

A LIFE IN THE DAY

Tom Hartley

The supercar salesman on going to “any lengths” to get deals done

Hartley, 60, was born in Glasgow, where his family ran a cash-and-carry carpet business. He left school aged 11 unable to read or write due to dyslexia but sold his first car only a year later. He became a millionaire at 17, then soon after married his childhood sweetheart, Priscilla. The couple have two sons, Tom Jr and Carl, who both live on the family estate in Overseal, south Derbyshire. He runs his eponymously named supercar showroom from the same site.

I’ve built a mini kitchen into the en suite of our six-bedroom house. It means I can slip out of bed at 6.30am and make myself a coffee. I take Priscilla a cup of tea then start going through emails. Selling supercars is a global business: people on the other side of the world are waking up when I go to sleep. There’s no time to relax.

My life has been like this since I was 12, when I sold my first car. I was a nosey b***ard and overheard that a friend of my father had ordered one of the very first Range Rovers, an extremely sought-after car. Somehow, I convinced my parents to loan me £1,960 to do a deal — a lot of money in 1973. I sold it on for a £250 profit.

That early success gave me the hunger. Once you’ve had the taste of money you want more. I thought I’d made my fortune by 17, then lost it all a year later, before building the business back into the empire it is today. Rory McIlroy, Rod Stewart, Elton John, Nicolas Cage — I’ve done deals with



the lot of them, but I’m the same person with everyone.

What I learnt at the weekly car auctions in Glasgow and Edinburgh they couldn’t teach me in school. It was in at the deep end — tough. I admit I broke the law a few times too. I delivered a Rolls-Royce to a customer when I was 14 and on the couple of occasions when I was stopped by the police, I gave a false name and address.

At 17 I was making a fortune importing German vehicles for less than the UK price. When the carmakers found out, they tightened import rules. I lost a lot of money.

I eat breakfast at 8am with my son Carl. We run the business together now and hold our

board meetings over boiled eggs and toast. He lives 40 yards away with his family; my elder son, Tom Jr, has a house on the other side of our [50-acre] estate, which we have recently expanded.

My wife says that when I walk out of the door in the morning, she doesn’t have a clue when I’ll return. If somebody has a car in Hong Kong for the right price, I’m on a plane. We sell 40-50 vehicles a month and the average price is £250,000, although some classics fetch tens of millions each.

If I’m not travelling, then customers come to us at our showroom. We installed a helipad here and have chauffeurs to collect people from the airport. There’s always a chef on hand, even a masseuse if the buyer’s wife wants to relax while we talk cars.

I often forget to eat lunch if I’m busy. If I do feel hungry, I’ll grab a smoke salmon sandwich, but I’m rarely away from my desk. What’s most important is closing a deal and I’ll go to any lengths. In the early days, I followed cars I wanted to buy across London and then approached the owner when they stepped out. I once followed a man into a sauna to get a deal done. I still find it very hard to pass a great car without saying something to the owner.

We might see five customers a day at the showroom, by appointment only. It’s not uncommon for a Rolls-Royce buyer to leave with a couple of other cars too. I do think there are worrying signs in the luxury sector at the moment — there could well be a re-evaluation of prices in property, cars and everything else.

Before I go home I have a therapy treatment. It’s a moment when I get to completely unwind. Supper is often a ham sandwich before I do a few more hours’ work. I am very competitive but that’s what made the family business. It’s very hard to stay at the top when you get older but I still get the same buzz today as when I sold that first Range Rover ■

Interview by Jeremy Taylor

WORDS OF WISDOM

Best advice I was given

My dad said you never go broke if you always make a profit

Advice I’d give

In life people give up too easy. Never give up on a deal

What I wish I’d known

in 1970 ... that a £10,000 Ferrari 275 would be worth £3 million today