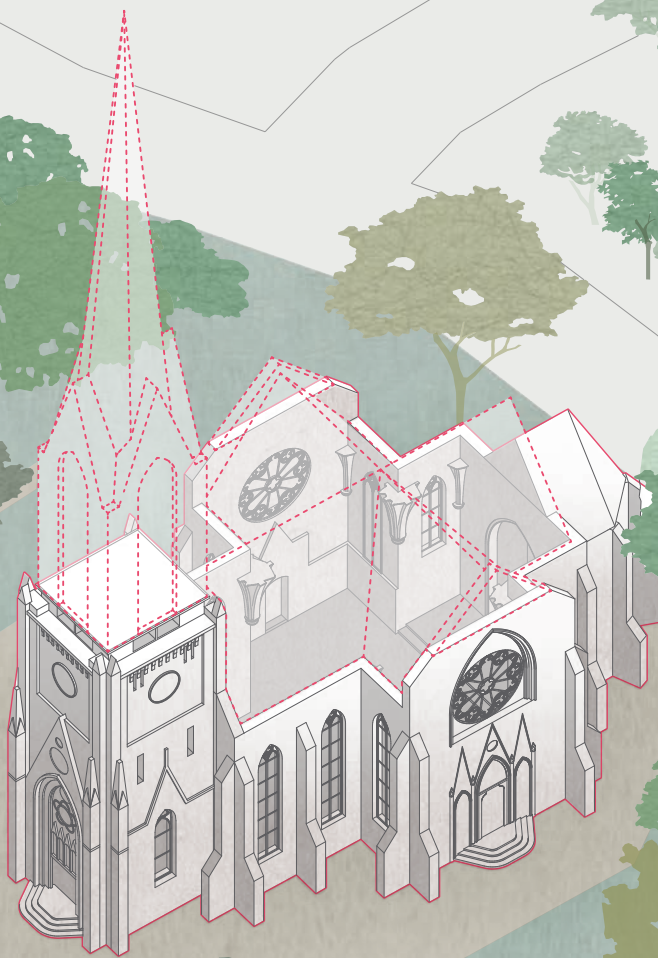


the church ruin of wachau





Farmland and rural idyll

View of the Wachau village, around 1850
Museum of City History Leipzig, F/5560/2005

The parish church in Wachau entered recorded history in 1393. At that time, it was owned by Buch Monastery, about 50 kilometres (30 miles) away to the east.

In 1465, the church received a bell, which has been preserved to this day. In 1581, it became a filial church, and for the next few centuries was largely administered by the pastor of its mother church in the village of Cröbern.

Wachau was surrounded by flat farmland. Although the majority of its population were farmers and peasants, some inhabitants practised

modest rural crafts. Until the mid-17th century, the surrounding riparian forest was very dense.

In the second half of the 16th century and the 17th century, however, many landowners expanded their estates. Large manors were built, some with parks, orangeries and menageries, which attracted growing numbers of visitors. The countryside and floodplains around Wachau were considered delightful, and footpaths, bridges and roads were built there, along with large inns, such as the Golden Crown in Wachau.

The horrors of war

Between 1618 and 1648, a power struggle known as the Thirty Years War raged between Catholics and Protestants for supremacy in Europe. Details about this era are contained in the book Chronicle of Wachau written by Ferdinand Wilhelm Weinschenk, a neighbouring manor owner, and published in 1902.

Although Wachau was spared the direct impact of the war for eleven years, higher taxes were imposed, and the inhabitants also had to deliver supplies to the troops.

The city council of Leipzig was responsible for delivering an 'army wagon' – including four horses, two farmhands and their entire upkeep – to transport military equipment. Wachau, together with four other villages, had to furnish half of this wagon, including one farmhand, two horses, one month's pay, and 'meagre payment', i.e. the farmhand's wages and keep. The taxes raised to support the army were increased every year, and there was widespread poverty.

In 1621, the "venerable city council of Leipzig" therefore arranged a "public bread market" to supply the populace with food.

