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## Damon Hill

on Formula One *"The adrenalin rush is like a kid with Smarties"*

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page 108

## Upfront

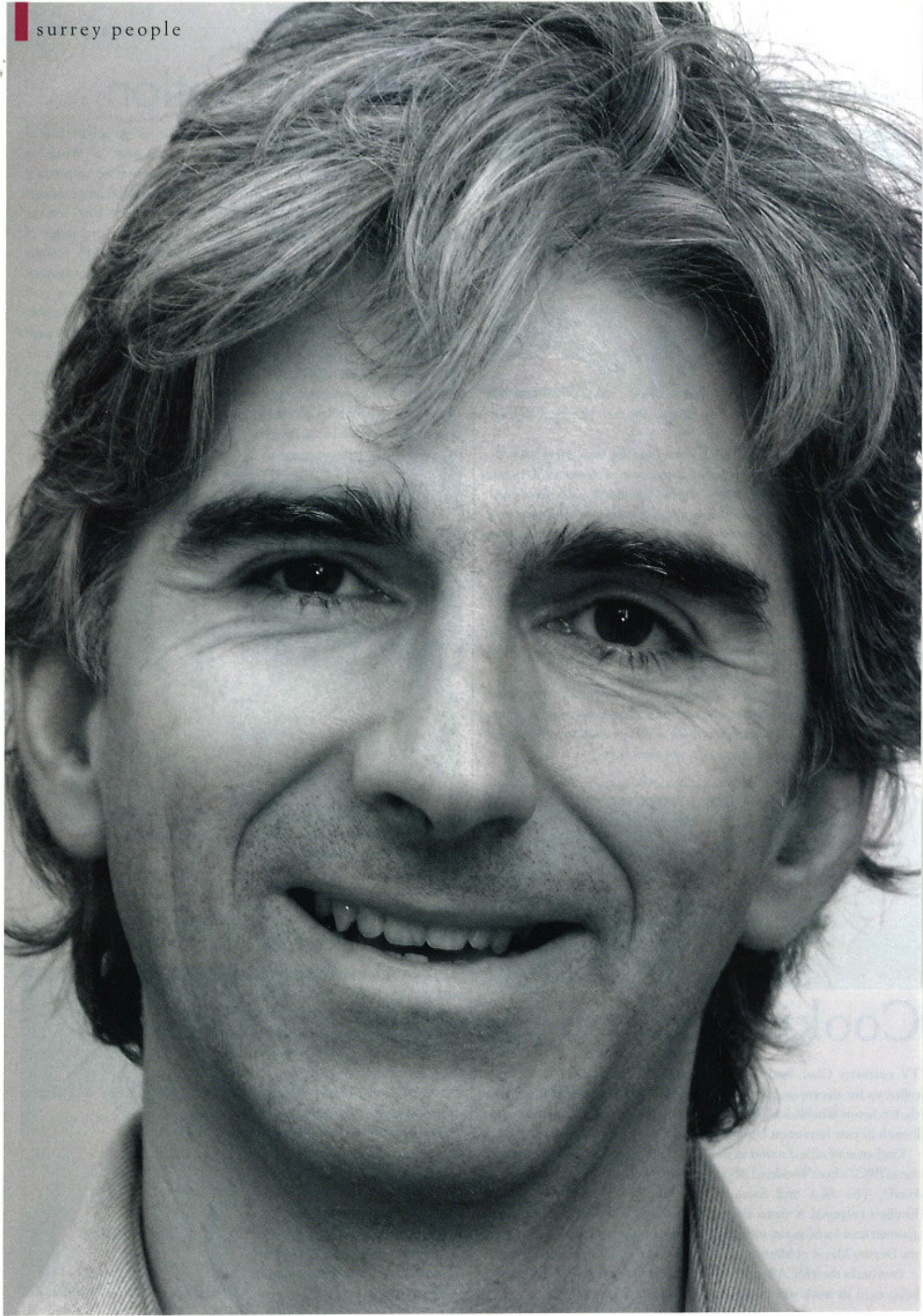
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page 11

Signs of spring in the garden



page 82



# “It’s scary out in front”

Damon Hill on Formula One, his business and family

Words: Katherine Simmons  
Pictures: Andy Newbold

TUCKED away in the corner of Leatherhead’s Imperial Park industrial estate is one of the world’s most impressive car parks.

