

Under the skin

HENRY FIRMAN

Porsche dealer extraordinaire, racer, and all-time character – being in a one-time McJob did not hold back Henry Firman. The g11virgin.com man talks to Paul Davies

Words: Paul Davies
Photography: Paul Harmer

I took a Jag in part exchange when I sold my first Carrera 3.2. It had all the bells and whistles, but I really missed the honesty of the Porsche and went out and bought another g11. Since then I've never been without one – I've usually got a couple (or 40) around me. As a brand, Porsche gets under your skin.

I was at art college, studying design, but at the same time had lots of different jobs – on a farm, running a grain-drying business, in McDonald's flipping burgers – I had a McJob – and a pizza delivery driver. That was great – I had a Peugeot 205 diesel, and with the engine on the rev-limiter I could get all four wheels off the ground on a hump-back bridge in Lincoln, but we never lost a pizza!

The first car I owned (it was a Ford Cortina or something) broke down and I couldn't afford to get anyone to mend it. So I repaired it myself and, all of a sudden, I was mending all my friends' cars. Then, eventually, someone asked me to look at a car they were thinking of buying.

After college I trained as an industrial model maker. I think I was quite good at

it, but the hours were ridiculous. I built a 70-foot narrow boat, sold it, then did up a house, but I carried on working on cars. I'd buy something, do it up, then sell it. My mum said it wasn't a real job and I should think about working in a bank.

I learnt my trade at auctions, doing 12 to 13 a week. I was driving around the country, seeing thousands of cars and having to appraise them very quickly. Because I had to repair the car before I could sell it, I knew I had to buy well and not make mistakes.

Then I bought my first Porsche, a g24 automatic, outside Milton Keynes auction. I still remember it now – I thought I'd really arrived. The next was a g44 auto that had been to the moon and back. Another great car. Eventually, I bought a g11, a white 3.2 coupé that had been written off. It had been repaired but I spent £3500 having it done properly. Two or three years ago someone brought it to me – it was looking shabby but I thought I'd buy it and have it restored again because it was my first g11. I bid the owner far too much, and he turned me down – probably a good thing!

I liked what Porsches were about.

dignity", so we tidied things up and changed it to g11virgin.com. Sometimes people misunderstand the name and think we will only sell them their first Porsche – but in reality most of our customers have owned them in the past.

In the early days I was repairing cars myself, and learning about Porsches all the time. It's something I'm passionate about – if you sell a product you should know about it. Knowledge of the cars means you know what you're buying, which means we often don't buy from the trade, because a car's been taken in part exchange by a salesman keen to make a sale – and he has been looking at the car through untrained eyes.

Most of our stock is bought directly from private owners. We pay huge amounts of money for really good cars, but if it's horrible we pay accordingly. I have not bought from an auction for ten years. This year we'll sell around 300 cars – we get a lot of repeat customers who sell their cars back to us. We don't do classic cars – we sell 'old' modern Porsches, say from 1980 onwards, but we also sell current models.

We spend time with people – we'll sit

Henry proving that he's still happy to muck in – or is that just for the camera? We should be told

