



# First & Last M-powered

*BMW Motorsport was developing the 5-series long before the M5 itself arrived. Ian Young drives early and late examples of its predecessor, the M535i*

**T**he thing about motorsport is that once you get it into your system, you'll most likely be hooked for life. Get the smell of race-burnt rubber into your nostrils and life will never be the same again. Better still, build a production road car that can be modified to race – and win – on the track, and your thrill-seeking suddenly makes sound financial sense as customers queue to share in the glory. This has been the philosophy of myriad car manufacturers since before the war – Mercedes-Benz and Porsche are cases in point – and it is a policy that has been pushed to its furthest

extremes by one of their biggest rivals, BMW, whose engineers and technical boffins have been tinkering with competition/road cars since the glorious BMW 328 was debuted – and ran out victorious – in the Eifelrennen on June 14, 1936.

In the modern era, this has meant the awesome M1 coupé: a limited production road car with race-bred characteristics that basked as a support act in the heady glare of the 1980/81 Grand Prix seasons. At the same time BMW began supplying turbocharged engines to the Brabham Formula One team, eventually winning the

*Ultimate driving machines? The BMW M535i spanned two generations of the 5-series body shape. First version, on left, was also the first M-badged saloon*





world championship in 1983 (the first for a turbocharged car). Today, BMW power charges the loins of the fastest production road car in the world, the McLaren F1. BMW's curriculum vitae, as you can see, is impeccable.

There were two model variants of the cars featured here, the M535i, and both were significant players in the evolution of BMW's modern 'sporting performance on the road' creed. Neither can honestly claim to possess the sort of cachet bestowed upon its saloon sisters, the M3 and M5, but it is worth noting that the second-generation M535i, the E28 model, remains the most

popular M-series model bar the M3.

More significantly, the first-generation M535i – the E12 – is also the first BMW road car after the M1 to receive the 'motorsport' treatment since the foundation of BMW Motorsport GmbH in 1972. This model takes the 218bhp, 3.5-litre Bosch L-Jetronic injected engine of the 635CSL coupé and 735CSL saloon and puts it squarely in the lighter bodyshell of the 5-series model, creating the definitive wolf in sheep's clothing.

And sheep's clothing it most assuredly is: the only exterior features that distinguish the M535i from its





milder-mannered cousin, the 5-series, are front and rear spoilers – a front air dam beneath the bumper and a raised bootlid – and two discreet M badges displaying the distinctive colours of BMW Motorsport.

Beneath the skin it is all change. The 6/7-series engine not only produces significantly more power than had been seen in the 5-series before, it offers greater torque too – 228lb ft at 4,000rpm – prompting journalists of the day to comment that 'at any point from 2,000 to 6,000rpm in any gear there is a swift appreciation of speed. Even down to 1,000rpm and under, the 3,453cc six chuffs out a fair impersonation of maximum torque, though the peak is an official, and high, 4,000rpm'.

The extra power catapulted the 5-series into a differ-

ent league. The hardy six-cylinder engine comes into its own in the mid-to-upper echelons of the rev range, and is especially energetic in the 70 to 120mph band. Our test combined a good deal of motorway driving as well as some more challenging – which is to say greasy – country roads. The engine was efficient and smooth to the point of imperceptibility on the motorway, but once the crash barriers were replaced with hedgerows we regularly visited the 5,000rpm mark and still the engine remained unflustered.

The gearbox of the first-generation M535i is a close-ratio five-speed Getrag manual, with first gear on a dog-leg first. It seems an unusual gate to come to terms with in a high-roofed, four-door saloon – and the



Top, front air dams were part of M bodykit for both models. Below, early car fitted with non-standard Alpina wheels and Yokohama rubber

## 1980 BMW M535i – the sporting saloon

**Launched:** April 1980; designated E12. The ubiquitous 5-series saloon given 'Motorsport' treatment in the aftermath of the awesome M1.

Produced in limited numbers and axed in May of the following year.

