



Privateers of Skagerrak

LICENSED TO PLUNDER





Privateer's frigate Greve Mörner on fire off the coast of Gothenburg, 1719. Oil painting by Jens Andresen. Maritime Museum & Aquarium.

Introduction

Privateers? In Sweden? Many react with surprise when they hear what happened out in the waters of Skagerrak in the not-so-distant past.

But these are not just pirate stories – they are actual events. Many nations were engaged in and affected by these fierce battles, audacious acts, heroic deeds and tragic fates, and Sweden was no exception.

The last privateers ravaged the west coast of Sweden a mere 200 years ago. Another hundred years before that, in the early 18th century, Sweden underwent a period of particularly intensive privateering. This golden age of the privateers would affect many people's lives – for better or worse.

Although a lot has been written about the Swedish privateers, knowledge of their existence has not reached a broad public. It has also been hard to find out information about the 'normal' people – both those on board the privateer ships and the poor souls who were victims of the privateers' deeds. Lysekil Municipality has therefore decided to bring these stories into the light as part of an effort to strengthen our cultural heritage, promote tourism and create development opportunities for various other people and organisations living and working in Bohus County.

Privateers of Skagerrak is part of the Business to Heritage project, which is partly funded by the European Regional Development Fund 2012-2014. Lysekil Municipality is collaborating with Isegran/Fredrikstad Municipality in Norway, Fredrikstad Museum in Norway, Innovatum in Trollhättan, Havets Hus aquarium in Lysekil, and the Fyrbodal association of local authorities.

The project website can be found at www.skagerrakskapare.se. A documentary suite and an experience exhibition for children and young people have also been made, and both can be seen at Havets Hus in Lysekil in 2014 and 2015.

It is hoped that the project can continue beyond this period and develop even further, because there are of course even more stories about the privateers of Skagerrak that need to be told. This is just the beginning.

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Privateer or pirate?

Ever since man began sailing across the Skagerrak, Kattegat and Baltic Sea, the waters off the coasts of Sweden have been plundered – a misery that continued right into the 19th century. But there was a difference between legal privateers and illegal pirates.

The pirates freely ravaged the seas, obeying no laws but their own. The word 'pirate' conjures up images of the stereotypes in books and films with a black eye-patch, a wooden leg and a hook for a hand. Real-life pirates were mostly far more ordinary. However the classic pirate flag bearing the skull and crossbones has been used in various places around the world, although not off Sweden's west coast.

The privateers also attacked ships, but unlike pirates they had the king's permission to do so in what is called a 'letter of marque'. A letter of marque legally entitled the holder to plunder and conquer ships from enemy countries.

The privateers therefore served as an addition to the military navy and helped their country during times of war. Some were of course tempted to go from legal privateering to illegal piracy and smuggling – the line between the two was sometimes very thin.

A captured enemy ship would be taken ashore and a special court, an admiralty court, would determine whether or not the capture was within the law. On the west coast the admiralty court was in Gothenburg, and after it had had its say the spoils, known as the 'prize', was

distributed among the involved parties.

The ship then became the property of the Swedish navy or the privateer ship's owner. A small proportion of the cargo went to the state and the rest was distributed roughly as follows: Half to the owner of the privateer ship, and half to the crew. Of the crew's share the captain received four parts, the first mate three, the able seamen one and the ship hands a half.

Encountering a privateer was of course an unpleasant experience, particularly for those on civilian merchant ships who were not directly involved in the war. However, as long as the crew didn't put up strong resistance they were treated relatively well and could stay in port until the trial was over and the prize distributed. Then they had to cope as best they could.

Military crews from fighting ships were, on the other hand, viewed as prisoners of war and ended up in prison, perhaps at Carlsten Fortress in Marstrand or Nya Älvsborg Fortress in Gothenburg. Only when the war was over were they set free – if they had managed to survive their tough period of captivity.



Blunderbuss, circa 1750. The short barrel meant blunderbusses were mainly used in close combat and to defend against boarding enemies. Picture from Maritime Museum & Aquarium, Gothenburg.

LETTERS OF MARQUE

In principle, almost anyone who owned a suitable ship could apply to become a privateer. A special letter of marque was issued to each ship – so no one person received a single letter for all their ships.

