

The Rowan Atkinson McLaren F1

TAYLOR & CRAWLEY



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ROWAN ATKINSON'S
UNIQUE 'ONE-OWNER'
MCLAREN F1 IS FOR SALE
- HE TELLS JOURNALIST
ANDREW FRANKEL WHY

I first met Rowan Atkinson in 1997 at the unveiling of the then latest version of the McLaren F1 race car. I remember talking to him about Richard Noble's and Andy Green's extraordinary quest to break the sound barrier on earth and not much else. But we happened to leave at the same time and walked across the car park to where his brand new McLaren F1 awaited. By then I knew F1s quite well, but I still couldn't take my eyes off it. Its dark burgundy red paint was so subtle, yet so far from an obvious choice for such car (indeed no other F1 road car shared its colour), but for some weird reason I was more fascinated by its instruments. Unlike every other F1 (of which there were just 63 in standard specification), his were white on black rather than the other way around. And they were utterly gorgeous.

... I've always regarded my decision to buy an F1 as an almost religious Act of Faith. Faith in the unique and uncompromising vision of Gordon Murray. Certainly, it could never have been a rational decision. The car was madly, horrendously expensive and the received wisdom at the time was that because it wasn't a Ferrari, its value was only going to go one way - and that wasn't up...

Spool forward to the present day and there's Rowan Atkinson welcoming me to his home and his F1 and what do I most want to do? Look at those clocks again. Seventeen years, 41,000 miles and two quite big accidents later, they are as captivating as ever.

I know Rowan a little better now, having shared a small amount of both Revival and Festival track space with him at Goodwood over the years. He is not just a properly quick driver, but also an enthusiast in the

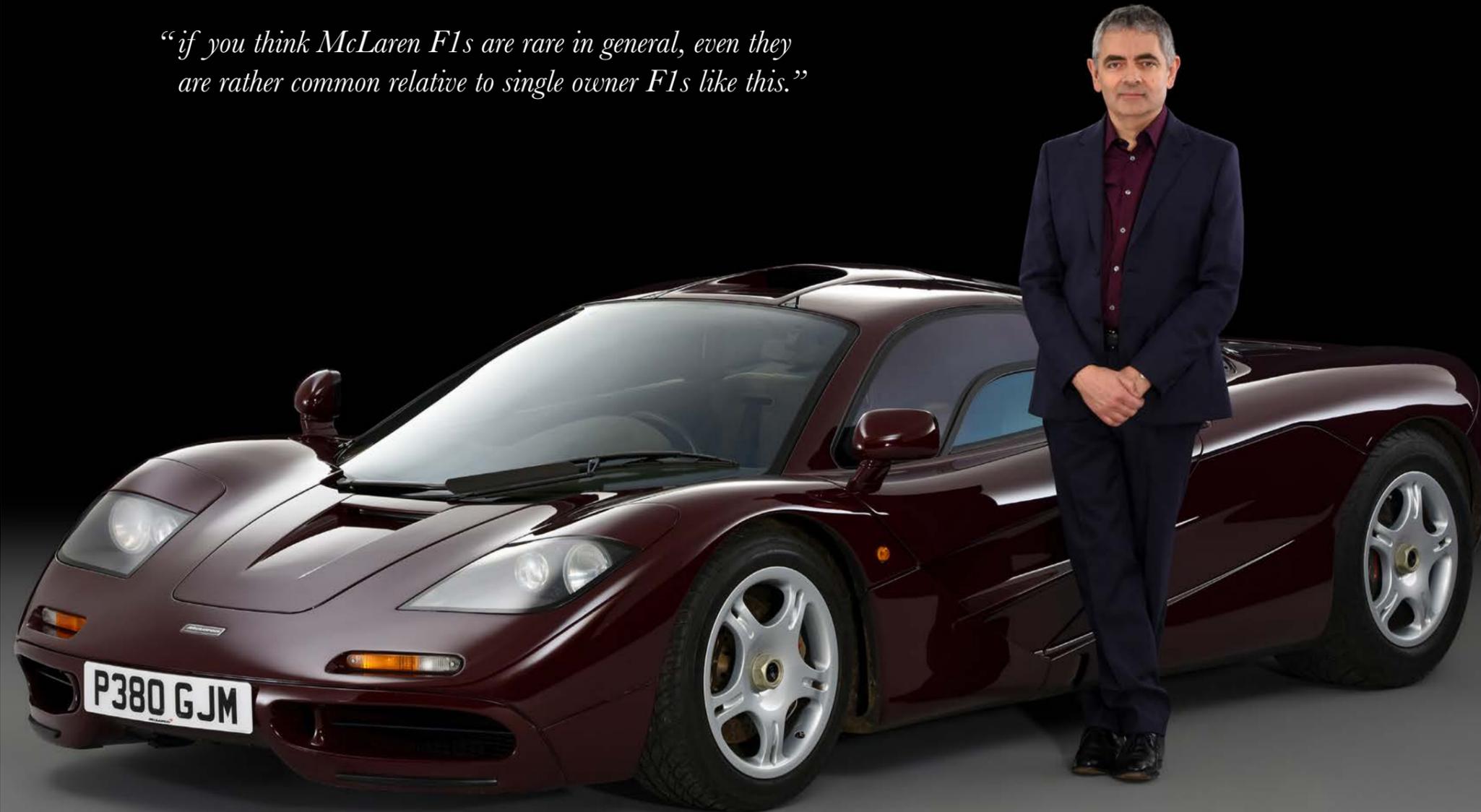
truest sense, with passion and knowledge that makes me realise how many people I know in this industry who merely effect a love of cars for the sake of expedience or credibility.

