

The big laundry.

If the small linen was washed every eight or fifteen days, big laundry was done twice a year, one at the end of winter and the other after the big harvest work.

These large washes usually lasted three days. First of all, the wood ashes collected throughout the winter and used as soap had to be sorted. The ashes of oak, ash and hornbeam were the best, composing the washing powder or "ludu tan" in Breton. They were sieved very finely in order to remove any carbonized wood debris that could have dirty the laundry.

The day before the laundry was washed, the cloths were soaked in lukewarm water to loosen the dirt; hot water would have cooked the dirt and then it would have been impossible to remove it.

The hard work takes place the next day in the laundry room, the "steam house". The vat, which often consists of a barrel, is well placed on its "steam trough or steam slab" near the fireplace where a good fire burns to heat water from the boiler.

A "laundry sheet" covers the whole vat in which the various elements to be washed are laid out in successive layers, taking care to place the less soiled pieces at the bottom. After a first layer of cloths, sheets, shirts... we would sprinkle it with wood ash, "ludu tan". Those ashes were full of potash and were sprayed with hot water; then a new layer of laundry was placed. And so on up to the limit allowed by the vat. All that remained was to fold down the whole, the edges of the "laundry sheet" and to pack with a heavy stone.



Steam trough of the presbytery.

Another way of proceeding was to stack all the laundry in the "steam bin", then cover it with a large canvas overflowing on the sides on which the "ludu tan" is spread. Canvas which is then folded back to retain the ashes.

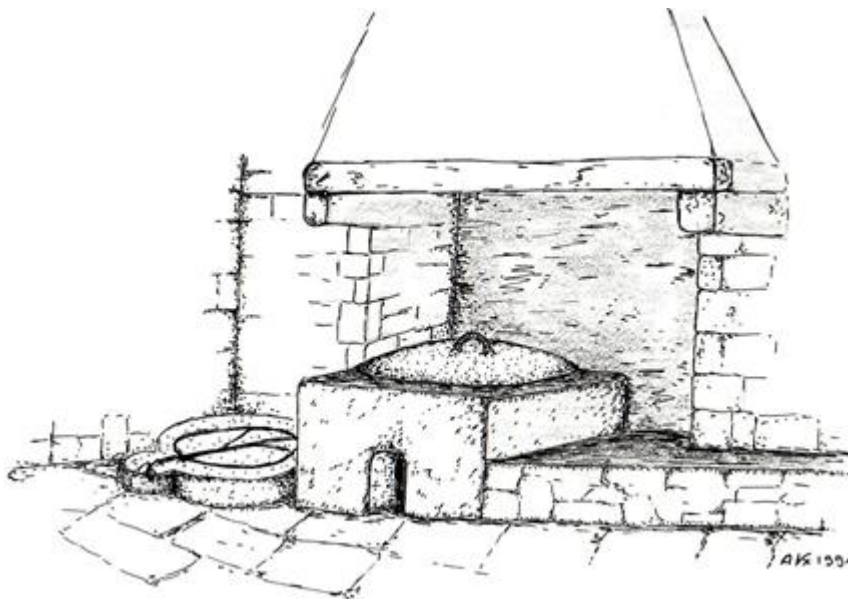
Near the fireplace, a good supply of wood is necessary, because the work can last. The hot but non-burning water is drawn regularly from the boiler and poured over the top of the well-filled vat. The water soaks the ashes, dissolves the active salts and passes through all the layers of cloths.

This hot water, poured over the top and which had passed through the various layers of laundry and ash, was then recovered by the pouring spout of the "steam trough" into a bucket or tub. It made several successive passages in the vat. Gradually the water and ashes were doing their work. Towards the end, almost boiling water is poured over the laundry.

The dirty water rich in potash, resulting from the various passages on the ashes of wood was preserved, constituting a fertilizer called "ar scloag", sought by market gardeners.

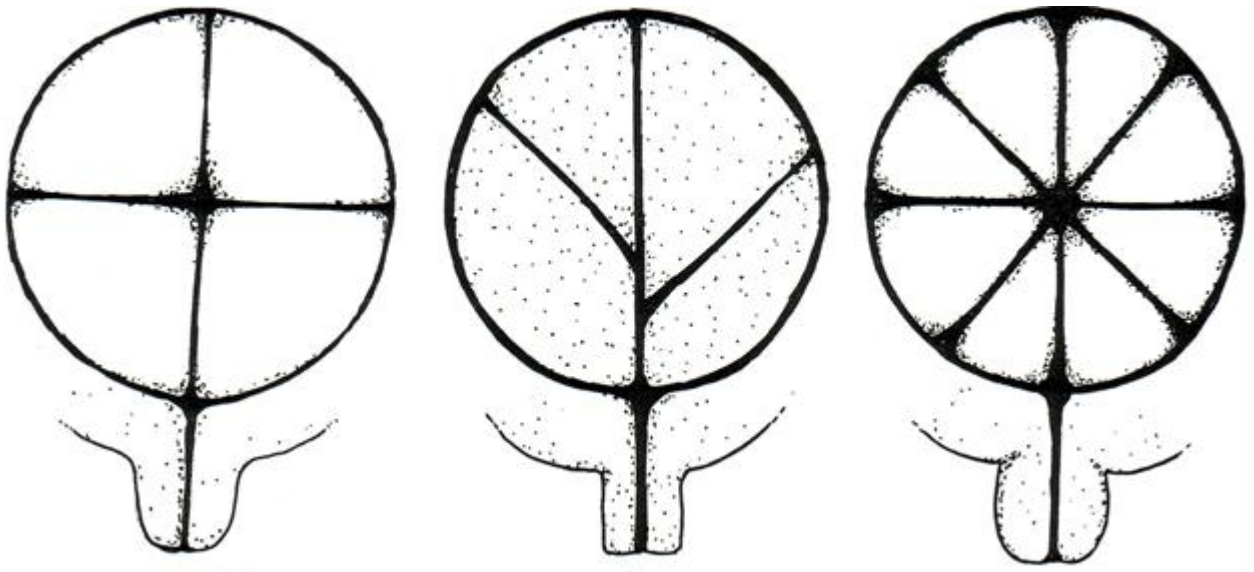
The next day, the laundry taken out of the vat, left for the wash-house, to be rinsed with a brush and a beater. After rinsing, the cloths and sheets were dried and bleached, spread out well in the sun on the grass of the placister.

This process was also used for bleaching flax yarn and hemp.



The fireplace of the "steam house" of the Trémébrit mill in POULDERGAT.

The inventories after death are very useful to find and locate these ancestors of the washing machine. Various terms or designations allow us to think of it: "steam barrel", "stone barrel used to make steam", "steam baillot", "steam baillot and its stepladder", "steam baillot and its slab", "steam trough", "effused barrel", "effused barrel containing ash", "sheet to wash", "sheet to steam"...



Various "steam slab" models.

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