

## Fish fingers: an exhibition and research project at the German Maritime Museums, Bremerhaven

Heidbrink, Ingo

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► INGO HEIDBRINK

## Fish Fingers

### An Exhibition and Research Project at the German Maritime Museum, Bremerhaven

In spring 2006 the German Maritime Museum presented a special exhibition exclusively dedicated to Fish Fingers. The exhibition was accompanied by ongoing historical research, public outreach activities, special programmes for schools and an international conference dealing with a wider range of fisheries history topics.

This article will provide an overview of the whole fish fingers project at the German Maritime Museum, its origins, developments and final results, as well as discussing the relevance of such popular science exhibitions to fisheries history research.

#### The story behind the exhibition

The department of fisheries history at the German Maritime Museum was founded only in 1996, and its first major exhibition project was of course the permanent exhibition on fisheries history in the new museum building opened in 2000. As this museum's display was intended to provide an overview of at least the last hundred years of the development of deep-sea fisheries in Germany, special topics like fish fingers, much less the fish-processing industry as a whole, in detail. Nevertheless, the foundation of the department was at the same time the foundation of a voluntary study group dedicated to fisheries history, the members of which were nearly all contemporary witnesses of the fisheries in the 20th century. In a city like Bremerhaven it is not surprising that a fair number of people inside this group had been closely associated with the fish-processing industry during their professional careers. At the very first official meeting of this volunteer group a number of topics for future exhibitions and/or research projects were discussed. One of these was fish fingers, proposed by the late Günther S.M. Fuchs.

Although the department of fisheries history at the German Maritime Museum did not start research on fish fingers immediately after the proposal, everybody recognized this particular topic as being of real importance. Consequently fish fingers became at least one of the collection's priorities, and during the years that followed a variety of objects related to fish fingers found their way into the fisheries history collection.

In 2003 the department of fisheries history at the museum was asked to prepare a chronology for the hundredth anniversary of the Association of the German Fish Industry and Fish Wholesale Trade (*Bundesverband der deutschen Fischindustrie und des Fischgroßhandels e.V.*). While up to this point research in the department had concentrated mainly on the history of the fisheries themselves, now fish processing attracted much more attention than ever before. Consequently, existing contacts with the industry were intensified and new ones established, and the idea of a special exhibition devoted to fish fingers was given a higher priority on the agenda. Nevertheless it was spring 2006 before the exhibition on fish fingers could be opened.

## Fish fingers as a topic for a special exhibition

While most previous exhibitions at the German Maritime Museum had dealt with maritime history in the context of the arts, engineering, navigation, trade, or archaeology, now for the first time a specific type of food became the central topic. What were the reasons for mounting an exhibition on food rather than on fishing?

Of course, it would have been equally possible to prepare an exhibition entitled “The introduction of deep-freezing technology to the German distant water fisheries and related fish industry, 1930-1990” – but who would have been interested in such an exhibition?

The statement of research objectives of the German Maritime Museum stipulates that research and exhibitions should have at least some relevance to the present day. Or, in other words, maritime history should have some connection with contemporary society and hence to the museum’s visitors. While the fisheries themselves are more or less a closed world out on the open seas, they are firmly connected to the world of consumers or visitors to the museum via their final products. The very basic idea behind focusing on fish fingers instead of the fisheries was that fish fingers are familiar to virtually 100 per cent of the population in Germany, while perhaps only 10 per cent would have the knowledge to be able to define a term like “factory freezer trawler”. In addition, fish fingers are a product that is highly appealing to most children and so offers an opportunity to attract children to the museum.

While it became obvious that a special exhibition on fish fingers would attract the visitors to the museum, the question remained of whether such an exhibition would fit into the scientific concept of the museum and what topics should be presented to fulfil the remit of both a historical research institution and a national museum.

Of course, dealing with fish fingers means explaining the product and the production process, but this would not in itself have been enough for a maritime history project. The conceptual design of the fish fingers exhibition finally covered three major categories and so gave rise to three main historical stories that needed to be told:

The first category or story comprised everything related to the fish stocks themselves and the catching process; the second was the actual industrial processing of the fish fingers, and the last story covered all consumer-related aspects.