Carlsten Fortress, Marstrand.

THE VITAL WATER ROUTE

The motorway of its age ran via Skagerrak between Sweden and Denmark and in towards the Baltic Sea. Many different merchant ships and warships from different countries passed through this eye of a needle. The starting point around Gothenburg and Marstrand was excellent for the Swedish privateers.

The golden age of the privateers

Although Sweden had been an active privateering nation since the 16th and 17th centuries, only in the two subsequent centuries do we clearly see how well organised the whole operation was.

This was also when Swedish privateers started taking some real prizes!

In the early 18th century, Sweden was a nation heading for a crisis. King Karl XII was on the verge of losing control of his empire and countries like Russia, Poland-Saxony and Denmark-Norway declared war on an increasingly vulnerable Sweden. The Great Northern War (1700-1721) turned into a tough, long drawn-out struggle for power.

Karl XII initially invested heavily in arming his military navy, but the money soon ran out. This affected the west coast fleet badly, where the need for ships and crew was particularly urgent. Letting civilian privateers in on the action to take part in the war was a natural solution to the problem.

From 1710 to 1719, more than 80 letters of marque were issued to private individuals on the west coast – perhaps as many as a hundred or even more. This period can truly be called the golden age of privateering.

After the end of the Great Northern War in 1721, Sweden entered a time of peace and for long periods it was no longer legal to privateer in Swedish waters. Other countries, however, continued to pursue this lucrative business and several Swedish merchant ships were captured by privateers during their international travels.

The privateers off the west coast of Sweden were not mobilised again until King Gustav III's war against Russia and their ally Denmark-Norway in 1788-1790, but privateering didn't gather the same momentum this time.

Sweden's last major privateering era instead occurred during Sweden's next war against Denmark-Norway and Russia in 1801-1809, and the subsequent period of unease up until 1814. At least 50 letters of marque were issued to private captains along the west coast during this period.

Privateering was banned internationally in 1856 following an agreement in Paris pioneered by England and France.

Cutlass, 1748. A cutlass is a type of short sword used, for example, by the navy when boarding enemy vessels. Picture from Maritime Museum & Aquarium, Gothenburg.





Spices, wines and weapons

Imagine an ambitious businessman with several ships in his fleet. He buys and exports goods, and has various good contacts with countries like England and the Netherlands.

Then war breaks out and a far-reaching trade embargo is introduced. What does he do? The answer is clear: he takes up privateering.

A lot of people were eager to get a slice of the profitable privateering cake – everyone from individual ship-owners and captains to seasoned merchants and rich farmers. Well-known figures such as the first potato importer Jonas Alströmer and the merchant mayor Hans von Gerdes owned or part-owned privateer ships. And there was nothing strange about that. Now they suddenly had a chance to make a fortune! In fact the whole of Gothenburg and its surroundings benefited from the trade generated by all the confiscated goods that poured in.

During an intensive year of privateering, as many as 100 ships might come in to the 'prize court' in Gothenburg, which says a great deal about how many goods ended up in Swedish hands.

The goods aboard the captured ships varied greatly. Primarily grain, weapons and ammunition were taken from the many Danish-Norwegian ships. Prize lists from the privateering era in the early 19th century include everything

from robust goods like iron, potash, wood and tar to more exclusive or exotic goods like wine, cotton yarn, corduroy fabric, Virginia tobacco, cinnamon, sugar, coffee, raisins, rice, buffalo hides and rugs.

The privateer ships' crews mainly came from the areas around Gothenburg, Onsala and Marstrand, but if there was a shortage of Swedish sailors, foreigners were recruited.

The civilian privateers enjoyed a close collaboration with the navy in Gothenburg. They often loaned captains, crew and ships to each other, and successful owners of privateer ships like Lars Gathenhielm were free to collect weapons and ammunition from the navy's stores.

Another way of earning money was to demand a ransom for important people who had been captured – an extortion method that wasn't that common among Swedish privateers, but was among many other privateers around the world.



