

Hilary Weston knows business, art, philanthropy and royalty.

And she's created the perfect billionaires' hideaway in Florida. So might family friends Meghan and Harry come property shopping one day?

Go Weston



ABOVE The Westons' home in Windsor, Florida, was designed by Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk to evoke traditional southern US architecture. OPPOSITE Hilary Weston with Grayson Perry at the opening of his exhibition at her gallery, in 2018

It comes as no great surprise to learn that Hilary Weston used to be a model. Now 78, she exudes perfect poise and a very well-honed dress sense. Over the several days we meet, at the extraordinary Floridian gated community that she owns with her husband, Galen, 79, she wears a chic assortment of Dior (a pale-pink quilted jacket), Valentino (a white zip-fronted lace jacket), Chloé (broderie anglaise trousers) – all from a selection of recent seasons – plus Chanel (two-tone pumps) and, for a particularly celebratory evening event, a much-loved Armani trouser suit. 'I thought, oh let's give it an outing!' she says, stroking a manicured hand down its shimmering ice-blue silk.

The Westons are perhaps best known in the UK as the billionaire Canadian owners of Selfridges. They acquired the retail behemoth in 2003, and beyond bringing the store itself back to life as an all-singing, all-dancing people's palace, have been major players in making entertainment part of the consumer experience (Selfridges now has its own cinema). But their empire is larger by far. Apart from many department stores, including Fortnum & Mason (in which the extended family has a sizeable stake) and Ireland's Brown Thomas chain, in Canada the Westons have dominated the rather less glamorous (and incredibly profitable) grocery market for a couple of generations. 'It really is the family business,' says Hilary, pouring tea into exquisite celadon-glazed cups. 'It's what we talk



about around the dining table, especially with the children playing such key roles.'

The Westons' daughter, Alannah, 48, is now chair of Selfridges, while their son, Galen Jr, 47, is chair of food giant George Weston Ltd in Canada. 'I still have an office in Selfridges,' says Hilary, 'though these days I just go in, plant my handbag down and head straight to the shop floor to see what's going on. I'm not involved in operations any more, but emotionally very much so.'

Hilary usually visits London every six weeks, as well as her and Galen's home on the Crown Estate of Windsor, rented on a 100-year lease. The couple also spend time in Canada, in Toronto and on a tucked-away island. But in the winter, eastern Florida is a good place to find her, near the smartly discreet little city of Vero Beach, where the land is flat and the nature lusciously subtropical. This time, for reasons of health, Galen is noticeably absent.

The couple bought up nearly 500 acres of land here in 1989 – a former citrus plantation bordered by the Indian River on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other – and set about building a utopian community of second homes, primarily for wealthy north Americans and Canadians from further up the continent's east coast wanting to escape winter's harsher months. 'We just fell upon this place,' she says. 'There were still lovely lanes and oaks and dirt roads. Local laws had forbidden the building of any skyscrapers, which is why the beach is so immaculate. We've had to adhere to strict planning laws – nothing can go higher than 35ft.'

Thirty years on, the development – which the Westons also chose to call Windsor – with its village stores and dinky church, restaurants, pools and gym, offers a paradigm of perfect living for community-minded millionaires to billionaires. (The Americans, should they choose to be here for at least six months of the year, get to enjoy Florida's tax-free status too.) Among them are titans of industry and Wall Street, plus some recognisable names: the Swarovski family, tennis champion Ivan Lendl.

The houses – with the smallest starting at \$1.8 million and the largest going for \$12 million – are designed according to a pattern book of styles created by architects Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. They selected elements from the traditional domestic architectures of Charleston, South Carolina, and the former British West Indies. There are generous porches and



ABOVE Hilary Weston on her veranda. LEFT AND OPPOSITE Grayson Perry's exhibition *Making Meaning* at the Westons' gallery in Windsor, Florida



fretwork and louveres galore – just call it plantation chic. Now nearly 300 have been built, the smallest clustered in the centre of the estate, the largest sitting in splendid isolation on its further fringes.

At the heart of everything is a verdant golf course, designed by top course-maker Bobby Trent Jones, which wraps itself endlessly around the houses. The eight clay tennis courts were put together by the American tennis star Stan Smith (he of the Adidas shoe). The polo ground is looked after by Max Secunda, the British stepson of champion polo player Julian Hipwood, and is a key to the Westons' wider royal connections. 'My husband used to play polo with the Prince of Wales,' says Weston. 'And then my son did too. Now it's the grandchildren's turn. There's always a junior match at Windsor [Florida] before the high-goal [top-level] main game, and my 10-year-old grandson takes part.'

