

The man who kept a country ticking over

His work made the British rulers of the sea and explorers world class, writes **Nick Foulkes**

It is not just the Golden Globes and the Oscars that have seen a resurgence of British talent, it is happening with watches too. The latest launch – to be accurate, re-launch – is a watch brand of which few but the most hardened horophiles will have heard. However, even those with absolutely no interest in timekeepers will be familiar with its most famous product: the Great Clock at the Palace of Westminster, also known as Big Ben.

But although he made the world's best known public timepiece, the pacemaker at the heart of Queen Victoria's ever growing empire, Edward John Dent came to clockmaking relatively late in life. A maker of miraculously accurate marine chronometers, in many ways he remained a creature of the 18th century.

The history of British watchmaking is inextricably linked to the sea. As anyone who has read Dava Sobel's *Longitude* will

know, the key to successful navigation was accurate timing. Britain was the world's leading maritime power and after the loss of 2,000 lives in one particularly dreadful maritime disaster, Parliament passed the Longitude Act of 1714 offering prize money of up to £20,000 (the equivalent of several millions today) to the man who could offer a solution to the problem of finding longitude.

Dent's working life as a chronometer maker and his views of timekeepers were in great part shaped by this prevailing culture and scientific endeavour, in particular The Board of Longitude, formed as part of the Longitude Act, which was only dissolved in 1828, well into Dent's working life. Dent's timepieces were scientific instruments rather than public ornaments or private playthings. By the time he was in his 20s he was already a trusted supplier to the Admiralty. In 1814 he made a "Standard Astronomical Clock" for the Admiralty,

while the Colonial Office African Expedition of the same year made use of his talents as a maker of pocket chronometers.

For Dent, horology was a branch of science, a vital component of exploration, astronomy and man's attempts of his place in the universe. Throughout the

19th century Dent timepieces would be a key component of any well-equipped expedition. In

1829, as well as selling chronometers to the Board of Ordnance and the Colonial Office for "the use of persons then employed on an Expedition to the Interior of Africa", he also "supplied various Chronometrical instruments to the East India Company".

When the HMS Beagle embarked on its second, five-year-long voyage in 1831, accompanied by Charles Darwin, to survey the coast of South America it was equipped with a chronometer from his workshops.

A Dent pocket chronometer was issued to Dr Livingstone in 1865. The explorer had already taken a Dent Marine Chronometer (No 1960) on his South African Expedition of 1858, and rather carelessly it was lost on another African Expedition in 1860 when his canoe overturned. Indeed the great explorer was more than a little cavalier in his treatment of his Dent timepieces. Records show that a pocket chronometer, issued to him in 1857 was also lost on an expedition to southern Africa.

As time wore on Dent timepieces found themselves on expeditions everywhere from the River Plate to the River Severn, Newfoundland to Australia, the Pacific to Palestine and in both the Arctic and Antarctic. And towards the end of the century, in 1890, a friend of Dr Livingstone's wrote to Dent adding his praise to a pile of encomia that had accrued during the century. "The Chronometers supplied by you, and which were taken across Africa in my last Expedition, proved a very great service to me and were in every way

thoroughly satisfactory and reliable." By the mid-19th century the name of Dent was woven into the fabric of British life: his clocks were the talk of the Great Exhibition, the Duke of Wellington used to stop outside Dent's shop to set his watch, he received Queen Victoria's warrant and after creating a critically acclaimed clock for the Royal Exchange he submitted a tender for the creation of a clock for the new Houses of Parliament, designed by Sir Charles Barry to replace the buildings that had burned down during the 1830s.

It was not until 1863 that the clock would begin the trouble-free running for which it would become famous, and by that time Dent would be dead. But the company that bore his name would continue to maintain the world's most famous clock until the mid 1970s.

In recent years, the Dent name has been associated with a very small number of almost bespoke clocks made for a few discriminating connoisseurs: these have tended to be reworkings of eccentric timepieces demonstrating the ingenuity of historical watchmakers. Among the clocks dating from this time are the Epicyclic Skeleton, the Congreve, the Mysterious Circulator and the Inclined Plane.

In 2005 a group of British investors bought the company and decided to re-introduce Dent watches, all certified chronometers of course, to the retail market. The signature model, Parliament, is a fitting wristworn tribute to the most famous clock in the world.



Time-keeper:
Edward Dent
National Maritime Museum