**Price:** £13,745

**Engine:** 3,453cc, six-cylinder in-line with cast-iron block and aluminium alloy head; Bosch L-Jetronic ignition

**Power:** 218bhp (DIN) at 5,200rpm; torque 228lb ft at 4,000rpm

**Performance:**

136mph maximum speed;

0-60mph in 7.5sec

**Overall mpg:** 20

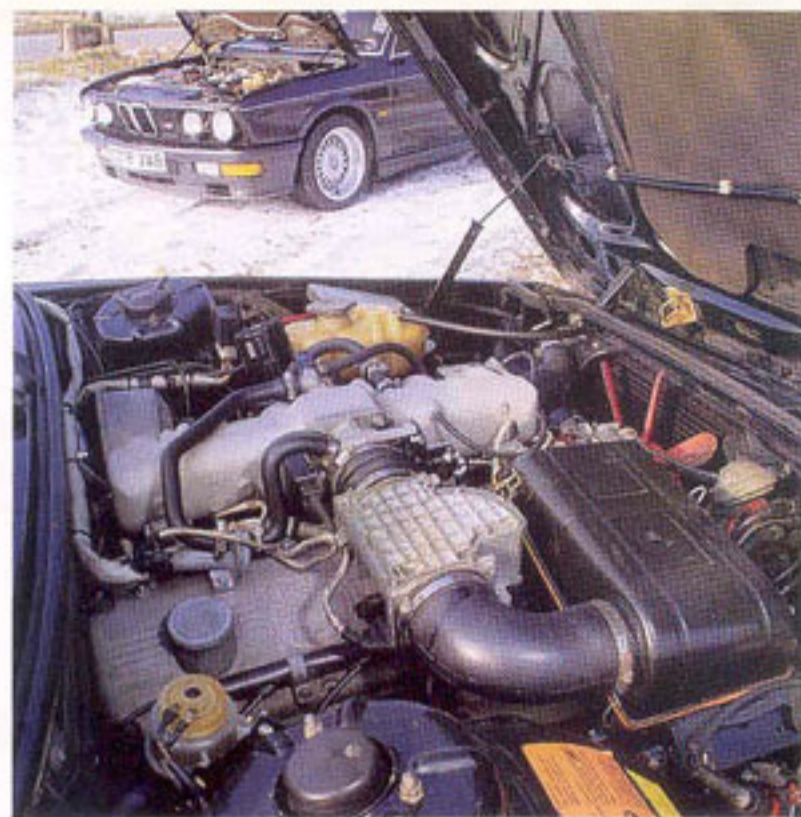
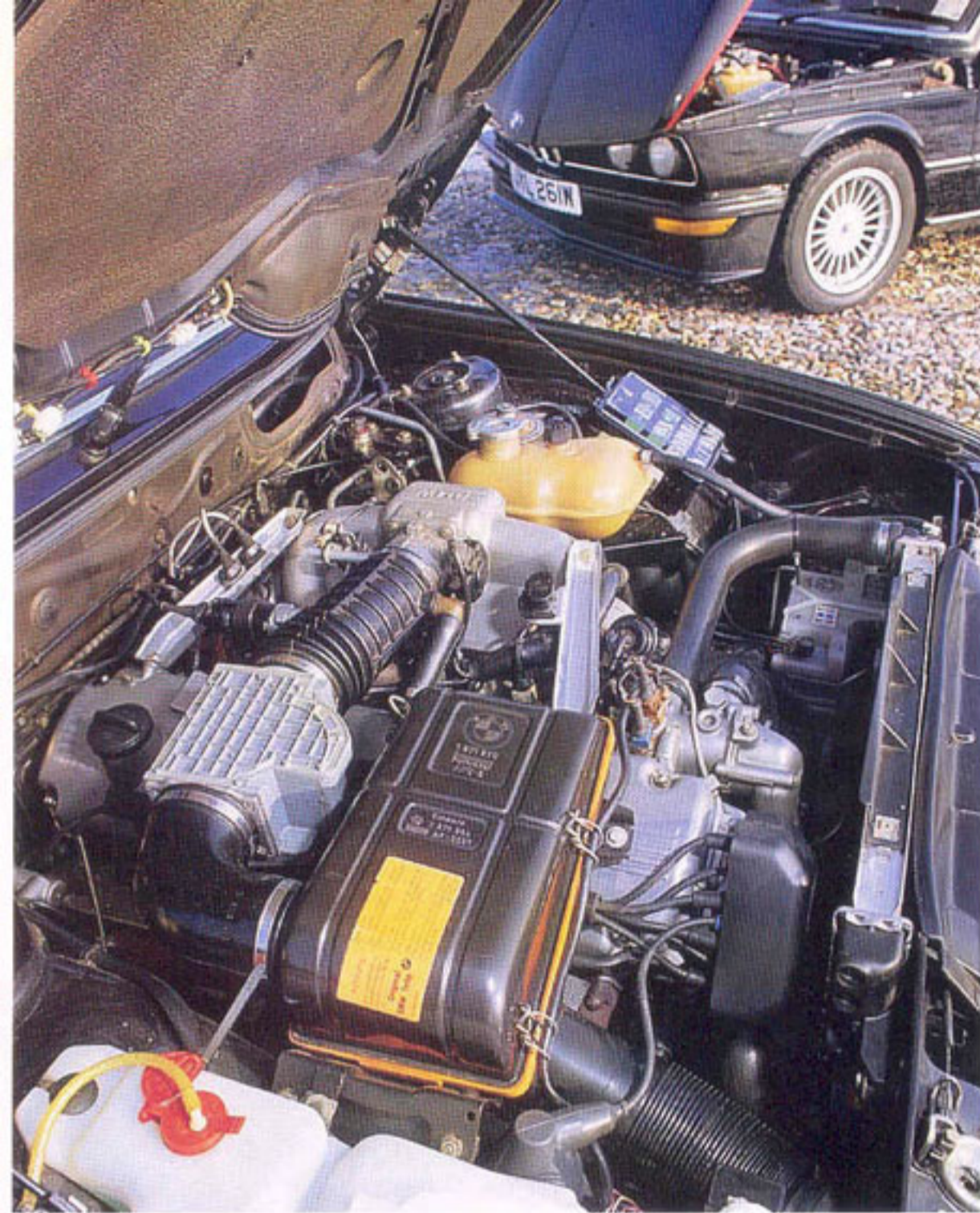
**Suspension:** inclined coil spring struts with Bilstein shock absorbers and rubber anti-roll bar at front; auxiliary springs, trailing arms with Bilstein spring/damper and anti-roll bar at rear

