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The Farmhouses of Hälsingland were nominated to be inscribed on UNESCO's world heritage list in January 2011. This brochure is based on the nomination document.  
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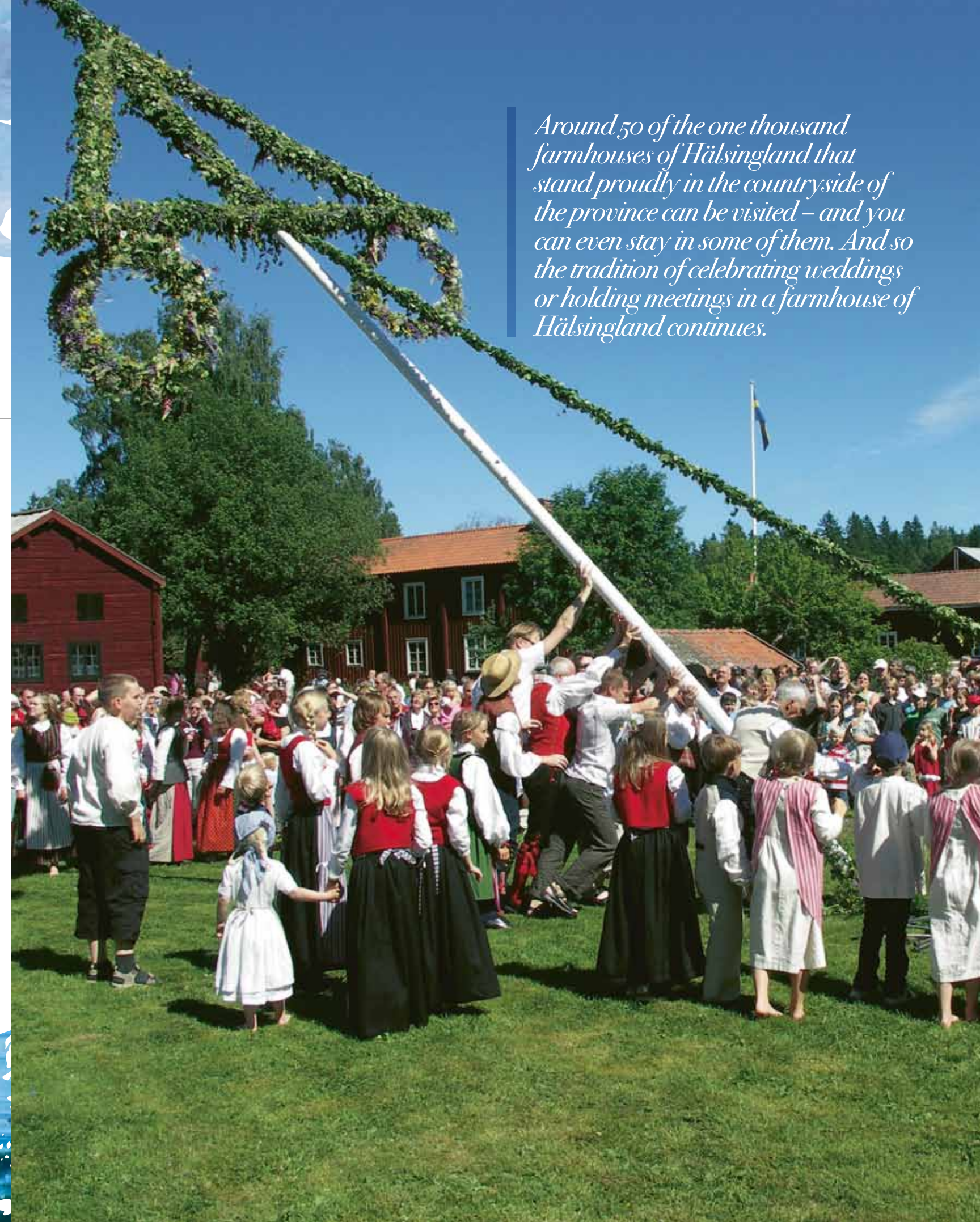
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*Around 50 of the one thousand  
farmhouses of Hälsingland that  
stand proudly in the countryside of  
the province can be visited – and you  
can even stay in some of them. And so  
the tradition of celebrating weddings  
or holding meetings in a farmhouse of  
Hälsingland continues.*





HÄLSINGLAND is one of 25 provinces in Sweden

HÄLSINGLAND

HUDIKSVALL

SÖDERHAMN

GÄVLE

ARLANDA

STOCKHOLM

350 KM

# HÄLSINGLAND

**COULD THE HÄLSINGLAND** farmers have ever imagined what an amazing cultural gem they created there in the heart of Sweden when they built and decorated their beautiful farmhouses and rooms for festivities, so long ago...?

Down through the centuries social and cultural expectations, a long period of peace and a farming class free from the aristocracy have enabled today's Hälsingland – one of Sweden's 25 provinces – to take pride in its globally unique cultural heritage: the farmhouses of Hälsingland. Here in the 1800s, entire houses were built exclusively for festivities.





*Not even high-spirited harvest festivals or Christmas parties qualified to be celebrated in the rooms for festivities. But it was another matter when the time came for truly significant family occasions, such as weddings.*

# FESTIVITIES

**ROOMS, STOREYS AND** sometimes entire farmhouses were furnished, painted and decorated, to be opened on only a few occasions in a generation. Not even the jolly harvest festivals and atmospheric Christmas parties were prestigious enough to be held there. Only truly significant family events with many invited guests were permitted inside those doors.





