TWO GIANT SEESAWS OVER THE THAMES

Is it a drawbridge?

The official facts page is plain: it is not.

Drawbridges "require ropes or chains to pull up the road, but Tower Bridge's roads are too heavy to be opened like this." "Instead, it is a bascule bridge, which means the roads (bascules) move like two giant seesaws and pivot to open and close the Bridge." The word bascule "derives from the French for 'see-saw' or 'balance'."

Question	The official story
Was a drawbridge ever planned?	A drawbridge "was actually how Tower Bridge's architect, Sir Horace Jones, initially intended the roads to open." Then "it was discovered that the roads would be too heavy for the towers to hold." The bascule was the answer.
How does a bascule move?	"Each bascule moves around an off-centre pivot, meaning they look a bit like a seesaw in a children's playground." "Each side of the bascule is evenly balanced, so less energy is required to open up the roads and no pressure is put on the Towers."
What turns the leaves?	"The hard work of opening and closing the Bridge is left to eight large cogs. These are about 1m in diameter, four on each side." Power "was initially supplied by steam and then, post-1976, by electricity."
Who must it open for?	Under the Corporation of London (Tower Bridge) Act 1885, the Bridge must be raised for registered vessels with a mast or superstructure of 30 feet or more, free of charge, subject to 24 hours' notice, any time, 365 days a year.

How often has it opened?

In its first year the Bridge opened more than 6,000 times. By the late 1960s that had fallen to a few hundred times a year. The official facts page records that the highest-ever number of Bridge Lifts in one day was 64. It is still opened, free of charge, for river traffic.

Bricks, foundations, and a glass floor

Around 31,000,000 bricks went into the work, and the foundations reach almost 8m into the riverbed. It took eight years, five major contractors and 432 construction workers each day. In 2014 the High-Level Walkways were fitted with glass floors that "can hold the weight of more than two black taxi cabs."

A short quiz

1. What kind of bridge do the official pages say Tower Bridge is?
2. How many cogs turn the bascules, and about how large is each?
3. What is the highest-ever number of lifts in one day?

Answers. 1. A bascule bridge, not a drawbridge. 2. Eight cogs, about 1 m in diameter, four on each side. 3. 64.

Sources: towerbridge.org.uk, "Top facts of Tower Bridge," "How does Tower Bridge work?" and "About us," checked 17 November 2026.
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