The distant history of Blekinge can be described as a long and drawn-out battle between Danish and Swedish dominance. Blekinge was principally considered to be a part of the Danish realm until the peace treaty signed in Roskilde in 1658.
1. Sölvesborg – a medieval town

Sölvesborg developed on the waterside area between the sea and Ryssberget. An important coastal route, Via Regia, passed here, and the location offered a sheltered harbour at Sölveviken. Beside the road lay the royal castle of Sölvesborg, the most important military and administrative centre of support in the eastern part of Denmark.

The oldest buildings found were located next to the church, whose earliest parts are from the 14th century. The name “Sulverborg” can be found in documents from 1436, and it is probable that Sölvesborg was granted a town charter at this early date. This was renewed by the Danish king in 1445.

The oldest surviving map is from around 1650, and despite its date it gives a good idea of the extent of the medieval town. The map agrees well with the structure of the modern town, with a central square from which streets run in all directions.

Trade and shipping
Many towns were established in the Baltic Sea region during the 15th century. In Blekinge, these included Sölvesborg, Elleholm and Lyckå. The new market towns were intended to be a factor in gaining control over trade in the region. It is probable that Sölvesborg was founded following a royal initiative.

The area closest to the town was known as “Listerlandet”, while goods from the northern part of the area and from Värend in Småland also passed through the harbour in Sölvesborg. There was extensive contact with other towns around the Baltic Sea and the rest of Denmark. The maritime trade included imports of grain from the Danish islands, French and Spanish salt, German beer, Flemish fabric, Swedish bar iron, etc. Exports consisted mainly of forestry products, timber, firewood, juniper stakes, barrel staves, pitch, tar and potash. Horses and livestock, not least oxen from the crown farms at Elleholm and Sölvesborg, also passed through the town to be exported.

After the newly constructed fortress of Kristianstad was granted township in 1614, Sölvesborg gradually lost its importance. It lost the right to conduct foreign trade, and its role as market town became evermore limited. It was not until 1835 that Sölvesborg regained its full charter as a town.

War and flames in Sölvesborg
Its position next to the main road with a castle of strategic military importance meant that the town was repeatedly plundered and fired by Swedish troops. After it had become part of Sweden, the town was hit by three major fires, the last one of which in 1801 destroyed all buildings in the town except for the church. The town raised itself from the ashes after each blaze, most houses being constructed as clay-based half-timbered houses with reed roofs.
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2. Sölvesborg Castle – a royal fortress

A fortress was raised here, between the road and Sölveviken with its protected harbour, as early as the 13th century. The fortress, which came to be called Sölvesborg Castle, was the most important military base in Blekinge until around 1600. The fortress was raised by the Danish king in order to impress on people the extent of his military power. It formed the centre of Sölvesborg County, which at times completely covered what is today Blekinge. This was the seat of military power that would ensure that the income from the county went to the Danish king.

This was replaced at the beginning of the 14th century by an imposing brick tower, remains of which can still be seen. The tower of height 30 metres gave a complete overview of the surrounding countryside. The mound was surrounded by a moat. A smaller outer bailey with storage, livestock pens and living quarters was located outside. The castle and the town were taken by Swedish troops in 1564, when the castle was destroyed by fire. It never regained its military significance.

The castle has been a ruin for centuries now, but the high castle mound is still impressive. A tower, originally of wood, rose from the square castle plateau.
3. Sölvesborg Church

The church at Sölvesborg was built in its entirety during the medieval period. The available evidence suggests that the main choir was initially a free-standing chapel built as early as the 14th century. Other parts such as the nave, side chapels, porch and western tower were added in stages during the following century. The exact dates are uncertain, but it is clear that the extension of the church is coupled to the development of the town after it was founded around 1400. The brick architecture of the church is unique in Blekinge, and has clearly been influenced by Danish church construction.

