

# When an Englishman's castle is his home

Eight years and £350,000 later, self-confessed eccentric John Mew and his wife have created a dream manor home, complete with drawbridge and moat, says Clive Fewins

The southern half of England is famed for its castles – not the medieval fortresses found further north and in Wales but more domestic affairs built to proclaim the status and wealth of the owner rather than to scare away alien hordes.

It was the latter that inspired John Mew, one-time aviator, sailor and amateur racing driver, writer on social anthropology, visiting orthodontics professor and self-professed eccentric, to join the ranks of Britain's castle builders.

Mew, 76, grew up in the corner of England that houses Ightham Mote, Hever, Bodiam, Sissinghurst and Scotney castles.

So, in 1990, when he and his wife Jo paid £95,000 for four hectares containing a ruined Victorian farm labourer's cottage and a silted-up lake, he knew exactly what sort of home he wanted to put on it.

Braylsham Castle now stands proudly on a small island in a lake, at the end of a rutted track on the side of a wooded valley a few miles from the small town of Heathfield in East Sussex. Mew pronounced it finished three years ago but has been busy since with extra touches of authenticity.

The drawbridge mechanism, for example, now works perfectly. Mew presses a button and three quarters of a tonne of timber and chain rise gently towards the twin bastions that support them.

Gaining permission to build Braylsham was not easy. The process took 15 months and was a topsyturvy affair, during which the plans were at one stage "called in" by the government. Once over this hurdle the Mews finally won the day with their local planning committee by resorting to art. "We commissioned a

local artist to paint an impression of what we had in mind and sent a copy of it to each member," Mew says. "After a number of them visited the site we managed to convince them that this was an exceptional project. The application was passed on a nine to seven vote."

The agreement was that the Mews would demolish the cottage up the slope from the lake but use the salvaged materials in the new castle, which was to be sited about 100 metres further down the slope, just inside what is now the water's edge.

The new property was to be an authentic replica of a moated, fortified medieval manor house on an island that the Mews would create by building on a small spit of land they would later remove.

The main work took eight years. A stonemason spent two years building the stone

towers and the main structure of the great hall, and a bricklayer worked for three years (the brick stack in the great hall contains 13,000 bricks, enough to build a small house).

But, the Mews did much of the work themselves. John regularly spent three days a week on the project, while maintaining his orthodontics practice in Tunbridge Wells and London. The Mews'



Mews' house: the couple with their old house and 'new' castle

three grown children lent a hand when they were in town, as did a small army of friends.

Among the biggest challenges were digging the sewer trenches – which had to be 2.7 metres deep in order to run under the lake and connect to the castle – and building the 90 steps that lead to the tops of the two towers.

Mew says: "I cast each one in concrete using carefully chosen dyes and special sands, adapting techniques I learned during my dental training. I even cast a wear pattern into most of them. It was a case of 'must needs', as the best quote I could find was beyond my pocket – £300 for each step."

He also learned wood carving – to create the six ornate corbels set in the posts supporting the hammer-beamed oak roof of the great hall – and stone carving for the bear, dragon and serpent

gargoyles on the towers. The gothic windows and arches in the great hall are from a Victorian church that was being demolished in Bristol. The Mews paid £2,000 for the stone windows that were still intact and made two journeys with a hired van to get them to Sussex. They carried out a similar exercise with the oak floorboards in the hall, but found them closer to home, in Tunbridge Wells.

The best example of Mew's quest for authenticity is the "squiffy" tilted roof he built on the main timbered wing that contains most of the bedrooms.

"I explained to the council officials that if it were to be constructed perfectly square it would look all wrong," he says.

"One of my neighbours had the roof renewed on his beautiful old house and, because it looks regular and

not skew-whiff like ours, he has knocked thousands off the value of the house. So when the A-frame roof was craned into position I had it set at an angle. One of the wall frames is also tilted 18 inches out of vertical."

The total cost for the castle has been about £350,000 – an astonishingly low figure considering the six-bedroom property is now valued at several million pounds. "We had no pot of gold to built it with," Mew says. "Really we did it on a shoestring."

When the Mews die, the castle will be donated to a local heritage organisation on the understanding that it will be let to visitors who want to live in a castle for a few days. In the meantime, paying guests can participate in special interest weekends at Braylsham focusing on heritage and vernacular architecture.

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