This approach guaranteed that the whole fish fingers project – i.e. not just the special exhibition, but also research and related activities – had such a wide scope that questions relevant for historical research as well as for today’s societal questions relating to the environment could be included in the research agenda.



Fig. 1 The logo for the fish fingers project, which was also the central element of the corporate design for the whole project. Although using design elements similar to those found in fish finger advertisements, it was distinguished from these by the colours chosen, which were also the main colours used for the exhibition design itself. (Silke Brinkmann, Büro für Gestaltung, Bremerhaven)



## Preparations

Like any special exhibition at the German Maritime Museum or in any other museum around the globe, the fish fingers exhibition needed a curator, a designer, museum technicians, etc., but in the specific case of the fish fingers exhibition there was a great need for research before work on the exhibition itself could be started. At this particular point the voluntary study group on fisheries history stepped back into the project, having initiated the idea for it some years earlier.

Three retired managers from one of the leading fish-processing companies in Europe were willing not only to support the project as a whole but also to form an advisory group that really became central to it.

In addition, a young Bremerhaven-based designer was, from the outset, integrated into the whole project, not just for the design of the exhibition. Because she was able to bring to the project a wealth of experience on how to communicate fish-related topics to a wider public, she took on the primary responsibility not only for the design but for the whole concept for the communication of the content. As head of the museum's department of fisheries and whaling history, I was responsible for the historical research involved in the fish fingers project as a whole. Here I must mention the other members of the team who together mounted the fish fingers project: naturally, the museum's workshops and the administration contributed to the project, as did the photographer, the archive and library staff and many others.

When I embarked on the historical research for the exhibition, I soon realized that there were practically no sources available in public archives, nor secondary literature dealing with the topic. Archival sources were for the most part still in the archives of the fish-processing companies and not available for the project. With regard to three-dimensional source materials, the situation was at least a little bit better, as the department had started collecting items related to fish fingers soon after it was established. For example, in the 1990s the museum had been able to obtain rare examples of original fish finger packaging from the former GDR production, and of course models of all generations of trawlers related to the production of frozen fish products were available.

While the first story to be told in the fish fingers exhibition was relatively easy in terms of research, the other two proved more difficult.

## The three stories

As mentioned earlier, the first story that needed to be told in the exhibition was the development of stocks and fishing technology, or in other words the dark blue component out on the open seas and in the oceans. The second story was the industrial processing itself and its development: the stainless steel component in brightly lit industrial surroundings. The final story was the consumer aspects with their atmosphere of normal everyday light.

### Fish fingers, fish stocks and the fisheries

As fish fingers are an industrialized product the fish fingers project focused its research especially on the heyday of industrialized fishing under the German flag. A model of the factory freezer trawler BREMEN, built in 1972 in Bremerhaven, impressively conveyed the idea that fish fingers are linked with large scale fisheries and highly sophisticated vessels. Further models of ships from earlier periods enabled comparisons to be drawn, and were of particular relevance because the raw material for the first fish fingers was not always caught by factory freezer trawlers, but by much smaller conventional trawlers.



Fig. 3 Entrance to the fish fingers exhibition at the German Maritime Museum. The visitors were welcomed by the fishes themselves. (Photo: Egbert Laska, German Maritime Museum)



Fig. 4 A model of the factory freezer trawler BREMEN as the centrepiece of the first chapter of the exhibition. (Photo: Egbert Laska, German Maritime Museum)

Thus the story of fish fingers in relation to fishing was largely an account of the introduction of deep-freezing technology in the distant-water fisheries, whether on board the vessels or at land-based industrial facilities.

Research about the vessels themselves had for the most part already been done by the German Maritime Museum, because the early attempts to develop factory freezer trawlers during the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s had been analyzed in the course of the last decade. For the factory trawlers from the late 1950s onwards the situation was more or less similar, because their development had formed part of a bigger research project on fishery conflicts in the 20th century.