**LEFT** *The bridal couple with the bridal train. To the left are the party's fiddlers, and a man who serves the obligatory refreshments, wine or schnapps. Food and drink were central throughout the days of celebrations. To avoid eating the host and hostess completely out of house and home, guests were expected to bring gifts of food and drink to the farm.*

**WEDDINGS WERE THE BIGGEST EVENTS**  
Weddings were by far the biggest celebrations of all. They were a way to display status and position emphatically, and secure them for the future. No expense was spared. Workers were hired to bake, decorate, clean and polish in the months leading up to the wedding. The celebrations themselves lasted for several days. Hundreds of guests were welcomed to the wedding farmhouse, amid constant pomp and splendour. Arriving guests were accompanied by fiddlers playing cheerful tunes, and the farmhouse had to look impressive as soon as it came into view. Using carpentry and decoration to make porches spectacularly beautiful, imaginative and lavish became a folk art all of its own in Hälsingland. Each had its own individual detailing, found only in a particular parish. A porch from Järvsö, for example, cannot be confused with one from Alfta.

**THE WEDDING DAY AND GREAT FEAST WERE THE HIGH POINT**  
Besides the farmhouse, the bride took pride of place on the wedding day itself, of course. She was adorned in a black dress, delicate pearls, silk shawls, paper flowers and lustrous silver. The effect was completed

with a gilded crown. After the marriage ceremony itself came the biggest event of the day: the great feast. Quantities of food were served every day throughout the celebrations, but this was when the choicest delicacies were presented. Served on beautiful pewter dishes, they included cheesecakes, lye-cured stockfish, grain porridge, meats, berry compotes, cake and prune soup. And that was not all. A letter from a farm in Järvsö, probably written around 1880, describes a feast, and concludes with: "I have not mentioned that there were exceeding quantities of drink".

**EVERYONE JOINED THE CELEBRATIONS**  
The handsome bridal couple were naturally at the centre of attention during the meal. The room's very finest wall paintings indicated where they sat. The priest was placed next to the couple, while the other guests were positioned in order of precedence, spilling out into adjacent rooms. Sometimes several sittings were needed. Later in the evening, those without a formal invitation were permitted to join the party. First to arrive were the village farmers' unmarried daughters. A little later came the "knutarna", masked men who fooled around and jokingly demanded to see the bride. Social status was now no longer a major concern, and everyone could come in and celebrate.



**WEDDINGS WERE CELEBRATORY** *gatherings with many invited guests. The bridal couple are in the middle, with the bride in her finery as the focus of the celebration. Standing above her is the fiddler, whose job it was to lead the music. This too was an essential element of the celebrations. The picture captures a period of transition between old traditions and a new era. The women at the bottom left are wearing their old-fashioned holiday aprons, which were part of the farmers' traditional parish costume. However, above them are women who have adopted the new era's ideals of middle-class dress, though they still wear their brooches from the old days.*







# YOUNG PEOPLE IN “LONG BEDS”

## SLEEPING PLACES

Even the sleeping places were organised with great care. The bridal couple spent their first night as husband and wife in a special, beautifully decorated chamber in the festivities building itself. High-ranking guests slept in the grandest guest rooms, while those of lower status had to sleep in nearby buildings or with neighbours. The young people spent the night in long rows on the floor. They

lay two by two on calfskin-covered straw mattresses in rooms that were otherwise used for storing clothes – usually in the attic. Anna from Delsbo, writing in 1896, describes the goings-on in the “long beds”:

“It goes without saying that it is not exactly peaceful and quiet in the ‘bed’. The lads elbow each other aside in their efforts to reach the ‘right’ girl.”



#### PARTIES AND DANCES FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE

There were a few other occasions when the rooms for festivities could be used, but only if outsiders were to attend, such as the annual parish catechetical meeting. And sometimes, even if it was only rarely, the farmers generously made the rooms available to young people. There was dancing and partying all through the night – even in those days!

