

**Welcome to the  
Medieval Public Bath House  
in Pommelsbrunn**



**A guide for English- speaking visitors**

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# The Public Bath House in Pommelsbrunn

## A Treasure to be Preserved

Pommelsbrunn's former physician Dr Otto Braun was very interested in the history of Pommelsbrunn and its surrounding area.

In 1994 while studying the archives of the church, he came across the "Pommelsbrunner Badhaus".

It was mentioned for the very first time in 1486.

All in all 19 barber-surgeons practised in this house.

It is almost completely documented.

In 1844 the church stopped running the bath house, because of bankruptcy.

It has not been easy to preserve this unique cultural monument. It is the only remaining public bath house existing in a rural area of German speaking regions.

Since right from the start of excavation work, many volunteers have helped to save this treasure from dereliction.

With devotion and patience, and financially supported by large as well as small donations, they have succeeded in turning the old neglected building into a museum.



The museum is located in Dorschstr.2 in 91224 Pommelsbrunn and you can visit it every day from 9am to 6pm.

To get into the museum, you have to put a **2€ coin** into the coin-box on the left hand side in front of the entrance door.

Should there be a problem to open the door, either you can ring the door bell at the Diakonie (on the first floor around the corner)

or notify Mr. Vogel at "Gasthof Vogel", Sulzbacherstr.14, Tel:09154-1207 (the inn across the main street, not far from here).

Inside the museum you will find a folder with information in English about the history of the bath house and the history of the "medieval culture of bathing". So it is possible viewing the museum on your own pace.

If you would like to read a copy of our museum guide in advance of your visit you can download our pdf.



Enjoy your visit,  
The Local Heritage Society

# The History of the Culture of Bathing

Evidence strongly suggests that nomadic tribes from Northern Europe and Northern Asia had already taken steam baths in the Stone Age.

The people dug earth pits in areas close to lakes or rivers and put up tents over these pits. The tents were then sealed up. In order to create steam they placed fire heated stones into the tents and doused the stones with water.

After having their steam baths people would cool themselves off in the nearby waters.

Archaeological findings show that even the most ancient civilisations appreciated a bath not only

for personal hygiene but also for relaxation.

About 6500 years ago the rulers of Mesopotamia (the area between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers– today's Anatolia, Syria and Iraq) also had baths. In their palaces they had bathrooms which were equipped with bathtubs made of clay.

1000 years later the people from Sumeria took baths in bathtubs for healing purposes.

## **The history of soap:**

A soap-like material found in clay cylinders during the excavation of ancient Babylon is evidence that soap making was known as early as 2800 B.C. A formula for soap consisting of water, alkali and cassia oil was written on a clay tablet dating around 2200 B.C.

Approximately 4000 years ago people had shallow water basins and used ceramic bathtubs as well as baths constructed from bricks.

Archaeologists have discovered them in excavations of a former palace in Mari ( a town in Mesopotamia).

At that time people preferred bathing in warm water.

The Egyptians also appreciated the pleasant effect of water.

In some of the pharaoh's palaces, built some 5000 years ago, bathtubs lined with asphalt were found.

These tubs had a drainage system and some of them even had water supplies through copper pipelines which made it possible to regulate the temperature of the water.

The Egyptians were also familiar with steam baths, which they used for medical purposes.

Evidence exists which suggests that in Europe the culture of bathing started about 4000 years ago.

Excavations on the island of Crete have provided evidence that the Minoans had bathrooms in their palaces.

In the huge palace complex in Knossos the throne room and the queen's bathroom were the largest rooms.

The bathtub discovered there was shaped similarly to a modern tub.

With the decline of the Minoan civilisation the culture of bathing vanished for quite a long time.

Approximately 2600 years ago the culture of bathing returned again to ancient Greece.

Wealthy people had bathrooms in their private houses.

Poor people went to public baths.

