Widtsköfle

Widtsköfle is not only Scania’s largest occupied castle, with about 100 rooms, but also one of the Nordic countries’ best-preserved Renaissance strongholds and perhaps the most beautiful of the province’s many castles. The present building, from the 1550s, had a medieval predecessor north of the church in the castle’s immediate proximity.

The earliest owners, from the 1200s, were members of the Egeside family. During the 1300s, it was owned by a more well-known family in Scania, Krognos. In 1401, Widtsköfle passed, through marriage, to the Brahe family, via Axel Pedersen Brahe. He died in 1425, after which the inheritance was divided between the children and several owners who bought and sold the estate during the rest of the 1400s. Ownership returned to the Brahes in the 1530s. It was Jens Brahe who, in 1553, started to build the present castle and it was complete when his son Henrik took over in 1557. The castle’s location in the terrain and the interplay between architectural elements shows that it was built to be a defensive stronghold. Marshy ground made storming the castle more difficult and construction of the moat easier. The diagonally placed corner towers, like the allure under the base of the roof, made it possible to repel enemies around the entire building.

After Henrik Brahe’s death in 1587, ownership went to his daughter Margrete, who was married to Christian Barnekow, a member of an old German noble family. It was the start of the Barnekow’s ownership of Widtsköfle, which went on until 1826. Among the many talented and colourful individuals from the ownership line, the widow of Colonel Kjell Christopher Barnekow, Margareta von Ascheberg can be mentioned. The colonel died in 1700, after which she controlled the estate alone for 53 years. She was widely known as “The Ascheberg of Widtsköfle”, had good business sense and bought several estates including Sövdeborg, Tosterup and Ellinge.

The Barnekow family kept the estate until 1826, when the last heir was forced to sell Widtsköfle to the banker, Jonas Hagman. A daughter of the second Hagman generation married marshal of the court, Rudolf Hodder Stjernswärd, which was the beginning of the present owning family’s line. The present owner is Carl-George Stjernswärd.

Widtsköfle Castle is located 4 km north-east of Degeberga. The castle is surrounded by a moat and a beautiful park. Near the castle is a church from the 1200s with medieval paintings and the graves of the earliest owners.

The countess and her dragoons

Margareta von Ascheberg has gone down in history as one of the many dynamic women on Scanian estates who were forced to assume a responsible role as owner, administrator and farmer when the husband was killed or captured in wartime. She was the daughter of the field marshal, governor general and king’s favourite, Rutger von Ascheberg, who approved her marriage to Kjell Christopher Barnekow in 1691. He was then owner of Widtsköfle, which he had inherited at the age of three in 1666.

The newly married couple were not able to settle at Widtsköfle. The young officer Kjell Christopher Barnekow took a commission in the Dutch army in the war against France, and his wife followed him on the campaign. It is said that their youngest child was born during the siege of Brussels in 1695.

Barnekow rose to the rank of colonel, which made him attractive for the Swedish service, and Charles XII therefore ordered him to set up and lead a new regiment in Kalmar. He immediately took on the assignment with such seriousness that with the help of his father-in-law, Rutger von Ascheberg, he established a stud farm at Widtsköfle to rear horses for the dragoon regiment. This became one of the oldest and biggest private studs in the country.

In 1700, following inspection work in Kalmar, Barnekow was struck by a high fever that would not break, and he died at the age of only 37.

This was, of course, a tragic event for his wife and children, but she was mature enough to confront
the situation and quickly took the initiative to continue leading the estate’s activities in all areas. This would continue for 53 years and she gradually became widely respected as “The Ascheberg of Widtsköfle”.

After the husband’s tragic death it was revealed that he had in some way committed himself to set up and equip 200 dragoons. The promise was, of course, based on the stud’s resources, but otherwise there was no equipment or manpower to fulfil the pledge.

In these circumstances she wrote to King Charles XII and appealed to him to understand that she could not fulfil her deceased husband’s promise. She asked to be released "as I am a defenceless widow now, so I cannot concern myself with it". In addition, it stated in his contract with the Crown that: "if death befalls the colonel, his recruiting would not subject his children and heirs to any harm". This led the widow to believe the pledge could be broken.

Charles XII needed resources for his army, mainly in the Baltic provinces, and therefore rejected her request. It was later revealed that Count Carl Piper, Charles XII’s chief of staff, was behind the refusal in order to make her insolvent and force the sale of her estates.

Countess Ascheberg, however, was made of sterner stuff and refused to be despondent about the rejected plea. Instead, she got to work on recruiting vagrants and unemployed farmhands for her mounted dragoon unit. The horses were reared at the estate’s stud and the uniforms were sewn at the castle. In 1702, Widtsköfle’s private contribution to the army was shipped over to Livonia and was from that day involved in the political and military struggles for the Baltic provinces.

It was later shown that none of the Widtsköfle dragoons returned to Sweden. They died from disease, on the battlefield or in Russian prisons.

Margareta von Ascheberg later acquired large estates such as Ellinge, Sövdeborg and Tosterup. In the parishes the estates belonged to, she took initiatives to set up schools and hospitals and an early form of social welfare.

She died at the age of 84 and is buried beside her husband in the Barnekow chapel in Widtsköfle Church. Since her death, no-one has used the Ascheberg name.