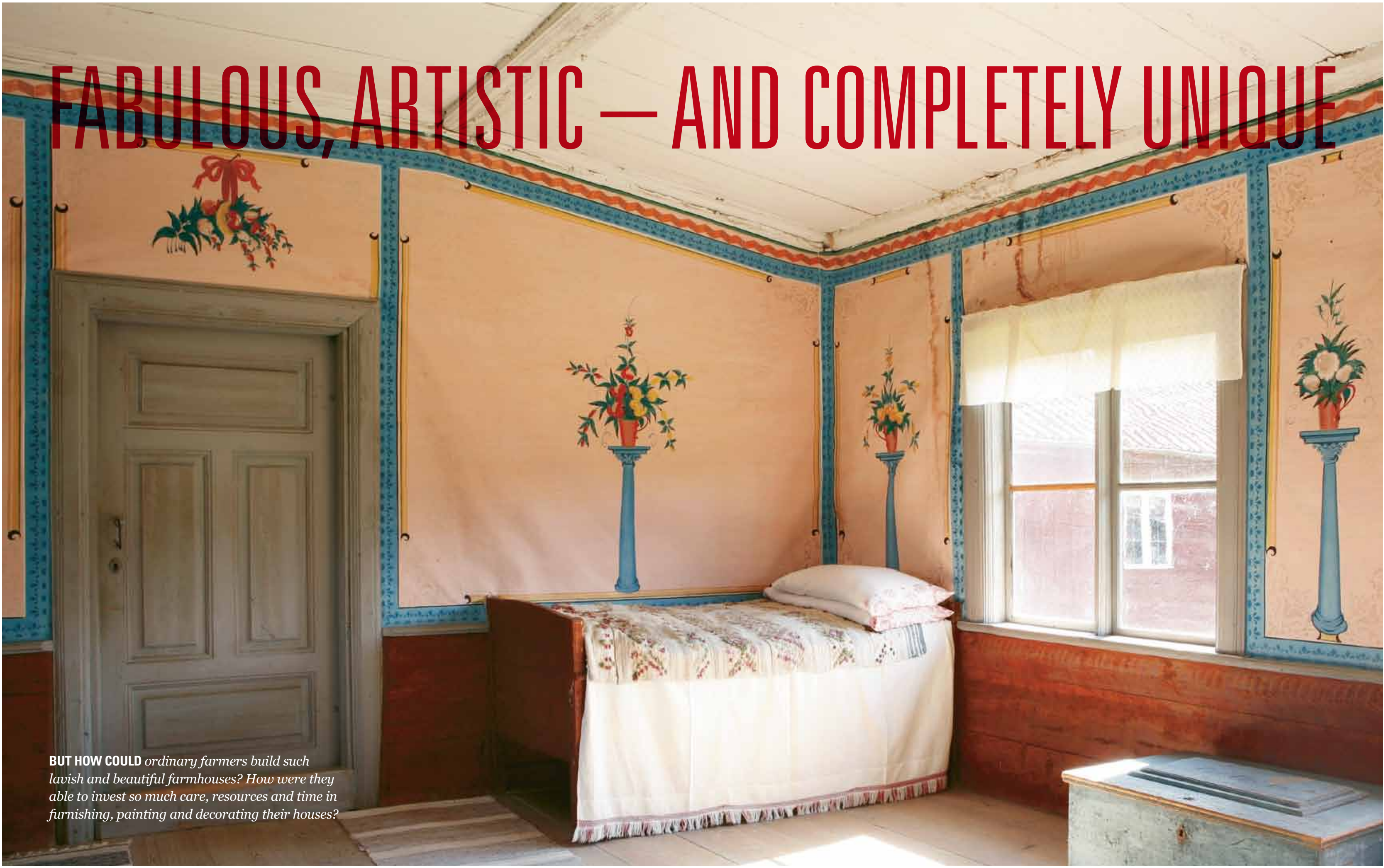
# ROOMS FOR FESTIVITIES





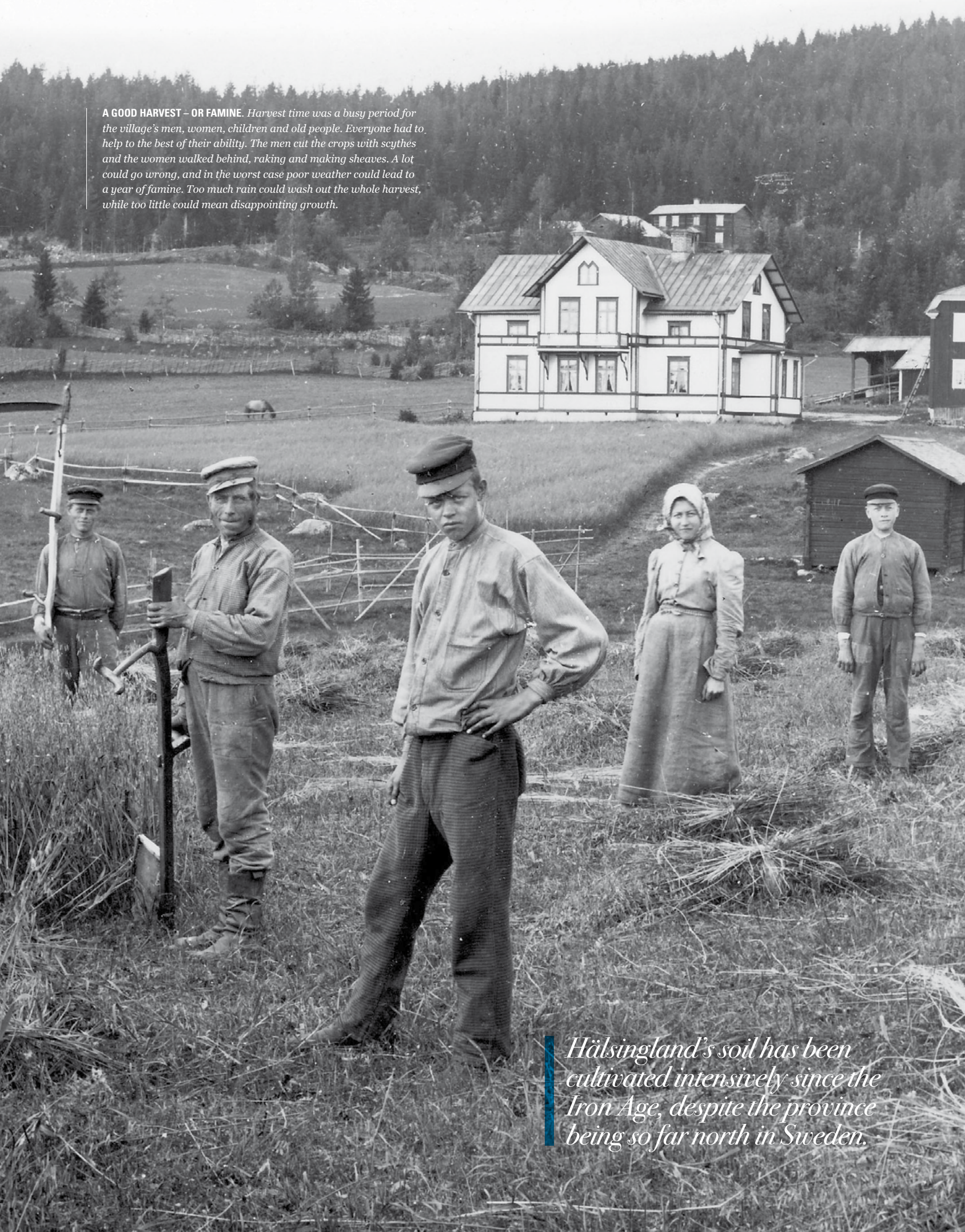
# FABULOUS, ARTISTIC — AND COMPLETELY UNIQUE

**BUT HOW COULD** ordinary farmers build such lavish and beautiful farmhouses? How were they able to invest so much care, resources and time in furnishing, painting and decorating their houses?