The medieval interior has been preserved. The arches and walls of the choir, nave, chapel and porch are all provided with frescos. The arch across the choir depicts the life of the Virgin Mary in a series of detailed paintings. A series of paintings with events from the life of Christ decorates the porch, and the large crucifix in the triumphal arch dates from the same period. As founder of the town, the king was without doubt central to the building of the church, which was consecrated to Saint Nicholas, patron saint of merchants and sailors.

King Hans, who was then patron of the church, donated it in 1486 to the newly created Vårfruklostret (Monastery of Our Lady) in Sölvesborg. The monastery was home to Carmelite monks, also known as the “White Brothers”. It was built just to the north of the church, and was partially united with it. The Reformation in 1536 put an end to the construction of the monastery, and it was probably never completed. The prior and the monks were forced to leave Sölvesborg and the monastery cloisters were torn down.
4. The Church mound at Jämshög
swearing allegiance at gunpoint

After the peace treaty of Roskilde in 1658, the Swedish authorities attempted to quash resistance in the forest-based communities at any price. Royal announcements threatened the local population with reprisals. If a Swedish agent of the crown was killed, every tenth man in the parish involved would be hanged. The punishment was soon increased to every third man, to be chosen at random. Four parishes were notorious for their resistance to the Swedish crown and were known as centres for a guerrilla movement whose members were known as “snapphanar”: Jämshög, Näsum, Gammalstorp and Örkened. The conditions laid on these parishes were therefore more stringent than other parishes in Blekinge.

In the early days of 1677, Privy Councillor Johan Gyllenstierna started a drive in Blekinge. He took a few hundred knights and mobilised peasants from Småland on a campaign through the countryside. In parish after parish all men aged 15 or older were collected together. An amnesty was promised to anyone who signed an oath of allegiance to the Swedish king and promised to refrain from contact with the Danes and the “Snapphanar” guerrilla movement. Every resident of Jämshög was present on the church mound on 14 March. Under the eyes of several hundred Swedish soldiers they were there compelled to swear an oath of allegiance to the Swedish king, and seal it with their cross.

The oath of allegiance taken by the people of Jämshög in 1677.

Snapphanar

The communities along the border between Denmark and Sweden were hard hit by the many wars between the two countries during the 16th and 17th centuries. Protected by the forest, snipers and guerrillas known as “snapphanar” attacked the Swedish troops and collaborated with the Danish as scouts and pathfinders.

They worked in small groups, attacked suddenly and disappeared just as suddenly. The snapphanar were recruited from folk who had fallen out of the peasant society for one reason or another. Some were escaped foot soldiers, or peasants who had been forced from the land, and others who were to all intents and purposes bandits.
Lund was the seat of the archbishop, who was one of the largest landowners in Denmark, with a highly efficient administrative organisation. Elleholm and the castle at Sjöborg were included in the archbishop’s estates. A community grew on the low-lying land at Alholmen, where good salmon fishing in the stream and extensive surrounding land provided the conditions required for trade and marketing. Archbishop Tuve Nielsen granted a charter with marketing privileges to Elleholm in 1450, which promised six tax-free years to anyone who moved to live in the new town to ply a trade.

According to a description dated 1520, the buildings on the island consisted of only two rows of timber or cross-timbered houses. The town contained also a chapel, which was replaced at the beginning of the 18th century by the current church. The bishop’s residence lay at the extreme south, separated from the island by a moat.

Many new towns were founded in the Baltic Sea region during the 15th century, including not only Elleholm in Blekinge, but also Sölvesborg and Lyckå. This was in part an attempt to break the dominance of the Hanseatic League and transfer trade to domestic merchants.

Military catastrophes hit Blekinge many times during the 16th century. Elleholm was captured and plundered. Its town charter was withdrawn in 1600 and transferred to Sölvesborg.