Jostling for attention in the line up of the supermodels of the performance car world are a Lamborghini Gallardo, Ford GT, Aston Martin DB9 and a Ferrari F430 Spider to name but a few. It’s a sight connoisseurs of performance cars would drool over.

The unassuming figure looking over these beauties is the co-founder of the P1 Prestige and Performance Car Club, Formula One world champion, Damon Hill. Put a F1 racing driver in the middle of some

a late starter in motor racing terms. Having started his career racing motorbikes, he didn’t switch to cars until his mid-twenties.

After a steady rise through the ranks of Formula Ford, F3 and F3000, Damon made his debut in the Spanish Grand Prix in 1992 for the Brabhams team. At the same time, he served as test driver for the Williams team. When Nigel Mansell left the team to drive Indycars in 1993, Frank Williams took a chance on Damon and promoted him to the race team alongside Alain Prost. It was a successful season and he went on to win the Hungarian, Belgian and Italian races, in doing so, he scored

experience for everyone in F1 and the spotlight was on me as a racing driver - I had to raise my game. I wasn’t a young driver, I was only three months younger than Ayrton Senna [34] and he had won three world championships. I thought of myself as quite fortunate to get as far as I did in F1 but there I was spearheading the Williams championship effort. It was a tough experience and a crucial part of my life as a racing driver. It was a challenge to take on someone who has turned out to be possibly the greatest driver the sport has ever seen [Schumacher]. No one knew how tough he was to beat.”

Read about the revival of the British independent sports car page 110

*“When you are winning and leading a race you have to manage the adrenalin or you would get exhausted. You can see what would happen if you don’t with children - when they have too many Smarties at a party.”*

of the world’s most highest performing vehicles and you’d expect him to be like a kid in a sweet shop. But as proprietor of the UK’s first performance car club his job is more steering his business than being at the wheel. “I am a little hard on cars but I’m not careless. After all, you wouldn’t buy a used car off a racing driver, would you?” he laughs, “I can guarantee that every car here has not been driven by me!”

Pressed, he admits it isn’t exactly true and he does occasionally get behind the wheel for a spin. But Damon, who lives in Godalming, his wife Georgie and children Oliver, Joshua, Tabitha and Rosie, says his usual mode of transport now is a practical “five door hatchback.”

Damon Graham Devereux Hill was born in London in 1960, the son of late twice Formula One World Champion Graham Hill. Despite his racing pedigree, Damon still faced the same money struggles as his father had done before him. And like his father, he was also considered

another world first, as the second generation of a Grand Prix winning family.

In 1994, world triple champion Ayrton Senna joined the Williams team following Prost’s retirement. Pre-season, the expectation was the Brazilian would take the title. But tragedy struck at the San Marino Grand Prix when Senna was killed when his car crashed into a concrete wall. On the previous day, Austrian driver Roland Ratzenburger had died in an accident in virtually the same spot. The motor racing world was left reeling and Damon suddenly found himself in the limelight as Williams’ team leader.

“Nobody was prepared for that. Quite apart from the shock of Imola race weekend, there was the challenge and pressure to take on the championship battle with Michael Schumacher. I had never envisaged being anything but Ayrton Senna’s understudy and to try to score a few points from him, but then the field changed pretty quickly.”

He continues: “It was a life changing

After winning in Barcelona, Damon went on to win the British Grand Prix - a race his late father never managed to taste victory in. He lists it as one of the high points of his racing career. “It was the best feeling because it’s on home ground, so there’s no rush to fly back home. I sat in the motorhome with Frank Williams on a beautiful evening and signed autographs with a big smile on my face!”

With Schumacher disqualified from the British Grand Prix and banned for two races for ignoring a black flag, the two drivers went head to head in the battle for the championship. A win at the penultimate race in Suzuka for Damon meant the title was decided on the last race in Adelaide. But Damon lost the championship by just one point when his rival crashed into his car forcing it from the track. But in the eyes of the British public, Damon was a winner and they showed their appreciation by voting him BBC Sports Personality of the Year. After again →



Damon with his favourite car, the Ford GT

playing second fiddle to Schumacher in the 1995 F1 season, Damon took the World Championship title in 1996 and was yet again voted Personality of the Year, joining boxer Henry Cooper and F1 driver Nigel Mansell as the only sportsmen to win the accolade twice. He points to the trophy, on display in P1's meeting room and smiles: "I'm the only sports personality to have won once for losing and once for winning!"

