



When the inhabitants of Fanø gained their independence

The Fanø inhabitants' buy-out from the Danish King in 1741

An anniversary book written by Per Hofman Hansen a.o. With drawings by Bernd Hobohm.

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English Summary

There is one historical event that is especially memorable to every Fanø inhabitant, namely the story of how, in 1741, the Fanø inhabitants purchased their freedom from the Danish King. Ever since the Middle Ages, they had, like many other farmers, been copyhold tenants, but by buying the island they became freeholders and owners of both their land and farms. The reason why King Christian VI (1699-1746) chose to sell Fanø and other land under the royal estates stems from the fact that Denmark had been at war more or less continuously with Sweden for almost 80 years. In addition, he wanted to build new hunting lodges and country seats in Copenhagen and North Zealand.

The King therefore decided to sell the land that belonged to Riberhus Ladegård, which included Mandoe and Fanø. The sale was to take place at an auction at the Town Hall in Ribe, on 10 July 1741.

In 1719 the King's father, Frederik IV, also tried to sell Fanø, but as he did not find the offer satisfactory, he chose to cancel the sale. Once bitten, twice shy, the Fanø inhabitants (*fannikerne* and *sønderhoningerne* as the two peoples are locally called), had to put a strategy and a cunning plan together, if they were to have luck on their side.

After their failed attempt to buy the island in 1719, the Fanø inhabitants had saved up as much as possible. Experienced sailors went on dangerous whaling trips in the Arctic Ocean, and all doughty girls worked during harvest time on mainland farms. When the auction was announced, they gather together as much money as they could from chests and drawers, but the total sum was not very large. There was reason for concern! They therefore had to devise a cunning plan.

It was decided that two of the most outstanding men from Nordby and Sønderho, together with selected men and women, should sail from Sønderho to Ribe a few days before the

auction was due to take place.

After they had arrived safely, they learned that their worst fears had come true. Both a wealthy landowner and some rich Jewish merchants from Altona had showed up. All of them likely buyers, the Fanoe inhabitants thought.

Fortunately, the delegation from Fanoe also included some lively women who happened to be staying at the same inn as the Jewish merchants. To prevent the merchants from getting to the auction on time, the story goes that the women used their cunning. In one story it is reported that the doors to the merchants' rooms were blocked with chairs and tables. In another, that with their deceptive flirting, the women had drunk the merchants under the table the previous evening, resulting in them oversleeping the following morning.

But how could the squire be kept out of the game? According to the most persistent anecdote, the auctioneer had a little nap. He had however beforehand asked the Town Hall attendant to wake him when the auction was to take place. But Sonnich Jensen from Sønderho bribed the attendant and asked him to move the Town Hall clock's hour hand ahead by one hour. The attendant did as he was instructed, and as a result the auction began an hour early. As no one else was present to bid, the Fanoe inhabitants were able to place the winning bid, and their cunning plan had hence been successful. The auction was therefore happily over, when the squire from Trøjborg - and with him also the rich merchants from Altona - appeared.

Of course these are good stories, which over the years have grown in the telling. Had the Fanoe inhabitants' plan succeeded, the interested buyers for the other plots of land to be sold after Fanoe would have protested vehemently. Yes, needless to say, even the auctioneer would not have continued with the auction, if not a single bidder had appeared. However, from the protocol we know that successful bids were placed on all 21 auction lots.

We must therefore disappoint those who love a good story with the fact that it remains an old wives' tale! However, we must of course continue to pass this tale on, given that it has become a regular part of Fanoe cultural history.

After the auction, the auctioneer submitted the signed minutes to Copenhagen, where the Exchequer recommended that Christian VI approve the sale. Approval was granted with his signature on 26 July 1741.

When the inhabitants of Sønderho heard of the King's approval of the sale, they were quick to pay the winning bid of 1,698 rix-dollars to the King. The Exchequer was then able to draw up the final deed and seal it with the King's red wax seal and signature.

Despite saving hard, the Fanoe inhabitants in the northern part of the island were only able to pay one third of the total price. They therefore had to sign a certificate of debt, but to their credit, it is interesting to note that this was paid off just one year later.

At long last the Fanoe inhabitants from Nordby and Sønderho were able to gain their independence. Over centuries they had been enslaved bondsmen and women, but now they had become free independent farmers. In addition to the purchase of the island, the important right to use the beach was also included. This meant that Fanoe inhabitants now had the right to take possession of the wreckage, including shipwrecks, that washed up on the beach, in cases where nobody accompanied the wreckage and no owners came forward.

After the buy-out of Fanoe, the island had to be divided into two parishes. The King had previously owned all the plots of land on the island, and although there had been two parishes on Fanoe since the Reformation in 1536, there had been no actual boundary mark. The big question was, of course, whether or not the two parties could agree on the partition. There are as many colourful old wives' tales about the auction process as there are about the partition.

The tradition says that they were to meet in the middle of the island, and that those from Sønderho had to bring brandy and those from Nordby beer for everyone to drink. The Mayor of Sønderho had been given orders from home to obtain as much beach and meadowland as possible. To achieve his goal he drank the inhabitants from Nordby under the table, while they themselves only drank water.

After enjoying a fair amount of schnapps, the delegation moved westward and drove in the posts to mark the boundary. The two Mayors lead the way, and for every step they walked, the mayor from Nordby got a little push in the side, so the direction gradually became more north-westerly than westerly, with the result that they eventually ended up well north of the high dune, which naturally today is named "Pælebjerg" (Post Hill), after the partitioning posts that were driven into the ground alongside the dune. The day after, they did the same, this time moving eastward, and the Mayor was yet again pushed a little, making the direction north-easterly. Thus the inhabitants of Sønderho succeeded in getting a significantly greater share of both the beach to the west and the meadowland to the east! When they partitioned the beach at the North Sea, they drove in a post and placed a number of stones to mark the boundary.

Although the buy-out had increased the Fanoe inhabitants' self-esteem and given them a certain degree of autonomy and clarity about the ownership of land, it is not likely to have been of great importance to the island's shipping and sailing activities.

Due to Denmark's policy of neutrality and a worldwide boom, trading houses and ship owners throughout the 1700s enjoyed good conditions for international shipping and trade.

This of course also rubbed off on Fanoe. Over the course of the century, bigger and bigger ships were built, which enabled people to sail to and trade with more distant destinations. Many of the ships were built on Fanoe, and it was also during this period that many of the characteristic skipper houses with Dutch tiles on the walls were built, which are still preserved today. However the *silver age*, as this period of Fanoe history was called, ended

abruptly with the Napoleonic Wars and the English War of 1807-14, in which a large part of the Fanoe fleet was captured, and seamen were held in captivity by the British, in the so-called "prisonen" (prison camps). But that - and what further happened on Fanoe - is a completely different story.

English translation: Lone Beheshty