

The washhouse

The washhouse, built into the walls of the slate quarry, is particularly striking due to its unusual construction. It dates back to 1886.

Next to the washhouse is a staircase (now filled in) that once connected the lower part of the village to the quarry workshops, allowing direct access between the two.

Essential in a village before the invention of the washing machine, the washhouse was a gathering place for women to do laundry. This one is probably unique in the region: it was built using slate waste extracted from the mine and reused as construction material. Its vault, with a remarkable span, is a heritage feature worth preserving.

The washhouse is supplied with water pumped from the mine. Water was indeed a constant concern for mining operations. If not removed, it would quickly flood the entire underground workings. Thus, when activity resumed after the First World War, it took more than a year of pumping before extraction could begin again.

The Washhouse Circuit:

Housewives would bring down the dirty laundry from the attic, where it had been stored in bundles of coarse cloth (1).

They would place it in a large tub (often wooden):

- At the bottom, a small bag of aromatic herbs (thyme, lavender, bay leaves) was placed to perfume the laundry.
- The dirtiest items were placed at the bottom.
- The finest items (shirts, underwear, handkerchiefs, etc.) were placed on top.
- The whole was covered with a cloth or a hemp sheet, on which a thick layer of sifted ash was spread, acting as soap and detergent.

Hot water was then poured over it in large pots; this process was repeated many times.

The boiling water dissolved potassium carbonate; this alkaline solution helped remove grease and dirt from the clothes.

When the water flowing out was as hot as the incoming water, this step was complete.

Then the laundry was left to soak overnight (or left to drain slowly); this corresponds to the “soak” and “pre-wash” settings on your washing machine.



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