**A GOOD HARVEST – OR FAMINE.** Harvest time was a busy period for the village's men, women, children and old people. Everyone had to help to the best of their ability. The men cut the crops with scythes and the women walked behind, raking and making sheaves. A lot could go wrong, and in the worst case poor weather could lead to a year of famine. Too much rain could wash out the whole harvest, while too little could mean disappointing growth.



*Hälsingland's soil has been cultivated intensively since the Iron Age, despite the province being so far north in Sweden.*

### AGRICULTURE WITH A LONG HISTORY AND MANY OPPORTUNITIES

Hälsingland is a landscape of great variety, with majestic forests, rushing rivers, mountains, valleys and farmland. Hälsingland's soil has been cultivated intensively since the Iron Age, initially where the soil was most fertile, in the river valleys and by lakes. Despite the province being so far north in Sweden, it is still a good place to grow cereals thanks to the warmth from the Gulf Stream, even though this cannot entirely overcome the cold climate and long winters. However, the creative and innovative farmers did not simply stick with the cereals that the soil offered. It was also possible for them to augment their incomes, mainly in three other areas: cattle farming, selling tracts of forest and the manufacture of linen cloth.

### CATTLE FARMING GAVE FOOD, MATERIALS AND ABUNDANT HARVESTS

The extensive cattle farming contributed not only food and materials but also to abundant harvests, because the many animals meant richly manured fields. All the available land at home went towards growing cereal and hay for the winter. The animals were sent to graze in the summer pastures, far away in the forest. They were accompanied by summer pasture girls who guarded against predators and took care of the milk, making it into butter and cheese. It was hard work, but it also offered freedom and a lot of responsibility. Each farm had its own summer pasture complete with small agricultural buildings. There were often several of these in the same place, creating their own little villages in the forest.

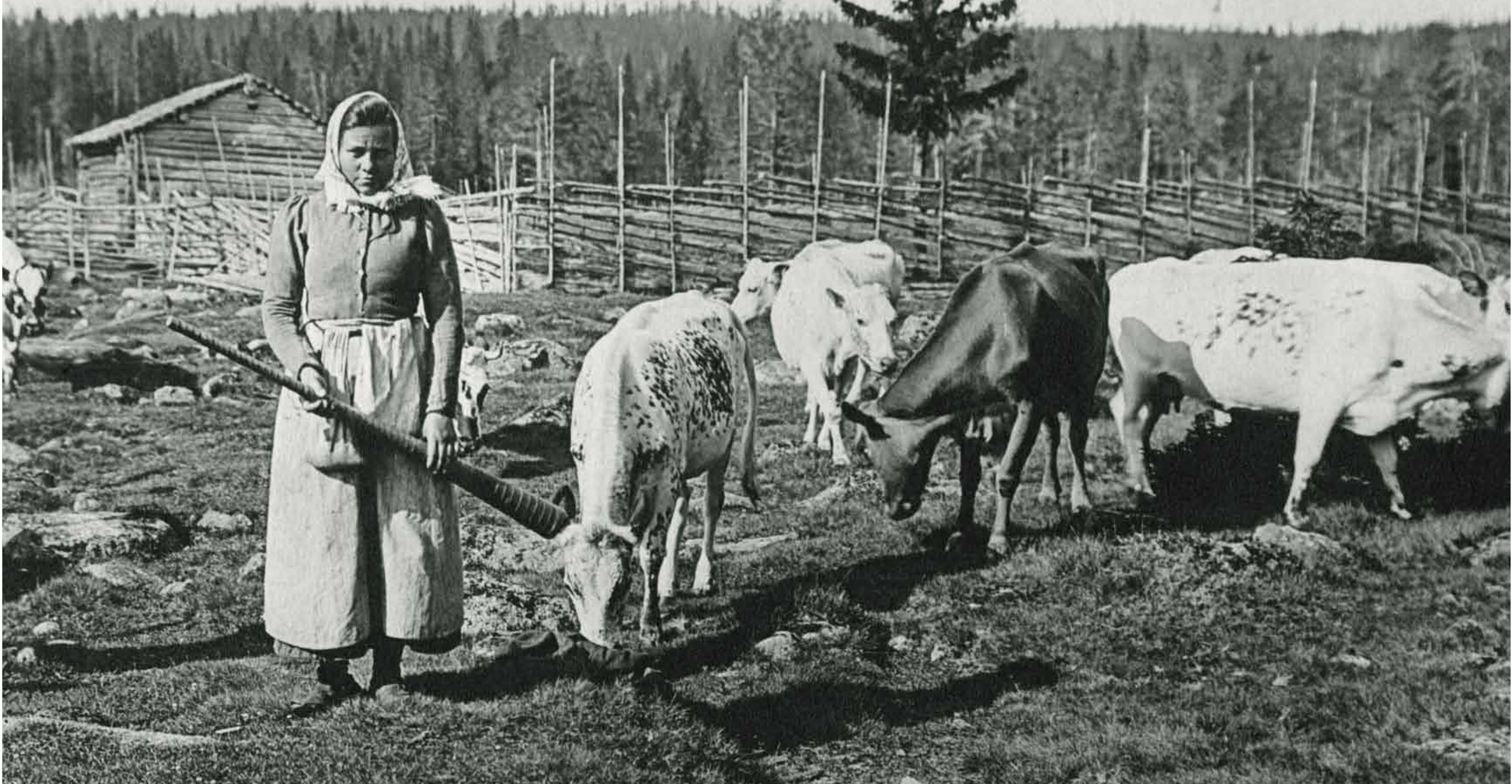
## AGRICULTURE WITH A LONG HISTORY





# CREATIVE AND INNOVATIVE FARMERS

**A SUMMER PASTURE GIRL ("FÄBODJÄNTA") WITH HER COWS.** *The summer pastures in the forest were an important aspect of agriculture when all the land had to be under cultivation. During summer grazing, a summer pasture girl, perhaps a daughter of the farm or a maid, was there to guard, care for and milk the cows. The girls used birch-bark horns to communicate with each other and to call the animals.*





### FLAX GENERATED AN INCOME

The tradition of cultivating flax actually goes as far back as the 200s. However, it was between the 1600s and 1800s that flax thread earned really big incomes. Many women had to work very hard to pull, ripple, hackle and spin the flax. They wove everything from fine linen to coarse cloth to be sold to the rest of the country. Worn out, they may have given the farmers extra encouragement to try to find better and more efficient ways of doing the work. Success eventually came when streams were harnessed in scutching and fulling mills, and water power took over more and more of the work.

