BOILERS, ACCUMULATORS, AND ENGINES YOU CAN STILL VISIT

Steam until 1976

The pumping engines are still there to look at. They no longer lift the Bridge.

The official facts page says: “It used steam power until 1976.” “When first built, Tower Bridge was the most sophisticated bascule bridge ever completed. The bascules were operated by hydraulics, using steam to power the enormous pumping engines.” Today they are “still operated by hydraulic power, but are driven by oil and electricity rather than steam.”

Part of the steam system	What the how-it-works page says
Boilers	Power “was generated by three large boilers, continuously fuelled by stokers working in shifts, 24 hours a day, to ensure there was enough energy available to lift the bridge whenever required.”
Pumping engines	The steam “was used to power the large steam pumping engines in the next room.” Their pistons “turn a large flywheel at the same time as powering a set of hydraulic pumps.”
Accumulators	The pumps pushed water “into six huge storage containers called accumulators.” They “act like batteries, storing the energy by holding the water under high pressure.”
The lift itself	“When the Bridge was required to open, the water was released into the drive engines, powering yet more pistons to turn a set of cogs. These cogs connect to a rack on the back of the bascules.”

The change, dated on the how-it-works page

“By the late 1960s, Tower Bridge only opened a few hundred times a year (down from over 6,000 in the first year), and steam was no longer an efficient way to open it.” “The installation of a new electro-hydraulic system began in 1974.” Electric pumps created “oil-hydraulic energy to turn the cogs.” The new engines “were installed while the steam system was still in operation, so the Bridge could still open for passing river vessels.” “In 1976, the work was completed, Tower Bridge became fully electro-hydraulic powered. It has remained the same ever since, and the old system was disconnected.”

Still there to visit

The facts page says you can still see “the original pumping engines, accumulators and boilers on display in the Engine Rooms.” The how-it-works page describes those engines as “brightly painted” and says they “resemble a steam train when they move.” They no longer lift the Bridge: the old system, that page says, was disconnected in 1976.

A short quiz

1. How many boilers, and how many accumulators, does the how-it-works page name?
2. In which year does that page say the new electro-hydraulic system was begun, and in which year was it completed?
3. Until which year does the facts page say the Bridge used steam power?

Answers. 1. Three boilers and six accumulators. 2. Begun in 1974; completed in 1976. 3. 1976.

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