Everyday life on board the factory trawlers, and the particular conditions experienced while catching fish intended for later processing into frozen fish products such as fish fingers, were part of the large oral history project undertaken by the whole voluntary study group and completed only a short time earlier, and so their recordings were available, though as yet only on tape. More limited research results based on participant observations on board the German fisheries research vessel WALTHER HERWIG (III) or the fishery protection vessel MEERKATZE rounded out the research for the first part of the fish finger exhibition.

### Fish fingers and their processing

The second part was the really tricky one, because virtually no objects and no archival or other sources were available at the beginning of the project.

As the main principles of the industrial processing of fish fingers have not really changed during the last 50 or 60 years, since the production of the first fish fingers in the United Kingdom, it was even harder to develop a historical storyboard for this central part of the exhibition. Of course, although the basic principle continued more or less unchanged, nearly all the indi-



Fig. 5 Oversized models of fish fingers guided the visitor through the different stages of the production process. (Photo: Egbert Laska, German Maritime Museum)

vidual steps in the processing became much more sophisticated, and above all the working conditions inside the factories changed totally.

Because fish finger production was from its early beginnings strictly a production line process, the concept for this part of the exhibition was based on a linear approach, comparing a production line of the 1960s with a production line today, with an additional line in between showing the product itself at the various stages of the production lines as a reference.

For this reference line, oversized models of fish fingers were produced. The first one was the frozen fillet block cut into fish finger format. The second and the third were fish fingers with batter applied to the fillet, while the next ones showed the pre-fried product and the shock-frosted product before its packaging. The final oversized model was of a fish finger after pan-frying in the consumer's kitchen.

The comparison of the 1960s production line and today's production line focused on the development of the sawing technology. In the 1960s manually operated band-saws similar to those in carpenters' workshops bore a large share of the whole production process, while today the workload is carried by more or less fully automated rotating saws with diamond saw-blades.

The good contacts of one of the members of the advisory panel with the industry provided the opportunity to get not only a historical band-saw for the exhibition, but also a complete present-day production line. As a result, visitors were able to realize the scope of the changes just by observing the technology itself, with the further assistance of a number of short video sequences. Moreover, this particular member of the advisory board managed to get authentic archival documents from the companies involved in the development of this specific technology, so that visitors could be shown how, simply due to improved sawing technology, it had been possible over the last half-century dramatically to increase the number of fish fingers that could be cut out of a single frozen fillet block.



Fig. 6 An original manually operated band-saw from the early days of fish finger production. (Photo: Egbert Laska, German Maritime Museum)





Fig. 7 Exhibition panel explaining the development of sawing technology. (Silke Brinkmann, Büro für Gestaltung, Bremerhaven)

Finally, contrasting pictures of 1960s production and corresponding pictures of today enabled the visitors to see the change in working conditions. In the 1960s there were hundreds of female workers with hardly any protective clothing involved in the whole operation, while today only a very limited number of workers control the almost completely automated production process.

For those visitors who were interested in the technological aspects of the history of fish fingers, systematic layouts of fish finger processing lines from four decades were provided in this section of the exhibition.



Fig. 8 Pictures of fish finger production in the 1960s showing the huge amount of manual work required during the early periods of fish finger processing. (Photo: Egbert Laska, German Maritime Museum)

### Fish fingers and consumers

The final section of the fish fingers exhibition was devoted to the story of consumers and fish fingers. Unlike the section on processing, this section was not dominated by a strictly linear narrative, but consisted of a variety of topics and therefore a number of shorter stories.

One of these dealt, for example, with cookery books and fish fingers, and showed that fish fingers were sometimes promoted in cookery books as a potential element of even high-quality cuisine, while in fact they continued to form part of quick and easy meals. Another little story was about children and fish fingers and how advertising learned to address children and more importantly their mothers in television commercials for fish fingers. These and other stories were embedded in the larger story of how German consumers integrated convenience foods into their cooking and how fish fingers became to some extent part of the lifestyle of families with young children, especially in the 1970s.