Immediately to the north of the main island there are remains from a medieval fortress, Sjöborg. The fortress area consists of two grassy plateaus separated by what was once a moat, now filled in. Sjöborg was captured and razed in 1436 during a popular uprising, as were many sheriff fortresses.
Early in the medieval period, the growing Danish realm established support points in Blekinge, and the surrounding countryside can be regarded as a part of Denmark from around 1200. The land survey of King Valdemar in 1231 lists the estates and properties from which the king received income, known in Danish as “kongeleven”. These were essentially estates under the administration and control of the crown. Six such estates were located in Blekinge: Lösen, Ronneby, Vambåsa, Hoby, Mörrum and Mjällby.

The survey emphasises the significance of salmon fishing for Mörrum. This was under the control of the crown, but was on several occasions leased out, to be controlled by the archbishop in Lund. The region around the well stocked rapids in Mörrum had been significant as early as the prehistoric period. South of the churchyard, settlements from the Stone Age and Iron Age have been investigated. Two of the largest villages in the region, Mörrum and Hästaryd, lay on either side of the stream up until the land reforms of the 19th century.

A stone church was built in Hästaryd towards the end of the 12th century. The coastal route, Via Regia, which united the region with the rest of Denmark passed here. Beside the road and to the west of the stream lay a burial ground from the Iron Age, now largely spoiled, while a silver hoard from the Viking
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7. The Royal Road through Blekinge

A region of forested mountains known as the “Vireyd plateau” with a width of over 10 km lies between the old agricultural land around Ronneby and Bräkne-Hoby. This region was long a physical barrier between the eastern and western parts of Blekinge, and the road between Ronneby and Bräkne-Hoby passed through this difficult forest during the Danish period. The road was a part of Via Regia, the Royal Road, from Malmö towards Kalmar, and was in general use until the 1640s, when it was replaced by a new route to the north of Nässjön.

The road is mentioned as early as 1200 by the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus in a description of what was thought to be a runic inscription at Runamo. This route is, however, much older. What used to be the road today consists of forest tracks and pathways, along which there lies a chain of prehistoric burial sites, which show that the origin of the road can be traced back at least to the period around the birth of Christ.
8. The Runamo inscription

At Runamo, the road passes a diabase formation in the rock. The cracks in the rock were interpreted for a long time as a runic inscription. This “inscription” is described for the first time around 1200, and came again in focus in the 17th century, when it was depicted in a large folio of drawings by Erik Dahlberg, “Suecia Antiqua et Hodierna”. It was not until the 1840s that the Runamo inscription was finally determined to be a natural formation.
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9. Ronneby – town of kings

From the west came Skånevägen. From the north came the road from Värend in Småland. But more important than the roads was the stream, which could be navigated by small vessels right up to Snäckebacken. It is believed that the original name of the stream was “rotn”, an old Danish word for “one who roars”, an onomatopoeic name that echoes the many waterfalls and torrents. The town grew slowly next to the most powerful of these, taking power from the waterfall. The millwheels turned here for centuries.

The land survey of King Valdemar in 1231 mentions Rottneby among the crown estates, known in Danish as “Kongeleven”. These were essentially estates under the administration and control of the Danish king.

Several towns were founded in the Baltic Sea area during the 13th century. One key driver of the development was increased trade with the Hanseatic League, based in northern Germany. Ronneby became a town at this time, the first in Blekinge. It was most probably the Danish king who founded the town, confirming in this way the interests of the crown.

Ronneby developed into a major market town, with extensive trade in oxen, horses and “fat goods”. Some were local produce, but most came from Småland. The livestock were slaughtered and ox hides cured. As many as “60 furriers and leather workers” were in the town at the beginning of the 16th century. Other exports included firewood, timber, juniper stakes, potash, tar and pitch, together with dried flounder and pike. There was extensive trade with the complete Baltic Sea region. The status of Ronneby as a centre of trade was undermined when Blekinge became Swedish in 1658. The town charter was withdrawn and the population was encouraged to move to the naval city of Karlskrona, founded in 1680.

Ronneby was hit by a catastrophic fire in 1864. All the buildings below the church were destroyed. The plots of land were subsequently laid in a geometric network on top of the burned land. Only around the church, where the fire did not reach, is the old street pattern preserved.