Cinnamon became a popular spice in Sweden early on. The first time the spice is mentioned in Sweden was during the era of St. Bridget in the 14th century. It was therefore not unusual for the spice to be found in the captured cargoes in the 18th and 19th centuries.

TRIBUTE TO MOROCCO

Swedish merchant ships were also the victims of privateering. It was particularly dangerous in the waters around the Mediterranean. For example to travel safely, Sweden was forced to pay a fee, known as a tribute, to Morocco up until 1845.

SHIPS' NAMES

Some of the more imaginative names for privateer ships in the 18th century were Snappopp, The Whale, The Fox, The Nordic Hero, The Swedish Ransom, The Helper, The Flying Crow and The Ravenous Wolf.

A hard life on board

No one knows how many people died in the privateers' attacks. But there was certainly a lot of bloody close combat. Sometimes the ships caught fire and sank, crew and all.

Even so, it was harsh weather and disease that took most sailors' lives. Many recruits could not even swim.

The privateers' ships were usually small and agile so they could catch up with the larger vessels. Typical privateer ships could range from small single-masted sloops and galleys to slightly bigger two-masted schooners and galleasses. However, three-masted ships like frigates, armed with up to 40 cannon, were also used in privateer attacks.

One common way of deceiving the enemy before an attack was to use the same national flag as the enemy to create confusion. Who was this? Who was friend and who was foe? Only when the enemy was close by would the captain quickly change flags and show his true identity.

During some of Sweden's wars privateers were allowed to sail under the Swedish navy's three-tailed flag, which the king believed would strengthen the privateers' morals and loyalty to the state.

As the privateers approached the enemy ship, hand grenades were thrown as a scare tactic or warning shots were fired by cannon or rifle. Unless the enemy could flee or surrendered straight away, it was a life-and-death battle.

Otherwise drowning and disease were the crew's worst enemies. Life on board was cramped and it wasn't always easy to maintain good hygiene. Dirt, crowding, cold and moisture were ideal conditions for disease to take root and spread quickly. Not to mention lice and other vermin.

No doubt the monotonous diet also played a part. On the menu was little more than highly salted and dried meat, groats, basic bread, peas and sometimes butter. To drink there was light beer and perhaps a nip of snaps if you were lucky.

The standard sailor's outer clothing was often made from wadmal – a compact woollen fabric that was both warm and water-repellent. Under the jacket the sailor would wear a shirt and underwear of tightly woven cotton or linen. Footwear took the form of shoes or boots, but weather permitting sailors preferred to get around the deck barefoot.



Some naval officers didn't like the fact that privateers were allowed to sail under the Swedish navy's flag. They were worried that it would have an adverse impact on the Swedish navy.

Photo: Shutterstock

The Gathe family take their place

Who's that limping man down in the port? Isn't it the famous 'Lasse i Gatan', the privateer who has brought more captured ships to Gothenburg than any other? The man who has made such a massive fortune through his conquests? King Karl XII's favourite himself?



If anyone truly benefited from privateering, it was Lars Gathenhielm and his family. Their standing rose significantly when they

devoted themselves to this big business during Karl XII's Great Northern War. During the privateering era of 1710-1719 they owned at least 50 of Sweden's more than 150 privateer ships.

Lars Andersson Gathe – as he was known before being raised to nobility – was born in 1689 on the Gatan estate in Onsala, and this is where he got his nickname 'Lasse i Gatan' (literally 'Lasse of Gatan', Lasse being the familiar form of Lars).

His father was a successful ship-owner. On his death in 1710 Lars, his brothers and mother Kerstin Larsdotter inherited his entire fortune and took over all business operations. The family had made sure that the daughters married well, and this was also very good for

business. A solid foundation and a considerable network had now been established to build up a strong privateering business.

Lars did not take part in all the privateering himself, but mainly controlled his fleet of privateers and his business from land – always with his wife Ingela by his side. All the successful conquests and the family's growing fortune resulted in him later being raised to nobility and given the name Gathenhielm. When he died of tuberculosis of the bones, aged just 28, Ingela continued to run the privateering empire until the end of the war.

It is interesting to speculate on the importance of women in the Gathenhielm success story. Lars's mother Kerstin and his wife Ingela were both strong women who expanded and strengthened the family's business operations after their husbands had died. In those days women were often kept away from formal power until they became widows. Only then did they become more visible.