I'm here on assignment. Atkinson has decided the time has come to sell the F1 and recognises that words such as these in a place such as this may possibly lead to a buyer being found. And no, before you ask, I have no idea what he's asking for it though my very strong suspicion is that it will begin with a '1' and be followed by not six, but seven, digits. And that's not because it's owned by a famous man, for that factor may or may not be offset in full or part by its well documented unscheduled interactions with the scenery, but because if you think McLaren F1s are rare in general, even they are rather common relative to single owner F1s like this.

Why is he selling it? If you want an insight into the mind of the man, his answer provides it. 'I bought it for the quality of the thinking behind it. Now it has become a thing of value, it is time for someone else to enjoy it.'

That thinking belongs to Gordon Murray and Atkinson is evangelical on the subject: 'Look at a modern supercar of comparable performance and it will be vast, heavy and offer little or no space for your luggage. By comparison the F1 is tiny yet will seat three, store enough for you all to go on holiday and still find space for a proper, normally aspirated 6.1-litre V12 engine.

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When I was Sales & Marketing Director of McLaren Cars and Rowan finally decided to buy his F1 (I think it was during the making of the first Mr Bean movie), one of the things that stuck in my mind was that he mentioned he had purchased a Ferrari recently and when he went to collect it, they said that unfortunately he was not allowed to drive it away until his cheque had cleared! Needless to say, I remembered that and treated him more trustingly.

His approach to the car and its specification was extremely individual and perfectionist. He had a very clear vision of what he wanted. His enthusiasm and perfectionism were very refreshing but also very reflective of our company at the time. We always integrated the client with the people building the car, it was very much a family approach. I think that enthusiasm has gone into every mile that he has driven.

David Clark

“Nothing has ever been designed before or since with such imagination and clarity of thought.”

I was determined from the outset never to let the car's value or performance to restrict my use of it. In private diaries, I have record of taking it to many film locations. To Cornwall to shoot Keeping Mum in 2005, to Shepperton and Pinewood Studios for the Johnny English movies; a long hot journey through Provence when shooting Mr. Bean's Holiday in 2006. And it was a hoot for those dawn runs to race meetings at Brands Hatch, Snetterton, Silverstone etc. when I was racing my historic Aston Martins...



And it weighs the same as a shopping car. Nothing has ever been designed before or since with such imagination and clarity of thought.'

The lanes of rural Oxfordshire are cold and wet, similar to those conditions that contributed to an accident sufficiently big for the F1's carbon fibre construction to be almost certainly the only reason Atkinson was able to avoid serious injury. It has of course been returned to

