

Imagine no possessions

Why buy a supercar when you can simply borrow one? Ex-Formula One world champion **Damon Hill** reveals the philosophy behind his car-sharing club, P1

It is normal practice to analyse things when they go wrong, and to congratulate ourselves on our self-evident genius when they go right. Much as I would love to claim that my "car-sharing" club concept, P1, was all my idea and that I knew it would work all along, I have to be honest and say, "er... what's happening here?"

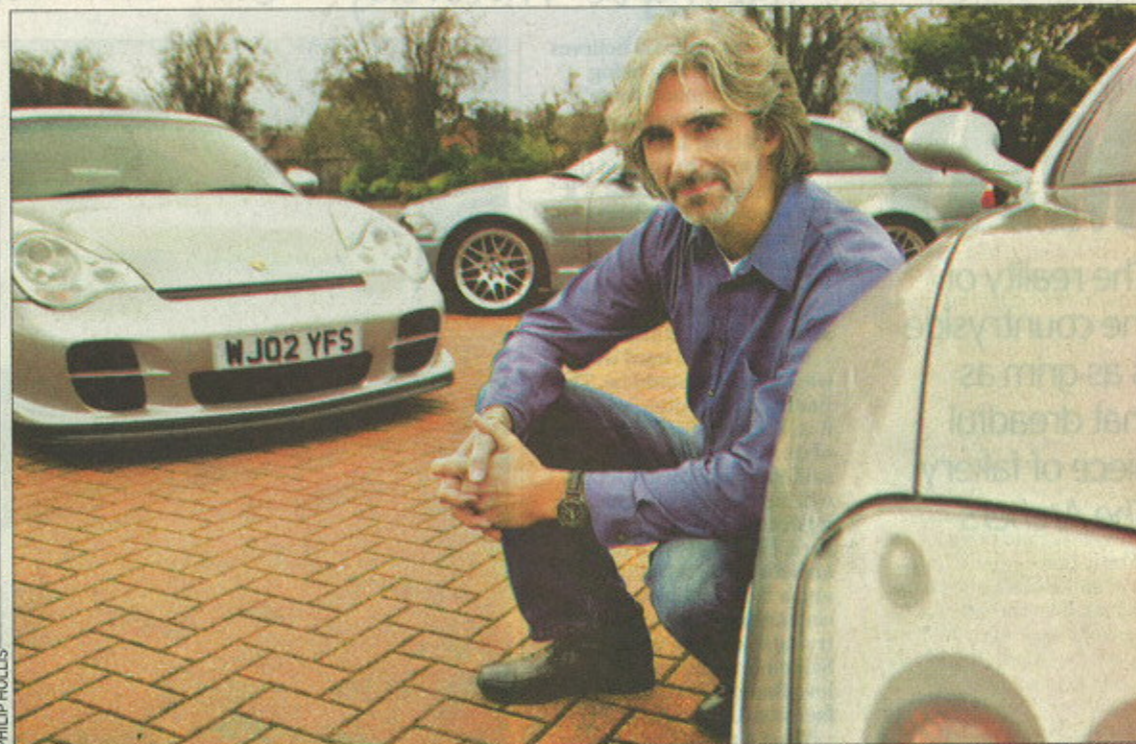
In the late summer of 2001, a month before the Twin Towers were attacked, I had set a target of 50 members as a threshold that would have to be met before Christmas if I was to avoid winding up the business. Bearing in mind this was not a cheap club to join (£12,500 per annum), and that the stock market had just popped, I believed it was curtains for P1 after 9/11.

The prevailing mood was hardly conducive to encouraging people to indulge their fantasies by parading about in Lamborghinis, or tossing away hard-earned cash on mere pleasure. I thought the whole idea was deadlier than Stonehenge. In fact, I had real difficulty justifying the concept to myself, let alone trying to convince potential members that it was a great idea. Flash cars and war plans seemed incongruous. It also raised all the other issues to do with responsibility to the planet and conspicuous consumption. Did I really want to be part of the problem?

Mercifully, expediency came charging to my rescue in a brand new Aston Martin Vanquish, and I realised the key to P1 was that it offered a way round the moral, social, psychological and practical dilemmas that accompany a certain level of income, a subject close to the heart of *Telegraph Motoring* regular Sir John Whitmore.

The dream of owning a Ferrari (or similar) will never die. If it is a beautifully made machine, and you can afford it, and you've worked like a dog for 20 years, then you should buy it, keep it, drive it, love it, show it – and yourself – off too. But that's not what always happens. There are hundreds of Ferraris sitting under dust sheets in garages that only see the light of 10 Sundays a year, and then are sold with 2,000 miles on the clock, losing their owners the best part of £40,000. They are the dream victims.

Now, as the man in the showroom said, if you can afford it, go ahead. That's what being rich is for. But my experience is that most people (no matter how rich) hate to lose money,



Winning formula: Damon Hill's car-sharing club is 'a more responsible, sharing, pragmatic way' to enjoy exotic cars

'You can be flash and yet frugal, smart but not smart-arsed'

so the whole experience can feel like a very chilly bath. Another thing about the well-off is that they often work too hard, which means they never have time to enjoy the things they work so hard to afford.

To own things that will never be used is not only pointless but morally wrong; that same money could be loaned to a third-world country so that its government can buy Ferraris, or perhaps something more useful. But why go without a supercar if you want one and can afford it? The solution is to dip into a pool of cars only when you have the desire and the time to do so.

This argument seems to have worked, and the P1 idea has caught on. It is, in Darwinian terminology, "best fit" for a cash-rich/time-poor society sensitive to political correctness. You can be flash and yet frugal, fulfilled but not burdened,

smart but not smart-arsed. It also adds 20 years to your driving experience because, unless you are Jeremy Clarkson's chauffeur or you plan to live to 150, there is no way that a mere mortal could ever get to drive all the cars in the P1 collection by the normal routine of ordering, waiting, servicing, selling, replacing and so on. There are simply not enough hours in the year to get through that amount of car dealing. The variety of experience offered by car sharing is another powerful factor in the uptake of membership. In fact, since 2001, the club has grown to the point where there is very little need for promotion: the idea itself is doing all the work. A bit like communism.

So what is this powerful new force? I think that we have (partly accidentally) invented a kind of alternative capitalism, a semi-material materialism, a more responsible, sharing, pragmatic way to enjoy the things we previously wanted to own. There is something disquieting about having too many possessions. We know in our conscience that wanting to own more than we can possibly use is just gluttony. However, the desire to "experience" is much more difficult to avoid than ownership, which has

its own self-regulating mechanism (it's called money).

And, in most cases, it is the experience that's at the root of the desire, rather than mere ownership. I don't own a single car that I raced. What I do have, however, are some wonderful memories of my experiences behind the wheel of some of the most amazing cars ever built. That is all I ever wanted. To actually own the cars would be like collecting religious relics.

The idea for a car-sharing club filtered down from jet-sharing schemes such as Flexjet and NetJets. These create a middle ground between those for whom buying a private jet is too expensive and those who can afford it but don't want \$10 million sitting idle on the tarmac while the pilots play golf. The rich, contrary to popular mythology, are not always stupid. There are a lucky few P1 members who could buy all the cars in the club, plus a jet and a yacht besides. The only thing that stops them is that they know they no longer have to.

● More information about Damon Hill's P1 club is available at www.p1international.com, or on 01372 374400.