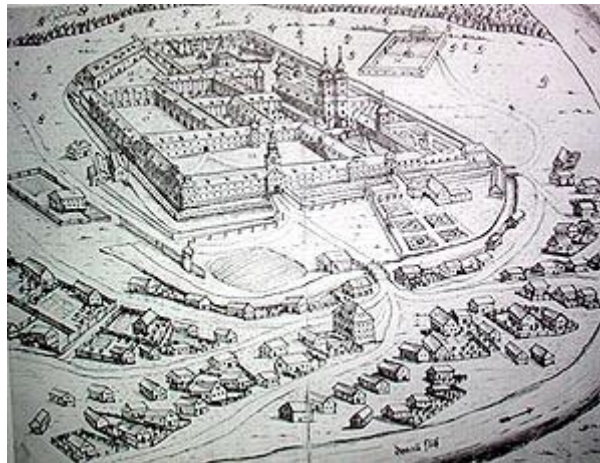


Description of Niederalteich



The historical roots of Niederalteich extend back over many centuries. After the migration of peoples within Europe came to an end, and the political situation had stabilised, Duke Odilo asked Abbot Eberswind to found the Monastery of Niederalteich in 741 (731). Twelve monks accompanied Eberswind to the River Danube from Reichenau Island in Lake Constance. The founding of a new monastery at this location made it into an important and strategic site and Niederalteich came to be known as the „*Gateway to the East“. Along with political significance, the Monastery developed a religious mission and became a cultural center (knowledge, education and administration). The first clan laws are attributed to Abbot Eberswind. The economic development of the region was a task that the Monks found particularly important and which continued over the centuries (colonisation of the Bavarian Forest region, establishment of settlements).



The year 1803 marked the end of the long history of Benedictine influence when the Monastery was abolished. Around 100 years later, monastery tradition was revived with the new establishment of nearby Metten Monastery.

The tradition and influence of spiritual and theological education has continued until today in different institutions in our community: Abbey St. Mauritius, St.-Gotthard-Gymnasium (secondary school), Abt-Joscio-Elementary and Middle School which offer music as a core subject, and an after-school care center, St. Gunther Landvolkshochschule (Rural Adult Education Center), Ecumenical Institute, Byzantine Church (the only one in Lower Bavaria), St. Primin Education Center and Guest House, the Convent of Ursuline Nuns.



The people of Niederalteich were confronted with a new and difficult situation when the monastery was abolished because this meant they lost their main employer and place of work. The villagers petitioned for re-establishment of the monastery and after this failed, they tried to find employment in small farms, trades and different part-time jobs.

The end of monastic tradition was also significant for the township of Niederalteich. Through municipal and state reforms, the village became an independent authority which from that point on, was responsible for the fortune and community life of the inhabitants by itself. Village development experienced dramatic changes after the end of the Second World War. As in many other towns and communities, refugees came to live in Niederalteich. These were people who had had to flee from Eastern Europe and who found a new home in our village.

The economic upswing after the war had a very positive impact on Niederalteich. The number of jobs increased as larger businesses were established which gave people the possibility to earn their living within the village once again. Today there are 70 businesses and service industries registered in Niederalteich. Many farm jobs, on the other hand, have disappeared. The social structure has experienced a dramatic shift. Out of 100 businesses there is only one family who now earns their living as full-time farmers.



A milestone in the development of Niederalteich was the restructuring of the village (completed in 1986) into the loveable and liveable community that it is today. The village restructuring process included re-modeling of the so-called *Bürgerhaus* (previously the summer house of the Abbots), building a new *Rathaus* (town hall) and the opening of the youth club in a structure which had been the Poor House of the village.

The Basilica was restored and the Byzantine Church was consecrated during this period of village restructuring. Tradition and the past, the future and innovation: both aspects fit together perfectly in Niederalteich. The historic walking path leads visitors past well kept-up historic family homes, barns and chapels. In the village center there is a futuristic glass structure, the Airplane Museum „Gerhard Neumann“, the only such museum in Lower Bavaria.