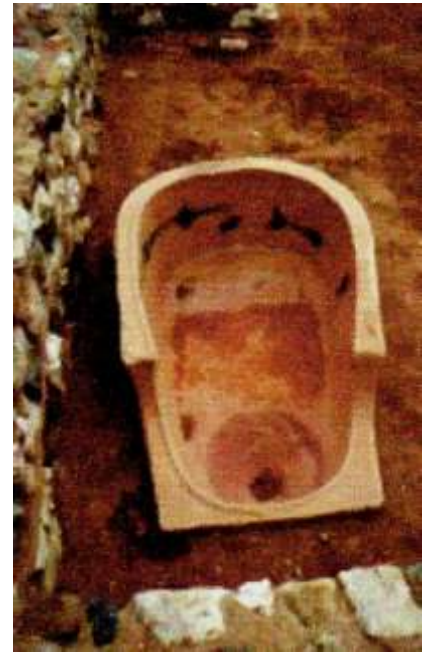
The water was usually cold because people at that time believed that warm water would soften the body.

The Spartans however preferred sweat baths. After sweating, water of varying temperatures was poured over the body.

Finally, a mixture of pleasant smelling herbs was rubbed into the skin.

Originally the gymnasiums were places for sport and socialising only.

Later bath houses were often built within the gymnasiums. (Actually, the term 'gymnasium' comes from the Greek word 'gymnos' - meaning 'naked'.)



Reconstructed bathtub unearthed in Olynth (an ancient Greek city)

The Greek culture influenced the emerging Roman Empire:

The Romans adopted the culture of bathing.

Approximately 2300 years ago it was considered normal to take a bath.

As time went on you could find lavish bathing temples throughout the Empire.

The bathrooms were furnished with ornately decorated tiles.

Hot air came from pipes running underneath the floor.

Luxurious bath houses consisted of a number of rooms: sweat rooms, rooms for steam baths of varying temperatures, several water basins, as well as lavish rooms for relaxation and conversation.

Added to these rooms were areas where bathers could eat, drink, gossip with friends or walk outside in the garden. These bathing complexes became standard during the heyday of the Empire.

After the decline of the Roman Empire about 1500 years ago, the culture of bathing in Europe vanished into oblivion.

About 1300 years ago the Muslims in the ancient Near East adopted the customs of steam baths from the Greeks.

Sultans and caliphs had generously equipped bathhouses built for their subjects.

There were large bathing pools, steam baths, as well as rooms for massages, relaxation and recreation.

## The Medieval Culture of Bathing

There are two different explanations in discussion at the moment concerning the origins of the culture of bathing in our area:

Firstly: One version maintains that the crusaders returned home from the Middle East and brought the idea of bathing with them.

Secondly: The other version bases its explanation for the sharp increase in the number of bath houses on the rapid growth in documentation associated with the founding of cities at that time.

Anyway, the up-and-coming middleclass adopted the culture of bathing. Public baths were firstly built in larger towns, then in smaller towns and villages as well (mainly on the outskirts because of the danger of fire).

The culture of bathing reached its all-term high in the late Middle Ages.

At the end of the 15th century there existed up to 12 bath houses in Nuremberg. There were also bath houses in our neighbouring villages Hartmannshof and Hohenstadt, as well as there being two in Hersbruck.

Although bathing had become very popular and perfectly natural, that culture came to a standstill. There were various reasons to account for this:

Firstly: Wood prices went up due to the growing demand which was caused by the rapidly rising population in towns. In the course of time nearby forests had been cleared and wood had to be transported from farther away. As water was heated by wood fire only the rich could afford to bathe. Hence, many bath houses had to be closed.

Secondly: Due to the increasing population in cities, the quality of water worsened. Garbage and the contents of chamber pots were simply dumped into the streets or behind the houses. The result was a bad quality of water. This led to the justifiable conclusion that the bath houses were the source of infectious diseases and epidemics.

Thirdly: Some of the bath houses were like brothels or at least had the reputation of being so. This was the reason why the church, especially in protestant regions, protested against those sinful places.

Fourthly: The outbreak of the black plague, the spreading of syphilis and the 30 Years' War almost put an end to the culture of bathing.

In the 18th century the bath houses vanished completely.

# The History of the Bath House

## A Brief Summary

In the charter of 24. September 1486 Eberhart von Mistelbeck, the then owner of Castle Lichtenstein, donated the public bath house to the church.

1593 There was a landslide behind the bath house. The very first existing picture of the bath house comes from this time and shows it in front of the disaster. This picture can be found in the "Pfinzing Atlas".

1631 There was a fire. Fortunately, not much damage was done to the public bath house.

1672 The public bath house was closed.

1680 By this time the house was reconstructed considerably:  
The walls of the cellar were made of stones.  
Among other things the bathroom was improved and the broken old roof thatched with new bundles of straw.  
Finally, an interior wall was probably built into the bathroom around this time as there were reports about a flat in the basement.