The epitaphs in the church allow us to meet the ambitious citizens of the 16th and 17th centuries. Sheriff Caspar Petersson Skow was not only mayor of the town, he was also a merchant and entrepreneur.
For more than 800 years the church on the hill has dominated the valley. This was a strategically important place, and Ronneby was a point of administrative support for the Danish realm. Trade routes from Skåne and Småland met at Ronneby, and the stream could be navigated by boats this far. A marketing centre grew on the ridge in front of the church, and this was granted a town charter during the second half of the 13th century.

Building the church
The first church was built here towards the end of the 12th century, to be doubled in size as early as the first half of the 13th. The nave was extended, and the transepts with side chapels were built. These changes reflected new demands on function and liturgy, and were probably inspired by the cathedral in Lund, which was under construction at this time. Building work continued throughout the 14th century, including the construction of brickwork arches over the church. The measures taken can be seen in the light of Ronneby now having been granted a town charter. The imposing western tower was added during the 15th century, and a vestry during the 16th.

The church
The interior of the church reflects its long history. The medieval interior has been preserved in its entirety, and in the dimness of the porch, it is possible to make out the southern entrance to the original church. Late medieval frescos in the northern transept show St. George and the Dragon, and Saint Peter as Pope. Otherwise, the richly ornamented interior is dominated by styles from the Renaissance and the Baroque period. The church was severely damaged during the Nordic Seven-Years’ War, in what has become known as the “Ronneby Bloodbath”, 1564. During the subsequent restoration work, the choir and the southern transept were covered fully with a decor based on vines, a symbol for Christ. Edifying texts and scenes are interspersed among the vines. The choir is dominated by the large altar structure in bombastic Baroque style, although this competes for attention with the many epitaphs set up for leading townspeople. Flamboyant church fittings boast of the Baltic Sea connections of Ronneby and its position as the most important trading centre in Blekinge during the 16th and 17th centuries.
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11. At Österport

The town was bounded on three sides by the stream. On the eastern side, there was a dry moat and earthworks, reinforced with a simple palisade known as “staketet” (or “the fence”). The moat and the fence were primarily a means to mark the limits of the town, and were ineffectual as defensive measures. The coastal rout, Via Regia, entered the town through Österport.

The Ronneby Bloodbath
War between Denmark and Sweden broke out in 1563. Danish troops took the fortress of Älvsborg on the Göta River, and thus cut Sweden off from Kattegat and Skagerrak. Sweden countered by attacking the border territory. The war was fought with great ruthlessness on both sides.

Towards the end of the summer of 1564, a Swedish army of nearly 8,000 men entered Blekinge under the command of the Swedish king, Erik XIV. The troops met with little resistance. Two towns, Askär and Lyckå, were taken and razed, and on 3 September, the army reached the gates of Ronneby. The town contained a small army unit, the citizens, and a large number of refugees from the surrounding countryside; a few thousand people in total. On the morning of 4 September the town was stormed. Men, women and children were slaughtered; no-one was saved.

Only ashes were left of the town buildings except for the church, which remained standing. The aged, women and children had sought shelter in the church – in vain. The indiscriminate killing continued inside the church, described in the victors’ own words: “Terrible murder was carried out in there. Red as blood was the water in the stream also coloured. And the enemy was so decimated that they presented essentially no resistance, we could kill them as easily as killing swine.”

Map of Ronneby in the 17th century.

Tradition says that the axe marks in the old church door are reminders of the storming of the church by Swedish soldiers in 1564.
Edestad and its miraculous spring were Blekinge’s most highly visited goal for pilgrimages during the Catholic period. This tradition continued after the Reformation, even though the Protestant church tried to prevent it. A witness in 1624 states that “much superstition” can be seen in Edestad, and that the spring for this reason should be stopped. In 1665, visits to the spring were prohibited. Further orders were issued by the county governor at the beginning of the 18th century: the spring was to be filled with stone. Under cover of darkness, however, the stones were removed.