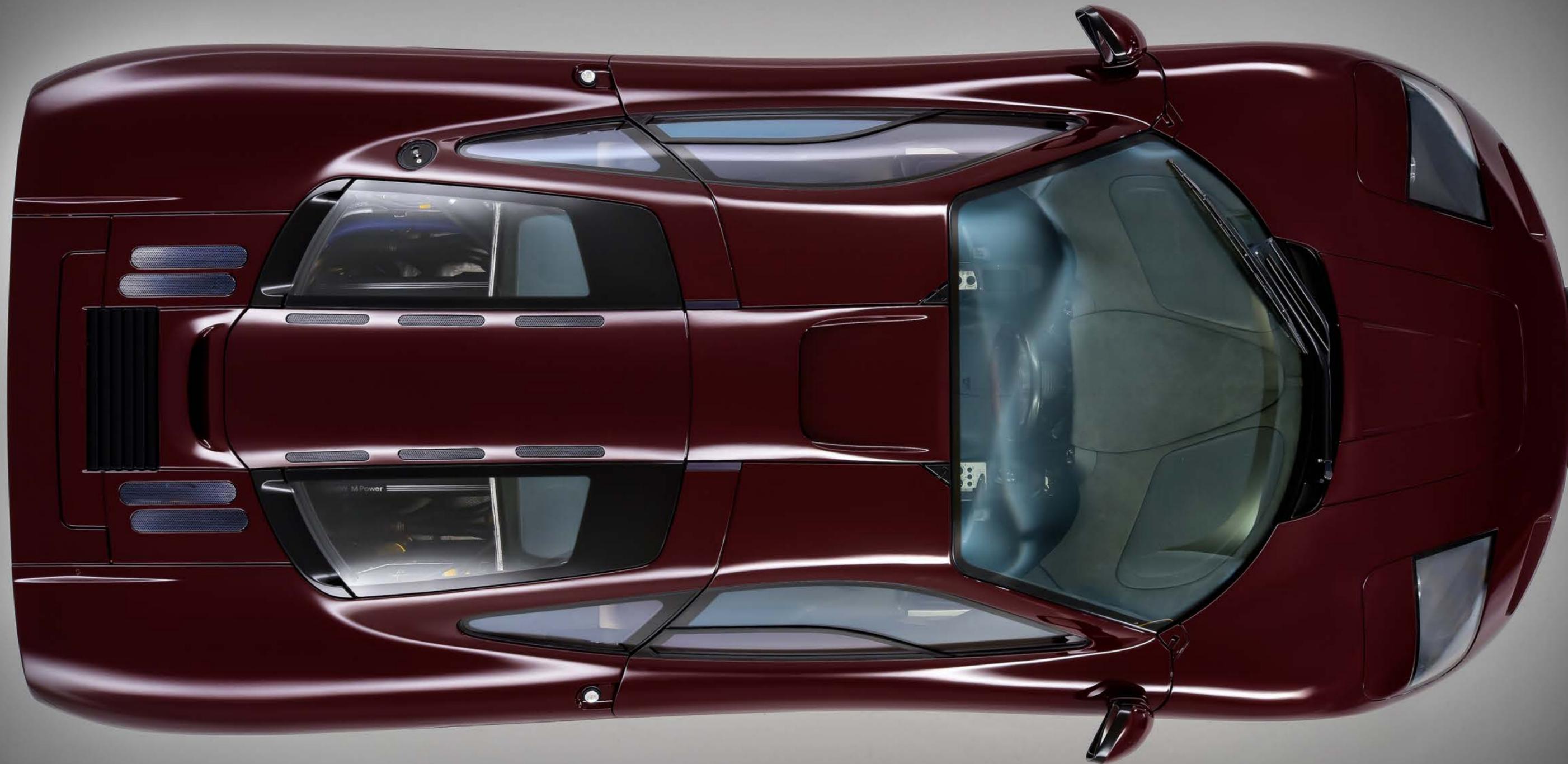
at least as good as new condition by McLaren itself but there's no need to tempt fate.

Still, Atkinson drives swiftly but smoothly, extolling the virtues of its rifle-bolt gearshift and unassisted steering and brakes. 'Unlike modern supercars, the F1 is a completely analogue machine. It doesn't invite you to sit back and watch the show, you have no choice but to take part yourself. I like that in a car.'

I ask him to tell me about his favourite drive in the car and the answer is once more illuminating. 'You can take the car to the race track (and he has, pulling over 200mph in it) or over mountain passes but what make it so different to other supercars is that you don't have to. You don't need to plan a long distance journey with military precision before it's worth getting out of the garage. You just get in and because it's so small, comfortable and practical, go and do the school run. Or the shopping. Really, the vast majority of the miles have been accrued doing outwardly very mundane trips.' But on every one he knew he'd need just the shortest straight for the F1 to deliver a thrill of such intensity you could drive most other supercars for the rest of your life and not experience anything similar.

