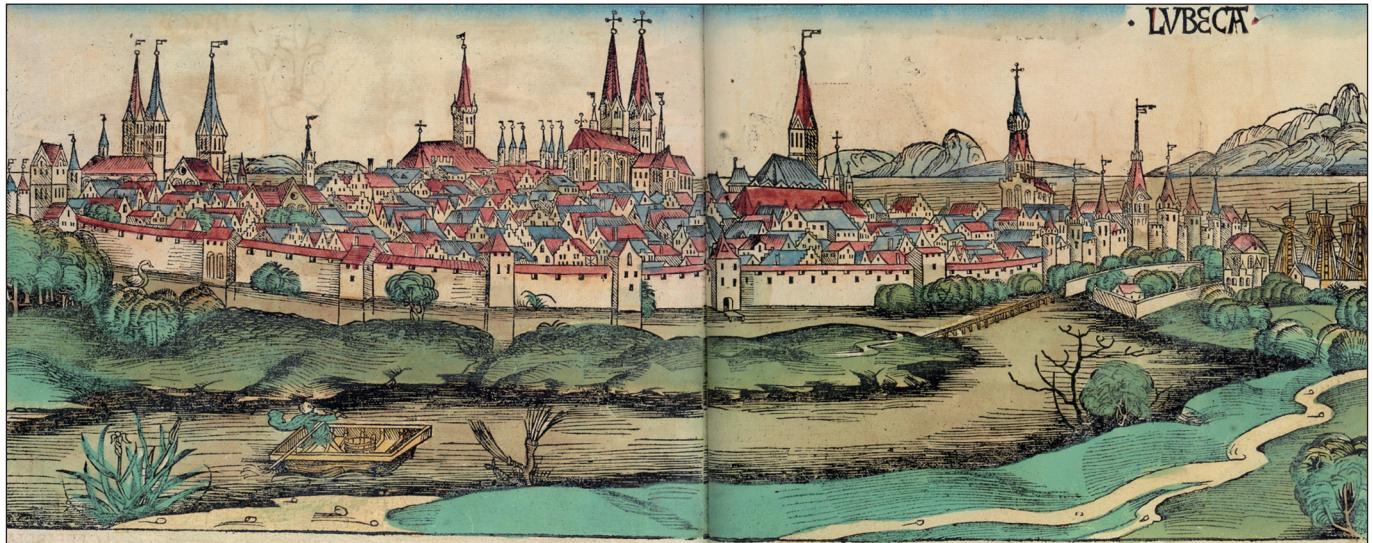


# The Hanseatic League



ABOVE: Lübeck in 1493.

## Inventing The Single Market

If any historical event was likely to cause the establishment of new navigational aids, then it was the creation of the world's first single market.<sup>1</sup> As far back as the 11th century, the benefits of adopting a trading system free from the limitations of tariffs and other barriers were becoming increasingly obvious. It all came about with the formation of an organisation across the North and Baltic seas by a guild of merchants that nucleated in Germany. *Hanse* or *hansa* is an old German word meaning a band or a troop, and it was applied to an organised group of merchants trading over significant distances by land or sea.

