

Not to the manor born

Multimillionaire businesswoman (and former *Real Housewives* star) Ann Kaplan Mulholland and her plastic surgeon husband Stephen have splashed £25 million on buying and renovating Lympne Castle in Kent, with dreams of becoming lord and lady of all they survey. But can new-money Canadians cut it in the world of British aristocrats? Guy Kelly joins them for high tea

Portraits by
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‘Buying a castle,’ muses Ann Kaplan Mulholland, ‘is like going to see your doctor and saying you want a facelift, and he goes, “OK, but first you’re going to need a colonoscopy.”’ With a small fork, she separates a morsel of gluten-free, vegan spiced carrot cake, which she will not eat for another hour, and floats a perfectly manicured hand around the Great Hall of Lympne Castle in Kent, her new home. ‘Literally, we’ve had to do everything here you can’t see. Fire alarms, new wiring, new plumbing, new boiler, the tunnels... Then we needed to hire people to manage it, run it, clean it out...’

Sitting opposite, picking suspiciously at his slice of simnel cake and sharing a pot of green tea, her husband, Stephen (incidentally, a plastic surgeon) nods with alacrity. ‘It’s why my wife deducted a good chunk off the purchase price. Just repairing the roof tiles was £1 million.’

The Mulhollands, both 63, are experienced with fixer-uppers. For the past 25 years, ever since they met at a plastic surgery convention in New Orleans (where Stephen knew he’d marry her ‘within 30 seconds of talking to her’), they’ve built, then rebuilt, then expanded everything – from their family (eight children at the last count) to their physical appearances (mostly Ann’s), to their business interests (surgery, finance, TV work, philanthropy, and more) and, perhaps most ambitiously, their property portfolio.

They have 11 houses, including a gargantuan penthouse in Las Vegas, plus places in Hawaii, the British Virgin Islands, and two in their native Canada. ‘When my wife buys property she buys low and then she sells high,’ Stephen says. That strategy has worked time and time again, but it may be tested with their latest project, in which we’re currently having high tea: this Grade I listed, 1,000-year-old, 19,000-square-foot, 140-acre medieval fortified manor house and estate staring over the English Channel from coastal Kent.

They only wanted a place to spend the summers, when Vegas gets too hot, but London just didn’t seem like good value. ‘The market’s moved three per cent in

20 years, it’s insane,’ Stephen mutters. So they snapped up the castle for £5.5 million in February 2023.

They later determined that renovations could cost more than £20 million. Oh, and the heating bill will be about £15,000 per month in winter. And that’s without the challenges of owning a Grade I listed building – they ‘can’t even plug in a hairdryer’ without written permission, Ann huffs.

In Canada they’re minor celebrities. Ann is famous for being a glamorous, ultra-successful businesswoman, and she once appeared in the reality TV series *The Real Housewives of Toronto*. Stephen is a celebrity plastic surgeon and medical entrepreneur, who has made frequent TV appearances of his own – not least as Ann’s husband. Now they plan to document their renovation of Lympne Castle with an as-yet-unannounced reality TV show, to be aired globally.

‘It’ll be huge,’ Stephen assures us. ‘Think *Bridgerton* meets *Below Deck* meets *Escape to the Chateau*. Except way cooler, way hipper.’ Filming is expected to start in June. Ann is intending to style it.

They certainly have a setting fit for drama. On the site of a ruined Roman fortress, *Portus Lemanis*, halfway between Folkestone and Dungeness, Lympne (pronounced ‘Limm’) Castle was first constructed in the 11th century, then rebuilt in the 13th century as a fortified manor house, with crenelated towers, dozens of outbuildings, beautiful stepped gardens and vast stone walls.

For hundreds of years it was part of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s estate, before it was sold privately, then became a hospital for injured Canadian soldiers in the First World War, and a British Army lookout station over the Channel in the Second. In the decades after that, under new owners again, the castle went through a period of being vaguely bohemian, including hosting the Rolling Stones and being rented by Paul McCartney, who recorded Wings’ final album, *Back to the Egg*, on site.

Most recently its Great Hall has been used as a wedding venue, while other parts of the castle were left to fall into a state of disrepair. The last owner, a man about whom the Mulhollands know little other than that he allegedly bought the castle without ever telling his wife, listed it for sale for £11 million

in 2021. Soon after, across the Atlantic, the Mulhollands’ youngest son and favourite child (‘I literally gave him a trophy,’ Ann stresses), Chase, left their Toronto home for university. So they started house-hunting.

London – specifically Belgravia, Knightsbridge and Mayfair – was an early option but Ann, who has several business degrees,

made a spreadsheet and conducted a quantitative analysis of various houses’ service charges, a study that resulted in the following unimpeachable conclusion: London is ridiculous.

