Tour of duty

08/08/2022 Amid the time-honoured challenges of tradition and obligation, one English noble finds welcome distraction behind the wheel of a 911 GT3.

At the age of 26, William Herbert was two years into a promising career in industrial design, working for Sir Terence Conran in London. But the sudden death of his father in 2004 would turn his world upside down, forcing him to abandon his work and return permanently to the family home in southwest England.

The home in question was Wilton House, perhaps the finest 17th Century residence in the UK, sitting in more than 14,000 acres of Wiltshire countryside and containing one of the most important private collections of fine art and sculpture in the world. Will, the up-and-coming young designer, was now The Right Honourable William Herbert, 18th Earl of Pembroke, on the seat of an ancestral home that had been in the family for well over 400 years.

Today, at the age of 44, Lord Pembroke wears the role lightly. He talks with deep knowledge and great fondness about the Wilton estate, its joys and the many challenges, but shares with equal enthusiasm the lifelong love of cars that has accompanied him on this journey.

"I think my passion for cars actually stems for 1980s TV shows," he says. "I grew up with 'The Dukes of Hazzard', 'Knight Rider' and all those classic American shows and I was hooked on them as a kid. But it's also in my family's blood. My great grandfather used to compete a lot at Brooklands in the early 20th Century and I've always had an innate passion for anything car related."

Collection of sports cars

Today, the 18th Century former riding school at Wilton houses an impressive collection of classic and modern sports cars, the most recent addition to which is a 911 GT3 Touring, a car that already seems to have the Earl entirely under its spell. "A good friend of mine offered me a drive of his GT3," he says, "and I wasn't expecting to be blown away quite as much as I was. It was phenomenally fast and the engine was just extraordinary. I had another turn on a test day at Silverstone and decided I really needed a car like that in the collection. I simply didn't have anything else that could do everything quite so well."

There were practical considerations, however, for an unassuming and devoted family man who prefers to keep a low profile. "I wanted to be able to use it frequently," he explains, "for shopping and other everyday trips. It's such an understated car, but for those that know, it's an incredibly rare and special Porsche project."

The search would take almost a year, with several dealers and Porsche Centres helping track down a car with just the right spec. When one finally appeared, Lord Pembroke reserved it without even seeing the car in person, but has never looked back. "The more I drive it, the more I discover about it, the more layers it has to it," he says. "It's incredible just cruising at motorway speeds, and is actually quite economical there. But then you dial it up and it turns into this unbelievable animal of a car. It's so powerful, but never intimidating, because there's so much traction and the feedback through the steering wheel and brake pedal is fantastic. It's incredibly capable but also very practical, and of course, being a Touring, it flies under the radar quite comfortably. I really can't think of any other car that can do what this car does on so many levels."

But for someone with such a deep-seated interest in the automotive sphere, and a diverse personal collection at his fingertips that includes several of the 20th Century's most coveted sports cars, why has a 911 become Lord Pembroke's go-to? "The design is really quite modest compared to a lot of other supercars," he explains. "It's more elegant, and the fit and finish is exceptional. But really, it's about that engine, which is just staggering. It has a really raw, racing car edge to it that I love, and when you get past 8,000 rpm the car is still pulling, the engine screaming and it sounds nothing short of beautiful. I'm actually planning to retrofit rear seats so I can use it every day on the school run," he adds with a smile. "That's the dream anyway, because genuinely, any day I don't drive that car, I miss it."

MEDIA ENQUIRIES

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Consumption data

911 GT3 with Touring Package (Predecessor model)

*Further information on the official fuel consumption and the official specific CO_2 emissions of new passenger cars can be found in the "Leitfaden über den Kraftstoffverbrauch, die CO_2-Emissionen und den Stromverbrauch neuer Personenkraftwagen" (Fuel Consumption, CO_2Emissions and Electricity Consumption Guide for New Passenger Cars), which is available free of charge at all sales outlets and from DAT (Deutsche Automobil Treuhand GmbH, Helmuth-Hirth-Str. 1, 73760 Ostfildern-Scharnhausen, www.dat.de).

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