## Objectives

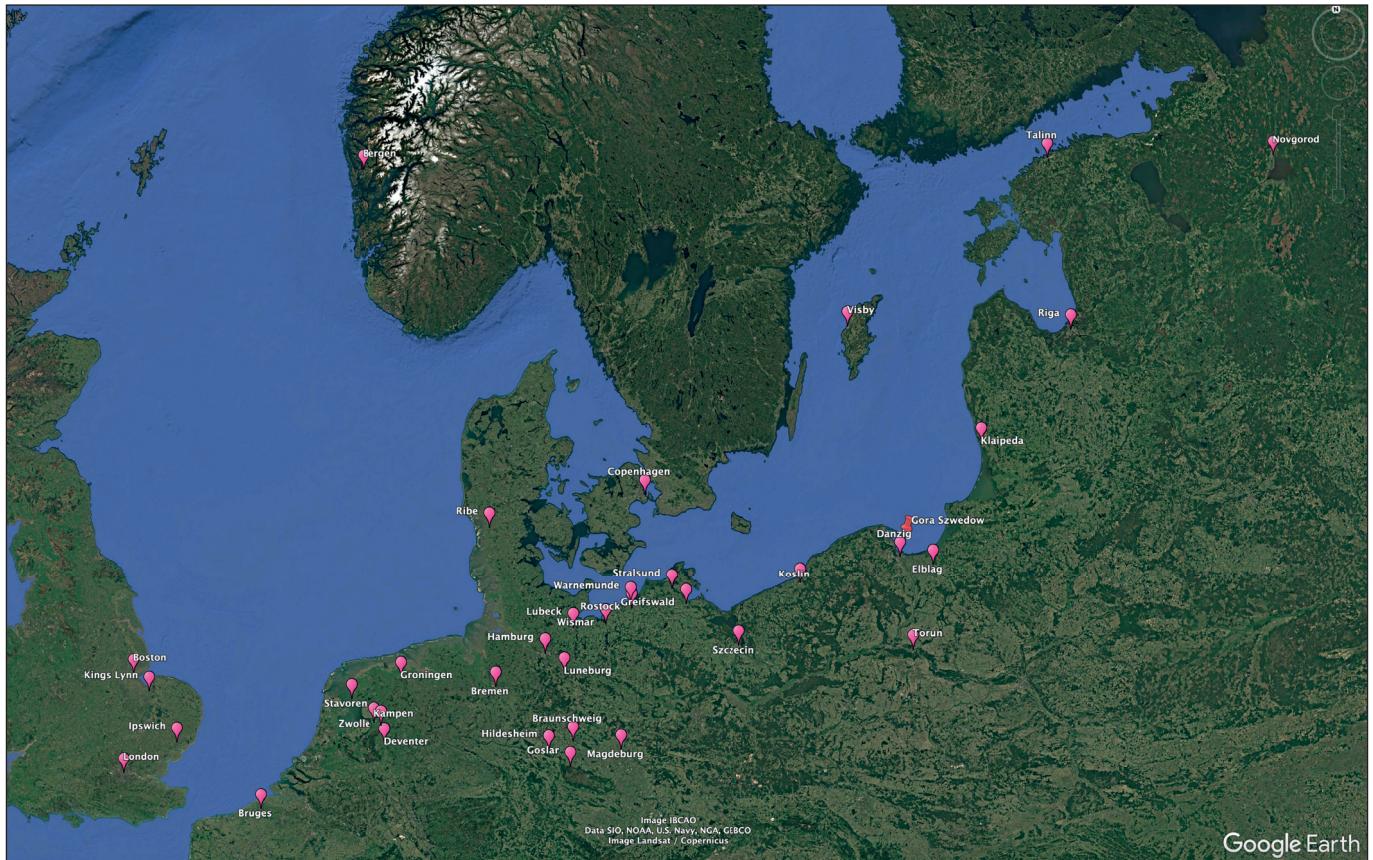
The objectives of this chapter are:

1. To review the formation, functions and progress of the Hanseatic League
2. To consider the impact of the Hanseatic League upon the need for lightstructures.
3. To identify the locations of significant lighted aids to navigation in the North and Baltic Seas during the 11th to 17th centuries.

The precise origin of this *hanse* is vague but it was a natural parallel to guilds, brotherhoods and fraternities - self help co-operatives that were springing up across Europe and are the subject of the next chapter. Whilst trade in the Mediterranean region was being dominated by the Venetians and later the Genoese, the angrier, more hazardous waters of northern Europe were thousands of nautical miles away. After so many centuries of violence and chaos, the slow development of new societal norms led to new strands of nautical expertise, especially in shipbuilding and these, in turn, facilitated growth of all kinds.

The principle of banding together into co-operatives was clearly an obvious way to improve civilised societies that needed supplies of many types of goods. By rationalizing supplies and demands, merchants were able to grow businesses and improve the lifestyles of their communities. As co-operatives in England were still in the future, German merchants initiated the forerunner to the 20th century European Economic Community.

