeping edifice, has stood as a symbol of democracy, hope and resistance to despotism for over 70 years, and of our country's ambition and sense of place in the world since 1859.

Do not, though, read this book just to learn about the Elizabeth Tower and Big Ben. Discover the history of turret clocks, the etymology of the words 'clock' and 'hour', what stood close to the site of the present Tower in the days of Edward the Confessor and Queen Anne, the development of timekeeping and the standardisation of time; enjoy the illustrations and photographs of our ornate palace and meet the people who have kept the Great Clock ticking to a degree of accuracy thought impossible when the clock was devised. See the many other clocks in the public and private rooms in Parliament, the most attractive, John Hardman's gilded brass clock, now in the Prime Minister's office.

Then go up the Tower, see the clock and stand close to Big Ben at noon. Unforgettable. 🏰

Edward Garnier is Conservative MP for Harborough

The Voice of the Backbenchers: The 1922 Committee – The First 90 Years, 1923-2013

By Philip Norton, Conservative History Group, £7.99



Few people get the origins of the Conservative Party's 1922 Committee right. “The Party really did itself a considerable service when it set up the committee at that famous Carlton Club meeting which brought down the Lloyd George Coalition in October 1922,” a former Tory Cabinet minister told me with great confidence recently. Writing about its 90th anniversary in April, the normally well-informed, belligerent heavyweight Tory journalist Bruce Anderson asserted that “it was named after the year of the successful insurrection” against the Welsh Wizard. “Its association with the fall of Lloyd George was an asset,” he added, providing it with “a reputation for ruthlessness” which made it a powerful force in the years ahead.

The 1922 Committee was not created at the Carlton Club meeting. It had nothing to do with the fall of Lloyd George. It was a wholly unforeseen by-product of the general election that followed the Coalition's collapse. The Tories won by a landslide, though they had little idea of what to do with their victory since they had no programme for government. The Conservative ranks ➤

included 110 neophyte MPs, nearly a third of the total. One of them, Gervais Rentoul, an ambitious barrister with an eye on ministerial office, “conceived the idea, not, of course, an original one, of forming a small committee for the guidance and assistance of those private members who, like myself, were in the House of Commons for the first time,” as he subsequently explained in the first of two volumes of memoirs.

Rentoul acted swiftly. “After consulting a few colleagues who were chafing, as I was, against the feeling of ineffectiveness and bewilderment, an invitation was issued to all the newcomers to meet in one of the committee rooms and discuss what could be done about it.” The result was that in April 1923 “an organisation was brought into being under the name of ‘The Conservative Private Members (1922) Committee’, a title soon to be abbreviated by the press into the ‘1922’ Committee, as it is known to this day”. A later attempt to rename it as the Conservative

and Unionist Members Committee failed dismally. Tories love their little traditions.

Rentoul naturally became the first Chairman. Membership was initially confined to the newcomers who had arrived in 1922. Meetings were unexciting. Details of forthcoming parliamentary business were announced; pronouncements by ministers and Tory party officials were heard with unquestioning respect. The Committee remained a modest and unassuming body even after its enlargement in December 1925 to include all backbench MPs, invitations to frontbenchers only being issued when the party went into opposition.

The Committee came of age during the Second World War, as Philip Norton, widely respected as both historian and constitutional expert, makes clear in this admirably crisp study written to mark the 90th anniversary. “We see, for the first time, the 1922 exerting significant policy influence and the Chairman playing a key role as an intermediary

between ministers and members.” Churchill’s Coalition partners addressed meetings. One hundred and twenty MPs came to listen to Ernie Bevin, then Minister of Labour, in July 1941. What a pity that this Coalition Government has not followed that precedent. There is much that Nick Clegg and the 1922 could learn from each other.

A powerful speech to the 1922 can have a decisive effect, as Harold Macmillan was perhaps the first to discover. In

November 1956, towards the end of the Suez crisis, as Eden’s premiership was moving to its close, Macmillan was unexpectedly given the chance to address a meeting after his rival for the Tory leadership, Rab Butler. He produced a tour de force after a typically lacklustre performance by Butler. As D. R. Thorpe observes in his brilliant biography *Supermac*, “this was the day that ensured that Macmillan would be the next Prime Minister”, some nine years before the introduction of leadership elections under the 1922’s control.

