

THE DIVISION BELL

The Nine O'Clock furore wasn't over yet, however. The new format had, grudgingly, been accepted as unstoppable, largely thanks to Greene's hard stare. But no sooner had that been sorted out than another, arguably louder controversy erupted over the programme when the Radio Times casually mentioned that the chimes of Big Ben, which had opened the old Nine O'Clock News, would now be reduced to just the first bong instead of all nine - or ten, rather. That way there was more time for news and less chance of listeners seething with impatience waiting for them to get on with it.

But the listeners weren't grateful, or at least not all of them. And the ones that weren't were by far the loudest. In particular, a lobby group called the Council of the Big Ben Silent Minute, considered this essentially a patriotic blasphemy. The Silent Minute had begun in 1940 in the darkest days of the Blitz, as a suitably chauvinistic way of bringing the British people together and helping them keep their heads while screaming death machines constantly buzzed overhead trying to kill them personally. It was the idea of Major Wellesley Tudor-Pole, who believed that if enough people joined together in a minute of silent prayer at 9pm every evening, "the tide would turn and the invasion of England would be diverted".

Said invasion was of course successfully prevented (Guernsey notwithstanding) and while the Silent Minute didn't exactly take credit, neither did they object to the association. Eventually, of course, the whole war itself was won, thanks to the power of prayer and the atomic bomb. The Silent Minute continued into peacetime as a sort of nationalistic daily ritual, centred around the BBC's daily broadcast of Big Ben announcing nine o'clock.

The chimes had gained the symbolic, spiritual significance they retain to this day. As Hugh Carleton Greene himself put it, "People associated [them] with the splendours and miseries of the war and the Churchillian speeches of long ago." That, however, was written in hindsight, at the end of his tenure. He didn't know it at the time - until he casually decided to save a minute of dead air on the evening news.

It became personal when the eldest Greene brother, Herbert, took up the cause of the chimes and managed to rally thousands of supporters behind him. The press gleefully described it as a "civil war in Greene-land" - Graham, for what it's worth, sided with Hugh. The Director-General himself could barely conceal his irritation at the ridiculousness of the situation - which he was later to dismiss as a "silly rumpus".

It seemed serious enough at the time, however - certainly impossible to ignore for long. Greene and the Governors eventually huddled together to agree on some sort of response to the “rumpus”. The Governors wanted to stress the difference between the decision to move the news from nine to ten - which was, they said, a policy decision not open to debate - and the one pertaining to the chimes, which was an executive decision that had nothing to do with them and was therefore entirely mutable.

Greene agreed to these terms on condition that he could arrange a broadcast explaining the decision and asking for feedback, which was duly arranged. The new programme’s editor, Stephen Bonarjee, read out a script written by Greene and asked listeners to “write in” with their views and ideas on what to do with Big Ben. They duly did - over 3000 of them, vindicating the Governors’ suspicions that this issue, while in no sense could it be considered to *actually* matter, definitely mattered.

So a compromise was reached: the “Westminster Quarters” chime would play out in full, and then the headlines would be read out between the chimes of the hour as they discreetly faded out. This seems to have satisfied all parties, if only because it’s still used to this day on Radio 4’s Six O’Clock News. As for Greene, the whole mess served as a pre-emptive warning. If something so innocuous (at least to him) could get him in this much trouble seemingly out of nowhere, there was no knowing what other, more radical changes could unleash.