

A Slice of English Time

The foremost symbol of London (and by extension, of England) to the world is a clock. The clock tower of Big Ben appears on every postcard, souvenir mug, pin, keychain, or tea towel purchased from a London souvenir shop, dominating the public view of London as the Eiffel Tower does Paris or the Statue of Liberty New York. And London being the center of England, and England the center of the world, and the world the center of the universe (as I'm told was once believed), Big Ben keeps time at the center of it all.

Elizabeth Tower (the official name as of 2012 of the clock tower commonly known as Big Ben) features a clock that is renowned for its accuracy. To me, this clock and its tower are also in many ways symbolic of the way that time moves in England so that historic objects and places both contribute to and are an intrinsic part of modern life.

The clock itself was designed in the early 1850s by Edmund Beckett Denison and the astronomer royal Sir George Airy. It was Denison who made the clock novel when he designed for it the world's first gravity escapement. The escapement is a mechanism that serves the dual function of giving the pendulum the energy (or "impulse") to keep its swing constant and also, by way of various other internal mechanisms, keeping the hands moving in a steady beat. The most common type of escapement in mechanical clocks at the time would have been a deadbeat escapement, wherein the movement of the pendulum and the drive force of the clock's hands would be linked. Denison's invention of the gravity escapement separated these two elements so that the heavy hands of the clock, even if weighed down by snow or ice, would not interfere with the swinging of the pendulum. It was this invention that made the clock in the Clock Tower (the official name of Big Ben preceding 2012) the model for future tower clocks, as well as perhaps the best known and most famously accurate tower clock in the world, even up to the present day. The clock, its mechanisms, and its accuracy have remained so constant a part of London and the world as to barely appear to have aged.

A clock tower is, of course, an example of a human effort to divide and measure time. Such structured efforts notwithstanding, time has a tendency to move strangely around people, perception, landscapes, and even the very structures built for the purpose of dividing and measuring it. The United States, having only so much time in its national Treasury, has seen an efficient flowing of time, one era inevitably giving way to the next and taking its own affects with it. Any that are left behind step outside of the flow of time to act as a kind of memorial to bygones. England, on the other hand, has around a millennium of recorded history over the United States, and wears its time quite differently.

Consider Stonehenge. One could say that Stonehenge is the oldest standing timepiece in England. In fact, the only fact that can be conclusively agreed upon regarding Stonehenge's purpose is that it was once used to mark the passage of time. This timepiece of a bygone time sits in the midst of an untouched landscape wherein it is possible to really feel the age of the land. Stonehenge stands as a living reminder of what has passed even before memory or record. It differs from many other monuments in England because it, like an American monument, can be said to stand outside of time. Its surroundings, however, share this quality. This made me as a viewer feel less aware of the difference between the time I inhabit and the time Stonehenge once inhabited than I would have been if I were seeing the same thing in America. Seeing it in England, it appeared that the monument was in fact inhabiting both times at once.

In the hilly Sussex countryside, I found that time, while fluid, had a tendency to pool rather than flowing river-like. There is a sort of reservoir that collects time so that history is not preserved, crystallized, and set outside of time, as it might be in the States, but is stirred in with each present era as it comes so that buildings remain, farms and their practices remain, and manners remain. Moreover, they remain not as fossils but as a part of the landscape and of life. This is in part a natural reservoir, formed by some inexplicable tendency of the land to hold on to the things that the ages draw on it, be they cliff-face chalk etchings or buildings of stone and flint. It is also in part a man-made reservoir, constructed of the people's interest in the sundry things deposited by time,

which leads them to dam it up and disallow it from carrying its cargo away. They proudly claim kinship with the things that Time has brought their way throughout history, and wrap these things up protectively in present time so they do not float away.