Main picture: Part of the plot awarded to Lars Gathenhielm by King Karl XII (on what is now Stigbergstorget square in Gothenburg). It is located next to Gathenhielmska House, which was built just over 20 years after Lars's death.

Small picture: Lars and Ingela Gathenhielm's marble sarcophagi can be found in Onsala church. Photo: Albert Sandklef/Halland Museum of Cultural History.



GO-AHEAD ENTREPRENEURS

The Gathe family's businesses included a shipyard, a ropeyard, a sailmaker's yard and tobacco spinning. They were also responsible for Nidingen lighthouse off the Onsala peninsula.

IT IS SAID THAT...

Legend has it that Tordenskjold once attempted to capture Strömstierna in his home, Vese Manor (now privately owned) on Brofjorden fjord. But Strömstierna got wind of the plan and managed to chase the Danish ships away – all except one which ran aground and sank. And it is said that still today, that Danish ship lies in the clay seabed.

Two war heroes and an adventurer

Gathenhielm is not the only name to stand out in the history of Swedish privateers.

Meet a Norwegian, a Swede and an Englishman – all of them linked to Lars Gathenhielm in one way or another.

Peter Tordenskjold was a successful military man, born in Norway, who fought for the Danish navy. Still today he is a hero in Denmark and Norway for his courageous deeds against Sweden during the Great Northern War. His main victory came in 1716 against the Swedish in Dynekilen fjord, just north of Strömstad.

The Swedes were coming with reinforcements for King Karl XII's land army, bringing large amounts of weapons and ammunition. Several of Gathenhielm's privateer ships were in the convoy. Most of the cargo fell into Danish hands, and King Karl's plans to conquer Norway from the south failed completely.

Tordenskjold continued to lead attacks against Sweden. During one dramatic attack in 1717, he attempted to put the Swedish forces out of action in Gothenburg and Nya Älvsborg Fortress. This time though the Swedish managed to resist, largely thanks to Gathenhielm's privateers who were quick to defend the city approaches.

Olof Strömstierna was born on Käringön island as Olof Knape, before being raised to nobility. He forged a brilliant career in the navy, became a war hero and was promoted to admiral. He fought Tordenskjold on several occasions and led the Swedish forces at the defeat in Dynekilen and the victory at Nya Älvsborg Fortress in 1717. Strömstierna worked closely with Gathenhielm's privateers.

