

Swiss Monasteries

Objektyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1973)**

Heft 1655

PDF erstellt am: **12.07.2024**

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SWISS MONASTERIES

We are beginning with this issue a new series of articles on Swiss convents and abbeys kindly supplied and illustrated for us by Mr. Pierre Savoie, who sent us an inspiring series of reports on his visits to Swiss churches and cathedrals last year. This new series begins with the famous Barogne Abbey of Einsiedeln.

INTRODUCTION

The Abbeys of Switzerland were originally the conventual churches of the medieval monasteries. Prior to the Reformation, monasticism had grown to be a prominent feature of the religious life of Switzerland.

Many of the abbatial churches were rebuilt on a grander scale. Landowners founded and endowed new monasteries, and monastic life was so extended and reformed that, by the 13th century, many monasteries had become themselves prosperous landowners, and abbots were powerful feudal lords wielding political as well as religious influence.

The centre of the monastic life was the abbey church, on whose decoration and furnishing much of the wealth of the monks was lavished.

The church had a cruciform layout. It consisted of an aisled nave in which the congregation worshipped. Beyond the nave stood the chancel where the sacred rites were celebrated and which was so named from the "cancelli" or screen which shut it off from the nave. Erected on columns and arches between the nave and the chancel was, usually, a tower, an architectural feature which led to the development of the transept.

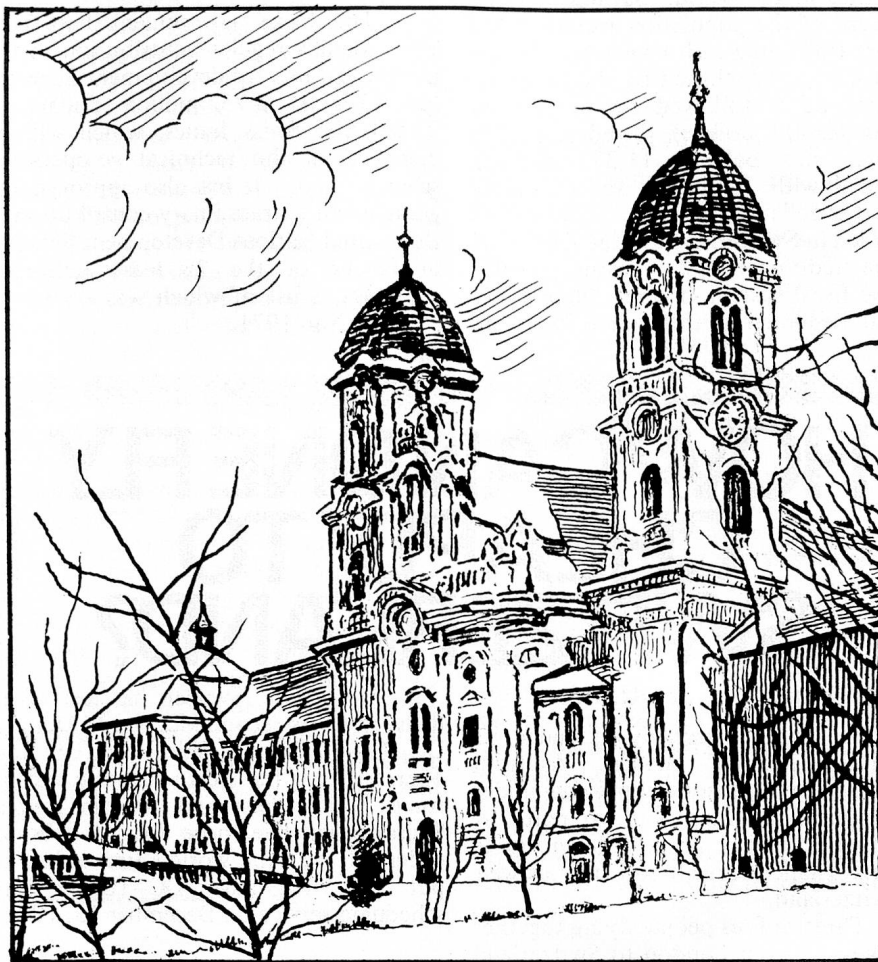
In the larger abbeys the aisled nave was practically universal and the problem of covering these structures with vaults of stone produced the characteristic art of the middle ages.

Rough walls were plastered and painted in frescoes, or brilliantly coloured pictures painted on dry walls. The windows were filled with stained glass and furniture was elaborately carved.

In the beginning of the 16th century, some of the abbeys became the cathedrals of the Bishoprics created at that time. Others were made into collegiate churches, and some are still in use today as parish churches. The articles to follow will be on churches that I have visited and on which I cherish unforgettable memories.

Churches are among the finest edifices of Switzerland, a country where even small and isolated villages are endowed with a church or chapel enriching the landscape.

Unfortunately, we are also witnessing today the growth of modern monstrosities, alien to Swiss architecture and ideals, and a bitter disappointment to lovers of our beautiful country.



EINSIEDELN ABBEY

In 861, the hermit Saint-Meinrad, descendent of the Hohenzollern, was killed by brigands "im finster Wald" (in the dark forest) between Mount Etzel and the Mythen, in the Zurich Oberland. At the beginning of the 10th century, Benno, Cannon of Strasbourg, who later became bishop of Metz, cleared the surroundings of Meinrad's cell. Hermann 1st, Duke of Swabia, made a gift of "finster Wald" to the Provost of the Chapter of Strasbourg, Eberhard. The latter built the first convent at the place where Saint-Meinrad had lived as a hermit from 828 to 835, and around which a village was built and named "die Waldstatt zu den Einsiedeln" (the forest village near the hermits).

The Benedictine convent, dating from 1704 to 1777, contains the miraculous image of the Virgin, which attracts many pilgrims. Despite five successive fires which destroyed countless riches and precious ornaments, the statue and its chapel were left intact.

The superb church of the convent included 17 altars, 3 organs and several chapels. It has a length of 117 m and a

width of 65 m. The great chandelier, 6 m high and 4 m wide, was given by Napoleon III. In the Treasury stands a monstrance of solid gold weighing 5 kg, embellished with 303 diamonds and more than 1,100 genuine pearls. The convent has, moreover, a great library of more than 32,000 volumes, 900 early-printed books, and a rich collection of parchment manuscripts and precious archives. To the convent are also annexed a theatre, a natural history museum, a physics laboratory, three colleges and several out-buildings, including a saw-mill, a flower-mill, various workshops and modern stables.

On 14th April, 1516, the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli was ordained preacher at Einsiedeln, where he stayed until December 1518.

On 17th September, 1798, the Convent was closed and its possessions declared State property. It was re-established, together with many other convents, by the Act of Mediation signed by Napoleon 1st. In 1848, the Convent undertook to settle half the war expense imposed on Schwyz by the Confederation.

At the millenary Jubilee of 1861, 210,000 pilgrims converged on Einsiedeln — a great name indeed.