



THE ULTIMATE M TEST

BMW's M Division has produced some of the finest drivers' cars of the last 30 years, but which is the greatest? We bring together our 13 favourite M-cars to find out

Words **John Barker**
Pictures **Andy Morgan**
Malcolm Griffiths

E28 M5

Engine: In-line 6-cyl, 3453cc, 24v
Max power: 286bhp @ 6500rpm
Max torque: 251lb ft @ 4500rpm
Top speed: 155mph
0-60mph: 6.2sec
On sale: 1984-87



E30 M3 Sport Evolution

Engine: In-line 4-cyl, 2467cc, 16v
Max power: 235bhp @ 7000rpm
Max torque: 177lb ft @ 4750rpm
Top speed: 154mph
0-60mph: 6.1sec
On sale: 1990



E34 M5 (3.8)

Engine: In-line 6-cyl, 3795cc, 24v
Max power: 340bhp @ 6900rpm
Max torque: 295lb ft @ 4750rpm
Top speed: 155mph (limited)
0-60mph: 5.9sec
On sale: 1992-95



M Coupe

Engine: In-line 6-cyl, 3201cc, 24v
Max power: 321bhp @ 7400rpm
Max torque: 258lb ft @ 3250rpm
Top speed: 155mph (limited)
0-60mph: 5.2sec
On sale: 1998-2002



E39 M5

Engine: V8, 4941cc, 32v
Max power: 400bhp @ 6600rpm
Max torque: 369lb ft @ 3800rpm
Top speed: 155mph (limited)
0-60mph: 4.8sec
On sale: 1998-2003



E46 M3 CSL

Engine: In-line 6-cyl, 3246cc, 24v
Max power: 355bhp @ 7900rpm
Max torque: 273lb ft @ 4900rpm
Top speed: 155mph (limited)
0-60mph: 4.8sec
On sale: 2003-05



M6

Engine: V10, 4999cc, 40v
Max power: 500bhp @ 7750rpm
Max torque: 383lb ft @ 6100rpm
Top speed: 155mph (limited)
0-60mph: 4.5sec
On sale: 2005-present



E46 M3 CS

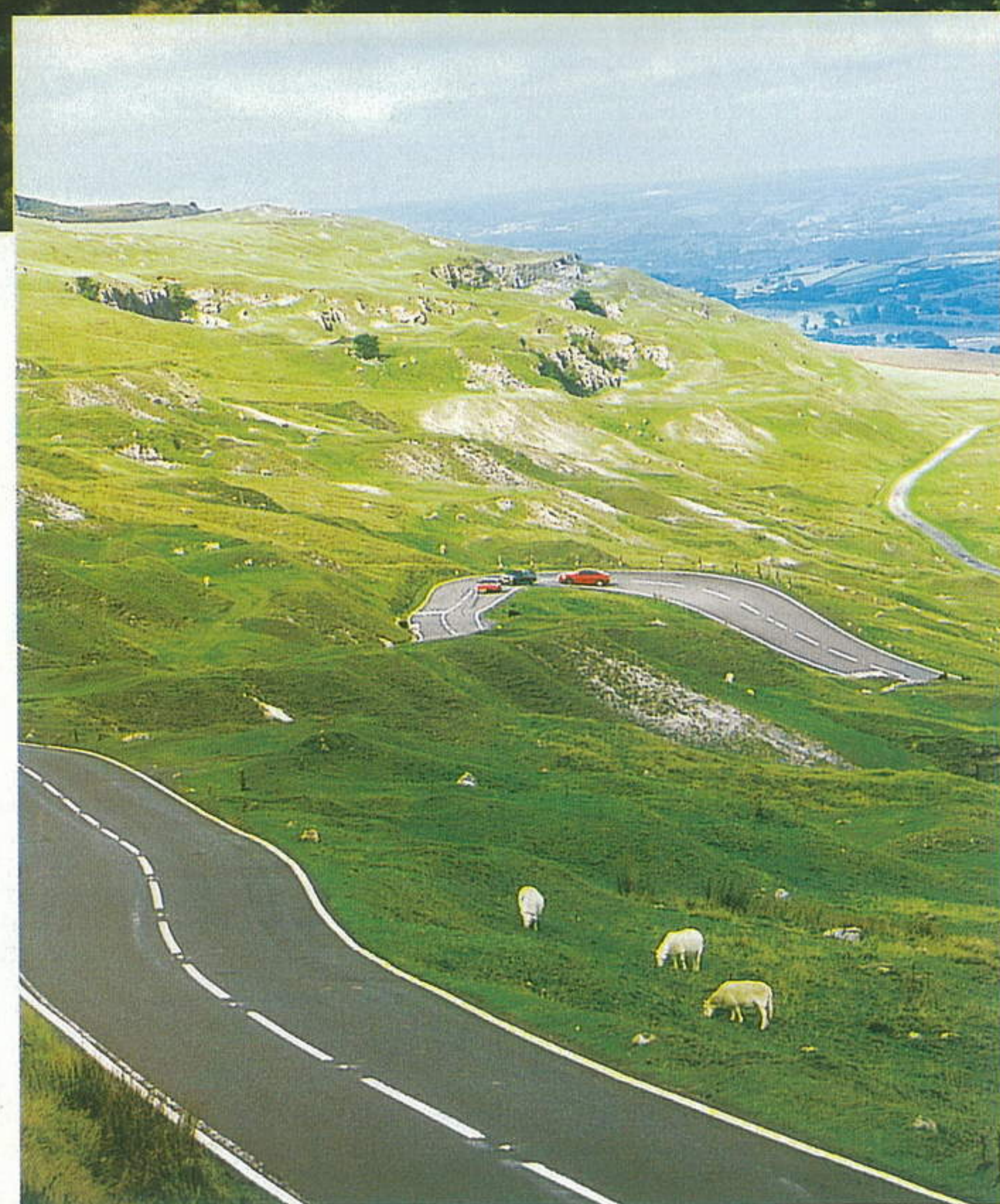
Engine: In-line 6-cyl, 3246cc, 24v
Max power: 338bhp @ 7900rpm
Max torque: 269lb ft @ 5000rpm
Top speed: 155mph (limited)
0-60mph: 5.1sec
On sale: 2005-07



Z4 M Coupe

Engine: In-line 6-cyl, 3246cc, 24v
Max power: 338bhp @ 7900rpm
Max torque: 269lb ft @ 4900rpm
Top speed: 155mph (limited)
0-60mph: 4.9sec
On sale: 2006-present





THE ELIMINATOR

What is the greatest BMW M-car ever made? Not the biggest, the most powerful or the best-selling – though our winner may also count one or more of these as an accolade – but the most engaging, inspiring and downright entertaining drivers' car to wear the M badge. There is certainly no shortage of contenders, with almost 30 years of M-cars to choose from, including four generations each of M3 and M5.