By the start of the 11th century, it was common to find German merchants trading in London, as well as in northern Scandinavia and the eastern coast of Russia, and it was these Germans who initiated the first co-operation with like-minded traders. It was the towns of the River Rhine that were first to form



**ABOVE:** This satellite map shows a selection of the many cities that were either full members of or participants in the Hanseatic League. Whilst many cities were not directly located in seaports, nevertheless, almost all had efficient access to the North and Baltic Seas by being on major river networks. (And, of course, it was their very position with excellent water-borne communications that caused them to develop into major centres of population in the first place.) Germany clearly held the strategic centre ground and was therefore the major player focused on the city of Lübeck. One of the most curious cities to the modern eye is Novgorod that was important in medieval Russia and played a significant role in the political, economic, and cultural development of the region. Another is the little-known centre at Visby of the island of Gotland. Though part of Sweden today, it played an important self-governing role in the Baltic region in times when it had not been conquered by neighbouring power-brokers. By the start of the 16th century, one third of the population of the Dutch island of Texel was engaged in fishing with all produce being marketed via the Hanseatic League.<sup>6</sup>

themselves into an alliance; the Baltic towns were quick to follow suit, once they realized that this was for the benefit of the common merchant. The word *hansa* also means *society* or *union*, but it was not until much later that the formal title, *Hanseatic League*, was used.

If there were differences in methodology, the principles were always constant, i.e. the organization of trade, the minimising of losses at sea by shipwreck or groundings, and the mitigation of the effects of ever-present piracy in that lawless environment. That is not to say there was no contact between the south and the north. Naish points out that there must have been interactions between Germans and Venetians by means of the extensive system

of waterways across central Europe. The Romans had already shown how this could be exploited, especially if the long route via the Atlantic Ocean could be avoided. Naish supports his theory by the many similarities found in the navigators' sailing directions that have survived the centuries.<sup>2</sup>

The move was both inspired and demanding in these times that still lacked many of the tools and facilities enjoyed in later centuries. The creation of the Hanseatic organisation required extensive travel and diplomacy, the forging of international agreements in times well before much of the political structures of society had been built.

The League grew organically as it assembled like-minded city states that had the independence to take



ABOVE: *The Steelyard in Thames Street, London. Engraving by Henry George Hine (1811-1895)*

part. The result was that, rather like the present idea of Freeports today, factories and distribution centres were established on land specifically intended to be part of the Hanseatic trading system. Groups of mostly German merchants became resident in these commercial zones where they operated international markets trading imported and exported products. Over the course of several centuries as many as 160 different cities and ports took part in this economic model that ranged geographically from the London Steelyard and Bruges in the west to Novgorod in the east and Bergen in the north. Some of these markets are indicated in the map on p121.

It was not all plain sailing. Despite the significant improvement to economic activities afforded by the Hanseatic League there remained many groups of non-conformist, criminal minds ready to indulge in piracy. In similar fashion to the various East India companies of later centuries, which had to employ armed forces to protect their business interests, so also did the Hanseatic members frequently use protective methods in the form of troops on board their merchant ships. In addition, the ever-changing ambitions of the major European rulers also created a deep hiatus to the system. Nevertheless, the Hanseatic League was a major step forward in European civilization at a time when it was badly needed.

It seems, however, that despite the significant increase in the volume of shipping in the North and Baltic seas, the time was still not right for significant increases in the number of navigational aids. There can be no doubt that the principle of providing lights to assist navigators in their complex journeys across these turbulent waters was well established and desirable, but the setting up of a lighthouse in these times was not as straightforward as it might first appear, as the graphic on p314 shows. And the bottom line

was that the technology to achieve the reliability of these navigational aids was lacking. The concept of a lighthouse was still constrained by the only significant lighting method available—coal or wood fires. It is clear that the establishment of reliable fires that could be of sufficient value to navigators was still very dependent upon the supply of resources, by which I mean significant quantities of fuel, trustworthy manpower in all weather and atmospheric conditions, and last but not least, the money to pay for it all.

I have already discussed at length my argument about the influence of Christianity in the provision of the most basic navigational aids at night, that is the showing of lights from prominent positions by members of the church or other sympathetic individuals in a not-for-profit capacity. Although this was in extensive use by the end of the first millennium, there was also a growing understanding that more substantial lights could be provided by dedicated individuals managing fires in strategic locations.