Hilary Weston was born in Ireland; she met Galen there in the early 1960s, when the young grocery heir was enjoying a spot of foreign travel. Galen saw her larger than life image on a billboard. 'It was huge, an advertisement for tights,' she recalls, remembering how



LEFT A Michael Craig-Martin sculpture by the golf course in Windsor. BOTTOM The Westons with the Prince of Wales in Toronto, 2001; the couple are friendly with the Royal family



her long legs were emerging from a swinging fur coat. 'It was all very James Bond. I might even have had a gun.' She laughs. A dinner was arranged, to which both the model and the smitten Canadian were invited. They married in 1966. Galen bought a share in the Dublin department store Brown Thomas five years later, then acquired it outright in 1983, and it was Hilary who set about rebuilding it as an effective business. 'It had a unique reputation and heritage in Ireland. Galen saved it really,' she says. Though the couple relinquished any residency in Ireland after a kidnap attempt by the IRA in 1983 and made a permanent home in Canada, Hilary retains her Irish inflection.

While observers might have expected Weston to become the flawless trophy wife, she has instead worked rather hard. She was the de facto project manager in the early years of Windsor, and in 1997 was invited by the then prime minister of Canada, Jean Chrétien, to become Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, the British Crown's constitutional representative in the province. 'When they offered it to me, I phoned my husband and he didn't really believe me,' she says. (Though far from being what

she calls 'a public person', Weston was known not only as a serious businesswoman, but one who already knew the Queen.) What she hadn't expected was the backlash that followed. 'People said I'd only been offered the role because I was rich and born with a silver spoon in my mouth. Untrue! But a good friend said, "Hilary, it's good for them to say that, because you can only prove them wrong. You can only go upwards."'

In five years, she made over 600 speeches and attended receptions across Canada. She gave her salary, about £52,000, to her charity the Hilary M Weston Foundation for Youth. 'It was fascinating to go into government,' she says. 'People came to my office to express what they felt about things. It was a way to make themselves heard. And it tied me even closer to Canada.'

She thinks the country is an interesting choice for Harry (who, of course, she knows well) and Meghan. 'I feel really sorry for them, and I think the Queen has been brilliant in the way she's dealt with the situation,' she says. 'But I hope they're not disappointed by Canada. At least we don't have any paparazzi - we don't have any celebrity culture. We have very few newspapers.' Unfortunately, in the weeks since we spoke, it turns out that Canada does have paparazzi after all.

Life in Florida is a long way from such considerations, and the Westons' home, with its louvred French windows and long veranda overlooking the ocean, is a deep-pastel haven of calm. In the drawing room, the armchairs are clad in mint and sea green; tables and walls are filled with artworks, including a spectacular pair of ceramic watermelons by Ai Weiwei. 'We bought them at Art Basel,' says Weston. 'I went for a couple of years, but I prefer not to go to fairs now! There is a portrait of Alannah, aged around 20, by the Italian artist Francesco Clemente, and a perfect early work by the Scottish painter Peter Doig, who lived in Canada in his childhood. A vase by Grayson Perry is a reminder of the artist's visit to Windsor, Florida, a couple of years ago.'

Every year, for the past 17 years, an artist has been

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invited here to stage a small show in a little gallery that the Westons opened in the Windsor clubhouse in 2002. 'Peter Doig was one of our first shows,' says Weston. 'He was really hot at that moment.' Since then, the artists have included Michael Craig-Martin, Ed Ruscha and Jasper Johns. This year's choice (the third year that the gallery has been curated by the Royal Academy) is Rose Wylie, the octogenarian British painter whose work, in a deceptively cartoonish and apparently naive style, carries stridently feminist and socially conscious messages. 'I went to see her in her studio in Kent,' says Hilary, 'which is really just the ancient cottage where she brought up her children. Every part of it is now a studio. She starts by making the work on the floor.'

Needless to say, Weston has acquired a major piece of work by Wylie. Composed of several panels, featuring figures including Snow White and objects including vacuum cleaners, it's currently hanging in the gallery in Windsor. 'We're going to have to find a space once the show's over,' says Weston, looking perplexed - though doubtless not for long. She seems like a woman for whom solutions are quite effortlessly never far away. ●