



This is Tom. In a few days he will be 18 and after saving up his earnings he's bought himself something special - a partnership in his dad's £70m supercar business. We went to meet him.

I have no idea to expect - I've never met a self-made, teenage multi-millionaire before. There's more chance of bumping into one these days, thanks to the Internet and the phenomenal growth in computer sales, but Tom isn't a dot.com millionaire with a paper fortune, or a 'windfall' tycoon reaping the rewards of a fabulously success console game. No. Tom has made his £5 million fortune by selling cars. Expensive ones, of course.



His CV reads thus: sold his first car, a 911 Cabrio, when he was 11. Made his first million three months before his 15th birthday (making him Britain's youngest-ever self-made millionaire). Plays off five at his local golf club, the Belfry, and has been club champion three times. Took his driving test at 17 in a Ferrari 360 Modena and passed after one lesson. Celebrated his 18th birthday by buying into his dad's supercar business as a partner with £5 million.



You'll probably want to read that last paragraph again. All of that before he was able to vote. What had you done before you were 18? As I made my way to deepest Derbyshire to meet Tom, it's a question I asked myself. When Tom left school aged 11 to deal in cars, I'd just got my first paper round. When his bank account had one and six noughts, mine was all noughts. And at 18 I was two years into an apprenticeship while Tom, well, his already served. He is now legally able to take his rightful place as an equal partner in the company he has been helping to run for six years.

It's no ordinary firm of course. Tom shares his name with his dad and the company they now officially run together. Tom Hartley. Over the last 30 years, Hartley Senior has built up the most successful independent dealership in premium cars in the UK. Last year it had a turnover of £70 million; this year, under the direction of Tom Junior, the target is £100 million, 'I still have one hand on the wheel,' says his dad, 'but Tom's changing the gears.'

There is a showroom full of exotica but it's not the sort you pop into to browse; visits are by invitation only. At the rather chintzy iron gates, the left one wearing a swirly 'T', the right an 'H', an intercom crackles and after a moment the gates glide open. A short, curved driveway brings us past immaculate lawns and a modern, bungalow-style family house to the showroom, also immaculate.

Tom Snr, greets us, introduces us to Tom Jnr and then makes himself scarce. Perhaps he has calls to make, deals to clinch, but I sense that by leaving us with his son, he's letting us know that whatever we want to know about the business, Tom Jnr is our man. He isn't here for cute PR - the company doesn't need that - he's here because he's earned his place, and the capital to buy in. He's now the hands-on-boss while Tom Snr devotes more of his time to nurturing another venture; buying up mobile home sites.

So what's Tom Jnr like? Not like his dad. He doesn't have the soft Scottish brogue or the penchant for talking fast and sprinkling his conversation liberally with sound bites. He's taller, quieter, confident but in a relaxed way, and strikingly young.

Since he was in short pants, Tom Jnr has been hanging around, absorbing the nature of the business, watching exotic cars come and go and learning the craft of making a deal. Like his father he left school early, at 11, without qualifications. 'It wasn't hard to prove I was getting an education at home,' he says. 'There's the psychology of dealing with all sorts of people, and the travel - while other kids were at school learning about places, I was out there visiting them.' And the maths, of course.

The biggest difference between the two Toms is that Junior loves cars. Tom Snr never really has: 'It doesn't really matter to dad whether he's selling cars or carpets, to him a deal's a deal.' Later, Tom Snr sums up his take succinctly: 'You don't get a picture on your bank statement.'

Imagine, then, being an 18-year-old car fanatic and being able to pick up the keys to an F40, strap yourself in, and go for a quick run. Tom Jnr can and occasionally does. That's why the Ferrari driving test came about; young Tom needed to prove to the insurance company that he could handle the stock. It was planned that he'd pass his test in an F50 but apparently the authorities wouldn't allow a left-hand-drive car.

Yet even though he has a passion for cars, Tom Jnr's appraisal of them is professionally biased. 'The SLR Mercedes will be a great car,' he says with a note of respect, 'and so will the Vanquish.' If you're lucky enough to be on the waiting list for either, Tom Hartley will want to know you when you take delivery. And the Pagani Zonda? 'It has a long way to go before it's a supercar,' he says. 'A supercar has to have the name and the heritage.' How about the Bugatti Veyron, then? 'How much is it?' he asks. 'Well, I'll wait and see, but £400,000 of my money wouldn't go into it. Give me an F40 and an

F50 any day.'

Right now, the 360 Spider is the car everyone wants. 'We'll give more of a premium than anyone else,' he says. 'They're fetching £40K over list at the moment, which isn't really realistic when you consider that an F50 is only £225K.' Yet this company is built on supply and demand. Back in the early 70's, Tom Snr kicked off the business with a deal on the first 'premium vehicle' - the Range Rover. He paid someone who'd just taken delivery £250 over list and then sold it on at a £500 premium to someone who he knew wanted one. Tom Snr was 13 at the time.

It has become a matter of honour for Tom Hartley to be the first to get the car everyone wants. This is the company's marketing, a key to its reputation. 'We'll sometimes pay £130K for a car and only make £2K profit,' says Tom Jnr. 'The risk is that the market can change overnight.' Risk is part of the business, though. 'I love the cars, I love the people,' he says, 'and I love the thrill of the deal.'

Just like dad, then. Only young Tom isn't as keen a self-publicist and I doubt that the décor of the spacious office is what he's choose; the walls are lined with framed articles about the business. On Sundays, though, you won't find young Tom anywhere else. 'There isn't a typical week, but I'm always in here very early on Sunday for the Sunday Times. First I check our ads, then I see what other people are selling, how our prices compare, and make sure I'm first to get to any car.'

They're interested in everything from Porsche Boxster to CLK GTR. They reckon they've had just about every new 911 Turbo that's got loose, and sold no fewer than 135 360 Modenas, more than any official Ferrari dealer. The one deal that has eluded them - and, to Tom Snr's relief, every other independent car dealer - is a McLaren F1. So far it has been a closed shop, says Tom Jnr, with McLaren brokering deals between sellers and buyers so that no cars escape onto the open market. If McLaren was worried about low values harming the car's reputation, it can probably stop now. The days of the two-thirds-list-price £400K F1 are no more, according to Tom Jnr: 'I'd pay £600,000 for one and expect to get £675,000 for it.'

So far, Tom Jnr says he hasn't made a bad deal, i.e. one he lost a packet on. The high points have been selling an F50 and part-ex'ing a pristine, 900-mile F40: 'That was enjoyable deal. There was also the Bentley Azure on Christmas eve - a really dead period, especially for convertibles...'

You get a sense of how long young Tom has been wrapped up in this business and what he's learned from his father when he says convincingly: 'Meeting Tom Hartley is a good feeling, you know you can do a deal.'

So what wouldn't he buy right now? 'Big Jags aren't selling well, Bentley Red Labels are good but Rolls-Royce Seraphs are too ostentatious (take note, BMW), and the Z8 hasn't taken off because £80K is too much for a left-hand-drive BMW.' In Tom Hartley Jnr's car-loving but necessarily hard-nosed world, even Ferrari can get it wrong: 'The 456 has had its day, they should drop it now,'

That's not to say he'd buy one at the right price. After all, a deal is a deal.



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