We also know from the Chronicle of Wachau that inhabitants had to pray for peace in the region at certain times of the day as stipulated in a decree issued in 1618.

When the fighting drew closer to Wachau in 1626, services of prayer and repentance were ordered. In 1629, Protestants living in Wachau were drafted. Finally, in 1631, the horrors of war struck the village itself when enemy soldiers advanced on

Wachau from different directions and pillaged the area. The troops committed “appalling acts of indecent assault on women and virgins”, looted people’s homes, and drove away horses and cattle. To make matters worse, plague was rampant in Wachau. As a result, 120 residents lost their lives in 1631, compared to the usual annual death toll of six or seven.

The entry in the church’s accounts for 1632 that there was “nothing in the offertory bag” isn’t surprising. Probably in response to the church’s dire financial straits, the register of deaths for the following year records a bequest to the church when Gertrudis, the daughter of Jochen Hübscher, left money in her will to be used to dress the altar after its frontal had been looted by soldiers. Only from 1634 is no more fighting recorded in Wachau.

At the centre of world events



Battle of the Nations near Leipzig 1813:
Equestrian fight near Wachau on October 16, 1813
Image: SLUB, Deutsche Fotothek, Walter Möbius

In 1813, the area between Wachau, Markkleeberg, Liebertwolkwitz and Probstheida was the centre of one of the most important battles in the Napoleonic Wars: the Battle of Leipzig (also known as the Battle of the Nations), which contributed decisively to the defeat of Napoleon. Wachau – including its church – suffered severe damage during the hostilities. Just how fierce the fighting was can be seen from Markkleeberg. Prussian and French troops drove each other out of the town four times before Friedrich Graf Kleist von Nollendorf, a Prussian Field Marshal, finally ma-



Napoleon linden tree in the garden of the manor at Wachau near Leipzig, 1855

Image: Poenicke (album of castles and manors in the kingdom of Saxony)

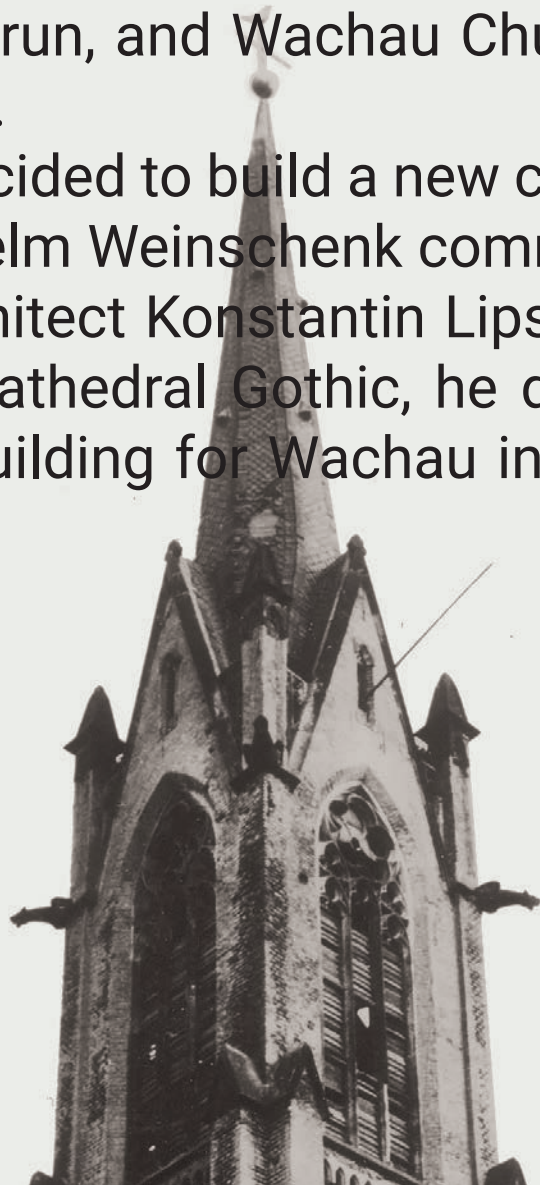
naged to hold the town.