1680 A tenant lived in the basement. He had a fence built all around the garden.  
The room upstairs was uninhabited.

1682 It was decided that the bath house was to be kept as such.  
The barber-surgeon could either buy the whole house or just rent the basement.

1868 Substantial renovations were carried out:  
The timbered walls of the west and the east sides of the ground floor were replaced by stone walls.  
The timber framed gable and the thatched roof were taken down and rebuilt:  
The roof became steeper and was tiled.  
The gable was encased with planks.

1952 A new chimney was built.

1993 The barn next to the house was pulled down.

2007 Since this time the new deaconry (Diakonie) has been housed here.

2011 Official opening of our  
"Museum for Medieval Culture of Bathing".



The presentation in the "Pfinzing Atlas"

## The Barber-Surgeon's Living Room

**A shortened version from the archives:** *Georg Nicolaus Karg (former schoolmaster of the village Etzelwang) bought the public bath house in Pommelsbrunn in 1672 from the nobleman Jacob Haller zu Hallerstein. H. Pfleger was the mediator. Karg was entitled to build an upstairs room. He was also given the right to heat this room.*

The barber-surgeon was able to live in the flat next to the public bath and do his work there. Nowadays it is hard to imagine a family living in a tiny room, filled with steam and smoke. However, this report among others plus the inventory lists which have been found, show that: It was the barber-surgeon's living room.

A further indication of this is the foundation of a stove found during excavation work.

The latest find of a (tiled) stove only dates back to more recent times but the foundation of it can be dated back to the period when the building was actually being used as a bath house. Archaeologists have found parts of ceramic pots (i.e. elaborately decorated) from the 16th century.

Furthermore, they have dug up pieces of bones from animals (leftovers of a meal?).

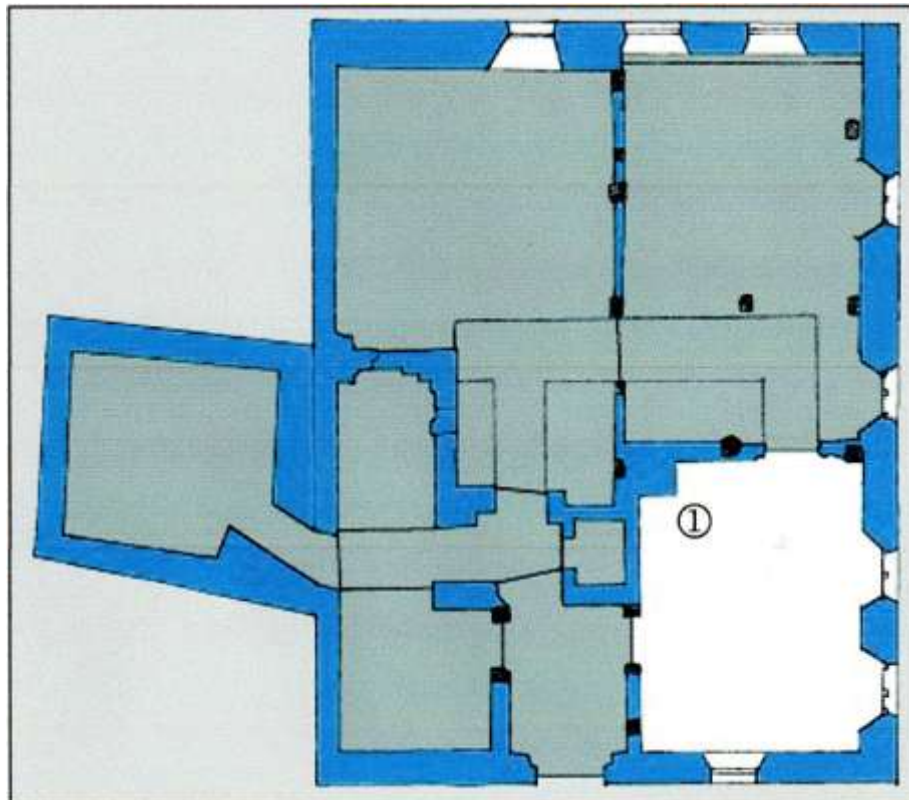
In the first display case on the right these pottery shards and these bones and a milk jug dating to the 19th century are exhibited.