This book attempts to draw together as many of the recognised locations across Europe as possible. (Evidence of this happening beyond the extent of Christendom, i.e. Europe, the Middle East and those parts of north Africa that had been exposed to Christianity is scarce and does not seem to contribute competitive elements to the activities occurring here (see p115).

We will never know what the true inspiration for the construction of medieval lighthouses was, but the extensive operations conducted by the Hanseatic League must surely have significantly raised the awareness of safety at sea amongst its many ship captains who, as wide-ranging travellers, spread the word. It was one thing having open fires as beacons in the gentler conditions

of the Mediterranean, but quite another in the harsh weathers of northern Europe. The absence of suitable means of achieving satisfactory navigational aids at night must surely have been the dominant retarding force. Despite all that, we have good evidence that this new momentum for the increased seaborne trade did indeed result in the building of new lighthouses. We shall see in coming pages where this took place, but clearly the influence of merchants whose businesses depended upon profit and growth was able to overcome the hurdles mentioned above, especially the absence of financial support.

A kind of medieval freeport was established in London, upstream of London Bridge, called the Steelyard. This in itself is a most curious name given that we are some 400 years in advance of the industrial business of making steel rather than iron. The explanation probably has something to do with the name being derived from a German term. The Steelyard site is reported to have been where the current Cannon Street station exists.<sup>3</sup> It was said to have been a significant trading post consisting of many stores and warehouses accessible to sea-going ships, and generally managed and operated by German immigrants who presumably understood the rules and regulations by which the League conducted its business.

London was just one such centre for, as I have already mentioned, almost all of the Hansa centres took this format, varying only in size and extent, but operating under the same sort of single market rules and obligations as we see today in the European community. It was, indeed, a remarkable development in European history, centuries ahead of its time.

## Over Land And Sea

**A**t the start of the second millennium, the civilized world of northern Europe was beginning to realize how much its future depended upon successful trade. However, the constant turmoil caused by endless disputes over land, resulted in great losses to those trying to earn an honest living.

After the decline of Viking dominance and the rise of Christian kingdoms in the Baltic, long-distance trade began to expand. German merchants from towns like Cologne, Lübeck, and Hamburg began trading in the Baltic region, especially with Scandinavia and the Slavic lands. These merchants

often travelled in convoys for protection and formed informal alliances to co-ordinate trade and defence.

The Hanseatic League was primarily a maritime trading network, but land trade also played a significant role, especially in connecting inland cities and transporting goods to and from seaports. The core cities of the Hanseatic League (and those with the potential for development) flourished accordingly. Seaports like Lübeck, Hamburg, Bremen, Danzig (Gdańsk), Riga, and Stockholm formed the backbone of the League.

Maritime trade was vital for bulky and high-volume goods, especially salt from Lüneburg and western France; grain from Prussia and Livonia; fish (particularly dried and salted herring and cod); timber, tar, flax, furs, and wax from Russia and Scandinavia; cloth, wine, and spices from Flanders, England, and further afield via Bruges and London.

Land routes connected inland cities like Cologne, Braunschweig, Goslar and Nuremberg with seaports, and the development of better roads allowed many of the valuable goods to be moved over land, including luxury goods such as silks, spices and metals, manufactured products like armour, tools and textiles, and salt and fish from coastal to inland markets.

Trade fairs in such locations distant from the sea as Champagne, Leipzig, and Frankfurt stimulated overland commerce where, even here, as much use was made of water-borne transport as possible. The great river networks of the Elbe, Weser, Vistula and Rhine were crucial for inland water transport, often blending sea and land routes.

Sea trade dominated in terms of volume and value, particularly in inter-regional and international commerce. Land trade was essential for distribution and logistics, feeding the maritime network and linking it to inland producers and consumers. The League's strength was its ability to integrate both systems. Cities like Lübeck served as transit hubs, moving goods from the Baltic coast to the interior. Overland routes ensured goods reached areas without direct sea access. Maritime trade was the economic engine of the Hanseatic League - faster, more efficient for bulk goods, and crucial for international trade. Land trade was complementary but vital too, enabling access to inland markets and raw materials, and supporting overall logistical networks. The balance was weighted toward the sea, but the League would not have functioned without well-developed and protected land connections.