**Transmission:** five-speed Getrag manual gearbox with first on a dogleg

**Body:** all-steel, four-door shell from 5-series saloon, with additional front air dam and rear bootlid spoiler







E12 model was first BMW saloon to receive 'M' treatment



Spoiler of early car looks tacked on; later is more stylish



Top, late car has rear-hinged bonnet; shares six-cylinder engine. Above, 'M' badge is one of the few external signs of extra power. Below, M-Technic rims

change-up from first to second is never quite as slick as you wish it to be. But then, this engine isn't the type to punish the GTi brigade when the traffic lights switch to green; it's far too civilised a beast for that.

To accommodate the extra power, the M535i has borrowed ventilated discs from its big brothers, as well as Bilstein gas-filled dampers, a limited slip differential and anti-roll bars front and rear. This development work translated into one of the most enjoyable driving experiences around – and certainly continued to enhance BMW's reputation as manufacturers of the world's finest sporting saloons. The engine has a wonderful, rasping growl to it; the sort of noise that makes you want to drive with the windows open on even the coldest of days. It

will gleefully dance up and down the rev range, whether you ask it to pull away from standstill in third or relentlessly slap down demands of more than 5,000rpm.

Although the recirculatory ball steering is power assisted, it doesn't suffer from a lack of feel or communication with the road surface. It is light, certainly, but the handling is nimble and surefooted, and the steering is exceptionally precise, so that the combination of the two tends to egg the driver on rather than intimidate. This is a car that likes to have fun, which is its fundamental *raison d'être*.

Like its exterior, there is little to the interior specification that points to its sporting pedigree – save for those rather important features, the seats and the

## 1984 BMW M535i – smoothing out the edges

**Launched:** June 1984; designated E28. Most popular M car after the M3; the second (and final) generation M535i was produced alongside the M5 and M635CSi. Overall, 8,335 models were built; production ended in December 1987.