To have included every M-series car would have been spectacular but impractical and probably emotionally overwhelming, so

we had to be selective. Our first decision was to make this a full-on M-car-only test, rejecting the half-hearted cars, specifically the two versions of the M535i. Next we weeded out the derivatives – the convertibles, the Tourings and the like – then we got specific with the models, selecting what we considered to be the best version of each. For instance when it came to the second generation (E34) M5, we chose the 3.8-litre six-speed.

Still we ended up with 13 cars, our contenders ranging from the first of the breed, the M1 supercar of '78, to the brand new '08 model year M3. We felt it was important to include all the current M-cars as a statement of where the division is now, so the Z4 M Coupe and V10-engined M5 and M6 are in, but they have to compete for a place in the second stage. Only the V8 M3, the newest M-car, gets a bye to the final.

Stage One

A dozen cars and only four places up for grabs. It didn't sound easy when we planned it, and now, standing in the small car park of our hotel in Abergavenny, South Wales, surrounded by M-cars, the task looks both thrilling and daunting. The generous owners who have brought along the older models have bagged the best parking spaces, and I'm not the only one to notice the high Nürburgring sticker count. It's a mark of the passion these cars inspire, an affirmation that 'M' was originally shorthand for 'motorsport' (the early road-going M-cars were created by BMW Motorsport GmbH, the department that developed and built the company's competition cars).

In the past I've enjoyed memorable drives in almost all of the cars gathered here, but at the outset there's a tangible sense of adventure. Will the older cars feel under-

powered? Will the new cars feel less tactile? Will there be anything approaching a consensus among the five of us whose job it is to decide which cars make the cut? And where do you start? Actually, the answer to the last question is easy: at the beginning.

M1 (1978-1981)

The daddy of the M-series cars is the most exotic of them all, and although it bequeathed those that followed only one substantial element, that element was rare in ability and rich in character – the magnificent 3.5-litre, 24-valve straight-six.

Perhaps over-ambitiously, the M1 was BMW Motorsport GmbH's first attempt at a road car following its formation in 1972. If all had gone to plan it would have been a successful Group 5 sports car too, but for a variety of reasons (see box, page 84) its intended race career went unrealised.

Our initial group of 12 M-cars will fight it out over two days to see which four go through to stage two to meet the new M3. And what better venue to make the decision than the quiet, challenging roads of South Wales (left)

M1 (below) designed to cope with up to 700bhp, the expected output of the turbocharged racer. Road-going M1's engine appeared in E28 M5 (right and below left)



M1: never again?

BMW had already established its competition pedigree in Touring Cars when it formulated plans for an assault on the World Sports Car Championship. The car was the mid-engined M1, but lacking the resources and expertise in-house, BMW outsourced the job of developing the car to Lamborghini.

Unfortunately, the Italian supercar maker was enduring one of its more troubled periods and progress was glacial. By the time BMW took the project back and made the M1 production-ready, Group 5 regulations had changed – eligibility

required a number of road cars to have been delivered. The M1 had missed the boat, yet it still created huge publicity thanks to the one-make 'Procar' series that saw a field of M1s, some driven by then-current Formula 1 drivers, battling it out ahead of F1 races.

Overall, though, the project was such a painful experience that, until recently, BMW maintained that the M1 was its first and only mid-engined production car. Now, however, it finds itself lacking a top-end model to compete with Audi's R8 or Mercedes' rumoured R8 rival. Never say never...



Nonetheless, the production car was pretty special. The slightly conservative styling of the M1, the work of Giugiaro and BMW's Paul Bracq, is so finely detailed and has stood the test of time so well that the interior comes as a surprise. There's an almost '60s feel to it and a real sense of the car's low-volume nature, with a simple dashboard apparently stocked with switches, knobs, dials and controls from a variety of sources. The plain seats are squasy, the pedals are offset strongly to the right and the steering wheel is large and flat.

Twist the key and the straight-six churns slowly into life, almost as if it's on carburetors; hook the dog-leg first, find the clutch biting point and you're away. Quite quickly the

M1 reveals itself to be light, tight and sweet, the twin-cam six super-smooth and really strong above 3000rpm. It doesn't sound like an Italian supercar, the howl of the engine having a more classic tone, but by the same token it doesn't feel like one either; the unassisted steering is heavy but manageable and

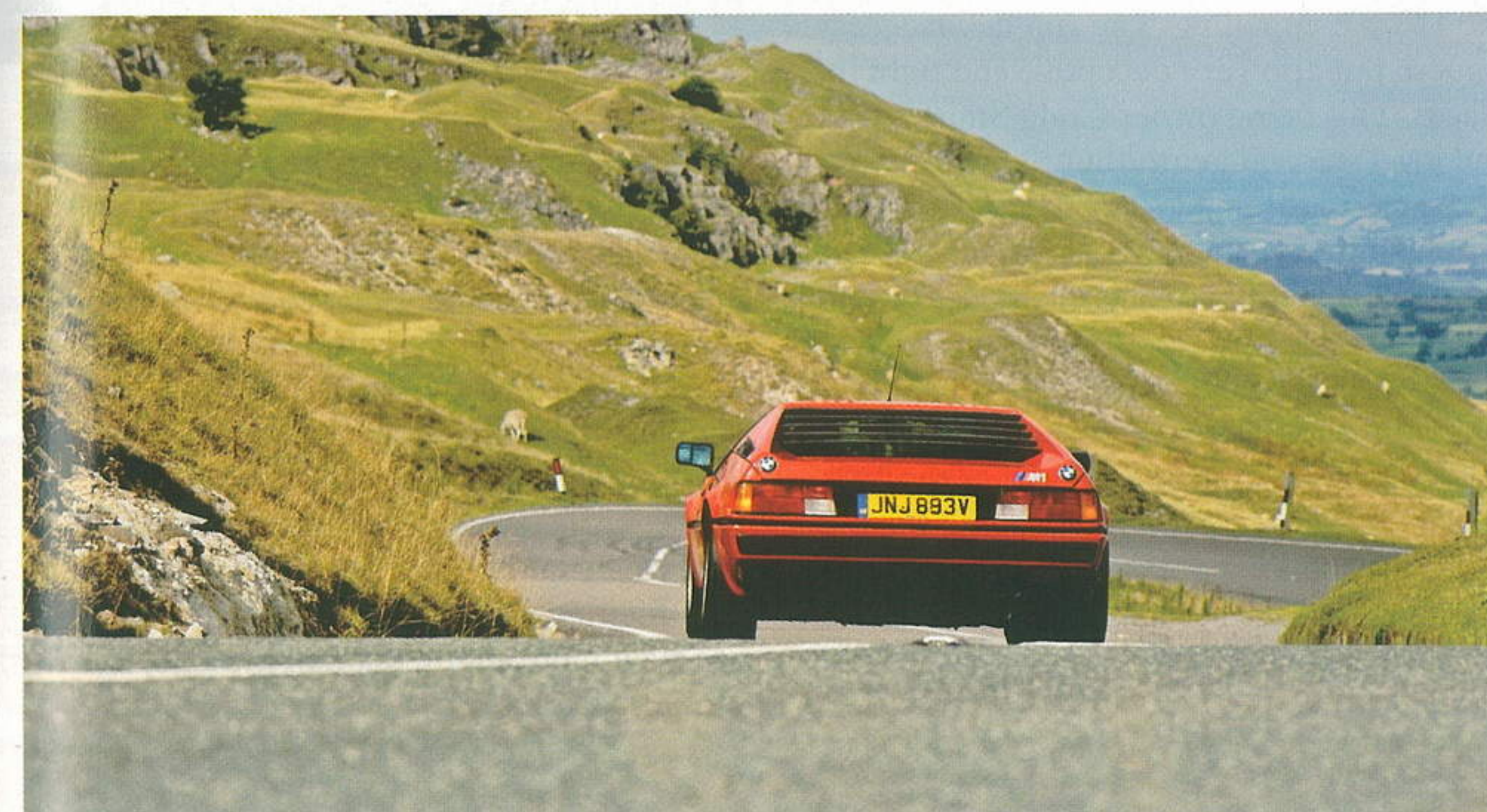
wonderfully precise, and the M1 feels poised and responsive, with a remarkably calm ride. It feels polished and finely honed. I love it.

