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Why Gavin's made of the write stuff...

BRIAN PAGE meets a young genius who at the age of 19 has had four books published and is studying for a master's degree – despite leaving school at 16

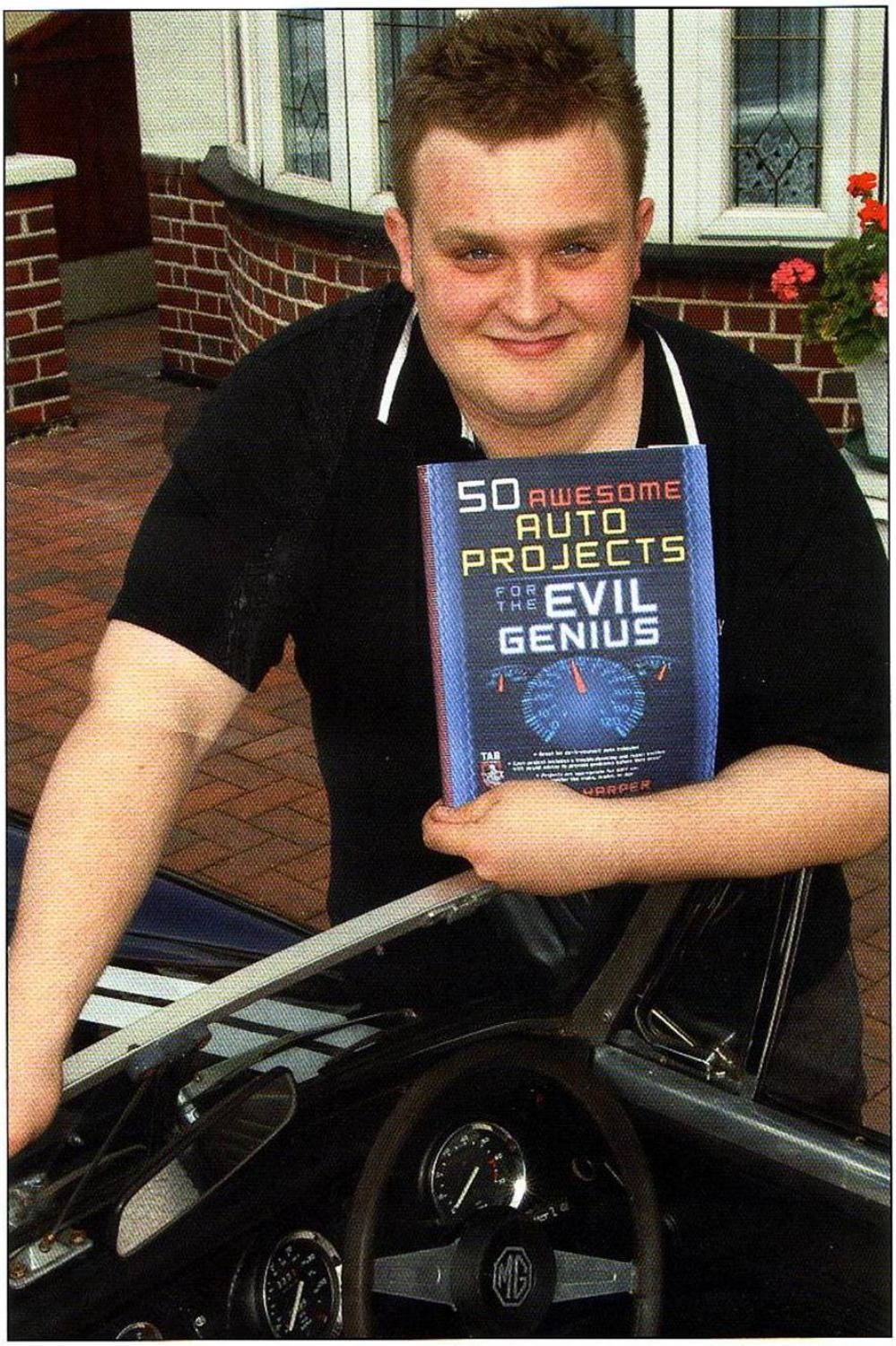
"I like to do things differently," says Gavin Harper. And right away we can add another talent to his considerable stock. That of understatement.

A likeable, easy-mannered Mensan, Gavin left school at 16 in the face of fierce opposition from his teachers. "They thought I was mad not to do A Levels," he laughs.

"But I was bored with school. I went to a good comprehensive but, like most comprehensives, the teaching was one-paced, which did not suit either the quick or the slow. I found it frustrating."

He's now 19 – and what a lot he has managed to pack into those three years.

Most students struggle with one degree but Gavin is not only completing a bachelor's degree in technology with the Open University (he will become the OU's youngest ever graduate when he finishes) but is also working towards a master's degree in



ON THE ROAD: Gavin Henson with his latest project, an old MG he is doing up – and a copy of his first book, since followed by three others

sustainable architecture with the University of East London.

And, what's more, he's about to have his fourth book published...

