

The Abbey of Pielenhofen – a Baroque Pearl on the Shore of the Naab

It must have been a glorious day in 1738 when Pielenhofen's new Baroque abbey was solemnly consecrated. The White Monks of the Cistercian Order moved into their new church with dignity, silently thanking the proud master builder. The architect Franz von Beer from Vorarlberg in Austria had managed to complete the large church in a record-breaking construction time of only 21 years.

And he did a superb job, too. The magnificent high altar and the splendid ceiling painting of Holy Trinity are impressive testimonies to Baroque architectural design. The abbey's characteristic double-towered facade and three-story spires can be seen from afar, inviting believers to visit and pray.

While today's building complex dates from the Baroque period, the site of Pielenhofen Abbey is much older. As early as 1240, Cistercian nuns had identified the spot on the river Naab as an ideal place to found an abbey. They consecrated their monastery to the Mother of God and named it "Portus Marianus – Mary at the Beach".

Under the protection and with the support of the lords of Hohenfels and of Ehrenfels, the abbey flourished throughout the Middle Ages, and with it the village of Pielenhofen. The mill and the brewery already belonged to the abbey in the 14th century. Given the close connections between the abbey and the nearby village, a good number of today's family names can be traced back over centuries in the abbey's records.

The abbey did not always fare well. It suffered its first blow in 1559, when Otto-Henry, the prince elector of the Palatinate at the time, converted to Protestantism and ordered the dissolution of monastic communities in his domain.

Nearly a century was to pass before Cistercian monks from the Princely Abbey of Kaisheim near Donauwörth purchased the by then rather run-down complex and reoccupied Pielenhofen Abbey. It was also their achievement to renovate the existing facilities, demolish the old abbey church, and finally consecrate the new Baroque church in 1738.

But even though the inaugural ceremony came with a flourish and the reconstructed complex proved groundbreaking for future centuries of monastic life, the fate of the abbey continued to be changeful. In the early 19th century, it was again dissolved, this time in the context of secularization in Bavaria. The tradition of monastic life prevailed once again when first Carmelite and then Salesian nuns lived and worked at Pielenhofen Abbey.

They converted the monastery into a school and ran it for a long time. Most recently, the abbey had housed the preschool of the boys' cathedral choir called Regensburger Domspatzen. The school has moved to Regensburg, however, and in 2010, the monastic use was also discontinued due to lack of staff.

The abbey's tradition of accommodating schools nevertheless continues. A private secondary school and a technical college now teach at the ancient abbey premises.