

# Aalholm Castle

A Novel – Seven Hundred Years on a Flat Island

Aalholm Castle

2026

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## **SOURCE KEY 119**

*This story is built on the 96 source articles collected at aalholmslot.dk: dates, names, letters, accounts and legends. The people lived, and most of it happened. But the conversations, the thoughts and the weather belong to the novel – for the archives are silent about what people said once the door was closed. At the back of the book is a source key showing which chapter each of the 96 stories has been written into.*

# PROLOGUE

## **The Eels**

Before there was a castle, there were the eels.

They came in autumn, when the nights grew long and the water in the inlet turned cold, and they slid in from the Baltic through the narrow gap at Nysted, thousands upon thousands, silver-bright and purposeful, bound for the fresh lake behind the islet. The fishermen knew their ways. They set their traps in the current where salt water met fresh, and they called the place by its proper name: Ålholmen. The eel islet.

One day in the last decades of the thirteenth century a man stood on the islet who was not looking at the eels. He was looking at the water. He saw that the islet was as flat as a tabletop, that one could see every boat that came in through the gap and every rider who came down the road from the north. He saw that there was water all the way round, and that no one could reach the place without being seen. And he saw that Germany lay just over there, beyond the low horizon to the south, where the counts of Holstein sat calculating what Denmark was worth.

The man was the king. We do not know for certain which one – the sources say 1256, and they say that the older castle at Refshale had fallen and a new one had to be raised. But we know what he was thinking, because it is written in the walls: *Here*.

They built in red monastery brick on a foundation of boulders. They built a rectangle thirty by seventy-four metres, with towers at the corners and walls so thick that a man could lie crosswise in a window niche. They built for decades, and when they were done, Denmark had a gate to the south that could be closed.

It was not the beauty. The king had not seen the sunset over the inlet, nor the light in the reeds, nor the herons standing on one leg in the shallows. He had seen the angles.

The beauty came later. It came with the queens, with the counts' gardens, with a mad man's bears and a baron who loved motor cars more than land. But for seven hundred years, everyone who wanted anything of Lolland has had to reckon with the flat islet in the inlet.

Some of them came with an army. Some with a wedding dress. Some with chains around their ankles.

And the eels came every autumn, whoever sat in the castle.

# PART ONE: THE KING IN THE CELLAR

## 1. 1329 – A Kingdom for Sale

Christopher the Second was a king who never had enough.

Not enough money, not enough soldiers, not enough friends. He had inherited a kingdom already pawned in pieces, and he had made it worse. When he took the throne in 1320, the magnates had forced him to sign a charter so strict it would have turned a saint into a rebel. Christopher was no saint. He broke it, clause by clause, and he paid for each breach with land.

By 1328 there was no more land to pay with. Only the islands.

One can picture him at Ringsted, at the settlement where Aalholm first steps into written history. A heavy man with a heavy face, surrounded by Holstein counts who spoke Danish with German accents and calculated faster than he could think. Across from him sat his half-brother, John of Plön – called *the Mild*, whether in irony or simply by a very low standard of comparison.

“Lolland and Falster,” said John. “With the castles. With Aalholm.”

“As security,” said Christopher. “Until the loan is repaid.”

“Naturally,” said John, and smiled, and everyone at the table knew the loan would never be repaid, because Christopher had never repaid any loan, and because the sum was so large that it could not be paid by a kingdom that no longer owned itself.

The deed was written. Aalholm changed hands without a single sword being drawn. The king rode home with money for a war he had already lost.

And Count John sent his people to the flat islet in the inlet.

## **2. 1330 – The Count’s Letter**

The oldest letter we know from Aalholm dates from 1330, and it is a letter about gifts.

Count John sat in the castle and wrote to the priests of Lolland. He gave them something – land, rights, privileges – and he signed with the count’s seal. It is a friendly letter. It is the letter of a man who wants the local clergy to like him, because he knows he is a stranger here, and that the peasants of Musse Herred have not forgotten who their rightful king is.

John was not stupid. He strengthened Aalholm. He had walls raised and towers added, he put Holstein guards on the ramparts and Holstein scribes in the chancery. He let the eel fishermen keep their traps, for a wise man does not quarrel with those who

provide the food.

But he had a problem, and the problem was called Christopher.

The deposed king was still alive. He wandered about the kingdom that had been his, a beggar with a crown, and wherever he went, unrest went with him. Peasants who would not pay taxes to a Holsteiner. Noblemen who had miscalculated and now regretted it. Christopher was weak, but he was the king, and a weak king is still more dangerous than no king.

In 1331 Christopher made a last attempt. He gathered what he could, and he lost. And after the defeat there was only one place the Holsteiners could put him where no one could reach him, and where no one could forget who held the key.

They sent him to Aalholm.

### **3. 1332 – The Cellar**

The king was lodging with Peder Hvitfeldt.

It was a stone house with a reed roof in Sakskøbing, and it was what the King of Denmark had left in 1332: a bed under a nobleman's roof on Lolland, in the very landscape he had pawned three years before. Christopher the Second was still king in name. He had no castles, no army, no money, and his half-brother John ruled the islands from Aalholm with his own chancery.

Two men of the lesser nobility, Henneke Breide and Johan Ellemose, saw a business opportunity in it. A king had to be worth something, after all. In those lawless times, when

everything was for sale, they reckoned on a handsome ransom – and they set fire to Hvitfeldt's house.

Christopher jumped out of the window. There they seized him.

Then they took him to Aalholm. In through the gate of the castle he himself had strengthened, and which his own half-brother now held as his residence. The sources say Count John was at the castle that day. One has to imagine it: the King of Denmark and the true ruler of Denmark, sons of the same mother, the dowager queen Agnes of Brandenburg, face to face in the courtyard. One in soot and ash, his hands bound. The other with the whole of eastern Denmark in his grip.

The dungeon beneath the north-west tower is still there. You go down narrow steps, and the light turns grey and then is gone, and the air turns cold in a way that has nothing to do with the season. The walls are three metres thick. You cannot hear the inlet outside. No one knows exactly which room the king sat in, or for how long. One must imagine straw on the floor, a bunk, a bucket, a little light from a narrow opening. Not a torture chamber. A secure room, where a defeated king could be kept under guard while his captors waited for someone to pay.

No one would pay.

That is the cruellest point in the whole story: the kidnappers wanted to sell a king and discovered there were no buyers. Count John, as the popular history of 1869 dryly notes, “set no store by his half-brother, but let him go at once.” Not out of mercy. Out of indifference. He sent Christopher on to Nykøbing – released,

without a kingdom, without power, without a future.

There Christopher the Second died on 2 August 1332, broken by grief, the chronicle says. He was buried at Sorø. At his death the whole of Denmark was in pawn: Jutland and Funen to Count Gerhard, Zealand, Scania and the islands to Count John. The kingdom stood without a king for eight years. Historians call his estate what it was: a bankruptcy.

Visitors who go down into the cellar today notice a particular silence. Some say it is only the stones. Others say nothing and go quickly back up.

#### **4. 1342–1360 – Atterdag**

He was the youngest son, and he had grown up abroad, at the emperor's court, where one learned to wait.

Valdemar Christoffersen came home to Denmark in 1340 as a young man with his father's name and nothing else. The kingdom was still in pawn. The Holsteiners still sat at Aalholm. But Valdemar was not his father. He could count, and he could wait, and he knew that a kingdom is not bought back all at once but piece by piece, castle by castle.

In 1342 Count John's man at Aalholm wrote home to Holstein complaining of "the king's gross presumption". It is a glorious phrase. It tells us that young Valdemar had already begun behaving as though Lolland were his, without asking anyone's leave.

By 1346 it was his. Not through a great battle, but through a mixture of money, pressure and patience the Holsteiners could not in the end withstand. Valdemar took Lolland and Falster back, and he rode into Aalholm as the first Danish king in eighteen years.

One can picture him standing in the courtyard looking up at the towers. He had them strengthened. He had the walls seen to. And he did something no king had done before and none has done since: he made his own son Christopher Duke of Lolland.

The boy was named after the grandfather who had sat in the cellar. Now he held court in the castle above it. In 1360 the young duke issued privileges to Nysted “at our castle Ålholm”, and one can hear the pleasure in the words. *Our castle*. Not the count’s. Not the creditor’s. Ours.

Valdemar was given the byname Atterdag – “day again” – because he made it day once more. Duke Christopher died young, in 1363, of a wound from a battle at Helsingborg, and Valdemar lost his only son. But Aalholm was Danish. And Danish it remained.

## **5. 1362–1366 – The Table Where the North Was Divided**

In those years Aalholm was not just a castle. It was a negotiating table.

In 1362 Valdemar Atterdag sat here with Albrecht of Mecklenburg, a German duke with ambitions as large as his beard, and the two divided the North between them like two men cutting a cake. Who should have what in Sweden, where the border should run, who should marry whom. Aalholm's great hall must have heard more high politics in those years than any other room in Denmark.

Four years later, in July 1366, Valdemar sat here again. This time he concluded a secret alliance with Duke Albrecht – aimed at his own son-in-law, Håkon of Norway. The alliance took its name from the place: the Treaty of Ålholm. It is one of the few times a Danish castle has given its name to great-power politics, and it happened in an agreement the king's own daughter was presumably not meant to know about.

Family dinners in the Middle Ages were not for the faint-hearted.

But Valdemar was not invincible. In 1368 the Hanseatic towns, the Holsteiners, Sweden and Mecklenburg rose against him all at once, and the king had to flee the country. He left his castles to their governors and his kingdom to God.

At Aalholm sat a man named Kersten Kule.

## **6. 1368 – The Man Who Talked**

In September 1368 Count Henry of Holstein landed on Lolland with an army the Hanseatic ships had carried across. They

called him Iron Henry, and he had not come to negotiate. Valdemar Atterdag had fled the country. The Hanseatic towns, the Holsteiners, Sweden and Mecklenburg had risen at once, and the king's castles were falling like skittles. Now Iron Henry stood before Aalholm.

In the castle sat the knight Sir Kersten Kule. He held Aalholm in pledge; he was no war hero, and he knew what he had: too few men, too little grain, no king to send to. He also knew what Iron Henry had: an army that could not lie before a water castle all winter.

So Kule talked.

On 8 September 1368 he concluded a truce for the whole of Lolland. Three days later the governor of Ravnsborg followed suit. The terms were ingenious. There was to be peace until 1 May 1369, on which day the fate of the castles would be decided. Until then everyone kept their property undisturbed. The army could withdraw. No one need starve through the winter.

Iron Henry agreed. It was, after all, a surrender with a postponed date.

And then Kule played for time.

The first of May 1369 came and went. Aalholm was not handed over. There were, it turned out, ambiguities in the agreement, letters that had to be compared, negotiations that were not concluded. In November 1369 Valdemar made peace with the Hanseatic towns. As late as September 1370 Kersten Kule sat in Bardewick with the Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg,

explaining with great earnestness that the castles would of course be surrendered as soon as the parties were “fully agreed and reconciled on all negotiations and letters”.

They never were fully agreed.

Meanwhile Valdemar won the war. When the king came home, Aalholm was still standing, untaken, with Kersten Kule on the rampart. The popular history of 1869 concludes drily that Kule and his colleague at Ravnsborg “had therefore evidently acted very wisely”. A century later the National Museum’s great castle archaeologist called it a masterly delaying agreement.

It is one of the finest titles a Danish official has ever earned: the man who talked his way out of a siege. He did not loose a single arrow. He wrote letters, held meetings, asked for extensions and let the calendar work for him until the war was over. The castle learned something that autumn day which it would need again and again over the next six hundred years: that one does not always win by fighting.

## **7. 1376 – Two Kings, One Crown**

Valdemar Atterdag died on 24 October 1375, and he left a kingdom without a son.

Christopher, the Duke of Lolland who had held court at Aalholm, had died in 1363. What remained were the daughters and their children. Ingeborg, the elder, had been married to Duke Henry of Mecklenburg, and their son was called Albrecht.

Margaret, the younger, was married to King Håkon of Norway, and their son was called Oluf. He was five years old.

Denmark was an elective kingdom. But the Mecklenburgers did not wait for any election. A few months after Valdemar's death the young Albrecht appears in the documents as *King Albrecht of Denmark* – a title with great ambitions and no kingdom behind it. And on 21 January 1376 the family and their allies gathered at Grevesmühlen in northern Germany to buy the help that would make the title real.

The price was Aalholm.

The document lies in the archive at Schwerin, hung with twenty-seven wax seals. In it the fifteen-year-old “King of Denmark”, together with the Dukes of Mecklenburg, declares that they owe the counts of Holstein 30,000 marks of pure silver, and as security they pledge Ålholm, Ravensborg and the whole land of Lolland – and Kolding, Ribe and Sejerø besides. In return the Holsteiners were to fight for the Mecklenburg cause.

Albrecht pawned a castle he had never seen. Aalholm was not in his hand. On paper he disposed of a kingdom he had yet to conquer.

At Aalholm sat the captain Henning Schacht, and he belonged to the other camp. Six weeks after Grevesmühlen, on 4 March 1376, Duke Bogislaw the Sixth of Pomerania stood in the courtyard by Nysted inlet and bound himself to support Oluf, King Håkon and Queen Margaret against their enemies “with all his might”. While the castle was being given away in northern

Germany, inside the castle itself an alliance was being sealed for the opposite side.

Two other things happened that same day. In Roskilde the Archbishop of Lund and a number of magnates declared their support for Oluf. And at Eger, several hundred kilometres to the south, Emperor Charles the Fourth promised to help the Mecklenburgers acquire the kingdom of Denmark. Two camps on either side of the Baltic were working, on 4 March 1376, on two different Danish kings, and Aalholm stood in between.

Margaret won the first round with the weapon she commanded better than anyone: the kingdom's own men. On 3 May 1376 the assembly at Slagelse elected the five-year-old Oluf king. A Mecklenburg fleet sailed into the Sound in September and war hung in the air – but on 21 September a settlement was reached in Copenhagen. Mecklenburg recognised Oluf.

One would think Aalholm was thereby out of the affair. It was not.

## **8. 1377 – The Emperor Summons**

On 12 September 1377 Emperor Charles the Fourth sat at Tangermünde on the Elbe and had his chancery write three letters.

All three concerned Denmark. The old Duke Albrecht of Mecklenburg had complained again on his grandson's behalf: the kingdom had by right of succession fallen to the young

Albrecht, and yet Danish captains sat in the Crown's castles and held them, in the words of the imperial letter, *contra deum et iusticiam* – against God and justice. One letter went to eighteen captains in Jutland. Two almost identical letters went to the captains on the islands.

The emperor named the castles one by one, and the man in each. Hagenskov. Nyborg. Fåborg. Kærstrup. Tranekær. Ravensborg. And then:

*tu Nicolae Thome castrum Alholm* – “you, Niels Thomsen, the castle of Ålholm”.

Aalholm had changed captain. In August 1376 it had been Henning Schacht; a year later it was Niels Thomsen, a squire who ten weeks earlier had stood at Nyborg among the men who, together with King Oluf, Queen Margaret and forty-four knights, bound themselves to hold the kingdom together. He was one of those on whom Margaret's rule rested.

Now he was ordered to appear before the emperor or the emperor's court judge in Germany within eighteen weeks. Should he fail to appear, the emperor would proceed against him “as far as the law allows”. So that he could not plead fear of the journey, he was even granted imperial safe conduct there and back. It was routine in the imperial chancery, and precisely the routine tells us how Charles the Fourth saw the matter: as a perfectly ordinary lawsuit before his court, with Denmark's castellans as the defendants.

One can picture Niels Thomsen receiving the letter. A

parchment with the emperor's seal, carried by a herald. An order to travel into enemy territory and answer to the most powerful man in Europe for the crime of holding a Danish castle for the Danish king.

There is no trace of his having gone.

There is, however, a trace of the opposite. On 27 January 1378 – a few weeks after the eighteen weeks had expired – Niels Thomsen appeared at the Lolland assize. There he was conveyed a manor at Hessel with land in Radsted parish. In the deed he is called “captain of Aalholm and district judge of Lolland”.

He did not go to Germany. He bought land on Lolland.

And he stayed put. In October 1382 he is still recorded as captain of Aalholm. The emperor died in Prague in November 1378, old Duke Albrecht in February 1379, and the case ran into the sand. The three imperial letters lie to this day in Schwerin – in the plaintiff's own archive, untouched. An imperial summons had to be served by the party who had requested it. That the letters never left the duke's strongbox says everything about how far the case got.