In the second case you can see some tools from the 20th century.

And in the third one there are the excavated metal cups, tools for bleeding and glass cups which were donated by Doctor Braun.

Perhaps living in this flat and coping with the smoke was not as bad as one might think: Taking a bath was expensive, so bathing activities only took place once a week.

(1) foundation of the stove





# Cupping and Bloodletting

During the Middle Ages no one knew the cause of diseases. The prevailing opinion in Europe was that "bad (body) fluids" were responsible for diseases.

According to this theory, there were four main fluids: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile (the mysterious bile).

It was believed that health depended on maintaining a certain balance of those so-called "humours".

Bloodletting and cupping were performed in order to eliminate bad substances from the body.

## The two methods of cupping:

### Dry cupping:

The cup-shaped vessel was held over a flame and then placed onto selected areas of the skin. Once the air in the cups had cooled down the resulting vacuum was meant to improve the blood flow in those areas.

### Wet or bloody cupping:

The barber-surgeon used to scratch the skin with a scalpel before cupping certain spots.

Thus a small quantity of blood was drawn into the cup.



Cups of varying materials (ceramic, glass and metal) have been found at different archaeological excavation sites throughout Europe, Asia and the Near East.

In this public bath house of Pommelsbrunn alone, they have found ten non-ferrous metal cups.

### Blood letting:

Blood letting was a popular treatment for many diseases. It was seen as the obvious cure.

People believed that bad blood accumulated at the joints of the body.

The appropriate vein of the patient was pierced or cut into and then drained off blood, thus removing the bad blood.

The main instruments for this technique were called "lancets" (a double-edged scalpel) and "fleams".



## **The Barber-Surgeon**

A barber-surgeon's training took about three or four years.

During that time he learnt everything about bathing and body care including hairdressing and shaving as well as being able to do pedicures and manicures.

He also learnt about surgical skills, which were a vitally important part of his job as the academically educated physicians ( Medicus) confined themselves to the theory of health and diseases.

A barber-surgeon's medical treatment included cupping (very popular then with the general public), bloodletting, extracting teeth, treating ulcers and wounds, straightening broken bones and resetting dislocated limbs.

He even conducted amputations.

And, of course, he also did trimming and shaving.

Apart from that, piercing cataracts and washing dead bodies were part of his job as well.

**The following occupations can be traced back to the barber-surgeon's tasks:**

- **Surgeon**
- **Orthopaedist**
- **Dentist**
- **Eye Specialist**
- **Veterinarian**
- **Hairdresser**
- **Undertaker**

As the barber-surgeons came in contact with body fluids their occupation was held in very low esteem.

In some areas, however, (Augsburg, Vienna and Würzburg for example) they were incorporated into guilds, and later even formed guilds of their own.

## Bathing Area 1

Originally the area for bathing was one big room connected to an adjoining room. The inside wall was erected later.

You can still make out where the course of the water channel, constructed as a means of getting rid of the used water, was located. You can identify where this channel extended through the outside wall.

Remains of the old floor paving can also still be seen.

