

# Buoy Tenders of the Weser, Germany

By Christian Ostersehite

**B**remen is the second largest seaport in Germany and over the years became well known to Americans, as the North Germany Lloyd Steamship Company operated a transatlantic line between Bremen and New York City. The shipping line was established in 1857 and had a good reputation among Americans traveling to Europe.

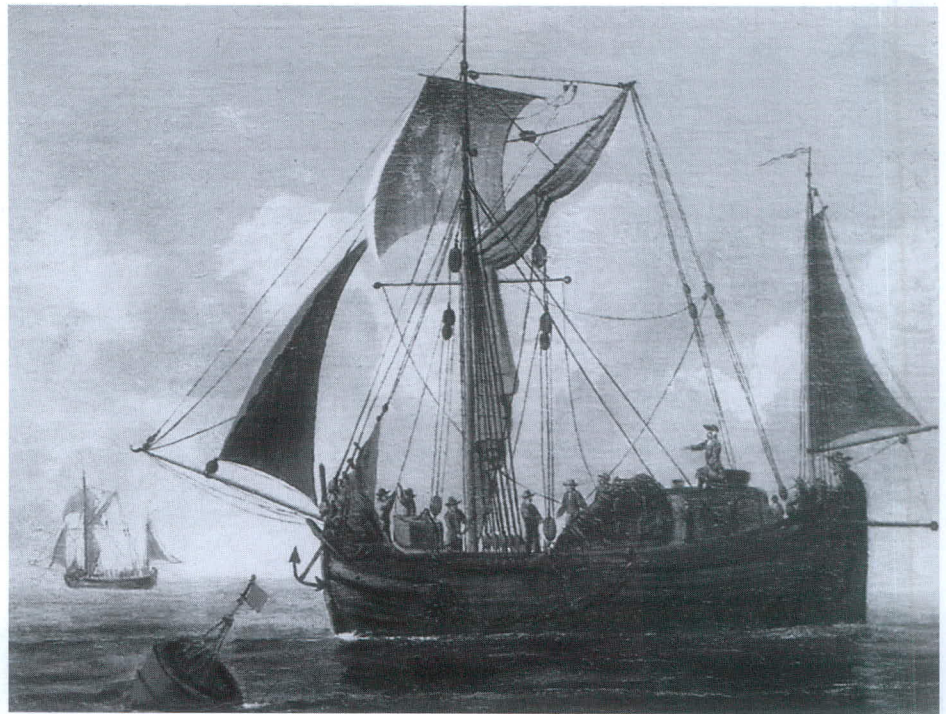
The City of Bremen, founded in 765 A.D., is situated on the Weser River about 30 miles upstream from the North Sea. Bremen was a member of the powerful Hanseatic League, which controlled northern Europe from the 13th to 15th centuries. After the 15th century the League and German shipping gradually declined, but rose again in the 19th century when German vessels traded extensively with North and South America, as well as other places overseas.

In 1871, Germany was unified and the merchant fleet grew to a point that, just before WWI, it was the second largest fleet in the world.

As far back as the Middle Ages, aids to navigation were used on the Weser River. The first navigational aid on the waterway has been documented as early as 1410, and some buoys were established in the 15th and 16th centuries. These aids were maintained by the merchant's guild of Bremen, which, of course, had a vital interest in the safety of navigation in the area.

The merchants and ship owners of Bremen Harbor were active in the development and expansion of their port. However, they were somewhat hampered by the geography of the Weser River. The river between the port and the North Sea is surrounded by marsh land and tends to silt in. In earlier times vessels were able to reach Bremen as the channel was less filled in than in the last two centuries. But by 1800, only barges and shallow draft vessels could reach Bremen.

In 1827, the mayor of Bremen purchased an area of land near the mouth of the Weser and established the Port of Bremerhaven, which rapidly developed. From 1887 to 1895



Painting from about 1770, showing the smack-type Bremen buoy tender. The Bremen Barsemeister (master of navigation aids) is sitting on an elevated position, giving instructions. Note the sinker on the bow and buoy already positioned. Photo courtesy Bremen Museum of Cultural History.

the lower Weser River was further deepened to allow larger merchant ships to reach the port of Bremen. Prior to WWI, Bremerhaven and Hamburg were engaged in a fierce rivalry for transatlantic trade.