“ Norton does not neglect the many moments of high (and low) drama in his meticulous account of the 1922 Committee’s evolution ”

The 1922 has intervened decisively at other moments of acute political crisis. As parliamentary approval for Britain’s accession to the EEC hung in the balance, the committee rallied to Heath’s defence even though at a crucial discussion on 6 May 1971 the opponents and the doubters had outnumbered the supporters of entry. The redoubtable Rear-Admiral Morgan-Giles (whose death occurred recently) swept aside the faint hearts with his celebrated call to arms, “pro bono publico, no bloody panico”.

Heath responded with characteristic lack of generosity, treating the 1922, as its secretary later wrote, “with ill-concealed contempt”. When she first became leader Margaret Thatcher listened attentively to the committee, but as time wore on she “could, according to one member of the executive, be seen to be tapping her feet with impatience”. That, as her admirers saw, was a grave mistake. As Alan Clark noted in his diary, “she’s storing up trouble”.

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Margaret Thatcher admires a bowl given to her in 1989 at a special lunch for past and present members of the 1922 Committee. When she was first elected leader, Thatcher listened attentively to the committee. As time went on, however, she began to show her impatience with it – a grave mistake, according to Lord Lexden.

structure and work of the 1922 Committee, which draws on its records held in the Conservative Party Archive at the Bodleian Library, and on a wide range of other sources. He is impressed – and rightly so – by the leadership given to the committee by its longest-serving Chairman, Edward du Cann, and by his most recent successors, Archie Hamilton, Michael Spicer and Graham Brady. Du Cann summed up the essential requirements of a successful chairman: “a long nose to sniff out trouble, the oversized ears of a ready listener, a firm hand to deal with the problematic and a boot to apply to the recalcitrant”. Brady’s boot, formidable in size, would certainly best be avoided. It might help deter any repetition of the sharp practice employed at the time of the change of party leader in 2003. The letters received by Michael Spicer calling for a leadership election included no fewer than 19 forgeries.

I have one small complaint. The title of the book is printed on the front cover in yellow, once long ago a Tory colour but now firmly in the possession of the Liberal Democrats. Still if it misleads any of Mr Clegg’s colleagues into thinking this book has been written for them, they will find in it much revealing information about the tribal customs of their Coalition allies. 🏰

Lord Lexden is a Conservative Peer and a historian of the Tory party

Giving is Good for You

By John Nickson,
bitebackpublishing.com, £20



Members of both Houses of Parliament and of different political parties speak their mind about why people should give to charities and good causes in this fascinating book. John Nickson, one of the country’s top fundraisers, has written a call to arms. He wants us to be bothered and give more.



Workers at the Black Country Food Bank prepare parcels for the vulnerable. Nickson is furious at the social injustice which leaves so many people depending on food banks in the sixth richest country in the world.

It’s a completely beguiling combination of rage and gossip. Rage is directed at a cackhanded Government which preaches Big Society and then tries to cap gift aid suggesting it’s used to evade taxes, rage is directed at non-doms and people who have been honoured by Britain yet who do not pay taxes or give to charity. But Nickson’s deeper rage is directed at the social injustice which leaves so many people depending on food banks in the sixth richest country in the world.

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The gossip is provided by a series of interviews with people who give to charity, who run charities and who benefit from giving (both as people who are supported by charity and people who give to charity).

From his experience at Tate, English National Opera and the Royal Academy, Nickson has got to know a number of Britain’s big givers. Their trust in him is

obvious from the candour with which they have spoken. Some have hidden behind a cloak of anonymity, but most have not, and their message has become the title of the book: giving is good for you.

I have known the author for nearly 40 years and we have had many arguments about politics, because he rarely votes for my party. And reading this I can see why he has been reluctant to trust a political party. He believes that individuals can and should build a better society through giving and charity; he rightly wants cross-party consensus about help for giving.

If there is a flaw in this powerful book it is that it does not address sufficiently how contracts from central and local government are forcing charities to be less innovative and might depress the innovation which excites people to give. But that’s a quibble. It’s good stuff: we should read it and then talk across parties about how we can help to create a society where rich people give as big a part of their income as poor people do. 🏰

Fiona Mactaggart is Labour MP for Slough