

# The History of Kloster Banz

## From Monastery to Educational Centre



Commanding an extensive view over Franconia, the former Benedictine monastery of Banz rises high above the valley of the River Main. On its opposite bank lies the Staffelberg, emblem of the town of Bad Staffelstein – former royal court of the Franconian kings and later home of the German mathematician Adam Riese. This bank of the Main is also the location of the pilgrimage church of Vierzehnheiligen (Basilica of the Fourteen Saints) which together with the Staffelberg and Banz Monastery forms the Franconian triptych on the Upper Main. Described as “God’s garden on the Upper Main”, this splendid landscape around Banz is a truly blessed part of Bavaria.

Originally a border post in the eastern area of the Grabfeld district and in the Banz region between the Main and Itz rivers, the castle – on Banz Mountain was fortified in the first half of the 10th century on the orders of **King Henry**, in order to serve as a bastion against the Hungarians approaching from the east. The influential Margraves of Schweinfurt ruled in Banz. **Countess Alberada** of that house and her husband, **Margrave Hermann von Vohburg**, donated their nine-towered Fortress Banz in 1069–71 to serve as a Benedictine monastery, which was dedicated to St. Peter and St. Dionysius. (1) Until the diocesan borders were reorganized as a result of secularisation, Banz belonged to the Diocese of Würzburg. This was later to prove the source of many conflicts for the monastery.

Weakened by the disturbances of the Investiture Conflict, the monastery fell into disrepair after its founders died. Monastic life seemed to have ended by the start of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The restoration of Banz and the instatement of monks from Hirsau Abbey and Abbot Balduin of Prüfening were the work of the **holy Bishop Otto I of Bamberg**, who consecrated the renovated church in 1114. Nothing then prevented the convent from growing. In 1180 the dukes of Andechs-Meranien became protectors of the monastery. Supporting it with substantial donations, they also tried to strengthen their influence in the Banz district, which led to conflicts with the bishops of Würzburg and Bamberg.

From 1241 the abbots of Banz had the right to wear the bishop’s mitre and carry the staff, in 1250 the convent was freed from duty on wine, wood, stones, and wool, and Abbot Heinrich wrote the first Chronicle of Banz.

When the Andechs-Meranier line died out in 1248, the Saxon Wettin dynasty – the new rulers in the Coburg area – attempted to gain influence over Banz. Not surprisingly, these external difficulties affected the monks and created conflicting party loyalties which disturbed monastic life. In addition to these external disputes, inner pressures developed, driven by an increasing neglect of the rules of St. Benedict.

As early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the monks in Banz had their own sinecures. After 1348 they were allowed to determine who would inherit their property, and in 1379 the number of monks was limited to 20 to ensure an income adequate for their social standing: the convent accepted only those of noble blood until 1550.

Banz’s connections to its surroundings were many and varied. Many monks were related to the noble families of the region; members of various houses had the right to be buried in Banz and created endowments in exchange for prayers. The monastery granted credit, and the ban on interest-bearing loans was circumvented by selling goods to the monastery while retaining the right to repurchase them at a later date. Land tenure was also granted to noble families, thus binding them more securely to the cloister and increasing the monastery’s important economic function in the region.

A fire destroyed much of the monastery in 1505. Then the **peasant war of 1525** with its plundering and pillaging began while the monastery was still being reconstructed. The monks fled in fear of the farmers, the abbot rescued

the most precious possessions of the monastery and hid them in Staffelstein, insurgents from Lichtenfels and Staffelstein plundered the cloister, a fire broke out, and Banz was destroyed again. The laborious rebuilding lasted through the entire 16<sup>th</sup> century. These external pressures were exacerbated by internal changes: the Reformation found sympathisers among the monks, and Banz drew closer to the Saxon-Coburgs under Abbot Georg Truchsess von Henneberg.

The ecclesiastical principalities of Bamberg and Würzburg feared the loss of their abbey and this danger was only averted when the abbot was imprisoned by Bamberg's troops. In 1575 **Abbot Johann Burkhard** became a reformer of the cloister. He stabilised the abbey's finances, repurchased lost lands and revitalised the brotherhood by accepting monks who were not of the nobility.