Finally, an illustrated timeline linked the specific history of fish fingers with the wider history of fisheries and selected aspects of the much wider social and economic history between the interwar period and the present day.

A very last section of the exhibition presented the distribution of fish fingers produced in Germany all over Europe and many other parts of the world, and provided information on initiatives such as the Marine Stewardship Council.



Fig. 9 Distribution chart for fish fingers produced in Germany (Photo: Egbert Laska, German Maritime Museum)



Fig. 10 A variety of topics relating to fish fingers were presented in the final section of the exhibition. (Photo: Egbert Laska, German Maritime Museum)

## Relevance of the fish fingers project to fisheries history

Naturally a project like the fish fingers exhibition has a certain value for a museum, especially in the context of getting new visitor groups into the museum and/or as a part of the educational role of a museum like the German Maritime Museum, but has the exhibition also been of value to fisheries history research in terms of scholarship?

As with any exhibition project with a scholarly basis, one can say that it had at least a certain value in that it communicated scientific knowledge to a wider public than can be reached purely through scholarly papers or articles. But in the case of the fish fingers project the scholarly value was much higher because this project allowed the German Maritime Museum's department of fisheries and whaling history to focus most of its activities, for a certain period, on a single topic.

Without the exhibition there would have been no such concerted research effort on this particular topic, and – more significantly still – the exhibition was the means of unearthing source material that would otherwise not yet have become available for research.

The fish fingers project was one from which the fish-processing industry and fisheries history research each had something to gain. The processing companies agreed to open up their archives or to make documents available via the advisory board largely in exchange for the direct or, certainly, indirect return they obtained from the exhibition. While industries are often reluctant to open their archives for analytical research which may prove unsympathetic, they were willing to do so on this occasion in the knowledge that an exhibition of this kind would not only communicate their history to a wide audience, or group of customers, but would actually provide them with a kind of marketing opportunity.

The project as a whole brought a double benefit to fisheries history research: sources from industrial archives became accessible to researchers, and because of the popularity of fish fingers it was possible to generate enormous public awareness of the field of fisheries history in a very short space of time. It was truly a win-win situation.

WISSENSWERTES AUS DEM BEREICH FISCH UND FANG	
PRODUKTION	
ABSATZ, MARKETING UND VERBRAUCHER	
1911	Durch den Dänen A.J.A. Ottensen wird erstmalig ein industriemäßig nutzbares Tiefgefrierverfahren zum Patent angemeldet
1915	Aufnahme der Produktion von tiefgefrorenen Fischen nach dem Ottensen Patent in Schweden und Dänemark
1925	Gründung der Kühlfisch Aktiengesellschaft in Wesermünde Unter der Geschäftsführung von Walter Schliez entsteht eine erste Versuchsanlage für das Tiefkühlen von Seefischen in Deutschland
1938	Die ersten schnellarbeitenden Fisch Filetieranlagen werden durch die Firma Nordischer Masch neu bau Rud. Baader in Lübeck entwickelt Die Anlage wird bei Fisch ins land in Wesermünde getestet und später in der Produktion eingesetzt
1938	Das Ottensen Verfahren wird durch den amerikanischen Fischereibiologen Clarence Birdseye weiterentwickelt. Neben dem Plattenfroster ist der Verdienst von Birdseye vor allem die Einführung von Haushaltspackungen und der Tiefkühlkiste bis zum Einzelhandel in den USA
DIE ERSTE GENERATION TK-TRANSPORTER	
1939	Gründung der Solo Feinfrost GmbH in Berlin In dem Unternehmen werden die gesamten Tiefkühlinteressen von Unilever in Deutschland zusammengeführt
WESER HAMBURG	
1940	Mit der WESER und HAMBURG werden die ersten Schiffe in Dienst gestellt die erfolgreich Tiefkühlfischprodukte bereits auf See produzieren. Ausgestattet mit Filetier-, Fischmehl- und Tiefgefrieranlagen sind sie die technologischen Vorläufer der späteren Fang Fabriksschiffe
1948 1949	Während die Nordsee bereits 1948 die Produktion von tiefgekühlten Fischfilets wieder aufgenommen hat, stellt Solo Feinfrost 1949 die Produktion und den Verkauf vorübergebend ein
1953	Die Continental Frost Gesellschaft wird als firmenmäßiger Zusammenschluß aller an der Tiefkühlung interessierten Unternehmen durch F. Busse gegründet
1955	In den bundesdeutschen Einzelhandelsgeschäften stehen gerade einmal 2.500 Tiefkühltruhen mit mehr als 200 l Inhalt
1955	Tiefkühlkost wird erstmalig auf der ANUGA präsentiert
1956	Unter dem Markennamen EFF Feinfrostfilet bringt Nordsee Tiefkühlfilet als Markenartikel in den bundesdeutschen Markt
HEINRICH MEINS	
1957	Mit der HEINRICH MEINS wird das erste als Heckfänger gebaute Fang Fabriksschiff der bundesdeutschen Hochseefischerei in Dienst gestellt
1959	Solo Feinfrost testet nach zehnjähriger Pause die Rückkehr in den deutschen Markt (Versuchsgebiet Düsseldorf/Neuss) Die tiefgekühlten Produkte stammen von der Nordsee Tochter Fisch ins Land und der englischen Unilever Tochter Birds Eye Unter den Produkten befinden sich erstmalig auch Fish Fingers für die deutsche Bezeichnung Fischstäbchen gewählt wird
1959	Nach einer zögerlichen Versuchphase entwickeln sich Fischstäbchen schon 1 zu einem der wichtigsten Produkte des deutschen Tiefkühlmarktes »WAS SIND FISCHSTÄBCHEN?«