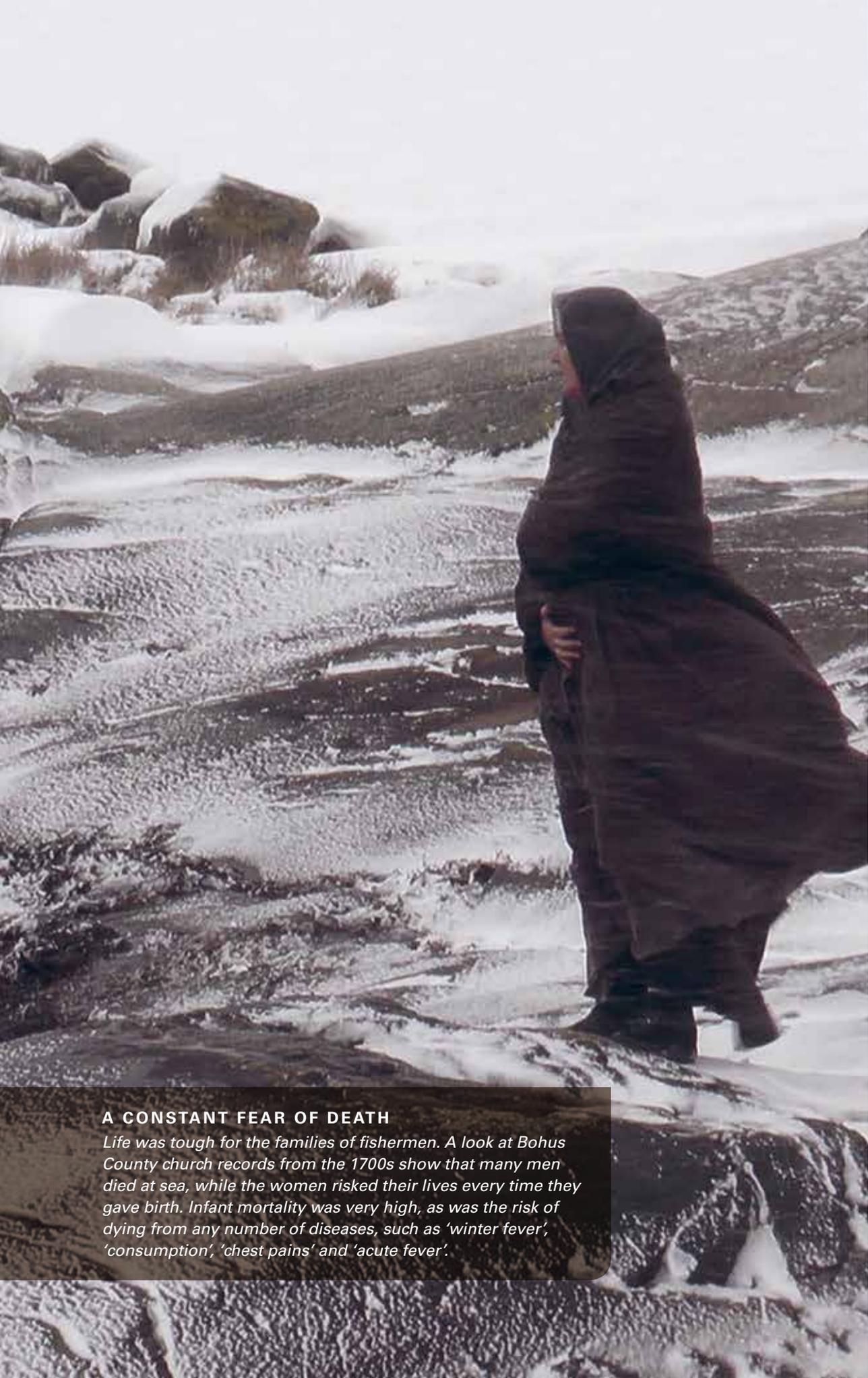
Englishman **John Norcross** was an extremely adventurous man with many strings to his bow. During the intensive privateering years of 1716-1717 he was a privateer captain for Gathenhielm, striking fear and panic into foreign ships. But Norcross often crossed the line from privateer to pirate while on his missions.

He was sentenced to death in Sweden but managed to escape and was later pardoned. He eventually ended up in a Danish prison where he died after 30 years as a prisoner.



Detail from commemorative plaque for Olof Strömstierna. Located in Bro church near Lysekil, where he is buried.

Tordenskjold's attack at Nya Älvsborg Fortress in 1717.
Painting by Jacob Hägg. Maritime Museum & Aquarium, Gothenburg.



Mårten Bengtsson from Orust

In the small fishing villages of Bohus County, the commerce and wealth of privateering seemed far away. People generally led very simple, impoverished lives.

Far out on the island of Orust, we find Mårten Bengtsson, a simple fisherman's son who ended up aboard Gathenhielm's privateer ships.

Mårten Bengtsson lived 1689-1747 in Stördalen on the island of Orust, close to the small archipelago around Kåringön. Not very much is known about Mårten Bengtsson's life, except that his family were closely linked to the sea and sailing. But how did he get from there to being a crew member on Lars Gathenhielm's privateer ships?

During the Great Northern War, Bohus County's first enrolment company was established on Kåringön island under the command of Olof Knappe, later Strömstierna after he was raised to nobility. The enlistment records from these turbulent war years include the name Mårten Bengtsson, along with an interesting note:

"Boatswain Mårten Bengtsson from Stördalen in the parish of Morlanda was not present during enlistment [1716-17] as he was privateering with Gathenhielm."

Strömstierna knew the Bengtsson family well. Mårten's father worked as

a navy boatswain on his sloop. And as we know, Strömstierna enjoyed a close collaboration with privateer ship-owner Lars Gathenhielm.

