

ENGLISCH

History

Alsfeld was probably founded during the Carolingian period in the 8-9th century and functioned initially as the seat of the royal court. According to excavations carried out in the Walpurgis Church, by the 8-9th century it already possessed a Roman Basilica with three apses. Both the castle and the town were established as a result of the territorial policies pursued by the Landgrave of Thuringia between 1180 and 1190. The earliest records of the settlement are from 1069 and 1076. Alsfeld achieved city status in 1222 or 1231. Together with Gruenberg and Marburg it belonged to the Rhine City Association.

The city enjoyed rising prosperity due its favourable geographical location and the policies of the Landgrave of Hesse. Trades and handcrafts flourished and Alsfeld developed into a wealthy, industrious community on the "Street through the short Hesse". Evidence of this is the church, monastery, towers, town hall and water supply system. Alsfeld was, for a time, the residence of the Landgrave Hermann II of Hesse, who built a castle here in around 1395. Of great importance were the guilds, which gained influence over local government through the so-called "Korebrief" (constitution).

In the 16th century, the citizen's creativity brought about a "golden age" in architecture and design, resulting in the erection of the town hall (1512 - 1516), the wine house (1538) and the wedding house (1564 -1571) - all unique buildings. The many half-timbered buildings, which are still in existence today, are what make the market place so singularly attractive. Together with the medieval streets and their typical character, the city is regarded as the jewel in the crown of the upper Hessian cities. In those days the population of Alsfeld was about 2500 – 3000.

Whereas the geographical position of Alsfeld had been to its advantage, it also led to its demise. The city was centred on important trade routes and the following 30 Years War (1618-1648) resulted in plunder (1622), starvation (1626), plague (1635), occupation (1640 and 1643-1646) and the destruction of 226 residential buildings and 80 cottages (1646). By 1648 only 1120 people were still living in the city (mainly women and children). The economic and social fall of the city created a population of struggling smallholders, active in crafts and trades and also agriculture. Many of the fine buildings fell into disrepair.

It wasn't until the 19th century, in 1832, that Alsfeld was to experience a renewed rise as the district capital. Railway construction (1870) and the industrial revolution resulted in the fundamental transformation of the smallholding system. Motorway connections (1938) and further industrialization ensured that the location regained its previous geographic and economic importance. Thankfully the historical town centre was preserved.

European model city

Previously surrounded by an oval shaped city wall with 4 gates, the medieval town of Alsfeld is still characterised by a wealth of half-timbered buildings, which stand alongside simple residential buildings and monumental civic constructions. The narrow, twisting streets and passages open out into courtyards and squares presenting the most delightful and unique features to be found in the whole of Hesse. The visitor is provided with a complete overview of the development of wood construction from the late Middle Ages to the beginning of the nineteenth century. For the past 100 years a conscious cultural conservation has been nurtured to preserve the buildings. Ever since the local statutes of 1963, the civic bodies have been obliged to care and preserve the old city landscape. Thanks to a happy twist of fate, the historical city centre with its medieval and renaissance architecture has been passed down to us. The local population appreciates and supports the city's architectural heritage.

As a result of these efforts, particularly the renovation of the old city, which began in 1967, Alsfeld was selected by the European council as one of 51 exemplary cities in 17 European countries for the European Year of Building Preservation.

The numbers on the city map below correspond to the following route description of the most interesting buildings.

This city walk will take approximately 60 minutes.

The Route

1. Town Hall (1512-1516)

This is one of the most important German half-timbered town hall buildings. Erected over a late Gothic stone substructure, this building with its attractive woodwork, bent chevron bracing and protruding moulded beam-ends, is an outstanding example of a "Rähmbau" (frame construction). The ground storey was once a market hall. The "Alsfeld cubit" can still be seen on the left corner. On the first floor the offices of the Mayor and Magistrate are situated. Since 1633 the councilmen have had their coats of arms on display. On the second floor, interesting old doors lead into the meeting room and the Registry Office (formerly the Court Room). Michael Finck, the local artist and carpenter, designed and crafted the magnificent Renaissance door in 1604. Curt Oberman forged the decorative hinges.

