

CLASSIC DRIVER

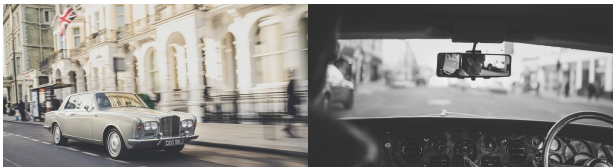
[An afternoon with Graeme Hunt, London's most gentlemanly car dealer](#)

Lead

Tucked away on a quiet mews in fashionable Kensington are the business premises of one of the most respected dealers on London's ever-burgeoning classic car scene. We spent an afternoon with Graeme Hunt (and numerous cups of tea)...

After beginning his automotive career with famous [Bentley](#) and [Rolls-Royce](#) dealer Jack Barclay, Graeme Hunt set up his eponymous mews-based classic car dealership in 2001. Since then, his business has gone from strength to strength, with a stocklist populated by cars of all types, from [Citroen Meharis](#) to [Bentley R-Type](#) Continentals. On a personal level, Graeme is one of the most personable, respectable and best-dressed characters you're likely to find anywhere in the classic car scene, so we spent an afternoon in his company to find out what keeps his passion alive after three decades in the industry.

Early memories



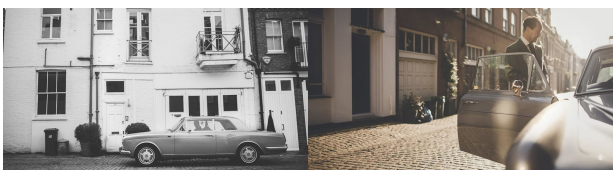
What is your earliest automotive memory?

Sitting on the armrest in the front of a Ford Zephyr Six at around four years of age. My father was driving, and it was the only way I could see above the dashboard. I also had a white plastic steering wheel with a gear lever stuck to the fascia - so you could say I've been driving since I was four years old.

My next question was going to be 'was this when you decided on a career involving cars', but I suppose four years old is a little too early to be making career decisions?

Quite! I always liked cars, but I wouldn't say I always felt I'd have a career involving them. I left school and worked for a company producing meteorological equipment, and then trained as an accountant. After a brief stint working for Dallah Avco, an old school friend of mine that was living in Geneva reminded me that left-hand-drive cars were less expensive in the UK. He was looking to buy a [Mercedes 350 SL](#), so I found one - metallic green with tan leather - at the French consul in London, and then drove it over to him. Even after it was registered, it was still a third cheaper than any similar cars over there. So he said 'let's sell it and buy another one'. That's how I fell into the motor industry; there was no cogent or strategic plan to do so.

The everlasting attraction



After so many years in the industry, what still attracts you to cars?

I have classic cars coursing through my veins, even though I deal with them all the time. I still get a buzz out of buying a car, and it doesn't matter whether it's for £10,000 or £500,000. The interesting thing is, the cars that command £500,000 today were nowhere near that level, in 'real terms', when I began trading 30 years ago.

Family business



Your business is very much a family-run company, is that right?

Yes. My wife Bettina works here full-time, and my sons play their part. When they're not at university, we grab them by the ear and drag them to events at which we might be stalling out, such as the [London Classic Car Show](#). They help us get the cars there, they help out on the stand and, if we're not at the event, they help out here at the showroom. This way, they understand work ethic rather than dossing around, as university students so often like to do!

Anyone looking around your showroom will soon realise your business isn't only about cars. What else are you involved in?

Well, my wife Bettina handles the watches. She's been involved in the Swiss watch industry for many years, and she currently operates a franchise for two German watch brands, [Mühle-Glashütte](#) and Junghans, while also offering custom watch straps in various colours, sizes and materials, including python, alligator, lizard and shark skins. We've also got some lovely original art for sale in the showroom, whether it's the motoring bronzes, the vintage posters, or artwork by the likes of Walter Gotschke, Paul Bouvot or Kevin Shepherd.

A propensity for Bentleys?



Did you naturally gravitate towards Bentleys and Rolls-Royces as part of your employment at Jack Barclay, or did they interest you from a younger age?