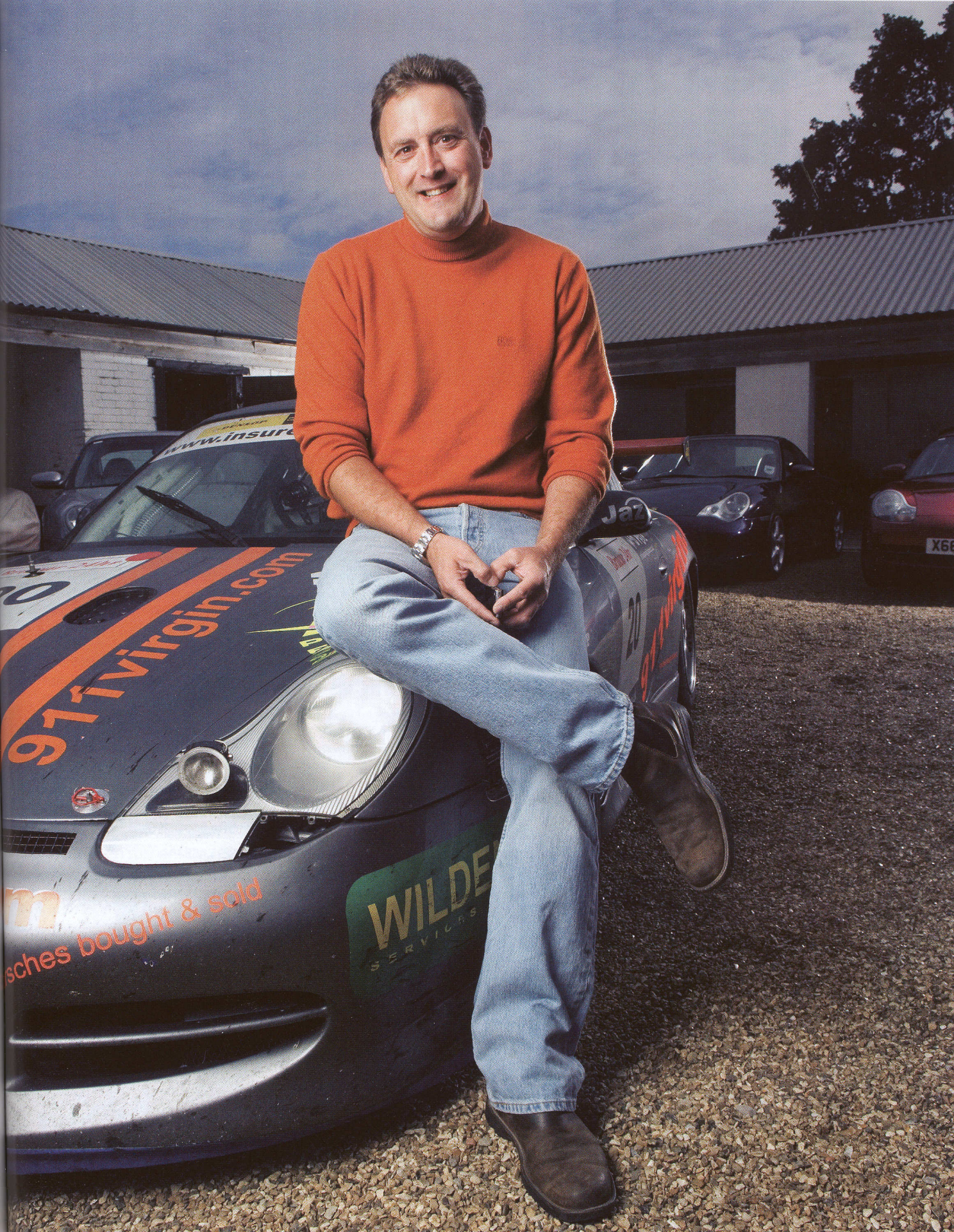


“THEY WANT A PARTICULAR CAR, AND WE SAY ‘DO YOU REALLY?’ WE PLAY DEVIL’S ADVOCATE TO GET THEM THINKING”

Dealing with normal cars, I was having to scrap them because they were not economical to repair for resale, whereas with a g11 – providing you bought for the right money – you could always repair it and sell it again. They never die. So, I fell into the business of buying and selling Porsches.

The company started properly in 1996. We're actually Prestige and Performance Cars Ltd, but the original website name was a nightmare. We had a tag line that said "g11 virgins handled with care and

down and have a chat. People don't always understand my attitude – sometimes they take it as arrogance. They say they want a particular car, and we say "Do you really?" We play devil's advocate, not to say they're wrong but to get them to consider everything that's available. They may think they want a 993 RS because they've been told it's the car to have, but we end up selling them a Carrera 2 because they are never ever going to do a trackday, want it for everyday use, and end up



Henry's 996 GT3 endurance racer in pole position at 911 Virgin, where it would appear that 996s are in good supply. Henry reckons on shifting around 300 cars a year



saving £30,000. If they do end up buying their original choice, at least they know all the other options were considered.

People sometimes buy on image. They may come in and say they want a pre-impact bumper car because they look lovely, but the reality of living with a 1971 car is maybe not what they think. We might suggest they'd be better off with a Carrera 3.2 if they wanted a classic feel.

To my mind there isn't a favourite car at the moment. My answer is that a good example of any Porsche always finds a home.

I think people here (in the UK) worry too much about resale values. In other countries they relax a bit more and buy for themselves. I'd love to have a workshop out the back and make custom cars out of Porsches – they'd be hideously uneconomic but they would be fun.

Motor racing? My wife Sharon bought me a trackday session for my birthday ten years ago. I went to Brands Hatch and spun backwards into the gravel at Paddock Bend on the second lap, with Sharon in the car screaming at me. I was

in the pits picking stones out of the brake calipers when Mark Sumpter, from Paragon, came up and made a comment. Later the same day he had a much bigger off, and what was left of his 996 was put on the back of a truck. He didn't stay for lunch, and we've joked about it ever since.

That day I went out with both Kelvin Burt and Tim Harvey, who were telling me what to do, and thought: "I know nothing about this." I did more trackdays, passed the ARDS test for my licence, and then did my first race at Silverstone in the ex-Jones brothers' 993 Cup car. Then I bought a GT3. It might have been a bit early to buy a car like that, but it was a good deal.

It was a massive learning curve. You have to be humble to learn to go racing – if you don't, you miss the plot. Now I'm just getting to the stage where I'm not the best driver in the world, but I can hold my own. There's still more speed to come, I think.

I like long-distance events of two, three, or even 24 hours, where tactics are important. The single-driver, one-hour,

Porsche Open races are fun, as well. It's like playing chess out there – you've got the driving, of course, but also tactics with the other cars. Teamwork, fuelling and tyre strategy, pit-stop timing – the whole team is involved. I like the three-dimensionality.

The 24 Hours at Silverstone last year was both a high and a low. We led for a lot of time, lost out to Dieter Quester and other top names in a BMW, were going to be second then had to pull out because of a fuel leak.

Do I race to give publicity to my business? I race because I'm passionate about cars and driving, and I think the same passion is the reason why 911virgin is successful. It's a way of letting people know I'm not just in it to buy and sell metal. And if I tell someone a car drives well, hopefully they feel I know what I'm talking about. **12**

CONTACT

911Virgin:
www.911virgin.com
Tel: 01895 255222

Below: Happy Henry? Well, wouldn't you be with that lot on your drive?