One result of the Battle of Leipzig was that a tall old lime tree in the garden of Wachau manor became legendary. The gallery installed on it was used first by Joachim Murat (one of Napoleon's marshals) and later by the anti-French allies as a lookout over the battlefield. Afterwards, the tree (which later fell victim to a lightning strike) became known as both Murat's Lime and Napoleon's Lime.

A towering achievement

Subsequently, the dilapidated church in Wachau also became too small, and the parishioners wanted a new, larger place of worship. In addition, since they had their own financial resources, they tried to cut ties dating back centuries with the mother church in Cröbern and have their own pastor. But Ferdinand Wilhelm Weinschenk, the church patron and lord of the neighbouring manor, objected that the parish couldn't afford its own pastor in the long run, and Wachau Church remained a filial church.

Nevertheless, it was decided to build a new church, and Ferdinand Wilhelm Weinschenk commissioned the famous architect Konstantin Lipsius. Influenced by French cathedral Gothic, he designed his first church building for Wachau in the neo-Gothic style.

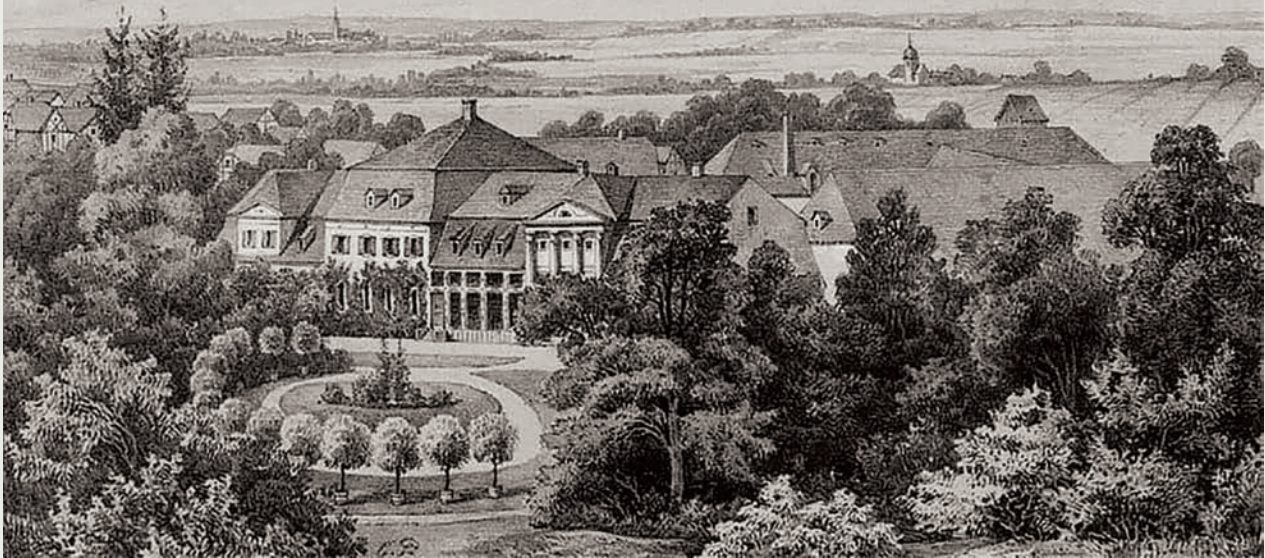




He went on to build other churches in Gera as well as Leipzig (St Peter's and St Nathaniel's). All in all, the new church in Wachau cost 49,000 thalers; 20,000 thalers came from church assets while the rest was contributed by the district administration.

When the church was consecrated in 1867, the people of Wachau had an imposing building in their small village. The tower had a height of 65 metres (213 feet), making it the tallest in the Leipzig district. The old, small bell was joined by three new ones from Jauck's bell foundry. Unfortunately, the church had some structural problems and repairs had to be carried out repeatedly. In the very year of its consecration, for instance, all four ornamental pointed turrets were blown off the roof during a storm.