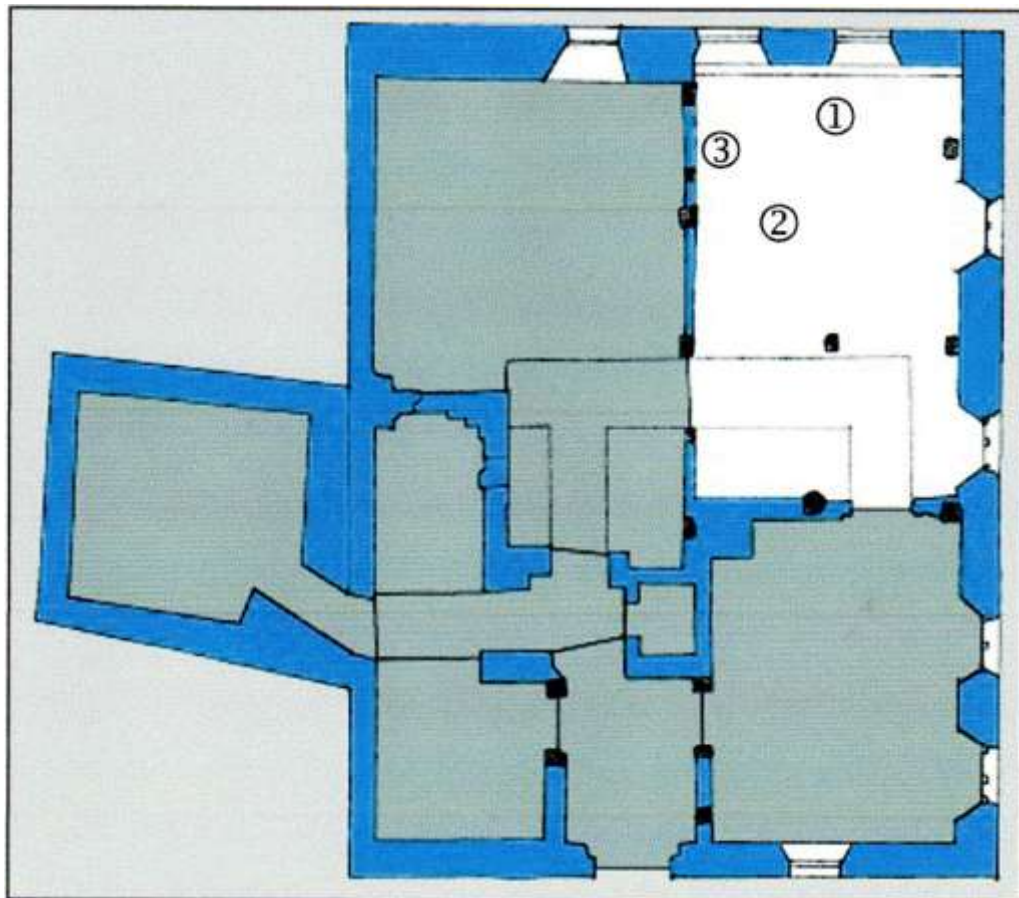
It was in this room where the late medieval earthenware was found.

The excavated fragments of ceramic pots (i.e. elaborately decorated ) date back to approximately the 15th century.

(1) water channel

(2) floor paving

(3) excavation pit



## Bathing Area 2

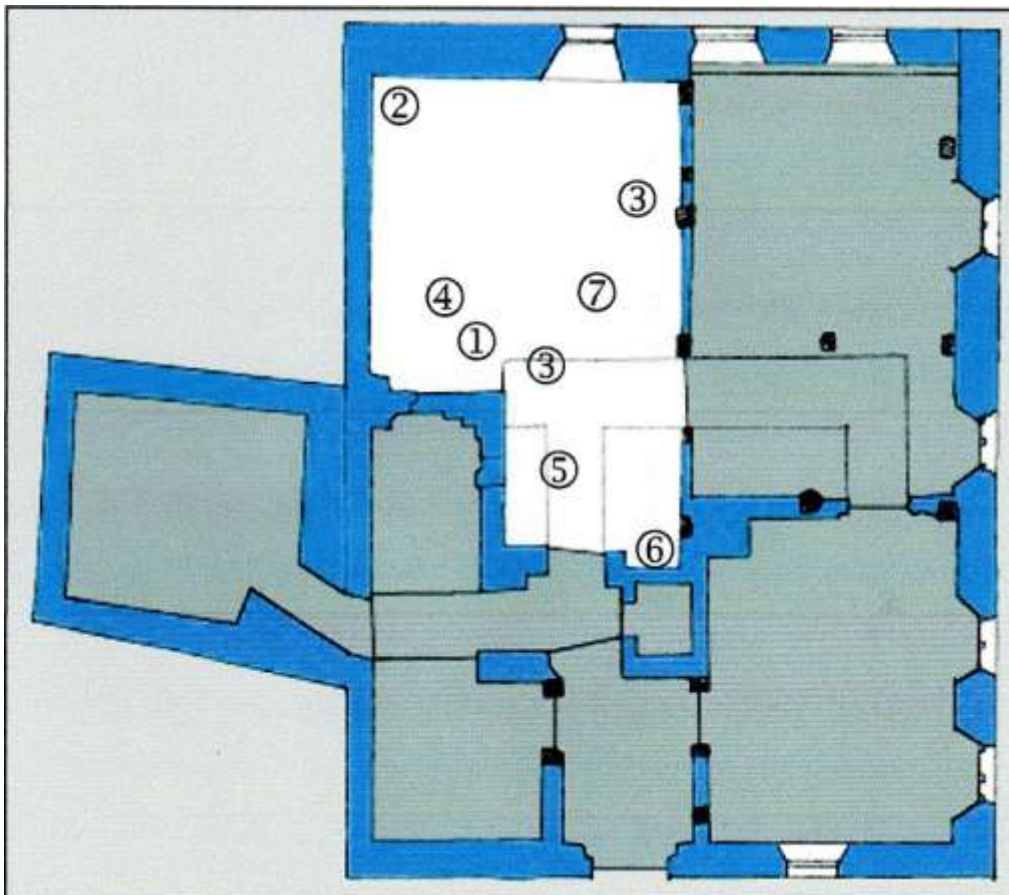
In this second part of the former bathroom you can also see the water channel leading away from the boiler. The boiler itself obstructs the way to the rooms behind it.