For a moment in September 1377 the captain of Aalholm sat as the Danish king's man while Europe's mightiest ruler declared he had no right to sit there. He sat there anyway.

## **9. 1394 – The Most Powerful Woman in the North**

She was ten when she was married, and seventeen when she became Queen of Norway. She was thirty-seven when, in practice, she ruled three kingdoms, and no man in the North dared contradict her.

Margaret, Valdemar's daughter.

In 1394 she moved into Aalholm. Not to rest – Margaret never rested – but to negotiate. The Hanseatic towns, the rich German merchant cities that had humiliated her father, sent their envoys to Lolland, and the queen received them at the castle where her grandfather had sat in the cellar.

One can see her in the great hall: a woman in black, for she wore mourning for years, with a face that gave nothing away and eyes that saw everything. The Hanseatics came with demands. She listened. They came with threats. She listened. They came with offers. Then she began to speak, and when she was done, they had given her more than they had come to take.

It was here the castle took its final medieval shape. The south wing was completed while the queen lived there, and the wing that still bears her name – the Margaret Wing – stands as the memorial of those years. She sat at the window over the inlet dictating letters to Stockholm, to Oslo, to Rome. For those months Aalholm was the capital of the North.

The Hanseatic envoys went home with agreements they had not wanted and a respect they had not expected. One of them is

said to have remarked that it was easier to negotiate with three kings than with one Margaret.

She died in 1412 aboard a ship in Flensburg Fjord. Aalholm passed on to the kings she had made possible.

## **10. 1409–1471 – The Procession of Kings**

After Margaret they came in a line, as though Aalholm were a staging post on the road to power.

Eric of Pomerania, her foster son, was the king who set Nysted free in 1409. The town had lain beneath the castle like a servant girl beneath her master; now it received a charter and the right to trade for itself. Nysted thanked the king and never forgot. In 1438, when Eric was on his way out of his kingdom and into his career as a pirate on Gotland, he gave Aalholm to Duke Barnim of Pomerania – a parting gift from a king who no longer owned anything to give away.

Then came Christopher of Bavaria, and he came with a bride.

Her name was Dorothea of Brandenburg, and she was fifteen years old when she met her king at Aalholm in 1445. One can picture her: a German prince's daughter, sent north with chests of trousseau and a retinue of ladies who had told her what to expect. She saw the castle rise out of the inlet, red and heavy, and she saw the man who was to be hers.

Christopher died three years later. Dorothea was eighteen and a widow.

She married again – the next king, Christian the First, who ruled from Aalholm in 1454, and who could manage his finances no better than his predecessors. In 1471 Dorothea lent him money and took Aalholm in pledge. The queen as the king's banker. The girl who had come to the castle as a fifteen-year-old bride now owned it.

It was the beginning of something that would last two hundred years: Aalholm as the queens' island.

## **11. 1460 – Dower Land**

The word is old and heavy: *livgeding*, the dower. It was the medieval and Renaissance widow's pension on a royal scale – estates, fiefs and castles assigned to the queen for her maintenance for as long as she lived. Lolland-Falster suited the purpose perfectly: rich farmland, consolidated crown estates, a convenient distance from Copenhagen. The islands became the queens' province above all others, and Aalholm went with them.

It meant something strange for the castle in the inlet. For long periods the governor was appointed not by the king in Copenhagen but by a dowager queen at Nykøbing Castle. The castle quite literally had a queen for a boss.

The line begins with Dorothea, Christian the First's formidable widow, who held a pledge on the Lolland crown estates until her death in 1495. King Hans's queen Christine knew the way too, and visited Aalholm a couple of times. Christian the Second's

Elisabeth was the first to be formally promised Lolland as her dower – a promise history reduced to nothing, for the royal couple fell, fled, and Elisabeth died in exile without ever seeing her Lolland estates. Yet the precedent was set.

Frederick the First's Sophie of Pomerania was promised Nykøbing, Aalholm and Ravnsborg at her coronation in 1525. But two councillors of state who had sealed the promise to Elisabeth felt bound by the old word and refused their consent. And when Sophie was to take possession in 1533, the Count's Feud intervened: Aalholm became "for a time a ball between the various powers" – redeemed, surprised, enfeoffed, recaptured – before the dowager queen finally got her dower. From one of her under-bailiffs, Erik Rosenkrantz, a letter survives from 1551 about the king's complaints over the castle's dilapidation and the order to repair it – with the under-bailiff's despairing addition that he "cannot obtain brick clay on its lands". Nine years later they had got as far as preparing the kiln. The queens' Aalholm was also the Aalholm of postponed repairs.

And then there was the other Sophie, Frederick the Second's widow. She sailed to Hven and visited Tycho Brahe at Uraniborg; she took an interest in astronomy and medicine, and she ran her dower like a business. We shall meet her shortly.

After her it went downhill. Nykøbing Castle became the dower's seat, and Aalholm slipped into the background, reduced to a governor's residence where governor followed governor. A survey in 1642 found in the king's chamber at Aalholm only two

four-poster beds and “some scarcely usable boards and benches” behind a wall hanging that was old, worn and moth-eaten. The queen’s chamber was no better.

The last queens were distant owners: Sophie Amalie 1670–85, Charlotte Amalie 1699–1714. When Charlotte Amalie died in 1714, Aalholm reverted to the Crown for the last time. Eleven years later the kings’ time was over too.

Seen as a whole, the epoch reveals something unusual. Margaret negotiated here in 1394. The dowager queens owned the castle for centuries. And when the dowager’s day was done, the buyer in 1725 was yet another formidable widow. For more than 250 years it was more often a woman than a man who, in the end, gave the orders on the islet in the inlet.

## **12. 1503 – King Hans**

The evidence fills a few lines, but it is strong. On 4 October 1503 King Hans wrote a letter to Archbishop Birger Gunnersen of Lund, and he ended it in Latin: *Ex castro nostro Aleholm*. From our castle Aalholm.

The letter still exists, as a paper original with the remains of the king’s seal, in the Swedish National Archives. So we do not have a tradition that King Hans once visited Aalholm. We have a royal document, written while he was here.

And he was not visiting. He was governing.

The first part of the letter concerns land. The archbishop had

written about some estate, and the king would not settle the matter in writing – it would have to wait “until God wills that we come to speak together”. Then the letter changes subject: the ban the king had earlier issued on exporting “corn and edible wares” from the realm was now lifted. From Aalholm, that day, went out a change in the kingdom’s food-export policy, with an open letter enclosed as proof.

One must imagine what that meant. The king did not travel alone. With him went courtiers, servants, guards, horses – and the chancery. Royal power in 1503 was itinerant, and when the king moved from Copenhagen to Nykøbing or Aalholm, the apparatus of government moved with him. Scribes drafted documents, seals were set, messengers rode out. On 4 October 1503 part of Denmark’s central administration was on an islet in Nysted inlet.

But 1503 was not a normal year, and that makes the date bite.

Six years earlier Hans had achieved what his father never quite managed: he had been crowned King of Sweden, and the three kingdoms of the Kalmar Union were again united under one crown. Then came the defeat in Dithmarschen in 1500, the Swedish revolt in 1501, and Sten Sture took power as regent. When Hans left Stockholm to fetch reinforcements, he left Queen Christine in the castle in charge of its defence. The Swedes besieged it, hunger and disease decimated the garrison, and in May 1502 the queen had to surrender. The king’s relief fleet arrived a few days too late. Christine was thereafter a

Swedish prisoner.

She was released only in the autumn of 1503 – at roughly the same time as her husband sat at Aalholm writing letters.

And yet he opens his letter with his full title: *Johannes, by the grace of God King of Denmark, Sweden and Norway*. The archbishop is styled *Primate of Sweden*. On one small sheet of paper from Aalholm the whole political world of the Union meets: a king who still called himself King of Sweden, an archbishop who still bore Sweden's title, and a Sweden where power in reality lay with Sten Sture.

Hans's father, Christian the First, can be documented at Aalholm in 1454. Hans's son, Christian the Second, in 1516 and 1519 – a few months before the campaign that made him King of Sweden, for a short while, until the bloodbath in Stockholm. Three generations of Oldenburgs, father, son and grandson, used the flat islet as a royal residence. When Hans wrote "our castle Aalholm", he meant it literally.

# PART TWO: THE QUEENS' ISLAND

## **13. 1516–1526 – The Widow's Portion**

In 1525 it was laid down as law: Denmark's queens were to have Aalholm, Ravnsborg and Nykøbing as their widow's portion.

It sounds like a gift of honour, and it was that too. But above all it was a business. The crown estates on Lolland and Falster were some of the best farmland in Denmark – flat, fat, frost-free in winter, with woods for firewood and shores for fishing. A dowager queen who was given the use of them did not receive a pension. She received a corporation.

And the queens were not ornaments.

Frederick the First ruled from the castle in 1526. Christian the Second had ruled from here in 1516, before he lost the kingdom and ended as a prisoner at Sønderborg – yet another king who learned that a Danish castle can be used for two things. But it was the women who settled at Aalholm and stayed.

No one took the task more seriously than Sophie.

## **14. 1533–1534 – The Year the Peasants Came**

Not every guest came by invitation.

In 1533 Frederick the First died, and Denmark stood without a king. The council of state could not agree on who should have the crown – the Lutheran Duke Christian or a Catholic candidate – and while the lords quarrelled in Copenhagen, the countryside seethed. The peasants had had enough. Enough of taxes, enough of bailiffs, enough of lords who took and took and never gave.

On Lolland it seethed most of all.

Aalholm's bailiff – the king's man, the tax collector, the one with the keys and the ledgers – rode out one day in 1533 and did not come back. The peasants killed him. We do not know where, or how, or who struck first. We know that the man who had stood for everything the peasants hated lay dead in the Lolland soil, and that no one at the castle dared ride out to fetch him.

The following year the rest came.

The civil war is called the Count's Feud, because the Holstein Count Christopher of Oldenburg let himself be hired to put the imprisoned Christian the Second back on the throne – and because the townsmen and peasants stood behind him. In 1534 Nysted rose. The town Eric of Pomerania had set free in 1409 marched against the castle that had loomed over it for three hundred years.

One can imagine it: a summer morning, mist over the inlet, and then the sound of many feet on the causeway.

Townsmen with axes and peasants with pitchforks, fishermen with boathooks, boys with stones. Not an army. A town. The guards on the rampart watching them come and knowing there are not enough men, not enough arrows, not enough time.

Aalholm fell. The medieval castle built so that no one could get in was taken by its own neighbours.

## **15. 1538–1551 – The King Who Won It Back**

It did not last.

Christian the Third – the Lutheran duke who ended up winning the civil war – took Aalholm back. Not at once; years passed, and the feud ended only in 1536 with the fall of Copenhagen and the introduction of the Reformation. But in 1551 the king stood in the castle, and he had come to hunt.

It says something about how quickly forgetting works. Fifteen years after the town had stormed the castle, the king rode out into Roden Wood with his huntsmen and shot deer as if nothing had happened. The peasants were back on their farms. The townsmen were back at their stalls. The bailiff was a new man who did not speak of his predecessor.

But it was a couple of hundred years before anyone at the castle forgot what could be heard from the town when the wind was right. And in 1538 the Greyfriars' house in Nysted closed – the last Franciscan friary in Denmark, the one that held out longest against the new faith. The friars walked out of the gate one last

time, and Nysted was Protestant, as the king was.

The Reformation came to Lolland like everything else: across the causeway, past the castle, into the town.

## **16. 1581–1585 – The Wall**

But before she became a widow, she came as a queen, and she came to a new castle.

In the 1580s Aalholm had been modernised. Behind the east wall a proper wing had been raised, the two north towers heightened, and the masons had used cross bond – the sixteenth century's new technique. King Frederick the Second wanted to see the result with his own eyes, and in 1585 he came with Queen Sophie and the whole council of state.

It was a feast. One can see it: the fires in the courtyard, the roasts on spits, the beer in barrels, the councillors' wives in silk and fur, the king's huntsmen with dogs that would not keep still. Frederick was a king who loved to eat and drink and hunt, and he was in his element.

And at some point during the visit – perhaps one evening, when the wine had loosened the mood – the king decided it should be remembered. He sent for a painter. On the wall of the east hall in the north wing, everyone's name was to be written.

At the top, the king's. *Frederick the Second*, with his motto. Then the queen's. Then the councillors, one by one, with shields and devices, the mightiest men of the realm in a row.

And at the very bottom – beneath all the fine names, beneath all the Latin maxims about honour and loyalty – stands *Christoffer Koryot*, accompanied by a fool’s cap and a drinking jug.

Frederick the Second’s court jester.

One can imagine the scene. The painter stands with his brush and asks if he is finished. The councillors nod. Then a voice comes from the back of the hall, a voice with a little too much beer in it: “And me? Am I not going on?” A moment’s silence. The councillors look at the king. The king laughs – he laughed easily, Frederick – and says: “Put him on. Put him at the bottom. And give him a jug.”

So Koryot went on the wall. Together with the king and the mighty, for ever, with his cap and his jug. It is perhaps the most Danish wall painting in existence: power, honour, orders – and then a man whose job was to make them all laugh, and whom no one afterwards dared to paint out.

The wall was whitewashed over in the centuries that followed. It was found again in 1889. Koryot had waited three hundred years to have the last word.

## **17. 1588–1611 – The Cattle Queen**

Frederick died in 1588. Sophie was a widow of thirty-one, with seven children and a kingdom she was not permitted to rule.

So she ruled Lolland instead.

The dowager queen moved to Nykøbing and made Aalholm

the centre of an agricultural empire without equal in Denmark. She kept accounts. Her letter books – copies of every single order she sent out – survive, and they show a woman who knew exactly how many cows stood in which byre, what a barrel of rye cost in Lübeck, and which steward was cheating.

She was, in the words of her contemporaries, *the greatest breeder of oxen in the land*. Oxen – castrated bulls, fattened on the Lolland meadows and driven in great herds to the markets of Holstein and Holland. It was the seventeenth century's oil export, and the dowager queen owned the pumps.

In 1611 she had a new cowshed built at Aalholm, thirty-two bays long, and she justified it in a letter with words that deserve to be remembered: that her cattle breeding “by God's blessing has multiplied from year to year, wherefore the Almighty shall rightly have praise and thanks”.

A queen who thanks God for her cows. There is something fundamentally Lollandic about it.

She grew so rich that she lent money to her own son, King Christian the Fourth, who built castles and waged wars on the dowager queen's cattle money. When she died in 1631 she was one of the richest women in Europe.

She had her own island in the inlet, where she could sit in peace from stewards and sons. It is still called the Dowager Queen's Island.

## **18. 1628–1634 – The Governor Who Said No**

There were prisoners at Aalholm in 1628, and they were not Danish.

Christian the Fourth had thrown himself into the Thirty Years' War, the great European slaughter over faith and power, and he had lost. But he had taken prisoners, and the prisoners had to go somewhere. Aalholm, with its thick walls and its dungeon, was the obvious place. Imperial soldiers, German mercenaries, Catholic officers sat in the towers and looked out over an inlet that meant nothing to them, while their king – Christian – negotiated ransoms.

Six years later, in 1634, a different kind of case landed on the governor's desk.

A woman in the district had been condemned as a witch. The sentence was the stake. It was not unusual; all over Europe the fires burned in those years, and Denmark was no better than the rest. There were witnesses, there were confessions – extracted, as confessions were – and there was a verdict.

The governor refused to light the fire.

We do not know his name for certain, or what it cost him. We do not know whether he was an enlightened man who did not believe in witches, or a pious man who did not believe in the stake, or simply a practical man who knew the woman and knew she was as much a witch as he was the Pope. We know that he read the sentence, looked at the woman, and decided that he

would not.

It is one of the quiet hero stories Aalholm keeps. No cannon, no siege. Just an official on a flat island who, one day in 1634, said no.

## **19. 1658 – Across the Ice**

In the winter of 1658 the Baltic froze. No one had reckoned on that.

Charles the Tenth Gustav of Sweden was the kind of king who does not wait for spring. He stood with his army in Jutland, and between him and Copenhagen lay the Little Belt, Funen, the Great Belt and Zealand – water, water and more water. Denmark had always been safe behind its straits. No army had ever marched across them.

Then came the frost. Day after day, week after week, until the ice on the Little Belt could bear a rider, and then a cannon, and then an army. On 30 January the Swedes crossed to Funen. On 5 February they went on – not across the Great Belt, which was too wide, but by the southern route: from Langeland to Lolland, over the ice, in the dark, with the horses in long lines and the guns on sledges.