# Lübeck

The German city of Lübeck was founded in 1143 by Count Adolf II of Schauenburg, established on the site of an earlier Slavic settlement. In 1158, Emperor Frederick Barbarossa<sup>4</sup> granted Lübeck special rights and privileges that enhanced its status as a trading center. In 1159, the city was rebuilt by Henry the Lion, Duke of Saxony, after a fire destroyed the original settlement.

Lübeck became a Free Imperial City in 1226, giving it a high degree of autonomy under the Holy Roman Empire. The city developed a strong legal and administrative tradition and was known for its well-organized civic institutions. It became a center for Gothic architecture, particularly the Brick Gothic style seen in landmarks like St. Mary's Church (Marienkirche) and the Holstentor city gate.

Lübeck's location with excellent access to the Baltic Sea made it ideal for trade. It quickly grew into a major port and commercial center and became the leading city of the Hanseatic League. By the 14th century, Lübeck was often referred to as the "Queen of the Hanseatic League" due to its wealth, influence, and strategic importance. The city traded extensively in salt, fish, grain, cloth, and timber, connecting German inland regions with Scandinavia, Russia, and the low countries.

The late 15th and early 16th centuries brought a decline in Lübeck's dominance as the Hanseatic League grew weaker due to the rise of powerful nation-states, especially Denmark and Sweden. Shifts in trade routes caused by exploration of the Atlantic and the discovery of the Americas reduced the significance of its Baltic Sea location. Internal political conflicts and economic competition contributed greatly to its troubles, but despite these challenges, Lübeck remained a significant regional power and maintained its cultural and economic importance.

## Civic Alliances Grow Strong

In 1241 an alliance was formed between Lübeck and Hamburg. This is often cited as the first formal step toward the Hanseatic League. The two cities agreed to protect trade routes and assist one another militarily, thus marking the beginning of coordinated Hanseatic cooperation. In today's jargon we might think of it as a kind of NATO, an international alliance in which the partners agree

to help one another in case of attack, except that this was not an alliance between countries. It was the disagreements between kings about their kingdoms that was causing all the trouble in the first place. No, this was an alliance between middle-class businessmen who were fed up with the impediments to their enterprise. The Hanseatic League was not just a co-operative, formed for reasons of trading, but also a collaboration for reasons of defence against the unreasonable use of force. But the forces employed by members of the alliance were never used aggressively - only when their peaceful intentions were threatened.

During the 10th and 11th centuries German emperors had converted the Danes to Christianity, mostly at the point of a sword: the Germans were in firm control of the Danes at this point in history. However a change in the balance of power began to take place as the Danes grew stronger and more able to resist the forces of German rule.

By 1182, Danes had achieved great strength under their militant leader, Waldemar the Great, and they began to exert disruptive influences on what had always been a profitable and established herring industry. It was not until 1227 that the Hansa towns were able to defeat the Danes to secure their trading and fishing interests.

Other Scandinavian powers continued to harass the German merchants, ignoring the consequences of treaties and continually breaking faith with those with whom they had entered into agreements. The island of Gotland was frequently at the centre of troubles. In 1361 it was conquered by Waldemar IV of Denmark with great violence and many deaths. The island's city of Visby was devastated. Gotland had been an early member of the Hanseatic League and so the League was forced to engage in military action with the Danes. Valdemar demanded enormous tributes to be paid following the defeat of the Gotlanders, but he was destined to lose it all when ships were sunk in a storm on the way home.

There are still showing at Visby twelve sections of rose windows of Saint Nicolas Church,<sup>5</sup> in which, according to tradition, there once burned two large lamps that served as beacons to light the seamen safely into harbour in the day of the town's prosperity. In retaliation, forces from the Hanseatic League attacked the Danes in Copenhagen in 1362, a battle that ended in defeat for the Hanseatics.

It was not until November 1367 when deputies from no less than 77 towns met in Cologne and declared themselves to be the enemies of the king of Denmark as constituted in the Hanseatic League.