They did interest me as a youngster, but at that age I preferred the fast loud things from [Lamborghini](#) or [Ferrari](#). My father's business partner had a T-series Bentley, and there was an official Rolls-Royce and Bentley dealer near our house in Hadley Wood. I used to walk past the showrooms every day, and I remember seeing a Camargue in the window when it was first introduced - they were phenomenally expensive in those days. But yes, I guess my passion was formulated in my Jack Barclay days. Nowadays, everyone says I'm a Rolls-Royce and Bentley specialist, but I'm not. I like them, but I like other cars just as much - it's just particular cars, quite often the models that others don't appreciate so much. I can see the benefit in those cars that other people don't.

Quirks of the job





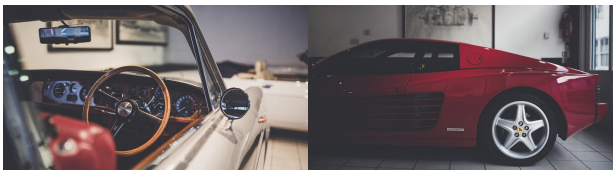
Many of the cars you stock have unusual specifications, such as bright green paintwork or an orange velour interior. Usual desirability factors aside, is this something you purposely look for when sourcing a car?

I like things that most people wouldn't be interested in. I like the black sheep of the family, the oddball motor car, they do attract me. For instance, back in my Jack Barclay days, people would come to us with cars that they couldn't sell on due to unusual colour combinations. Often, the local dealer who supplied the car wouldn't even buy it back. They were told that their cars would be impossible to sell, because they were 'too bright'. But even if they were quite gauche, I'd take them on and put them in the window of the showroom, and they'd fly out of the door because you couldn't find one anywhere else. Those painted in standard colours such as Balmoral Green or Cobalt Blue could be found in any Rolls-Royce or Bentley dealership, but you couldn't find the oddball colours. That, I suppose, led me to understand and appreciate those things that the majority wouldn't be comfortable buying.

Doesn't that make your job more difficult?

Yes, sometimes I'll have an oddball car that can take longer to sell. But you only need one person to like it too. It doesn't matter if a hundred people don't like it; you only need one person to agree with you.

Doing things the old-fashioned way



"We're not modern; we don't do health and safety - we do things the old-fashioned way, on a personal basis."

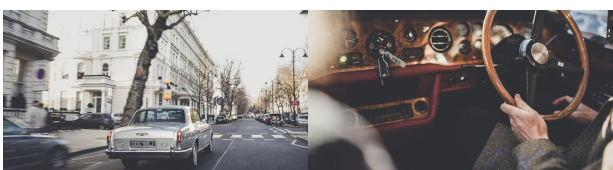
What can customers expect from Graeme Hunt that they wouldn't be able to find elsewhere?

Well, I wouldn't want to suggest they wouldn't be able to get what we provide elsewhere, I think that would be a bit pompous. But what I'd like to think we do is offer the complete package in a very personalised manner. We're not modern; we don't do health and safety - we do things the old-fashioned way, on a personal basis. Our approach to service and quality of product is something I was taught by Victor Barclay. It's all about meeting the expectations of the customer without them even realising you're doing it.

You're well known in the industry for your friendly and approachable manner. Do you think this has been a major factor in your success?

Am I? I wasn't aware of that! I think our industry has two types of character: one is the cantankerous self-centred chap who customers tolerate solely because he has the car they want to buy. The other type is an enthusiast, who finds customers to be intriguing, rather than a pain in the backside. I'm from the latter school of thought - I don't understand those that regard potential customers as a thorn in their side.

No regrets



Which single car from your career do you wish you had kept?

There isn't one, because there's always another exciting car around the corner. It doesn't matter whether a car has gone up in value by two or ten times since I sold it - I'm a dealer, not a collector. If I wanted to be static, I'd put all these cars in a warehouse, shut this place down, go and sit in the sun for a year, and see what happens. I've never yet bought a car and not been excited by it.

What do you drive at the weekends?

I drive Bettina mad! But seriously, I don't actually have a personal car – every time I put a parking permit on a car, somebody asks to buy it. Now, I rotate the stock to make sure every car is used regularly and is on-the-button. Tonight, I'll be taking home a [1971 Bentley Corniche](#).

And finally, for my German colleagues as much as our Continental readers: how do you pronounce your first name?

The last vowel on my first name is a silent one, so that should clear up any confusion!

Photos: [Amy Shore](#) for Classic Driver © 2015

Gallery

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