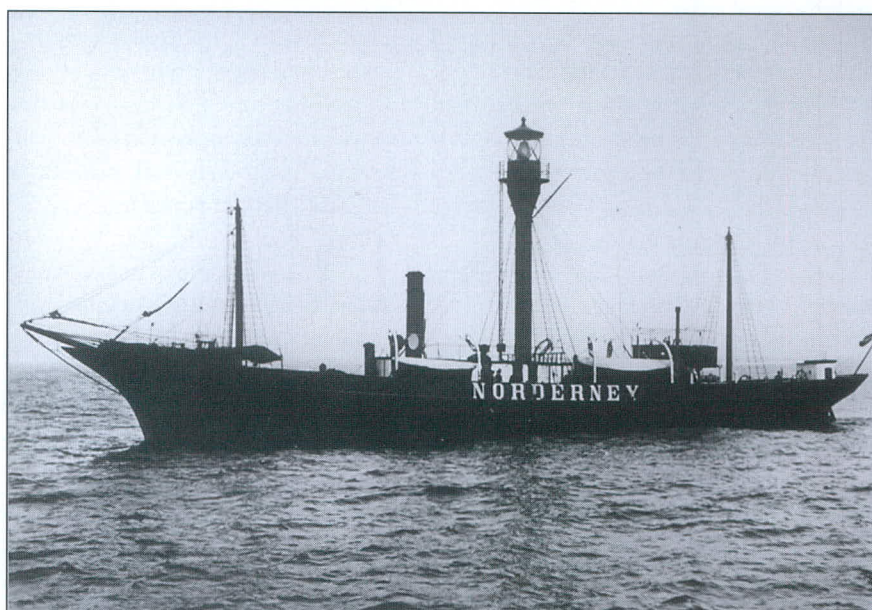
The area of the Weser River between Bremerhaven and the North Sea is laced with shifting shoals and channels and subject to a ten-foot tidal range. These conditions require careful navigating and the support of numerous aids to navigation.

The first lightship in the area, the *Bremen*, was established in 1818 and served until 1981, when the station was discontinued. The second station in the estuary was the *Weser*, which lasted from 1874 to 1981. The Hoheweg Lighthouse was constructed on a shoal in the estuary in 1856. A third lightship station, *Norderney*, was established in 1907.

The rapid growth of German shipping in the latter half of the 19th century required reshaping the organization in charge of aids

to navigation. Although there was, and is, a strong federal government, the responsibility for managing aids to navigation in Germany rested with the individual states. Around 1900 three states bordered the Weser River: the free Hanseatic cities of Bremen and Bremerhaven, the Western Riverside of the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg and most of the eastern bank under Prussia. After the Franco-German War of 1870-71, the Tonnen-und Bakenamt (buoy and beacon authority) was established and began operation in 1877. The authority managed the aids for all three states mentioned before and the work was financed by shipping dues. Surprisingly, the funds received from visiting merchant ships not only funded all expenses of the authority but actually showed a huge profit: a half million Marks in 1900. The profits were used to continue dredging the Weser estuary. The excess funds also enabled the authority to establish the most modern navigational aids of the day and

Right – Lightship *Nordeney* on station. Along with an identical sister lightship and a relief vessel, this ship was built in Bremen in 1906. Both had a modern light tower and were propelled by a steam engine. Photo courtesy Wasser-und Schiffsamt, Bremen.



Below – Lightship *Bremen* on station circa 1913. the ship was built in 1874. Photo courtesy Wasser-und Schiffsamt, Bremen.



Above – Hoheweg lighthouse, constructed in 1856, is still in service today. The radar and microwave antennas on the top are the obviously recent adaptations. Photo courtesy German Maritime Museum, Bremerhaven.



Left – Buoy tender *Weser*, foreground, alongside the lightship *Bremen* circa 1913. Photo courtesy Wasser-und Schiffsamt, Bremen.

construct the impressive Rotesand Lighthouse between 1880 and 1885.

After the Weser was dredged between Bremerhaven and Bremen for deep draft vessels, a series of skeleton towers were constructed along the waterway. These impressive towers still serve the mariner today.