David Vivian has lots of M1 miles behind him. 'It was as good as any mid-engined car of the time,' he says, 'and although it isn't really fast any more – it has the same power as a Vectra VXR – it has great steering and a lot of charm.' Roger Green is also smitten: 'It's a gorgeous thing. It feels old and it's not perfect, but you're an integral part of the process, and power matches grip.'

E28 M5 (1985-88)

The next car to use the M1's 24-valve straight-six was the M635CSi. It was a fine car, but a few months later there came a more significant, more bespoke and wickedly understated saloon with the same 286bhp version of the engine – the first M5. The M5 was hand-built by BMW Motorsport and, at £31K, cost eleven grand more than the M535i, which was largely an exercise in badge engineering.

Stealth was a key part of the M5's appeal, cross-spoke BBS alloys and subtle body-coloured arch brows the main clues to its potential. There was little take-up of



the optional body kit, which is entirely understandable as the same addenda was fitted as standard to the wannabe M535i, though this car, belonging to Mike Alexander, does have it.

The original M5 looks petite alongside the current V10 model and little bigger than the latest M3; inside, its adequately roomy cockpit feels airy thanks to those tall, thin roof pillars. Fine seats put you at the heart of things and, although you'd wince if a new Mondeo had a fascia made of this grade of

plastic, the way it's angled towards the driver and the clarity of the instruments set into it were already BMW hallmarks.

The straight-six sounds gorgeous, idling with a slow, steady rumble that is somehow full of intent and confidence. Mike's M5 has over 140,000 miles on the clock, so the gearshift is a little loose and the recirculating-ball steering a touch vague about the straight-ahead, yet the engine is silky and pulls low revs and high gears with ease. For decisive overtakes you need to

have it spinning above 4000rpm, and even then this near-300bhp engine doesn't feel dramatically potent.

There is magic here, though. Up on the roads of the Black Mountain, the M5 snaps into focus; guide it into a turn and all vagueness vanishes, the meatily weighted steering suddenly sharp and precise, the whole chassis tensed up and responsive. The brakes are a little wobbly after a few hard stops and there isn't the massive grip of the modern cars, but the E28 flows beautifully over the tricky terrain and engages you with its poise and adjustability.

Vivian again: 'It's not a million miles away from what I remember. It's so well balanced, and it has steering with feel so you can key into what the car is doing. In other areas it's unexpectedly good; the seats and gearshift are excellent.'

E30 M3 Sport Evo (1990)

'I so want the E30 M3 to be good,' said staffer Catchpole earlier. I know exactly what he means. The original M3 has the finest motorsport pedigree of all the M-cars, being both a fantastically successful touring car racer and a rally winner. It looks great, too, the effort expended by Motorsport GmbH on making it competitive evident everywhere, from its blistered arches to its



more aerodynamically sloped rear screen. But the worry Catchpole and I share is that it will feel slow and gutless – the first 2.3-litre versions had 200bhp (5bhp less with a catalyst), no more than today's average fast hatch.

The model we've chosen is the last-of-the-line Sport Evolution, with the deeper, more pronounced front splitter, adjustable rear spoiler Gurney and, crucially, the bigger 2.5-litre four with 238bhp. It looks superb; crisp-edged, compact and purposeful, and riding on modestly sized wheels and tyres.

It's left-hand drive, as all E30s were, yet it feels right slipping into its sculpted seat and gripping the thin suede rim of its steering wheel, even though it's non-adjustable and slightly squint. The big-capacity in-line four sounds a bit lumpy, a bit tappety, and it's clearly not overburdened with torque, getting into its stride at 5000rpm and then

feeling reined-in by the limiter at 7500rpm, yet by the time I get to the bottom of the hill from the car park, I'm certain I've sampled one of the world's finest drivers' cars.

What a chassis. As an advert for small and relatively light cars, with a sufficiency of grip, the M3 is compelling. The run down is very smooth but also very deceptive and tight in places. This being owner Craig Smith's pride and joy, I start off gently, but the willingness of the car to turn and its amazing poise and tweakability even when it's loaded hard mid-bend, mean that I'm using the brakes less and less and picking up more and more speed. It sounds bizarre, but it feels like a Clio Williams, another car that seems as though it will never fail to turn. The tail of the M3 doesn't feel loose, it just follows, and the mass of the car seems concentrated low. You really need those huggy seats.

'I was worried I'd be disappointed after the

E34 (above and right) was last hand-built M5. E30 M3 (below) has a big reputation to live up to. Bottom right: later 3.2-litre E36 M3 given 'Evolution' tag in UK only

more powerful cars,' says Green, 'that I might have been viewing the E30 through rose-tinted spectacles. Not a bit of it.'

When Vivian steps out of the E30 he simply comments, 'That's definitely making the cut.' Catchpole is even more succinct: 'Brilliant.'