So what does it feel like to be a champion racing driver? What goes through your mind lap by lap - is it nerves, adrenalin or sheer determination? And how does it feel to be out in front,

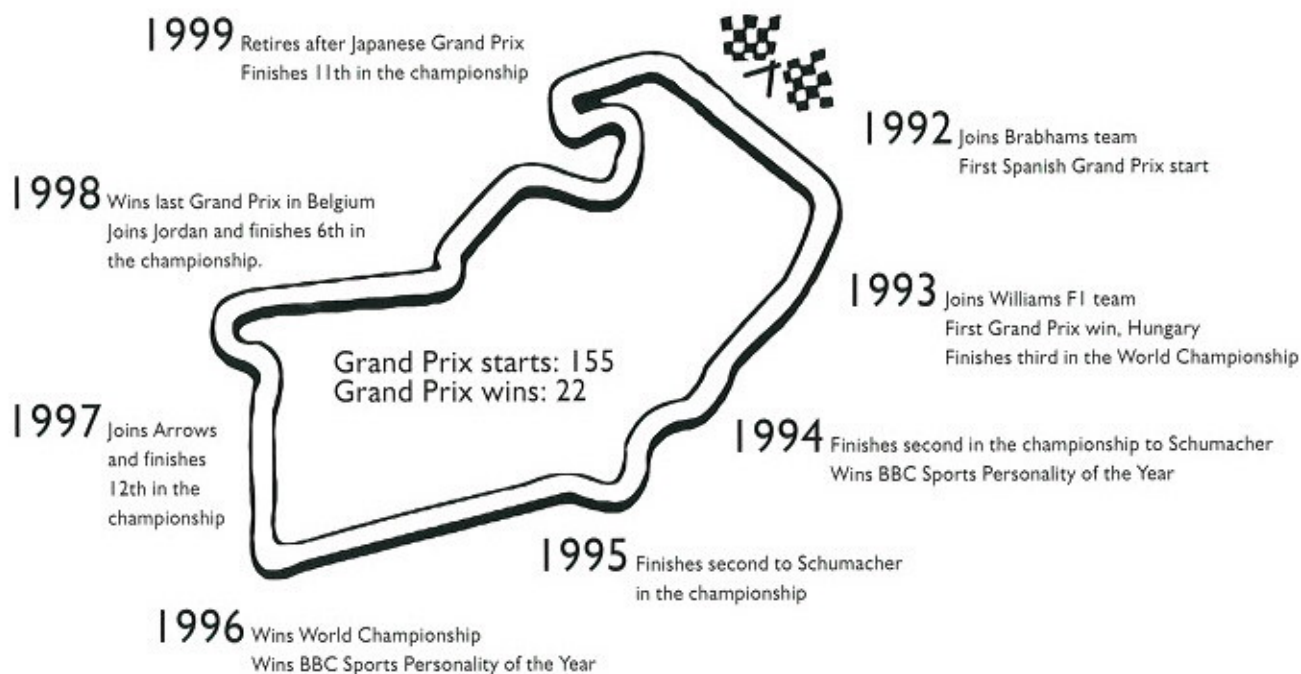
knowing other drivers are close behind?

Damon explains: "When you are winning and leading a race you have to manage the adrenalin or you would get exhausted. You can see what would happen if you don't with children - when they have too many Smarties at a party. Your objective is to get out in front, to get yourself in position leading the way. It's a very scary place as there's no one else to follow. It's like a quote from Cromwell, who said 'No one rises so high as he who knows not whither he is going.'"

You might think he would say his proudest moment was winning the world

*"You feel different in a Lamborghini and you get a real feeling of Britishness when you drive the Bentley. And you feel like James Bond when you drive the Aston DB."*

championship, the British Grand Prix or twice winning personality of the year, but surprisingly it's not a moment of podium glory or a cunning overtaking manoeuvre. Damon joined the unfancied Arrows team after his contract with Williams expired in 1996. Little was expected from the car but Damon put in an outstanding drive in the Hungarian Grand Prix. Close to the finish, the Arrows developed gearbox problems allowing Jacques Villeneuve to storm past and win, leaving Damon in second place. For Damon, the achievement was all about silencing critics' claims he could only win in the best car: "Nobody expected it to be





out in front, which was why I consider it the best moment. There is a common denominator there to when you win because you have the best equipment."