During the Thirty Years' War (1618 – 1648), Swedish and Imperial troops both harassed the cloister which stood directly in the path of their armies. The Swedish authority in Franconia threatened the cloister's very existence. Food was scarce and even the vast granaries and cellars of Banz could not provide enough. The abbot was kidnapped and not freed even after the ransom was paid. When the soldiers finally withdrew, the buildings were laid waste and the altars demolished; documents, the library, the bells and the organ were stolen. A few monks returned in 1636. The damage to the cloister itself was estimated at 130,000 guilders, while the abbey's lands were devastated and the population decimated. (2)

This decline was followed by a new resurgence culminating in the zenith of Banz's history **under Abbot Otto de la Bourde**. When he died in 1708 as bishop of Gurk in Kärnten, he left Banz a considerable part of his large estate. Banz had already begun reconstruction in 1698 using plans for a grandiose baroque building, completely redesigned by the Upper Bavarian baroque architect Leonhard Dientzenhofer: Otto de la Bourde's legacy proved quite timely. First to be rebuilt were the abbey itself, the monastery, refectory and dormitory. After Dientzenhofer's death his work was continued by his brother Johann, culminating in the 1719 consecration of the cloister church which is today the parish church of the congregation of Old Banz. The remaining old outbuildings and the armoured gate were redesigned by the Staffelstein architects Thomas Nißler and Sebastian Weber with help from the famed baroque master builder **Balthasar Neumann**. The building was finished in 1772.

The artistic decoration of the new interior was undertaken by the Vogel brothers, who created the grand plaster ornamentation, as well as the baroque painter **Sebastian Reinhard**, creator of the many painted ceilings which embellish the magnificent rooms of the monastery. The most impressive one is the festival and assembly room, the Emperor's Hall. Here Reinhard depicted episodes from the family history of the founder of the monastery, Countess Alberada von Banz (3). After the **Emperor's Hall**, it is undoubtedly the church which leaves the greatest impression on the visitor's memory. The baroque façade with the two three-storey towers and the two-storey middle section epitomises majesty and dominates the Main valley far and wide.

Catholic and Protestant researchers were drawn to Banz by the monastery school, an internationally respected magazine, its famous library with over 15,000 volumes, a comprehensive collection of paintings, a curiosity cabinet of natural organic and inorganic objects, and not least a circle of artistically and academically talented monks (Abbot Gregor Stumm, Pater J. B. Roppelt, P. Valentin Rathgeber). The **Age of Enlightenment** was a time of **intellectual flourishing** for the monastery. An ornamental park with fountains and exotic plants was laid out. The country castles of Buch and Gleusdorf were built, and streets decorated with over a hundred shrines. About fifty monks were laid to rest in the crypt beneath the church. The active spiritual life in Banz did however bring its own problems. Many monks were seized by the spirit of the Enlightenment, and two groups formed within the monastery: **traditionalists and progressives**. Monastic life suffered, many monks left Banz and turned to secular occupations.

Thus the **secularisation of Banz in 1802/03** was not unexpected. The political events of the turbulent Napoleonic era had not gone unnoticed, and Banz was prepared. In the autumn of 1802, the Bavarian coat of arms was nailed to the monastery gate. In November of the following year, the Reichsdeputationshauptschluss (Principal Conclusion of the Extraordinary Imperial Delegation) dissolved the Benedictine abbey. The remaining monks received pensions, the collections of art treasures and the library were scattered to the winds, parts of the crypt were converted to byres, and parts of the baroque building's gates were torn down. Unused wings of the buildings fell into disrepair. The destruction of the entire complex was considered.

Then in 1814, Duke Wilhelm in Bavaria purchased Banz and set up his summer residence there. Thus the former Benedictine abbey became a **Wittelsbach palace**. The buildings which had been torn down were replaced, new stables were built, and a large fossil collection was established which can still be viewed today. Banz now hosted many prominent guests including the **czarina of Russia**, the kings of Bavaria and Prussia, and at the turn of the 20th century, the German **emperor Wilhelm II**. Hunting parties, famous scholars and artists stayed in Banz, among them **Viktor von Scheffel**, who in summer 1859 composed his "Frankenlied", the unofficial Franconian Hymn. Under Duke Max, a significant Egyptian collection was added to the collections of Duke Wilhelm.

After the end of the First World War, court life in Banz came to a swift end. The Wittelsbach family leased their property first to the Trappists, who had fled Alsace. Thus Banz Palace again became a monastery. However, the Trappists only stayed for ten years and then moved to Engelszell on the Danube. In 1933, the **missionary order of the Community of the Holy Angels** purchased Banz Monastery. Cloister life blossomed again within the baroque walls. A tablet at the entrance to the abbey states: "This property of Banz was purchased with funds collected from the Catholic Germans of North America by Bishop Xaver Geyer through his sermons and speeches."

During the Second World War, Banz was converted into a field hospital, and afterwards the order lost importance. Monks still lived there, and a large part of the monastery was set up as a Caritas nursing home, but the location was too inaccessible as a home for the aged, and Caritas left in 1964. After a long search, the Community of the Holy Angels found a successor for Banz in the **Hanns Seidel Foundation** which bought the buildings and the grounds. The essential work of complete restoration and renovation was quickly begun in order to save the buildings from decay and to prepare them for their new use as a **centre for adult education**. "The imposing location above the Main Valley, the majestic style of the baroque structures, the layout generally suited to its new use, the sophisticated magnificence of the rooms, finally the rich historical tradition of a Franconian seat of culture and the opportunity to continue and develop this tradition, while solving a problem of Bavarian-Franconian architectural preservation – these considerations led the executive board of the Hanns Seidel Foundation to this decision." (4)