A trade war followed. Embargoes were placed upon all Danish goods. Those towns that refused to join the war against the Danes were considered to be outside the League membership and to suffer financial penalties in trades with them.

Faced with the threat of considerable force, Waldemar fled to safety in Pomerania. Meanwhile the Hanseatic forces punished the Danish territories and avenged the attack on Visby. Thus in 1369 the Danes surrendered completely to the Hanseatics.

With the Peace of Stralsund, the German merchants had established supremacy of the Hansa over Scandinavia. The obvious strength achieved by the Hansa enabled them to exert pressure on other competitors in Western Europe demanding trade privileges and concessions.

A long period of success followed and most of the cities that belonged to the Hanseatic League became wealthy. Lübeck became the *de facto* capital with no less than 80,000 inhabitants in the 14th century. The expansion of what was essentially a German project was greatly successful.

Until the end of the 13th century it was the inland towns who seemed to gain most, but as the ocean highway took a greater importance thanks in part to better seamanship and navigation, it was the coastal ports which became increasingly significant.

A very important route for sea traffic was between Bruges and northern Russia with hundreds of ships sailing annually, all owned by the Easterlings, which was the name given to the Baltic merchants to distinguish them from the inland traders.

Only in the 15th century were the Dutch Zealanders and the Frisians able to compete with the Hansa.



ABOVE: An early clinker-built Viking ship. The design proved to be very significant for better seafaring in the middle ages.

## The Consequences for Seafaring of Increased Trade

The acceleration of the processes of civilization caused by the growth of trade was only possible because of much improved seafaring technology, in particular, the design and building of much better ships. Van de Noort<sup>7</sup> places much emphasis upon development of clinker design in boat building, a paradigm that originated in Scandinavia and was used to great - often destructive effect in the early middle ages by the Franks, Saxons and later the Vikings. Inevitably, the better seagoing characteristics of these craft were adopted by the merchant classes to advance their trading efficiency that was necessarily carried out primarily by sea. Improvements to keel design were of much advantage and this had occurred by the start of the second millennium, by which time, sadly, the benefits to piracy had been recognized more than to peaceful activities. Curiously, in the early middle ages, piracy seemed to go hand-in-hand with migration, an activity that had a profound impact upon the development of centres of European population. In that sense, the twin activities of piracy and migration were a necessary preliminary to overseas trade. In particular, the design of ship known as the cog is considered to have been developed from the basic clinker design by German builders during the time when the Hanseatic League was coming into prominence. Maybe the Limfjord waterway that had once allowed ships to pass from the Baltic to the North sea without passing around the dangerous waters of the Skaw at Skagen on the northwest tip of Denmark became unusable. With ships forced to transit past Skagen and around the north of Denmark, a better design of ship was necessary and thus the cog emerged to make safer sailing.



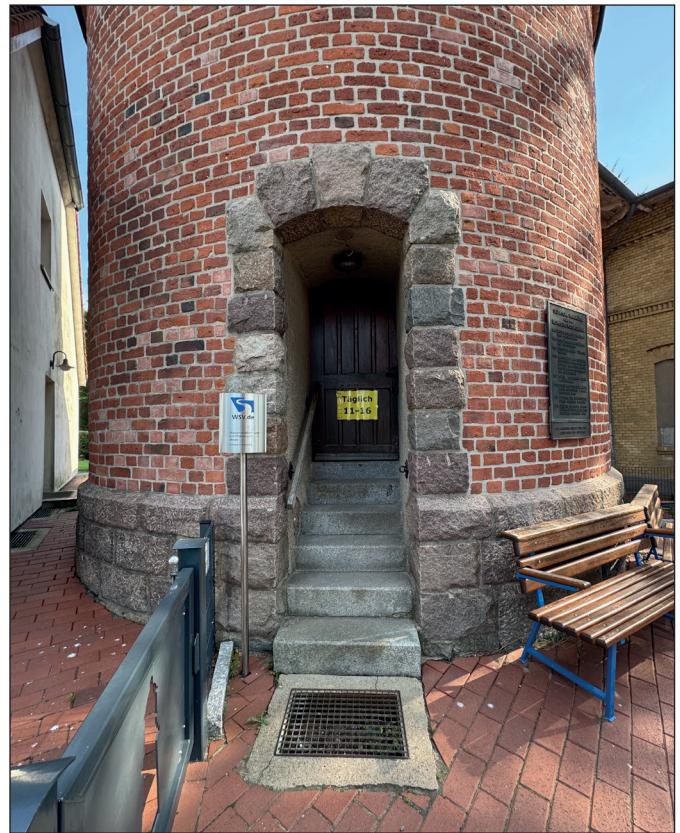
ABOVE: The old lighthouse at Travemünde is very significant in the history of medieval lighthouses

