



BREMER BAUMWOLLBÖRSE

B R E M E N C O T T O N E X C H A N G E

Text for the Open Day on 5 April 2025 to mark the laying of the foundation stone of the Bremen Cotton Exchange 125 years ago on 31 March 1900

by Theresa Knapstein, Archivist at the Bremen Cotton Exchange

Cotton, what is it?

We all know about cotton. We wear it on our bodies and appreciate its beneficial properties. However, we also carry it in our wallets and purses, as our Euro notes are, in fact, also cotton-woven. These two examples alone demonstrate the wide range of uses for cotton, and it would certainly lead to a lively discussion if we looked further into the multitude of cotton products available.

Botanically, cotton belongs to the mallow family (*Gossypium*), which can reach an impressive height of two metres. Its beautiful, mostly pink flowers develop into capsules containing tufts of white fibres. These are picked, nowadays mostly by machine, before being sent for further processing. The long-fibre ones are the best in terms of quality. It should certainly also be noted here that cotton is one of the oldest crops in existence.

So, how did it come about that 125 years ago the foundation stone was laid for a building in Bremen that was to be dedicated entirely to cotton? In the 19th century, cotton imports grew rapidly, especially from the USA. Bremen had the same sort of size and potential as Liverpool, the English city that was a leading centre for the cotton trade in Europe. The resulting momentum set the foundations for healthy competition.

Several fundamental global industrial achievements had already manifested themselves in Bremen, thanks to its location by the sea and trade in cotton, tobacco, wood, grain, rice and wool, to name just a few.

The expansion of Norddeutscher Lloyd led to the emergence of major new shipping lines. The construction of several central railway stations, electric lighting, telephones, radio and automobiles all brought about a transformation in trade and industry similar to that which we are experiencing today with the development of computers and the media opportunities they offer.

The economic association founded in 1872 under the name “Bremen Cotton Exchange” had set itself an accepted and successful task by establishing the “Bremen customs”, i.e. the Bremen conditions for trading in cotton, quality testing of cotton, and also its arbitration. However, fulfilling this task now required a large amount of space.

Before the Cotton Exchange was built, business was conducted in the New Exchange, the building that once stood on the site of Bremen’s current parliament building and was destroyed in the great bombing raid of 1944, and in the Schütting guild house. Board meetings were held at venues such as the copperplate gallery at the Art Gallery.

The first confidential meeting of the “Comité”, the Executive Board of the Bremen Cotton Exchange, on the subject of building its own premises, took place on 30 August 1897, chaired by its first president Geo Plate. He explained to the Comité that in agreement with the Senate, there was an opportunity to construct a building on Wachtstrasse, which was also conveniently located close to the general stock exchange, post office and telegraph office, and would cost approximately 2 million marks. Geo Plate did not need to use his powers of persuasion to convince the Board.

“Finally, Director Brauer provided some detailed information about a draft design for the new building, drawn up by the architect J.G. Poppe. However, this plan was only intended to serve as a rough guide for the overall design of the building. A general competition will be held for the construction itself. Mr Poppe has already been engaged as technical advisor with a remuneration of 4,000 marks for the first year and 3,000 marks for the second year.”

Before the winner of the design competition was announced on 25 March 1899, a number of illustrious events were held in Bremen, which Wilhelm Cramer,

president of the Bremen Cotton Exchange for over 30 years and whose portrait hangs behind you in this room, described in his book “Wie ich es sah” (How I saw It). Here is a summary of the success story of architect Johanne Georg Poppe:

“Mr Poppe encouraged the distinguished ladies of Bremen to raise funds for one of his construction projects at a glamorous party in the Town Hall, which was to surpass all previous events in terms of its splendour. It was intended to reflect a party on the moon. The ladies were asked to put all of their charms, artistry and kindness to use in the service of the cause. He took charge of executing this magnificent plan himself.

The ladies of Bremen were not exactly renowned for their charm and loveliness. It is said that if you met the ladies of Bremen, no other society in the world would seem as stiff and closed. However, our women proved themselves far better than their reputation during the festival of the moon. An incomparable magic emanated from it and thrilled the whole world. On the day when the decision was to be made about the building’s design, everyone was still completely under the festival’s spell. It was in this mood that the designs were viewed and evaluated. Lo and behold, the crescent moon shone out brightly on one of the designs. This design was awarded the prize and was finally built.”

Mr Poppe was not only a master of designing houses in the historicist style, but also at dealing with society. Today, a highly respected cotton expert says: “The cotton exchange did everything right back then.”

The architectural competition was advertised throughout Germany, with the furthest applicants coming from Berlin and Dresden. Fifty-four designs were exhibited in the Art Gallery on 450 sheets of drawings. Seven of these were purchased.

The design by architect Poppe best met the requirements: two atriums to solve the lighting issues, suitable rooms for arbitration on the fourth floor facing north-east, offering completely neutral light influenced by secondary reflections thanks to their open location and wide windows.

The trowel and hammer used to lay the foundation stone, artistic creations by Koch and Bergfeld, are still on display today. The Bremer Nachrichten newspaper reported in detail on the laying of the foundation stone on 1 April 1900.

Just two years later, in 1902, the iron skeleton structure of the Cotton Exchange – a new and rare type of construction at the time – was completed. Its extremely

opulent exterior façade stood in stark contrast to the interior design. The staircase, which is so beautiful today, was made of concrete steps at that time. The mosaics in the foyer were designed in 1907 and donated by the spinners' associations.

The figures of Hermes and the spinner, which originally stood opposite each other on the two towers, now have their place inside the building after a long history. The galvanoplastic depiction of Hermes was found again after many years and restored, while the lost spinner was recreated in a contemporary style by Bremen artist Claudia Krenz and returned two years ago.

One other thing about the original sandstone façade: the sandstone that was originally used proved unstable, with a piece even breaking off and killing a cotton merchant. As a result, the entire façade had to be replaced with sandstone from Obernkirchen. The Cotton Exchange was therefore covered in scaffolding for many years before acquiring its current appearance. Now a listed building, it is being preserved and maintained for posterity.

This account only offers a brief outline of the exciting events leading up to the laying of the foundation stone. More detailed information can be found in the documents held in the Cotton Exchange archives. And this will not be the last time that the Bremen Cotton Exchange opens its doors to you, with possible reports on further construction progress as well as developments in the trade and transformation of cotton.