

## The Inspiring Milieu of Leichhardt's Homeland

Tim Müller

Ludwig Leichhardt was born in Sabrodt. His birthplace is situated north of the Spree River and not far away from the Schwielochsee – the largest lake in Lower Lusatia and the main waterway between this landscape and the city of Berlin.

The move of the Leichhardt family to the Schwielochsee-region was prompted by shifts in the primary sector around 1800 that saw a growing governmental investment in mining. In 1783, Friedrich Anton von Heynitz (1725-1802), head of the *Prussian Mining Sites and Ironworks*, declared the use of mineral resources as vital to the welfare of Prussian subjects. And facing rising prices for wood and timber, the Prussian government began to look for peat as a substitute. Fearing that the growing Prussian capital, Berlin, and even the royal capital Potsdam could be affected by a lack of combustible material, the *Prussian Forest Administration* and the *Mining Administration in the Margraviate of Brandenburg* established 28 new peat-ditches between 1790 and 1804 alone.

Leichhardt's father, Christian Hieronimus Matthias Leichhardt (1778-1840), began to work in one of these newly established sites as inspector of the Sawall peat-ditch on 21st June 1803. It had opened only two years earlier, in 1801, when the *Prussian Forest Administration* started extracting peat. At that time the Sawall peat-ditch was situated directly on the former border between Prussia and Saxony. This administrative obstacle became obsolete in the year 1815, when Prussia incorporated two-thirds of the former Saxon territory.

Already before Christian Leichhardt took up this post, he had gained a great deal of experience in peat cutting. As a child he had laboured in the peat-ditch of Schadeleben in the Harz foreland, a site that was operated by the *Prussian Mining Administration*. And in the early 1790s, Christian Leichhardt had moved to the important peat-ditch of Linum in the "Rhinluch", not far from Neuruppin. Afterwards he had been employed in the peat-ditch of the Dahlewitz manor for some years, a site that was privately owned by the von Marschall family. Christian Leichhardt became a public servant when he was finally offered to work as inspector of the Sawall peat-ditch near Trebatsch. It was here that eight of his nine children were born, and the Schwielochsee-region became the home of the Leichhardt family. With an income of 180 thalers per annum, 10 thalers accommodation allowance per year and 2 fathoms of peat for free, Leichhardt's father was a privileged man in a region that was mainly inhabited by poor farmers and fishers. Christian Leichhardt's tasks as inspector of the Sawall peat-ditch included the planning of the peat mining in the pasture of Sawall, the transport of

the peat to the reloading point on the western riverside of the Schwielochsee, the sale of the peat to consumers in the region or in the Prussian capital and, last but not least, the coordination of the day labourers who worked in the peat-ditch.

It is widely known that the peat-ditch of Sawall was an important place for Ludwig Leichhardt to come in contact with and to develop an interest in the local botany and geology of the Schwielochsee-region. We also know about the significant influence of the Protestant pastor Anton Rödelius (1779-1859), who taught the later Australian explorer in the sciences and in natural history. In addition to these formative aspects of Leichhardt's early years, this essay wants to direct attention to the fact that the Sawall peat-ditch was much more than Leichhardt's remote birthplace on the Prussian periphery. The "Economic Enlightenment" – an academic as well as real-world development of the late 18th century – reached the Schwielochsee, too, as one can determine from files in the archives of Berlin (*Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz Berlin*) and Potsdam (*Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv Potsdam*). Documents by the *Prussian Forest Administration* and of the district of Trebatsch show Leichhardt's father in a sustained exchange with different modernisers of the Prussian administration.

One of those innovators was the Prussian official Karl Philipp von Kropff (1745-1820), who held a senior position in the Forest Department and who, in 1807, had published a much-acknowledged book about scientific improvements in forestry. After visiting the Sawall peat-ditch in 1812 von Kropff was very dissatisfied with the revenues of this site. Its poor performance, he believed, was caused by the insufficient quality of the peat, the absence of consumers in the district of Trebatsch, and by transportation problems. Due to low water levels, the peat could only be moved in small barges, and the old and narrow locks in the town of Beeskow would impede trading to Berlin until 1822. To raise the delivery and the quality of the Sawall peat-ditch, von Kropff engaged the mining expert Tändler to explore the site's geological character. Tändler's geological reconnaissance work in the year 1815 showed that the Sawall peat-ditch had sufficient resources for the next 40 years. As a Forest official, von Kropff was pleased by Tändler's results and made plans for make similar tests of all the peat-ditches operated by the Forest Department in the future.

Tändler's investigation was not the only geological exploration of the Sawall peat-ditch in Leichhardt's youth. Siehe, a peat and mining expert from the eastern riverside of the Schwielochsee also studied the peat-ditch's quality. He most probably worked as peat inspector in the pasture of Goschen near Pieskow, which, after 1817, had come to be operated by the Mining Department. Siehe had probably known Christian Leichhardt since the 1790s,

when they both worked in the peat-ditch of Linum. In the year 1813 we find Siehe working as peat inspector in the pasture of Scaby. Like von Kropff, Siehe published in the field of geology, and, in 1793, issued a practical instruction on how to carbonize peat.

As these contacts of Leichhardt's father with mining experts demonstrate, the Sawall peat-ditch was an inspiring milieu for a future explorer to grow up in. Compared to most of his contemporaries, Ludwig Leichhardt had since his early youth known about the economic relevance of mineral resources. In Prussia, as well as in Australia, their exploitation had only just begun.

Tim S. Mueller was born in the Ore Mountains/Germany in 1979. He studied history at the Technical University of Dresden. From 2006 till 2015 he worked as a scientific assistant at the Chair of the History of Technology at the Brandenburg University of Technology in Cottbus. Since 2015 he is the head of the Museum of the History of Energy in Hannover.