## Travemünde - The Hanseatic Lighthouse

The focus of this chapter is that an important stimulus to the building of lighthouses in modern times was the creation of the Hanseatic League with an agreement between merchants of Lübeck and Hamburg. This significant event provided the motivation and allocation of resources to initiate a new network of lights shown all along the southern North and Baltic Seas.

The entrance to the port of Lübeck was guarded by a light at Travemünde and this location is fortunate to have a grand survivor of one of these earliest lighthouses, unlike so many other locations where nothing remains. This local lighthouse has now become a vital repository of items from these early days, although most are more appropriate for inclusion in volume 3 where I will describe the equipment used in the industrial age.

The main structure of the tower of 1539 is of brick with some ornamental stonework, and the unique architectural feature is how the numerous floor levels are visible from outside the building, indeed, have become an attractive characteristic of



ABOVE: In August 2025, the lighthouse was open from 10 am to 4 pm.

the design. Internally, each floor has been enhanced with excellent displays of relevant artefacts, some of them that were actually part of the lighting mechanism in times past.

The lantern is, of course, the most important part of the structure and here, rather than have an all-round glazed enclosure, as in so many other lighthouses, the need for light to be targeted in a narrow field of view is fulfilled by having sectored windows in the upper brickwork. Whilst the main window is for the navigation light, other windows are included on other floors for human observations.

Lighthouse optics were not adjusted for tides - the rise and fall of the sea did not affect how far or in which direction the light needed to shine. Instead, the light was always meant to be visible across a fixed arc or in specific sectors. So, of particular interest is a device for controlling the beam of light that includes a shuttering system run by clock-driven weights and a system of vertical shutters.

Other items are very early electric lights amplified with concave mirrors behind and primitive Fresnel optics. Coloured filters are also retained to give red and green leading light signals that show the best courses to steer into the channel.



*ABOVE: Looking north, ships bound for Lübeck carrying goods for the Hanseatic trade entered the river Trave from the Baltic Sea on the left with the help of the lighthouse. BELOW: Looking south towards Lübeck.*





*ABOVE LEFT: The observer's chair with telescope dominates level 5 and is walled off from the stairs.*

*ABOVE RIGHT: On level 6 a rare display of daymarks that were used to indicate the state of the tide.*

*BELow: Views of level 6 from different angles.*





*ABOVE: At the topmost level 8, usually referred to as the lantern room, we find on the left the exit door to the outer balcony. On the right is the arrangement used in early times whereby the light source was mounted in front of a reflector to amplify the light and project it in the required direction through the narrow window, itself fitted with adjustable vertical metal slats. In this case, the light source on display was an early electrical apparatus (BELOW RIGHT) with a rotational arrangement to bring a second back-up light into play if the primary bulb failed.*

*BELOW LEFT is the same space from a different angle.*



# Britain and the Hanseatic League

It was on the east coast of England that most of the interactions with the Hanseatic League took place. Locations such as Beverley, Boston, Great Yarmouth, Hull, Ipswich and Kings Lynn could all be reached easily from the many ports along the southern and eastern North Sea. One is of particular interest here.

King's Lynn, located in Norfolk on the east coast of England, has a rich maritime history that dates back to at least the 12th century. Originally known as Bishop's Lynn, the town was founded by Bishop Herbert de Losinga of Norwich around 1101. He established a church and a market, which helped the town grow. Its location on the river Great Ouse, which flows into The Wash, made it an ideal spot for a port. It provided easy access to the North Sea and to inland areas via the river. By the 13th century, Lynn was one of England's most important ports. The town was granted a charter by King John in 1204, giving it greater independence and fostering its growth as a port and trading hub.