E34 M5 (1992-95)

I have a soft spot for the second-generation M5. Partly because I think it's based on the best-looking 5-series and that the M tweaks are even more subtle than on the E28, and

'It's the basic ability of the chassis, and its perfect match to the power available, that makes the E34 M5 so impressive'



partly because it'll exit roundabouts with 30 yards of perfectly balanced opposite lock. It's a wonderful combination.

Hand-built like the earlier M5, the E34 M5 first appeared in 1988 with a 3.6-litre version of the M Power straight-six delivering 315bhp, yet it wasn't quite enough to make light of the newer car's significantly increased mass and exploit its more capable and grippy chassis. The later 3.8-litre 340bhp engine and six-speed gearbox solved that, and that's the model we have here.

Technology began to assert itself with this M-car, EDC adjustable dampers making their first appearance, and there was a 'Nürburgring' suspension option, too, but it's the basic ability of the chassis, and its perfect match to the power available, that makes it so impressive.

The 3.8-litre six sounds like previous incarnations but revs much more hungrily and offers a magnitude of mid-corner punch that invites experimentation. Tip the M5 into a turn and the rear is right there, loaded with options. Do nothing and it does nothing. Back off and it backs down to neutral. Prod the throttle and – *way-bey!* – it moves smoothly and calmly into oversteer, the

yardage a matter of taste or space.

True, it takes a good few miles to get used to the idea that it isn't going to be a handful when you push beyond the limit of grip – a big, comfortable car like the E34 oughtn't go so hard or feel so balanced and composed under pressure – but it's a joy to discover.

E36 M3 Evo (1996-98)

'Each successive model is a greater sales success, showing that we are giving the customers what they want,' a man from

BMW told me recently. Replacing the iconic, competition-honed, four-pot E30 M3 with a bigger, six-cylinder M3 with no racing remit certainly didn't stall traffic in the showroom. It disappointed the enthusiasts though, and the early cars weren't perfect. The 286bhp engine was muscular and sounded superb, the chassis felt good but, oh, the steering. On the slippery Majorcan roads where the car was launched, it felt slow enough to get you into trouble. It was no surprise to learn later that, on his first run for the camera,



M Coupe (this pic) has a slightly old-school feel; E39 M5 (below and far right) hard to fault. Bottom right: when it was launched, the M3 CSL's £20K premium seemed hard to justify



a colleague had oversteered into shot and carried on at the same angle out of shot and off the road.

By the time the 3.2-litre 321bhp model came along the steering had been improved and convertible and four-door models had expanded the range. It's perhaps a measure of the E36's current low ranking among BMW enthusiasts that we struggled to find an owner with a two-door coupe keen enough to join this test, which is why there's a four-door here. 'It's the ugliest of them all,' opines Green, 'but I reckon it's a bit of a sleeper and right now a bit of a bargain.'

Really? Vivian has just stepped from it muttering 'awful'. Mind, he's not long since driven the E30 M3. There's certainly not the intimacy or the low-slung feel of the E30, and there's tacky wood trim too, but things improve when the 100bhp-per-litre six sparks up. It sounds like all the bulkhead sound-deadening has been ripped out, and within a few hundred yards the reality that this is a large, potent engine in a modestly sized car really hits home. Mini M5, anyone?

Sure, there's nothing like the keenness of the E30's chassis, but the steering is commendably direct and, although it feels tall leaning into corners and takes a moment to settle, it's also alert and adjustable. Green may be right about it being undervalued, but I think it will forever be the least loved M3.

M Coupe (1998-2002)

Catchpole is looking thoughtful as he steps from the M Coupe. He's driven the E36 M3 too and wonders if the M Coupe was an attempt to get back to basics, get a little closer to the spirit of the original M3. It's an interesting idea. Certainly there's a hunkered down, more sporty feel to the 'breadvan', and the E30's semi-trailing rear suspension and the lack of traction and stability control undoubtedly add an edge to the drive.

As in the E36 M3, the straight-six sounds glorious, its note hard and metallic, and its exertions are even more obvious, the Coupe's nose lifting and its tail squatting as the six hits hard. It's a more involving drive as a result, the loading of the rear suspension

giving a greater sense of how hard the rear tyres are working. The rear is quite keen to slide, too, occasionally requiring large and accurate movements of the big wheel set close to your chest, not that that is a minus for some. 'I like it for being a little unruly,' says Green. Classic car feel, then, but not a classic M-car is the general opinion.

E39 M5 (1998-2003)

Very occasionally there comes a car whose looks, sound and feel are perfectly matched. The E39 M5 is such a car. Sitting on deep-dish smoked chrome alloys, the chunky, third-generation M5 has a lusty 400bhp V8 that delivers a thunderous soundtrack, and its demeanour is hefty but confident. It marks the end of an era, being line-built and ditching the straight-six, but when the result is so cohesive and characterful it seems churlish to complain that it's not a 'proper' M5.

The gradual improvement in interior quality and design reaches its peak in the E39. The fascia is stylish and reassuringly substantial and neatly incorporates a TV/satnav screen, though the considerable button and switch count points to why iDrive was on the way. As ever, the basics of driving position and seat shape are spot on, and the now white-faced dials are a model of clarity. Cleverly, when the 5-litre V8 fires up from

'Very occasionally there comes a car whose looks, sound and feel are perfectly matched'



cold, filling the cabin with its rich rumble, the moveable outer band of the rev counter initially places the red line lower down.

It's a heavy car, topping 1700kg, but the big, torquy V8 is its equal and the chassis controls the bulk with remarkable precision. A little more feel through the chubby wheel-rim wouldn't go amiss, but the M5 feels lithe and pointy in a way that you don't expect, and if you show commitment you can steer it on the throttle.

'It's a bit of a hot rod,' says Vivian, 'but everything is in proportion. BMW nailed it with this model.' Catchpole echoes these thoughts, adding: 'It's big but agile – exactly what an M5 should be.'

E46 M3 CSL (2003-05) and CS (2005-07)

There was some debate over which third-generation M3 to include. We're on record as saying that the very last of the E46s, the CS, is the best, but there was strong lobbying from some quarters to include the CSL because it shows how far the M concept can be taken. In the end we decided to allow both entry into our initial group.