Perhaps Mårten, curious and eager for adventure, received a hot tip that there was a place aboard Gathenhielm's privateer ship. The young man saw his chance to earn some extra money. A more likely explanation is that Mårten was simply ordered to join Gathenhielm's crew. After all, Sweden was under pressure in the war and privateering was so important that King Karl XII allowed navy boatswains to transfer to civilian privateer ships.

So how long was he away, and what did he get up to? The only answers we have are that Mårten Bengtsson survived the war and left his privateering days behind him. On 13 December 1719, aged almost 30, he married Sigrid Persdotter from the neighbouring village of Hällevikstrand. They had 10 children, several of whom settled on Kåringön island, where descendants of the couple still live today.



Old fishing equipment. Bohuslän Museum, Uddevalla.

A CONSTANT FEAR OF DEATH

Life was tough for the families of fishermen. A look at Bohus County church records from the 1700s show that many men died at sea, while the women risked their lives every time they gave birth. Infant mortality was very high, as was the risk of dying from any number of diseases, such as 'winter fever', 'consumption', 'chest pains' and 'acute fever'.

Main picture: Still from the document suite about the privateers of Skagerrak, produced by Pensionat Granliden Produktion.

The master blacksmith who disappeared

Tomas Koch was a master blacksmith who worked for the Swedish East India Company in 1750s Gothenburg. He lived in the city with his wife Maria Margareta Zellbell and their three children.

Suddenly one day in 1758 he was gone, enlisted on a French privateer ship.

The story of Tomas Koch is shrouded in myth, but some true facts have been established. At the time of Tomas Koch's disappearance, the famous privateer captain and smuggler François Thurot was known to be on the island of Kängsö, just off Gothenburg. Here he repaired his French frigate, the privateer *Maréchal de Belle-Isle*, which had been damaged in sea battles and harsh weather in the Skagerrak and Baltic Sea.

Thurot was known for terrorising large numbers of British ships on the North Sea during the Seven Years' War of 1756–1763. This was the first world war in history, but the real power struggle was between France and Great Britain. And Sweden had chosen to ally with France.

During his time in Gothenburg, Thurot managed to acquire ammunition and replace fallen crew with Swedish men. It is highly probable that the master

blacksmith Tomas Koch jumped at the offer to go aboard the privateer ship.

After a while his wife Maria Margareta managed to get Tomas Koch officially declared dead, and she married a man called Carl Grönsten. The couple moved to her childhood area of Stora Anrås in Tanum municipality and had their own children.

It is said that Tomas Koch suddenly turned up one day after being gone for seven years. Maria Margareta was probably as happy as she was horrified – not to mention worried. She now had two husbands, and that was unacceptable.

Maria Margareta decided to stay with Carl, with whom she had her youngest children. Tomas Koch is said to have gone his way, a dejected man. At the parish boundary he turned a final time and gave each of his three children a gift: a family bible, a goblet and a horn.

The bible was destroyed in a house fire many years later, but no one knows what became of the goblet and horn. What happened to Tomas is also a mystery, but we do know that many of his descendants still live in Bohus County today.



*French privateer captain François Thurot.
Engraving by Giles Petit.*

A PROFITABLE COMPANY

Before Tomas Koch took up privateering he was employed by the Swedish East India Company, founded in 1731. In total the company carried out around 130 trade expeditions, most of them to China. Fortunately, all of the 37 Swedish ships managed to survive any privateers and pirates.



The capture of the frigate Kilduin

It is a dark August night in 1788. Rumour has it that Russian ships are somewhere off Marstrand.

Swedish soldier Johan Petter Ternstedt and his men are about to face an extraordinary adventure...

It is true that the Russian frigate Kilduin was captured by the Swedes, but there are two wildly differing versions of how it came about. One is more believable and just as exciting, if not quite as imaginative and dramatic as the tale starring Johan Petter Ternstedt.

Johan was born in 1760 in Tärby, in what is now Borås Municipality. By 1788 he had turned 28 and advanced to petty officer in the Royal Älfsborg regiment. He had been ordered to serve in Marstrand together with some of his men, including horseman Petter Öjelund. Aboard the navy ship Bellona they were to protect Sweden's west coast against Danish and Russian vessels.