It is true that many east coast ports saw trades with Hanseatic members. For example, Edinburgh was occasionally a beneficiary of Hanseatic trading, but there was never sufficient activity to move the port into a higher level of 'membership'. This was not the case in certain English ports such as Lynn. Although not a full League member, Lynn had such important connections that it hosted a Hanseatic trading post (Kontor). These German merchants from the Baltic and Hamburg secured trading privileges at Lynn in 1271 that were confirmed in 1310.

The Hanse House, was built around 1475 for German merchants trading in the town and still survives as a rare example of this type of site in England. Exports from Lynn included wool, cloth, salt fish, and locally produced agricultural goods, while imports mainly consisted of timber, furs, resin, wax, and beer from the Baltic ports. This trading relationship made King's Lynn one of England's most important medieval ports, rivalling much larger cities in terms of wealth generated through trade. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII, Lynn passed from ecclesiastical to royal control, and in 1537 it was officially renamed King's Lynn.



*ABOVE: The Hanse House in Kings Lynn represents the historic legacy of the town as a Hanseatic trading centre.*

The town adapted to changing patterns of trade. In the 16th and 17th centuries, it maintained a healthy trade with the Low Countries, Scandinavia, and, increasingly, the emerging Atlantic world. A shipbuilding industry developed alongside the port activities, and King's Lynn became an important centre for coastal shipping and fishing, especially for cod and herring.

As larger ports that served Atlantic shipping like London, Bristol, and Liverpool grew in prominence, King's Lynn's relative importance declined, but it remained a thriving regional port well into the early modern period. Efforts to improve the river and harbour, including engineering works in the 18th and 19th centuries, helped maintain Lynn's commercial vitality.

# Conclusions

**From the 12th and 13th c the idea of making elevated lights using the lever principle proved to be a popular solution in these waters. Criticism of these lights as being ineffective was unwarranted in view of the absence of anything better.**

**Though it appears that the setting of fire beacons was common throughout the maritime routes of the eastern European countries, there are very few firm documents in support of their locations.**

**The provision of navigation lights never improved beyond simple fire baskets until the earliest stone towers appeared in the 16th c, for example at Kopu.**

**In this chapter we have come close to the central idea of the period which was to assist the mariner with highly visible daymarks but to supplement the navigational aid with occasional fires atop the structures.**

**The Hanseatic League provided a stimulus for the creation of a network of medieval lighthouses to facilitate maritime trade between the Baltic and the North Seas through the narrow waters of the Skagerrak and Kattegat separating Norway and Sweden from Denmark.**

**We have no confirmatory evidence that the Hanseatic League actually built or commissioned lights directly. However, there seems no doubt that the incentive to enhance trading practices was a motivation for maintaining ecclesiastical lights already in existence or for building new ones.**

**The evidence of this chapter is that there were a great many fire lights shown along the coasts of the North and Baltic Seas, and that the principle of assisting mariners by means of lights at night was well established into the 12th and 13th centuries. The only retardation to the expansion of the network was the provision of suitable resources.**

## Notes

1 It could be argued that there were many other trading systems before this. An obvious example might be that of the Romans, but it seems to this author, at least, that the Hanseatic League was especially close to being a fore-runner of today's European single market by having a solid foundation in international law.

2 Sailing directions, or *rutters*, were written documents used by navigators to catalogue the details of routes, ports and harbours that were the tools of their profession. Not least amongst the content were descriptions of the many coastal features and other precious navigational aids. Even today, these items - now generally called Coastal Pilots - are vital components of the navigator's toolbox.

3 On the north bank of the Thames, just west of London Bridge.

4 Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (c. 1122–1190) was one of the most powerful and charismatic medieval rulers of the Holy Roman Empire. His nickname "Barbarossa" means "Red Beard" in Italian. He was King of Germany from 1152 and Holy Roman Emperor (crowned by the Pope in 1155)

5 Another example of the link with seamen.

6 Van de Noort, p89.

7 Van de Noort, p169-174.