

THE LESSEBO HISTORY TRAIL

The Lessebo History Trail runs through the area around Lake Län. Nowadays this area is largely covered with pine and spruce woodland, but there are also deciduous woods, farmland and fallow arable fields and pasture. You will follow a marked path with signboards that tell the story of what happened here in the past.



Welcome to the History Trail in Lessebo

Sign 1

The power station

The trail is around 7 km long and takes about two hours to complete. It is marked with white rings on trees and posts. You can, of course, walk only part of the trail and still get a good feel for what it is like. It makes its way through fields and woodlands, and shows how people made use of a landscape which was originally covered with forests, but has changed gradually over the centuries. The trail runs through areas where people first settled during the early Stone Age. The activity in this area increased significantly during the Iron Age. Large areas of land were cultivated and cleared of stones, which were piled in large mounds. You will come across hundreds of these mounds on your walk. Iron ore was extracted from the bed of Lake Läen and used to make new and more effective tools. You will also find traces of the time when there was an ironworks in Lessebo which took the raw materials for producing iron from the surrounding forests. The remains of the crofts set up by the ironworks, with their pastures and arable fields surrounded by forests, will add further interest to your walk. You will find 25 signboards along the path with descriptions and maps that will give you important information.



Sign 2

Did you know that these stony areas are called "stentorg"?

During the second half of the 19th century the fields were cleared of stones and stone mounds. The stones were used to build long walls, taken out onto the frozen lakes where they sank to the bottom of the lake when spring came or tipped off in areas which could not be cultivated.

This is what happened here. The stones have been dumped in a marshy area and now form what is called in Swedish a "stentorg". This was a common practice around large farms.

Sign 4

The Stockholmshagen

On the path up to this sign you will have passed a large number of stone mounds. On the right you could see the remains of the stone wall which once marked the boundary between the infields and the outfields. The individual infields were owned by each farm, but the outfields were common land which belonged to all the farms in the village. On the infields the farmers grew corn, root vegetables and hay for feeding their animals in winter. This formed the basis of a farm's prosperity. The harvest from the infields was what determined whether the family had plenty to eat or whether people went hungry when the harvest failed. In this pre-industrial society there was usually a bad harvest every fourth year and a famine every tenth year.

Before the redistribution of land, the way in which the farms used the common land or outfields was governed by the village or parish council and in general the system worked well.

The animals from the village grazed on the outfields. This was where the villagers collected wood to build houses or fences or to burn on the fire to heat their homes. They burned charcoal in charcoal kilns to heat the small furnaces and smithies. Turnips and rye were grown on the slash-and-burn land in the outfields.



Sign 5

The outlying land around Lessebo forms part of a long production chain

The forests and outfields grew in importance during the 17th century. The charcoal and ore produced by the farmers from Småland was the first link in a trading chain which began with charcoal kilns and lake ore and continued via the ironworks and the ports to the continent of Europe.

When the ironworks in Lessebo was founded in 1658, the outlying land was exploited in a new way. The furnaces and hammers needed charcoal to transform the ore extracted from the lakes and bogs into iron which could be forged to make tools. The farmers began to produce charcoal in large kilns. The charcoal was loaded into large wicker baskets mounted on sledges pulled by oxen. The sledges were driven through the forest on snow-covered tracks to the furnaces and hammers of the ironworks. The ore was generally extracted in the winter through holes in the ice.

The farmers who provided the raw materials were paid partly in forged iron, castings and tools. In many cases the farmers sold these goods on. It was also quite common for the farmers to be paid with food.

Sign 6

The first stone mounds

To the right of the path you can see a few low stone mounds. One is right in the middle of the path. If you go into the forest, you will find around another 50 mounds. They probably date back to the Iron Age and form part of a system of mounds which runs from Emborås in the east to the croft of Linneberg in the west. (See the map). There is a total of 700 or 800 mounds which indicates that the land was extensively cultivated over a long period. You will find out more about the mounds when you come to sign 7.

Sign 7

Charcoal kiln bases and charcoal burners' huts

The forests around Lessebo are full of charcoal kiln bases and charcoal burners' huts. Directly behind you is the base of a kiln which looks like a circular raised area. Before charcoal burning could start, a hut had to be built where the charcoal burner could live while he was watching the kiln. Here you can see a restored fire place and the semi-circular foundations of the hut.

Conifer wood which had been seasoned for a year was used to produce charcoal. The same kiln base was often used several times because the kiln sediment formed a crust on the ground which prevented the air from entering the kiln. The wood was packed tightly together with no air pockets and the kiln was covered with moss and fir twigs so that the cinders which were laid over the top did not fall into the kiln. When the kiln was completely covered, it was lit. The charcoal burning process generally took around three weeks.

It was very important to watch the kiln carefully so that it didn't burn out.

Skilled charcoal burners could hear if something started to go wrong. When the kiln had finished burning, it was allowed to cool for several days before being dismantled, which was tough and sometimes dangerous work.

