

# Broughtons

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# Driving Ambition

Ex world champion Damon Hill retired from Formula 1 racing in 1999. So what does a man who has achieved his life goal before the age of 40 do? Enjoy more time with his family, of course, as he tells Tessa Harris.

Damon Hill is looking tanned and relaxed as he sits behind the desk of his Surrey office. It's been a while since he dropped out of the media spotlight, but those familiar dark brows are still there and those eyes are still piercing and earnest. Dressed in jeans and sporting a close-cropped beard, he's just spent the half term break in France, near La Rochelle, with his family. "We went there for the waves," he explains. He is an avid surfer and whenever the opportunity arises he heads for the coast. "I just love it," he enthuses.

It's this easy, modest, self-effacing attitude that endeared Damon to the media when he was a Formula One driver – he won the BBC's Sports Personality of the Year Award in 1994 – only now he seems even more content with his life away from the Grand Prix circuit.

It's been six years since he hung up the famous deep-blue "Hill" helmet for the last time. (Both Damon and his father, the legendary Graham, sported the insignia of the London Rowing Club, of which the latter was once a member.) But he has no regrets about turning his back on F1. "Absolutely none," he says emphatically.



Winner Damon Hill, Williams FW18, takes the chequered flag at the French Grand Prix, Magny-Cours, 30 June 1996.



Race winner Damon Hill, Williams FW18, Argentinean Grand Prix at Buenos Aires, 7 April 1996.



Damon Hill, Williams, celebrates race victory and the World Championship crown on the podium at the Japanese Grand Prix, Suzuka, 13 October 1996.

**Left:** Damon at the wheel of a Bentley Continental GT. Photo by David Montgomery.

Not surprisingly, Damon's post-F1 life still involves prestige and performance cars, but of a very different kind. Shortly after he retired he and his business partner, Michael Breen, set up an exclusive club that allows its members to drive the world's most exciting and exotic cars without having to buy them or worry about the running costs. Damon has a 50 per cent stake in the Leatherhead-based company, called P1, and is actively involved in its running, sometimes even tutoring members on special event race days.

Two Bentley Continental GTs and an Arnage are included in the 50-strong fleet and Damon has nothing but praise for the cars' sleek lines, luxury feel and flawless performance. "They're sumptuous. It's a treat to drive one. The world seems to be a different place when you're driving in a Bentley," he smiles.

P1 offers over £4 million worth of top quality cars to up to just 250 members who exchange points for driving time in the cars of their choice, ranging from the latest Ferrari F430 and a Ford GT – one of only 28 in this country – to an AC Cobra. But while members can enjoy the drive, the club takes care of the anxieties of ownership like depreciation and maintenance.

Suggest that he has a love of cars, however, and Damon clearly bristles at the thought. "I've

never loved cars," he says forthrightly. "That's not my motivation. The motivation for me is the competition. To say I'm a car lover conjures up an impression of someone who covets the car. F1 cars were beautiful things, and the quality of the cars is superb, but no. I am an experience lover, I would say. I like to have the experience of driving cars. I don't think I'm alone in that I like to experience as many different styles of car as I can. That's what appeals about P1. It's just a different approach."

If competition motivated Damon in Formula One, he had clearly lost his appetite for it in early 1999. "I was 40 years old and you know when you're past your best," he says candidly. "To be a racing driver the passion has to come from within yourself. You get an opportunity to prove yourself through your results and as you get higher up you ask yourself if you have satisfied that desire within. I had. I answered that question."

Although that passion for motor racing began early in Damon's life – he was famously given his first motorbike for passing his 11 plus – he was 33 before he found himself on the starting grid in a Grand Prix. Yet it had been his ambition to follow in the footsteps of his illustrious father, twice World Champion Graham Hill who was tragically killed in a plane

crash when Damon was just 15, from a very early age.

After a protracted apprenticeship, first in F3, then 3000, he first raced for Brabham in 1992. But his big break came when he replaced Nigel Mansell at Williams, where he had been a test driver.

