

# ASPECTS OF FRANCONIA

---

In recent years observers of Erlangen's Bergkirchweih will have noticed how young people are increasingly turning up in smart Lederhosen and dirndls. Dressing up in Tracht is very much in, it seems, though not everyone, according to the British newspaper "The Guardian", is enamoured of the idea. The paper's German correspondent writes: *"Traditionalists feel a piece of their heritage is being threatened by a fad for cheap, "sexy" dirndl-style dresses made in China"*.

The traditional German costume has its roots in Franconian and Bavarian culture and the three-piece outfit – usually consisting of a low-cut white blouse, a long skirt and an apron – can cost several hundred euros. When hand-sewn and properly tailored it will last for decades. However, traditional makers are concerned that a trend among the young for off-the-peg party dirndls is an affront to their heritage. Usually dirndls carry distinguishing marks that are specific to a particular region, but cheap imports from China or Bangladesh, available on the high street for less than €60, are often a mishmash of several styles and traditions. Purists are rightly dismayed.



*A dirndl on a young German girl in 1933*

*The name Dirndl originally meant in southern German dialect a young woman or girl, whereas Dirndlgewand referred to the dress itself. Nowadays Dirndl can refer to both. It is, of course, the diminutive form of the word Dirn(e), which once only meant "girl", but today invariably means "prostitute".*

A Dirndl's basic blouse-skirt-corset idea, originally simple rural clothing, came from the eastern regions of the Swiss Alps, and was to become the "uniform" of Austrian domestic workers during the nineteenth century. It appeared in its current state of decorative format and style in eastern Switzerland in the 1890s, and spread in the early twentieth century to the south of Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein, South Tirol, and Trentino.

It's a fascinating development and fashion and societal changes do play a role.

The five Franconian ladies pictured below would certainly stand out at the Erlangen Bergkirchweih, but for all the wrong reasons. Today it is all about revealing a shapely leg, so the Dirndl skirt has wandered upwards to well above the knee, while the blouse is low-cut and leaves little to the imagination. I have to confess, all these ladies are rather eye-catching!



If you want to find out more about **historic** regional dress you should make for a Heimat- und Volkstrachtenverein, like the one we have in Neunhof, a short distance south of Erlangen. It will soon be open again and I suggest we take a trip there on a spring weekend, so keep your eyes open for an announcement to this effect in the next Franconian.



F. Gillard

P.S.

My article came back from our secretary, Valerie, with the following comment:

*This brought back memories of when I first lived and taught in Bamberg (1975) and travelled up to Erlangen on a regular basis. In Forchheim the train was filled on Wednesdays by Franconian 'Bäuerinnen in Tracht', coming here for market day.*

*That, to me, was a very quaint picture. They were very friendly, but I didn't understand much of what they said, so I just smiled and said 'Ja'.*