

Handwritten shorthand symbols on a blue-lined background.

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Tower Beach

Today might have been spent poring over a list of awkward outlines to produce another practice list for you, and rearranging and looking up outlines. But no, something more interesting came up that just could not wait. I found out that today the Thames had a very low tide and that Tower Bridge beach in Central London would be specially open for visitors to go down and look around. This only happens twice a year. We arrived at 12.30 and saw people queuing, receiving their leaflet (with instructions for health and safety, and expected behaviour), and being "processed" for this short foray down to the beach. We read the instructions and were each given a pair of blue plastic gloves so that we could pick up objects safely. We had to sign a form stating we had read and been warned of the risks, and then we made our way down the granite steps.

Tower Beach was created by order of King George V in 1934 for the families and children of London's East End, most of whom could not afford to go to the seaside. Thousands of tons of sand were brought in by barge and deposited on Tower Foreshore. In the next five years over half a million people enjoyed the new beach, lounging on deckchairs, having picnics, making sandcastles and taking a dip in the Thames. There were entertainments, boat rides, and food and sweets sellers. It closed in 1971 over concerns about the health risk of the river water. The Thames has been greatly improved since the nineteen sixties and although there are fish in it now, it is most uninviting and dirty looking, being a yellowish brown muddy colour, where you can see the silt swirling around at the slightest disturbance beneath the surface. Only a narrow strip of sand remains underneath the wall.

We visited it for the purpose of getting some good photographs from an unusual angle, and record the beach and river in close up. Although we were not litter-picking or archaeology hunting like some of the others, it is just about impossible

not to scan the ground in front of you for interesting debris. Amongst all the stones and pieces of masonry scattered over the gravelly sand, there is lots of broken bright red brick and I did find a piece with a hole, so I think that might have been a roof tile. I saw one or two pieces of broken crockery, and one interesting tiny piece of patterned pottery with a brown and blue glaze, which we left perched on a brick in the hope that the next person coming along would want to add it to their other finds in their plastic margarine tub.

We did see one piece that will be of interest to posterity, a broken budget mobile phone with a rusted and mud-washed circuit board, and we decided that future searchers ought to have the chance of finding that. To tell the truth, we really did not want to poke about in the pebbles and pick up anything after all the warnings about the health risks of the water and mud. We could wash our hands but we would not be able to do that with the cameras and risk transferring anything later on to our sandwiches. We finally agreed that we had pictures of everything possible and returned back up the steps. Sanitising hand wash gel, big buckets of water and paper towels were provided for us to clean our hands.

Although I will enjoy all the photographs, I can't help thinking that those looking for artefacts were having a much better time, with the excitement of finding tiny fragments from the past. Their eyes know what to look for and I am sure they see items instantly which we would never even have noticed amongst all the rubble and pebbles. Once correctly identified, the pieces will tell a story about the past in this part of London. I am sure they will begin wondering who owned it, what their life was like, how they lost it and how it eventually ended up in the river. I enjoy seeing and learning about archaeology but if it is not a Roman coin or Viking brooch washed up at my feet, I am really not that much into being a mudlark on the Thames foreshore. (732 words)