

THE KIDSTON FILES

Social-media influencers are becoming 'so last season' as old-fashioned skills and talent make a comeback, says **RICHARD WEBB** after talking to 'classic-car supplier to the very, very wealthy' Simon Kidston in London.





Left: Glen Kidston and Woolf Barnato celebrate their victory at Le Mans in 1930
Below: One of the five 1900 SSZs that participated in the 1930 Mille Miglia, the legendary race of 1 000 miles from Brescia to Rome and back



Above: Simon Kidston inspects a vintage 1963 Ferrari 250 GTO. Only 36 were produced from 1962 to 1964, and this particular car won Le Mans in 1963
Right: Simon Kidston believes the beauty of cars lies in their heritage



Influencers have been around for hundreds of years. Josiah Wedgwood became the 18th century's most famous potter through innovative, artsy products differentiated by celebrity and royal endorsements. As 'Potter to Her Majesty' he demonstrated the early power of the ultra-influencer.

Centuries later, after the ill-fated 2017 Fyre Festival in the Bahamas turned out to be a high-profile fiasco – and the subject of a subsequent Netflix documentary – questions are being asked about the responsibilities of social-media influencers.

As influencing trends and personalities come and go, sustainable influence should be underpinned by a powerful combination of authentic personality and individual style. Enter stage-left one Simon Kidston.

The credentials for Kidston, a dual English-Swiss national, read like the 'Who's Who' in the world of classic cars. Educated in Italy and Switzerland, he supplies vintage and classic cars to the very, very wealthy. Heritage and legacy run deep here: his father, uncle and grandfather were all raffishly good-looking British military officers, and his uncle was one of the famous 'Bentley Boys'. He's also the cousin of Cath Kidston, the famous British modern-vintage designer.

It was in 2012 at BMW Group's Concorso d'Eleganza Villa d'Este – where he was the multilingual master of ceremonies – that I first met Kidston. We reconnected recently at his Mayfair bolthole – the famous 5 Hertford Street Members Club in London – where royals, fashionistas and A-listers congregate. His club, for all its heritage, manners, dress codes, clashing patterns and prints, is a surprisingly unpretentious place, and it sits rather well with Kidston's character.

TO THE AUTOMOTIVE BORN

Kidston, it seems, came out of the womb interested in cars. Blue-eyed and coolly persuasive, the intuitively

fashion-spry Kidston speaks of his early years. 'I grew up at Southover House in Dorset, a modest country estate punctuated by fast cars in the garage and a small aircraft in the farm hangar. And dogs, lots of dogs.'

As he pours us another glass of Chablis, he confides, 'My family always loved cars, not flashy ones, but always fast. Some cars radiate beauty. Their aesthetic has something pleasing to some and not to others. With a car much of the attraction is in the heritage. A great beauty has a combination of all those attributes.'

Kidston runs Kidston SA, a boutique classic automotive advisory firm, differentiating itself from auction houses like Bonhams, Gooding and RM. 'Some have thousands of staff, dealing with hundreds of thousands of clients. We're a team of 10 and represent no more than 20 cars at a time, acting as an agent for the collector. This is not a car dealership. We don't have a garage, forecourt, or an inventory. It's about helping clients to buy and sell rare cars, advising them of the best approach.'

Kidston undertakes a huge amount of historical research for each car, dedicating more time than auction houses usually can to every consignment. 'We understand that there is no such thing as a perfect car. Our buyers make informed decisions based on that historical research,

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the support available for restoring them and knowing the potential upside or downside of a car. We handpick restorers and supervise everything to completion.

'Folded metal doesn't get folded on its own. It gets designed, built, moulded, restored and raced by people with passion. Cars are the products of human endeavour, and for me it's the human stories that bring cars to life. Cars are a wonderful medium for getting people together.' With the average price of the vehicles he sells around R18 million, he's really helping people to create and maintain a legacy.

THE LOCAL LINK

Kidston seems to possess an endless stream of stories, each one as fascinating as the last. There is a South African link here, too. 'In 1930 my uncle Glen won the Le Mans race with a Speed Six Bentley and soon after took another record by flying between Wiltshire in the UK and Cape Town in a 313kW radial-engined Lockheed Vega – at an average of 212.1km/h for the 12 070 km. He was in the air for a total of 57 hours and 10 minutes.'

Lieutenant commander Glen Kidston and Captain Thomas Anthony Gladstone both died on 5 May 1931 while flying over the Drakensberg mountains in a de Havilland Puss Moth ZS-ACC. 'Flying into a gale and a thick dust storm that had whipped up, the wing sheared off about 27km north of the tiny mountain town of Van Reenen in the Drakensberg. To this day there remains a sandstone memorial near the crash site.'

In handling some of the most expensive cars in the

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world, Kidston says that dealing through a broker is often like 'kissing through a gasmask', but finding a meeting of the minds on price is often difficult enough with the buyer and the seller holding totally different objectives. 'I like to deal with a person who respects the car, not someone who sees it just as an asset, and who may not keep it the way it came out of the factory,' he says.

THE ROAD AHEAD

'Now more than ever we are seeing a dramatic change of focus and a new set of collectors are coming to the fore. Increasingly we are being asked to find cars from the '80s and '90s. Bugatti Veyrons are now seen as collector cars – no longer "new" but not quite old enough to be classic, yet when you look at what goes into them you can see why they deserve to have a future.'

He believes tastes are clearly changing, and that this generation does its homework with methodical dedication. 'They value authenticity,' he says, as he ponders whether a culture of instant gratification and the hot pursuit of 15 minutes of fame can ever replace real-life expertise.

As in the fields of design and music, technology has enabled many influencers to mask their lack of genuine skill. Add to that the proliferation of 'fake news' and it's easy to see why canny collectors truly value influential experts like Kidston and his personal brand reputation when it comes to spending their own money. ■