

MILL TECHNOLOGY | ALTENBERG MONASTERY LANDSCAPE TRAIL

Water mills

There were several mills in the Altenberg monastery grounds, which were used to process the grain grown by the friars, to drive handicraft tools and to produce oils and fabrics. These mills – of which nothing can be seen today – were driven by water power.

For this purpose, the monks of Altenberg Abbey initially had the course of the river Dhünn and its tributaries at their disposal. This had also been a decisive reason for the choice of the monastery site at this very spot in the river valley.

In addition to the natural course of the river, the water supply for the mill operation could also be artificially generated and regulated, for example through the construction of mill ponds and ditches. The water from the rivers and streams was channelled into these and directed to the mills. An ingenious system of weirs, dams and canals enabled the control of water power and a constant supply of water, independent of the natural fluctuations of the waters. In this way, the Cistercians once again intervened in the surrounding landscape for the operation of their water mills and shaped it according to their needs: The construction of weirs, mill ditches or ponds as well as river diversions still characterises the monastic landscape today.

For the fulfilment of Cistercian ideals of self-sufficiency, seclusion and simplicity, the use of the natural resources found on site was enormously important. Their advances in milling technology enabled the Cistercians to grind larger quantities of grain more quickly and effectively, which led to an increase in food production. This not only made it possible to better supply the population in the surrounding villages, but also had an influence on the local economy. Although the friars were not the inventors of water mills – the technology had been known since antiquity and was brought to the Rhineland by the Romans – they made a decisive contribution to their spread. Quickly, the large milling plants powered by natural resources displaced the hand mills that had been common until then and could be found on every farm. Local farmers were increasingly forced to have their grain ground in the monastery mills for a fee. As a rule, the Cistercians refrained from leasing their mills and thus determined the prices on the local markets for a long time.

Mills in the Altenberg Abbey

The earliest records of Altenberg Abbey mention a first grain mill on the site, which is said to date back to the time of the first Abbot Berno. By 1640 the number of mills had then risen to four. In Johann Jakob Sartor's copperplate engraving from 1707, however, two mill wheels can be clearly seen. At that time, Altenberg Abbey had a grain and malt mill for processing grain, as well as an oil and tanning mill for tanning. Later, a fulling mill for cloth production was added. The products produced in the monastery mills, such as oil, flour and cloth, were highly valued in the region and sold well in the surrounding communities.

Bömerich Mill

The Bömerich mill at the foot of the slope was first recorded on maps in 1824. Until 1966, the farmers from the surrounding farms had their grain ground into flour here. The mill was driven by a water wheel on top of the shaft: The water from the adjacent mill pond fell from above onto the mill wheel and set it in motion. Today, the two old half-timbered buildings are used for residential purposes.