Skabersjö

Hardly any of the remaining late-medieval estates in Scania are so associated with their owner as Skabersjö and the Thott family. With the exception of some short periods, the property has been in the family ever since 1609 and it remains so today. As several generations have distinguished themselves through economic, military and farming successes, the Thotts have come to be considered among the leading families of the Scanian nobility.

However, Skabersjö’s history began long before the Thott family’s era. In the late 1200s, there was a fortified farm here, but the ownership line is unsure until the mid-1400s, when the powerful and rich Ulfstand family came into possession of the estate through marriage. The Ulfstand family then remained at Skabersjö for many generations until 1609, when the first Thott took over. Excluding a few years in other hands, Skabersjö has thus had only two owning families over a period of 550 years.

Tage Ottesen Thott of Näs and Ericsholm was one of the richest landowners in Denmark’s history. His private property amounted for a while to around 70 per cent of Scania’s total acreage. The reasons for this extremely large land ownership can be found both in the period and in his personal qualities. In the 100 years or so that had passed since the Reformation (1537), both the Crown and the state had laid the basis for the nobility’s increasing influence through appointments, granting of estates and favourable rules for landowners. Tage Ottesen Thott had personal qualities that made him one of the period’s most entrusted nobles, both by the Danish state and by the Scanian nobility in general. In addition to the qualities that made him a far-sighted businessman, he was a humanist and pacifist, which were unique character traits during the war-torn era. His extensive landholdings can be ascribed partly to the conflicts, as he could exploit the business advantages of Scania’s vulnerable position in respect to Sweden.

He remained a Danish citizen throughout his life, as he died a few days before the signing of the Treaty of Roskilde in 1658. With the exception of a few years after the end of the Scanian War in 1679, Skabersjö has stayed in the Thott family.

The first castle at Skabersjö was built during the 1510s, when Holger Gregersen Ulfstand was the owner. The castle was plundered and burned during the conflicts relating to the Danish throne, but was soon rebuilt. After the Thotts took over, the castle burned down again and was rebuilt in 1629. Its present appearance dates from rebuilding during the period 1774-1783.

The present owner is Count Peder Thott.

The surroundings
Skabersjö is located 12 km south-east of central Malmö. The castle is surrounded by old-world buildings and an old, stylistically-varied and well-planned park, originally from the 1760s.

The white house
The morning of 19 July 1961 started in brilliant high-summer style in south-west Scania. The surface of the lake, Yddingesjön, glittered in the sunlight as the morning breeze swept away the mist. Along the shallows of the lakeshore grow clumps of reeds, and further out water lilies sway on the surface. Natural pastureland dominates the lower slopes around the lake, further up are beech woods where the land is not cultivated. In several places, wooden jetties have been built so small boats can be moored, and people can go fishing or swimming without problem.

On the eastern side of the lake are the Bökeberg farms. They have been part of the Thott family’s Skabersjö estate since the early 1600s. Among the buildings at Bökeberg is one that particularly grabs attention. It is a beautiful, white-painted manor from the 1840s, embedded in the woods. It was originally built as a hunting lodge for Skabersjö, but in the early 1950s it became the summer
home of Greta Thott, the widow of Count Stig Thott, who died in a plane crash in 1947. Greta Thott’s partner since the early 1950s, the poet Hjalmar Gullberg, also lived here. He had been ill since 1958, when he was struck by an incurable muscle disease. This confined him to bed for long periods and at times he could not breathe without a respirator. However, in the spring of 1961, he felt strong enough to return for another summer at Bökeberg.

Hjalmar Gullberg was born in Malmö on 30 May 1898. He was an illegitimate child, which meant that he grew up with foster parents. After senior high school studies in Malmö, he moved to Lund in 1923 to work as a poet, literary researcher, translator and writer on literature until 1936, when he was named as radio theatre manager for the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation in Stockholm. He was then a licentiate of literary history, after having completed a dissertation on another Scanian poet, Ola Hansson. He later had several assignments for the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation, The Royal Dramatic Theatre and the Swedish Academy, and therefore lived in Stockholm for most of the year and in Falsterbo during the summers, where he had inherited a half-timbered farmhouse. He spent his last summers at Bökeberg.

He was named as an honorary doctor of philosophy at the University of Lund in 1944. By the evening of 19 July 1961, Hjalmar Gullberg was no longer alive. He had gone down to the jetty at Yddingesjön and did not come back. He left a note to his beloved that ended with a quote from the occasion when he first visited the white house at Bökeberg. “There is a lake and then never more…”

Hjalmar Gullberg is buried in the Gullberg family grave at Mellersta churchyard in Malmö.