Just once he squeezes the titanium throttle pedal just a little harder than necessary to make the point. We'd been ambling and chatting for so long were it not for the arrowhead three position cabin layout I might have forgotten what I was in. The sharp bark from its 627bhp, 6.1-litre V12 BMW engine would soon have reminded me. Unlike the modern generation of turbocharged supercars, there's no pause for thought: it just flings you. And seemingly in that very instant you are already somewhere else.

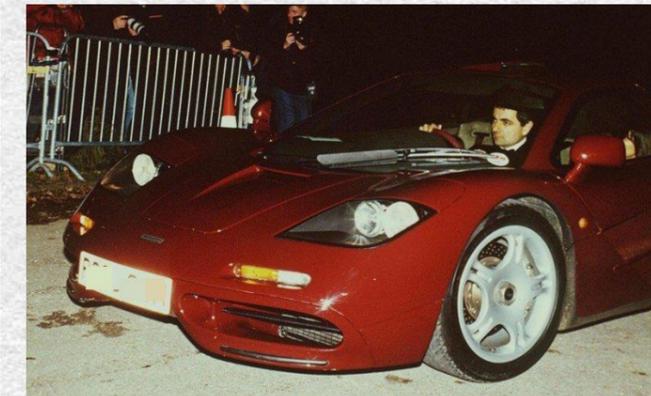
But back to his story. 'Probably my best moment in the car was just a few months after I took delivery. I remember driving down to Cornwall for a holiday with my two then very young children. We packed all our bags without problem, I put their child seats in the car, strapped them in and set off on the five-hour journey. I can remember looking at them a few minutes later and both were already fast asleep. And I thought to myself what kind of car was it that could seat three in such comfort, carry enough for a week away yet also do 240mph? There was no other then, and there is no other now.'



My first drive of a McLaren F1 came when test driver Simon Palmer asked if I'd like to accompany him in a prototype to a test at Goodwood race circuit. I did most of the road driving, he did the driving at the track. I was hooked immediately. I had never driven anything quite like it and haven't since. I remember it was the same week that I took delivery of a new Ferrari 456. Big mistake. The Ferrari was a nice enough car but the ownership experience was ruined before it started...



“What kind of car was it that could seat three in such comfort, carry enough for a week away yet also do 240mph? There was no other then, and there is no other now”



Arriving in the F1 at Highgrove for the Prince of Wales's fiftieth birthday party, November 1998.

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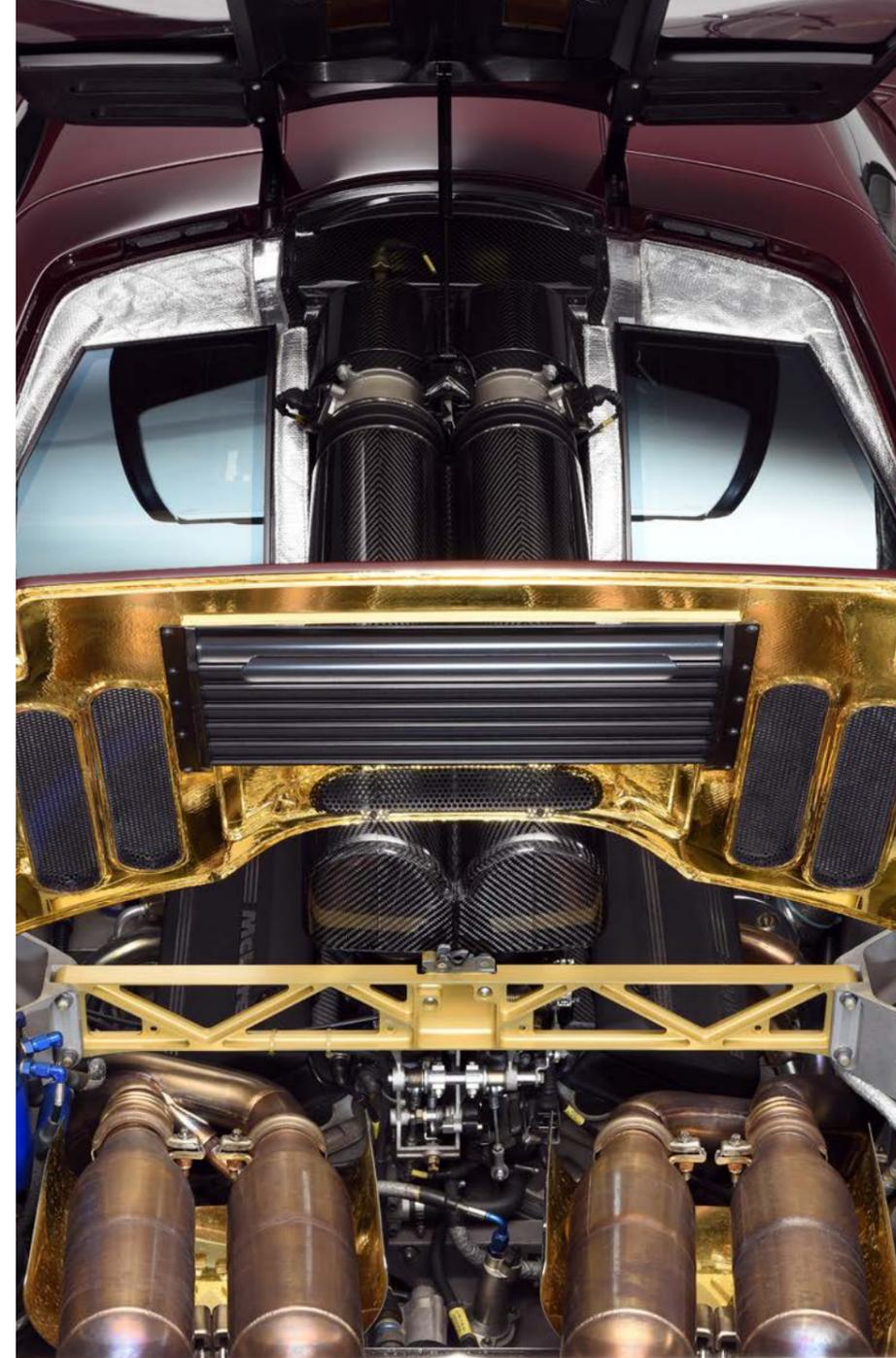


