

# WHO ARE THE WENDS?

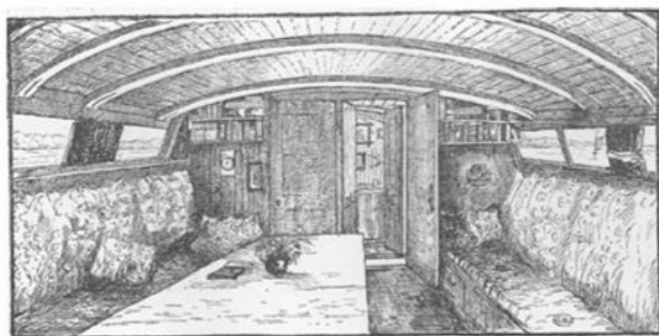
by Keith Lokan

Most of us nowadays identify the Wends as the Slav group living along the Cottbus-Bautzen axis (Lusatia or Lausitz), some of whom still speak their own Slav language, which overlaps with Polish and Czech. We know too that in the present day these Wends much prefer to be known as Sorbs, although the rest of Germany refers to them as Wends.

Some months ago Lyall Kupke lent me a book, written in the 1890s, entitled *'Our Wherry in Wendish Lands. From Friesland through the Mecklenburg Lakes to Bohemia'*, by HM Doughty. A wherry is a large shallow-draft barge-like sailboat, once common in the flat canal country of Norfolk, and in this case comfortably fitted out with bedrooms, toilets, kitchen and a large common saloon to accommodate eight or so passengers and several crew.



*The wherry*



*The saloon of the wherry*

With his two daughters, the author had in previous years travelled across the North Sea to explore the waterways of Friesland in the northern Netherlands. In 1889 they had laid up their wherry in Leeunwarden, fairly close to the German border, and returned in the following year to begin a journey, over two summers, which would take them through north-western and eastern Germany from the Baltic border down to Bohemia.

In the course of their adventure Doughty and his family travelled by way of canals, rivers and lakes across

Schleswig Holstein (Hamburg), Mecklenburg (Schwerin) and then south through Brandenburg (Berlin, Potsdam), Sachsen Anhalt (Magdeburg), Saxony (Dresden) and along the upper reaches of the River Elbe, all the way to Prague. From time to time they left their wherry to travel by railway on side excursions to towns and cities of interest.

The author was clearly well educated – his account is replete with classical quotations in the somewhat florid style of the time – and seems to have had a good command of German, although he had to depend on his Dutch crewman to interpret the related Platt Deutsch spoken in the far north-west.

Similar to the northern Netherlands, the Baltic north of Germany was criss-crossed with canals, rivers and lakes, which had until this time provided a very important regional transport pathway. This was now entering a decline as the growing railway network was undermining its commercial survival. Nevertheless, it was still mostly navigable, although the party found difficulties from time to time with stretches which were not well maintained and sometimes they had to backtrack to find alternative ways through.

The account of their voyage is interesting, and full of detail, but my interest lay mostly with the author's references to the Wends, which stimulated me to look further into Wendish history.

I soon discovered that the term 'Wend' in Germany was virtually synonymous with 'Western Slav', and describes the descendants of the Slav tribes who moved into the area east of Saxony and as far south as Slovakia, towards the end of the first millennium. In the period 300–500 AD, the Germanic peoples had moved westwards as the Roman Empire weakened, and, as the Franks, became the nucleus of the future France and Germany. They were replaced by the Western Slavs, initially as fairly major migratory groups, but soon dividing into smaller tribes separated by large tracts of woodland. In the north-west, the Polabian Slavs (Veleti-Lutici-Pomeranian and others, evolving later into the Obotrites), were known collectively as Wends. They were a pagan people whose land was gradually re-colonised and Christianised during the German Ostsiedlung (eastern settlement) in the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. They were culturally assimilated by the Germans over time, though their Polabian language was still spoken in northern Germany (Lower Saxony, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern) until the early 1800s.

There are vestiges still of the Polabian language in the names of many towns and villages in these former Wendish lands of northern Germany. Just as many place names in Lusatia end in 'ow', so too is the 'ow' ending commonly found in the north (for example, Hagenow, Jesow, Marsow, Tüschow, Badekow, Schwetow.... all east of Boizenburg).