Fig. 11 Major events relating to fish fingers in the 1950s. (Silke Brinkmann, Büro für Gestaltung, Bremerhaven)

The benefits to scholarship were all the greater because the research results gathered during the whole project could be immediately used for academic teaching at the University of Bremen, where a special class dealt only with the history of the fish-processing industry, and because, in addition, fish fingers, or the history of industrial fish-processing, became the subject of an international research conference on fisheries history at the German Maritime Museum.

Altogether, the fish fingers project was much more than just a special exhibition. Nevertheless, we must consider whether popular and contemporary topics such as fish fingers are really part of the remit of a national museum devoted to historical research.

The research guidelines for the German Maritime Museum state that the historical research undertaken should have at least some relevance to today's society. In line with this principle the fish fingers were, first and foremost, a device for stimulating public interest in some of the key questions of fisheries history research, questions that are closely related to challenges faced by our present-day society, such as the over-exploitation of marine resources, or the alienation of consumers from primary food production. Although these questions are not linked to fish fingers alone but to the whole frozen fish-processing industry, fish fingers served to catch the eye of a public which, once inside the exhibition, was readily attracted to the historical research issues.

Finally, at least some comments on our cooperation with the industry and the advisory board should be made at this point. Although the fish-processing industry at no point tried to exert any direct influence on the exhibition's content, the project was not hyper-critical or polemically environmentalist. Instead it was committed to an approach suited to scholarly research, aiming to be as neutral as possible while at the same time providing visitors with material and information on which they might base critical thinking of their own. Issues such as over-fishing or certain obsolete and undesirable production methods formed part of the stories told in the exhibition, but without a final comment – this was left to each individual visitor to the exhibition.

During the whole period of the fish fingers project the advisory board was an important factor, both for contact with the industry but also for scholarly interpretation of the source material. As the members of the advisory board were high-ranking retired employees and/or managers of the fish-processing companies involved in the fish finger business, they provided the project team with a wealth of insights which might otherwise never have become available. On the other hand, working with contemporary witnesses can sometimes lay a very special duty on historians because they are no longer dealing with the history of an anonymous individual, but with the history of a known person, the contemporary witness. To a certain degree, fish fingers have been these people's lives, not just their professional lives, and therefore a considerable part of the discussion with members of the advisory board was devoted to whether only the final story of success should be presented, or whether some detours and even dead-ends in the historical development of fish fingers should be included. It may sound strange, but it was actually this discussion which proved most illuminating for an understanding of the history of fish fingers and the wider subject of industrially processed food derived from the biological resources of the oceans.