Steam buoy tenders were used by the Hamburg authority in charge of aids to navigation as early as 1855. But, the Weser authority didn't purchase a buoy tender until 1887, when it contracted to have a small buoy tender named *Bremen* constructed. At 63 feet in length, she was only able to work or service small buoys and in sheltered waters. Her boom could lift 1.5 tons and the small engine only allowed a speed of 8 knots. This modest vessel, with a crew of five, maintained aids to navigation between Bremerhaven and Bremen until 1961.

Recognizing the need for a larger vessel to service aids in exposed and off-shore waters, a delegation of the Tonnen-und Bakenamt Authority traveled to Britain in 1889 to evaluate the Trinity House buoy tenders. In 1890, the Johann Lange Shipyard near Bremen was awarded the contract to construct a British -style tender. The vessel, named *Weser*, was commissioned in 1892. She was 120 feet in length, equipped with twin screws (providing a speed of 10.5 knots) and a boom with a lifting capacity of 8 to 10 tons.

At the end of the 19th century, the Authority maintained 206 floating aids to navigation. In 1890 the first iron buoy was placed in service. At about same time lighted buoys, fueled with pressurized gas, allowed vessels to navigate along the Weser at night. These aids were maintained by the two vessels, *Bremen* (in sheltered areas) and *Weser* (exposed locations).

World War I caused international shipping in the Weser and its ports of Bremerhaven and Bremen to be drastically reduced. The decline in shipping meant decreased lighthouse dues and the Authority soon began operating in the red. The cost of continuing to maintain aids to navigation now fell on the heavily burdened German taxpayer. After the war, in 1919, the Ministry of Transportation was formed in Berlin and took over the responsibility for aids to navigation from the various states. The new organization also assumed responsibility for a large non-standard fleet consisting of buoy

tenders, lightships, dredges, icebreakers, barges, and inspection vessels. The new agency was called Reichswasserstrassenverwaltung (waterways administration of the Reich). But the daily work and substantially the same staffs remained unchanged.

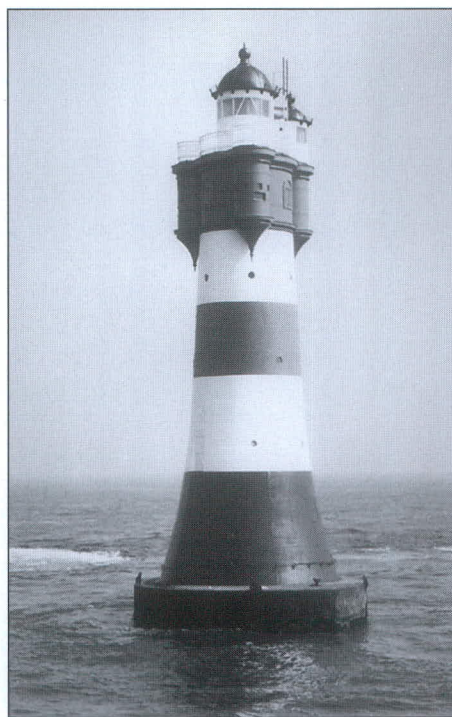
**D**uring World War II the agency remained pretty much civilian. The *Weser* was lost, apparently in a collision with a submarine. Bremerhaven was

devastated during the war, but little Bremen remained unscathed.

Bremerhaven became the principal port of disembarkation for U.S. troops. Because the Allies were interested in the safety of navigation along the waterway, the responsibility for the aids remained under the Allies until 1950, when the Water and Shipping Administration was created under the West German government.

Because of the loss of the *Weser*, the steam buoy tender *Langeoog* was transferred to the Weser area in 1945. The vessel had been constructed in Belgium in 1942. Due to wartime shortages it was not constructed of the best metal and sections of the hull had to be replaced. The vessel faithfully served the aids of the Weser River and delivered supplies to lighthouses in the area until she was scrapped in 1969.