### THE FOREST GAVE TIMBER FOR CONSTRUCTION AND TO SELL

The forest would prove to be the most profitable. Throughout history it has offered grass and leaves for fodder, wood for heating, bog ore for iron and birch-bark for roofs. But above all it was the sale of tracts of forest and felling rights that became a vital source of income in the mid 1800s, when cotton began to outcompete flax. Although the biggest winners were the sawmill owners who bought the forest from the farmers, it still contributed to the prosperity of the farmers of Hälsingland in several ways. The forest gave the farmers some hard cash and ample top-quality timber, enabling them to build their large and beautiful farmhouses.

### INDEPENDENCE AND PEACE PRESERVED THE HERITAGE

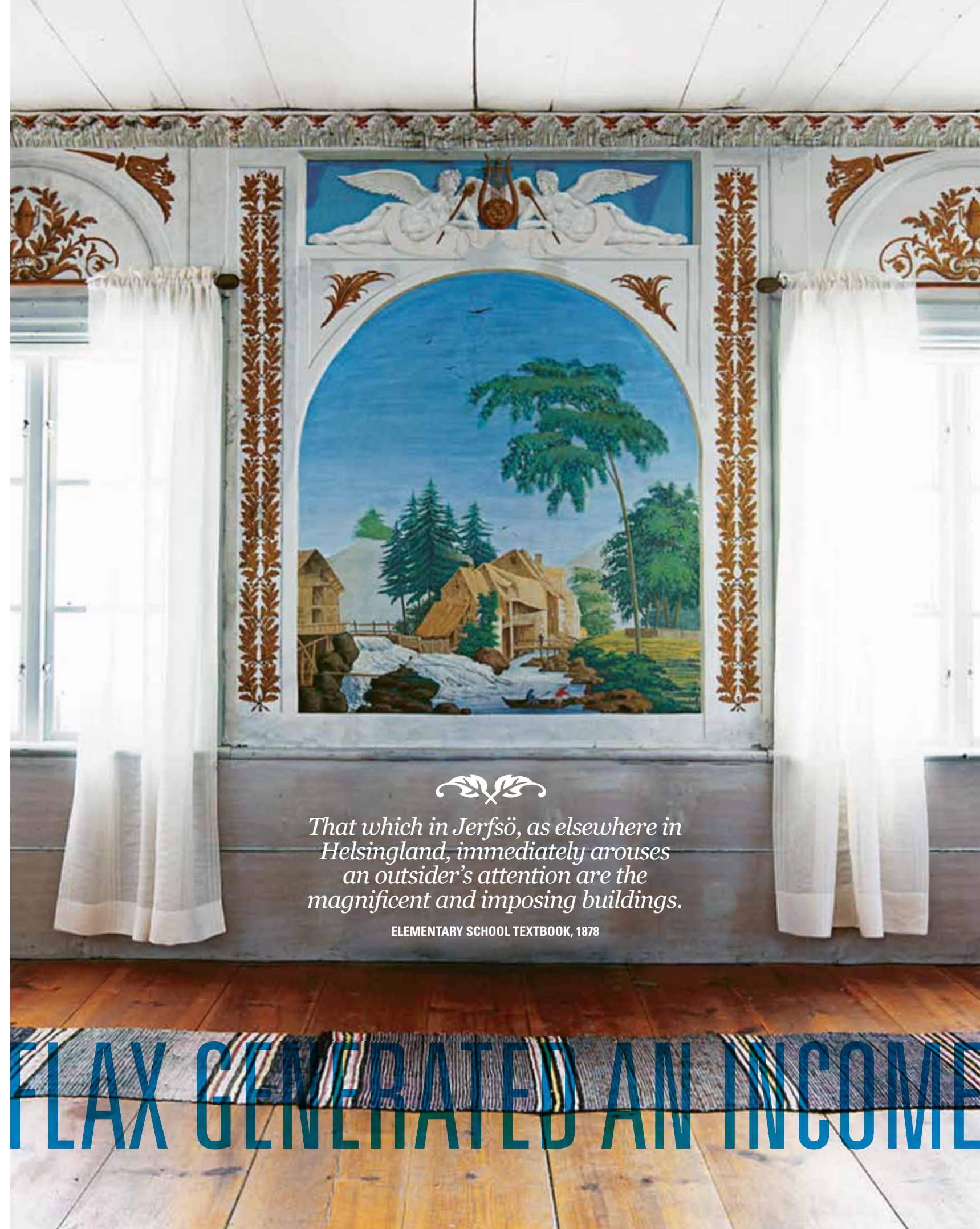
Much of the prosperity of the farmers of Hälsingland results from their retaining control of their villages, farms and agriculture. They were not subject to the appropriation of the countryside and holdings by the aristocracy. This, combined with a well-developed flair for business and a strong demand for goods, led them to undertake trading trips by horse and sleigh. What they saw in other villages, trading centres and towns throughout Sweden and Norway gave them inspiration and ideas for the styles of buildings. Furthermore, the area has been spared from war on its own soil since the early 1700s when the Great Northern War ended. This has helped preserve the farmhouses in all their magnificence right down to the present.



