



Motorsport

for the masses

The precursor to the M5 and the first affordable M Division car, the E12 M535i was the epitome of Q car cool

Words: Luke Wood Photography: Dom Fraser





Owner's view: Charles Dorai

"I have owned this car since 2001 and it took me a long time to find it – almost 15 years in fact. I did lots of research about this particular model and, quite by chance, while passing through Eastbourne, I found this car sitting in a specialist sports car showroom.

"In original condition, and with only one family ownership, it had done 64,000 miles. Because of a few years spent in storage it needed lots of TLC, although most of it was detailing. One look was enough, here was the end of my quest.

"My intention originally was to clean it up sympathetically and use it but I ended up removing everything underneath. I painted everything, including floors and wheelarches. All panels were wax-treated, including inside the doors. To keep it in 'factory spec', the wheels were sent away to be refurbished and fitted with correct tyre sizes. All parts fitted were genuine BMW ones.

"I really enjoy this car, especially the dog-leg gearbox. Because of its light weight, especially compared to many cars of today, it performs outstandingly well, with handling to match.

"The admiration piled upon this car is well deserved, but the performance is something which stirs the blood and gives an excitement which needs to be experienced in order to truly understand what I mean.

"This is a real driver's car. With its thrilling performance and superb handling, it is responsible for the cult status of the M-powered machines. This is an accolade which, in my opinion, is richly deserved."



Photo: Mike West Photography, Tom Jones



it's a fast car even by today's outlandish standards so in 1980 its performance must have been absolutely electrifying



M1 steering wheel looks and feels great, and Pioneer stereo is retro cool personified

Take one 5 Series, throw away the engine, replace the brakes, upgrade the suspension and tweak the chassis. Next, shoehorn a ridiculously large and preferably motorsport derived powerplant under the bonnet, sprinkle the finished item with a light coating of subtle badges and aero tweaks for assured Q car kudos and voila, you have yourself an M5.

Sounds simple doesn't it? The basic ingredients for each generation M5 have essentially revolved around modifying whichever 5 Series is current at the time to create a ballistically fast yet sensible looking supercar in sheep's clothing, and while the process has become increasingly more accepted over time, it makes you wonder what the engineers at BMW were smoking in order to come up with the idea in the first place.

When the first generation E28 landed at the Amsterdam motor show in 1985 it would have been understandable if the vast majority of people presented with the boxy looking saloon felt a little underwhelmed. There is after all, very little to shout about on the exterior of an M5 and quite rightly so. Had they spoken to any one of the privileged few that BMW had treated to the first batch of cars, which rolled silently off the production line in October '84, then they would have realised just what the M5 was capable of. Which was 286bhp, 0-60mph in just 6.2 seconds and a top speed of 153mph. In 1985. Wow.

The arrival of the M5 was not a complete bolt from the blue as there was of course the bodykitted E28 M535i that preceded its arrival by a year. However, aside from the addition of M Technic suspension, this was essentially a regular 535i that had been treated to a more extreme bodykit and was therefore quite the opposite of what we have now come to expect from a true M car. To really understand the roots of the M5 we have to look back even further still to the late 1970s and the focus of this month's Legend pages, the E12 M535i. Unlike the E28, this was a full fat effort from the emerging Motorsport Division and on its debut in 1979 it represented the fastest machine in BMW's entire model line-up with 218bhp, a 0-60mph time of 7.5-seconds and a top speed of 138mph. OK, so the M1 supercar was quicker and more powerful but then it was just that, a supercar, and as such was well beyond the means of 99 per cent of the population. The cooking E12 was, therefore, the car that introduced the famous M

badge to the masses – although even this was preceded by a number of low volume experiments from M. Built for certain members of BMW management and the occasional VIP, these one-offs were nearly always based on a 5 Series shell and were invariably fitted with the largest engine possible from the nearest parts bin.

As BMW put it, "These were very special 5 Series saloons hand-built with painstaking care and featuring the largest possible six-cylinder power units taken from BMW's wide range of engines and sometimes tuned for higher performance. The engineers at BMW Motorsport GmbH also took a close look at the chassis and brakes of these cars."

Possibly the most well known example of one of these 'specials' was a car created in 1974 for the then joint managing director of BMW GB, Jonathan Sieff. The 'Sieff 5 Series' was several years ahead of its time in that it featured a 3.0-litre six-cylinder, which in this case was lifted straight from a CSL. Sporting uprated Bilstein dampers and anti-roll bars to cope with the extra performance, we can only take a guess at what this relatively lightweight 200bhp super saloon felt like in 1974. Considering the contemporary opposition, which at a glance would have consisted of cars like the Triumph 2.5 PI (straight-six, 150bhp), Rover 3500S (V8, 150bhp) Jaguar XJ6 2.8 (straight-six, 140bhp) or even Mercedes' 280 SLC (182bhp) it's probably a safe bet to say that it was plenty fast enough.