From farming to mining



Manor house in Wachau

The Pleisse-Gösel region was largely unaffected by industrial development until the late 19th century, with agriculture remaining the dominant economic sector. In the 1880s, however, an industry with a huge future emerged and grew rapidly in the nearby district of Borna: lignite mining. Lignite (also known as brown coal) was turned into briquettes – a transportable product that could be sold on the local market.

Leipzig's rapid industrial development required more and more lignite. Until the 1920s, the majority of the lignite extracted was made into briquettes. The new industrial processes involving lignite were only profitable if carried out on a large

scale, so many new mines were opened before the turn of the 20th century, and more and more seams between Borna and Leipzig were exploited. Since private enterprise wasn't able to make the necessary, risky investments, the majority of the lignite fields were publicly owned.

Much of the lignite was used to generate electricity. Demand had increased dramatically since World War I owing to new processes in the chemical industry and metallurgy, the advance of the electric motor, and the rise in domestic electrical appliances. Finally, in 1925/26, the first large power station was built in the region, attracting various downstream industries like the production of phenolic resins. The silhouettes of Böhlen and Espenhain, two strongholds of the chemical and energy industries, were landmarks that could be seen from afar. The conveyor bridge used to transport lignite that went into operation in 1944 at the opencast mine in Espenhain was the biggest in the world.

Nevertheless, agriculture in Wachau's surroundings remained a prominent source of income until the 20th century. Considerable volumes of fruit, vegetables and grain were sold to Leipzig, which by 1900 already had a population of 450,000.

Wachau Church in the Second World War

In the Second World War, the manor next to the church was destroyed by a British blockbuster bomb during a heavy air raid in December 1943. The blast wave tore holes in the church roof, and several lead glass windows were shattered. In February 1945, American incendiary bombs hit the tower and the sacristy. The three newer bells had already been melted down for the war effort; the smallest one from 1465 remained in the church and is still rung today.



