

# 'Honey, I bought A CASTLE!'

*Glorious gardens*



Clockwise from left: Lympne Castle and grounds; Ann in her new home and with her husband Stephen; the view from one of the castle's stately rooms



Historic Lympne Castle and its lovely gardens in Kent have an unlikely new owner – a glamorous Canadian reality TV star. She tells Ciar Byrne why she relished the challenge of restoring it to its former glory

**A**nn Kaplan Mulholland is not your typical owner of an English castle. The glamorous 62-year-old Canadian is best known as one of the stars of reality TV show *The Real Housewives of Toronto*, and she is married to the leading cosmetic surgeon Dr Stephen Mulholland.

Yet here she is on a bright but wintry day showing me around Lympne Castle, the nearly 1,000-year-old castle overlooking Romney Marsh, near Hythe in Kent, which she and her husband have owned since February last year.

It is a spectacular setting, with views out of mullioned windows over green pastures and salt marshes stretching down to the English Channel. The 139-acre estate comprises the castle, terraced gardens, walled gardens, stables, cottages and even some Roman ruins. The castle

itself was extensively modernised and added to in the early Edwardian era by the Scottish architect Sir Robert Lorimer. Once the residence of the Archdeacon of Canterbury, it fell into disrepair after the Second World War. In 1979 Paul McCartney and his band Wings recorded songs here for their 1979 album *Back to the Egg*.

Having built up successful careers in Canada and established a property portfolio, with houses in Hawaii, Toronto and British Columbia, the Kaplans decided it was time to change their lifestyle while they were still young enough to enjoy it.

'A lot of people get to a certain age and say, "OK, let's change our careers", but then they just watch TV and relax. We didn't want to. We wanted to switch careers while we were young enough and agile enough to be able to go cycling, hiking – that's what we like to do. When the youngest

of our six kids moved out we said: "We're moving to Las Vegas tomorrow". We did a very short stint there and then decided we'd rather live in England,' says Kaplan, whose mother was English and whose adopted father was Scottish.

They soon discovered that if they wanted to live in the style to which they were accustomed in central London, it was going to be expensive. As an expert in finance – Kaplan founded iFinance, a personal loans company, and is often interviewed about money issues on TV in the US and Canada – she began to think outside the box.

'When we were looking to buy, the least expensive flat was £8.5 million, with £47,000 a year management fees, plus taxes, plus decorating. No matter what, we'd be in it for £9.5 million. We're not used to that kind of pricing. Then I got curious and started Googling "What can you buy if you go a little bit outside the city?" On the edge of London you can buy a house for the same price as a flat in Mayfair. I thought if the houses were lower priced, what would a castle cost?'

Her online search yielded two, one of which had just been sold. The other was Lympne, so she sent the broker a message, but didn't initially hear back. A few weeks later she chased him, but was told it was no longer on the market. More time passed and the broker got in touch to say the deal had fallen through. After some hard >



PICTURES: CIAR BYRNE; ANN KAPLAN MULHOLLAND/LYMPNE CASTLE





bargaining the Kaplans bought the castle and estate for £5.5 million. Ann also got a television company on board to record her progress as she set about restoring the castle.

The previous owner ran the castle as a wedding venue, and when news got out that they were selling up, couples who had already booked feared their celebrations would be cancelled. Kaplan was quick to reassure them, realising the revenue would help with the upkeep, and they hosted their first wedding two months after taking ownership. Following a busy season, Ann is taking stock over the winter, making the most of the opportunity to get the castle into good shape.

The gardens make a stunning backdrop for wedding photographs, with gothic arches and curlicues galore, as well as views to die for. Kaplan also wants it to become a hub for the local community.

On the first May bank holiday last year they held a hog roast, and nearly a thousand people turned up. 'I thought I'd better take this seriously, to honour the history and the people here,' says Kaplan. 'You need to realise that you are making an impact, but they are so welcoming and so nice. When you're here on a Saturday or Sunday it's almost like the TV sitcom Cheers – everyone knows everybody, it's one of those places.'

It has been a steep learning curve, however. The castle is Grade-I listed, so any changes need planning permission. 'What I didn't realise was how extreme the costs were going to be. Just something like changing a sink can mean £70,000-£80,000, because when you take out the sink you see the pipework is made of lead, and then you have to change all the pipes. It's like you go to the doctor for a facelift and he says he wants to do a colonoscopy.'

On selected dates the castle is open for people to come and enjoy the medieval bar, as well as roast dinners prepared by the in-house chef. These have proved a cultural barrier for Kaplan. 'I found out that British roast "dinners" are served at lunchtime. And it isn't necessarily roast beef, it can be pork or chicken,' she says in bemusement. With her ready sense of humour, she has bought specially themed plates, including gravy jugs in the shape of chickens and cows, and shark-shaped platters for fish and chips. As a self-confessed germophobe she insists on using bottled water even for the preparation of food.

You enter the estate through a huge stone and wood archway, down a paved drive flanked with beds of

lavender and perennials. In summer, wisteria climbs up over the ancient stone walls.

To one side is St Stephen's Anglican Church, which sits on a doughnut of land cut out of the estate. Kaplan has become a regular churchgoer when she is in residence, finding solace in services that have helped her cope with family illness and bereavement.

The castle itself is like something out of a film set, with turrets, ivy-clad walls, enormous wooden porticoes and stained-glass windows. A well in the entrance courtyard is now used as a planter. It is difficult to tell what is original and what was part of Lorimer's design – in his age it was common to add antique-looking features to old buildings.

The gardens around the castle are accessed through a door in an old stone wall or via the castle itself. There are stone terraces with stunning views, a fancy iron gate framing the vista, and extensive lawns and herbaceous borders. The walled kitchen garden, filled with ancient apple trees, sits just outside the main castle complex, at the head of an avenue of towering beeches. Kaplan hopes to restore the Victorian glasshouses and vegetable beds to

*'What I didn't realise was how extreme the costs were going to be'*

provide produce for the restaurant. She would also like to run apple-themed cookery retreats, based in an adjacent building that they are also in the process of renovating. 'I grew up with gardens,' says Kaplan. 'My mother would sit in the garden and I would sit with her, eating green beans off the stalks.'

Within the heart of the castle grounds is a smaller walled garden with a large pool. This is currently overgrown, but Kaplan has visions of turning it into a tranquil space for her family and guests to swim in. On the far side of the beech avenue are the stables, as well as a riding ring they are planning to convert into a space for larger weddings.

In Roman times the sea came further in than it does now, to the fort of Portus Lemanis, whose crumbling



Opposite page: the well in the courtyard; Ann doing some dusting and the inner garden. This page, clockwise from left: the castle battlements; a gateway looking out to sea and a quince tree



ruins now sit in an area grazed by cattle. Inside the castle is a grand medieval banqueting hall, a bedroom where Henry VIII is said to have slept, and a room with sea views where a previous owner used to watch the television he had illegally wired into a cupboard – it is said that you can still smell his cigar smoke.

The day after my visit Kaplan welcomed a camel into the grounds as part of a nativity-themed photoshoot to advertise their Christmas events. If anyone can breathe new life into this magical place it is this energetic and mercurial woman, for whom no challenge seems too great. ■  
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