The map shows the spread of Western Slavs by the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. For present-day orientation, Wrocław was formerly Breslau in Prussia; Lubusz = Lebus, on the Oder River - the present border between Germany and Poland; Szczecin (north of Berlin and formerly Stettin in Prussia), also on the Oder River; Praha = Prague; and Nitra in the far south is a major ancient city in Slovakia, about 100 km east of the present Austrian border.



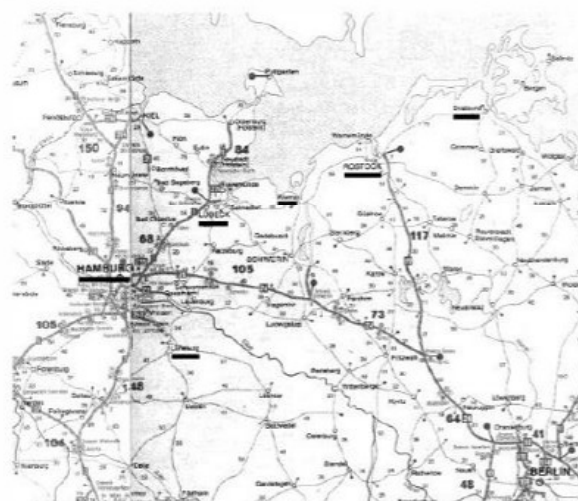
There is a small region southeast of Lüneburg, on the borders of Lower Saxony, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Brandenburg, known today as Wendland. This is not however an ancient regional name. It was first used by a priest from Wustrow in the eighteenth century, when writing about the language, customs and habits of the Polabian people who lived in this region. He considered them to be Wends, and so named the region Wendland.

As mentioned earlier, there is still a related spoken language further south in Lusatia. Indeed, in 2005 my wife and I attended the dedication of a new fire station in the village of Heinesbrück, north-east of Cottbus,

where the mayor of the regional municipal centre (Peitz) spoke in brief paragraphs in German, interspersed with the same paragraphs delivered by a Sorbian interpreter. This type of occasion is, however, more symbolic than necessary and illustrates a determined effort to sustain the Sorb identity in an environment where the language and culture are in significant decline. Street signs in this area all have their names in Sorbian as well as German.

In the eleventh century, Prince Niklot, leader of the Obotrites, became 'King of the Wends', establishing a dynasty which ruled the region for eight centuries until 1918, when the Grand Duchy was abolished to become the Free State of Mecklenburg-Schwerin in the Weimar Republic. The abdicating duke and his predecessors were known as the 'Princes of the Wends'. Interestingly, H M Doughty points out that the present English royal family enjoys the same Wendish ancestry, as Queen Victoria's grandmother, Queen Charlotte, a Mecklenburg princess and direct descendant of Niklot, married George III of England.

Strung across the southern shores of the Baltic Sea and inland along the navigable rivers are the ports of Lüneburg, Hamburg, Lübeck, Wismar, Rostock and Stralsund, identified by Doughty as 'the six Wendish towns'. These were important trading centres, which lay at the core of the mediaeval Hansa, a sort of 'common market' which, at its zenith, stretched from Belgium to Estonia.



*'The six Wendish Towns' (underlined)*

The Hansa or Hanseatic League originated in Lübeck in the mid-1300s and developed as a loose confederation of mercantile cities. Its purpose was to develop, manage and physically protect trade between ports and cities in northern Europe. Its members jointly pulled together military or naval resources when needed to preserve its interests, for example against piracy or intermittent attack against its members by

feudal kingdoms. It faded out about three hundred years later as the centre of European trade moved southwards and the chaotic collection of independent European dukedoms and kingdoms gave way to nation states. Its memory survives today in the name of the German airline Lufthansa.

What emerges from this brief summary is that the Wends, who were one of the ancestors of the Germanic people, played a much more significant role in German

history than is apparent from the surviving enclave in Lusatia.

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Bibliographic note:

Apart from the book by H M Doughty, much of the remaining material, including the map showing the 10<sup>th</sup> century distribution of the Slavic tribes, has been drawn from a number of sources within Wikipedia.

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