

Denmark Estate Records - Not Just Accounts and Ledgers

Jeff Svare, A.G.®

svarejm@familysearch.org

When most people in the United States of America think of an estate their mind conjures up images of *Downton Abbey*, *Monarch of the Glen*, *To the Manor Born* and maybe Southfork Ranch from *Dallas*. While these images may illustrate some of the estates in Denmark, it's not true for all of them. Though estates are correctly associated with nobility and wealthy landowners, this presentation will focus on the records created by the operation of the property rather than the people who owned them.

The nobility constituted a larger portion of the population in Denmark than in Norway. The geography and socio-economic conditions in Norway were not conducive to the development of large estates, except in very small areas. Prior to 1648 it is estimated there were nearly 1,000 estates in Denmark. By comparison, in Norway there were fewer than 100 in 1639, with about half of them in the area of Oslo fjord.¹ By 1821 the number had dropped to about 25.

Definition

Estates have existed in Denmark and Norway since the 1200s. Historically several terms have been applied to estates, such as *gods*, *hovedgård* and *setegård*. The *setegård* came to be associated with the estate where the nobleman and his family lived, while *hovedgård* indicated the most significant property. In Denmark the term *gods* is used generically to refer to either a *hovedgård* or *setegård*, which is how it will be used in this class.

From their inception estates were associated with families that had obtained noble status. In return for their loyalty and support of the monarch, the nobility enjoyed special privileges such as freedom from taxation, tithes, and military service, as well as income derived from their properties and rent charged to their tenants. In the 1660s laws changed in connection with the establishment of the absolute monarchy.² This limited tax-free status to only the estate where the family had their primary residence.

Property Valuations

In Denmark the valuation of a property is tied to its annual production of grain (barley or rye). This measure is called *hartkorn* (literally, hard corn). The 1688 land survey set the area that a single barrel (*tønder*) of seed could sow as 14,000 square alen (5,500 m² or 1.35 acres) as one *hartkorn*³. Any property that planted over 24 *tønder* was assessed as an estate.

¹ *Norsk historisk leksikon*, 2nd ed., "Setegard." Other estates were found on the west coast near Bergen and in the north near Trondheim.

² The *Enevoldsarveregeringsakten* or *Suverænitetssakten*, of 10 January 1661.

³ This was then divided further into 8 *skæpper* containing 4 *fjerdings land*, which included 3 *album*, separated into 4 *penning*.

Estate type (Denmark)	Size (Tønder)
Gods or herregård	>24 (32 acres)
Proprietærgård	12-23
Helgård	6-11
Halvgård	3-5
Boelsmandssteder	1-3

In 1661 a commission was formed in Norway to register all the properties and implement a more evenly applied valuation. In 1665 the assessments were reviewed, and again in 1723. Unlike Denmark, the property classifications were simpler and were based on a system from the 1300s called *vissøren*. This divided farms into three taxable groups: *fullgård*, *halvgård*, and *kvartgård* (or *fjerdingsgård*) the smallest farms, designated *ødegård*⁴ were exempted at this time. Fullgård was taxed at a rate of 1%, halvgård at ½%, and kvartgård at ¼%.

Ranks of Nobility

In 1671 Christian V introduced *Grevernes og Friherrernes Privilegier* to create more feudal properties and further strengthen the ties between the nobility and himself.⁵ Men owning estates valued at 2,500 tønder hartkorn were created *Grever* and their properties became a *grevskab*. Men owning properties valued between 1,000 and 2,499 tønder were created *Friherre* or *Baroner* and their properties became a *baroni*.

Titles of Nobility (Masculine)

Danish / Norwegian	English
Fyrste	Prince
Hertug	Duke
Markgreve / Markis	Marquess / Marquis
Greve (Lensgrev)	Count (Earl in the UK)
Baron / Friherre	Baron

⁴ This term possibly traces back to the Black Death, when farms were abandoned and left desolate (*øde*). Making them profitable, or even sufficient to sustain a family was a considerable undertaking.

⁵ This is one of three articles enacted simultaneously. The other two, *Gemaksordinansen* and *Rangforordningen* regulated access to the king and created a new hierarchy placing the king's officials above those of noble birth respectively.

The End of the Nobility

In Norway in 1821 the nobility lost their privileges as result of the *Adelsloven (Lov, angaaende Modificationer og nærmere Bestemmelser af den Norske Adels Rettigheder)*. In 1849 the new constitution in Denmark (*Junigrundloven*) transformed the absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy with Frederik VII as head of state, and abolished the privileges of the nobility, essentially leaving them with only their titles.

The Records

Record (Danish)	English	Definition
<i>Fæstebreve</i> and <i>Fæsteprotokoller</i>	Copyhold records	Recorded the terms by which a farmer leased property from an estate.
<i>Tyendeprotokoller</i> and <i>tyendekontrakter</i>	Registers of servants	Recorded the names and employment details of persons employed by an estate.
<i>Hoveriprotokoller</i>	Registers of serfs	Post-1702 record of day labor performed by tenants on the estate. These include the laborer's name and residence.

Despite the nobility losing their privileges estates continued to function. Some had already been purchased by wealthy merchants who were looking to expand their enterprises. Many estates are still in operation today, some as private residences, and others as hotels, restaurants, executive conference centers, or living history museums. The Dansk Center for Herregårdsforskning has several articles online that explore the role of estates in Denmark's history.⁶

Digital Publication

In 1946 the Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU) began microfilming at Rigsarkivet. During the time the GSU was working in Denmark, not all estates had deposited their records with the archive. Therefore, not all of them are represented in the FamilySearch catalog. In December 2012 FamilySearch published the records they had microfilmed with the title *Denmark, Estate Records, 1436-1964*. This Historical Record Collection allows users to access the records by selecting the county where the estate is located, the name of the estate, then the record type and volume. A corresponding article in the FamilySearch Research Wiki, *Denmark Estate Records (FamilySearch Historical Records)*, provides additional information on the collection and links to other helpful resources. Additionally, images can be accessed through the FamilySearch Catalog.

The National Archives of Denmark (*Rigsarkivet*) has also made many of these films available on their site through their database *Daisy*, at https://www.sa.dk/daisy/daisy_forside. The search is available only in Danish, but is very easy to use. Enter the name of the estate in the **Arkivskaber** (archive creator) field

⁶ <http://www.danskeherregaarde.dk/historisk-kontekst.aspx>

and press the button **Søg i Daisy**. You can click the links in the results list for more details and access the records. Documents that have been scanned can be viewed online, and those which have not can be ordered for use at any of the Archives' reading rooms.

Semi-Diplomatic Transcription

In contrast to diplomatic transcription where all the details of a document are reproduced, semi-diplomatic transcription shows how the text appears on the manuscript as close as possible while maintaining readability. There are several very good software applications available to help you create a good semi-diplomatic transcription. But you can use Google Docs and any image viewing software to accomplish essentially the same thing.

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This is easier to do if you populate a few lines of the list with some random text. Highlight the text, click the **Numbered list** icon on the menu bar, then move the **First Line Indent** icon (the little blue rectangle on the ruler at the top of the page) left to the 1 inch mark. This should give you enough space to transcribe a document of 999 lines. To improve readability use a monospaced font like Courier New with a font size of 10 for the transcription.

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