One could almost say that our village lies near two different streams of transport: for one thing, our village is on the banks of the River Danube, the longest river in Europe. In ages past, the Danube provided one of the most important east-west routes. Today that role has been taken over by the A3 motorway which, after the Fall of the Iron Curtain, now connects our region to south-eastern Europe. Not far away in Plattling (20 km), there is the east-west train junction and the Munich airport is only about one hour from here.



From the standpoint of traffic, Niederalteich is ideally situated, both from its scenic attractions and geographical situation. On the one side, a network of walking paths crisscrosses the Danube River valley and the soft hills of the Vilz Valley, and on the other side, paths lead into the front range mountains of the Bavarian Forest region. The pilgrimage route called *Gunthersteig*, crosses into Bohemia (Czech Republic) to the grave of St. Gunther, and then to Prague. The ViaNova, the European Pilgrimage route dedicated to St. Wolfgang, leads from Austria's *Salzkammergut* past Niederalteich to Regensburg.

Visitors can take the ferry „Altaha“ to cross the Danube to other side. Bicycle riders along the Danube Bike Route, in particular, like to cross the river here. Nature reserves and bird protection areas on the other side of the river are inviting places for recreation and relaxation. Anglers enjoy the quiet countryside at the many small lakes. The experience of quiet and stillness, becoming more seldom nowadays, is one of our specialities. This is partially what makes Niederalteich so charming; it is far away from modern noise and is a

center of peace and quiet. For centuries, as well as today, Niederalteich has always been a place of quiet strength and vitality.



The total area of the municipality comprises 10 km. Niederalteich is a compact village with 1,960 inhabitants, without counting the outerlying hamlets. The local infrastructure, water supply and sewage system connect the entire area. Many streets have natural gas taps for heat and energy. Due to the people of Niederalteich's highly developed level of ecological awareness, the county's first recycling center was constructed here.



During the county reforms in the 1970s a few premature decisions were made. Niederalteich was incorporated into an administrative collective with the nearby town of Hengersberg. In 1986 this decision was revised and since then, Niederalteich has again been an independent municipality, as it became after the secularisation (the first municipal warden was in 1810). The development of the infrastructure in Niederalteich began and finished early. There has always been enough new land for building. Because of this there have been no major expenditures in the last years.



On the church and pastoral level, there is a special aspect which should be mentioned: along with Roman Catholic and Evangelical-Lutheran church services, there is also a Byzantine service. In the 1930s, at the urging and wish of Pope Pius the 11th, the Monastery implemented a dialogue with the Eastern Orthodox Church in order to strengthen their ecumenical work. The Ecumenical Institute of the Monastery was founded for this express purpose.

There are numerous shopping possibilities in Niederalteich: 2 bakeries, 2 butchers, an organic-biological gardener with their own shop, drug store, gift stores, an Edeka grocery store, angler speciality shop, toy store, wine merchant and 2 banks (Raiffeisen Bank and Sparkasse) all of which round out the opportunities for the daily shopping needs of Niederalteich inhabitants.

The large number of guests who come here find a variety of pensions and other possibilities for staying the night. There are three comfortable pubs offering food and refreshment. Niederalteich is a convivial village, happy about each and every visitor, and gladly welcoming them here.

