

# HISTORIC RIVER VESSELS

European Network of River Museums



## FRANZ-CHRISTIAN THE FISCHER FAMILY AND THEIR BARGE

The barge **FRANZ-CHRISTIAN** belongs to the circa twenty historical ships collected by the LWL-Industriemuseum. These vessels are on view at the Henrichenburg shiplift on the Dortmund-Ems-Canal. The **FRANZ-CHRISTIAN** is an early diesel-powered barge. When it was launched from the Hitzler shipyard in Lauenburg in 1929 it was not usual for such boats to be equipped with their own means of propulsion. Goods were mostly loaded into a convoy of linked cargo barges which were then pulled along the rivers and canals by a tugboat.

Nonetheless the owner of the barge, Franz Fischer, and his partner Christian Schernbeck ordered a motor-driven barge to be built. They were gambling that a speedy and easily manoeuvrable ship would take on express freight which was too complicated and expensive for the tug convoys. In order to preserve this advantage they continually replaced their old diesel engines with new, more powerful ones. In this way the engine capacity in the barge grew from an original 70 horse power to 180 horse power. Originally the barge was 46 meters long. After an enlargement in 1953 its length grew to 50,25 metres. The maximum load was 319 tonnes.

From 1934 onwards the master of the **FRANZ-CHRISTIAN** was Franz Fischer (born 1912), the son of the owner. From time to time the barge travelled to Dortmund, passing the Henrichenburg shiplift along the way. In 1940 it was confiscated by the German navy for war duties in "Operation Sea Lion". This was the code word for Hitler's plan to land German soldiers along the English coast. But finally the action was called off. At the end of the war the **FRANZ-CHRISTIAN** was handed back to the owners. From then on the barge transported bulk cargoes like rocks, coal, ore and cereals. From 1950 onwards it often travelled through East Germany in transit

to Berlin. The sons of Franz Fischer, Hans (born 1942) und Franz (born 1946) grew up on the barge and learned their father's trade. Their mother Elisabeth (born 1919) stayed on board and helped to run the family business until the younger one of the two boys had to start attending school.

As freight prices gradually sank it became increasingly difficult for the **FRANZ-CHRISTIAN** to cover its costs, and in 1974 Franz Fischer called a halt to his operation. By now so many barges were transporting goods that the German government was paying owners to scrap uneconomic vessels. The **FRANZ-CHRISTIAN** was spared this fate when its owners handed over the barge to the LWL-Industriemuseum in 1986. The barge is unique in that the museum has been able to take over its complete inventory (furniture, clothes, kitchen utensils, toys etc.) along with a large number of photos documenting its history. Thus the permanent exhibition in the hold of the **FRANZ-CHRISTIAN** can exhibit all the different aspects of the life and work of a bargee and his family on an inland waterways vessel.



FRANZ-CHRISTIAN on the lower reach of the Henrichenburg shiplift, 2017



The wheelhouse of FRANZ-CHRISTIAN, 2017



Franz behind the steering wheel with his son Franz Junior, circa 1950

FRANZ-CHRISTIAN on the River Elbe in Magdeburg, circa 1932