**TOP** The timber was transported by horse and sleigh. In the spring, logs were floated to the sawmills down streams and rivers. The workers spent the long cold winter months in the forest in simple woodmen's cabins. Felling trees using handsaws and axes was heavy work. The power saw did not become common until the 1950s.

**CENTRE** Scutching removes the woody outer husk of the flax. The fast-moving scutching knives made it dangerous work, because fingers could be lost. Once harvested, the flax had to undergo several stages of processing before it could be spun into finished thread. The women of the farm and hired workers did most of the work.

**BOTTOM** Many long trading journeys. Winter was the best time to transport the farm's cloth, meat, handicrafts, dairy products and hides. The road network was poorly developed and inadequately maintained in those days.



*That which in Jerfsö, as elsewhere in  
Helsingland, immediately arouses  
an outsider's attention are the  
magnificent and imposing buildings.*

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEXTBOOK, 1878

FLAX GENERATED AN INCOME



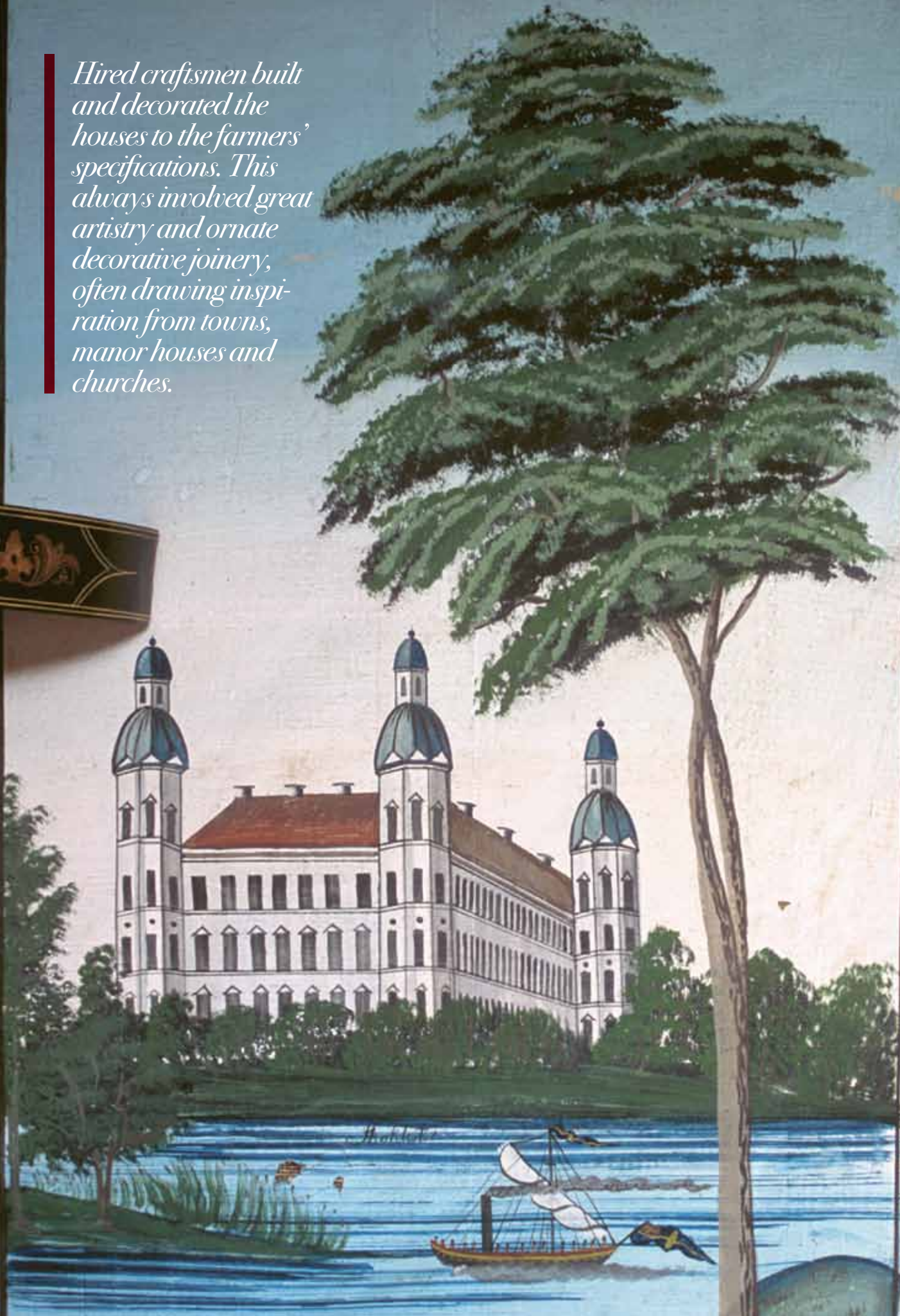
*THE FARMHOUSES OF Hälsingland can be of very different styles. In Voxnadalen, for example, wide multi-storey houses with mansard roofs were common, while houses elsewhere were narrower, with gable roofs. However, one common factor throughout the province is that the farms have several dwelling houses, although normally the household still squashed into just a couple of rooms. In most cases, the various dwelling houses had different functions, such as for festivities, sleeping or summer residences, or to accommodate several generations of the same family.*

# PASSED FROM FATHER TO SON

**THE FARMS WERE** passed down from father to son for generations, and today many still remain in the same families. Inheritance related not only to farm and land, but also to moral obligations and rights. Ideally, the immediate family and relations should be able to continue living on a viable farm. If this was not possible, the farmers split off smaller pieces of land to enable siblings to stay in the village by earning a living from trades such as painting, the flax industry, carpentry and joinery. In this way, they became an important workforce in the village.