The spring was visited on Midsummer’s Eve, a day believed to be charged with unseen powers. A ritual consisting of three parts was to be conducted. One must first wash in the miraculous water, then drink, and finally leave an offering of money in the spring itself, or in the church’s collection box. Visitors came from all over southern Sweden. The cult of the spring grew to become a popular event, which attracted the disapproval from the authorities. As late as the beginning of the 20th century, the spring was visited to seek healing from rickets.
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14. Fläcken a medieval crossroads

The main road through Blekinge, Via Regia, passed just below the final waterfall of the Lyckeby River. The town of Lyckå lay here during the medieval period. This was a strategic location with a well protected harbour at the mouth of the river, and the place became an early meeting place for trade and communication in eastern Blekinge. Even today, the old part of the town is known as “Fläcken”, from the old German word for a market: “fleck”.

Lyckå is mentioned for the first time in two letters from 1449. These mention that knight Claus Nielsen Sparre has purchased land in the town, and constructed a fortress on this land.

The founding of the town was one part of attempts to regulate and control trade around the old central settlements in eastern Blekinge. It was also part of an ambition to strengthen economic ties across the national border. Forestry products and iron from southern Småland could pass through the port at Lyckå. The project, however, was not a success. Lyckå was one of the smallest towns in Skåneland, having only 20 citizens in the middle of the 16th century. It lay in an exposed position close to the border, and the countryside around it suffered war and destruction time after time. Christian IV withdrew the town’s charter in 1600, and the residents were encouraged to move to the newly established fortress town of Kristianopel.

Today, the only visible remains of the medieval town are ruins of the church, but a map from 1779 given an idea of how it was constructed. It was limited to the southeast by the Lyckeby River, and surrounded on the other sides by a moat. To the east lies the ruin of the Church of Maria, while two regions to the south are known as Stora Vallen and Lilla Vallen. This was the location of the fortress constructed by Claus Nielsen Sparre.

Several archaeological investigations were carried out during the 1970s and 1980s, finding the remains of several houses with compacted earth floors and clay walls.

Map of Lyckå old town in 1779.
The construction of a castle at the mouth of the river just south of the town commenced in 1545. The site was surrounded by water on three sides, while a moat was dug to protect the northern side. The development consisted of a high rectangular stone building with two diagonally opposing corner towers. Similar fortresses and castles were built during this period throughout Denmark both by the Crown and by the aristocracy. With their massive walls and flanking towers they satisfied the defensive requirements of the period, in which cannon were playing an ever-increasing role.

The fortress, known as “Lyckå Castle” was built as a residence for the governor of Lyckå county. Its position by the principal road through Blekinge gave it an important role in border protection, and its massive walls would enable it to resist any revolt from the local population. Lyckå Castle was besieged and taken by Swedish troops in 1564. The castle was plundered and razed, but was retaken by the Danish later the same year. When the town charter of Lyckå was withdrawn in 1600 and Kristianopel was granted its charter, the castle at Lyckå was torn down.

The ruin was excavated in 1938-1940, and archaeological investigations carried out.
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16. Kristianopel

The fortress town of Kristianopel was founded in 1599 on the island of Korsaskär on the Blekinge east coast. At the same time, the town charters of Avskär and Lyckå were withdrawn. Kristianopel was the easternmost link in a chain of border fortresses to protect Blekinge from Sweden. The town became also the seat of the governor for the newly created county of Kristianopel.

Its plan and its defences were drawn up by Hans van Stenwinkel, court architect to Christian IV. Renaissance ideals dictated that the town should be regarded as a fortress, in which the geometrically constructed streets made it possible for troops to move rapidly to various sections of wall. The central town area was surrounded by a ring wall of length 2.4 km and height ranging from 4 to 6 metres, into which protruding bastions were set.

