



A short history of the *Charlesville*/Georg Büchner

The MS *Charlesville* was built by the shipyard John Cockerill SA in Hoboken, Antwerp, as the last of a class of five ships, namely the *Elisabethville*, the *Leopoldville*, the *Baudouinville*/*Thysville*, the *Albertville* and the *Charlesville*.

As of 1895, a total of 32 ‘-ville’ ships assumed the liaison between Antwerp and the Belgian Congo; first, for the Compagnie Belge Maritime du Congo (1895–1930) and, thereafter, for the Compagnie Maritime Belge (Lloyd Royal) (1930–1988). The shipping line CMB that provided shipping services under Belgian flag between Antwerp and the Belgian Congo, had suffered significant losses during the Second World War, and was fortunately able to offer her services again between Antwerp and Matadi, thanks to this new fleet, and this on a fortnightly basis.

The first ship taken into service was the *Albertville*, next the *Leopoldville* and then the *Elisabethville*. The last two ships of this class, the *Baudouinville* and the *Charlesville*, were somewhat larger than the previous three, had more passenger accommodation and were slightly faster (16,5 knots as opposed to 15 knots). For this reason the speed of the other three was also adapted.

On March 6th 1951, the MS *Charlesville* departed on her maiden voyage to the Congo and, following the independence of the Congo in 1960, she remained on the Antwerp–Matadi service.

During the night of December 22nd and on December 23th 1963, the ship fulfilled an important role in the rescue of survivors from the burning cruise liner, the *Lakonia*, a former Dutch colonial passenger ship, the *Johan van Oldenbarnevelt*.

In 1967 the *Charlesville* was sold to the East German shipping company, VEB Deutsche Seerederei of Rostock and was commissioned for the Cuba–Mexico service and as a training ship for seamen. She was renamed the *Georg Büchner* after the German writer (1813–1837). In 1977 she was taken out of active service, but continued to serve as a training ship, after almost 15 000 mariners had had their first experience of the ocean aboard her.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the ship was used for various purposes; in the past few years as a youth hostel/hotel. In January 2013 the vessel was threatened with sale for scrap: that fate was averted, thanks to the alert response of a number of volunteers – both in Germany and in Belgium. At present, a solution is being sought to preserve the ship as part of our maritime heritage.

With the disappearance of all the remaining ‘-ville’ boats of the CMB, the MS *Charlesville* is now, by pure chance, the sole survivor of these famed ‘Congo boats’. Thanks to its original construction and interior, the heritage value of the ship remains intact.

A series of photographs [available on Flickr](#)