From 1914 until the 1950's, the German authorities maintaining aids along the Weser waterway had relied on an aging fleet of buoy tenders, ice breakers and other vessels. They

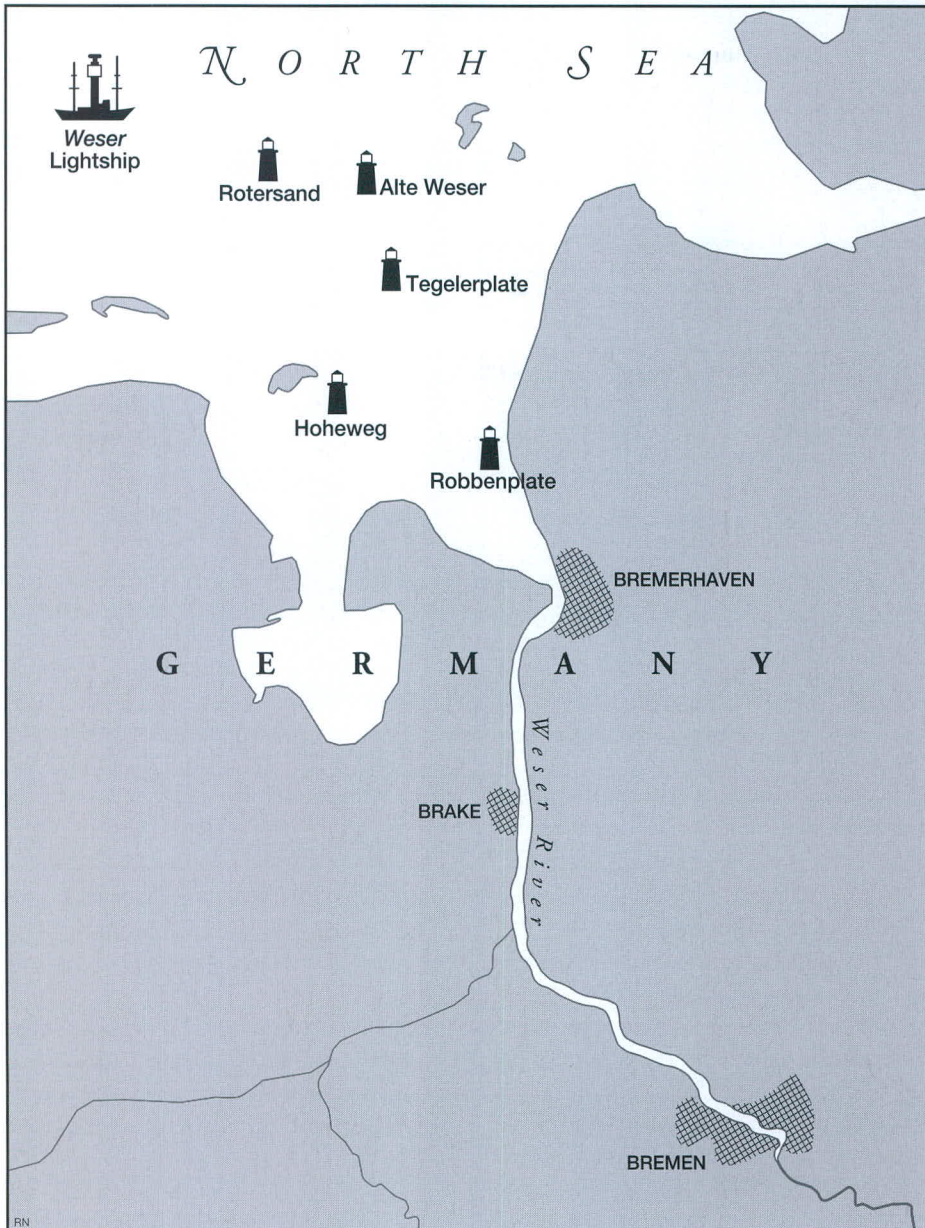
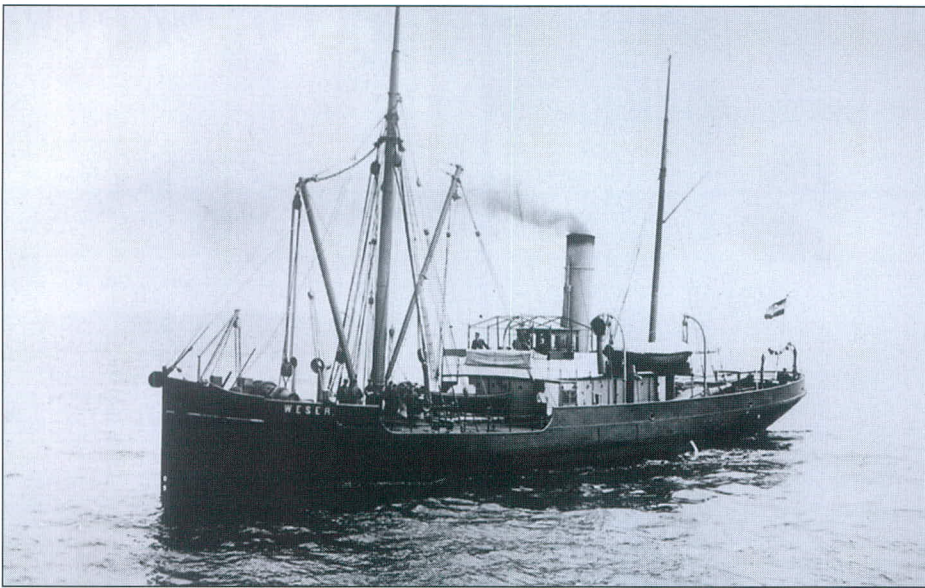