It was madness. The ice groaned beneath them, and somewhere a squadron went through and vanished. But they got across.

At Aalholm the governor heard the news. The Swedes were on

Lolland. There was no Danish army on the island. There was no fleet in the inlet. There was a castle that had not been a fortress for a hundred years, and four old cannon which the sources mention in 1642.

The governor rode for Nakskov to raise the alarm.

One can see him: a man in a winter cloak on a frozen road, snow in his beard and an enemy at his back, riding west to gather what could be gathered. It was the right thing to do. It was also the only thing he could do.

The Swedes came to Aalholm in the meantime.

## **20. 1658–1725 – The Bill**

They took what could be taken.

The lead from the tower roofs – melted into bullets. The slate – simply because they could. Thousands of roof tiles. They smashed every window, every single pane, not from necessity but out of the kind of joy a victorious army feels when it stands in an enemy's house. They took furniture, they took grain, they took the horses from the stable. And then they went on towards Zealand, across Guldborgsund and the Storstrøm, to Copenhagen, where on 26 February Denmark signed the Peace of Roskilde and ceded a third of its kingdom.

One woman at the castle would not stand for it. The castle clerk Iver Nielsen “was considered to be a rich man”, and a Swedish raiding party forced its way in to make him hand over

his money. His wife Johanne Lerche, a parson's daughter from Nysted, came at them with a red-hot poker and defended her husband so fiercely that the enemy had to take flight. Meanwhile word had gone to the town, and at the gate the Swedes met a band of armed townsmen; a couple of them were cut down. The castle clerk's wife, who put Charles Gustav's soldiers to flight with a piece of kitchen ironware: Aalholm's Swedish war has its heroine. She and her husband still hang in Nysted Church, painted with their eight children.

When the Swedes had gone, an official walked round Aalholm and counted.

His report survives, and it is sober in a way more frightening than any lament: for "merely tolerable restoration" 15,000 roof tiles, 30,000 bricks and 4,000 floor tiles were required. Not one window was whole. The towers stood open to the sky.

It was the end of Aalholm as a castle.

Not because the walls had fallen – they still stood, metre-thick, as they had stood for three hundred years. But because the age of castles was over. A kingdom was no longer defended with boulders and monastery brick; it was defended with fleets and earthwork fortifications and cannon that could fire across a strait. Aalholm had become an administrative office with holes in the roof.

In 1660 Frederick the Third introduced absolute monarchy, and the fiefs became counties. Aalholm Fief became Aalholm County. The governor became a county prefect. And the castle

that had seen kings in chains and queens at the negotiating table lay and decayed.

The sources have a word for those years: *Brøstfældigheden* – the Dilapidation. The survey of 1671 describes cracks in the walls, rotten beams, roofs that did not keep out the rain. It also mentions, teasingly, a fifth tower that appears on no drawing – a riddle the building archaeologists are still chewing on.

The last dowager queen, Charlotte Amalie, died in 1714. Then the queens' time was over. Frederick the Fourth tried to turn Aalholm into a cavalry district, where the estate would maintain the king's dragoons. In 1725 he gave it up.

He put the castle up for sale.

## **21. 1662 – The County That Outlived Its Castle**

Some time in the 1790s a clerk in the Exchequer in Copenhagen sat keeping a register of inheritance duties. He wrote the heading without thinking about it: *Aalholm County Revenue District*. The castle that had given the district its name had by then been in private hands for over seventy years.

When the king sold Aalholm in 1725, he did not sell the name.

The story begins with absolutism. After 1660 Frederick the Third abolished the old fief system, in which noble governors had run the Crown's castles on the king's behalf, and introduced counties. In 1662 Aalholm Castle Fief became Aalholm County – Fuglse and Musse hundreds, the south-eastern part of Lolland

with Nysted, the Maribo district and Sakskøbing – and with the county came a new kind of official: a prefect who represented the king, and a county steward who collected taxes from his office, the revenue chamber.

Here lies a distinction that is easy to overlook. A county was not an estate. The estate was the king's property: the castle, the home farm, the tenant farms, the woods. The county was the king's district: everyone living within its boundary came under the prefect and paid to the revenue chamber – including peasants under noble manors, the townsmen of Nysted, the parsons and the parish clerks. The king was at once landowner and sovereign, and the two roles each had their own administration.

In 1725 he sold the one. The Exchequer's papers speak of "the Sale of the Cavalry Estate and other Landed Property in Aalholm County". The estate lay in the county. The county was not for sale. The peasants under Aalholm got a new lord to pay rent and labour service to, but their taxes to the state still went to Aalholm Revenue Chamber, their cases to the prefect of Aalholm County, and on the Exchequer's shelves their papers lay under the heading Aalholm.

So it continued. When the agrarian reforms came in the 1770s, and the villages' scattered strips were to be consolidated into contiguous holdings, the enclosure was administered through the counties. The Exchequer's Rural Affairs Office holds four bundles of "Aalholm County Journal Cases 1773–81". The landowner was the count. The authority was Aalholm County –

a name the castle had lent it 110 years before.

Only in 1803 were Aalholm County, Halsted Abbey County and Nykøbing County merged into one county for the whole of Lolland-Falster: Maribo County. Aalholm County had existed for 141 years – sixty-three as the frame around the king's own estate, seventy-eight as the frame around another man's.

After 1803 only one thing was left that was called Aalholm: the castle. It was as if the name had been stronger than the stones.

## **22. 1717 – Powder for the Wigs**

His name was Povl Boldich, and he was a ferryman and clerk of the assize in Nysted. They are not titles one associates with industry. But on 8 February 1717 he received a royal privilege to sell starch and powder on Lolland, Falster and Møn. Three islands, one sales privilege. In practice it was a monopoly.

He built his factory on the land between the town and the castle.

To a modern eye it sounds like a footnote. It was not. In the eighteenth century no one who was anyone went about in their own hair. Every man and woman with social ambitions powdered wig or hair, every single morning, and the powder was essentially finely ground wheat starch, sometimes scented and tinted. It was consumed in enormous quantities. England introduced an outright powder tax in 1795 because the habit tied up so much grain. And starch had a wider market: stiffening

linen and collars, textile finishing, glue.

The raw material was wheat, and Lolland had it in abundance. Grain in plenty, a harbour town with shipping, and a privilege that guaranteed sales. It was exactly the kind of enterprise the mercantilist policy of the age wanted to promote: home production instead of imports, rewarded with exclusive rights.

When the authorities took stock of the kingdom's manufactories in 1735, Nysted's town bailiff reported a starch and powder factory in working order – and noted that it lay outside the town's jurisdiction. That was deliberate. The factory stood in the countryside, between borough and estate, beyond the reach of the guilds and the town court. And it was among the very few real manufactories in the entire province. There was industry on Lolland before there was much industry anywhere in Denmark outside Copenhagen.

The factory changed hands, and the privilege went with it. Boldich sold in 1729 to Councillor Hofmann, who in 1734 passed it to his nephew Dresler, who in 1752 obtained the king's permission for the exclusive right to follow the factory on any future sale – a legal detail that tells us what it was worth. At the auction of 1765 it was described as the most complete and best-appointed of its kind in Denmark, with capacity for 1,500 barrels of wheat a year. Bishop Pontoppidan called it, in the Danish Atlas, one of the oldest in the country, which had shown the way for several others.

There is a twist to the story. Several respected works – Trap's

Denmark and the reference books that build on it – attribute the factory's founding to Count Otto Ludvig Raben. But the chronology does not fit: the factory was operating in 1717, the Raben family bought Aalholm in 1725, and Otto Ludvig became count in 1750. Later authors credited the count with an establishment that was already there, and the error has been repeated in good faith for a century and a half. It was the ferryman who saw the business first.

So when Emerentia von Levetzau bought Aalholm in 1725, she did not just buy a dilapidated castle and a great deal of land. She became neighbour to one of the few genuine industrial plants outside the capital – a factory that ground Lolland wheat into powder for the wigs at court in Copenhagen.

The fashion for powder collapsed around 1800, when the wig went out of style and the Revolution made it unseemly to put bread on one's hair. What became of the factory between Nysted and Aalholm, no one knows.

# **PART THREE: THE WIDOW WHO BOUGHT A CASTLE**

## **23. 1725–1734 – Emerentia**

A woman came to Lolland in 1725, and she brought money.

Emerentia von Levetzau was the widow of Johan Otto Raben, and she was the kind of widow that eighteenth-century men did not know what to do with. She had no intention of retiring to a dower house to embroider. She intended to buy.

The king wanted to sell Aalholm and Bremersvold. Emerentia bid 94,929 rigsdaler – a sum so large one has to say it slowly – and she got them. After four or five hundred years as crown property, as the seat of kings and queens, as dungeon and negotiating table, Denmark's southernmost gate was now a private estate. And the owner was a woman.

One can picture her on the first day: a tall woman in black, with a face that had seen more than it showed, walking through

the rooms of the Dilapidation. Rain dripped through the roof of the great hall. The windows were patched with boards. The rats had taken over the cellar. The steward walked behind her apologising, and she did not listen, because she was not looking at what was there. She was looking at what was going to be.

She began to buy land. She had Bremersvold. Bramsløkke followed. Farm after farm, parish after parish, until in 1734 she held 1,221 barrels of hartkorn – enough for a barony, but only a little under half of what a countship required.

So she applied for a countship.

It was cheeky. It was also Emerentia. She wrote to the king that she wished to establish a countship for her eight-year-old grandson, Christian Raben, and that it should be called Christiansholm after the boy. The law said no. The king said yes. There were not many people in Denmark who said no to Emerentia von Levetzau.

## **24. 1746 – The Chapel**

She put the castle in order. The counts' restoration, the sources call it: new roofs, new windows, carpenters and masons from all over Lolland for years. Aalholm rose from its dilapidation – not as a fortress, but as a country seat.

And she thought about death, as wise people do while they are alive.

In her will she set aside money for the schools at Bremersvold

and Kærstrup and for the poor of the parishes under Aalholm. The countship was to pass undivided, generation after generation, in principle for all eternity. It was her work, and it was to outlive her.

Emerentia died in 1746. Christian was twenty and became the first Count of Christiansholm. Four years later he was dead – only twenty-five, without children, without having had time to leave his mark on anything.

The countship passed to his younger brother, Otto Ludvig.

Emerentia was laid in a black marble sarcophagus. Some years later her grandson had a chapel built for her at Nysted Church, north of the tower, where the family could lie together. She is still there. Christian lies beside her.

And she did not stay lying down.

Legend has it that Emerentia von Levetzau is Aalholm's *White Lady*. People say they see her in the long corridors, at the window over the inlet, on the stairs up to the north wing: a tall woman in white who looks at no one, and who is gone when you look again.

But she appears only when the owner is childless.

It is a ghost with an agenda. The woman who bought a castle and created a countship so that it could pass down for all eternity still watches over the succession. When there is no heir, she walks. When there is, she rests.

She would have a great deal of walking to do.

## **25. 1749–1783 – The Count's Diary**

Otto Ludvig Raben was twenty-one when his elder brother died and he became Count of Christiansholm.

But he was count in name only. His father, Christian Frederik Raben, managed the estate, and the young count was sent out into the world: to Paris, where for nearly four years he lived with his sister and her husband, the envoy Ditlev Reventlow, frequented the salons and rode to the stag hunt with Louis the Fifteenth. Home again, he became a chamberlain in 1755, married Anna Catharina Henningia von Buchwald in 1757, and in 1763, by virtue of his connection by marriage to the all-powerful A.G. Moltke, became the king's master of ceremonies. The family spent summers on Lolland and winters in Copenhagen.

And he kept a diary. From 1749 until the year before his death, forty-two years, in French, day by day: whom the family visited, when they were at court, which table he sat at, what people drove in, hunts, peasant weddings, the weather, the music. Rarely a feeling, never an omission. It is not a diary of the heart's secrets. It is the diary of a man who kept accounts of his life, because accounts were what life consisted of.

Music was his passion. He played the transverse flute to a high standard and collected sheet music on a scale no other Danish landowner came near – scores, sonatas, cantatas, which lay in a tower room at Aalholm for two hundred years before anyone found them again.

The castle, meanwhile, was uninhabitable. His elder brother Christian had lived at the home farm, “since the castle on account of dilapidation was uninhabitable”, and when the home farm burned on 1 July 1750, the sick, twenty-five-year-old count had to move into Nysted, where he died a few months later. The medieval castle stood ruinous and empty in the middle of the eighteenth century.

After the change of monarch in 1767 the Moltke circle lost its influence at court, and from 1768 the family settled more permanently on Lolland. In 1773 his father died, and Otto Ludvig finally took over the full running of the countship he had formally owned for twenty-three years. For the next ten years the family scarcely left the island.

Then he began to build. He had enlarged the countship with the village of Stubberup in 1761, and in 1786 he acquired Kettinge and Bregninge churches with their tithes. He wrote a book of instruction for his son on how to become a good man when one was born to be a count. And in 1779 the new east wing stood finished, in the early Louis Seize style: two storeys, regular windows in long rows, light in the halls where there had never been light in the castle. On the gable he set iron anchors with his own and his wife’s initials and the year. He planted a lime avenue along the causeway, clipped to shape, as it should be.

He had a picture painted of the family posing in front of the new Aalholm. They had eight children, two sons and six

daughters. They look content.

In 1783 he built an enclosed family pew high up in the gallery of Nysted Church, with its own door through the wall, so that the count's family could attend the service raised above the congregation – and be seen. One should not think Otto Ludvig was modest. He was merely patient.

He died in 1791 and was laid in the burial chapel at Nysted Church he had built himself in 1782, in a sarcophagus of grey-white Norwegian marble. But the diary contains more than weather and visits. We shall come to that shortly.

## **26. 1765 – The Count's Seals**

One August day in 1765 Count Otto Ludvig Raben rode alone from Aalholm to Tågense, the coastal village south-east of Nysted, boarded a boat and sailed out to hunt seals.

We know it because he wrote it down himself.

The picture is worth dwelling on. No hunting party, no ceremony, no courtiers. Just the count, a horse, a boat and the low, glassy water south of Lolland, where the seals lay on the stones and sandbanks and lifted their heads when the oar splashed. For a man whose life was otherwise framed by etiquette – he was, after all, the court's master of ceremonies – that must have been part of the attraction.

Three years later, in July 1768, he repeated the trip as a small campaign: off early in the morning with his brothers and the

estate's senior officials. Otto Ludvig came from a large family, and that the estate's trusted men went too tells us what the seal hunt was – not a duty but an outing. A summer morning's men's hunt on the water, with the mixture of sport, provisioning and sociability that belonged to eighteenth-century manor life.

But the most interesting piece of information is older than the count was when he could first carry a gun. As early as 1737 his mother complained that people from Nysted were shooting seals off the coast. The complaint makes sense for only one reason: seal hunting in those waters was reserved for the lords of Aalholm. Hunting in eighteenth-century Denmark was not a general right but a privilege attached to the land – and at Aalholm the privilege stretched beyond the shoreline and out into the wet element. The seals on the sandbanks were the countship's seals.

That the Nysted townsmen shot them anyway shows the seal was quarry for everyone. The skin was valuable, the blubber gave oil, and for the fishermen the seal was a competitor that tore nets and took the catch. In the centuries that followed, bounties were paid, and the seals were driven to the brink of extinction in the inner Danish waters.

The story has an epilogue the count could have seen from his boat. Today the sandbanks at Rødsand – in sight of the very shores where Otto Ludvig hunted – are one of Denmark's most important seal reserves. Harbour seals breed there. The grey seal has returned. The seals still lie out there, as they did one August day in 1765.

The difference is that no one sails out after them with a gun. And that we know of the count's morning excursions only because a meticulous man wrote everything down – and because his papers were left undisturbed in a tower room for two hundred years.

## **27. 1770 – The Count's Secret Code**

From 1770 a small mark appears between the dinners, the hunts and the visits in Otto Ludvig's diary: *IFT*.

It is there for twenty years. Usually alone, sometimes with a woman's name, and in a few places half written out – “iftu”, “j'ay f...”. Almost always while the count was staying at Aalholm.

The diary lay in the castle archive until the music historian Jens Henrik Koudal began working with it in the 1990s – first for the sake of the music collection, then as a source for aristocratic daily life. It was Koudal who noticed the mark, and who cracked the code: IFT stands for *j'ai foutu*, from the verb which in eighteenth-century French meant what it means. The count noted when he had had intercourse, alongside his visits and his walks. The historian Nina Koefoed counted the entries: ninety-seven in all, most of them in the 1770s, the last in 1790.