2. Winholt House - Apothecary (Chemist) (1561)

Similar to the Town Hall in structure, this also has a late Gothic stone substructure, ornamental Gothic doorway and half-timbered upper section. This has been an apothecary since 1665. The original unspoiled half-timbering dating back to 1600, can be seen on the adjoining secondary building on the Obere Fulder Gasse,

3. Obere Fulder Gasse 1/3

During restoration in 1973, the original half-timbered frame was uncovered revealing this impressive 16th century three storeyed eaved construction with protruding beam heads. From here there is a marvellous view of the gable-side of the town hall and the Walpurgis Church Tower.

4. Markt 13 (1726)

A very narrow, four-storeyed, gabled house with simple half-timbering. The width of the house on the upper floors is that of one room.

5. Markt 12 (1883)

A solid neo-gothic building on the site of an inn called "Zum Schwanen". It is said that Martin Luther's entourage spent a night there on their journey to Worms in 1521.

6. Markt 8

This pillar building was originally constructed around 1500. Although the gable side was rebuilt several times, the eave side is still in its original form. Recently old timbers were used in the careful renovation enhancing the general appearance of the market place.

7. Wedding House (1564 - 1571)

Constructed by Hans Meurer, this is one of the few stone buildings in the city. It was used for civic functions i.e. weddings and dances until 18th century. At later periods it was used as barracks, stables, a lazarette, a prison, storage for salt, foodstuffs, beer and recently housed the regional museum. It now hosts a bakery/café and office rooms. The building shows the Renaissance influence in the curved gables and the portals. The coats of arms of Alsfeld and the Landgrave of Hesse adorn magnificent corner oriels.

8. Stumpf House (1609)

Jost Stumpf, Mayor of Alsfeld for 3 terms and a master baker built this house on the south-western side of the market place. To accommodate his growing family, the house was extended towards the Rittergasse. This is the earliest half-timbered house in Alsfeld with magnificent painted wood carvings and a monumental scroll along its length. Lower Saxony Fan Rosettes, typical of the Renaissance period, adorn the frontage. Jost Stumpf, dressed in the latest contemporary clothing, has been carved on the left-hand corner post.

9. Medieval Well (Mainzer Gasse)

There used to be at least 120 public wells within the city boundary. Most of these wells disappeared following the construction of the water supply pipeline in 1896. This well was rediscovered and restored during the construction of the pedestrian precinct in 1974. It is 7.5 metres deep with a water level of 2 metres. A frog prince watches over the well.

10. Mainzer Gasse 19/21

Still in its original condition, this "Rähmbau" (frame construction) built around 1520 is similar in construction to the town hall with its massive timber sections and protruding beam ends.

11. Church of the Holy Trinity

Former monastery church of the Augustine hermits, with a long choir for the clergy built in the second half of the 14th century. Around 1435 an asymmetrical hall was added with naves and side aisles. There is no church tower as the monks belonged to a begging order. A closer view of the church on the inside reveals a well preserved cross-ribbed dome, a beautiful stone chancel with a pulpit ceiling from around 1660, as well as late Gothic frescoes from the early part of the 15th century, It was restored in 1960/62.

12. Former Augustine monastery

Presumably founded towards the end of the 13th century, and occupied by Eremite Hermit Monks. This is where Luther's friend, Tilemann Schnabel, the reformer of

Alsfeld lived and worked. At the time of the Reformation, in 1527, the monastery and church were closed down. Subsequently the buildings were used as a hospital and finally left to ruin. One remaining monastery wall shows where the monks' cells were located. The monastery was situated along the city wall, which had four gates and was largely demolished in the 19th century. A short section of the city wall remains and can be seen on the south side.

15. Rossmarkt 2 (1690)

A very well preserved half-timbered house from the golden age of wooden construction, similar in design to the Neurath House, presumably built by the same master carpenter.

17. Untere Fulder Gasse 2/4 (1490)

A three storeyed, double-fronted, half-timbered house from the transitional period (mixture of Gothic and Renaissance style). Of particular interest are the bent foot struts below the windows on the first and second floors and the thick protruding beams and diagonal bracing.

18. Untere Fulder Gasse 15 /17 (1450 - 1500)

A double-fronted house, divided at the gable, which has undergone several reconstructions; on the left side, the earlier pillar construction and on the right side, the Rähmbau (frame construction). Features include St. Andrew crosses, bent foot struts and on the left, a corner alcove accommodating a well.

