

The Sea Horses of Hamburg

By
Duncan J. D. Smith

The ears of most people with a sense of adventure tend to prick up at the mention of offshore islands cut off daily by the tide. From England's St. Michael's Mount and the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, to the Île de Noirmoutier in France and Battery Point Light in California, they all offer the thrill of using a narrow raised causeway that within hours will disappear beneath the sea. Inevitably, in the minds of those making the crossing, the islands themselves takes on a certain mystique.

Perhaps one of the most curious of these tidal islands is Neuwerk, which is located in the shallow coastal waters of the North Sea, north-west of Cuxhaven in Germany. There are two factors that make Neuwerk unusual. Firstly, it belongs administratively to Hamburg, a city more than a hundred kilometres away, and secondly, although it can be reached by ferry at high tide, it is best visited by means of a specially-adapted horsedrawn carriage. Having made the four-hour round journey myself, in the wettest and windiest of conditions, I can assure readers that the journey by carriage is an unforgettable one.

Before describing the crossing, something should be said of the early history of Neuwerk. Geologists tell us that the island originated as a sandy outcrop as recently as the 1st century BC, during what they term the Holocene period. The oldest documentary evidence for Neuwerk dates from 1286, detailing summer grazing rights on the island, which is referred to only as 'O', that being Old Frisian for the word 'island'. At that time the island belonged to the Dukes of Saxe-Lauenburg, who in 1299 granted Hamburg the right to build a tower on the island, which lies at the mouth of the Elbe. The river was vital to the commercial livelihood of Hamburg and the tower would act as a defence against pirates and would-be invaders. Thereafter, the occupants of the nearby East Frisian Islands referred to the island and its tower as *Dat Werk* or *Nige* (new) *Werk*, leading eventually to the name Neuwerk.

Since its formation the shape of Neuwerk has altered dramatically. After the building of the first tower, the island continually lost ground to violent winter storms necessitating



the construction of a protective ring dyke around the tower in the mid-16th century. Within the security of the dyke several farmsteads were established, together with all-year-round arable land. The dyked-in area – the so-called *Binnengroden* – was kept dry by the construction of a series of smaller channels known as *Grüppen*. Beyond the dyke, which can still be made out today, the land was only fit for seasonal grazing.

The dyke was still sometimes breached at high tide, however, and from the late 18th century until the 1930s the island's shoreline was comprehensively stabilised.

To reach Neuwerk I caught the Metronom train ME121 from Hamburg's main station (Hauptbahnhof) to Cuxhaven, where Bus 1006 winds its way out of town to the long and desolate beach of Sahlenburg Strand. I arrived in good time and took the opportunity to explore the protected heathlands growing along the sand dunes, and to watch the myriad seabirds feeding in the shallows. Alongside a cluster of shops and houses there is a sandy turning circle called *Wattwagenplatz*, and it is here that the horsedrawn carriages assemble before setting out across the mud flats to Neuwerk. The

name *Wattwagen*, incidentally, means ‘mud flats wagon’, which differs from a land carriage in that the seating compartment is set much higher than usual, in order to keep the occupants dry when deep water is encountered.

The handful of family companies offering *Wattwagen* journeys to Neuwerk issue printed and Online tide tables (e.g. www.wattwagen-cux.de), giving the exact departure times from Wattwagenplatz, as well as the similarly exact time of return from the island. These are strictly adhered to so as to avoid leaving visitors stranded by the incoming tide. A glance at one of the timetables will show how the tides – and hence departure times – vary depending on the time of year. Since only a limited number of carriages make the crossing daily (outside the winter months) booking is essential, as is all-weather clothing.

At just before 3pm, accompanied by the reassuringly steady clip-clop of horses’ hooves, a long line of *Wattwagen* approached the shore from various stables somewhere inland, and assembled in Wattwagenplatz.