At its launch, the CSL didn't quite add up. Much lighter thanks to copious use of carbonfibre (most notably for the roof), more powerful and louder, especially with the 'sport' button pressed, and riding on semi-slick Michelin Cup tyres, the CSL was loaded with potential. Yet it didn't quite deliver. Yes, grip was outstanding and the induction roar spine-tingling, but it didn't feel much more accelerative than the regular car, it was only offered with the SMG

gearbox and it cost a whopping £20K more. The CS, on the other hand, was pitched almost perfectly, borrowing the design of the CSL's handsome wheels and attaching them to a chassis with a quicker steering rack, revised springs and bigger brakes. It unlocked the latent potential of the stock M3 for a piffling premium of just £2400. Add the CSL bootlid with its integrated spoiler, as owner Tony Clarke has, and you've got most of the CSL's visual appeal too.



'If you want to convince anyone of the merits of rear-wheel drive, the M3 CS will do it'



No contest, then? The CS is as good as ever, flowing in the most wonderful, malleable way over difficult roads, the chassis offering fine adjustment, the steering direct, pure and feelsome. If you want to convince anyone of the merits of rear-drive, the CS will do it.

This is not game over, though. CSL owners are an enthusiastic bunch and, four years after the model's launch, they've improved it. According to Steve Davies, owner of this CSL, the majority of UK cars are now running the huge AP Racing brakes and regular Goodyear Eagle F1 road tyres found on his car. There's no question it feels more special than the CS when you slip into the



Above: CS may not be as extreme as the CSL, but past tests have suggested that it may well be the best E46 M3

Current M5 (below right) and M6 (right) use the same 500bhp 5-litre V10, making for effortlessly rapid progress, but their size, weight and extra sophistication means neither can match the intimacy found in the older models



tight embrace of its race-style seat, survey the swathes of carbonfibre and take hold of the slim, suede-covered steering wheel rim. There's more menace and purpose to the note of the straight-six too, here partly because Steve's car runs a race cat.

I'm expecting the CSL to feel good on the smooth, sinuous road that leads from the car park, but it's not – it's brilliant. The brakes feel sensational, offering massive stopping power with great feel and progression, and the chassis is fabulously direct without being nervous – imagine the agility of the E30 M3 in a slightly bigger, heavier package. It's direct, sharp and very grippy, yet adjustable too, and even the SMG 'box is superb, punching up and down the ratios faster and smoother than the SMG in the CS.

Then the road gets lumpen and tricky. It's the deciding moment between the two models for me. The CSL is firm, but riding on the Goodyears it has more than enough suppleness to cope with rural Welsh roads. It gets the nod from me.

E60 M5 (2005-present) and M6 (2005-present)

Years of gradual evolution, of shape and detail refinement, meet an abrupt end in the



current M5. Chris Bangle has arrived. As ever, the treatment that turns the cooking 5-series into the M5 is subtle – four tailpipes, big wheels, side skirts and deeper bumper aprons – but alongside its predecessors the E60 M5 looks less convincing, and huge. The same goes for the interior, which is wilfully less conservative and cohesive. iDrive has reduced the switch and button count significantly, but there's a multitude of buttons for tuning the way it drives, including

two-stage EDC, adjustable shift speed, DSC and a 'power' button, not to mention the 'M' button on the steering wheel.

There's revolution under the bonnet too, of course, with a new 5-litre V10 engine delivering a mighty 500bhp, while a succession of light and precise manual gearboxes give way to a seven-speed SMG paddle-shift type. From the original M5's 1431kg, the M5 now stands at 1830kg. That's only about 100kg more than the V8 M5, but

Z4 M Coupe (bottom) is our favourite of the current M-cars in this part of the test, but it can't match the appeal of the M1, E39 M5, E30 M3 and E46 M3 CSL (right)



'I was expecting two, maybe three cars to make everyone's shortlist but, astonishingly, there is virtually complete agreement'

it doesn't take long to discover that the new car isn't as rounded in its abilities.

About two corners is enough. The first thing you notice is that, even without the power button pressed, the traction warning light is flickering out of the turns. Then you heft the wheel into an inviting turn and, after an initially keen bite, mass takes over and the car shifts wide of the apex. There's no question that the warbly V10 is delivering the goods, though. Thumb the M button and throttle response sharpens and all 500bhp is at your disposal. The shove is mighty and sustained, upshifts thudding home briskly before the onslaught resumes. Ride quality is impressive too, but crucially you never feel connected with the car and the road as you do in other M-cars.

The mechanically identical M6 is a more satisfying package. It's more stylish inside, has more supportive seats, and the V10 sounds beefier too. Point it down the same road as the M5 and it feels like a smaller car,

better controlled, too. It weighs 120kg less, which probably helps, yet compared with the other M-cars there still seems to be a filter between you and what's happening at the road surface.

'The ease with which the M5 and M6 make huge speeds is impressive,' says Green, 'and they'll cover huge distances effortlessly, but that's not really what you want from an M-car, is it?'

Z4 M Coupe (2006-present)

Like its Z3-based predecessor, the current M Coupe brims with character and visual appeal. Nestled under that long snout is the E46 M3's storming straight-six, all 338bhp of it, and it delivers acceleration that's eye-opening even if you've just stepped out of the M6. It's a more exciting and involving ride too, the engine loud and proud, the gearshift of the five-speeder snappy in that knuckly way that defines BMW's manual gearboxes, and the chassis is up for a bit of fun if you get stuck-in mid-corner in second gear.

Sure, like the original M Coupe, it's not a

cutting-edge drivers' car, getting a bit ragged over difficult surfaces, but it has a verve and intimacy that make it the pick of the current cars in this section of the test. Will it make the cut? Probably not. 'The old girl gets my vote in the battle of the Coupes,' says Green. 'You have to dig that bit deeper to find the new car's spirit.'

The reckoning

After two days on glorious roads with twelve of the finest M-cars, each of our testers nominates their top four, with no conferring. I was expecting two, maybe three cars to make everyone's shortlist but, astonishingly, there is virtually complete agreement.

Everyone has chosen the M1, the E30 M3 and the E39 M5, and all of us have nominated the E46 M3 CSL too, apart from John Hayman – he went for the CS.

The M1 makes the cut not because it's such a landmark, or because it's the most exotic, as Catchpole explains: 'It stands head and shoulders above the others in terms of looks and charisma and so had to work extra hard

to earn its place, but it did.'

Almost all of us were worried that the E30 M3 would fall short of our high expectations, but in fact it exceeded them. 'You don't need 500bhp,' says Vivian. 'It's a cliché, but less is more.' Hayman is unequivocal: 'Perfect, isn't it? Its tacity stands out.'

The first two generations of M5 had their admirers, but the third was almost universally praised. 'Everything is in proportion; it's so right,' says Vivian. Catchpole goes further: 'Anyone setting out to make a rear-drive V8 saloon should get themselves into an E39 M5, because it is the idea perfected.'