Rowan called me one day and said in a very nonchalant way “I’m involved with a project at Buckingham Palace, why don’t you come along?”. Well, why not!? So he picked me up in the F1 and off we go, we get to the main gates, where the policeman doffed his cap (loved it!) and we parked just to the right of the Palace and wandered in, as you do! I have a great memory of looking out of the window and watching the changing of the guard from the inside, rather than the outside, quite a special moment.

I’m not sure anyone has enjoyed 41,000 miles in a McLaren F1 (apart from a couple of miles where different things happened!) more than Rowan Atkinson. He is one of the most enthusiastic car owners I have ever met, a real user of his cars and that is how he derives his enjoyment: from the using, not the having.

It’s a big decision for him to sell but now it’s time to pass it to an equally enthusiastic owner.

David Clark



The wind tunnel model, one of only a handful, was presented to me with the car when new, painted in a matching colour. Until a few years ago, there was no paint code for my car's exterior colour. Repairs and touch-up were simply done by matching the colour of the model, that had never been exposed to sunlight...



Included with the car are the wind tunnel model, the McLaren delivery mat, the Facom tool chest, titanium Facom tool roll and a Tag Heuer Watch which has the chassis number on the dial.

Rowan and I had been chatting about having a dinner for F1 owners to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the car's Le Mans win in 1995. It finally came to fruition and was held at Rowan's house near Oxford, a charming evening with, if I remember correctly, about 14 of us. F1 designer Gordon Murray and stylist Peter Stevens were there. A signed menu is in Rowan's history file. Rowan had borrowed the Le Mans winning trophy from Ron Dennis for the evening. Two of the guests were Paul Stewart, who had an F1 and his wife Victoria. Paul called late afternoon and said that Victoria was not able to come but could he bring his father Sir Jackie? Tongue in cheek I said "Yes, as long as he doesn't make a speech!!" He held out for most of the evening but near the end, the wee Scotsman just couldn't help himself. All good fun, a gaggle of McLaren F1's looked great in the drive.



David Clark



I got hold of the McLaren delivery mat because of a misunderstanding. I spoke to Harold Dermott at McLaren and asked if I could buy a mat with the F1 logo on it that I remembered seeing at the factory when I picked up my car. It was a small mat that I had seen in front of one of the doors. After a delay of some weeks, Harold got in touch and said that he had been sanctioned to sell it to me for £1,600. I said that I thought that that was a lot of money for a mat. He said that it was one of a kind, specially commissioned, electrostatically resistant etc. So reluctantly, I agreed the price and then what was delivered the following week was thirty times larger than what I was expecting: the large, logo-ed mat on which every new McLaren F1 had been presented to its first owner. It was hardly a doormat but certainly represented better value for money...