The Mulhollands looked at Lympne Castle only out of curiosity. But they liked the place, so made a low bid, but offered cash. ‘Then the survey report came

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The medieval Lympne Castle, below and right, sits in 140 acres of Kent countryside overlooking the Channel



back with all these deficiencies. It was a disaster. All the rooms were piled with garbage. No wiring, nothing proper. So we asked for another million off, but said they could have the money tomorrow morning at 10am, take it or leave it,’ Ann says.

They were rejected. ‘Then they called us back at 10pm and said OK we’ll take it. So we paid £5.5 million the next morning at 11am. I think we were an hour late.’ Suddenly they owned a castle.

Which may sound like a staggering act of folly – but to the Mulhollands, £5.5 million is not a lot of money. ‘No,’ they agree, in unison.

Ann made the bulk of her £500 million fortune selling consumer loans for private medical procedures, and from the sale of her fintech company iFinance. Stephen, meanwhile, was a pioneer in the cosmetic surgery industry in Canada and operated on many A-listers he refuses to name. He also started a medical spa that he too sold for a sizable profit and he is the co-founder of a medical device company, InMode, which has a market capitalisation of \$1.7 billion.

According to an interview given last year, Ann also takes \$1.6 million in rental income per year, \$2 million from an insurance company she started, plus she invests widely and has an annual personal expenditure of \$1.5 million.

Most of that goes on first-class travel (she has more than two million air miles with Air Canada), staying in expensive hotels (Four Seasons, The Dorchester, Necker Island), as well as jewellery and designer clothes – all documented on her Instagram account. Her favourite fashion house is Schiaparelli, but her trademark look involves Coperni hybrid flare trousers: half leg-

gings, half jeans, with tiny belts around each knee. They look unworldly. She loves them.

Stephen’s personal tastes are far less sybaritic, but among his biggest expenses must be getting married to the same woman every five years. The Mulhollands renew their vows with a full wedding every half a decade, and for every

To the Mulhollands, it’s all just a bit of ‘fun’ – a word they use over and over to explain all sorts of things they’ve done. It’s why they commissioned a set of medieval-style costumes for themselves; why they bought titles and a thimble of soil online for £30 so they can call themselves Lord and Lady; or why Ann religiously wears Louboutins

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ceremony, Ann receives a new diamond ring – with a carat added for every year they’ve been married. She has five now, with a sixth – a 25-carat diamond – to come at a wedding at the castle this summer. Previous ceremonies have included one on a beach, when Ann dug her feet into the sand so Stephen could appear taller. Then there was the circus-themed one, at which the bride floated down from the ceiling on wires.

‘The most hilarious was at a Scottish castle, when Ann commissioned an owl to fly the ring down the aisle to us and land on my arm, but the ring was too heavy so the owl took off and just hit the floor, fluttering its wings,’ Stephen recalls, before briefly imitating a prone raptor. ‘We had to upgrade it to a heavy-duty industrial owl from the north.’

‘It was funny,’ Ann says, softly.

to confession at Lympne village church so the congregation can see the red soles when she genuflects before the altar.

‘My wife is very over-the-top,’ Stephen says. Ann puts down her teacup and agrees. ‘Everything we do is insane.’

The normal aristocratic way in this country, I offer, is to wear threadbare clothes, drive a battered Volvo or Land Rover Defender, and keep the heating switched off even in midwinter. ‘I know, I got a business degree from Henley Business School, and when I was there I learned that people in England don’t like bling,’ Ann says. ‘The English way doesn’t show its wealth. But we’re not trying to look wealthy, we’re just having fun.’

Stephen nods. ‘Life’s too short to worry about other people. If they don’t like it, so what. It’s a big world, go your own way.’

Occasionally they’ve been mocked for their garishness. Stephen says they don’t like using the London Underground, for instance, as ‘people were really quite rude’ to them on the Jubilee line last summer. ‘But it didn’t help that we were dressed as Abba,’ Ann adds. Stephen nods. ‘Oh that’s true.’

The plan for the castle is to throw it open to the public, with a medieval-themed restaurant and bar (already open but they’ve plans to jazz them up, leaning further into the theme), plus they’ll host everything from archery to axe-throwing, medieval reconstructions, as well as offering free community events like Easter egg hunts and wreath-making.

In fact, Ann gets stuck in, not only attending a local church, but pot-washing every Sunday so that she can get to know the staff and customers, and helping to design the restaurant menu. Though the local terms can prove a challenge... ‘It’s so confusing. A roast dinner isn’t always at dinner or necessarily roasted, a wedding breakfast happens in the evening, and there’s things like Ploughman’s, Scotch eggs...’

A gluten-free vegan for most of her life, she was astounded at how unhealthy English food is. Early on, the restaurant manager banned her from waiting tables after she kept saying, ‘Would you like a defibrillator with that?’ ‘We did a healthy alternative at a hog roast but no one took it,’ she says, a little crestfallen. ‘[But] the community has been so welcoming and so engaging.’