In addition to these special order machines, Motorsport did have one further trial run before fully committing to the M535i by offering upgrade packages for the 525 and 528i models. The Motorsport catalogue, available in 1978, wasn't widely publicised by BMW yet it afforded regular customers the option of a potent 197bhp 3.3-litre engine conversion (the same powerplant as found in the 633CSi and 733i) along with a close ratio dog-leg five-speed gearbox lifted from the 635CSi and a limited slip differential. To differentiate from regular models, these exclusive cars would have been decked out with sportier front seats, a Motorsport steering wheel and lightweight 7x14-inch BBS alloys (an unusually wide wheel as even the 635CSi had to make do with a 6.5-inch wide rim) fitted with distinctive Motorsport emblems although just how many 5 Series drivers took advantage of this service is unclear because it was not widely publicised. With this





in mind it would be highly unlikely if numbers exceeded 200, so next time you see an inconspicuous E12 for sale it might be worth taking a sneaky look under the bonnet just in case!

When the real deal M535i finally appeared a year later it may have been equally as subtle, but it marked a significant chapter in BMW's approach to its high performance vehicles. You no longer had to be a favoured client or senior management to enjoy the fruits of M GmbH's labour, if you had £13,745 burning a hole in your pocket then the keys to one of the fastest and most exclusive saloon cars on the planet were just a short trip to the dealership away.

This price tag, which works out at around £42,473 in today's money, may have been £3,000 over a normal 528i but the overall package was a huge leap in terms of performance. In BMW's own words; "In its

design and development, this 3.5-litre power unit is closely related to the various engines that power the BMW M1. Both units have been developed out of the same engine, the extremely successful M49 racing engine which powered BMW's racing coupes from 1973 to 1976, developing no less than 480bhp as a normally aspirated engine and more than 800bhp in the turbocharged version."

While this statement is largely marketing hyperbole, it does of course play to the M535i's trump card, which is the fact that it came complete with the same 218bhp straight-six as found in the 635CSi, an engine that was by and large (minus the 24-valve cylinder head) a de-tuned version of the M88 firecracker found in the M1. Rather disappointingly, it didn't have the 'Motorsport' logo'd cam cover that later became the trademark of future offerings, but that's not to say

it was any less potent. A single overhead cam, iron block design with a 93.4mm bore and 84mm stroke, the 3453cc straight-six featured L-Jetronic fuel injection, 218bhp at 5200rpm, 224lb ft at 4000rpm and the capacity for a heady 138mph – true sports car territory for the day.

Two five-speed manual Getrag gearboxes were available, a close-ratio dog-leg or more conventional overdrive depending on whether you lived in Europe or South Africa, and a limited slip differential was standard kit. The suspension remained similar in layout to the regular E12, with MacPherson struts up front and a semi-trailing arrangement at the rear, although the springs and Bilstein dampers were specially tuned in order to cope with the extra stresses and strains, as were the brakes, which featured four pot callipers and 3mm thicker discs up front.



Driving an M535i today

It never ceases to amaze just how fresh a well looked after classic BMW can feel, how modern its interior and how strong its engine and running gear. 'Classic' is of course something of a loose term, although I'm sure there's not many that would disagree that a 29-year old, limited edition Motorsport special fits the bill more than most, especially one that has come under the spotlight of our Legends pages. And in this case, Charles Dorai's superb E12 M535i must be one of the finest of its breed outside of BMW's own Mobile Tradition.

Charles, an enthusiast with a keen eye for rare and unusual cars, has spent a considerable amount of time and effort bringing his M535i up to concours standard and as such it's as shiny underneath as it is up top and is essentially in the same, if not better, condition as when it rolled off the production line in 1980. Sporting flawless paint, and specced with the sportier no cost option front airdam and distinctive rubber bootlid, the overall impression is one of effortless class with just a hint of menace. A bit like a Saville row suit with a gun shaped bulge about the breast pocket. Even without the kit, there are other visual clues such as the larger front callipers tucked in tight behind the multi-spoke 14-inch BBS wheels that help mark this E12 out as something a little bit special. While the condition of the bodywork and engine bay are breathtaking enough, it gets even better once you lift the chrome door handle and take a peak at the interior. I haven't got this excited about blue corduroy since my first year at art college. In fact the whole cabin is a combination of retro cool and solid, no nonsense BMW design. The factory fit Pioneer head unit and graphic equaliser are a real party piece, as is the digital clock that is incorporated into the heating and ventilation controls, while the dash itself wouldn't look out of place in a car 20-years its junior. There isn't the driver orientated angle to the centre console that you'd expect to find in an E30 or E34, although the instrument binnacle is concave in its design which means it has a similar effect angling important information towards the pilot.

This particular car is reasonably well specced with electric windows all round, electric tilt and slide

sunroof and the stereo package mentioned earlier, although it is without air con or leather. The later is not particularly missed as the blue cloth lends a fantastic period feel to the proceedings and takes nothing away from the hip-hugging Recaros which, in turn, hold you firmly in front of the slightly offset M1 steering wheel and pedals. The engine, barely run in at only 66,000 miles, fires into life without hesitation and settles down quickly into a familiar and un-dramatic straight-six thrum. At everyday speeds the M535i is whisper quiet (I've sat in three year old cars with more creaks and groans) and, thanks to a healthy slug of torque, entirely happy to lean on fifth gear while cruising along the back lanes or ticking along in traffic. Again, I can't emphasise enough just how new everything feels.