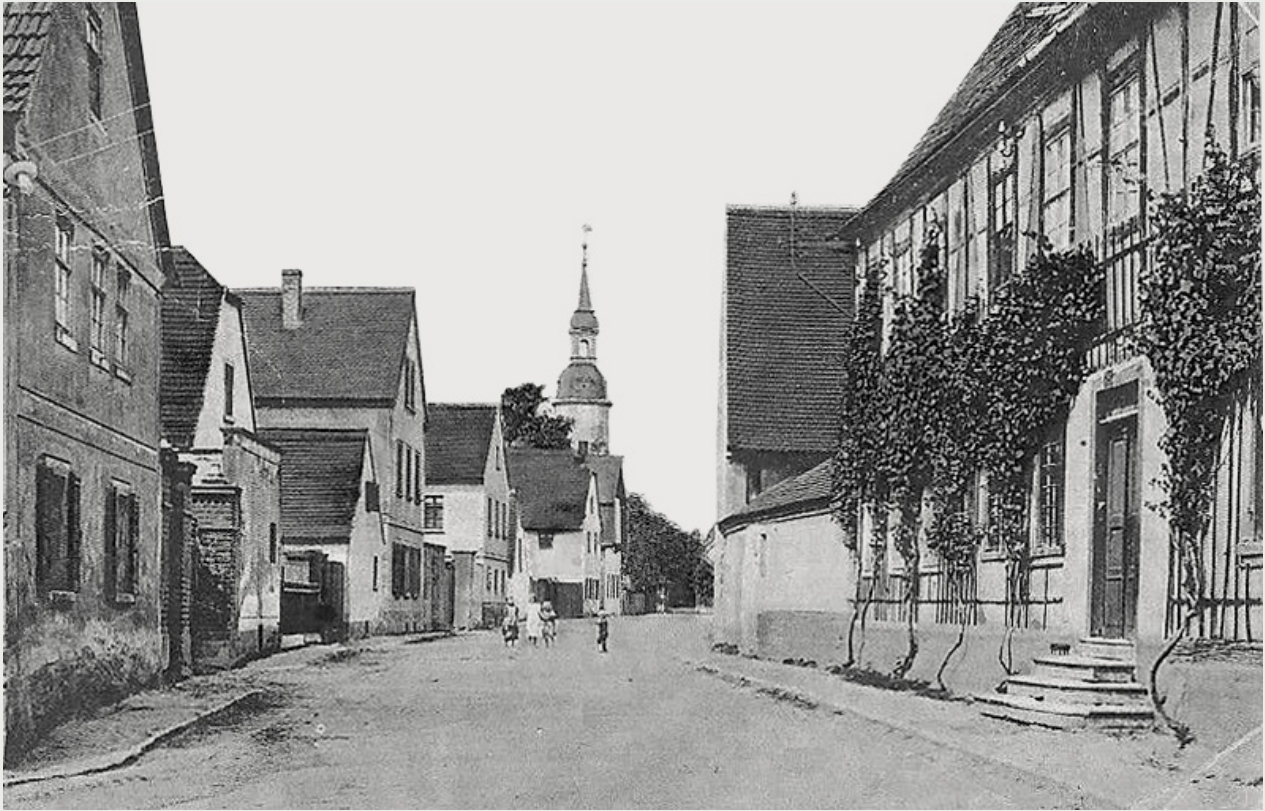
Waiting for the end



Espenhain opencast mine
Photographer: Norbert Vogel

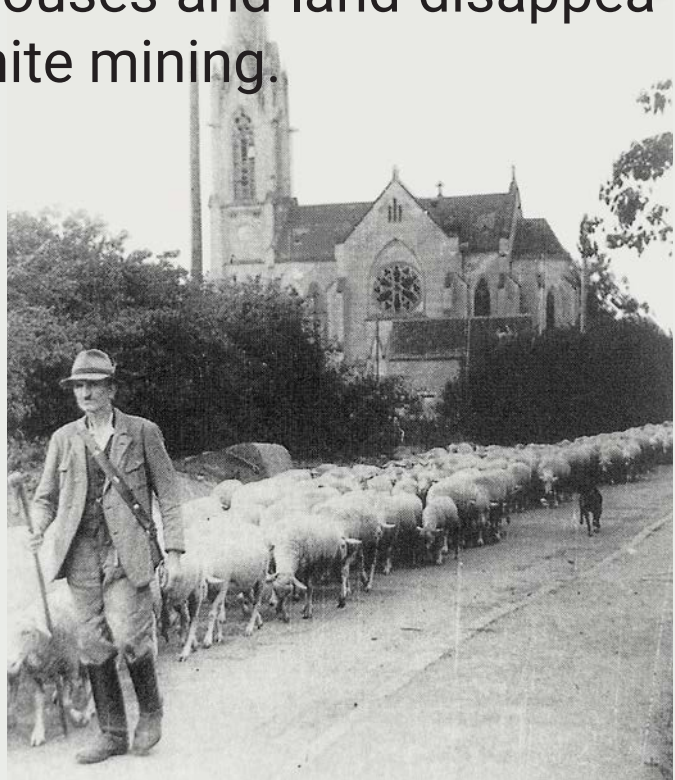
Industrialization changed the character of many villages in the region south of Leipzig. No longer purely farming villages, they gained small housing estates for industrial workers. The huge demand for labour in the lignite industry required large numbers of homes to be built, mainly in multi-storey terraces. In 1949, the population of Wachau reached a record 1,204.

However, a great deal of Wachau's farmland was eaten up as the adjacent opencast mine grew, and the entire suburb of Vorwerk Auenhain was demolished in 1976. The inhabitants were resettled in neighbouring villages and increasingly also in Leipzig, causing them to lose their old way of life as well as their neighbours and friends. Even the village of Cröbern, home to the mother church which had governed the filial church in Wachau



Village street in Cröbern
Image: Archive PRO Leipzig

since 1571, had to make way for the excavators. The residents of Cröbern were resettled between 1967 and 1972, their houses and land disappearing in the name of lignite mining.