The time passed slowly in the lonely forest. Folk tales tell of the charcoal burners visited by wood spirits who could help them but could also destroy all their work. Sometimes they were said to have seen the "Skogsrå", a woman who looked beautiful from the front, but had a hollow back.

Sign 8

The fish ponds

Two ponds were built here in the early part of the 20th century to breed fish for the table, usually carp. You can see the ponds on both sides of the embankment straight in front of you. Consul August André, the owner of the Lessebo estate, wanted to try new methods of farming fish. Water was brought to the ponds in

hand-dug channels. By the mid 1930s the ponds had started to become overgrown and the water supply system no longer worked properly. When you cross the embankment to the other side of the pond, you will see the remains of the old sluice gate.

Sign 9

The mysterious part of the trail

On both sides of this path, which runs from the croft at Linneberg on the other side of the road to Kosta to the remains of the croft at Nyäng, there are large numbers of charcoal kiln bases and large stone mounds. There is one directly behind the sign. They demonstrate that this area was once under permanent cultivation. They cannot have been built by the crofters because both crofts are too far away from the mounds. No traces of arable fields have been found which could be linked to the mounds.

These mounds probably form part of a large farmed area which stretched from Emborås in the east to Linneberg in the west. It was probably cultivated during the late Iron Age from around 700 to 1000 A.D. Charcoal found under the mounds which has been dated indicates that this is the case. The soil was worked with spades and mattocks and no visible traces of the fields remain.

Sign 10

The croft at Nyäng

During the last decades of the 18th century, the owner of the Lessebo ironworks built six crofts. The crofters formed an important part of the overall workforce of the ironworks. They worked as day labourers at the ironworks, burnt charcoal and extracted lake ore. But their earnings from this work were not enough to feed a whole family. Therefore they needed a smallholding to supplement their income. The croft at Nyäng was occupied for around 150 years during which time the arable fields and pastures were extended. The crofter had an ox, two or three cows and some pigs and hens. The croft was demolished in the mid 1920s and trees were planted on the fields.

Some of these trees have now been felled and we can see large numbers of stone mounds and also a stone wall. Many of the mounds were probably built during the Iron Age. When the crofters began cultivating the land at the end of the 18th century they added new stones to some of the old mounds. You will see the remains of the house, barn and cellar. A stone-built well lies about 50 metres from the house by the path to Emborås. While the crofters worked at the Lessebo ironworks, their wives and children were responsible for the day-to-day running of the croft.

You can either go on from here to Emborås, the most interesting part of the trail, or continue on the marked path to Tora pool.



Sign 11

Stone mounds

We have now left behind the fields farmed by the crofters at Nyäng. Here we find a stone mound which is highly unlikely to date from the era of the crofters. It is quite large, well-built and has what is called a "fotkedja" or "footing chain". It probably dates back to the Iron Age. Not far away on the slopes which lead down to Lake Läen there are around fifty mounds, now hidden in the forest. Here there was once an open landscape of arable fields and pasture farmed on the basis of a crop rotation system, with fields being alternately left fallow. After a few hundred metres you will reach the start of the most interesting part of the trail: Emborås.

Sign 12

Emborås – a major mystery

You have reached a point on the trail where there would once have been a wonderful view of Lake Läen. This was the case in the Iron Age, when the landscape consisted of open fields and clumps of trees. It is possible that the Iron Age people gathered here to discuss the problems of the community. According to tradition there was a village here which was abandoned during the plague years. This is unlikely to be true, because there are no traces of a medieval field system here. Studies and work on dating the large numbers of stone mounds you will see as you follow the marked path indicate that they were built during the late Iron Age from around 700 to 1000 A.D. The mounds are generally large and carefully constructed, which indicates that the area was farmed over a long period. Slag from iron production has been found in some of

the mounds. You will also see traces of more recent activity, including a few attractive-looking charcoal kiln bases which date back to the time when charcoal was burnt to supply the furnaces and hammers of the ironworks at Lessebo.

Sign 13

Stone mounds and tar hollows near the lake

In this large area of forest we have not only seen stone mounds but also the bases of charcoal kilns and traces of the charcoal burners' huts. We are now close to the shores of the lake, which during the Iron Age would have been a few hundred metres further out. The water level has risen by more than 2 metres since then. You will see a row of well-built mounds. There are probably many more on the bed of the lake, which were on dry land until the 1850s. The mound in front of you next to the large stone may well be a grave. Take note of the tar hollow to the right of the mound.

Sign 14

A settlement at Emborås?

You have now left an area with lots of large stone mounds and arrived at a place with a number of stone formations that are very different from one another – mounds, rows of stones, some in half-moon shapes, and loose stones. You can see two parallel rows of stones. There is also a stone mound which was abandoned shortly after it was started. You can see clearly how the foundation stones are laid out to form a circle – a footing chain. It is very difficult to determine what this area was used for. We can only hope that future archaeological investigations will find an answer to the question. Until then we can only guess at its purpose. Could this be a settlement where the people who worked the land between Emborås and Linneberg lived at the end of the Iron Age? There is nothing to indicate that there was a later settlement here.

Sign 15

A mound of stones from the fields or a grave?