It was not his marriage he was keeping account of. Otto Ludvig and the countess had eight children at intervals of no more than two years from 1759 to 1774, and then the births stopped. It is precisely in those years that IFT begins. The

few women named are not the countess. The two who can be identified were a servant girl and a tenant farmer's wife.

The countship had around two hundred tenant farmers in sixteen villages, plus cottagers and servants. It is among these people that the women must be sought. Ninety-seven entries do not mean ninety-seven women – they come in clusters, which suggests the count had a relationship with one particular woman for periods at a time. The sources cannot say whether the relationships were willing, bought or something else entirely. But the balance of power is impossible to overlook. The count was the women's master, landlord and judge.

And here the story becomes more than a piquant detail.

In the eighteenth century sex outside marriage was a punishable offence. Unmarried people who had children had to pay fornication fines, and it was the landowner who was to bring the case and collect them. When Otto Ludvig took over the running of the estate in 1773, he cancelled his father's entire list of arrears at a stroke. Thereafter each year's offenders were still carefully recorded – and the fines just as systematically remitted by verbal resolution. The men got off in return for contributing to the child's upkeep. The women were left to raise it.

One can read this as mild justice. Koefoed reads it as something else as well: the count, who himself broke the morality laws on his own estate, did not punish what he himself did – and each remission left an unsettled debt of gratitude between the estate's people and their lord.

Koefoed went through the parish registers for the countship's eight parishes. The count is nowhere named as a father; that was, as she writes, not a cultural possibility. But there are coincidences hard to overlook. On 30 March 1771 Anne Rasmusdatter of Herritslev had her illegitimate daughter baptised, and the parson recorded the midwife and all the godparents but not a word about the father; the count had written IFT six times in May, June and July of the previous year. In Toreby in 1775 a woman named "a stranger called Lars". In Herritslev in 1776 another claimed the father was "an unknown male person who came to her in the wood". And when Ellen Jacobsdatter named Rasmus Suhr in 1781, Rasmus Suhr had, between conception and christening, become tenant of a farm in another parish under the estate.

None of it proves anything. Parsons were careless, strangers existed, young couples moved in together before the wedding. But the three classic methods of concealing a lord's paternity – the father passed over, the stranger, the husband bought with a tenancy – are all represented in Aalholm's parish registers on dates that fit.

Why 1770? Koefoed points to the move. In Copenhagen the count was a subordinate figure in his brothers-in-law's network, and there it was the court and the music that made him a man. At Aalholm he was at the top. There sexuality became part of the landowner's authority – a demonstration that he had access to whatever he wanted in the realm he ruled. That he noted it

alongside visits and promenades shows that for him it belonged among the things worth keeping account of.

Otto Ludvig Raben was a man of the Enlightenment. He played the flute, hosted peasant weddings, built a burial chapel for his grandmother and wrote a book of instruction for his son. He was also an absolute landowner who was lawgiver, judge and master to the people he called IFT in his diary.

For centuries historians have assumed that lords of the manor exploited their servant girls, and have never been able to prove it, because that kind of thing leaves no sources. Otto Ludvig left one. He wrote it all down. Just in code.

One must think of the women behind the number. They did not get their names on any wall.

## **28. 1791–1838 – The Count Who Measured the Stars**

Frederik Christian Raben wanted the whole world in his study.

It was not a figure of speech. He travelled – for years, again and again, from Greenland in the north to Brazil in the south – and he came home with chests full of the world: dried plants, stuffed birds, fossils, minerals, stones, antiquities. His herbarium eventually numbered 20,000 plants. It was the Enlightenment's great project in one man's head: to see, record, collect and understand.

His grandfather Otto Ludvig had collected bird prints and coins. His father, sheet music. Frederik Christian collected nature itself.

In 1796 he began to plant. Aalholm's soil was made for it: frost-free winters by the fjord, shelter from the woods to the west, rich, moist clay over chalk. He laid out a landscape park that grew and grew. A special garden he called *the System*, with rare trees and shrubs in rows like a living catalogue. In the Horse Paddock he planted 1,500 imported exotic trees: North American oaks and pines, planes, fringed oak, species no one on Lolland had seen before. It became one of the richest collections in the country. An expert called it in 1862 "the most beautiful and interesting on the European mainland".

And then he built an observatory.

On top of the north-east tower, the medieval tower with the metre-thick walls, the count raised a two-storey superstructure – "hideous and square", a later author grumbled. Here he measured the weather, day by day, year by year, and here he looked at the stars. One can picture him up there on a clear winter night: a man in coat and cap, bent over an instrument, while Lolland slept beneath him and the tower that had kept watch against Holsteiners and Swedes now kept watch against ignorance.

In his study there were books from floor to ceiling, stuffed birds on the cabinets, dried plants in drawers, skulls, crystals, potsherds. And a great auk – a large, black-and-white, flightless

bird from Iceland, stuffed and mounted, which the count had acquired in 1821. He did not know he was collecting something that would soon no longer exist. The great auk became extinct in 1844. The count's specimen outlived him by a hundred years and finally went under the hammer at Sotheby's – one of the last of its kind, sold from a Lolland castle.

Frederik Christian died in Rio de Janeiro in 1838, in the middle of a journey, far from his tower. He was count for forty-two years and never lived to be old. But his plane tree still stands in the park, thirty metres high, and Nysted's doctor Emil Aarestrup – one of Denmark's finest poets, who earned his living as a village physician – wrote a poem about it.

One cannot ask for a better memorial: a tree and a poem.

## **29. 1830 – The Antiquarians Arrive**

Johan Gottfried Burman Becker was a pharmacist by profession and an antiquarian by passion. In the Denmark of the Romantic age, where the Middle Ages had suddenly come into fashion and the Commission for Antiquities and the idea of the museum were turning the past from curiosity into national treasure, he set himself something new: to describe all the kingdom's old castles, place by place.

In 1830 appeared his *Accounts of the Old Castles in Denmark and the Duchies*. Aalholm stands as article number nineteen – hidden under its name of the day, Christiansholm – and on four

dense pages of Gothic type the castle's history is told for the first time in one sweep. The book is Aalholm's birth certificate as a historical subject.

It is also an eyewitness account. Burman Becker saw the castle as it stood sixty years before Holm's rebuilding: a four-winged court which "formerly had towers on all four corners, of which two still remain" – one of them fifty-one ells high, a good thirty-two metres, with Frederik Christian's observatory on top. Moats on three sides. The upper storey with "a quantity of small windows which have presumably served as loopholes". Walls in the lowest storey four to five ells thick, nearly three metres. Every detail can today be held up against the building archaeology: the two vanished towers the excavations are now finding in the ground, the murder holes, the massive walls.

And he knew a great deal. He knew Count John's letter of privilege from Martinmas 1330. He knew that the captive Christopher was brought to Aalholm, and that Count John himself was there. He tells of the siege of 1346, the Treaty of Ålholm in 1366, the emperor's summons in 1377. He alone has preserved that Nysted's townsmen took the castle during the Count's Feud, and that the Swedes in 1658 maltreated the castle clerk Iver Nielsen to get money from him. And he ends with a detail even the countship's own history rarely remembers: that the new countship in 1734 was first established under the name *Christiansborg* – and only later renamed Christiansholm.

He also went too far. As a child of his time he had the division

of the kingdom between Svend, Knud and Valdemar in 1157 take place “at this castle”, and gave Lolland “with Aalholm” to the Wendish prince Pribislav in 1164. The kernel was real enough – the royal meeting did take place on Lolland, the island did have princely overlords – but locating it at Aalholm was the antiquarians’ own conclusion, inherited from Pontoppidan: the island’s princes must have had a seat, and Aalholm was the only one anyone knew. The castle was, as the excavations now show, born around 1256.

The error itself has become history. The idea of an ancient Aalholm has followed the castle for two hundred years, and it grew with each decade: in 1869 a popular history made the place “the well-fortified seat of the old sea-kings” of the ninth century. The Viking age, no less. The antiquarians sensed what the laboratories must now prove – they just got the date wrong.

Seen from today, the 1830 article is the ancestor of the timeline. The frieze of governors painted on the castle walls in the following century continues his list of names. Trap and the manor-house literature built on him. One man’s diligence in 1830 became the foundation that two centuries of research have since built on, corrected – and again and again confirmed.

### **30. 1838 – The Mad Count**

Then came Gregers.

Gregers Christian Raben was the eldest son, and he was not

like his father. Where Frederik Christian had measured the world, Gregers read it. He was a classical philologist with a doctorate, a man who spoke Latin the way others speak to their dog, and who found more truth in Horace than in any sermon.

And he was, as the manor-house book of 1938 drily observes, “something of an original, who could have the strangest notions and was therefore commonly called *the mad count*”.

It is a title one has to earn.

Gregers filled his father’s botanical park with summerhouses. Not one or two, but many, in every style, scattered among the exotic trees as though the park were a board game and the summerhouses the pieces. He raised memorial columns and monuments with classical quotations – Latin and Greek carved in stone between plane trees and fringed oak, so that a stroll in the garden became a philological examination.

He went to Norway to hunt bears. That is a sentence that deserves to stand alone. A Lolland count with a doctorate in classical philology, in the Norwegian forests, with a rifle, hunting bears. And he got them. He came home with several stuffed bears, and he exhibited them in a house in the park “together with other curiosities”.

No one knows exactly what the curiosities were. One can imagine it: the bears reared on their hind legs in a half-dark room, surrounded by the strangest things the count had collected – skulls, oddities, things from journeys, things from cellars – and the peasants from Stubberup coming on Sundays to look and

going home to tell the tale.

It was Aalholm's first public exhibition. A century before the motor cars came, a mad count stood in the park showing people his bears.

### **31. 1843 – The King and Queen in Nysted**

In the summer of 1843 a murmur ran through Lolland-Falster. The royal couple were coming – not as a face on a coin, but in their own high persons, with horses, carriages and a retinue of sixty. Rødby, according to the newspapers, had not seen a king within its bounds since Christian the Fourth.

The journey began as a private matter. Christian the Eighth's health was failing, and the goal was the North Sea island of Föhr, where the king was to build up his strength in the waves. But the road from Sorgenfri to Föhr could be laid as one pleased, and it was laid across the southern islands. Thus the private journey became a royal visitation. The king was to be seen. He was to inspect. And he was – though it stood in no programme – to dam up the unrest that was beginning to gnaw at the foundations of absolutism. Already at his accession a peasant petition had come from western Lolland asking for a free constitution. Christian the Eighth remembered that kind of thing.

He was not a king of pageantry. Where Frederick the Sixth had travelled with parades, Christian the Eighth travelled with a notebook. He went through town-hall minutes, tested fire

engines, visited the gaols and wrote it all down in the evening.

The diocesan governor von Jessen was balancing on a knife-edge. Two days before the arrival he wrote in alarm to the court: there were rumours the king would have himself escorted by twenty dragoons, as on Møn, where it had caused ill feeling. Von Jessen vouched with his oath of office that the royal couple would be received with the most sincere devotion – and begged urgently that no military be sent to Lolland. The dragoons were sent back.

On 22 July it was Nysted's turn. The town hall was whitewashed, the triumphal arches raised in greenery and flags. And the programme was divided: while the king drove into the town to do his duty as father of the nation, the queen, as von Jessen had arranged back in June, could "proceed directly from Nykøbing to Aalholm, there to be united with His Majesty the King".

That is the sentence that makes 1843 part of Aalholm's history. Caroline Amalie was indisposed for much of the journey and under the care of the travelling physician. She was spared the town's ceremonial and drove straight across the causeway to the castle in the inlet. There she waited for her husband.

The family were new to the role. Frederik Christian Raben, the travelling botanist, had died in Rio five years earlier, and the countship had passed to Gregers – the philologist, collector of Latin quotations rather than Brazilian plants. That same year, 1843, he was made master of the royal hunt. One can imagine him receiving the queen in Otto Ludvig's east wing, leading her

through his father's park between planes and fringed oak, past the summerhouses and the memorial columns. What was said within the walls we do not know. The court's archive boxes and the censored newspapers have left no account. The official is well lit; the private is silent.

In the town the king noted that the young teacher Friess seemed to him capable, but that another teacher ought to be appointed. Towards the town he was kindly disposed.

The undertone he felt three days later in Nakskov, when the parish councils stepped forward with an address of thanks that skirted dangerously close to a demand for the right to approve taxes. The normally composed monarch lost patience: he had given the people a municipal law – the affairs of state he would see to himself. An eyewitness thought he was scarcely free of stamping his foot.

After the departure each borough received the king's coronation medal in silver. Of them all, only one survives. It is Nysted's. It hangs framed in the local history archive – the last tangible trace of the day Denmark's last absolute monarch came across the causeway to Aalholm.

Five years later Christian the Eighth was dead. Six years later, so was absolutism.

## **32. 1864 – The Twelve in the Churchyard**

On 18 April 1864 the Prussians stormed Dybbøl. It cost seven hundred dead and over five hundred wounded on the Danish side, and the rest of the army withdrew to Als, where it was beaten again in June. When the war ended with the Peace of Vienna, Denmark had ceded a third of its territory and forty per cent of its population.

The wounded had to go somewhere.

Nysted lay as far from the fighting as one could get in the Danish monarchy, and the town had the only natural harbour on Lolland's south coast. That is probably the whole explanation. The wounded were shipped north from Als and Sønderborg, and on the islet in the inlet stood a castle with room.

Count Gregers placed it at the government's disposal without asking a penny. A letter from Lolland, printed in Berlingske, tells it: "The count and his family inhabited this castle until now, and when the government gratefully accepted the offer, the count's family removed the whole considerable household in a few days." The writer found Aalholm "perhaps one of the best hospitals the army has" – splendid high rooms, corridors behind, lime avenues in front, a garden of rare trees. "In short, this little spot is a pure paradise."

The jubilee book of 1909 remembers it from the town's side: "When the steamer came with the wounded and sick, the Nysted people supplied carts and strewed straw on the road they were to

drive.” The town that muffled the jolting of the cart wheels with straw. One could hardly find a finer image of the relationship between castle and town.

But one must understand what the men came to. Surgery in 1864 was before antiseptics. Treatment consisted of removing bullets where possible, and otherwise of amputations. Afterwards came what contemporaries called wound fever. Denmark refused international help, and refused women as nurses – ten years after Florence Nightingale. That is the reality the men at Aalholm lay in, in Otto Ludvig’s high halls with the view over the inlet.

Twelve of them died, between April and August.

Mads Hansen was born in Nørre Lyndelse on Funen, an illegitimate child, fostered with a farmer. He was wounded at Dybbøl on 12 April, six days before the storm, and amputated. He died at Aalholm on 26 June. There are two and a half months between the bullet and the death. That is the wound fever of 1864, applied to one man.

Hans Rasmussen was a gunner in the artillery, born in Tillitse on Lolland. He was wounded on 14 April and died forty-five kilometres from the parish where he was born. He was home.

Hans Christian Hansen from Tarup near Odense did not die of his wounds. He died of typhus. A hospital in 1864 was also a place where many men lay close together.

On 6 October 1865 an obelisk was raised in Nysted churchyard. It still stands: “in grateful memory of the 12 defenders of the

fatherland who in 1864 died at Aalholm's hospital". At the foot: "The Lord preserve the faithful."

There is a detail in the inscription that is easy to overlook. The monument was raised by the inhabitants of Nysted, the rural parish and Herritslev. Not by the state. Not by the army. Not by the count in whose castle they had died. Ordinary people from three parishes in southern Lolland collected for a stone over twelve strangers who had been carried into their town and not carried out again.

### **33. 1865 – The Mad Count at Rydhave**

Gregers Christian Raben was a doctor of philosophy, master of the royal hunt, chamberlain and member of the Latin Society at Jena. He had married outside the nobility, to Anna Margrethe Lund, and the marriage was childless – but not without a child. The couple had adopted her niece, Anna Marie Amalie, born in Næstved in 1832, the daughter of a billiard-hall keeper. She grew up as Countess Amalie Raben.

When his wife died in 1851, Gregers grew restless. He did not sit still at Aalholm. He owned Søbø on Funen, and from the 1860s the old west Jutland manor of Rydhave near Vinderup – a castle with an octagonal tower and a ghost in the wall, which had belonged to the Sehested family for two hundred years. He bought it, the locals said, to cultivate the vast heathlands under the estate, and he spent large sums restoring the main house.