At exactly 3pm I boarded my carriage and was invited to sit at the front, squeezed in snugly between the driver and his friend. Their heavy Lower Saxony accents made it difficult for me to understand much of what they were saying although I managed to ascertain that the horses upon which our lives now depended were strong, reliable, and very tolerant of

sea water. Indeed, I learned later that not only do many horses enjoy walking in seawater but also that seawater therapy reduces by about 40% the time an injured or exhausted horse is laid up. So it was that our journey over the sea to Neuwerk began.

With a whistle and a few words of encouragement our wagon train set out to the waters’ edge. The island was little more than a dot on the horizon at this point, and a good one and a half hours’ journey away, but the horses (a young female and an older male) were unperturbed. Their path had already been marked out at low tide by a parallel line of blackened branches, buried securely on the sea floor. With a second sense for the task in hand they plodded on, stopping only very occasionally to feel their way where a patch of sand had shifted during the last tide. All the while the driver, using only a set of blue nylon ropes as reins and a natural empathy with his team, reassured both animals and passengers that we were making good and steady progress.

After forty five minutes we reached the middle of the channel, where the water even at low tide almost covered the horses’ backs (much to their apparent delight!) and a lonely



wooden post carried a crow’s nest equipped with a telephone, just in case any lost soul should ever find themselves marooned here. Onwards, ever onwards the horses went, tails swishing in the water, their muscles rippling across their haunches as the wagon slipped slowly through the blue-grey water. Despite a chill wind whipping up, and a downpour of squally rain, the journey at this midway stage proves oddly

Zen-like, staring dead ahead, with a straight horizon all around, and only one’s thoughts of the colossal debt owed by mankind to the horse.

More time passed and slowly the car-free island of Neuwerk hove into view, like a sheet of green ice floating in a polar sea. The lighthouse itself was visible now and the horses seemed to know it. As the water became ever more shallow their speed increased, shaking off the salt water that was clinging to their backs. By the time we

reached the concrete ramp that connects the sea with the island the horses were moving at a canter and in less than five minutes we had arrived at the foot of the tower.

With an hour to explore I disembarked and took a further look at the 35 metre-high, brick-built tower, which was erected between 1367 and 1369, after a fire destroyed the



first one; it is officially Hamburg's oldest building, as well as its last extant fortification. The tower is surrounded by a protective earthen embankment and was accessed originally by a doorway set eight metres above the ground, reached only by means of a rope ladder (today there is a staircase).

From the top of the tower there is not only a splendid view of the horses and carriages congregated on the ground below but also far reaching vistas of the island itself. In the middle of the 17th century a coal-fired navigational light was added to the tower for the first time, and in 1814 the tower was converted into a lighthouse proper. The lamp, which has been remote-controlled from Cuxhaven since 1971, is visible for miles around due to a system of parabolic mirrors. Also visible from the top is a tiny cemetery, containing the remains of nameless mariners washed up over the years on the island's shore, as well as the houses belonging to the indigenous population, some of whom are related to the original tenant farmers who were allowed to purchase their farms at the end of the 18th century. Farming waned with the opening of the first hotel on the island in 1905 and today Neuwerk generates much of its income from tourism.

All too soon the horses were growing restless and the carriages were loaded once again



with their human cargo, myself included. Suitably refreshed with a hot drink and a chocolate bar from the solitary shop alongside the lighthouse the driver gave his signal and the horses set out across the mud flats once more, this time with the tide racing ominously. Dusk was falling and with it the temperature but the horses were unperturbed.

Thoughts of fodder and a warm stable undoubtedly fuelled them as we picked our way back towards the mainland – and home.

The most recent chapter in Neuwerk's history is no less unusual than the first. In 1937, under the terms of the so-called Greater Hamburg Law, Prussia traded three cities (Altona, Harburg and Wandsbek) with Hamburg in return for Cuxhaven and Neuwerk. After the Second World War these Prussian rights passed to the new state of Lower Saxony, which in 1969 transferred Neuwerk back to Hamburg, in readiness for the construction of a deepwater harbour. That never happened and instead Neuwerk became part of the Hamburg Wadden Sea National Park, one of three national parks along the German North Sea coast that share and protect the valuable Wadden Sea ecoregion.

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