Surprised to see the CSL make the cut? While its single-mindedness was recognised when it was new, it was hard to see how it justified the massive price. Now, its abilities enhanced and broadened by the stronger brakes and road tyres which most wear, it's a compelling car. 'Everything is so instant,' says Green. 'A kindred spirit to the E30,' says Catchpole.

Those are the four, then. Time to bring on the new M3...



END GAME

It doesn't sink in straight away. Shock seldom does. The paddock at Llandow Circuit suddenly seems awfully empty. As engines fire up and fade out of earshot for the last time, Catchpole, Hayman and I just stand and watch, largely lost for words.

The major mind-warp revolves around the star-studded casualties of the cut. New M5 and M6 – the swiftest, mightiest and most technically advanced M-cars ever to roam the face of the earth – silenced, cold to the touch, heading back to Bracknell in a transporter. Z4 M Coupe – sharp, nimble, sexy, shrink-wrap compact and bullet fast – patted on the nose, locked up, keys in pocket. M3 CS – a certified gem, some say the most finely judged six-cylinder M3 of all – marking the start of its journey home with an indignant chirp of rubber, muscled out of the frame by its more aggressively suited and booted progenitor, the unambiguously hardcore M3 CSL.

Incredibly, the remaining group has just

Words **David Vivian**

E92 M3

Engine: V8, 3999cc, 32v

Max power: 414bhp @ 8300rpm

Max torque: 295lb ft @ 3900rpm

Top speed: 155mph (limited)

0-60mph: 4.7sec

On sale: Now



E39 M5's V8 (below) offers similar power to the smaller V8 in the new M3. Far right: CSL has a 355bhp version of the 3.2-litre M Power six (bottom)



going to tear anyone's head off.

For raw, all-senses-engaged involvement, the M1 hangs the E92 M3 out to dry, and not because you'll immediately think you're Nelson Piquet the moment you slide behind the mildly disconcertingly angled steering wheel and offset pedals. Point is, you don't need to be a frequent visitor to the limit to raid the M1's goodie bag. If you do happen to find yourself with an armful of opposite lock halfway round a glistening mountain hairpin – as I did the first time I drove one in Austria back in the early '80s – you won't get bitten. As a low-to-medium-speed drifter, it's as benign and progressive as that other mid-engined marvel, the Ferrari Dino. But, for the most part, that's where the subtlety ends.

The gearchange and clutch are almost absurdly meaty affairs, the latter's indeterminate (sometimes seemingly mobile) biting point combining with the long, long first gear to make merely moving off from rest an adventure. And the unassisted steering initially seems impossibly low geared and more than a little vague. Once



travelling, though, it all starts to come together with a swelling rush of satisfaction. It quickly becomes apparent that scalpel-like precision can never have been part of the brief, but take up a little of the slack mentally and tune into the sublime balance and poise of the chassis and you have a dynamic repertoire that makes the rather numb-helmed E92 M3's seem two-dimensional.

Henry Catchpole is practically bewitched. 'It's just the way the unassisted steering moves around

in your hands through the ebb and flow of a long corner,' he says, 'and the long-legged surge of that remarkably gutsy engine. Lean on the M1 a bit in a bend and you can feel the front start to go then come back as you trim the throttle, but you can equally sense how unfriendly it might all become if you wanted to drive one absolutely flat out.'

Age simply hasn't dimmed the draw of its chiselled good looks and rare German/Italian breeding. 'It's just gorgeous,' says Roger Green. 'It sounds fantastic and,



'All the M Division's single-minded paring and honing mainlines into the CSL driving experience'

although the suspension feels a little tired, it isn't found wanting in this company. I love the haphazard nature of the dash, the fact you can see all the grub screws. You know you could take the whole thing apart if you wanted to, and it's that simplicity that carries over to the driving experience. You're indivisibly a part of what's going on.'

The last M5 standing can't rely on any of the M1's seduction techniques. By common consent, the E39 is the most sober-looking saloon here, the considerable V8 potency nestling beneath the plain but still pretty wrapper. And potential there most certainly is: 400bhp, 7000rpm red line, 369lb ft of torque at 3800rpm, lovely six-speed manual (an exquisite antidote to SMG paddles) and the early stirrings of the configurable electronics that will insulate the communicative abilities of the next generation M5 and, we all agree, form a large part of the reason the latest M5 and

M6 are absent from this gathering. Here it's just one button, labelled 'Sport', giving sharper drive-by-wire throttle response and an extra dollop of steering weight. Not particularly big or clever but, as with so much else about this M5, very nicely judged.

Likewise the suspension: conventional springs and dampers tuned for a perfectly

brilliant ride/handling compromise. Brilliant because it combines great comfort with almost absurdly exploitable driftability (once you've switched off the one-stage traction control), ensuring that driver and passengers are kept equally happy, though not necessarily at the same time. The basic 400-ish bhp V8 formula is exactly the same as the E92 M3's, of course, but it seems somehow more relaxed and effortlessly entertaining





— more Keith Floyd than Jamie Oliver. Catchpole: 'Before we came on this test I was really unsure if any of the M5s would make it through against the smaller, lighter Threes and Coupes, but then you drive the E39 and realise that there's something utterly fascinating about a big car going fast. You shouldn't be able to make a big galumphing saloon feel so easily balletic, but somehow they've managed it. Bizarrely,

the E39 M5 shows the E92 how you should really do the whole big horsepower, comfy electric seats thing, if that's the way you want to go.' So, a starkly contrasting expression of M-ness. It's hard to imagine the E39 winning a race, but easy to see it as the everyday wheels of a racer susceptible to the odd temptation, power-sliding it, one-handed, out of the paddock gate. The new M5 would