On this particular August night Johan Petter Ternstedt had found out that the Russian frigate Kilduin was anchored a little way out to sea. The ship was clearly lightly manned and was carrying many precious goods. Johan gathered five men and rowed silently into the night with oars bound in fabric.

They soon caught sight of the Kilduin's silhouette. Carefully they approached the ship and managed to attach their boat to the ship's hull. They boarded, and after a short struggle they overpowered the sailor on deck watch. Meanwhile some of the Swedes quickly screwed down the ship's hatches to stop the crew below deck from coming up.

The Kilduin had been captured! It was brought into Marstrand port as a trophy. On board were many weapons which were welcomed with open arms by the Swedish navy. In addition to mortars (an old type of firearm), swords and other weapon accessories, 22 anchors, 128 cannon, 16,000 bullets and 500 rifles were commandeered. The Kilduin was used by the Swedish navy for almost 10 years before she was sold on.

Johan Petter Ternstedt was declared a hero and was paid a large portion of the prize. He used the money to buy several estates in his home district near Borås. He died in 1852 aged 91.

THE BULLET THAT BECAME A CLOCK WEIGHT

During the struggle with the sailor on deck watch, Ternstedt is said to have set fire to a powder keg by mistake. In the explosion, a bullet was blown straight towards Ternstedt, smashing his knee. He kept the bullet and later put it in his clock as a weight, but he suffered leg pains for the rest of his life.



Cannonballs of various sizes, found in several places around Bohus County. On display at Bohuslän Museum, Uddevalla.

The Klöverön crime duo

In the early 19th century Marstrand had grown into a vibrant commercial port, but also a hive for smuggling and other iniquities.

One of the most feared men in the area was Daniel Jacobsson. His cunning partner Johannes Andersson was also involved in the shady business.

Coastal farmer Daniel Jacobsson's home was in Korsviken on Klöverön island, just south of Marstrand. His reputation as a smuggler and pirate was public knowledge. He was said to be very cruel and violent. A man who could chop the hands off castaways if they attempted to climb aboard his boat. Early on he had learnt to put on an honest front, so he was never punished by the authorities. He kept in with the church, funded much of the parish's church building and was even called Father Daniel by some.

There had been good times, but now the money-making herring was running out. At the same time, in 1808 Sweden was once again going to war with Denmark-Norway. The Swedish navy had few resources on the west coast, and once again it was time to enlist the help of civilian privateers.

Daniel's business partner, merchant Johannes Andersson, was one of the first to be issued with a letter of marque. The letter was for his yacht Planeten which was to be fitted out with a crew of 40, four four-pound cannon, four swivel guns and several rifles. Within two weeks of receiving the letter of marque Johannes had captured two Danish ships – one laden with 800 barrels of rye and the other with 771 barrels. Even more ships would fall victim to the privateers' raids.

While Johannes is said to have been responsible for the planning and finances, Daniel was the daring implementer who didn't hold back from attacking any enemy ship. The two residents of Klöverön became the perfect crime duo.