Damon retired from motor racing in 1999, spending his last two seasons with Jordan. He founded PI the following year with Michael Breen who had been his manager during his racing career. The idea was to create a solution for busy people who enjoyed driving performance cars but without the ownership hassles such as maintenance, insurance and parking. PI differs from a leasing company, with members subscribing on an annual basis to a points system, which allows them to drive a combination of the cars up to 6,000 miles per year.

"We were the first in the country to do this sort of thing. In addition to over 200 members in London and the south east, we get a lot of ex-pats who come in on long contracts, people who travel a lot. They come in via Heathrow and Gatwick and they want to drive something more interesting than a hire car, a Ferrari or a Ford GT while they are here."

So of this beautiful collection, does he have a particular favourite? "It's the Ford GT, a nice big, American sports car. But cars all have their own character and if you had the same thing the whole time you wouldn't appreciate it."

Damon is fascinated by the psychological effects of driving different cars and always encourages his members to be a little less



PHOTO: MILLIAN FI

conservative and something different. He likens the change to a "Trinity and Susannah" makeover on a person's psyche. "You feel different in a Lamborghini and you get a real feeling of Britishness when you drive the Bentley. And you feel like James Bond when you drive the Aston DB."

But along with the fascination with cars comes a real awareness of their destructive potential. It is a subject he takes extremely seriously as the face behind Surrey Fire and Rescue's 'Safe Drive, Stay Alive' campaign aimed at youngsters coming up to driving age. The campaign includes a presentation at the Dorking Halls with people retelling their real life experiences of road accidents. He explains: "You hear these people talking about what it's really like to be a parent of a crash victim or a police officer, or what it's like to save someone's life at the scene of a road accident. It's very hard hitting and quite stressful to watch - a very powerful show. Surrey has a particularly high accident rate because we have a high number of roads and motorway intersections and it's also a very leafy county."

It's a message he is well qualified to deliver to Surrey's young drivers - from those proudly displaying their 'L' plates in their first Ford Fiesta to the next F1 racing champion. ■

For more information on PI Prestige and Performance Car Club telephone 01372 374400 or go to [www.piinternational.com](http://www.piinternational.com).

## Off road with Damon Hill In pole position

Family comes first for Damon and he lists his favourite interest as spending time with wife Georgie and his four children and getting involved in their education. The family enjoys walks with their dogs and cycle rides in the Surrey countryside. The Devil's Punch Bowl, Hascombe and Leith Hill are particular favourites as are taking boat trips down the Thames at Kingston.

### Refuelling

As a vegetarian, Damon recommends a visit to the Guildford Institute. His favourite Indian restaurant even has his name on the front of it. He says: "There's a fantastic Indian in Cranleigh called Cardamon. When I looked at the name I thought it spelt out 'Car' 'Damon' so I had to go in there!"

### Slowing the pace

Nowadays, sport means the more sedate pleasures of golf course and Damon is a member of Milford Golf Club. It's a world from motor racing, as Damon explains: "Golf has a negative image and suggests slippers, cardigans and pipes but the attraction is that it is a mind and body experience. Having been a sportsman, I find that fascinating. It's a more spiritual game than its given credit for. It's not just putting a ball, it is more a state of mind."

### Team Challenge

Damon supports Guildford-based charity Disability Challengers which provides play activities and respite care for children with special needs. Damon and Georgie's eldest son, Oliver, was born with Downs Syndrome. The charity is currently raising funds to convert and refurbish an old school building in Farnham. The total cost of the project is £3 million with £1.8 million already raised. Oliver has taken part in Samba drumming sessions through the charity and has even played at Guilfest.

Damon says: "It's something that's often overlooked, play is a basic and fundamental need."

Damon and Georgie are also patrons of the Downs Syndrome Association.

For more information on Disability Challengers go to [www.disability-challengers.org.uk](http://www.disability-challengers.org.uk)

### Top to bottom:

Bentley Continental

Lotus Exige S2