* Haus der Bayerischen Geschichte



Niederaltaich – Bavaria's Gateway to the East

<p>Name, Year of Establishment 741 Altaich</p>	<p>The Bavarian Duke Odilo of the Agilofinger family founded his own "Eigenkloster", a monastery on a slow moving side arm of the Danube river. According to local tradition this took place in 731 AD. Modern research, however, dates the foundation of the monastery to 741 AD. Mauritius, the Patron Saint of the monastery indicates Duke Odilo's close contact with Burgundy. The first monks came from the famous Island Monastery of Reichenau. They were considered experts at preparing swampy ground for cultivation. This was necessary because the site of Altaich on the banks of the Danube was difficult for agriculture. Severe flooding throughout the centuries was also always a problem for the Monastery. At the same time the area offered excellent fishing grounds and good traffic routes by water.</p>
<p>Charlemagne 788</p>	<p>After the Agilofingers were deprived of their power, Charlemagne took over Niederaltaich as an Empirical Monastery in 788. During the middle of the 9th c. Altaich reached the peak of its worldly power. In the early part of the 10th c. the Monastery was ransacked and destroyed several times. Clerics who lived according to canon, or rule, replaced the monks and took care of the ducal grave of the Luitpold lineage.</p>
<p>Saint Gotthard / Saint Gunther 990</p>	<p>After 990 the Benedictines moved back to Altaich. It was Saint Gotthard (Godehard) who guided the Monastery Altaich into a new period of development during the time of Emperor Heinrich II. St. Gotthard's shoe and cloak have been saved in the Abbey Church and are considered very precious items. His Abbot's staff is still used today to consecrate the new Abbot, most recently in the fall of 2001. At the same that St. Gotthard was Abbot, St. Gunther was also involved with the Monastery. Gunther was related to the Royal Otto Family as well as with the Hungarian Arpades. This Duke of Thuringia from East Germany came to the Bohemian Forest and helped to bring civilization to the region by clearing the forests and planting fields. He died as a hermit in Gutwasser (Dobra Voda) in what is now the Czech Republic. Also in diplomatic mission, Gunther brought peace to the Germans and Hungarians, as well as to the inhabitants of Bohemia (Czech Republic).</p>
<p>Spiritual Influence 11th c. AD.</p>	<p>The spiritual influence of Altaich in the 11th c. is proof of the further activities of the Hermit Wilhelm and the Catholic Nuns named Alruna, Salome and Judith. Many Monks from the Convent took over other monasteries as "Reform Abbots". St. Alram of Kremsmünster was one of these as was also St. Richer, Abbot of the famous Montecassino. The Annals of Altaich are an important</p>

source for the history of the Otto and Salier Periods. Around 1100 AD. the Dukes of Bogen founded their own Monastery, "Altaich", about 40 kilometers from Altaich upriver on the Danube which was soon called "Ober Altaich" (Upper Altaich), while the older Altaich only gradually took on the name of "Niederaltaich" (Lower Altaich).

Emperor Friedrich 1152	In 1152, Friedrich I. Barbarossa ended direct rule of the Monastery by the Emperor. In appreciation for the support in his election as King, Barbarossa gave Niederaltaich to Bishop Eberhard II of Bamberg as a fiefdom. However, the real Lords of Na. from the second half of the 12 th. c. were the powerful Dukes of Bogen who tried to take over as bailiffs of the Monastery.
Wittelsbach Dynasty 1242	In 1242 the Wittelsbach family inherited the Bailwick of Niederaltaich from the Dukes of Bogen. As a result, the Bavarian Archduchy received sovereignty over the Monastery. The Wittelsbachers showed privilege to the Abbey by raising its status to royal level.
Gothic Church Construction 1260	Only the 1241 confirmation of the pontifical Abbots remained as a Bamberg fiefdom until secularisation; They were also canons in Bamberg. Gothic-style construction of the Abbey began very early. Abbot Hermann, also a famous historian, and five of his successors, built the new Monastery Church from 1260 to 1326. At that time it was one of the largest buildings in the entire Danube region.
Clearance of the Bohemian Forest 14. th c	The present-day village church is also a symbol for the very unusual flowering of Benedictine life in the 14 th c. The energy of the Abbey is documented through the clearance of the Bohemian Forest region. The Very Holy Hermits, Hermann, Otto and Degenhard , followed the example set by St. Gunther , and continued his work in the region.
Decline and Rise 15 th c	In contrast to the other Bavarian Benedictine Abbeys, Niederaltaich experienced a phase of spiritual decline in the 15 th century. However, the Abbey withstood the later Reformation with relatively few monks leaving to join the new religion. In the spirit of the Late Renaissance, an active period of cultural and scientific awakening dominated life in Niederaltaich.
Thirty Yeará War 1634	Niederaltaich went through a period of serious decline during the Thirty Years' War when, despite its heavy defence walls, Swedish troops completely destroyed it in 1634, 1641, 1647 and 1648. Fire catastrophes followed in 1671 and 1685 and destroyed the humble beginnings which had begun after the end of the Thirty Years' War.