19. Leonhard's Tower (1386)

The former city fortress had numerous towers of which the Leonhard's Tower is the last remaining. A rounded tower with cone and battlement crest, it is 27 metres high. Entrance was from the city wall, through a doorway half way up the tower. At the base of the tower was the dungeon, which was used for holding prisoners sentenced to death. The tower is known locally as the "Storks' Nest". Legend has it that babies were ordered from the storks nesting there.

20. "Grabbrunnen" Well

This well was used for dyeing cloth. Folklore has it that the storks from the "Storks' Nest" flew to the well to collect the babies and deliver them to the families who had ordered them. The old well base has been redesigned with this saga in mind.

21. Untergasse 12/14

This is a fine example of early seventeenth century half-timbering and carpentry expertise. It comprises a three-storeyed double-fronted house, decorated with ornamental wood carvings on the crossbeams. Over the years the ground storey has been subjected to many alterations.

22. Untergasse 22

One of the most impressive Renaissance half-timbered houses from the 17th century with a beautiful door frame and ornamental corner posts.

23. Hersfelder Gasse 15 (1453)

A very grand half-timbered building from 15th century. Along the eave side of the building, the original pillar construction has been altered but is still visible.

24. Hersfelder Gasse 10/12 (1375)

This remarkable patrician house is one of the oldest half-timbered, pillar constructions in Germany. It has 2 x 7 pillars (long posts) in the side walls and two jettied (protruding) storeys on the gable side. Uncovered in 1959, restoration began on the left side. Recent research suggests that it was originally not double-fronted but possessed a double-storeyed hall, in the front section, over the entire width of the building. Some of the corner panels, the breast and foot struts, as well as the hanging posts and long support brackets are original.

25. Amthof 8 (1470)

An important late-Gothic half-timbered house with a pronounced jetty (storey protrusion) and short foot struts. The top corner has hanging posts and straight support brackets. The ground floor has been completely altered.

26. Amthof 13 (1520)

An imposing three-storeyed, half-timbered house from the early Rähmbau (framed construction) period. The long, bent chevron bracing are reminiscent of the town hall. During restoration the exterior of the building was uncovered, revealing the fine wooden framework.

27. Bein house (1368 - 1510)

Late Gothic Chapel originally built in 1368 and reconstructed in 1510, on the north side of the churchyard. Later used for preserving the skeletons from the surrounding cemetery. (The cemetery was too small to cope with the number of deaths in the 30 Year War and the various plagues.) The chapel was later misused for profane purposes. At the beginning of the 20th century alterations were carried out to the attic roof. Since its restoration in 1982, the building has housed the city archives.

28. Kirchplatz 10

A very interesting half-timbered house constructed and modified from 15th to 17th centuries. The original building was constructed in 1392 of which only the top storey remains. The second floor, the gable and the roof were modified in 1585. The ground floor was completely replaced in 1664.

29. Obergasse 11 (1470)

The oldest preserved inscription in Gothic miniscule, dating back to 1470 – 1479. Restoration work in 1967 uncovered the original pillar construction. Unfortunately not many of the original timbers remain. Truly unique for this early period in Alsfeld.

30. Obergasse 26 (1480)

This imposing three-storey corner house is one of the oldest in the street. The complicated timber construction at the corners is made of interlocking braces and struts.

31. Obergasse 5

Originally, this half-timbered building with jettying (projecting storeys) and curved support brackets dates back to 15th century. The building has been altered substantially. A modern shop has been successfully integrated into the ground floor half-timbered framework.

32. Markt 2 (1350/1351)

The oldest building in Alsfeld, a Gothic, half-timbered house in pillar construction. It has two barrel shaped cellars dating back to the time when the city was founded. In 1394 when a large section of the Walpurgis Church Tower collapsed, the right-hand side of the house was severely damaged. It was rebuilt in 1403 and 1464/65. The upper storeys jetty (project) above the storey below giving additional living space to each upper storey. The hall on the ground floor is now used as a bookshop. The upper floors house municipal offices.

