

Handwritten shorthand symbols on a blue-lined background.

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Tower Bridge

We were looking for an excuse to go up to the city a few weeks ago. The weather was not really the best for visiting a park, but we saw online that Tower Bridge would be opening for the passage of a square rigger tall ship, the Pelican of London, a modern sail training vessel. We knew it would not be in full sail, but it was enough of a point of interest to get us out for a while. We arrived early and spent some time on one of the bridge piers, overlooking the central channel. We watched the muddy water speed up as it met the immovable stone piers with their pointed ends that parted the water. The long loops of chains along all London riverside walls always start my imagination going, of someone falling in and holding on until a rescue boat can get to them. Most of the walls are sheer and high, so there would be no chance of climbing out, although in a few places there are also narrow iron ladders to allow escape.

The bridge is now full of tourists again, after a year and a half of being mostly deserted. Walking across is an exercise in dodging cameras, as people are taking pictures of each other with the towers in the background. I always wonder what it all means to them, maybe this is their trip of a lifetime and no moment must be wasted during their very limited time here. For me, it is on my doorstep and I get to see it regularly. As I watch it flow past, I think the river is just grey water, the buildings are just so much stone and concrete, and the roads just ribbons of asphalt. The only thing that makes it interesting is the history and the stories of what happened here in past centuries, and all the events that led up to how it looks now, all of it having accumulated on the ancient foundations of the first settlements on the Thames marshes and islands.

Nearer the time we left the bridge and walked down the south bank, in order to have a full view of both bascules that form the centre roadway. Horns sounded for the traffic to stop, the gates across the road and paths were closed, and then very slowly the bascules rose. After a short while we saw the ship appear from down river, and then glide between the towers. There was music being broadcast from the ship, and the decks were full of crew and trainees, cheering and waving. My camera remained focussed on the bridge to record the lowering of the bascules, which bafflingly always look as if they are too long to meet exactly together in the centre. It is a tradition that passengers on boats wave to those on land and I like to think that it is primarily the childlike glee at making a tentative contact with the strangers on the shore and finding it cheerfully reciprocated, as both sides know it is a safe and very brief encounter with no dangers or strings attached.

On other days when we have stood in the centre of the bridge, the passengers on the top deck of pleasure boats often wave to us very enthusiastically, and it is amusing to also see all the shiny rectangles appear as they quickly point their phone screens upwards to get the unique shot of the underside of Tower Bridge. People always wave back, and children the most energetically, even if they have to stick their arm through the decorative iron railings to do so. It is heartening to see that people want to share their holiday excitement with anyone who will respond.

Tower Bridge

Here are a few facts about Tower Bridge to give some practice in writing names and figures, for which you can mostly use normal numerals, although a shorthand outline is sometimes faster. There were over 50 entries for the competition to design the new bridge. The successful design was submitted by Horace Jones and the engineer was John Wolfe Barry. The bridge was built from 1886 to 1894 and is located adjacent to the Tower of London. It was opened in 1894 by Edward and Alexandra, Prince and Princess of Wales. It is 800 feet (240 metres) long and the two towers are 213 feet (65 metres) high.

The towers are connected by two walkways. The opening span is 200 feet (61 metres) and the headroom allowance is 135 feet (41 metres). The centre is formed of two counterbalanced bascules which open to allow tall shipping to pass through. Each bascule weighs over 1,000 tonnes and they are raised to an angle of 86 degrees, taking approximately five minutes. They were originally hydraulically powered using pressurised water stored in hydraulic accumulators. They presently use an electro-hydraulic system and oil instead of water as the hydraulic fluid.

The piers contain over 70,000 tons of concrete, and over 11,000 tons of steel make up the framework of the towers, which are clad in Cornish granite and Portland stone in the Gothic architectural style. The side sections are suspension bridges each 270 feet (82 metres) long. The cost was over 1.1 million pounds, which is equivalent to 136 million pounds today. The bridge sees over 40,000 crossings daily, and I look forward to bumping that figure up slightly the next time I am in the area. (936 words)