**Baroque Period
1700**

Abbot Joscio Hamberger (Abbot from 1700 – 1739) played an important role in Niederaltaich during the Baroque period of history. Almost all of the monastery buildings which remain today were constructed under his term of leadership. Additionally, there is the Baroque interior of the early-Gothic Abbey Church which was completed in 1727. Particularly noteworthy is the redecoration of the sanctuary by Johann Michael Fischer when he was still a young man, and also the more than 200 individual frescos by Andreas Heindl.

**Economic Highpoint
18 th c.**

In the late 18th c, Niederaltaich was considered the most wealthy Monastery of the Benedictine Order in the Principality of Bavaria. Its agricultural property, including forests, was about 50,000 “Tagwerk”, i.e. about 170 square kilometers. This included the vineyards in Wachau, Austria which had been successfully producing wine since the Carolingian period. Since 1334, the Monastery’s ships on the Danube had not had to pay duties or taxes. The Abbot became Lord of the Market Town, Hengersberg, as well as Lord over the villages of Niederaltaich and Arnbruck. Added to this were hundreds of estates which belonged to the principality’s county courts. Two other Chapter Monasteries in the Bohemian Forest region, Rinchnach and St. Oswald (since 1567), belonged to Niederaltaich as well as Spitz in Wachau(present-day Austria). At the same time, Paters from the Convent served in eight parishes in Lower Bavaria and in the Parish of Aggsbach in Lower Austria. Niederaltaich owned the Right of Recommendation in 21 other Parish Churches.

Secularisation 1803

The annulment of the Abbey began in November **1802** when the Monastery was taken over by Monastery Civil Servants working for the Prince. The wealth of the Monastery was administered by the State. The actual secularisation began in Niederaltaich on **21 March 1803**, the Day of St. Benedict. The Abbot and some of the 43 Members of the Convent lived in the Monastery until 1806. Most of the Paters took over pastoral care positions. As with other Monasteries, the Convent Church was used as a Parish Church. The original parish church was torn down. Part of the building was used as a state storehouse for grain, another part was used for a school. The rest was sold to private individuals. In 1813 the area around the church was damaged by lightening and most of the other structures were torn down in the following years.

**Resettlement
Priorate / Abbey 1918**

In **1918** the Niederaltaich Monastery was reorganized as a Priorate of Metten Benedictine Abbey. It was raised to the level of Abby in **1930**. Since 1932, the Abbey Church has had the honorary title as a papal “**Basilica Minor**”.

**Ecumenical Affairs as
Main Point of
Spititual Interest
1930**

As early as the 1930s, Niederaltaich showed great interest in ecumenical affairs. Since **1965** the Ecumenical Institute has had its own research and conference centre. A group

from the Convent has been celebrating church services according to Byzantine ritual for the last 50 years.

Byzantine church of St. Nikolaus 1986 In **1986** the rooms of the former Monastery Brewery were redesigned and a worship room for Byzantine liturgical services was built.

Educational Services Since **1948**, the Niederaltaich Benedictines have run St. Gotthard Gymnasium (middle and secondary school) which offers tracks in both modern-language and music instruction. In **1959** the Catholic St. Gunter Landvolkshochschule was built, a Centre of Adult Education for the Dioceses of Passau and Regensburg. In **2001** the newly-built Conference Centre and Guest House, **St. Pirmin**, began operation. Since 1962, the Abbey Niederaltaich has offered the possibility of private retreats which welcomes retreatants to spend time in an atmosphere of Benedictine prayer, silence and community. Other Monasteries have since followed the example set by Niederaltaich and also offer such Retreats. Not far from the Abbey is the **Ursuline Cloister** which was built in 1979.

