

The History of *La Bohème*

On one of our first trips with *La Bohème* we went to the village of Oude Wetering. Thanks to the little bronze plaque right beside her wheel, we knew that she had been built at a boatyard there in 1931, so we went looking for that.



Once we had arrived in Oude Wetering, the boatyard was easy enough to find. The company that N. T. Van der Meer established in 1911 – on what had once been a plantation on Braassemer Lake – still exists. It is now run by his grandson Hans and Hans' son Gertjan. Four generations of boat builders!



We rang the bell and explained that we'd recently bought and restored *La Bohème*. With great enthusiasm, Hans pulled out some old photos and began telling us stories. Some ten bridge-deck cruisers had been built there at the boatyard. When it was first launched in 1931, *La Bohème* was called *De Wulp* [The Curlew]. Everything had been crafted by hand. Hans remembered how as a child he used to play with the big steel ball that was fastened to the punch to lend extra force to that machine. "It was a rather dangerous toy," he said, thinking back. All of the carpentry for the mahogany superstructures was done in the old plantation shed, but the vessels themselves were all made in the open air in the boatyard.

Another two other bridge-deck cruisers *De Ado* (1937) and *De Infernos* (1939) were built by Van der Meer & Zn in the same period.



In Alblasserdam we happened upon this statue that shows how the steel ships were riveted.



Hans told us that *De Wulp* was later rechristened as *De Albina*, after she had been purchased by Ed Klinkert of Maastricht. That explains why our sun tent was made in Maastricht. We know from Marcel Bleeker of Zwartsluis, from whom we bought *La Bohème* which he had rechristened as *De Calinda* that she had belonged to a Dutchman who lived in Belgium.

We invited Hans to join us on our boat, and as soon as he saw her lying there in the harbour of Oude Wetering, he began beaming with pride. He was impressed by her fine appearance. Once on board, he was more

than happy to be able to give our old dame a closer inspection. The original woodwork and steel were still in excellent condition, he concluded. Despite his own preference for sailboats, he confided that he was secretly looking for a bridge-deck cruiser himself. We promised him that if we'd ever be looking for a buyer, he would be the first person we called. But our love for this beautiful little ship is such that it will be quite some time before that happens.