But it was not the farming that earned him his nickname.

In west Jutland, where no one knew him as Count of Christiansholm, he became *the mad count*. The Skive historical society writes that it was mostly for his many ideas – such as breeding imported frogs from France. The boarding school now housed at Rydhave tells the children about the count who dug a frog pond in the wood for his French frogs, and who once shot a witch. The local archive in Vinderup still has a folder entitled “The Mad Count at Rydhave”.

Then there was the bear. Gregers was a passionate hunter, and his journeys went to Norway. On a winter hunt he brought down a large bear, and where most hunters would have stopped there, the count had the animal laid on a sledge and transported from Norway through Sweden to Copenhagen, where it was presented to the court – and served at one of Christian the Ninth’s dinners. One of the guests is said to have found the meat rather tough. Bear meat was not a success at the Danish court.

And then there was the train. The railway between Skive and Struer opened in November 1865, and the count used it. One day he stood on the platform at Vinderup and watched the train for Struer pull out – by his watch, five minutes early. The stationmaster tried to reason with him. The count demanded that Struer be telegraphed. The result, according to tradition, was a special train sent back to Vinderup to collect the triumphant count.

The stories were written down in 1957, three generations later,

and should be read for what they are: a district's memory of an eccentric squire. The bear can be neither confirmed nor refuted without the court marshal's dinner lists.

But the Norwegian journeys had a consequence that can be documented. On one of them the Norwegian poet Andreas Munch – a widower who had lost both wife and two sons – met Countess Amalie. Munch was Norway's first poet with a state pension, one of the three who, in the eyes of his contemporaries, had founded an independent Norwegian literature. On 10 October 1865 they were married in Borbjerg Church, the neighbouring parish to Ryde. The wedding was held from Rydhave. The mad count acquired a national poet for a son-in-law.

When Gregers sold Rydhave in 1873, he left more than anecdotes. In Aalholm's archive lies the deed of a foundation "for the benefit of the deserving poor in Ryde parish and the countship of Christiansholm" – 70,000 rigsdaler, an enormous sum, which bound his Jutland world and his Lolland world together in one charity.

The man people called the mad count spent his fortune on heathland cultivation, manor restoration, scholarship and poor relief. That is not madness. It is a type of landowner the nineteenth century knew several of: learned, stubborn, generous, and without patience for trains that left five minutes early.

### 34. 1869 – The Castle with the Star Tower

In 1869 appeared the second volume of *Old Danish Memories*, a popular book about Denmark's towns, churches, castles and legends, published under the name Holger Bruun – behind which the writer L.J. Flamand was hiding. It was the kind of book Danish families kept on the parlour table, and generations of Lollanders first met their castle's history on precisely those pages.

The first sentence is gold. Aalholm stands as “a massive, square building with two towers, one of which is fitted out as an astronomical observatory”. There we have it, in black and white: the star tower was the castle's landmark. Frederik Christian's observatory was mentioned before everything else when Aalholm was to be presented to the Danish reader. It was not a private curiosity. It was part of the castle's public identity.

And the author continues: by the castle lies “a beautiful garden and wood, in which are found a great quantity of rare trees and shrubs” which the late count, “who was himself a botanist”, had brought home from his travels “in foreign lands and other parts of the world”. Thirty years after the count's death in Rio his legacy stood so prominently in the park that it belonged in the description of the country. Raben the astronomer and botanist is the chapter's quiet protagonist.

The popular book also knows something about the older castle: that it “formerly had five towers, a wooden spire and two oriels”

– five towers, where all other literature counts four. Perhaps an error, perhaps a memory of the gate tower in the south wing glimpsed in Resen’s drawing. The excavations will have the last word.

Where Burman Becker in 1830 had Aalholm host the division of the kingdom in 1157, the popular book goes further back still: “Old accounts speak of Aalholm Castle as built in the ninth century, and it was then the well-fortified seat of the old sea-kings.” The author is himself sceptical and proposes instead one of the small coastal forts Svend Grathe raised in 1151 against the Wends, later expanded into a considerable castle towards the end of the thirteenth century. The guess was wrongly dated – but rightly conceived: a smaller, older fort on the islet, replaced by the real Aalholm. Curiously, it is close to the model the museum and the new finds are now drawing.

The chapter’s jewel, though, is the account of 1368, which corrects Burman Becker on a central point. Where the older book said briefly that the Hanseatic army took Aalholm, the popular book tells the true story: Count Henry of Holstein, the truce of 8 September, the deadline of 1 May 1369 that came and went, and Kersten Kule at Bardewick in 1370 with his endless reservations. Aalholm was never captured in 1368. The castle was besieged and rescued with pen and paper.

And finally the popular book makes the scene of 1332 more vivid than any other source: Peder Hvitfeldt’s reed-thatched stone house in Sakskøbing, the fire, the king jumping from the

window, and Count John, who “set no store by his half-brother, but let him go at once”. The kidnappers wanted to sell a king and discovered no one would buy.

Flamand compiled, and no one should believe his ninth century. But his chapter is an indispensable link in the chain: the snapshot of the observatory’s Aalholm, the full account of 1368, and a reminder of who was reading – ordinary people, at their parlour tables, in 1869.

### **35. 1874 – The Poet in the Castle Garden**

On 18 September 1874 one of the North’s most celebrated poets sat in Aalholm’s garden and wrote.

Andreas Munch was the son of a Norwegian bishop, cousin of the historian P.A. Munch and of the same family as the painter Edvard Munch. He was the first ever to receive a poet’s stipend from the Norwegian Storting, and Grieg set his verses to music. He was Norwegian national romanticism in person: nature, history and melancholy were his instruments, and all three were put to use that September day by Nysted inlet.

He was no tourist. Nine years earlier he had married Countess Amalie from Rydhav, and when he writes in the poem’s first stanza that the old family still lives in the castle, it is his own in-laws he means. The couple lived most of the year in Denmark, in Copenhagen in winter, in Nysted in summer – in 1877–78 they built their Italianate Villa Marina on the town’s main street for

around 80,000 kroner, the town chronicle noted, a fortune at a time when a skilled worker earned 26 øre an hour. Aalholm's park was their neighbour.

The poem is called "In Aalholm Castle Garden" and has six stanzas. It opens with the castle itself, the old castle with the red wall, whispered about by a wood of noble trees, while the sea roars from the shore like a greeting from a Viking's horn – romanticism's echo of the traditions of an ancient Aalholm which were circulating in the books of those very years. And then the line that shows the poet knew the place's history: the castle that once was the king's dwelling – and prison. Royal seat and dungeon, the whole span from King Hans's chancery to Christopher's cellar, caught in a single couplet. Many a dark legend still fills these places, he adds. He is right to this day.

But the heart of the poem is the garden. Stanza after stanza Munch wanders through the park and names what he sees: the bowed weeping ash, the spruce grove, the mighty planes in whose shade the walker senses the South – and within, magnolia, fig, laurustinus, acacias, the cypress that points up towards eternity. It is, he writes, as though a fairy with full hands had spread a wealth only the South knows beneath the North's grey sky.

Read as a source it is gold. The poem is a botanical eyewitness account – a versified plant list from the exotic garden Frederik Christian had created with plants brought home from his travels. Thirty-five years after the count's death his planes, magnolias

and figs stood in full glory, witnessed by a professional observer with an eye for the rare. For anyone who today wishes to replant the park, those stanzas are a document on a par with a gardener's register.

And then the national romantic turns the point beautifully: over the whole lovely garden beneath, Denmark's beech wood stands faithfully on guard, for all that culture can bring us thrives best under the wing of home. The splendour of the South in the embrace of the North – one could hardly sum up the idea of Aalholm's park, or nineteenth-century Denmark, more prettily.

The poem ends in moonlight. Elf-beams over the sea, mist over the meadow, and Aalholm's towers watching over the park. Every visitor to the park has been able to test that image since.

Aarestrup had written about the plane tree as Nysted's doctor. Now Norway's great poet wrote about the whole, as son-in-law. No other Lolland manor can show two poets in its garden, one Danish and one Norwegian, with the same tree over their heads.

### **36. 1875 – The Name**

But Gregers did one thing for which everyone has thanked him since.

The countship was called Christiansholm. It had been since 1734, named after a boy who died at twenty-five and left no trace. The castle was called Aalholm. It had been since 1328, since the eels, since the king in the cellar. For a hundred years the two

names had lived side by side, and one of them was the right one.

Gregers applied for leave to change it. And he was granted it. The Countship of Christiansholm became the Countship of Aalholm.

The mad count gave the castle its name back.

He died childless in 1875. His brother Julius took over, and Julius died four years later, in 1879, also without heirs. That branch of the Raben family was extinct, and the countship – Emerentia's countship, the one that was to pass down for all eternity – stood without an heir.

According to the founding document it was then to revert to the king.

One can imagine the White Lady in those years. Childless owner after childless owner. She must have walked a great deal.

### **37. 1880–1881 – The Supreme Court**

There was a collateral line.

Josia Levetzau of Lekkende was a privy councillor and the nephew of Emerentia's son – a distant relation, but a relation, and he had a claim. The king had another. In 1880 a blind historian wrote about the case, and in 1881 the battle for Aalholm reached the Supreme Court.

It was not a battle with swords. It was a battle with documents, with Emerentia's patent of 1734, read and re-read by the country's best lawyers, with pedigrees and rules of

succession and the eternal question of what an old woman had meant when she wrote “for all eternity”.

Levetzau won. He got the countship and the title, and the name became Raben-Levetzau, as it has been called ever since. Nine generations of one family in one castle – that was Emerentia’s work, and it held because she had written it down.

Josia died in 1889. His son had already taken over the management of the estate in 1881, as a young man, and he was to sit as count for forty-four years – right up to his death in 1933.

His name was Frederik Christopher Otto Raben-Levetzau. Posterity called him His Excellency.

And he inherited a ruin with a view.

# PART FOUR: HIS EXCELLENCY

## **38. 1882 – The Young Man and the Garden**

Aalholm was neglected.

Not ruined as after the Swedes – but neglected, as an estate becomes when two old brothers without children sit on it for decades and spend the money on summerhouses. The woods were badly managed. The fields were undrained. The home farm was squeezed up against the castle, where it had stood since the Middle Ages, and smelled accordingly. Frederik Christian's great park was still there, but the trees had grown over everyone's heads, and Gregers's memorial columns stood askew among overgrown paths.

Young Frederik Raben-Levetzau was twenty-five, a graduate in political economy, a former official of the Foreign Ministry with postings in Vienna and Paris. He had seen what a European country seat was supposed to look like. And he had decided that Aalholm should become one.

He began with the garden. In 1882, before he was even count, he called in the Englishman H.E. Milner, the leading landscape architect of his day, who had just laid out Count Knuth's park. Milner walked through Frederik Christian's wilderness and Gregers's Latin labyrinth and drew up a master plan: the old plantings were to be preserved and tended, the pleasure garden relaid in the English style, and the Horse Paddock drawn into a landscape that flowed together with the castle and the inlet.

It was big. A hundred and seventy hectares of garden. The road to Sakskøbing, which had run across the causeway just south of the castle, was moved north onto a new causeway that received the magnificent name *Alverdens Gang* – the Walk of All the World. The Reed Lake was dredged and an island of two hectares laid out in the middle of it, filled with flower beds – *the Pleasance* – where thirteen to fifteen thousand bedding plants were set out every year. West of the castle, by the chestnut avenue, a kitchen and fruit garden of five and a half hectares was laid out, surrounded by a wall of finely split granite, with palm house, vinery, peach house and, in the midst of it all, a twelve-metre water tower that made sure everything was watered.

The countess got her own island in the lake. It is still called the Countess's Island. You can walk out there today and stand where she stood and see the castle from the water as she saw it: red and heavy and yet, in the evening light, smiling.

### **39. 1884 – The Englishman and the Pheasants**

In the first year seven pheasants were shot at Aalholm. Seven.

The pheasant was an immigrant. The earliest Danish attempts go back to 1761, when A.G. Moltke at Bregentved received twenty eggs from the royal pheasantry – which a turkey hen was to hatch at the forester's, and which by spring had been bitten to death. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did the bird really take hold on the manors, and two schools developed. The German school released the chicks when they were nearly full grown and kept them under constant watch. The English school was bolder: the chicks were let out into the open at four to six weeks. That gave wilder, stronger birds and better flyers – but it made one inescapable demand. Vermin had to be fought mercilessly, or the chicks would not survive.

The foremost practitioner of the English method in Denmark was Robert Richardson. He had come to the country in 1876, and in 1884 he became pheasant master at Aalholm.

He went about it methodically. Together with the young gamekeeper Frederik Saurbrey, born 1861, he built up the rearing on the English pattern and at the same time launched an intensive campaign against vermin. The results came quickly. After a couple of years the annual bag was 476 pheasants. From seven to 476 was not an improvement. It was a transformation.

We can follow it because the Danish Hunting Association – founded in that very year, 1884 – published game returns in its

journal. For 1887 Aalholm stands at 206 pheasants and the whole countship at 413 out of 2,002 head of game. Only a handful of estates in the entire country ranked higher that year; Frijsenborg recorded 80. In three years Richardson had lifted Aalholm from the bottom of the lists to the top of the country. The pheasant was so new that in 1884 it did not even appear in the game law's table of seasons – and there was already a market: two to three kroner for a cock, one and a half to two for a hen.

Richardson's time at Aalholm was short. In 1888 he was recruited to Frijsenborg, the country's largest hunting establishment, where he ended as master of the hunt. But his most important mark was his pupil. Frederik Saurbrey, the gamekeeper from Aalholm, became head keeper at Bregentved in 1900, where under his direction the pheasantry grew to industrial scale – in 1929 over 8,000 eggs were collected from more than 500 hens. A photograph from a shoot in 1913 shows him standing beside Christian the Tenth. He even achieved a dubious literary immortality as the model for the relentless head keeper "the Bomb" in Svend Fleuron's novel *The Pheasant Creature*.

So when one speaks of the triumph of the English method in Danish game management, one of the main lines runs straight through Aalholm: from Richardson to Saurbrey, from Lolland to Bregentved, and from there out across the Zealand estates.

For Aalholm itself Richardson's years laid the foundation for the hunting culture that came to mark the great Raben-

Levetzau epoch: the autumn shoots, where royalty and foreign guests gathered on Lolland, and where the pheasant was an unquestioned fixture of the parade. That there were any pheasants to drive at all came down to seven lean birds in 1884 – and an Englishman who knew what was needed.

## **40. 1885 – The Golden Eagles**

On 15 March 1885 a golden eagle was shot at Aalholm.

We know it to the day because Jonas Collin in 1895 published his great register of Danish birds, and under the species' old Latin name, *Aquila fulva*, stands locality after locality – and in the middle of the row: “At Aalholm 15 March and 24 Oct. 1885 (Hunting Gazette)”. And a modern review of all rare records before 1965 removes any doubt: both birds are classified “sk”. Shot.

This was no ordinary bird of prey. The golden eagle is among Europe's largest, with a wingspan over two metres and a weight of up to six kilos, and it lives on hares, birds and medium-sized animals – in other words, precisely what a game department called its game. The dates fit the migration pattern: Scandinavian golden eagles come to Denmark as winter visitors in October and November and leave around March. These were probably wandering visitors from the north, not a local population.

Imagine the sight. An enormous dark raptor comes gliding in

over the flat Lolland landscape after weeks on the move. Today the binoculars would come out. In 1885 the gun came out.

It is tempting to ask how anyone could. But that is to misunderstand 1885. On the great estates of the day nature was crudely divided into what one wanted more of and what competed for it. Hares, partridges and pheasants were to be encouraged. Foxes, martens, crows and raptors were to be kept down – “vermin”, which a professional game department was obliged to fight, and on many estates bounties for dead raptors were part of the keepers’ wages. The Danish Hunting Association, founded the year before, had it in its very programme: the mallard protected in the breeding season – and the raptors exterminated.

And at Aalholm something else was happening in exactly those years. In 1884 Richardson had arrived and built up the pheasantry on the English method, in which the young birds were released at four to six weeks – strong and wild, but also especially exposed to anything with talons. The method demanded a merciless campaign against vermin, and he and Saurbrey launched one.

1884: the pheasantry is built up. 1885: two golden eagles are shot.

No source says who shot them, or whether they fell as part of the pheasantry’s campaign. That should not be claimed. But the two events unmistakably belong to the same development.