The Wachau Shepherd, around 1940
Photographer: Charlotte Angermann

In addition to entire villages, large areas of woodland fell victim to the opencast mines. This destruction of the countryside was accompanied by rising air pollution. Rivers had to be rerouted so that new mines could be drained. Since government planning provided for several villages to be sacrificed, including Wachau, a ban on construction work and even refurbishment was imposed there. People lived in wait for the order to evacuate as the historical buildings fell into dilapidation around them.



landscape in the Espenhain opencast mine
Photographer: Harald Kirschner

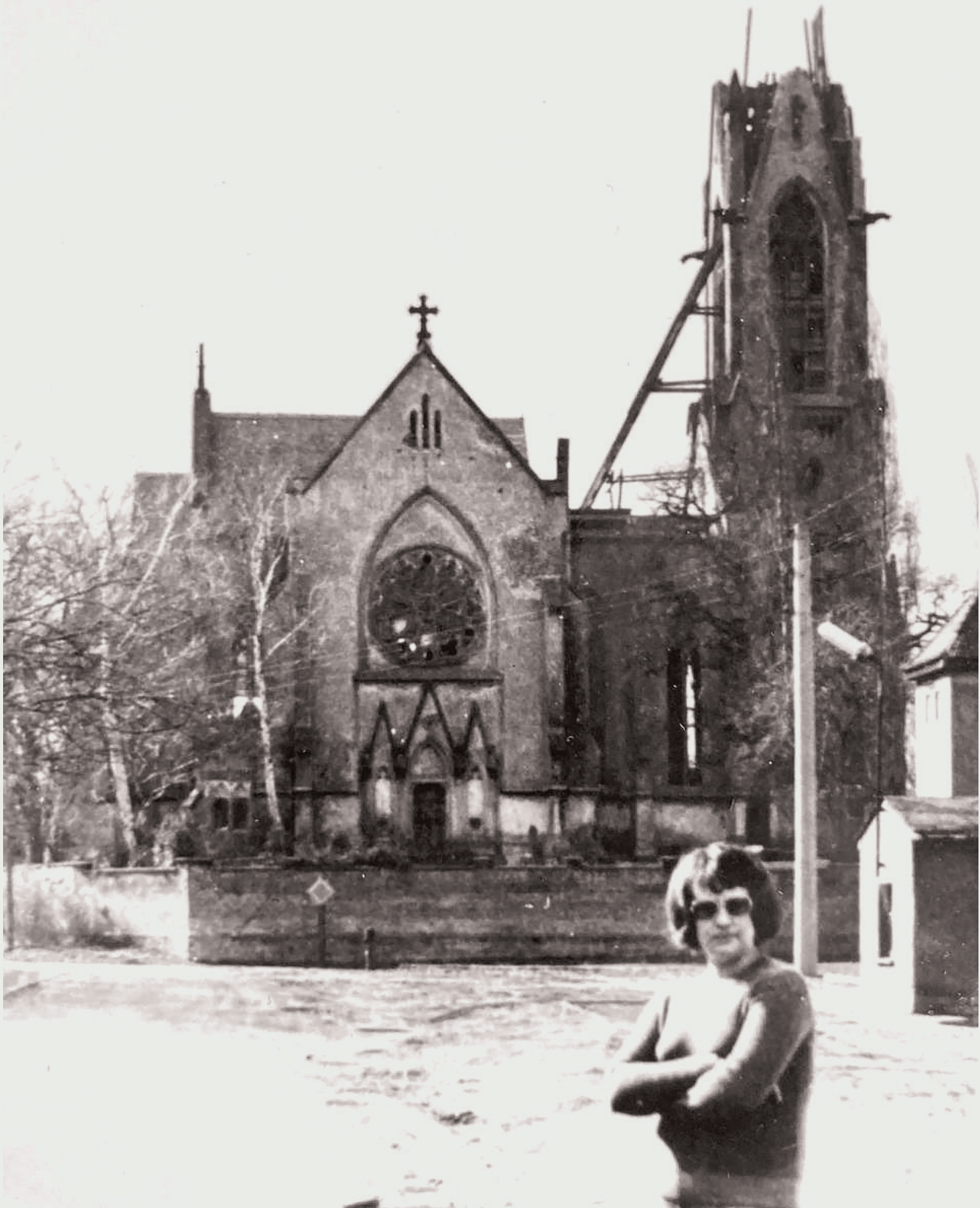
Slow decay



The church in Wachau was also marked by the ravages of time. After the war, repairing all the damage it had suffered was impossible. The lack of funding, the planned demolition of Wachau to extract the lignite underneath, and the anti-religious stance of the East German government meant that restoration was out of the question. The wind and rain were able to continue their destructive work.