"It was a long haul," he reflects. "I had the name but I didn't have my dad, but I knew I would get nowhere thinking along the lines that if I'd had my dad it would've been different. The example I learned from him was determination. He didn't have the money either at first, but he showed that it could be done. We all find inspiration from different sources and he was mine."

Winning his first Grand Prix in Hungary in 1993 he went on to finish as runner-up to Michael Schumacher in the Drivers' Championship in both '94, when a collision in the Australian Grand Prix handed his great rival the title – many believed unfairly, and '95. The following year he won the 1996 Formula 1 World Drivers' Championship, leading the competition from start to finish, winning eight races and finishing 19 points ahead of his nearest rival.

When asked what it meant to him winning the World Championship, however, he describes it simply as "a relief." The pressure on him was

Damon Hill celebrates race victory and the clinching of the World Championship crown for Williams. He is pictured with his wife Georgie, at the Japanese Grand Prix, Suzuka, 13 October 1996.



obviously enormous. "It was satisfying but I was blinkered, like a race horse," he reflects. "I had crossed over a barrier and joined a select band of drivers."

Despite the fact that he was World Champion, Williams, controversially and much to everyone's surprise, did not renew his contract and Damon moved to TWR Arrows. In 1998 he moved once more, this time to the Jordan team, before announcing his retirement from Formula One in June 1999.

When asked if he was happy to walk away from the motor racing world he answers without hesitation, "Yes," and it is very clear that the seductive powers of F1 no longer hold any sway with him. So has the sport lost something of its edge and excitement? "I get asked that all the time," he replies frankly. "Why would I be asked that question if it wasn't a fact? In the old days of F1 those skills and bravery were displayed much more clearly. The emphasis has shifted from being all about driving and skill to being about the power of ownership and political dominance."

Naturally he has been asked to commentate on various Grand Prix around the world for television stations, but these he has declined. "They would take me away from home for too long," he says.

He has also been approached to take part in the Grand Prix Masters World Series, something to which Nigel Mansell and his old team mate Alain Prost have signed up, but he turned that down too. "It's a very appealing idea to recapture all the excitement but it is going back and it will never be as it was," he says.

He has not severed his ties with the motor racing world completely however. He manages a young Northern Ireland hopeful named Steven Kane who is currently impressing punters in the GP2 series and he hopes to nurture him all the way to Formula One.

But as for getting back on the track Damon is adamant. "Self preservation seems to have kicked in a big way," he confesses. "A sport like motor racing is dangerous." His need for speed, which he admits was almost an addiction when he was racing in F1, is still there. "I like motion sports. I don't like things where a ball comes at me, like football, but if I'm moving I can do it."

Apart from his own self-preservation instinct, Damon is obviously thinking more and more about his family. He and his wife Georgie have four children, the eldest of whom, 16 year-old Oliver, has Down's Syndrome. Damon is a very active president of the Down's Syndrome Association and lends his high profile to fund raising campaigns whenever he can. "It's my children's happiness that is most important now. The big thing in my life is my family. I try and give as much time as I can to them."

So what next for the former World Champion who, during his career, commanded such affection, not just among F1 fans, but also among the public at large? Damon shakes his head. "I don't have any huge ambitions," he says. "I want this company to succeed, but I spent such a long time having this goal of winning the World Championship in the distance when I was racing, just paddling

away trying to get to that goal, that I want to live in the present. It's very easy to forget you are here, now."

This is a man clearly at ease with his new life and, as our conversation draws to a close, we turn our attention to surfing. It's the first time he has allowed himself to break into a real smile as he talks about his love for the sport. It turns out that he would really like to catch the waves in Hawaii. He pauses. "I've never been there," he says, and then adds with a wink, "Perhaps I do have an ambition left after all."

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Race winner Damon Hill celebrates victory on the podium at the Brazilian Grand Prix, Interlagos, 31 March 1996.