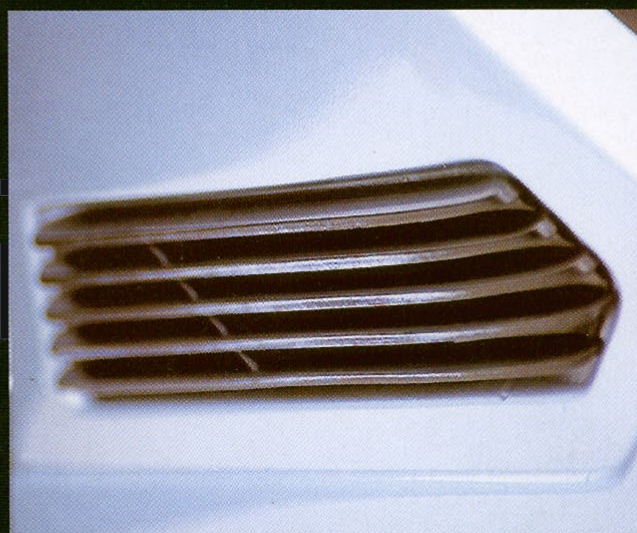




Resurrection

Suspension work and the correct diff bring our M535i warrior back to life as we beat the bodgers and do things properly.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVE WOODALL



Last month we left our 1981 E12 M535i with its new front Bilsteins fitted, new Yokohama tyres all round and both the brakes and the engine sorted. Since then we have had an opportunity to get into the nitty gritty and uncovered even more quality bodes.

For the rest of the work on SWY 7W, we took the car down to Laserchrom in Kent, probably one of the country's leading M535i people who are well qualified to sort out problem children like this one.

As we got it, SWY appeared to be a pretty fair example of the rare E12 model, so rare in fact that there are now only about 70 in existence in the UK. So far, we've fitted new front Bilsteins which are only available from BMW at £105 each, plus a set of Yokohamas, freed off the sticky callipers and fitted new pads, replaced the oil pump and big end shells and sorted out the rear axle with new beam bushes and diff mounting.

When we ordered our rear Bilsteins from BMW, little did we (or the dealer)

know that the one we received was in fact the very last rear E12 M535i Bilstein damper in existence — there were no more and BMW Mobile Tradition didn't seem too interested in making any more. We needed a solution and we found it — as we suggested last month, it transpires that E28 rear shocks will fit but apparently only the ones with removable lower spring platforms.

We called Geoff Weeks at One to One Motorsport who had a pair of E28 Alpina-spec Bilsteins, brand >>

spanking new and with two-position spring platforms so that you can raise or lower the rear of the car by an inch. At £60 each these were a bargain and he might still have a pair for you if you're quick. As it happened, Laserchrom found that our car's rear shocks were OK anyway so we left them as they were.

As for the diff, the individual responsible for fitting the 528 item to ours needs to be beaten to death with a 750iL propshaft. Not only was it totally the wrong unit with a ratio so low that it was like driving everywhere in third gear, but rather than fit the correct length bolts, he fitted bolts that were an inch too long

and used big nuts as spacers! A real craftsman obviously.

Laserchrom technician Alan wasted no time in fitting the correct 3.07:1 limited-slip diff and this in itself made the car a thousand times better — now we were getting somewhere.

Alan also replaced the growling power steering pump, rectified a knock in the front suspension which was caused by a knackered front top mount (in turn partly caused by the new mega-stiff Bilsteins) and generally sorted the car out.

And there we have it, a rare Motorsport classic that's been well sorted and is now ready for some more action. As a road car to use everyday,

the E12 doesn't make much sense these days and for this, the later E28 car is far better — it's equally as fast and is a lot more durable as well as having much better parts availability.

The trouble with the E12 is that it is really a 2002-era car with the rust problems of the 1960s and componentry designed in the same decade — the original E12 was only ever a mixture of 2000, Neue Klasse and E3 2500 bits remember.

Where the M-powered E12 does score though is in the way it drives. It's more of a 'scruff-of-the-neck' car than the E28 incarnation of the M535i and rather than being wasted on the road, the E12 needs to be used for track days



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where you can really hammer it about and get the feel of what these cars were about.

In many ways, this really was a four-door CSL and the alloy panelled coupé's spiritual successor — it's just a shame the values aren't in the CSL league too, otherwise more would have been saved.

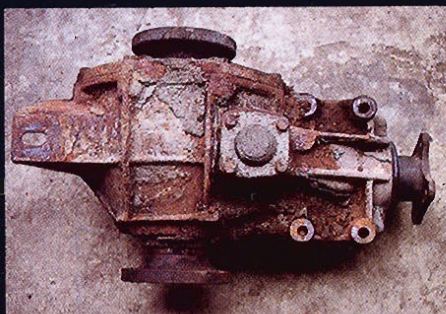
Performance is no better than the later E28 car in reality but on the road, the raw exhaust note and the throttle response from the engine that's unhindered by economy-biased Motronic injection is pretty electric.