Soon after the opening of the exhibition, the number of visitors and the media coverage clearly proved the success of "fish fingers" as an exhibition project, but what about the scholarly value of the whole project? It is of course difficult, as with the assessment of any other kind of research, to benchmark the research results, and this essay will therefore conclude without passing a final judgment on the scholarly value of the project as a whole. But perhaps it may at least be said that all the project's sponsors and the members of the advisory board can be confident that fisheries research has benefited from their support, and that the complex history of industrial fish processing in Germany is much better known now than it was before the fish fingers project was undertaken, even if understanding of it is still incomplete.

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**Personal acknowledgement:**

As the scholar and curator responsible for the whole fish fingers project, I would like to express my personal thanks to all those who supported the project or worked on one or another part of it. Special thanks are due to the members of the advisory board and to the designer Silke Brinkmann, who created a design that successfully communicated all aspects of fish fingers and related historical research, and was not only a corporate design for the exhibition but furthermore the centerpiece of a corporate identity for the whole project.

## Fischstäbchen. Ein Ausstellungs- und Forschungsprojekt am Deutschen Schiffahrtsmuseum, Bremerhaven

### **Zusammenfassung**

Im Frühjahr 2006 präsentierte das Deutsche Schiffahrtsmuseum eine Sonderausstellung zum Thema Fischstäbchen. Hierbei handelte es sich nicht nur erstmalig um eine Ausstellung zu diesem Thema mit seinem hohen Gegenwartsbezug für die Museumsbesucher, sondern vielmehr um ein integriertes Forschungsprojekt, bei dem die Ausstellung selber zwar ein zentrales Element war, aber von umfangreicher wissenschaftlicher Forschung und Arbeit gestützt wurde. Diese Ausstellung stand nicht nur in unmittelbarer Verknüpfung mit der gegenwärtigen fischereihistorischen Forschung sowie dem Anspruch öffentliches Interesse zu stillen und z.B. mit speziellen Schulprogrammen neue Besuchergruppen für das Museum zu erschließen, sondern sie wurde auch von einer internationalen Konferenz begleitet, die sich mit einer breiten Auswahl fischereihistorischer Themen beschäftigte.

Dieser Aufsatz gibt nicht nur einen Überblick über das gesamte Projekt Fischstäbchen am Deutschen Schiffahrtsmuseum, über seinen Ursprung, seine Entwicklung und die erzielten Ergebnisse, sondern diskutiert zugleich die Bedeutung solch populärer Wissenschaftsausstellungen für die fischereihistorische Forschung.

## Bâtonnets de poisson panés. Un projet d'exposition et de recherche au Musée allemand de la Marine de Bremerhaven

### Résumé

Au printemps 2006, le Musée allemand de la Marine a présenté une exposition temporaire ayant pour thème les bâtonnets de poisson panés. Il ne s'agissait pas uniquement d'une première exposition sur ce sujet, avec ce qu'elle pouvait avoir d'actuel pour les visiteurs du Musée, mais bien plus d'un projet de recherche intégré, au cours duquel l'exposition - bien qu'étant un élément central, n'en était pas moins étayée par des recherches et des travaux scientifiques importants. Cette exposition avait non seulement un lien étroit avec la recherche actuelle sur l'histoire de la pêche (répondant également au besoin de satisfaire les intérêts du public et par exemple, d'atteindre de nouveaux groupes de visiteurs avec des programmes spéciaux pour les scolaires), mais elle fut également accompagnée d'une conférence internationale qui était consacrée à un vaste choix de thèmes sur l'histoire de la pêche.

Cet article propose, outre un aperçu sur l'ensemble du projet «Bâtonnets de poisson panés» au Musée allemand de la Marine, sur son origine, son développement et ses résultats, une discussion sur la signification de telles expositions, à la fois scientifiques et populaires, pour la recherche sur l'histoire de la pêche.