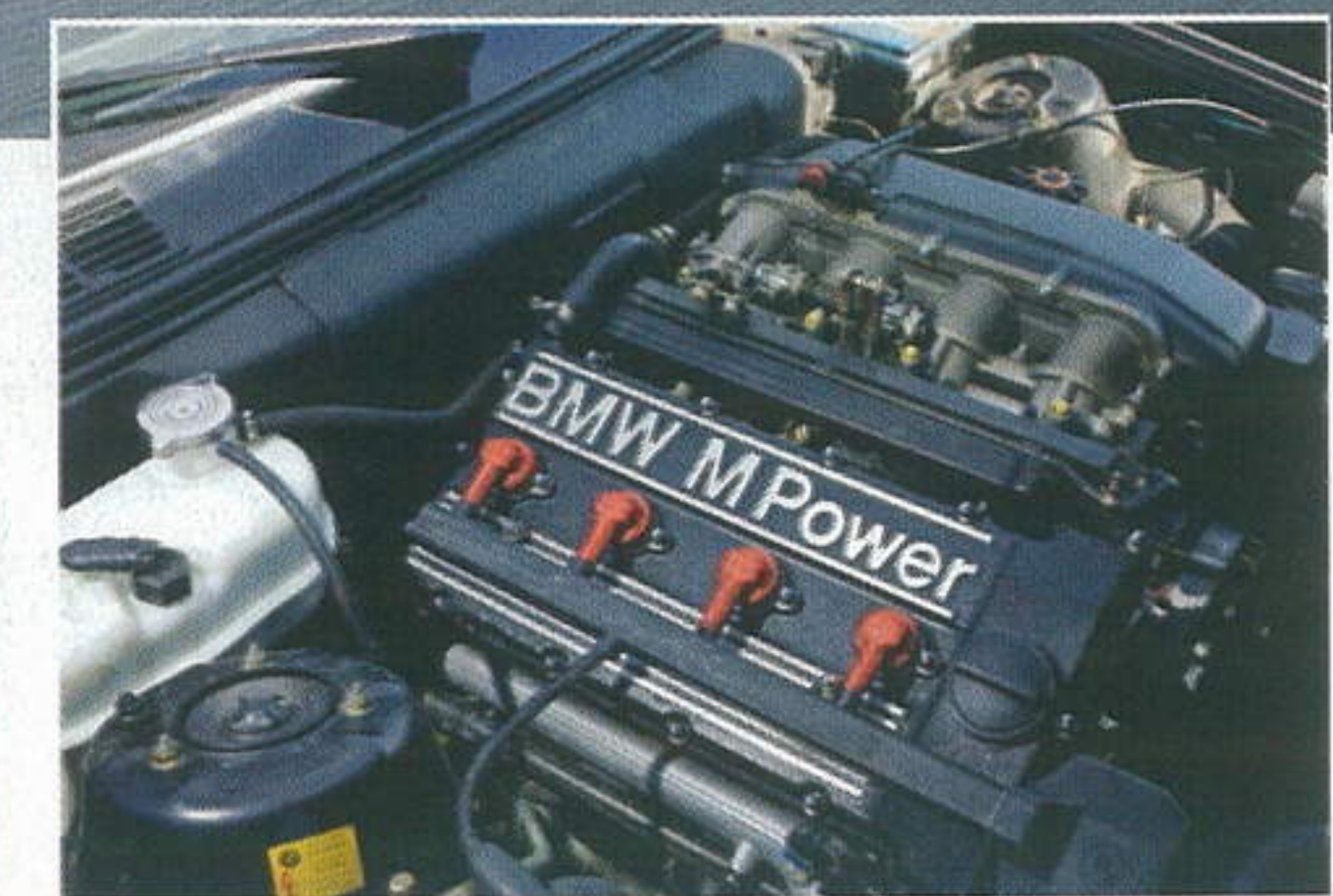
leave it for dead and deposit even longer black lines, but it seems terminally uptight by comparison.

The M3 CSL is a completely different proposition again and, in a very real sense, the spiritual successor to perhaps the E92's most formidable nemesis, the original E30 M3, found here as the fully evolved 2.5-litre Sport Evolution, quietly waiting in the wings to launch its bid for glory. The lightweight, carbon-roofed CSL has to be in with a serious shout, though. Depending on who you listened to at the time of its introduction, it was either BMW's honest attempt to fully restore the M3's track-evolved credibility after years of gradual weight gain and kit-list debauchery, or an expedient way to remove a surprising amount of cash from gullible poseurs. With the benefit of hindsight, the former proposition seems more likely but, whatever the case, the CSL now stands pretty close to the top of the M food-chain and is cherished and fettered by owners almost to the point of fetishism.

Apart from anything else, it looks the absolute nuts, a drum-taut, hard-muscled



Compact, light E30 M3 (right) feels a world away from the new V8 model (left). Below right: E30 Sport Evolution's 2.5-litre four-cylinder



object lesson in aesthetic warfare against which the E92 M3 comes across about as tough as a platoon of jelly babies. Sounds awesome, too. It's that Sport button again — wakes up the throttle just as it does on the M5 but also gifts the induction chorus a hi-fi amp and high efficiency speakers (actually, a carbonfibre air-box). No six-cylinder engine has ever sounded better. To tell the truth, few engines of any configuration have sounded better. The M1's? Maybe a little louder but with more mechanical thrash and less acoustic power. E92 M3's? An edgy V8 warble but volume limited and positively

civilised by comparison. M5's? A creamy baritone but hardly brutish. The CSL drowns it.

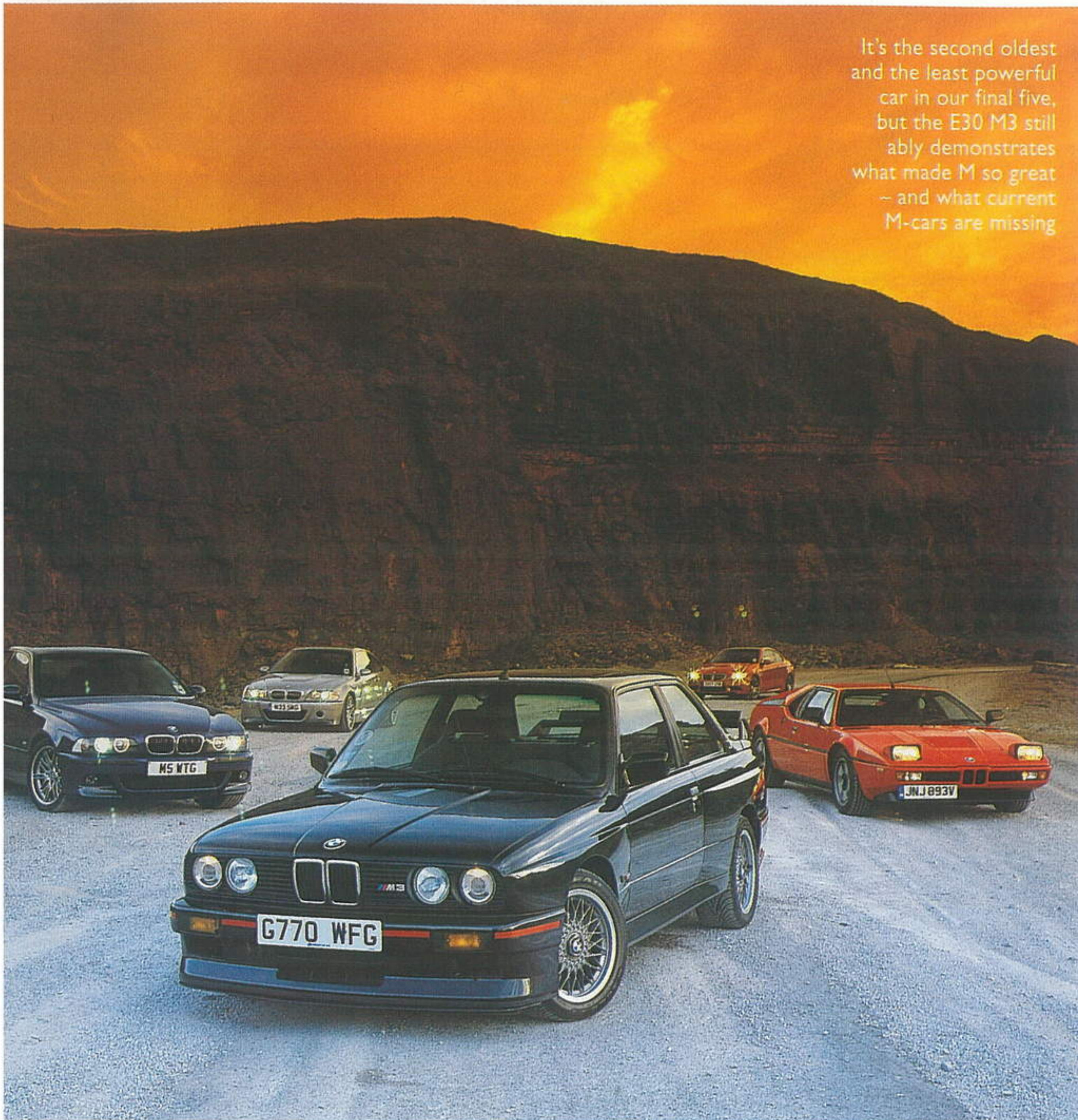
By any sensible standard, this is the most focused, hardcore M3 of the lot and, better still, all the M Division's single-minded paring and honing mainlines into the driving experience. When you lean on that 355bhp at 7900rpm it really feels like it's doing an honest day's work. The rest of the car's up for it, too. You can almost hear it chanting the mantra under its breath: maximum effort, maximum conviction, maximum commitment. Step from the M5 into the