And then it happened again. On 16 November 1889: Aalholm,

one golden eagle, shot. At least three golden eagles in less than five years.

There is a paradox in it. Many of the birds the naturalists of the day knew, they knew because the birds had been shot, sent to the taxidermist, mounted and noted in the hunting journals. The destruction of nature became the source of knowledge about it. Frederik Christian had collected birds to understand them. His descendants' keepers shot them to protect the pheasants – and thereby turned them into science.

In 1922 raptors were protected in the breeding season, in 1967 fully protected. In 1999 a pair of golden eagles for the first time with certainty raised young in Denmark. If a golden eagle glided in over Aalholm's woods tomorrow, no keeper would be told to fetch the gun. People would stop. Birdwatchers would drive a long way for a glimpse.

Three short notices in the Hunting Gazette tell of an entirely different relationship between man, hunting and nature – and of how much that relationship has since changed.

## **41. 1885–1889 – When the Castle Got Its Face**

In 1885 he moved the home farm. A kilometre and a half to the north, away from the castle, closer to the fields: an entirely new complex with tenant's house, pupils' building, dairy, barn, stables and cowshed, all drawn with a sure hand which – everything suggests – belonged to the architect Hans J. Holm.

The complex resembled the Brown Meat Market in Copenhagen, which Holm had built ten years earlier. It burned in 1907, all but the tenant's house, and was rebuilt exactly as before. On the old farm's site came a stable yard for the count's twenty riding and carriage horses and a coach house for the elegant vehicles.

And then, in 1889, the great work began.

Hans J. Holm was a professor, a historicist and a lover of the Middle Ages. He loved the Middle Ages so much that he invented more of them where they were missing. He stood in Aalholm's great courtyard and looked at the rectangle the king had drawn in the thirteenth century, and he saw what it could become.

He divided the courtyard. Cross wings with great square towers cut the old rectangle into two enclosed courts. A broad drive led into the centre of the new, symmetrical complex, where a spacious arrival court with a mighty stair tower received the visitor. The whole new south façade and the two courts received everything historicism could borrow from the Middle Ages: round- and pointed-arched windows, balconies, oriels, copper-clad dormers, corbelled masonry, stepped gables, roofs of both tile and slate, half-timbering with carved brackets. On the north wing came a picturesque "pepper pot" and a half-timbered oriel. On the outer wall of the west wing, new, large loopholes through which no one would ever shoot.

Frederik Christian's observatory was removed. The astronomer had to yield to aesthetics.

On the façade Holm set the seal of Copenhagen University and the year 1232 – for the castle’s supposed foundation under Christopher the First, and to give the place a weight no one could contradict. It was a heraldic narrative carved in stone: the princely history of the Middle Ages and the learning of the Renaissance, united on Lolland.

Inside it was staged like a theatre. Guests stepped into the stair hall with its marble steps and oak panelling and were greeted by the notes of a built-in organ. The entrance hall was medieval: masonry, arcades, columns, painted ceiling beams. The north wing was a state suite: elegant cabinets, dining room, great hall, ballroom – each room finer than the last, with imitation gilt leather on the walls, damask textiles, inlaid parquet floors, double doors with brass handles, carved woodwork, rich stucco ceilings. A row of guest rooms with four-poster beds and antique furniture stood ready for the count’s prominent guests, the royal family first among them.

And during the work the masons found something. Under the whitewash in the east hall of the north wing: Frederick the Second’s name. Queen Sophie’s. The councillors’. And at the bottom, with fool’s cap and jug, Christoffer Koryot.

The jester had waited three hundred years, and now at last there was a feast again.

Later antiquarians shook their heads. Much had been torn down, more rebuilt beyond recognition, and the castle’s genuine medieval character was severely weakened. But the guests of

the day gasped. Holm had created a pompous whole of almost princely splendour, and apart from Frijsenborg no Danish manor could measure itself against Aalholm. The age knew nothing of listed buildings. The point was to recreate. And it succeeded.

## **42. 1890 – The Hunt That Never Took Place**

In the middle of Roden Wood lies a place that on a map looks too geometric to belong in nature. From a round clearing, the Rotunda, eight dead-straight rides shoot out through the wood like the spokes of a wheel.

It is the classic form of the par force hunting landscape. The system let riders move quickly through great forests and keep their bearings; from the star clearings one could look down long sightlines and follow hounds and quarry. That is how Europe's famous royal hunting forests were laid out in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the North Zealand par force forests are today on UNESCO's World Heritage list for precisely this geometry.

And that is what Roden looks like too. The natural question has therefore always been: was par force hunting practised at Aalholm?

Probably not.

The hunting historian Jesper Laursen is unusually clear: when Roden was laid out as a deer park around 1890, the star was created – but it seems to have had no practical function. It had

symbolic value. Roden is not a relic of the kings' hunts of the 1600s; the layout is two hundred years younger. When the rides were cut, par force hunting had been abolished in the Crown's forests for over a hundred years. Nevertheless, at Aalholm they chose to create a landscape that looked like it.

Why?

The man at Aalholm in those years was Frederik Raben-Levetzau, the future foreign minister, home from his diplomatic years in 1881. And the year after his return he took part in an event that became famous in Danish hunting history: the great par force hunt at Frijsenborg in 1882, where Count Mogens Frijs had revived the English-inspired hunt in spectacular style, with imported hounds, an English trainer and large aristocratic parties on horseback. Otto Bache immortalised it in his teeming painting *The End of the Par Force Hunt at Frijsenborg 1882*. The figures are identified – and among them stands a man in a greenish coat, brown hat and white breeches: Count Frederik Raben-Levetzau of Aalholm.

He had ridden in it himself. Eight years later Roden got its star of rides.

There is no document in which the count writes that he wants his own par force star. That far it cannot be documented. But the chronology is hard to overlook, and if the connection is right, Roden is something refined: the count did not necessarily want the hunt. He wanted the hunting landscape. In the years when Holm was turning the castle into a medieval theatre, a par force

star in one's own wood was a declaration – this was a great estate.

There is a detail that keeps the interpretation honest. The star was laid out at the same time as a modernisation of the wood: foresters' houses, rational management, and long straight rides that could be used for transport, forestry work and firebreaks. The practical and the symbolic do not exclude each other.

And in the midst of it stands the forester Carl E. Kann, in post from 1875 to 1918, responsible for the woods throughout the reorganisation. A memorial stone was raised to him after his time. Where? At the Rotunda. In the middle of the star. It is tempting to see him as the man behind the rides. But we know only that he was forester, and that the star came in his time.

If Roden had been the centre of great par force hunts, they ought to have left traces: packs of hounds, riders, guests, accounts, paintings. At Frijsenborg they were painted. At Aalholm no one has found anything. No famous hunt. No pack of hounds. The star itself remains. The hunt is missing.

Eight rides still run out from the Rotunda. Everything is laid out as though the riders might come galloping at any moment. But they apparently never came. Aalholm got its par force star – just not its par force hunt.

### **43. 1891–1908 – The Guest List**

They came.

In 1891 the Prince of Siam stayed at Aalholm. One can

imagine it: a young Asian prince, sent to Europe to learn, lodged in a Lolland castle with four-poster beds and an organ in the entrance hall, walking in Frederik Christian's park between North American oaks and stuffed bears, while the gardeners set out fifteen thousand bedding plants on the Pleasance.

In 1902 the crown princely couple came – the future Christian the Tenth and Princess Alexandrine – for four days in November. There was shooting. There were dinners. There was ballroom and organ and gilt leather.

In 1906 the king himself came, Frederick the Eighth.

And in 1908 came the two men whose rivalry would set the world ablaze six years later: Kaiser Wilhelm the Second of Germany and King Edward the Seventh of England. At the same castle. In the same park. One can see them: the Kaiser with his upturned moustache and his withered arm, which he always hid, and the corpulent English king with his cigar, walking between Gregers's Latin columns and talking about something neither of them meant. Hans J. Holm's stair hall received them with organ music. Koryot watched from the wall.

The count was host to all of it. That was what Aalholm had been built for.

But Aalholm was not all he had. The census of 1 February 1906 records that the castle that day was inhabited by exactly one person: the housekeeper. The count was with his son in Copenhagen, at Amaliegade 17 – so close to Amalienborg that he practically stood under the king's eaves – with four footmen,

three housemaids, a kitchen maid, the cook, the cook's wife and a kitchen apprentice, twelve servants in all. The countess was "abroad" with her two daughters and her lady's maid, presumably at the Villa Beaulieu in Cannes.

At the home farm a kilometre and a half to the north, forty-four people lived that same day: the tenant and his family, the steward, dairy maids, coachman, farm bailiff, farmhands, cowmen, a labourer with wife and children. A hundred and twenty cows, forty-five young stock, six bulls, twenty-seven horses. In summer, ten Polish girls in the beet fields.

That was Aalholm at the turn of the century: a castle with one housekeeper and a home farm with forty-four. A family in Cannes and Amaliegade. And on the island in the Reed Lake, fifteen thousand flowers that no one saw.

#### **44. 1901 – The Town Begins Its Diary**

At the entrance to the twentieth century a man in Nysted set himself something unusual: to describe his whole town as it stood – streets, houses, businesses, people – and then to keep a record of everything that happened afterwards.

His name was C.A. Hansen, and he was the town's doctor. His first volume was not a history book but something in a way more valuable: a condition report. *Status 1901* – a snapshot of the borough by the inlet, just as the old world was about to meet the new. The town had as yet neither railway nor water tower, but

it had its harbour, its merchants' houses, its old town hall and a good five hundred years of history behind it. To take stock before beginning a diary was a stroke of genius: everything the later chroniclers recorded as change could be measured against the 1901 picture. It is town history's answer to the archaeologists' baseline survey before the spade goes into the ground.

Then the diary began. Hansen kept it himself from 1902; in 1927 Johs. Grønbech Jørgensen took up the pen, and so the Nysted Chronicle passed from hand to hand through the whole century, until the last chronicler, John Voigt, laid it down in 2006. Two world wars, the coming and going of the railway, the harbour's changing fortunes, shops, families, celebrations and accidents – set down as they happened by people who stood in the midst of it. A chronicle kept alongside events does not know how the story ends, and precisely for that reason it remembers the details posterity forgets.

For Aalholm it is a treasure chest of a special kind: the castle seen from the town. Castle and town have been woven together since the thirteenth century – the town that grew up in the castle's lee, was set free by it in 1409 and stormed it in 1534 – and in the chronicle's century the weaving went on in new forms: the castle as workplace, lord, neighbour and sight. It was the chronicle that noted what Munch's Villa Marina cost. It is that kind of figure, price, name and date, house by house and year by year, that no other source preserves.

The original is held by Nysted's local history archive, which

has digitised the whole work. One man's idea in 1901, carried on by volunteers through five generations. And perhaps there is a quiet invitation in the fact that the diary stopped in 2006. Nysted's chronicle is waiting for its next chronicler.

## **45. 1905 – The Foreign Minister**

In 1905 the count became foreign minister.

It was not a foregone conclusion. J.C. Christensen's government was a Liberal government, the farmers' government, and Raben-Levetzau was a Conservative at heart, a landowner, a chamberlain, a member of the board of the Farmers' Bank. But Denmark needed a foreign minister with an international outlook and languages in his mouth, and there were not many of that kind among the Liberals. The count had been in Vienna and Paris. He had been commissioner-general for Denmark's contribution to the Paris World Exhibition of 1900. He was vice-president of the Geographical Society, treasurer of the royal orders, and for more than ten years chairman of the building committee for the new Christiansborg – so he was building palaces in Copenhagen while Holm was building on Lolland.

So he became a minister.

For three years he held Denmark's relations with the world in his hands, at a time when Germany was growing, South Jutland was still German, and every diplomatic sentence had to be weighed. And then came the Alberti scandal of 1908: the

Minister of Justice, who had embezzled millions, gave himself up, and the government tottered. Raben-Levetzau withdrew. The government fell.

He did not return to politics. Apart from the post of parish council chairman in Nysted – one had to keep one's own town in order, after all – he kept to the castle, the gardens, the guests and his many offices.

Among those offices, listed in the manor-house book of 1938 between the Geographical Society and the chapter of the orders, stands a line easily overlooked: *Chairman of the Danish Automobile Club*.

Take note of it. It will matter.

## **46. 1905 – Norway Gets Its King**

On 7 June 1905 the Storting declared the union between Norway and Sweden dissolved. Sweden regarded it as a breach of the Act of Union. Over the summer the Swedish navy was sent to Strömstad, Norway partially mobilised, and the negotiations at Karlstad were on the point of breaking down.

At the same time Norway had to decide what the country was to be: republic or monarchy. And if monarchy – with whom?

The Storting first offered the throne to a prince of the Swedish royal house, as a gesture of reconciliation. But King Oscar was not inclined to accept, and the Norwegian government was from the outset looking for a reserve. The reserve was Prince Carl of

Denmark, naval officer, second son of Crown Prince Frederick – and married to Maud, daughter of England’s King Edward the Seventh. A Norwegian king from the Danish house would have both Scandinavian roots and direct family ties to the great power Norway most wanted to stand close to.

But a Danish prince could not be fetched out of Copenhagen without going through the Danish government. And the foreign minister in that government was the count from Lolland.

The man behind the candidacy on the Norwegian side was the diplomat Fritz Wedel Jarlsberg, the Norwegian government’s envoy in Copenhagen through the summer and autumn of 1905. The Danish Biographical Dictionary states it soberly: as foreign minister Raben-Levetzau conveyed Wedel Jarlsberg’s approach to Prince Carl about taking the Norwegian throne. Aalholm’s count stood directly between the Norwegian envoy and the future Norwegian king.

On 29 June the prince gave his conditional answer: he was willing – but only if King Oscar had definitively declined on behalf of his house, if both his grandfather Christian the Ninth and his father-in-law Edward the Seventh gave their consent, and only once Norway and Sweden had resolved the dissolution itself.

Raben-Levetzau had another consideration at the same time: Sweden. If Denmark helped Norway too eagerly to a Danish king, it risked poisoning relations with Stockholm for a generation, and a small state with Germany at its back could

not afford enemies to the north. So the count simultaneously sought to moderate the Swedish demands during the crisis – not least the demand for the demolition of the Norwegian border fortresses, the most inflamed point at Karlstad. It was classic diplomacy: Denmark wanted a Danish prince on Norway's throne, but could not let Sweden perceive the result as a Danish victory.

On 26 October King Oscar renounced the Norwegian crown. Now the way was clear – but the prince would not receive a crown through diplomats alone. There were republicans in Norway, and the rumours reached Copenhagen. Carl wanted the Norwegians' yes. Prime Minister Michelsen would rather have avoided a referendum; the Danish foreign minister, the Danish royal house and not least the prince himself wanted one. Michelsen had to give way.

On 12 and 13 November 1905 the Norwegians voted. 259,563 said yes, 69,264 no. On 18 November the Storting unanimously elected Prince Carl King of Norway. The telegram was delivered in Copenhagen that evening, and the prince's reply came three hours later: he accepted, took the name Haakon the Seventh and gave his son the name Olav. On 25 November the new royal couple were received in snow and fog at Drøbak.

Haakon reigned for fifty-two years. He stood firm against the Germans in 1940 and became his country's most beloved king. The Norwegian royal house that sits on the throne today begins with him. And in the diplomatic process that brought the Danish

prince from Copenhagen to Kristiania, one also finds the name of the man from Aalholm.

## **47. 1908 – The Count Goes to the King**

On Tuesday 8 September 1908 the government stood at the Custom House in Copenhagen to receive the Dowager Empress Dagmar and Queen Alexandra of England. While the ministers waited for the royal guests, the Minister of the Interior told the head of government that the Minister of Justice, Alberti, had given himself up to the police for fraud and forgery. J.C. Christensen called it in his diary a thunderclap. He dared not tell Frederick the Eighth in the middle of the reception and instead asked the Greek King George, the king's brother, to break the news on the way home.

Alberti had embezzled fifteen million kroner – a sum that could have bought the whole of Lolland. And the scandal struck Christensen twice over, for that same year he had let the treasury lend one and a half million to the savings bank Alberti chaired.

Straight from the Custom House the ministers drove to a cabinet meeting. Christensen himself raised the question of resigning. Two supported the idea, and one of them was the foreign minister, Count Raben. The others were against: a resignation could be taken as an admission of complicity and damage Denmark's reputation. The government decided to stay in office until parliament assembled.

Raben was not satisfied. On Friday 11 September Christensen noted that the count had misgivings both about the forthcoming defence bills and about the political situation, and that he had talked of going. That evening a letter came: he still wished to resign.

