

Home



Above: a room that Kaplan uses for wedding functions. Left: the couple outside their Toronto home



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Lympne Castle has a fascinating history. High on a cliff on the Kent coast, with views of France on a clear day, it stands on the site of a Roman fortress, the remains of which are dotted around its 140 acres. With crenellated towers and imposing stone walls, the 13th-century fortified manor house was for centuries part of the Archbishop of Canterbury's estate. During the First World War it housed injured Canadian soldiers, and in the Second World War the military used its turrets as lookout stations. In 1978 Paul McCartney, who was friends with the owner's son, recorded Wings' final album, *Back to the Egg*, here.

The latest chapter in its history is its most colourful yet. In February it was bought by Ann Kaplan, a Canadian businesswoman and star of the reality TV show *The Real Housewives of Toronto*, and her husband, the plastic surgeon Steven Mulholland. Kaplan, who has a net worth of £500 million, plans to spend £15 million restoring the grade I listed castle. She wants to turn it into a medieval-themed tourist attraction, hotel, wedding venue and corporate retreat with a restaurant, bistro, bar, shops and

vineyard, opening it fully to the public for the first time (it was previously a wedding venue). Kaplan plans to document the process on a new reality TV show. "I want to make this the most famous castle in the world," Kaplan tells me on an exclusive tour of the 21,000 sq ft pile. It is one of 11 properties she owns, in locations including Las Vegas, Hawaii, the British Virgin Islands, Vancouver and Toronto, where her mansion is a few doors down from the rapper Drake.

The couple needed a big house in Toronto – they have eight children from this and previous marriages (they met in 1998). But last year the pair, both 62, found themselves with an empty nest when their youngest son, 19, left home. They were at a turning point: Kaplan had recently sold her fintech company iFinance and Mulholland had sold his medical spa. Mulholland wanted to buy a base in London because his electro-surgical company does a lot of business in Europe.

The couple may be multimillionaires, but even they were taken aback by the prices of flats in Mayfair, Belgravia and Knightsbridge. "The prices were ridiculous: the flats we were looking at

“I realised we're not buying a castle, we're buying a job”



QUEEN OF THE CASTLE

Why a former Real Housewife of Toronto is spending £20m on an 800-year-old castle in Kent



started at £11 million; the service charges were anywhere from £4,800 a month to £350,000 a year," says Kaplan, who made her fortune providing \$2 billion of consumer loans for private medical procedures. "With the service charges, it's like watching money go out the door. I also feel there's going to be a 10-20 per cent drop in high-end house prices over the next two years. I said forget it. It didn't make any financial sense."

Kaplan reckoned that for that kind of money she may as well buy a castle. On a whim she did a Google search and came across Lympne, which was on the market for £11 million. "Buying a castle, it's an adventure, and if you've got the money to fix it up and use the business side of your brain, it could be a good investment – although you have costs, you've also got income coming in."

Mulholland was adamant: "We're not buying a castle." He has since embraced the idea, partly spurred by the Netflix series *The Last Kingdom*, which immersed him in English medieval history, and the friendliness of the locals. It helped that Kaplan negotiated the price down to £5.5 million. She nonetheless started having nightmares before the deal closed. "I realised we're not buying a castle, we're buying a job."

The renovation will include new oil

Main: the great hall with Ann Kaplan and her husband, Steven Mulholland. Clockwise from above: the couple commissioned a designer to make medieval costumes; she has a passion for gilt furniture; outside Lympne Castle

tanks, sewage system, electrics, bathrooms, plasterwork and floors. It will cost £1 million to overhaul the roof alone. "One of the first things I said was, 'What do you mean there's no wi-fi?' How do you run a business without wi-fi?" Kaplan says. "In July we'll get full-fibre [broadband], but it took that long just to book it. Everything is a learning curve. It's, like, 'What do you mean we can't drill a hole and put a light switch in the wall?'"

Kaplan is not complaining. She seems tickled pink with her adopted home. Far from the Cruella de Vil types typical of the *Real Housewives* TV franchise, she is softly spoken and self-effacing, with a kooky sense of fun. In her self-help book *How to Be Successful in Spite of Yourself* she calls herself a "nerd" and a "dork", but she looks cool in her punky Vivienne Westwood tartan trousers.

Kaplan says she's a self-made businesswoman. She left home at 14 and supported herself by working as a waitress in a pancake house in her home town of Victoria, British Columbia. She had fled a dysfunctional home life: at 12 she discovered she was not adopted, as she'd been told, but the result of a fling her English mother had with a Hawaiian entertainer. The hard times continued when her first marriage ended. "I never got one dime from my first husband...

I was a single mother with two kids. I realised no white knight is going to come and rescue me. I had to do it on my own."

She put herself through business school, earning an MBA and a doctorate, and founded her business in 1996. Secrets to her success include getting up at 5am and not watching TV. She moves at a brisk pace as she proudly shows me the grounds. "It's exciting. I want this to be a medieval experience, with jesters, axe throwing, archery, minstrels. In the bar we've got pewter goblets and wooden pints. All the staff will wear medieval outfits. I call the staff by their medieval names: our manager is a castellan, our events planner is our seneschal."

Kaplan even had costumes made for her and her husband. "I'm the prince to the queen of the castle," Mulholland jokes. "This is our Kent monarchy."

Kaplan's theatrics could create great reality TV. The pair are in talks with Netflix, Hulu, Prime and Bravo. "It could also be a makeover show like *Escape to the Chateau*, but with a couple of North American entrepreneurs who are used to turning things around quickly, frustrated by 2,000 years of bureaucracy in the UK."

The couple raised eyebrows, quite literally, on an episode of *The Real Housewives of Toronto*, when they threw a plastic surgery cocktail party where Mulholland performed a "suture suspension facelift" on a sedated woman in front of guests. Kaplan has no plans for Botox parties at the castle, but the cultural differences could make for entertaining TV. The traditional menu at the bar, which recently opened, is not Kaplan's cup of tea. "It's just horrible food if you're a vegan like me... When people order their bangers and mash and Scotch eggs I come out and try to talk them into something healthy, and then Mike, the manager, appears and tells me to stop talking to the guests."

She is filling the castle with gilded and ornately carved furniture, all the while trying to keep the budget reasonable. She bought 800 pieces at an auction when the Dorchester Hotel in London was doing a refurbishment. Other pieces are bought on auction websites the Saleroom and lovantiques.com. "I'm a businesswoman. The problem with going to [a place like] Sotheby's is when you have 32 bedrooms, that's going to be cost prohibitive. I'm not going to spend £10,000 on a bureau. We've been buying chairs for, like, £15."

The castle is more than just a business. Kaplan wants to give back to the community. Mulholland estimates that they'll create 30-40 jobs by the end of 2024. They have already hired an estate manager, a deputy manager, two chefs, two events managers, a marketing manager, a groundskeeper, an accountant, a bookkeeper, three cleaners, an IT specialist and an adviser to liaise with Historic England. All the food is local, even the wine and the crisps.

The couple held an official reopening ceremony of Lympne Castle on the weekend of the coronation, with a hog roast and a town crier. They expected 300 villagers – 1,000 people turned up. Kaplan was nervous about how locals would feel about an outsider buying a historic castle. "I wasn't sure if I would be embraced or not. I don't look like a local. But it didn't seem to make any difference to anybody. I spent about an hour and a half shaking people's hands. People were so polite and kind and were giving me hugs and saying thank you for opening up. And I seriously started crying. I was just overwhelmed by their graciousness."

All hail the new queen.