

A visit to the Ballenberg Open Air Museum : a mirror of Swiss residential culture

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A mirror of Swiss residential culture

Four cultures meet in the small space of Switzerland – four cultures whose differences are reflected in many ways. These include the varying styles of house construction. The goal of the Open Air Museum at Ballenberg above Brienz in the Bernese Oberland, which was opened in 1978, is to create an impressive overall view of the various types of houses encountered in our country. Acquisition and restoration are the means being used to attain this goal.

Open air museums are nothing new. The Scandinavian countries were pioneers in this field, and have been familiar with this form of institution for decades. Yet it was long before a national open air museum dedicated primarily to preserving and presenting old farmhouses as well as the original agricultural forms was established in Switzerland. An

initiative of this kind was launched as early as the thirties. But not until 1978 could the Swiss Open Air Museum at Ballenberg be handed over for its true purpose. This museum is far from being a typical museum, as director Peter Oeschger told the "Swiss Review". Apart from collecting, preserving and presenting items of Swiss culture, Ballenberg clearly

also has a tourist function. This is evident if we consider that over 300,000 people visit the wonderful grounds situated above Lake Brienz between May and October each year.

Short tour

It would be presumptuous to regard the Open Air Museum at Ballenberg as a static object or even a "Potemkin village" claiming to present an kind of idyllic life. What we see here allows us to submerge ourselves in the past in a very realistic way. We enter into the living rooms of our predecessors – whether daily labourers or masters – with a feeling of respect for these people, receiving a direct impression of living conditions in those days. How varied Switzerland is! We become conscious of this when we view the great variety of different houses, impressively grouped with didactic skill into thirteen construction groups in accordance with their regional origins.

It is absolutely impossible to see everything in this museum park in just one day. Yet a glance into the interiors of the spread out houses is certainly worthwhile. They are a living witness to the variety of residential forms in past centuries.

An example

Each individual house – and there are now over 80 of them – has its own tale to tell: the multi-purpose house from the High Jura, for example, which reflects a part of Jurassic economic history. Both corn barn and threshing floor show us how the inhabitants of the Jura cultivated grain during the early 17th century, rather than keeping many cattle. The impressive cheese cellar shows us that dairy farming and cattle breeding only became significant at a later date in the High Jura. The hard-working people used to put their long, hard and secluded winters to good use, and the watchmaker's room is evidence of the high standard of precision mechanics at the time. It reminds us that the cradle of the Swiss watch industry was located in the Jura.

This example illustrates a piece of Swiss history. This also applies to many other exhibits, whose rich testimony cannot be expressed in words here. A living museum of this kind goes to considerable effort to show various forms of traditional handicrafts in and around the houses. At Ballenberg these



The Ballenberg Open Air Museum is proud of its rich collection of restored farmhouse furniture. (archive photo)



Multi-purpose house from Ostermundigen, Canton of Berne, 1797. Solid farmhouse built by Lieutenant-Captain Bendicht Gosteli. (archive photo)

include the baking of bread in woodburning stoves, weaving, carving and basket making. The museum also pays attention to local flora, and the herb garden is a very special gem, symbolising as it does traditional healing crafts.

We hope that this brief introduction to one of Switzerland's most attractive museums will encourage you to visit Ballenberg. We heartily recommend that our compatriots visiting their home country on the occasion of the 700th anniversary make a detour to the Swiss Open Air Museum at Ballenberg. SM

Reflections on the Beginnings of the Swiss Confederation

Freedom or Peace

*One single band of brothers will we be,
In danger and in need unsundered still!
We will be free, as all our fathers were,
And rather die than live in bonds of shame,
We still will put our trust in God most High
And never cringe before the might of man!*

This is how Friedrich Schiller presents the oath sworn by the founders of the Swiss Confederation in his drama "Wilhelm Tell". Schiller's universally-known play has profoundly marked popular opinion on the origins of Switzerland. Bondage is overcome by freedom, trust in God is stronger than fear of fellow-man, and good triumphs over bad. But is this the truth about the birth of the Confederation?

Schiller's "Wilhelm Tell" created a stir in many large German cities between 1804 and 1806. It was the time when the French Revolution had just swept away the old system of royal-aristocratic rule in France, and the Holy Roman Empire lay in its death agony. It "lacked reason", as Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel had said, and was therefore no longer

"real". All across Europe the bourgeoisie was storming the remaining bastions of the reign of the nobility, whose rule was based on privileges. America became the model for Europeans, and it is this background that enabled George Washington and William Tell to be portrayed side by side on the same page as the great freedom-fighting heroes of the history of the world.

No Fight for Freedom...

The most ancient of these chronicles tells us that Romans settled in Unterwalden, and that the Emperor granted them the freedom to live there and cultivate the land. It also recounts that the people of Schwyz came from Sweden as a result of overpopulation there, and that they too received permission from the Em-



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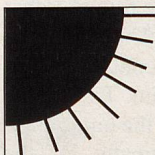
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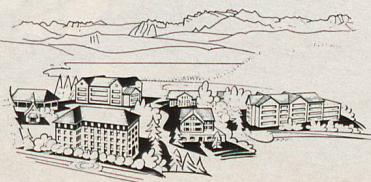
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