Kristianopel was the first example in the Nordic region of a town laid down according to Renaissance principles. It had broad, right-angled streets and large blocks of buildings. The church was originally farthest to the south, and constituted part of the town defences. It was burned and razed in 1611, and a new church built next to the town square.

Kristianopel, however, failed to become a significant town, despite being home to the governor’s residence and several trading companies. Its location on the barren eastern coast of Blekinge meant that there was no real agriculture or other activity in the surrounding countryside.

At the peace of Roskilde in 1658, Blekinge passed to Sweden, and Kristianopel lost its military significance. Destruction of the defensive works started in 1677, and the town was left barren.
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17. Avaskär – the eastern outpost

From Möllehall in the west, the important coastal road Via Regia passed northwards through the flat Blekinge countryside towards the border with Sweden. Avaskär lay on a sand ridge, just after a bridge across the Petri stream. It was mentioned as a town for the first time in 1350, and had probably been founded at the beginning of the century.

Avaskär lay far from the central settlements of eastern Blekinge, and lacked farming activity in its surroundings. It had been positioned just south of the border for strategic reasons, based on its location relative to the border fortress at Brömsehus, which was the administrative and military centre of eastern Blekinge until the middle of the 15th century. The position on the coastal road was an exposed one, and the town was repeatedly taken and plundered by Swedish troops. In 1600, the town charter of Avaskär was withdrawn, while the newly built fortress town of Kristianopel, just to the south, was granted a charter.

Archaeological investigations during the 1970s provided a picture of the medieval town. Buildings lay on both sides of the road, north of the current churchyard. This is on the site of the town church, which has since disappeared. It is natural that fishing was of major significance, and investigations have shown that the location was used for seasonal fishing early in the medieval period. Several permanent fishing centres are described during the 16th century. It was difficult to navigate in the shallow coastal waters, and a safe harbour known as “Gamle hamn” could be found out at Mölleskär.
A new war between Denmark and Sweden broke out in 1645. Swedish troops under the command of Lennart Torstensson attacked Jylland, and a second army penetrated Skåne. The intention was to break the Danish control of Öresund. The Swedish troops met stiff resistance, and it was not until a united Swedish-Dutch fleet won a resounding victory over the Danish fleet that peace could be reached. With the French as intermediaries, a peace treaty was signed at Brömsebro in 1645. Jämtland, Härjedalen, Gotland and Ösel passed to Sweden, as did Halland for a period of 30 years. Swedish ships were freed from paying taxes in Öresund. The treaty signed at Brömsebro ended Danish dominance of the Baltic Sea region. A further peace treaty signed 10 years later at Roskilde confirmed Sweden’s leading role.
Brömsebäck lay on the border between Denmark and Sweden for over 600 years, and remains of the Brömsehus fortress can be seen at the mouth of the river. Brömsehus is mentioned for the first time in 1360, as one of the royal fortresses in Denmark.

The fortress was built for the important coastal road, Via Regia, which led northwards from the border to Kalmar. A further strategic importance of Brömsehus was related to the sea route through the Kalmar Strait.

All of eastern Blekinge could be controlled from Brömsehus. The local peasants could be held under observation from here, and the collection of taxes and fees could be managed.

The remains of the castle consist of a high, square plateau known as a “motte”, surrounded by a moat. A low area of raised ground lay to the west of this, also surrounded by a moat. Most of the fort itself was of wood. High above the surroundings a tower stood on the plateau, surrounded by a palisade. Remains from buildings related to agriculture and other occupations have been found at the lower keep, with simple dwellings.

We have reliable information only about the final phases of the history of Brömsehus. The Swedish peasants under the leadership of farmer/miner Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson rose in revolt against the king of the union, Erik of Pomerania. Several sheriffs’ castles were taken. The revolt even reached as far as Blekinge, and Brömsehus was taken and razed in 1436. The location lost in this way its role as border post, which was taken over by a new facility at what is now Lyckeby, approximately 20 km to the west.