Behind the building is the “Schwalm Well”. This was erected in 1958 to show solidarity with the people of the Schwalm region and their traditions. On top of the well is “Gänseliesel”, a goose girl dressed in the traditional Schwalm costume.

33. Walpurgis Church

The main civic church in Alsfeld, dedicated to St. Walpurga, has a complicated building history. This is reflected both in the interior design and in the outer construction. Excavations carried out in 1971/1972, revealed the remains of the oldest section, a three apses Roman Church dating back to the 8th/9th century. In the late 13th century an early Gothic Basilica was built, with a low, elongated choir and west tower. In 1393, the choir was reconstructed, made longer and substantially higher. Plans to reconstruct the long house had to be cancelled as the church tower collapsed in 1394 and the funds were needed for reconstruction. In 1492, the existing basilica was further developed. Later the aisles were widened and heightened to form high arcades and create a hall-like church. Features include: a Roman baptismal font, late Gothic frescoes, carved altar, paintings, choir seating, baroque epitaphs and a late Gothic crucifixion group.

Work on the collapsed tower commenced soon after the event and was only

completed in 1542, with a strengthened octagonal storey topped by a Renaissance canopy. In 1836 one storey was removed. The tower has 7 bells, is approximately 50 metres high and was the residence of the tower keeper until 1921. Every year the traditional "Cradle of Christ" music is played over the Christmas Period. A trombone choir performs the traditional "May Blowing" every night during the month of May from the top of the tower.

35. Wine House (1538)

This impressive municipal stone building was constructed by Hans von Frankfurt and used to store and sell wine. Business deals, celebrations and special events were toasted and validated with wine. Wine sales generated up to 40% of the town's income. The transition between the Gothic and Renaissance architecture can be seen in the steep stepped gables and the fan rosettes facing. The original irregular, stone curtained windows were unfortunately replaced in 1840 /43 by the present rounded windows. Remains of the earlier windows are still visible.

On the left-hand corner of the building, facing the market place, is the former pillory where offenders were publicly humiliated.

36. Bücking House (1515)

An attractive house built as a Rähmbau (frame construction) with decorative timbering. A striking feature is the corner turret / bay windows extending over 2 floors. It was probably built by the same master carpenter who built the Town Hall. Of interest are the high support beams on the joint posts as a precursor to the "Wild Man".

Rittergasse

37. Neurath House (1688)

An imposing four-storeyed patrician's house, the largest timbered building in Alsfeld. The impressive gateway leads to the inner courtyard and cottage. The ornately carved Renaissance front door with upper and lower sections is typical of the Hesse style. It has massive corner posts with well-preserved carvings and fancy Thuringian-styled window frames. Three religious paintings of the creation adorn the eave side of the building.

38. Minnegerode House (1687)

The only privately owned patrician house built entirely in stone. Outstanding portal with ornate baroque masonry and featuring the double coat of arms: Minnigerode-Oeyenhausen. Inside there is an awe-inspiring wooden spiral staircase, extending over 2 storeys. The central post is carved out of a massive oak trunk over 8 metres in length. The museum has many interesting exhibits covering the history of Alsfeld.

Regional Museum

As part of the restoration process of the city of Alsfeld, a regional museum centre

was set up in the years 1975 - 1977 comprising the two patrician's houses described above (Minnegerode and Neurath) including the yards to the rear and a cottage. This was planned to adjoin the pedestrian precinct zone. The museum exhibits, previously housed in the Wedding House, are now displayed in the rebuilt and restored buildings under modern museum conditions. In addition, rooms were designed for presentations, lectures, concerts and exhibitions. The rear courtyards are used for musical events and festivities. The heritage of these historic buildings plays a vital role in today's world and is held in trust for future generations.

39. The Fairy Tale House (1628)

This half-timbered house was the first house to be renovated under the Historic Town Restoration Plan. The rooms are decorated to illustrate the Grimm's Fairy Tales. In the reading room children can listen to their favourite fairy tales being read to them. It is thought that the Grimm brothers wrote the fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood" while in the area. On the top floor there is a fascinating collection of 79 dolls houses dating back to the 19th. century. Many dolls, some in traditional costumes, complete the exhibition.

The well near the entrance was recently discovered and pays compliment to the legend of "The Frog Prince".