**Price:** £17,950

**Engine:** 3,430cc, six-cylinders in line as E12 model, with Bosch Motronic engine management system

**Power:** 218bhp (DIN) at 6,500rpm; torque 229lb ft at 4,000rpm

**Performance:** 144mph maximum speed; 0-60mph 7.4sec

**Overall mpg:** 17.7

**Suspension:** independent, MacPherson strut and double link, Bilstein gas-filled telescopic dampers and anti-roll bar at front; independent, semi-trailing arm coil springs, Bilstein gas-filled telescopic dampers and anti-roll bar at rear

**Transmission:** five-speed close-ratio manual or

five-speed Getrag overdrive manual; ZF four-speed and 4HP22EH three-speed auto 'boxes as options

**Body:** all-steel, four-door







## Clubs

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*Left, first-generation M535i has edge on its successor for sheer driving pleasure, although both have classic sporting characteristics*



steering wheel. The rest is standard 5-series garb, a dubious mixture of black plastic and wood that leaves it stuck firmly in the late Seventies fashion stakes. The seats are narrow, figure-hugging Recaros, set high to offer unparalleled all-round visibility, while the steering wheel is a small, leather-trimmed sports model.

Essentially, the boys at BMW Motorsport have done what we all did (didn't we?) to our first Beetles and Moggies when we wanted to feel like we were going faster than we really were: fit a 'go-faster' interior. The only difference here is that, with a 136mph top speed and a 0-60mph time of a shade under 7.5 seconds, the driver of an M535i will actually need these items.

It was just over three years before the second-generation 5-series bodyshell received the same sort of treatment as the E12. The E28 M535i was introduced alongside the new M5 and M635CSi, and employed the same technical philosophy as the first M535i – that is to say, borrow the 6-series engine and squeeze it into the new shape. Modifications to cope with the extra power were limited to an enlarged radiator and a thermostatically controlled oil cooler.

The final-series BMW M535i is a more sophisticated beast altogether, with anti-lock brakes, uprated springs, gas-filled dampers and the smooth, Bosch Motronic-injected six-cylinder engine. There was a range of automatic gearboxes available for the first time, too – in the form of the ZF four-speed or the electronically controlled version from the 6/7-series cars. The manual gearbox – the five-speed Getrag unit – is shared with the 6-series and 528i, but differs from those models in that it runs a high final-drive ratio of 3.07:1 which permits over 100mph in third gear.

Flexibility and smoothness characterise the second-generation M535i. It lacks the raw punch of its

predecessor, but nevertheless provides similar degrees of enjoyment. The spacious interior offers the best in 5-series finery, with Recaro seats (M-stripe badges) and a leather-trimmed steering wheel paying lip service to its BMW Motorsport connections.

The M535i is often dismissed as an exercise in badge engineering. This is not entirely fair. It remains a pioneering motor car in many respects: the first BMW saloon to receive official 'M' treatment

CLASSIC  
CARS

*Above left, last-generation M535i interior offers the best in 5-series finery, with M-spec wheel and seats. Above centre, early car's interior is comfortable but basic. Above, M-spec wheel*

## Those other 'M'-badged BMWs

### M1 1978-81

Produced between 1978 and 1981; 454 models were built. It was powered by a 3,453cc six-cylinder engine creating 277bhp at 6,500rpm and capable of 160mph. The suspension consisted of unequal-length wishbones, Bilstein gas dampers and coil springs. Created as the ultimate 6-series BMW, approximately 5,855 models were produced between 1985 and 1989. The twin camshaft, 24-valve six-cylinder engine boosted power to 286bhp at 6,500rpm. M-Technic body kit, plus alloy wheels, special seats and steering wheel, all served to create the right look.

### M3 1987-still current

Most successful BMW to carry M-series tag; over 12,000 of the E30 models found homes in a three-year production run ending in 1990. Roadgoing version used a four-cylinder twin cam engine producing 200bhp at 6,750rpm. Gradually upgraded over subsequent years, badged as Evolution model, in celebration of Group A M3's track success. M3 with third-generation, E36 3-series body style still made. Arguably the most impressive of the M-badged BMWs, the M5 is the ultimate sporting interpretation of the 5-series cars. The first generation of M5s began in October 1984, extracting 286bhp from the familiar six-cylinder engine. From 1988, the M5 more closely resembled the new 7-series cars: power was increased to 315bhp, while the overall shape remained as understated as ever.

### M5 1984-still current