The Community of Niederalteich The village of Niederalteich experienced fundamental social change during the second half of the 20th century. The local economy had been based on small farms and local crafts and trade. Today Niederalteich is a wonderful place to live with about **1930** inhabitants although it also provides 250 jobs in trade, crafts and business. The area of the village encompasses 10 square kilometers on both sides of the Danube. One of the most important bird protection regions in Lower Bavaria is in **Gundlau**, an area belonging to the village. On the other side of the Danube are important wetlands at the mouth of the Isar River where it flows into the Danube. This is a European nature-sanctuary.

Excerpts from: "Niederalteich, Bavaria's Gateway to the East", Christian Lankes, Centre for Bavarian History, Augsburg. English translation: Deborah Lehmann-Irl, B.A./M.A.

Basilica and Parishchurch in Niederalteich

Welcome to Niederalteich!



The church belongs to the building complex of the Benedictine Monastery which was founded in 731 (or 741, depending on which version of history one uses) by the Bavarian Duke, Odilo, here on the Danube River. At that point in time, the river was one of the most important means of transportation. The Monastery is also situated at the foot of the Bavarian Forest which, in the 8th c. was still unsettled. In 1803, all areas in Germany that had been under Church jurisdiction (including those areas which had belonged to Bishops or monasteries) were forcibly annexed by secular Principalities. The Monastery was dissolved by the Bavarian government during this period which led to the selling-off and destruction of a large part of the building complex.

The Monastery Church was given to the Parish congregation in place of the old Parish Church which had been torn down. Since then, the Parish celebrates Mass in the Basilica and is responsible for maintenance. The Basilica was completely restored in 1989.



The Monastery was re-instated in 1918 and the Monks were entrusted with the spiritual care of the Parish. Some of their own Masses were also celebrated in this church. As a sign of the newly-won significance of this time-honoured Sanctuary, it was given the title of Papal „Basilica minor“ in the year 1932.



The outer walls of the church show clearly that this was originally constructed as an early-gothic, hall-shaped, Sanctuary – this was completed in 1270, the nave in 1306: particularly interesting is the tympan entrance on the left outer side of the North Tower which joined the church to what had been a cloister. The construction of 72 m in the high towers was started in the Renaissance. On the south side (cemetery side) of the South Tower is a cosmic horoscope on top of a commemorative stone which was laid when construction began.



The inner area of the church was re-done in Baroque-style in 1720. The old and new styles of architecture were harmoniously combined during this period. Behind the High Altar, a half-circle was added for the vestry on the main floor and for the monks above in the „Upper Church“. This was the first sacral construction of the great Baroque architect, Johann Michael Fischer.



Upon entering the interior of the 60 m long Sanctuary, visitors first notice the central painting above the High Altar by Franz Geiger, Landshut (1675). It illustrates the Patron Saint of the Church, St. Mauritius (whose figure also stands above the pulpit), and his companions, soldiers of the so-called Thebaic Legion of the Holy Roman Empire. These soldiers came from Egypt, a region that had already been christianized and who died as martyrs in the 3rd. century because they refused to worship the Emperor as their God. Mauritius rises in the painting out of the lower part of the picture which shows in dark colors the massacre of these soldiers; from above, he is being met in the other direction by the bright light of Christ, the Risen, and a group of saints. The dramatic use of light and dark in this painting can be found throughout the entire church. The Passion of Christ is portrayed in the lower ceiling frescos in the relatively dark side naves next to the altar area; the altar paintings in the central nave show the „darkness“ which tests human faith: On the right side of the first Altar is the death of St. Benedict, over the second Altar is the fire ordeal of the Empress, St. Kunigunde; over the fourth Altar is the martyrdom of St. Sebastian, On the left side above the first Altar is the appearance of St. John the Baptist, the Preacher of Penance, above the second altar is the death of St. Joseph, and above the fourth Altar is St. Martin, monk and Bishop. Glass shrines can be seen above the paintings. They contain bones which have been decorated with shining stones from Christians, dated from the early period of the Roman Catacombs. These bones were brought here in the early Baroque. At certain times during the Church Year, the Relict Shrines, which are covered with beautiful Baroque plates showing the Saints, are brought out for display. The arches in the unusual opening above the altars allows one to see the frescos in the upper church which, in contrast to the lower paintings, show each holy figure bathed in heavenly light.