Similarly the handling: Far from being the wallowing barge that the regular E12 was, the M535i is very >>



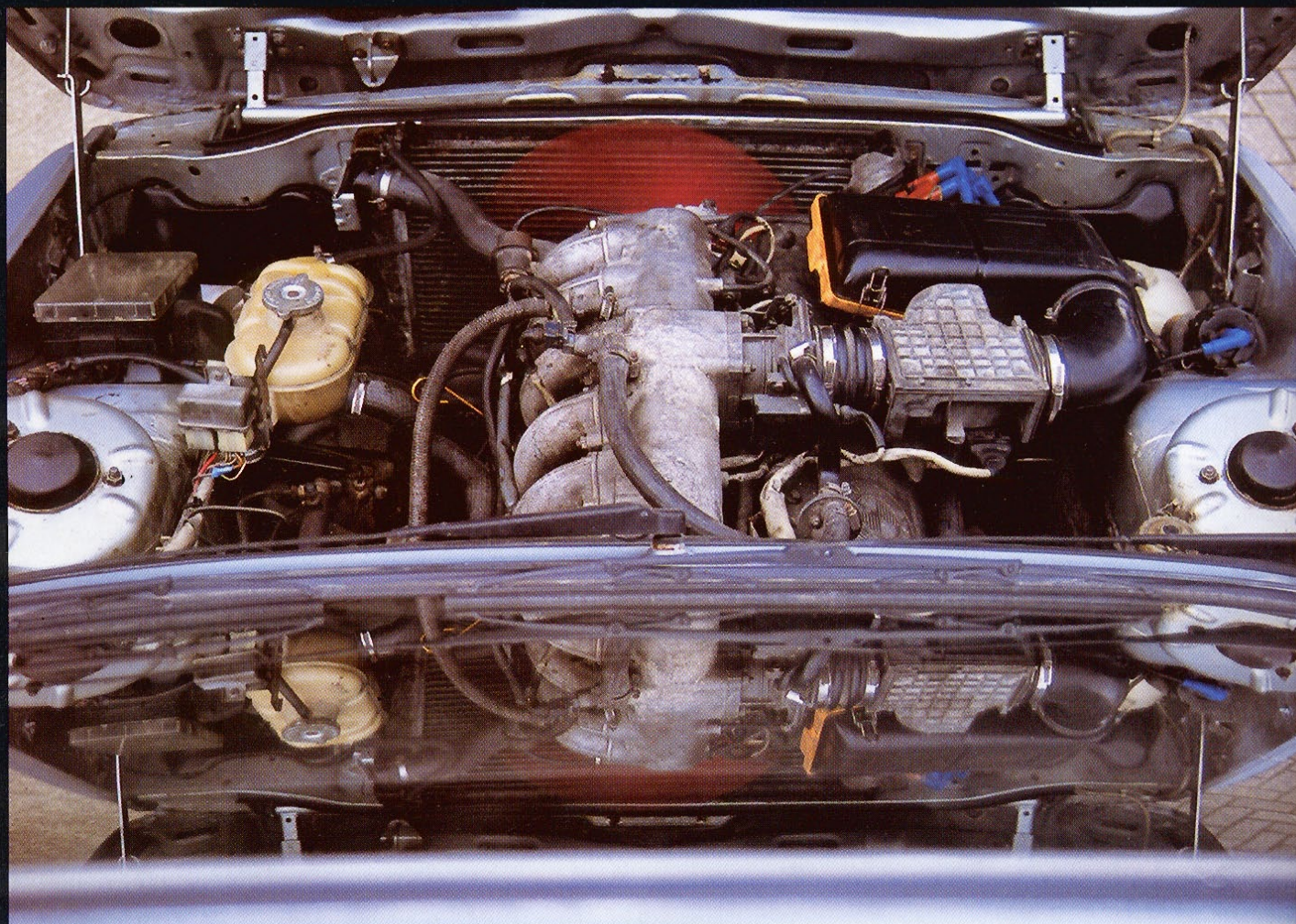
Above. Kent-based BMW specialists Laserchrom love their E12s so we let them handle the tricky work on ours.

Below. Screaming acceleration was down to this badly-fitted 528i differential. Fitting the correct 3.07:1 LSD item transformed the car.



Old age and stiff Bilsteins had brought this strut top mount to its knees. Replacement cured the knock from the front suspension. Yokohama rubber completed the handling sort-out.





The Bottom Line

Purchase price:	£700
Suspension bushes:	£40
Differential and mounting:	£220
Big end bearing shells:	£30
Yokohama A008 tyres:	£200
K&N air filter:	£35
Front Bilstein dampers:	£246
Oil Pump:	£70
TOTAL:	£1541



stiff, resisting roll and yet retaining a reasonable degree of ride comfort. Whereas the old E12 528i would get you into serious trouble on a wet roundabout, the Motorsport car is immensely chuckable.

Very controllable on the gas pedal, it's certainly more entertaining than the later and slightly softer E28. Hey, after all the trials and tribulations I really got to like the car... but not enough to stop Stuart making me an offer for it I couldn't refuse. After all, he's the M535i king and has more use for a car like this than we do.

We've had some good fun with the car but we've also learned a very valuable lesson too, which is that no matter how cheap your old BMW bargain was

to start with, you can guarantee spending the purchase price again to undo the dreadful bodging inflicted by previous owners. If our experience has whetted your appetite for an affordable M car, then unless you've got the time and patience for a rebuild project, go for a really good one with everything working and no rot.

All of these cars will have had some restoration work by now but what you need to do is sort the wheat from the chaff, and there's plenty of that about.

Find a good one though, and all you'll need to do is buy a decent set of tyres, fit a couple of new suspension bushes and head for the nearest track day. But if it's a set of new Bilsteins you're after, don't come to us...

Blue velour interior was high-tech in 1980 but wood cappings hint at earlier BMW designs like the E3 saloons.



Remember the Texas Instruments calculator you had at school? Funky early-days-of-LCD clock is one of the E12's best features.