Walking paths are an excellent example of this. In fact, the entire concept of England's Right to Roam is an example of this. That the people intentionally took on the task of reclaiming the ancient ancestral right to use them gives these walking paths a dual permanence in England (a permanence both physical and traditional) and makes them a symbol of the English consciousness of time. This consciousness has to do with history and tradition and their applicability to the present. It also has to do with the recognition of the acceptability – and even desirability – of living a slower life, which is more in keeping with an older era than this one, from an American perspective. Around these walking paths have grown up paved roads, highways, cars, and the like, but the walking paths remain preserved much as they might have been when they were the primary roads (if a little less in use). They are used to move from place to place just as the newer roads and newer modes of transport are used simultaneously for the same purpose. Along them are farms that are ageless in a way that I have only ever seen them in England. If cattle graze here, it is because cattle have always grazed here, or so it appears. With such a large piece of time comprising history, the chunks that it gets broken into can be much bigger than they feel. One hundred years can consist of a great many changes, but it is a relatively small period of history here. A farm can have been a farm for 800 years and the people on it can farm with modern machinery and go to church on Sunday to sit in an aisle rebuilt 300 years ago for a church first built 1000 years ago. Far from the marvel this appears from across the ocean where 400 years ago there was no recognized country, there it is simply life.

Time sweeps even more strangely around the cities of England, almost as if it has had to dodge the obstacles people have put in its way. It results in a very visible sort of tossed-salad mix of old and new. London, for instance, features the Tower of London, with its central White Tower dating back to William the Conqueror and centuries of subsequent additions. Yet the old stone walls and stately Tower Bridge beside are offset

on the horizon by a city of glass that has risen up around them – the strange irony of the 11th century looking like a confused latecomer to the 21st. The city is full of juxtapositions like this. As are others (though the sample may be skewed by the “historic” nature of the cities). Bath’s Roman Baths and 15th century Abbey overlook modern shops, grocery stores, and cafes all of yellow limestone to match. Canterbury boasts a 12th century cathedral, Norman castle ruins, and Roman city walls that enclose two train stations, streets of shops, Sainsbury’s. Oddly, none of this feels terribly incongruous. There is a feeling in the cities as though time (here slightly more solid than in the country) had not passed, but instead simply added to itself. It is this feeling that lends to the experience of being able to walk into a cathedral dating a thousand years back and feel that there is nothing out of place about it, or to observe the architecture of the Georgian era and find it a rather young sort of old, relatively speaking. Much like the Clock Tower, originating in Victorian times, is quite a young sort of old in England.

The result of all this is that the passage of time in the present feels insignificant in the face of all the time that has already passed. It is easy, in the midst of ancient fields or wilderness or constructions, to forget to count time and in doing so, perversely, find that it has moved more slowly than you had expected, and maybe even more slowly than if you had been conscious of it. Moreover, in an environment like this, the pace of life can be slow but with a sense of having earned its slowness. Like in any place, this slowness is sometimes resented by younger people who may take it for granted. The slowness is, however, a living slowness inherited from the ages instead of the sudden slowness of a suburb or the stubborn slowness of a rural part of a country that colonialism cut abruptly into not many hundreds of years ago.

London’s Clock Tower was built as part of the reconstruction of the Palace of Westminster, replacing a sundial that was destroyed along with much of the Palace in a great fire in 1834. The sundial had, in the 18th century, replaced a 14th century clock tower (England’s first public chiming clock) which had fallen into disrepair and which itself had replaced the original bell-and-clock tower built on Parliament’s grounds in the late 13th century. This is best illustration I can think of for the way that time gradually

alters and yet still preserves the integrity of England's objects, buildings, people, and landscapes over a number of centuries that is almost unfathomable to an American.

The Clock Tower is wonderfully symbolic of how Time and History have taken up residence in England. It stands fairly unobtrusively in spite of its own importance and assumes the timelessness lent to it by its position as the last of a noble line of timepieces at Westminster Palace. It contributed something new and important in its day and, having done so, settled in among everything else time had deposited around it. Everything in England, it seems, takes its moment to make its mark and lets time carry its contribution outward in ripples while it settles back to become a living monument and share its vital warmth with passersby. English monuments refuse to be taken out of the flow of time and made into fossils, and by doing so they somehow make the flow of time more hospitable to the people who experience it. They seem to store their own time in them and gently leak it out into the present so as to dilute present time with an older one. To me as an outsider, the slowness of time and the tangible accessibility of history in England could almost be felt as Time's concession that after all these centuries, it really had no more reason shoot on by. In England at least, it is now at leisure to fill up the days.