On Saturday 12 September, at half past nine, the two sat facing each other in the ministry. Raben held to his wish, but wanted first to speak with the king about whether he ought to go. Christensen understood the agreement to be that the two would in any case speak again before the count made up his mind. Then Raben attended the cabinet meeting at ten and the audience with King George at half past eleven, where the Greek king declared himself in agreement that the government should stay.

Around one o'clock the cabinet secretary came in to Christensen. The king wished to speak with him between two and three. Count Raben had asked for his dismissal and been granted it. While they were talking, a messenger arrived with the count's written application.

Christensen was outraged. On the way to the king he happened to meet Raben in the street. They exchanged a few words and parted, in the diary's phrase, rather abruptly.

Frederick the Eighth was in what Christensen called a nervous state. The king announced Raben's dismissal – and now asked for the whole ministry's. Then followed a long speech about Alberti, about the loan, about the defence question. And here another

conflict surfaced: Raben and Christensen disagreed about the fortification of Copenhagen. The king said the count could stay in the government if Christensen would propose some forts in a southern line from Køge Bay to Roskilde.

Christensen said no. And then came the sentence that has been quoted ever since: he could not, after all, buy Count Raben for a few forts.

The government formally continued for some weeks; on 12 October it resigned, and Neergaard formed a new one. Raben did not become foreign minister again. Christensen told the party that the count had acted on a misunderstanding, but in good faith – and added that it was all the stranger that Raben himself went about believing he would be in the next ministry.

Why had he become a minister at all? In 1905 he was a surprising choice – a Conservative, without a political base, with a diplomatic career twenty years in the past. Christensen's motive is unknown. Seen in that light, 1908 is the story of a landowner who entered politics without a real base, and who left it in a way that had greater consequences than he himself seems to have foreseen.

Alberti was the cause. Christensen's loan made him vulnerable. But it was Aalholm's count who refused to carry on as before. He went to the king. When he came out again, the government began to fall.

He returned to Aalholm and to life as one of the country's largest landowners. Later he sat on Nysted parish council. In

national politics he took no further part.

## **48. 1909 – The Doctor Who Wrote the Town’s History**

When Nysted turned five hundred as a borough in December 1909, the town council decided the birthday should be celebrated with a book. The man who wrote it was the town’s doctor.

Carl Adam Hansen, MD and diocesan physician, Nysted’s doctor for a generation and a town councillor for eighteen years – and the same C.A. Hansen who eight years earlier had founded the Nysted Chronicle. He took on the task with Lollandic modesty. The preface apologises that the work ought to have been written “by a historian by profession”, and that Nysted “has always been a modest little town”. One can safely say he misjudged his own book’s value.

In two places he rescues sources that would otherwise have been lost. The parish clerk Wejer’s manuscript of 1761 on the church’s epitaphs had been lent out of the parsonage archive and never returned – “fortunately I had made a detailed extract”, the doctor writes drily. And the town’s birth certificate, Eric of Pomerania’s letter of 7 December 1409, had vanished in the town hall fire of 1654; Hansen went to the Royal Library, copied the letter from Resen’s transcript and printed the whole text: freedom from “all bonds, labour and tax ... to our castle

Aaleholm”.

For the castle the book is a treasure chest, and three finds stand out.

The first is a heroine. The book tells 1658 at full length: when a Swedish raiding party forced its way into Aalholm to make the castle clerk Iver Nielsen, “who was considered to be a rich man”, hand over his money, his wife Johanne Lerche, a parson’s daughter from Nysted, came at them with a red-hot poker – and defended her husband so fiercely that the enemy had to flee. Meanwhile word had gone to the town, and at the gate the Swedes met a band of armed townsmen. The castle clerk’s wife who put Charles Gustav’s soldiers to flight with a red-hot piece of kitchen iron. The couple can still be seen: their portrait with their eight children hangs in Nysted Church.

The second is an empty castle. Of the eighteenth century the book records that the young Count Christian “lived at Aalholm Home Farm, since the castle on account of dilapidation was uninhabitable”. The medieval castle stood ruinous and empty in the mid-1700s – the direct background to Otto Ludvig’s rebuilding. And the circulation between castle and town gains another thread: as early as 1551 the monastery bricks from the demolished Greyfriars’ house had been reused at Aalholm. The friary the castle had protected for 250 years ended up, quite literally, in its walls.

The third is 1864 and the straw on the road.

The book also preserves the delightful episode of 1848, when

Count Raben offered the town seven to nine small cannon for the redoubt – the “cat’s heads”, which in 1909 still fired salutes on the king’s birthday – while the chairman of the town’s representatives found the count’s covering letter “couched in a sarcastic and offensive tone”. Gregers was Gregers, even towards the council.

The book ends where the future begins: “The railway line to Nykøbing has been staked out, and in a year or two we shall have the railway.” Nysted in 1909: 1,457 inhabitants, the kingdom’s number 70 of 76 boroughs, but with five hundred years of history, a poetic high street and perhaps the country’s most beautiful neighbour. Hansen’s last line is the town’s own toast: “May Nysted go forward to a bright and happy future!”

Aarestrup had been doctor in Nysted and written poems. Hansen was doctor and wrote history. There is a line in the town of physicians who could not content themselves with curing.

## **49. 1913 – The King Comes**

In October 1913 Christian the Tenth came to Aalholm, and the tutor watched from his window.

It is one of the finest accounts the castle possesses: not from the count, not from the king, but from a young man employed to teach the children, who stood at his window and wrote down what he saw. The king’s car on the causeway. The servants in a row. The count in uniform with his orders. The king, tall and

stiff as a post, stepping out and greeting them. The music. The flags. The townspeople standing along the road and waving to a king who had come to shoot.

The castle staff that year were photographed: rows of footmen, housemaids, cooks, gardeners, coachmen, lined up in front of Holm's south façade in their best clothes, with faces that say they knew what they were part of.

That was the peak. Aalholm in 1913 was everything Frederik Raben-Levetzau had wanted it to be: a country seat of international standing, with the king as guest, the park in full splendour, and staff enough to keep it all in the air.

And the following year the war began.

## **50. 1915–1921 – The Bill, Second Time**

The first thing the First World War took from Aalholm was the gardeners.

Denmark was neutral, but the world was not, and the price of everything rose, and the men disappeared to other work, and the great household the gardens, the buildings and the entertaining required could no longer be sustained. As at every other country seat, the labour-intensive gardens were the first to go. The watchword was simplification. The Pleasance's fifteen thousand flowers became fewer. The System grew over. The great kitchen garden became a market garden that was to earn money instead of costing it.

In 1915 the telephone rang at Aalholm. On the other end: the beginning of the sale of the Danish West Indies to the United States. The former foreign minister was consulted, and Denmark sold its tropical islands for twenty-five million dollars. That was the kind of call Aalholm received in those years.

In 1918 the Bear House was built – a house in the park, named after the mad count's bears, which still stood there. In 1919 a daughter married, and there was a wedding at the castle, the last of the great ones. The countess was English in spirit and created, in the little district around Nysted, her own piece of England – the English School, the sources call it.

And then came the abolition of the entails.

Parliament passed the law in 1919. The countships – Emerentia's countship, all the others, the whole system of bound land that had held up the nobility for two hundred years – were to be dissolved. The land was to become free property in return for a levy to the state and the surrender of land for new smallholdings.

For Aalholm the bill in 1921 came to 1,767,000 kroner to the state, 2,115,600 kroner set aside in the successors' fund, and 269 hectares surrendered for thirty-five state smallholdings and five additional parcels. The count fought to spare Aalholm itself and got the surrender here down to 68 hectares; Bramsløkke gave up 131, Egholm 41, and the rest was taken from his Zealand estate Beldringe.

The Countship of Aalholm ceased to exist. The castle was just

a castle. The land was just land.

The count was then sixty-two and had sat at Aalholm for forty years. He sat for twelve more.

## **51. 1920 – The Manors’ Hour of Destiny**

In the early 1920s appeared one of the most ambitious works ever written about Danish manor houses: *Danish Manors around 1920* – three heavy volumes, nearly two thousand pages, the country’s estates described house by house. Aalholm had its chapter in volume two.

The work’s real story lies in the title’s three small words: *around 1920*. The year was not chosen at random. With the constitution of 1915 and the entail abolition law of 1919, Denmark had decided to wind up the last remnant of the old society of privilege – the countships, baronies and entailed estates, the bound fiefs which since the days of absolutism had passed undivided from holder to holder. Now they were to become free property in return for a hefty levy to the state and the surrender of land for smallholdings. For families like the Rabens it was the end of an epoch.

It was in that light the work came about. Four men set out to document the Denmark of the manors exactly as it stood at the moment of transition. The editorial board was a picture of its time: Louis Bobé, the leading genealogist of the day; Vilhelm Lorenzen, the architectural historian; Baron

Berner-Schilden-Holsten, a landowner with a historian's heart; and Baron Palle Rosenkrantz, jurist, estate historian – and, incidentally, Denmark's first crime novelist. Two scholars and two noblemen who together raised a monument to the world the law was dismantling. *Around 1920* means: before the land surrenders, before the parcelling, before the old world slipped away. A baseline survey at history's turning point – for the manors, what Hansen's *Status 1901* had been for Nysted.

And how did Aalholm stand when the photograph was taken? As a castle at the height of its second golden age. Holm's rebuilding had given the medieval castle its historicist splendour. The royal visit of 1913 – with thrones, a thousand lamps and fireworks – had shown the old world in full bloom. The owner, a former foreign minister, belonged among the kingdom's most distinguished men.

But at the castle they knew perfectly well what 1920 meant – in more than one way. In precisely those years the great hall's frieze of arms received its moving addition beside the arms of Schleswig: *to 1864, again 1920*. The joy of reunification and the gravity of the abolition, painted and lived through on the same walls in the same years. A turning point could not be marked more clearly.

The family stayed at Aalholm for three more generations, until 1995 – but from the 1920s as owners in the modern sense, not as holders of an entail. The epoch of “the counts' Aalholm” received here its formal break, though its heart went on beating

for another seventy years.

Precisely because the work is a snapshot, it does not age. It is its moment. Burman Becker 1830, the popular book 1869, the jubilee book 1909, the manor work 1920: every half century has seen Aalholm with new eyes and written it down. This was the 1920s' gaze – the last to see the Denmark of the counts alive.

## **52. 1931 – The Garden Gets Its Historian**

Johannes Tholle was one of the strangest and most industrious figures in Danish garden history: a trained gardener and landscape architect, but above all a tireless writer who over half a century mapped Danish gardens, parks and churchyards in hundreds of articles – often in the local history yearbooks, where parish by parish and estate by estate he rescued garden history before it grew over.

In 1931 he turned his gaze to Aalholm. In the yearbook of the Lolland-Falster Historical Society appeared “Aalholm Castle Garden” – twelve pages, the first proper historical account of the castle's park, from 1796 to 1920.

Twelve pages does not sound like much. But when the historian of science Gerd Malling took stock of the counts' collecting in 2002, she found that Frederik Christian's arboretum and garden were “the only part of his achievement that has been remembered to this day” – and that it was remembered was essentially thanks to Tholle's little essay. Without it, the garden

too would have slipped out of memory.

He came in the nick of time. Only a decade or so after the abolition, while people who had known the grounds in their late splendour could still be asked. He gathered the threads: the count's own words about "my English garden at Christiansholm", laid out in the autumn of 1796; the botanical quarter which in 1833 held 1,500 species, without equal in Denmark, where many trees and shrubs grew for the first time on Danish soil; the garden journal's enthusiastic description of 1849; the popular book's mention of 1869; Munch's versified plant list of 1874; head gardener Larsen's account of 1897. He carried it up to the threshold of the abolition, when the gardeners disappeared and the Pleasance's flowers grew fewer.

It was, at bottom, an obituary. But also a legacy. The counts' herbaria were sold, the birds scattered, the sheet music forgotten in a tower room, the contents auctioned away – but the garden could not be packed in boxes, and its history survived because one man in 1931 sat down and wrote it. Telling is preserving. What is written down endures when the objects vanish.

And something of the old grounds lives still. The park still holds botanical treasures from the count's time – living green sources, older than most of what the archives hold. For anyone who today would restore the garden, Tholle's twelve pages, Munch's poem and gardener Larsen's account are the working basis.

## 53. 1933 – Farewell

His Excellency died in 1933, after more than fifty years as master of Aalholm.

On 5 June 1933 Christian the Tenth came to Aalholm to say goodbye. It was twenty years since the tutor had watched him step out of the car on the causeway. The king was older now, stiffer, and Denmark was a different country – with depression, with unemployment, with countships that no longer existed. But he came. One can see him in the photograph: the tall king in uniform, on his way into Holm's stair hall, where for once the organ was silent.

The count was laid in the chapel at Nysted Church, with Emerentia and Otto Ludvig and the others. Nine generations, soon.

The son did not receive the title of count. With the abolition of the entails the new counts had been done away with; he had to make do with being a baron. Johan Otto Raben-Levetzau, born 1904, twenty-nine years old, heir to a castle of international standing, a park of 170 hectares, a market garden, a home farm, a villa in Cannes, a flat in Amaliegade – and to an age that no longer had room for any of it.

Baron, as it turned out, was quite enough.

# **PART FIVE: THE MOTOR BARON**

## **54. 1940–1955 – The Restoration That Never Happened**

Johan Otto Raben-Levetzau had a plan.

He had grown up in his father's Aalholm – in Holm's theatre of pointed arches and gilt leather – and he knew, as anyone with eyes in their head knew, that it was no longer a medieval castle. It was an 1889 castle dressed up as one. And the baron wanted the real one back.

In 1943 and 1944, in the middle of the Occupation, he planned a major restoration that was to “camouflage his father's violent interventions”. The dormers were to come off. The incorrect facing brickwork was to be removed. The Margaret Wing was to be taken back to the queen's time. He managed some of it – the Margaret Wing was restored, some dormers disappeared, part of the false wall came down. But the times were against it. There was a war, and there was no money, and afterwards it did not get

better.

In 1945 the refugees came. German civilians, women and children and old people, driven before the Russian army, landed on Lolland in their thousands. At Stubberupgaard, one of the estate farms, barbed wire went up, and behind the barbed wire they lived for years while Denmark debated what to do with them. Ten years later, in 1955, the children of the war came to Skansevej 34 – a different kind of refugee, a different kind of care.

Aalholm went through the war as it had gone through all the others: by being there, by having room, by waiting.

But the baron was not good at waiting. He was not his father, the patient count with the many offices. And he was not his great-grandfather, the travelling naturalist. He was something else. He was, as the sources say with a rare smile, *playful*.

And he loved motor cars.

## **55. 1944 – The Film**

On 31 March 1944 a twelve-minute documentary had its premiere at the Palads cinema in Copenhagen, as the supporting film to the thriller *Murder Melody*. It was called *The Danish South Sea Islands*.

It was the fourth year of the Occupation, and the film was the kind Danish Cultural Film made to remind Danes of what was Danish: the Storstrøm Bridge, which had joined Lolland

and Falster to Zealand; churches, manors, sugar beet and sugar factories; beach life at Marielyst; ferries and trains; Maribo, Nakskov, Sakskøbing – and Aalholm and Nysted. The director was Bjarne Henning-Jensen, with his wife Astrid as assistant, the photographer Poul Gram, and music by Børge Roger Henriksen. Black and white, sixteen millimetre, with narration.

The camera moved across the inlet, along the causeway, in towards Holm's south façade with the sun on the red walls. They are the oldest moving pictures of the castle. The baron was forty and had just begun his restoration of the Margaret Wing. The cars did not yet stand behind the grain dryer. The park was still Milner's. You can watch the film today, on Denmark on Film, and see Aalholm as it was, just before everything that came next began.

## **56. 1964–1972 – Petrol in the Blood**

It was not a hobby. It was a life.

His father had been chairman of the Danish Automobile Club, back when motor cars were something the nobility drove and the peasants stood and stared at. The son took it further. Old cars. Rare cars. Impossible cars. He bought them on journeys all over the world – in England, in France, in America – and shipped them home to Lolland, where they were parked behind the grain dryer, in the barns, in the coach house where the count's elegant carriages had once stood.

One can picture the steward in the 1950s: a sober man responsible for an estate whose land has been halved and whose woods have been sold off, who one day is told that yet another car has arrived from America, and where is it to go? Behind the grain dryer, says the baron. There are already fourteen there, says the steward. Then behind the fourteen, says the baron.