You can now see one of the largest and most carefully built mounds in the whole area. It is separated from the surrounding land and built in the same way as a dry stone wall. Could it be a grave? This is quite possible. It is unlikely that anyone would have made this much effort for a simple mound of stones from the fields. We will now go back to Nyäng. To start with you will take the same route that you arrived on. You will then follow the white marks and bear to the right. You will soon see two open stone rings with clumps of birch in the middle. No one knows what these could be. You will also see a stone which may have been erected by people. It is similar to the stones which form the huge stone ship known as Ales Stenar on the Kåseberga ridge to the east of Ystad. You will also find a large number of stone mounds, many of which have been carelessly built.

You will pass sign 11 again and go on through the forest where you will see the remains of a charcoal burner's hut and the bases of charcoal kilns. Once you are back at Nyäng, you continue on the marked path to Tora pool. If you want to go back to the Lessebo fields and the power station, you will see a sign to "Nyängs parkeringsplats" (Nyäng car park) and you simply follow the marks.

Sign 16

Tar for ships and household use

In the past tar played a major role as a lubricant and waterproofing agent. The stumps and roots of old pine trees were the most important raw material for boiling tar which was generally done in the spring between sowing and haymaking.

A tar hollow was dug in a hillside. These were generally about 15 metres long, 2 metres wide and 1 metre deep. At the end of the hollow was a tub where the tar collected.

The heap of stumps at the top of the hollow was lit and bellows were used to encourage the fire to burn. The process lasted around 3 days and could be repeated several times. It produced about 1200 kg of tar and, as a by-product, around 7000-8000 litres of charcoal.

In the same way as the charcoal kilns, the old tar hollows were reused because a crust of sediment had formed on the bottom.

Tar barrels were often transported on packhorses or oxen to the road where they were loaded into carts. Tar was not sensitive to vibration and jolting in the same way as charcoal, so it could also be transported in summer.

Sign 17

Slash-and-burn and clearing stones

Slash-and-burn cultivation played a major role in the forests of Småland and supplemented the harvest from the arable fields and meadows. Slash-and-burn cultivation began in the Middle Ages, but really high yields were first achieved in the 18th century, when the harvests were in some cases between four and six times as large as the harvest from an equivalent arable field. This was due mainly to the introduction of so-called Finnish rye, which grew thickly and produced high yields.

The land was burned on calm spring days and the fire was forced into the middle of the area from the edges.

During the first year the farmers grew turnips or, in more recent times, "bråne" potatoes ("bråne" is a Swedish word meaning slash-and-burn). Then for two years they grew rye. After this the land was used as general pasture for a few years. Then the forest was allowed to grow up again until the next slash-and-burn process in around 30 years.

One of the reasons for the good harvests was the fertility of the forest soil. The nutrients in the soil which would normally have been absorbed by the trees and bushes were taken up by the turnips and rye instead.

Many disputes arose between the ironworks and the farmers about the right to slash and burn. In the area around the ironworks slash-and-burn cultivation was banned. Generally the disputes ended in a compromise being reached. If the farmers delivered the agreed amount of charcoal, the ironworks turned a blind eye to the slash-and-burn. The stone mounds built after slash-and-burn are very different from the mounds described earlier, which were often carefully constructed in the same way as dry stone walls. The clearance mounds were small and often untidily built.

Sign 18

Tora pool

Tora pool is one of the many small lakes in the Småland forest landscape. The pool may have formed in a so-called "dead ice hollow". During the period around the middle of the 19th century when the level of all the lakes fell, Tora pool also fell by a few metres. There are clear signs of the higher shore level in many places. The crofters at Nyäng probably caught fish in Tora pool.

A walk around the pool on a beautiful spring morning gives you the chance to enjoy the landscape and observe the wildlife. A wide variety of birds can be seen around the pool in spring.

Sign 19

Charcoal kiln bases and stone mounds

This is one of the largest and most distinctive kiln bases in the area around the Lessebo ironworks. These kilns were particularly large and needed to be watched very carefully. As you continue along the path you will find another row of stone mounds which form part of the same farming system that we encountered earlier. Many of them are small and hard for the untrained eye to identify.

Sign 20

Cellar for "bråne" potatoes

You have just passed the tumbledown remains of an earth cellar for storing potatoes. "Bråne" potatoes were often the first crop grown on the slash-and-burn land. Some of the potatoes were stored in a primitive type of cellar dug out of the earth and were then taken home during the winter.



Sign 24

Stone mounds and kiln bases

The stone mounds and the bases of the charcoal kilns once more show clearly how the land has been used over the centuries. Have a look at the large number of stones in the open mound.

Sign 25

Ekebacken

In the 1860s a house was built on the top of the Ekebacken (or "Oak Hill") for employees of the Lessebo ironworks. The land on both sides of the path tells the tale of what happened here long ago. On the hillside leading down to the lake there are long rows of stones which can be hard to see, the remains of the boundaries of abandoned fields. There is also a large number of small stone mounds on the right of the path. These rows of stones were very common during the Iron Age.