In 1956, the final wedding took place in the church before marriages were moved to the parish hall. In 1974, the church tower was struck by lightning. Luckily, the fire went out quickly – even before the arrival of the fire brigade, so the story goes. Because the tower was in danger of collapsing,

it was pulled down in 1975. The rubble was simply tipped onto the vaulted roof above the nave, which eventually collapsed under the weight. Magnificent stone carvings including figural decorations, gargoyles and foliage were lost forever. What remained was the covered-up stump of the tower.





Gradual resurgence



Opencast mining landscape south of the Auenhain settlement
Photographer: Harald Kirschner

German reunification in 1990 initially led to economic collapse in the region. The lignite-refining plants were immediately shut down, and nearly all the briquette factories followed by the end of 1993. Raw lignite production plummeted from 105 million tonnes in 1989 to 6 million tonnes in 1996, well below output in 1945. The number of workers in the lignite industry dropped from formerly 30,000 to just 2,500. Mining was restricted to areas containing lignite with a high calorific value and low in sulphur, namely Profen and Schleenhain, both south of Wachau. The mine

in what is now Lake Markkleeberg was closed down in 1994. Since the economic prospects of the lignite industry were now limited to generating electricity, construction work began on the state-of-the-art Lippendorf power plant in 1995. This, too, became a local landmark thanks to its cooling towers with a height of 165 metres (over 540 feet) – the tallest structures in the Leipzig district.

In 1992, an agreement reached between regional and federal government paved the way for the long-term transformation of the area south of Leipzig into a district of lakes and open spaces for recreational and leisure use. From 1999 to 2006, the disused mining pit on the edge of Wachau was flooded, creating Lake Markkleeberg. Today, Wachau is part of a region geared to tourism.

German reunification also saved the church ruins in Wachau, which were placed under a preservation order. The rubble was cleared by local parishioners, and the walls were stabilized, meaning people could enter the church again. The floor was replaced, and the altar and baptismal font were restored. In 1997, a service was held to re-consecrate the church ruins.

In 1994, the village of Wachau was incorporated into the town of Markkleeberg. As Cröbern had been bulldozed to allow lignite mining to proceed,

the parish of Wachau was administered by the church in the nearby village of Störmthal. These days, Wachau Church is part of the 'Church Quartet', whose parish office is in the Leipzig borough of Probstheida, and which also includes the parishes of Störmthal and Guldengossa.

Permanent maintenance work is required to keep the ruins open to visitors. In 2017, nets were attached to the tower to catch falling masonry. The walls also had to be extensively repaired as otherwise a site fence would have had to be erected around the church to keep people out. After lengthy preparation, much of the masonry was plastered in 2019/20, structurally securing the ruins. The costs of the building work totalled €530,000, the majority of which was financed by the EU programme LEADER. Additional funds were provided by the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Saxony, parishioners, and the Wachau Church Ruins Association. In 2020, the exterior lighting was replaced, and the paths around the building were repaired, making it accessible to disabled visitors.

Nowadays, church services and religious festivities are held in the church ruins. Every summer, they also provide the setting for a series of concerts and theatrical performances. A Christmas market in and around the ruins marks a delightful, highly atmospheric conclusion to the year. And

every day, the doors are open to the public, who are invited to come inside and explore. As soon as enough money has been raised, the next project will be to refurbish the chancel. The painted ceiling (originally inside the church but now exposed to the elements) needs to be restored to preserve the colours and ornamentation. And perhaps at some point the top of the tower will be rebuilt. It won't be the tallest tower in the area, but it will still afford visitors an expansive view of Leipzig New Lakeland (the flooded open-cast mines) around Wachau.