The dog-leg 'box provides a relatively long but precise change with each cog engaging with a well-oiled 'snick', the helm is light but direct and the experience is altogether a very civilised one. But this is an M car and it's designed to be driven fast, not pootled along at 45mph, so when a gap in the traffic finally materialises it's time for the old girl to show us what she can do. Which as it happens, is really rather a lot. Once roused the M30 doesn't respond with the fire and brimstone repertoire of a modern M Division car, offering up a much more tuneful straight-six yowl instead, but the effect on forward velocity is no less dramatic. Bear in mind that with 218bhp and 224lb ft this is still, on paper at least, a fast car even by today's outlandish standards so in 1980 its performance must have been absolutely electrifying. Big speeds, then, are not a problem and rather more alarming speeds are just as attainable if you decide to keep your foot in, although thankfully the rest of the chassis is more than up to the task of reigning it all in. The four pots are fantastic of course, easily coping with the M535i's 1465kg kerb weight even in licence losing territory and the Bilstein tuned suspension also manages to magic up a ride that is supple enough to soak up unwanted ruts and bumps, firm enough to provide an appropriately sporty feel and compliant enough to provide just the right amount of lean in the corners. They certainly don't make them like this anymore!

Apart from a tell-tale rubber boot spoiler and a smattering of subtle badges, the M535i doesn't shout about its performance

There was certainly plenty to get excited about in terms of performance, with contemporary road tests understandably making plenty of comparisons with the 635CSi and even the earlier 3.0CSL, although it was down to individual customers to choose whether they wanted to display their M535i's pedigree or opt for a more discreet package. If they decided on the former, then a deeper colour-coded front spoiler, prominent black rubber rear spoiler and trade mark Motorsport stripes on the bodywork and front airdam marked the new M car out as something special. If the latter, then even the M535i badges on the grille and bootlid could be deleted for optimum stealth, leaving just a distinctive set of 6.5x14-inch BBS alloys for the discerning to identify.

As for the interior, the seemingly endless list of options meant that your M535i could be as sparse or

Thirty years down the line and this E12 is still a fast car, so in 1980 it must have blown people's minds





E12 530 Motorsport Limited Edition

Along with the earlier special edition E12s there was one other version of note that was offered in South Africa to homologate a 3.0-litre 5 Series for the domestic Modified Production race series.

Developed by Motorsport GmbH and BMW South Africa, the Motorsport Limited Edition featured a 3.0-litre M30 as found in the E3 or E9, but modified with twin Zenith carbs, a more aggressive cam, lightened flywheel and an engine oil cooler to produce 197hp at 6000rpm and 204lb ft at 4300rpm. A close ratio five-speed dog-leg 'box, LSD

and uprated Bilstein dampers were fitted, along with thicker anti-roll bars, disc brakes all round and 14-inch BBS alloys. There were also a number of weight saving measures that included fibreglass front and rear spoilers, thinner steel or aluminium body panels, thinner glass and drilled pedals and boot hinges. Fitted with Scheel sports seats, even the rear bench was mounted to a foam base in order to shave off unwanted ballast. Only 100 cars were needed to satisfy homologation rules, but it is believed that as many as 216 road going cars were eventually built.

as luxurious as possible with air con, electric sunroof and windows and leather upholstery available at just the tick of a box. Alternatively, you could attempt to save some cash, and weight, and live with the wind down windows which would obviously mean getting a bit hot about the collar in summer, but at least the standard fit Recaro seats and leather clad M1 steering wheel lent a degree of sportiness to even the most poverty spec cars.

BMW stated on launch "The M535i represents a perfect symbiosis: First, it bears the name of a demanding manufacturer of standard production automobiles – a manufacturer which guarantees optimum production quality and a perfect finish. Second, it is the special product of a team of motor

racing experts – a team that is able to combine its dedication and motor racing involvement with industrial resources, scientific know-how, and professional efficiency."

In other words, if you were the kind of person that had always lusted after an affordable yet obscenely fast car that also happened to be practical, classy and well screwed together then the M535i must have appeared as an absolute revelation. The press certainly seemed to think so and, as seems to be the way today when hacks are suddenly presented with a really good car, were forced to nit pick in an attempt to find the slightest of chinks in the E12's armour. Car magazine reported: "Does this Motorsport wunderwagen have no faults at all?" It would appear

that apart from some minor gripes regarding high speed wind noise, some difficulty with the ventilation and a question mark over wet weather braking (ABS was not available) it was obvious that BMW were on to a winner.

That said, production of the M535i was wound down in May 1981 after 1410 cars, 408 of which made it to the UK in right hand drive form, with a couple of hundred more ending up in South Africa. At first it seemed that there was to be no immediate replacement either, although it is believed that M Division did make a 277bhp, M1 engined prototype and while this didn't make it to production, it seems that bigger and better things were already on the horizon. And the rest, as they say, is history ●

It might not have had the multi-valve head of an M unit, but the M30 was still plenty powerful