**Left – The caisson-type Rotesand lighthouse went into service in 1885. Because of its romantic design, it quickly became Germany's most popular lighthouse, frequently depicted on post cards and souvenirs. Although now out of commission, it is preserved as a historic monument. Photo courtesy of the German Maritime Museum, Bremerhaven.**



**The buoy tender *Bremen* (constructed in 1887). Photo taken in the 1950s in her last years of service.**

**Opposite page, top – Buoy tender *Weser* (constructed in 1892) at sea circa 1913. Both photos courtesy of the Schifffahrtsamt, Bremen.**



consisted now of more or less inadequate vessels and of varying designs. But with a strong German economy in the 1950's and 60's, a whole new fleet of vessels was developed. Standard designs, painted with standard colors and markings, provided a far more uniform public image.

The vessel *Barsemeister Brehme* (commissioned in 1960) was named after an early 20th century head of aids to navigation. The 135-foot-long ship has twin maneuverable screws, a type of propulsion used on many tugs of Bremen towing companies. She had two sister vessels. The motor ship *Bruno Illing*, 160 feet in length, replaced the *Langeoog* in 1968. She is one of four sisters and works 330 aids along the Weser River. This vessel is similar in size to the U.S. Coast Guard's Redwood class of tender.

Since the 1960's, changes in the aids to navigation in the Weser River and delta area include the decommissioning of the Rotersand Lighthouse in 1964, the construction of the Alte Weser, a caisson type lighthouse and the replacement of the Bremen lightship station by the small, automated Tegeler Plate Lighthouse.

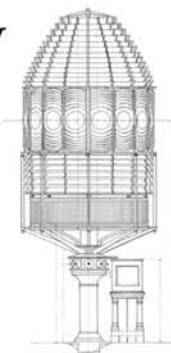
Buoy tenders are often overlooked in books written on aids to navigation. A recent scholarly German book on aids to navigation in the 19th and 20th centuries unfortunately has no chapter on buoy tenders, revealing that in Germany, like America, they are stepchildren. But surprisingly enough, Germany not only has organizations maintaining an impressive fleet of seven museum lightships, but also two buoy tenders: the *Bussard* of 1905 at the Kiel Maritime Museum and the *Kapitan Meyer* of 1950 at Wilhelmshaven. The preservation group in charge of the latter ship even maintains her steam engine plant.



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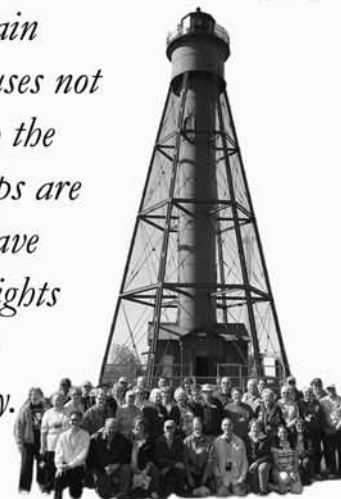
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