"It is a lot to pack in, I suppose" Gavin says, with more of that wonderful understatement.

Perhaps the most impressive point about his action-packed three years is that it has not all been calm sailing.

After leaving school he joined a business services company – and was devastated when it did not work out. Even though it was no fault of his own, he admits to having a sense of failure. A short-lived feeling because he immediately set about changing things.

"I have been thrilled with the Open University," he said. "Learning at classroom level, as I say, often moves at the same pace regardless of the individual's needs. The Open University allows you to study at your own pace. At first they were concerned because of my age. But I did residential courses and summer schools and they agreed to let me go for a degree."

Gavin goes on to make an interesting point about the growing popularity of the OU. "It is getting more popular for a number of reasons, one of which is that with it getting more expensive to go to normal university it is a good way for young people to study while they are working or while they are living at home, which cuts down costs. I think it will get even more popular in future."

That kind of studying, of course, requires a great deal of discipline and determination. Gavin appears to possess both. "I know people thought I was mad when I left school and after the job didn't work out it could have gone wrong. But it was a good thing for me because it took me out of my comfort zone. My feeling was that you should not be scared. I think you should reach for the stars and give it your best shot. If you are determined you can do what you want." Gavin channels his huge energy levels into an astute mix of "off the wall" thinking and down-to-earth practicality. It's a potent combination.

It first appeared when he bought an old Mini. "I was intrigued by whether you could take a basic car and put luxury features into it. The kind of thing I mean is windscreen wipers that come on automatically in the rain or lights that come on automatically in the dark. The things you normally only see in really expensive cars. I suppose it was like adding intelligence to a car."

He began to research the project and the humble Mini soon began to take on a most luxurious appearance.

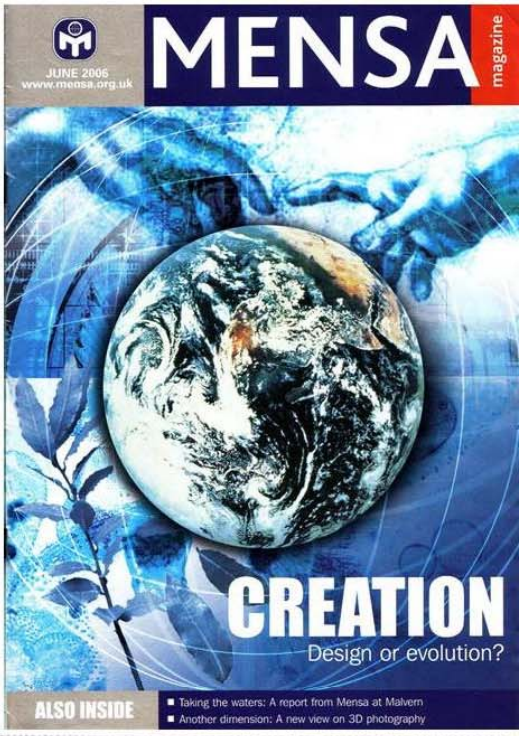
Gavin's first book deal came out of this ambitious project. He was signed up by McGraw Hill, technical publishers based in New York, to write 50 Awesome Projects for the Evil Genius. (Gavin may be a genius but he is not evil – the title is based on the publisher's Evil Genius series of books).

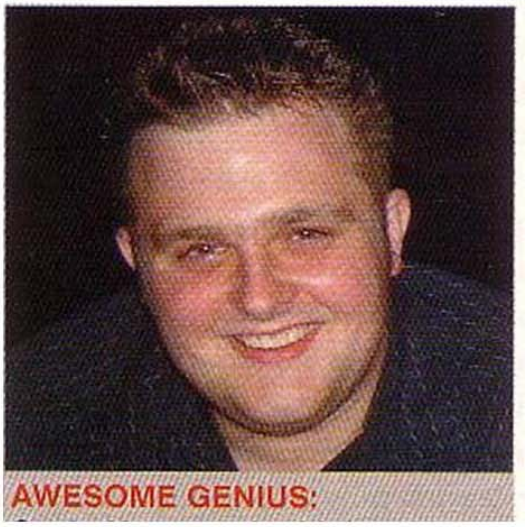
Since then Gavin has written three more books offering revolutionary but practical ideas. "I think that's important," he says, "that you marry off the wall ideas with a practical element. It's blue sky thinking. Good ideas don't always work at the time but they do eventually. If they have a practical application they get to people much more quickly."

This is an attitude he brings to his UEL masters degree, which sees him spending five intensive days every month at the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales, making use of sustainable technology such as solar panels and wind power.

Gavin, who joined Mensa when he was 16 is a member of DESig, the special interest group for designers but admits he's not as active as he would like to be.

Perhaps he could be forgiven that little lapse. After all, he has got rather a lot on at present... Not least trying, yet again, to pass his driving test. Yes, that's right. The man who is fascinated by cars, who has a brilliant mix of theoretical mind and practical abilities, can't drive. I've taken my test loads of times," he says. "It's a bit frustrating really. But I am sure I'll get there one day."





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