*Hired craftsmen built and decorated the houses to the farmers' specifications. This always involved great artistry and ornate decorative joinery, often drawing inspiration from towns, manor houses and churches.*







*The people are decent, their houses pleasing,  
and clean and in good order inside, and  
better built than elsewhere!*

CARL LINNAEUS, 1732

# WELCOMING HOMES



## MADE HOMES WELCOMING AS FAR BACK AS THE MIDDLE AGES

From early times, the farmers applied great willingness, skill and resources to making their homes and farmhouses beautiful and welcoming. Some wall paintings have been preserved since as long ago as the 1500s. The early use of chimneys in houses protected the paintings and decorations from smoke and fumes.

In the 1600s, the medieval single-room cottages were often extended, with one room for day-to-day living and another reserved for festivities. Building really began to take off in the mid 1700s, and this continued into the 1800s. By then it was not at all unusual to have two or three dwelling houses, with several storeys, on the same farm, but with just a couple of rooms in day-to-day use. The others were reserved for really large formal events and festivities.



**ABOVE** The porches are a distinctive feature of Hälsingland. The beautiful porches, carved doors and elegant door surrounds were where fiddlers welcomed wedding guests. It was important that the ornate entrance displayed the family's status and the quality of the farmhouse. These porches are from Alfta (left) and Järsvö (right).



**MOTIFS ACROSS THREE CENTURIES.** The altarpiece in Ovanåker church (c. 1680) depicts vines winding round pillars (pictured left). This inspired the Hälsingland painter Jonas Hertman, who was working at the end of the 1700s in a folk art-influenced, late baroque/rococo style using clear, light colours. The vines recur in his paintings in *Märtesgården* in Ovanåker (pictured centre). We still see the popular vines in the farmhouse wall paintings of the mid 1800s (pictured right), but by then they are the work of artists from the province of Dalarna commissioned by the Hälsingland farmers.

STATUS AND SOCIAL COHESION WERE IMPORTANT  
When the farmers decorated their farmhouses, they also created a folk art all of their own. They drew a lot of inspiration from the upper classes on their many trading trips and, just like them, wanted their homes to project a unified elegance, even if they did not have access to the same exclusive materials for its execution. Imagination and paintbrushes therefore took over where the resources ran out. Instead of buying expensive stone or exquisite woods, they simply achieved the effect with paint. This was not merely to outdo each other in elegance, but also to create social cohesion and indicate their status to outsiders. It is one of the reasons why many techniques and motifs are often seen repeatedly in the same parish.

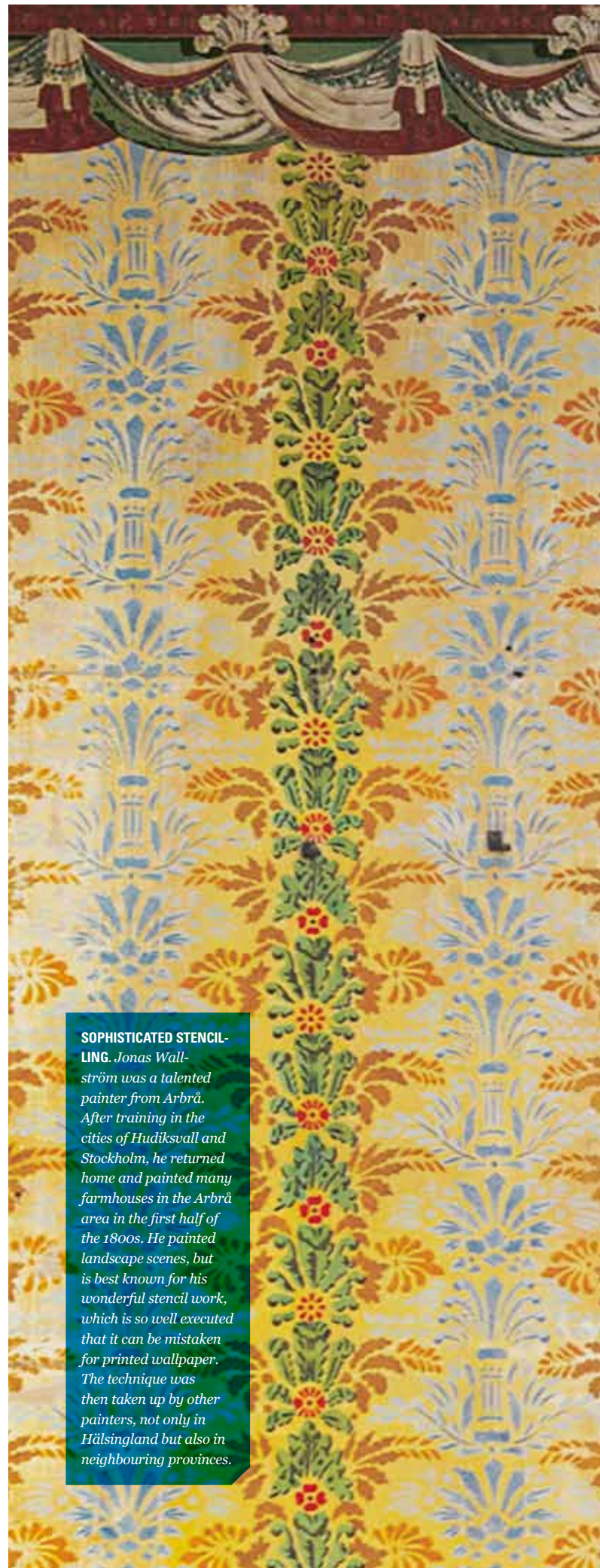
STONE, WOOD, WALLPAPER – ANY EFFECT COULD BE CREATED WITH A BRUSH  
The painting technique indicated the room's use, just like the materials of the families from the higher classes. In the hallway, porphyry might be represented using spattered paintwork, but a more common effect was that of very expensive Italian marble. There could also be some simple stencil work. Oak and mahogany effects led the guests towards the rooms for festivities. There they encountered the more elegant and unique Hälsingland stencilling, with its rich colour variation and shading making it look like French silk wallpaper. And finally, to really emphasise the room's formal character, large landscapes, townscapes and beautiful floral decorations were often painted directly on the walls. The whole idea was to show visitors that they had now arrived at the heart of the farmhouse and the focus of the event.