By 1964 the collection was so large that it was no longer a collection. It was a museum. And the baron made it a strategy: Aalholm was no longer to live off land. It was to live off visitors.

In 1972 the castle and park opened to the public. Three hundred vehicles on display. One of northern Europe's finest motor museums, on a flat island in Nysted inlet where six hundred years earlier a king had sat in chains. People came in their thousands. They drove from all over Scandinavia and Germany to see the baron's cars, and afterwards they walked through Holm's stair hall and Frederik Christian's park and Gregers's Bear House and did not quite understand what they had seen – but they came back.

*The Motor Baron*, they called him. He took it as a compliment.

## **57. 1965 – The Man Who Read the Walls**

If the timeline's sources were to crown their king, the choice would be easy. Chr. Axel Jensen was the National Museum's great medieval archaeologist, and his chapter on Aalholm in *Danish Castles and Manors* – originally written in the 1940s,

updated for the second edition of 1965, so late that even the newly opened motor museum made it in – is the text all later research stands on and cites.

He did something no one had done systematically before. He read the walls themselves as a source, stone by stone, course by course, and cross-checked them against the dry figures of the fief accounts.

The complex, a rectangle seventy-four by thirty-five metres with the corner towers flush with the walls, had “come into being piece by piece, enlarged and altered over a couple of centuries – and yet the castle was probably never finished”. Oldest is the north-west tower with the three-metre walls around the barrel-vaulted cellar room where the king sat: fourteenth century. Younger are the north wall and the north-east tower, whose flame-coloured bricks recall Vordingborg and may be Valdemar Atterdag’s. The cellars under the east wing’s south-east corner, with the remains of a spiral stair like the one in Nysted church, date from the early fifteenth century – “with every reservation one might here think of Eric of Pomerania as the builder”. And the west part of the south wing, where a hall had Gothic painted foliage from around 1400, bore “scarcely without justification” the name Margaret Wing. He even solved the five-tower riddle of 1671: the “south-west tower” was no tower but a lowered section of roof that gave the corner a tower-like look.

For the fourteenth century he found a document the timeline had to adopt: in 1336 the Bald Count renounced his claims to “dat

hus to Alholme” – and it appears that Count John in the following years not only founded Ravensborg but also built at Aalholm.

The chapter’s showpiece is the building site of 1578–1588, reconstructed from the fief accounts. A stone house in Nysted’s friary was pulled down for materials. The governor Hak Ulfstand was excused 500 daler of his dues for three years in return for paying the masons and carpenters himself, while the king supplied timber, iron and a hundred lasts of lime. The lime came from Mariager, the pine timber from Gotland. And when the royal couple inspected the finished work in 1585 – the visit the jester immortalised on the wall – there was, as Jensen drily puts it, “perhaps as a result of the conversations over the drinking, a new contract concluded”: Ulfstand was at his own expense to raise the unfinished towers 3.77 metres above the roofs. But Frederick the Second died in 1588 before the work was done – and that is why the west tower to this day lacks its top storey, while the east tower stands tallest. The castle’s lopsided pair of towers is a monument to a king’s death in the middle of a building project.

He also dared to pass judgement. Holm’s rebuilding of 1889 is described loyally in every detail, but the verdict is sharp: a luxurious residence “suitable for the country’s foreign minister and made for great parties – wholly in the international style”, which “for that matter could have stood anywhere on the European continent”. Of the Nordic royal castle little was visible. “It took a change of generation before this could be

remedied.” And the answer came: in 1944 the baron had the Margaret Wing restored by the architect Helge Holm, while the National Museum uncovered the foundations of the gate tower.

The baron showed him round, presumably, and talked about cars. Jensen looked at the stones. They each had their collection. And the chapter ends where one loves to stand: “The new Aalholm smiles cheerfully among the green trees out over the friendly fjord.”

## **58. 1968–1989 – A Steam Train, a Jet Fighter and a Telephone Kiosk**

He could not stop.

Through the castle park – Milner’s park, Frederik Christian’s park – the baron laid a narrow-gauge heritage railway with a real steam locomotive. The Stubberup Beach Line, it was called, and it ran from the museum through the park down to the beach, with smoke from the funnel and whistles at the crossings and children hanging out of the windows between the exotic trees.

He bought a retired jet fighter from the armed forces and put it on the playground. One can imagine the conversation with the Air Force: What do you want it for, Baron? The children are going to climb on it. Very good.

He bought one of Copenhagen’s old telephone kiosks – the little round copper-roofed booths where in the old days you could

make a call for ten øre – and set it in the garden west of the castle, where it stood like a polite stranger among rhododendrons and Latin memorial columns. No one quite knows why. The baron thought it was fun.

There came a cafeteria. There came a playground. There came, in 1989, a private airfield, where you could buy a sightseeing flight over the castle and see what the king had seen in 1256: the flat islet, the water all the way round, the angles.

And the film crews came.

In the 1960s and 70s Aalholm was the set for a string of Danish comedies – *Bedside Mayhem* and its siblings, films with lightly dressed ladies and complications at country houses. The great hall, where Frederick the Second's jester had signed the wall, became the set for bedroom farces. The cameras rolled through Holm's state suite. Actresses ran in negligé through the gilt-leather halls.

Koryot would have understood. He had, after all, sat at the bottom of the wall with a beer jug for three hundred years, waiting for someone to laugh again.

## **59. 1980 – Merete and John**

In 1980 the next generation took over in practice.

John Raben-Levetzau, the baron's son, and his wife Merete moved in and began running Aalholm as what it had become: a museum with a castle in it. The cars were the attraction. The

steam train ran. The park was open. And in the halls where emperors had dined there now lived a family with children who grew up between Holm's gilt leather and the baron's telephone kiosk.

That same year the National Museum came again, this time not to read walls but to read people. "Manor Life" the study was called: how one lived at a Danish country seat in 1980, what remained of the old, what had come new. Aalholm was one of the examples. The researchers went round with notebooks and asked, and the family answered, and it became a chapter about a family trying to make a medieval castle make sense in an age of television and motor museums.

It went on for twelve more years.

## **60. The Riviera – The Chauffeur Goes Ahead**

But the baron did not live only at Aalholm. None of them ever did.

He had a house on Sankt Annæ Plads in Copenhagen, in the quarter where his father had had Amaliegade. He had – and this is the detail that best tells who he was – forty hectares of sand by Ringkøbing Fjord, which he had lost his heart to in the 1930s, and where he built his own private holiday village: exotic houses, a tennis court, and a swimming pool of sea water pumped up from the fjord through a hose. A private holiday village. For himself and his guests. In west Jutland.

And he had a crewed motor yacht on the Riviera.

When the baron went to Cannes, he flew. It was modern, and he was modern. But a baron cannot arrive at the harbour in a taxi. So the chauffeur was sent ahead – all the way from Lolland, down through Germany and France, day after day – with the Rolls-Royce, so that the baron could be driven in proper style from the airport to the harbour, where the yacht lay waiting.

One can picture the chauffeur. A Lolland man in uniform at the wheel of a Rolls-Royce on the Route Nationale 7, past the vineyards and the French villages, with a map on the passenger seat and a baron to be collected in three days' time. One can picture him standing at the airport in Nice with his cap in his hand, and the baron coming out into the sun, and nodding, and getting in, and saying: "The harbour."

It was not madness. It was style. But it was style that cost.

## **61. 1989 – Dark and Thirteen Degrees**

To pay for it he sold the land.

Farmland first, then woods. The estate's basic resources, the things that had held Aalholm up for seven hundred years, went piece by piece until both had been roughly halved. The cars cost. The holiday village cost. The yacht cost. Life cost, and the baron had decided to live it.

In 1989 the wine cellar went to Christie's.

Aalholm's wine cellar was famous: dark, thirteen degrees, a

fortune in old vintages, collected over generations of counts who knew what they were drinking. Bordeaux from the great years. Burgundy no one could get any more. The sources call it *the baron's million-kroner wine*. It vanished in two hours under the hammer in London – bottle by bottle, case by case, to collectors from all over the world who had no idea they were buying a piece of Lolland.

One can picture the baron that evening. Alone in the empty cellar, lamp in hand, between empty racks where dust still lay in the shape of bottles. He was eighty-five. He had regretted nothing. He still regretted nothing.

## **62. 1990–1991 – The Tunnel and the Treasure**

There is a tunnel from Aalholm.

Everyone in the district knows it. It runs under the inlet to the town, some say. To the church, say others – to the chapel where Emerentia lies. Out to the Dowager Queen's Island. To Bramsløkke. It was dug in the Middle Ages so the king could escape, or in 1658 so the governor could slip away from the Swedes, or by the mad count, just because.

In 1990 it was talked about again, as it is every ten years. No one has found it. Everyone is sure it is there.

But in 1991 something real was found. In the tower – in a room no one had used for decades – lay a treasure of sheet music. Otto Ludvig's music collection, the patient count's eighteenth-century

scores, cantatas and sonatas and dances that had been played in Aalholm's halls while Emerentia's grandson waited to be able to afford an east wing. Two hundred years in the dark, and then one day the light again.

The tunnel does not exist. The music does. That is how Aalholm is: what you look for is seldom what you find.

### **63. 1992–1996 – Hammer Fall on an Epoch**

The baron died in 1992. He was eighty-eight and had sat at Aalholm for fifty-nine years.

His son, John Raben-Levetzau, took over. And he took over not only a castle and a motor museum and a park. He took over an inheritance duty so towering it could not be paid, and loans whose interest and instalments, as the sources say, went “up over the chimneys”. The baron had lived. Now the son had to pay.

There was no way to do it. The land was halved. The woods were halved. The wine was sold. The cars were all that was left of value, and they were not enough.

In 1995 the bank took the estate. It was the day when 270 years of family ownership began to end.

In 1996 Sotheby's came. The contents went to auction: the four-poster beds, the paintings, the gilt leather, the antique furniture, the whole of Holm's staging for emperors and kings, lined up in a catalogue with lot numbers and estimates. One can picture it: dealers and antique traders walking through the state

suite with the catalogue in hand, the price of everything worked out in advance, while the organ in the hall was silent and Koryot watched from the wall with his jug.

*Hammer fall on an epoch*, the sources call it. That is exact. After more than 250 years in the ownership of the Raben and Raben-Levetzau families, the ninth generation had to leave the flat island in the inlet.

The White Lady, the legend says, appears only when the owner is childless. John Raben-Levetzau had children. One may wonder what Emerentia thought that day – whether she stood at the window over the inlet and watched the removal vans on the causeway, and whether she understood that the countship for all eternity was over, not for want of an heir, but for want of money.

She had bought the castle for 94,929 rigsdaler. She had not reckoned that anyone could lose it.

# EPILOGUE: THE FOURTH CAMPAIGN

## **64. 1995–2012 – The Billionaire Who Collected Castles**

The buyer in 1995 was Stig Husted-Andersen.

He was a secretive man, a billionaire no one really knew, who collected manor houses and coast-road villas the way others collect stamps. He bought Aalholm and let it stand. He did not live there. He did not rebuild. The castle that had seen kings and emperors went into a kind of hibernation – owned, maintained, but without a family.

Husted-Andersen died in 2008, and three sisters – his daughters – carried Aalholm on. In 2002 research had rediscovered the counts' collections: Frederik Christian's herbarium, his birds, his fossils, scattered through museums across the country, but still traceable back to the tower on Lolland.

And in 2012 the last hammer fell. The cars left Aalholm.

The baron's three hundred vehicles, collected over a lifetime, exhibited for forty years, went to auction and were scattered to the winds. The Rolls-Royce the chauffeur had driven to Cannes drove away on a lorry. Behind the grain dryer it was empty.

## **65. 2019 – After 2019**

In 2019 Bo Bendtsen bought the castle with around five thousand hectares of land and woodland.

It is the fourth great campaign in Aalholm's history, the sources call it. The first was the kings': the castle that was to close Denmark to the south. The second was the counts': Emerentia's purchase, Otto Ludvig's east wing, Frederik Christian's park, Holm's theatre. The third was the baron's: the cars, the steam train, the visitors. And the fourth is the one under way now, where you can rent the houses, hold weddings in the halls, shoot in Roden Wood and read the history year by year on a website that has become the castle's new wall painting.

Lindholm – the small, uninhabited island out in the lagoon behind Rødsand – still belongs to it. The eels still come every autumn.

## **66. Today – Those Who Stayed**

Johan Frille was governor of Aalholm once in the Middle Ages, and he was crippled by the hardships of war.

He grieved deeply that he could no longer sit on his good horse. So he demanded that the horse – saddled, with bridle and stirrups – should follow him everywhere. Through the corridors. Into the halls. Down the stairs. A crippled man in a chair and a saddled horse behind him wherever he went, so that at least he could hear the hooves.

Legend says that Sir Johan Frille's ghost horse still haunts Aalholm. People hear it at night, they say: hoofbeats on a stone floor, in a corridor where there is no horse. It is looking for its master. Or it is still following him.

Christoffer Koryot still stands on the wall in the east hall with his fool's cap and his jug, beneath the king and the queen and all the councillors, and laughs at them all, as he has since 1585.

Christopher the Second no longer sits in the cellar. But visitors who go down there notice a particular silence.

And Emerentia von Levetzau, who bought a castle for 94,929 rigsdaler and created a countship for all eternity, still walks her rounds in the long corridors when there is no heir. She keeps watch. She has done so for three hundred years.

No one knows whether she walks today. What is known is that the castle stands, on the flat islet in the inlet where salt water meets fresh, red and heavy and yet – from the south, in the evening light, with the sun between the trees above the old walls – smiling.

A king stood here once and saw the angles.

The beauty came later. But it came.

*Read all the source stories year by year at [aalholmslot.dk/slot/historie](http://aalholmslot.dk/slot/historie).*

# SOURCE KEY

*The 96 stories at aalholmslot.dk (titles in Danish) and the chapter in which each is told. All chapters are based on the source articles themselves; only the two 1980 entries (marked †) were written from the titles alone.*

## **Under the Crown**

- 1195 Refshaleborg · 1256 Borgen fødes → Prologue
- 1329 Forliget i Ringsted → ch. 1
- 1330 Grevens gave til præsterne → ch. 2
- 1332 Christoffer 2. i fangekælderen → ch. 3
- 1342 “Kongens grove anmasselse” · 1346 Valdemar genvinder · 1360 Hertugen holder hof → ch. 4
- 1362 Topmøde · 1366 Ålholm-traktaten → ch. 5
- 1368 Manden der talte sig fra en belejring → ch. 6
- 1376 To konger, én krone → ch. 7
- 1377 Kejseren stævner høvedsmanden → ch. 8
- 1394 Nordens mægtigste kvinde → ch. 9
- 1409 Nysted sættes fri · 1438 Hertug Barnim · 1445 Den 15-årige brud · 1454 Christian I · 1471 Dorothea får pant → ch. 10

- 1460 Enkedronningernes livgeding → ch. 11
- 1503 Kong Hans → ch. 12
- 1516 Christian II · 1526 Frederik I → ch. 13
- 1533 Bønderne dræber fogeden · 1534 Nysted stormer slottet → ch. 14
- 1538 De sidste gråbrødre · 1551 Christian III vinder tilbage → ch. 15
- 1581 Østfløjen og kongeparret på væggen → ch. 16
- 1588 Sophies kopibøger · 1594 Enkedronningens ø → ch. 17
- 1628 Krigsfanger · 1634 Troldkvinden → ch. 18
- 1658 Over isen → ch. 19
- 1658 De glemte år · 1671 Brøstfældigheden · 1725 Kongen sælger → ch. 20
- 1662 Aalholm Amt → ch. 21
- 1717 Færgemandens puddermonopol → ch. 22

### **Under the Nobility**

- 1725 Grevernes genrejsning · 1734 Enken, drengegreven og grevskabet → ch. 23–24
- 1749 Grevens dagbog · 1775 Opdragelsesbogen · 1779 Den gamle borg bliver moderne → ch. 25
- 1765 Grevens sæler → ch. 26
- 1770 Grevens hemmelige kode → ch. 27
- 1791 Frederik Christian Raben · 1821 Gejrfuglen → ch. 28
- 1830 Antikvarerne opdager Aalholm → ch. 29
- 1838 Gregers Christian Raben → ch. 30 og 36

- 1843 Christian VIII og Caroline Amalie → ch. 31
- 1864 De tolv på kirkegården → ch. 32
- 1865 Den gale greve på Rydhave → ch. 33
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