It is believed that the initial passageway to the adjoining rooms led through the small chamber. The wall was bricked up at a later date.

Even in this room remains of the old floor paving can also still be found.

The holes in the ground were most likely needed for posts to install the iron bar on the ceiling in 1879.

- (1) barrel rings
- (2) supports for benches?
- (3) water channel
- (4) holes for posts
- (5) boiler
- (6) former passageway to the other rooms
- (7) location of where the metal cups were found



## Bathing Procedure

In order to make public that the bath had been prepared a notice was put on the door of the public bath house or someone went through the streets calling, blowing the horn or playing the cymbals (usually before Sundays or public holidays; once or twice a week).

In the robing room men put on bathing trunks (called “Brouch”) and women dressed themselves in short sleeveless linen shirts (called “Bad’ehr”).

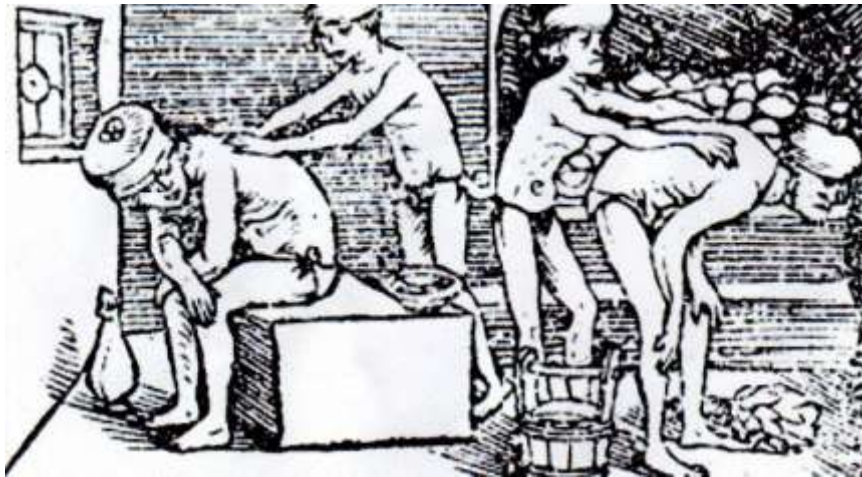
A hat - often made by the barber-surgeon himself - served as head covering.

For a sweat bath the bather sat close to the hot stove.

Cold water from wooden tubs was poured over the hot fieldstones of the stove to create steam. Bunches of leaves were used for tapping the body in order to improve the blood circulation.

After sweating a bather could enjoy additional treatment if requested (for extra money): While sitting in the bath tub, he or she was washed with lye ashes or soap and rubbed dry afterwards.

This was done by a servant (called “Reiber”) or - for women - a maidservant for bathing.



On request the barber-surgeon placed cupping glasses, cut hair or trimmed beards.

The bathers usually took their time and did not leave for home immediately after having had their baths.

Instead, they preferred to stay for hours eating, drinking and gossiping in good company. So it can be assumed that public baths used to be popular and vital places for social coexistence and communal life for all classes of society.

## The Stove - How Steam was Produced

The centrepiece of the medieval public bath house was the dome-shaped stove:  
Firstly, a vaulted ceiling consisting of fireclay or bricks was built around the fireplace.  
Next, a second layer of field stones was applied.  
After that, the side behind the stoke hole was walled up to stop the steam from escaping.

Finally, a fire was stoked up and burnt until the surface of the stove became so hot that water when poured on top, turned into steam.

The created steam had to pass through the vent openings into the room for sweating.