**ÄDEL'S FLORAL URN.** At the beginning of the 1800s, a distinctive Hälsingland painting tradition with strong Gustavian influences emerged in the upper Ljusnan valley. The soldier Anders Ädel is the movement's foremost name, but a number of talented painters preceded and followed him.

# MOTIFS ACROSS THREE CENTURIES



**SOPHISTICATED STENCIL-LING.** Jonas Wallström was a talented painter from Arbrå. After training in the cities of Hudiksvall and Stockholm, he returned home and painted many farmhouses in the Arbrå area in the first half of the 1800s. He painted landscape scenes, but is best known for his wonderful stencil work, which is so well executed that it can be mistaken for printed wallpaper. The technique was then taken up by other painters, not only in Hälsingland but also in neighbouring provinces.



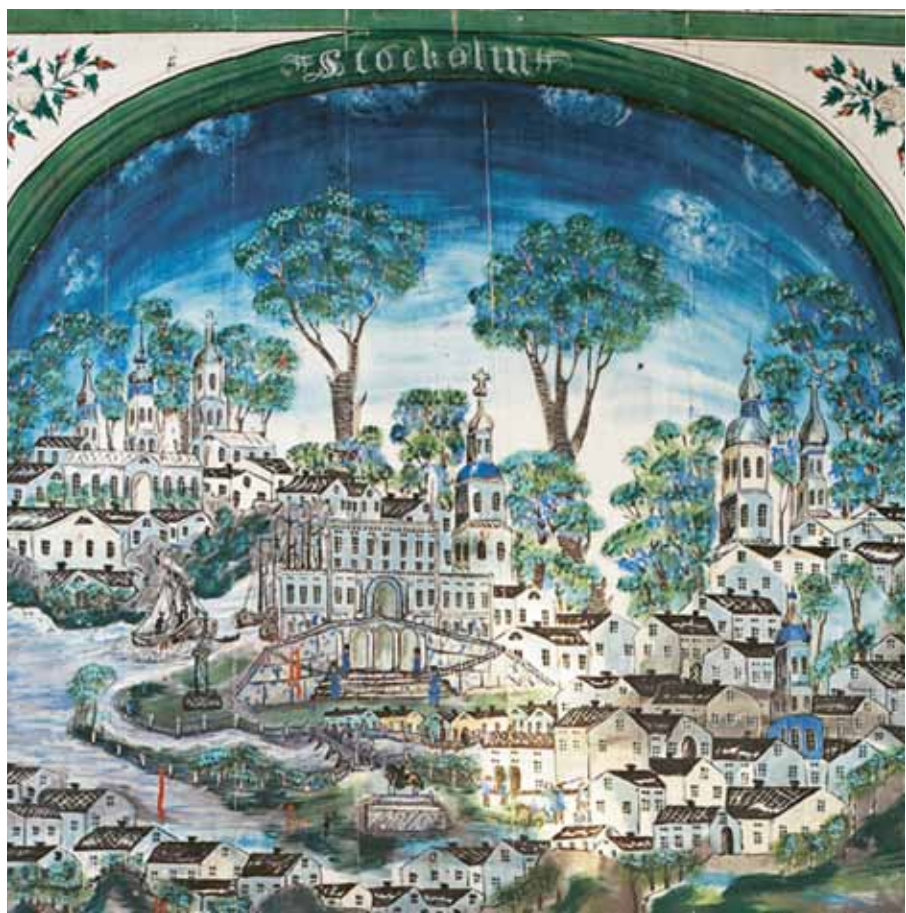




ANY EFFECT COULD BE CREATED WITH A BRUSH

**ABOVE.** When there were not enough Hälsingland painters, during the building boom of the 1800s, painters from Dalarna were hired. They usually had a more biblical painting tradition, but had to adapt to the Hälsingland farmers' wishes for landscape scenes, simulated materials effects and floral paintings, ideally in shades of blue. The picture shows a beautiful room decorated in marble-effect paintwork by one of the traditional folk art painters from Rättvik.

**RIGHT.** Landscape scenes in shades of blue are found in many farmhouses in Voxnadal. The landscapes do not depict Hälsingland, however. This one is titled: "Stockholm".



**THE WALL PAINTING** is in a farmhouse in southern Hälsingland, but alleys like these are not found there. The inspiration comes from far away.



# THE FARMHOUSES OF HÄLSINGLAND TODAY

## A THOUSAND UNIQUE FARMHOUSES

There are approximately one thousand farmhouses of Hälsingland, spread across 36 parishes from the interior to the coast. Having so many authentic farmhouses with well-preserved folk art together in such a small area is unique, not only to Sweden but also globally. Most of the farmhouses that remain today were built in the 1800s. That was when the grandiose building style, with its richly decorated interiors, reached its peak in Hälsingland. Brochures and information about booking and visits are available from the tourist offices in Hälsingland.

Read more at [www.halsingegardar.se](http://www.halsingegardar.se)

*We extend a warm welcome.*



**FEWER AND FEWER** people earn their living from farming. Even today, most of the farmhouses of Hälsingland are private homes, and the beautiful buildings and rooms are still sometimes used for special events. People living in the farmhouses often have ordinary jobs or their own businesses in sectors other than farming such as carpentry. Most farmhouse owners still have tracts of forest, but dairy cows have become increasingly rare. These days, sheep and beef cattle graze the land instead.



*Around 50 of the one thousand farmhouses of Hälsingland that stand proudly in the countryside of the province can be visited – and you can even stay in some of them. And so the tradition of celebrating weddings or holding meetings in a farmhouse of Hälsingland continues.*