**Tradition and modernity** thus meet and form a harmonious whole in Banz Monastery, just as harmoniously as the monastery fits into the upper Franconian landscape, as Josef Dünninger describes: "There are regions which epitomise Franconia, including in one great image all that Franconia represents. Among these Franconian motifs, the brightly shimmering land at the Upper Main is unique in its strong movement – as if these rocky crags of the Jura mountains, which frame the wide valley as mighty flanks, had only just been thrust up high to bold ridges. As if the light and dark saturated colours had only just been painted in this broad-spanned canvas, no rest, no age, rhythmic movement, a permanent now. Even the great architectural monuments, in which this country's essence is distilled, are as without time, as if they were always at this moment rising up from pale stone and coloured earth." (5)

The decision of the Hanns Seidel Foundation to turn Banz into an **adult education centre** was welcomed with gratitude. A significant European cultural monument could be preserved, and the Foundation as an institution of political education found the desperately needed space to meet the constantly growing interest in its educational and conference programmes. After extensive expansion and restoration work, Banz Monastery was opened on 22 April 1983 as the Hanns Seidel Stiftung adult educational centre for the North Bavarian/Franconian area. The renovation was completed in 1992 with the conversion of the former coach hall to a representative events room. Banz Monastery is now a modern educational centre where tradition and progress blend harmoniously. The first 20 years of Banz Monastery as an educational centre were celebrated on 4 May 2003 with festive events including an open house.

**Modern conference technology** including a rhetoric studio and media centre with a **radio and television studio** make it possible to fill various educational requirements. Each year about **23,000 guests** come to Banz from around the world, and participate in around **600 events**. In the Banz Monastery Educational Centre, 12 seminar rooms accommodate from 15 to 200 persons. The largest seminar room can accommodate up to 400 persons when seated in rows. The conference rooms are equipped with the most modern audio-visual equipment. The basic equipment includes a flip chart, a screen, and overhead and slide projectors.

The **Coach Hall** is an ideal location for lectures, readings, theatrical and musical performances, exhibits, meetings, and functions. Lecture seating provides space for 200 persons, but formal functions can also be held in the pleasing

atmosphere. A variable stage (60m<sup>2</sup>), dimmer lights, gallery lighting, track lighting with variable lamps, a speaker system for speech and music as well as hall microphones satisfy the requirements for all types of events.

The prestigious **Emperor's Hall** can host receptions for up to 200 people. For smaller events, the **Refectory** can host 60 people and the **Prince's Room** can host 50 people. Facilities at the monastery include 134 rooms which can provide overnight accommodation for 200 visitors. Some 50 staff members work for the comfort of their guests, and their commitment to service guarantees participants a pleasant working atmosphere.

Up to 200 persons can be served in the dining room. Our rustic "Bierstübla" beer cellar can accommodate up to 85 guests. The **wellness centre** consists of a swimming pool, sauna, steam bath, solarium, and a German-style bowling alley for relaxation. The **fossil and oriental collections** on the monastery grounds are open for public viewing.

## Responsibility and Mission of the Hanns Seidel Foundation

The Hanns Seidel Foundation has its headquarters in Munich, and since its founding in 1967 it has been committed to political education with the goal of supporting "the democratic and civic education of the German people on a Christian basis" (extract from the Charter).

The primary concern of the Foundation is to awaken an appreciation for politics and an understanding of political decision-making among the public, as well as to encourage citizens to take part in the political process.

Moreover, the Foundation aspires to draw more attention to the intellectual and moral dimension of politics. Democracy, the rule of law, and freedom are rooted in the Christian-humanist tradition to which the Hanns Seidel Foundation adheres. Current information about the Hanns Seidel Foundation in Germany and around the world can be found online at [www.hss.de](http://www.hss.de).

### Sources

- (1) Compare Pfuhlmann, Heinz, Kloster Banz, P. 254 f., special reproduction from "850 Jahre Marktrecht der Stadt Staffelstein", Staffelstein 1980
- (2) *ibid.*, P. 261
- (3) Compare Pfuhlmann, Heinz, Hermann und Alberada, Die Gründer von Banz und ihre Darstellung durch das Kloster, Fränkische Heimat am Obermain, Volume 20, Lichtenfels 1983
- (4) Backes, Magnus, Vom Kloster zur Erwachsenenbildungsstätte, in: Kloster Banz in Franken, Berichte und Forschungen anlässlich des Ausbaues als Erwachsenenbildungsstätte der Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung, S. 180, (special reproduction from Jahrbuch der Bayerischen Denkmalpflege, Volume 34) München 1980
- (5) Dünninger, Josef, Kloster Banz – Ein fränkisches Kleinod, Betrachtungen und Reminiszenzen HSS – Informationen 1/2 – 80, Munich 1980

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