In the middle of the right side nave crossing over to the third altar, there is a Pietà (a sandstone figure from about 1480). This Meditation of the Christ being taken down from the Cross and laid in the lap of his Mother, is still the sanctum of a group which was founded in 1503 called the Brotherhood of the Archdeacons of the „Sieben Schmerzen Mariens“.



The fresco above this in the upper cloister shows a rare picture of St. Mary, Mother of the Child: like milk, her Faith flows as a Blessing to the people below. On the opposite side, over the third Altar the veneration of St. Gotthard (Godehard) is illustrated. He was a Niederalteich monk and Abbot of the Monastery, who was named Bishop of Hildesheim in 1022. The wax figure below shows St. Augustine, religious scholar and teacher.



All frescos (more than 200) were created by Wolfgang Andreas Heindl from Wels, Upper Austria. The ceiling frescos in the 21 m high middle nave symbolize the history of the monastery of Niederalteich. The name Nieder-Alteich is sometimes traced to the German word for oak, i.e. „Eiche“, but it is more correct to assume that the name goes back to the Old High German word „Ache“, or water. This root can be found in many place and river names (for example, „Ohe“, a common name for a river in this region). Along with the official spelling „Niederalteich“, the name of the Monastery is also written as „Niederaltaich“.



Special attention should be given to the carvings on the confessionals and pews which were made by the Niederalteich monk, Pirmin Tobiaschu. Georg Jann from Allkofen near Abendsberg built a new Baroque organ in 1985. It is a mechanical organ with 48 register stops, 4 manuals and 3555 pipes.



The sonorous ringing in the South Tower comes from four bronze bells which were all made in modern times: the largest one (St. Michael) weighs 2074 kg and has a diameter of 153 cm. It rings the tone of c'3 (Johann Graßmayr, Innsbruck, 1938); the second-largest (St. Antonius) weighs 1300 kg and is 125 cm wide and rings in e flat'4 (Georg Sammassa, Passau, 1814); the third-largest (Annunciation Day) has 971 kg and is 118 cm wide and rings f' (Rudolf Perner, Passau, 1961); the smallest one (St. Brother Conrad) weighs 500 kg and is 98 cm wide and rings a flat'6 (Karl Hamm, Regensburg, 1931).



In the year 2003, exactly 200 years after Secularisation when the Anniversary Bell of 1731 was brought to Vilshofen, the bell- ringing was amplified by a generous gift: in what had been the empty North Tower there now hangs the Mauritius Bell with a weight of 4,820 kg and a diameter of 200 cm. With the tone of a flat' 0, this mighty bell built by Rudolf Perner, Passau, expands the resonance of the other church bells.

On Sundays and religious holidays the following Masses are celebrated in Niederalteich:



On Sundays and religious holidays the following Masses are celebrated in Niederalteich:

Eucharist Parish Mass in the Basilica:

☐ 7.00 pm: Saturday Evening Service

☐ 7.00 am and 9:00 am

Convent Mass of the Monks, normally with Gregorian Chants:

☐ 10.30 am in the Basilica

Latin Vesper:

☐ 5.30 pm in the Basilica

Byzantine Liturgy:

☐ 9.30 am: in St. Nikolaus Church

Byzantine Vesper:

☐ 5.15 pm in St. Nikolaus Church

In the Chapel in the North Tower (towards the Exit Doors on the right side), you have the possibility to light a candle for your own personal situation. In doing so, you can contribute to the maintenance of this unusually beautiful church. The relatively small parish congregation of Niederalteich appreciates donations for the upkeep of their church. You can put your donations in the offertory box next to the lattice at the exit.

God Bless You and Your Relatives!