They’re both studying the history of the castle, delighting in its age and the stories behind it; they intend to return it to its former glory – albeit with high/low furnishings. A carpet in one room came from the renovation of The Dorchester, while the bedlinen on a four-poster in another is from M&S. The plan is that they’ll live there for half the year, otherwise leaving the 30-odd staff to keep things ticking over.

Once up and running they aim to host one or two events each week to cover the cost of renovations. ‘We need to do 80 a year, with an average selling price of £10,000 or £14,000,’ Stephen says. ‘We’ll get there, for sure. This is a castle an hour from London. People will want to come.’

The Mulhollands' own life stories are worthy of historical study. Ann was born in Winnipeg into a Scottish-English family. As a child, she was told by her mother that she was adopted, but the truth was that she was the product of an affair between her mother and a Hawaiian entertainer. To avoid judgment locally, her parents concocted a lie.

'I chose to live my life happy, in spite of that. So I was never bitter about it,' she says. 'I had two good kids and thought I might as well make it on my own as a single mother.'

Getting up at 5am and working 365 days a year, she earned a doctorate and an MBA among other business degrees, plus a qualification in interior design, eventually

a professional ice hockey player, then studied medicine after briefly considering dentistry, 'because I liked the idea of the dental nurses in their tight white shirts'.

He also had 'a starter marriage, everyone has to have one' – which resulted in two children. He and Ann then had two of their own – collectively, the brood is Luke, 34, Gabrielle, 32, Barrett, 31, Keaton, 30, Molly, 20, and 19-year-old Chase. Ann also adopted her late sister's two children, Destiny and Rock, after she died six years ago.

'There was also a young girl who was getting surgery in Canada for a cleft face who I'd quietly funded to bring from Ethiopia to Canada, but she was getting depressed having so much surgery, so I said she and her family could come and live with us,' Ann says. 'I phoned Stephen at work and said, "Stephen, there's an Ethiopian family moving into our basement." And by then my

himself, 'I just have good Irish DNA.' And... Ann?

'Well, when I had surgery on my feet for my bunions, my sisters said, "What did you do, run out of body parts to operate on?"' They both roar with laughter.

'We were flying into the Bahamas about a month ago,' Stephen chips in, 'and they said over the PA that the Bahamian government has introduced a "no plastics" policy in the country. I said, "Well, Ann, you're not going to be let into the country, we're going to have to turn around."'

Surgeons in Canada aren't permitted to operate on family, so he's never taken a scalpel to his wife. 'I don't think I'd have married him if I'd known that before,' Ann deadpans.

How many procedures has she had? The answer is just enough, Stephen cuts in, 'to look naturally unnatural. Because it's not natural to look so good so old. She looks younger than she did when she was younger.'

Stephen's pride and devotion is limitless. 'When you meet someone who looks like Ann, and it was my first impression, you think, "Oh she's going to be a bitch." Because people who look like her, typically they're a bitch.'

Ann, staring at her tea, looks briefly affronted but Stephen continues: 'But when they come to know her, how nice she is, how she's always thinking of others, that turns around. She's the kindest person I've ever met.' Ann reaches across and thanks him. 'But I'm not a pushover.'

If anybody pre-judged them at Lympne Castle, they've kept it to themselves. 'It's just, "Shall we have some cake and tea?" I don't think they treat me any differently from anybody else they meet. When I go to church they don't take a second look,' she says.

Even if some do, I don't doubt the Mulhollands have charmed Lympne. Their newly designed logo for the castle features two figures making Usain Bolt-style lightning hand gestures. The Mulhollands do this pose in many of their Instagram photos.

'That's our "onwards and upwards" sign! Our move!'

'We had a lot of responsibilities for a long time, but now we have freedoms, so...' Ann says, airing that regal hand again, 'buy a castle?' Yeah, buy a castle. Why the hell not.

'When I had surgery on my feet for bunions, my sisters said, "Did you run out of body parts to operate on?"'



'They kept the story up until I was about 12, when my mother told me. I was really happy.' Seven years later she met her Hawaiian father and found she had 13 new half-siblings. 'He was quite the entertainer,' Stephen says.

After leaving home, she became a waitress in a pancake restaurant, then had a brief, unhappy marriage which resulted in two children, but by her early 30s she was divorced.

building her businesses. She now regularly coaches young women in entrepreneurship and she has written two books, including *How To Be Successful in Spite of Yourself*. If you thought the CV was done, wait: she is also an ordained officiant in Ontario, available for weddings.

By the time they met, Stephen was riding the wave of the incoming cosmetic surgery boom. Originally from Vancouver, he was once

mother had broken her neck and was living in our dining room. He just said, "Oh get it over with and put a soup kitchen in..." She laughs. Stephen shakes his head. 'It was chaos.'

Now both 63, neither of them looks their age. 'Gotta stay hip,' Stephen says. 'It's a state of mind, and a state of surgical alteration. Growing old is obligatory; looking old is now elective.'

He's had no surgical procedures