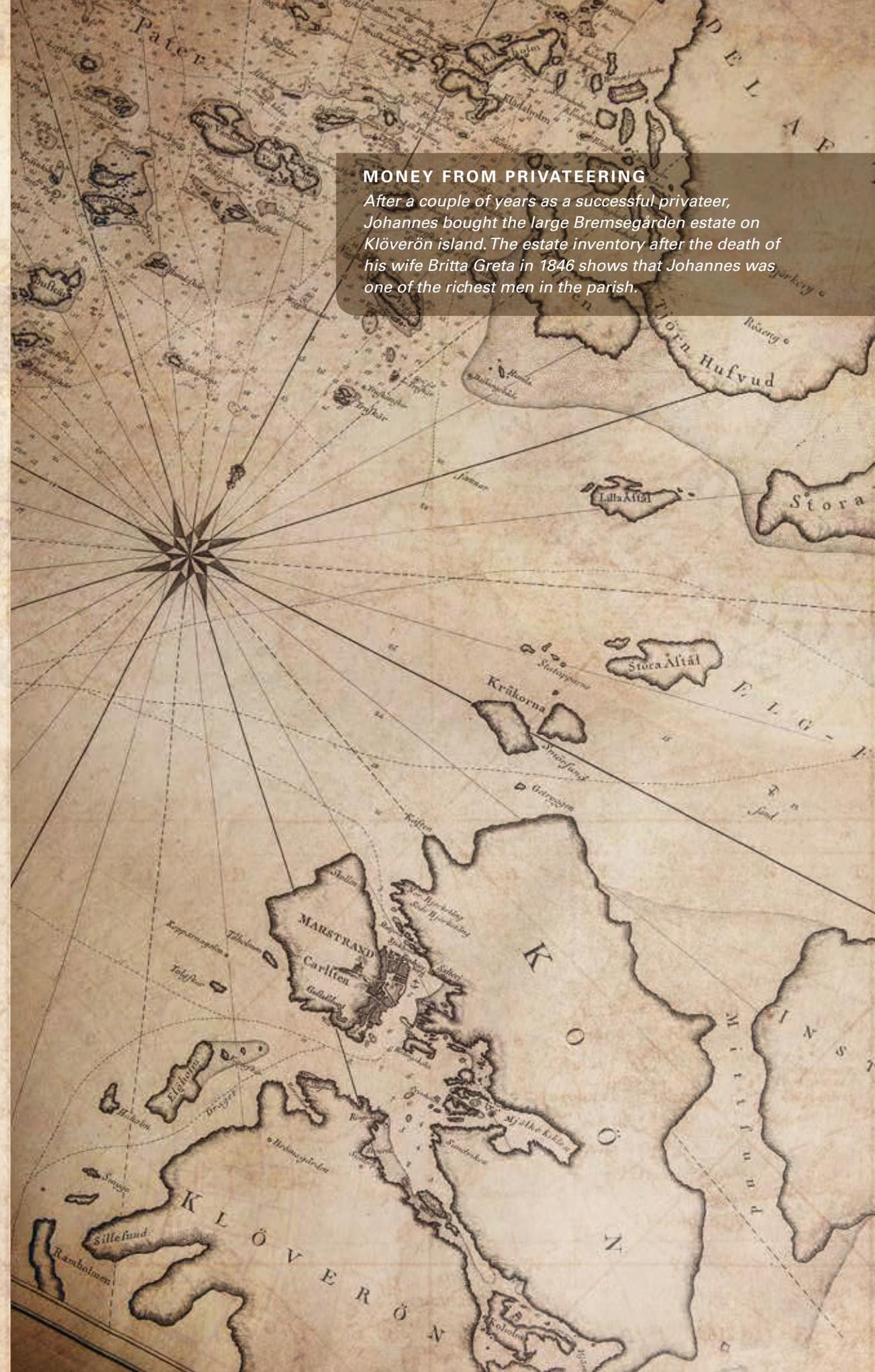
MONEY FROM PRIVATEERING

After a couple of years as a successful privateer, Johannes bought the large Bremsegården estate on Klöverön island. The estate inventory after the death of his wife Britta Greta in 1846 shows that Johannes was one of the richest men in the parish.



Main picture: Part of a 1795 nautical chart. Maritime Museum & Aquarium, Gothenburg.

Photo of Bremsegården from the 1860s. Johannes Andersson bought the estate in 1810. The photo is from the journal Träbiten, published by the Föreningen Allmogebåtar association.





Thanks to everyone who took part

This brochure has gathered information from many different sources – primarily the material of previous researchers, historians and genealogists. Great accuracy has always been the aim when collecting facts and information. All the texts have also been reviewed by Lars Ericson Wolke, author and Professor of History at the Swedish National Defence College's Military History department in Stockholm, and by Dick Harrison, author and Professor of History at Lund University.

This compilation would not have been possible without the help and advice of the people and museums listed below. Many thanks, therefore, to:

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The following books by Lars Ericson Wolke are highly recommended to anyone wishing to find out more about the privateers along Sweden's west coast: *Lasse i Gatan – Kaparkriget och det svenska stormaktsväldets fall* (Historiska Media, new edition 2007) and *Kapare och pirater i Nordeuropa under 800 år* (Historiska Media, August 2014).



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