CSL and you might as well have donned Tour de France-spec Lycra after shedding an overcoat of Eskimo animal furs. And you'd better be ready for business.

The SMG paddleshift is. In fact, it's so manically swift and completely 'on it', even those of us who'd take a conventional manual 'box any old day of the week are partially won over. 'Of all the paddleshift M-cars, the CSL makes most sense,' says Green. 'It's the most hardcore, the closest to a racer on the road. The CS is very good, but once you've driven the CSL it unfortunately feels like the poor man's version. If you're going to have paddles you might as well go the whole hog and go extreme on everything else. For me, this car comes closest to recapturing what the E30 was all about.'

The CSL is the most firmly suspended of all the remaining cars. Yet it never feels harsh or jarring. Its steering is a revelation, too: light but brimming with deliciously resolved feel and not one millimetre of wasted motion. Turn and the CSL changes tack instantly — no body roll, seemingly

It's the second oldest and the least powerful car in our final five, but the E30 M3 still ably demonstrates what made M so great – and what current M-cars are missing



weight distribution gives one clue to why it feels so good, so balanced, so biddable. The car works with you. It can't rely on electronic aids, so there has to be a mutual bond of trust. The experience can sometimes feel uncanny. It's as if it knows exactly what you want to do. And, in turn, the car's intentions and abilities are completely transparent to the driver. If you can't form a close relationship with the E30, chances are you have no friends.

Catchpole understands where it's coming from immediately: 'The E30 looks and feels light. It's the antithesis of the new E92 with its big horsepower and comfy electric seats.' And Green is pleased his fond memories haven't been shattered. 'This car has always been a hero of mine,' he says, 'and it thrives on the mountain roads here. Its cornering pace, feel, precision, the pure interaction between man and machine, all more than counteract the comparative lack of pace down the straight bits. You can tell exactly what each of the four wheels is doing and the balance allows them to work in unison. It's the car that the M Division built its reputation on, its very essence.'

The M1 has that quality, too, but feels old-fashioned and lacking firepower these days, so comes a noble fifth in this rarefied group. The new M3 doesn't have the E30 magic, but its speed and ability are electrifying. That it doesn't finish higher than fourth is testament to the fact that it's up against the all-time greats here. The V8-engined M5 is absurdly good fun, the M3 CSL just pipping it for total sensual overload. But when we tot up the scores at the end of the day, it's the E30 that beats them all. It wins because it does more with less and destroys

the idea (apparently at the core of BMW M thinking these days) that if power is good, more power must be better. If that were the case,

the E92 M3 – which, on paper, is a best-of-all-worlds solution, with its old-school M5-esque V8, M3 size and supercar pace – would represent the very pinnacle of the M Division's achievements. But the touch of the master belongs to a different era.

no suspension bush compliance to blur the message, just lightning responses, terrific precision and masses of grip. Point-to-point, it's the E92 M3 that struggles to stay in touch, despite its straight-line speed advantage. But then, subjectively, it feels as if it weighs about half as much again and has been given a slug of anaesthetic.

Catchpole was sceptical about the CSL before this test, but then he hadn't driven one. What a difference a day makes. 'The speed of the shifts is awesome,' he says, 'but I reckon the paddles on the steering wheel attached to the PlayStation in our office feel more mechanical. In some ways I really want a manual, but the SMG does seem to suck you into the whole focussed CSL experience. You need to be held in place by a big bucket seat, you need to keep both hands on the wheel while you react instinctively to all the movements going on beneath you.'

Question is, have we saved the best till last or are we about to witness a bloody massacre? How can the boxy, weedily tired, four-cylinder E30 M3 – even in its ultimate 238bhp Sport Evolution form –

stand up to the finely resolved savagery of the CSL, the effortless mumbo of the M5, the mid-engined supercar chops of the M1 and the phenomenal pace, poise and polish

'The original M3 is utterly brilliant in ways the people at M have either forgotten about or choose to ignore'

of the E92 M3?

Quite easily as it turns out. Let's make this simple: the original M3 is utterly brilliant. More pointedly, it's utterly brilliant in ways that the people at M have either forgotten about or, these days, choose to ignore. Something of the essence of the E30 is present in the CSL and the M1 – a sense of integration, purity, connectedness and mechanical honesty – but not in the E92 M3. For all its pace, grip and throttle adjustability, the new car simply doesn't have the E30's dynamic subtlety, its loose-limbed agility, its intimacy.

There's a story that F1 hero Jean Alesi liked his E30 so much, he later said it was one of the most enjoyable and best handling road cars he had ever owned. The 48/52

Thank you...

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