- (1) stove
- (2) passageway for steam
- (3) stoke hole
- (4) vents (for air supply?)



## Cellar with Well

The rediscovery of this outside cellar was a big surprise - the entrance had been bricked up completely.

It was only when the foundations had been revealed that the room was found.

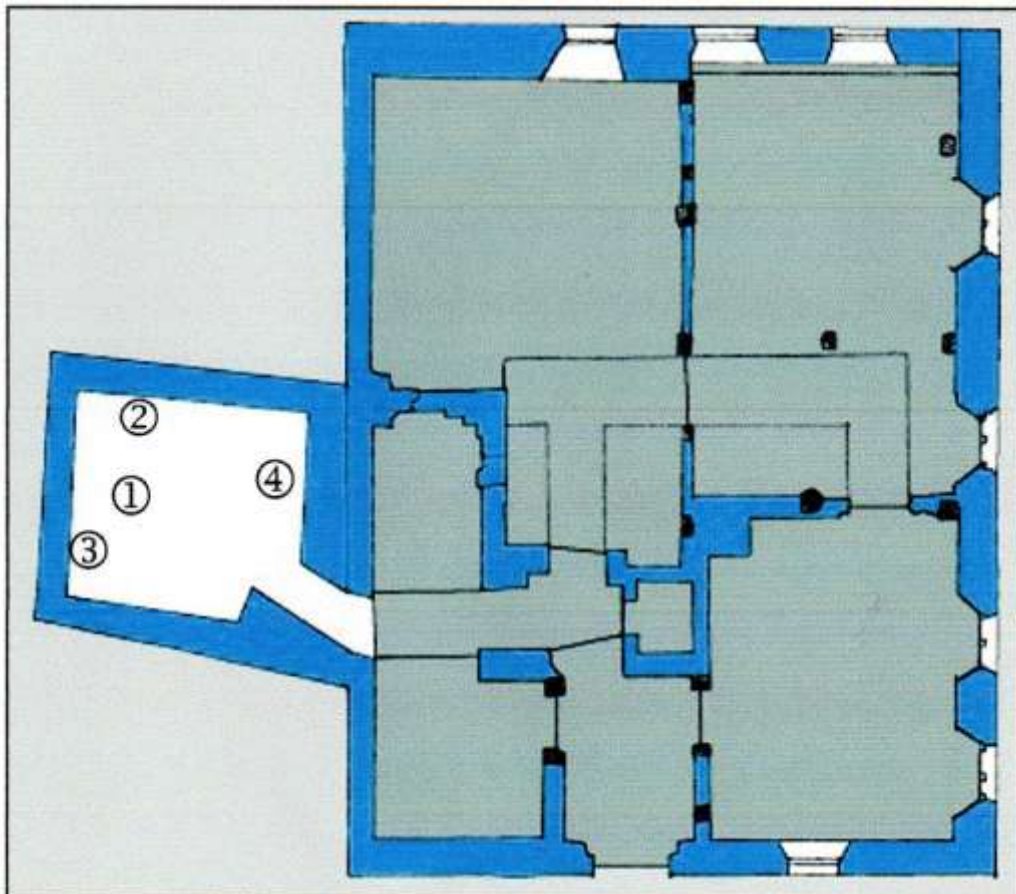
The basin with its natural water inflow is still a mystery:

Did it serve as a water supply or was it meant for the cold bath or was it even used for an entirely different reason?

This question will probably never be answered.

The holes in the rear wall were apparently meant for ventilation.

- (1) water basin                      (2) pedestal bearing(?) maybe used for storing fire wood  
(3) ventilation openings          (4) vents(air supply for the stove?)



Dear Visitor,

The document that you are holding in your hand is the result of the work of two ladies, Edith Kolb and Hildegard Sieder.

Neither of them have English as their mother tongue. Nonetheless, their dedication to the "Pommelsbrunn Bath House" inspired them to put hours and hours of work into translating the original German text into English so that you, too, can easily reconstruct the development of the "bath house" culture, particularly in and around Pommelsbrunn.

Their expressions are sometimes somewhat unusual but through this, one sees their way of presenting their precious piece of history ... in English!

Congratulations and thank you Edith and Hildegard.

Jenny Pilhofer

\*some pictures come from private collections,  
others are taken from Wikipedia.  
The stove on page 12 was illustrated by Dr Pollmer.