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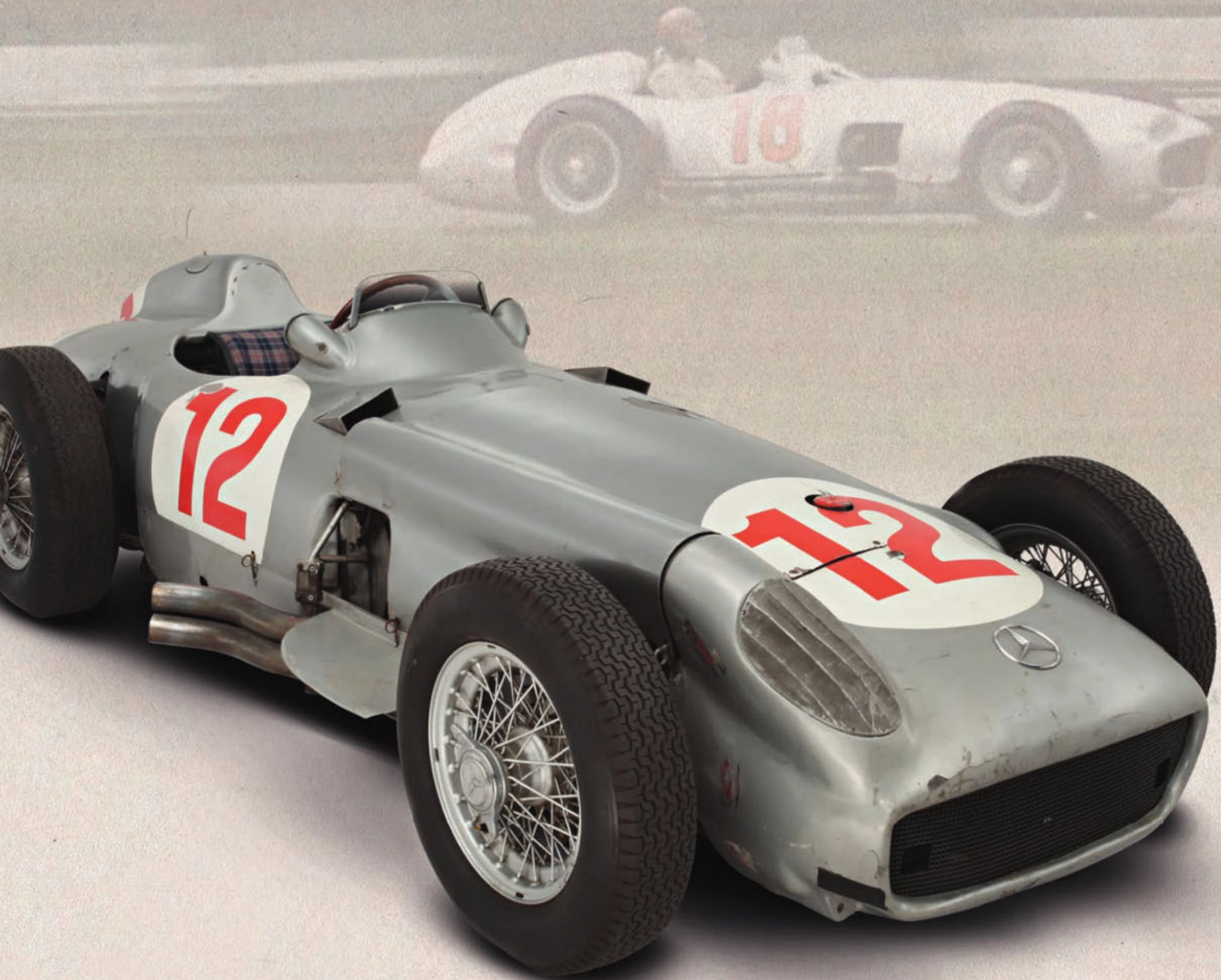


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Welcome

There was no way that we could put together a collection of automotive *Greatest Hits* compilations without covering perhaps the most important make in the history of the motor car. Karl Benz's pioneering 1885 Patent-Motorwagen set the template for more than a century of innovation from the firm named after his Austrian importer Emil Jellinek's daughter Mercédès, but over the ensuing decades the company has also proved highly adept at reinventing itself, as well as hugely resilient through often almost impossibly challenging circumstances.

From leading the technology race to leading on the track – first with its mighty chain-driven titans and later with a series of stunning Silver Arrows – to becoming the most revered and respected builder of luxury cars, Mercedes-Benz has remained at the very top of the motoring tree.

For this special edition, we delved into the archives to gather some of the finest stories about the three-pointed star from the pages of *Classic & Sports Car* magazine over the past decade. We've an incredible pair of exclusive Silver Arrows tests, the



limousine beloved of dictators and despots, and even a few supersaloon bargains. And if you're tempted, you'll also find buyer's guides to some of the key models to help you buy the best.

ALASTAIR CLEMENTS

Editor in chief, *Classic & Sports Car*

This special edition is compiled from the past 10 years of Classic & Sports Car magazine. Each article has been kept as close to its original format as possible, so cross-referencing some material against its publication date may help to put it in context – the issue in which each article originally appeared is listed on these pages



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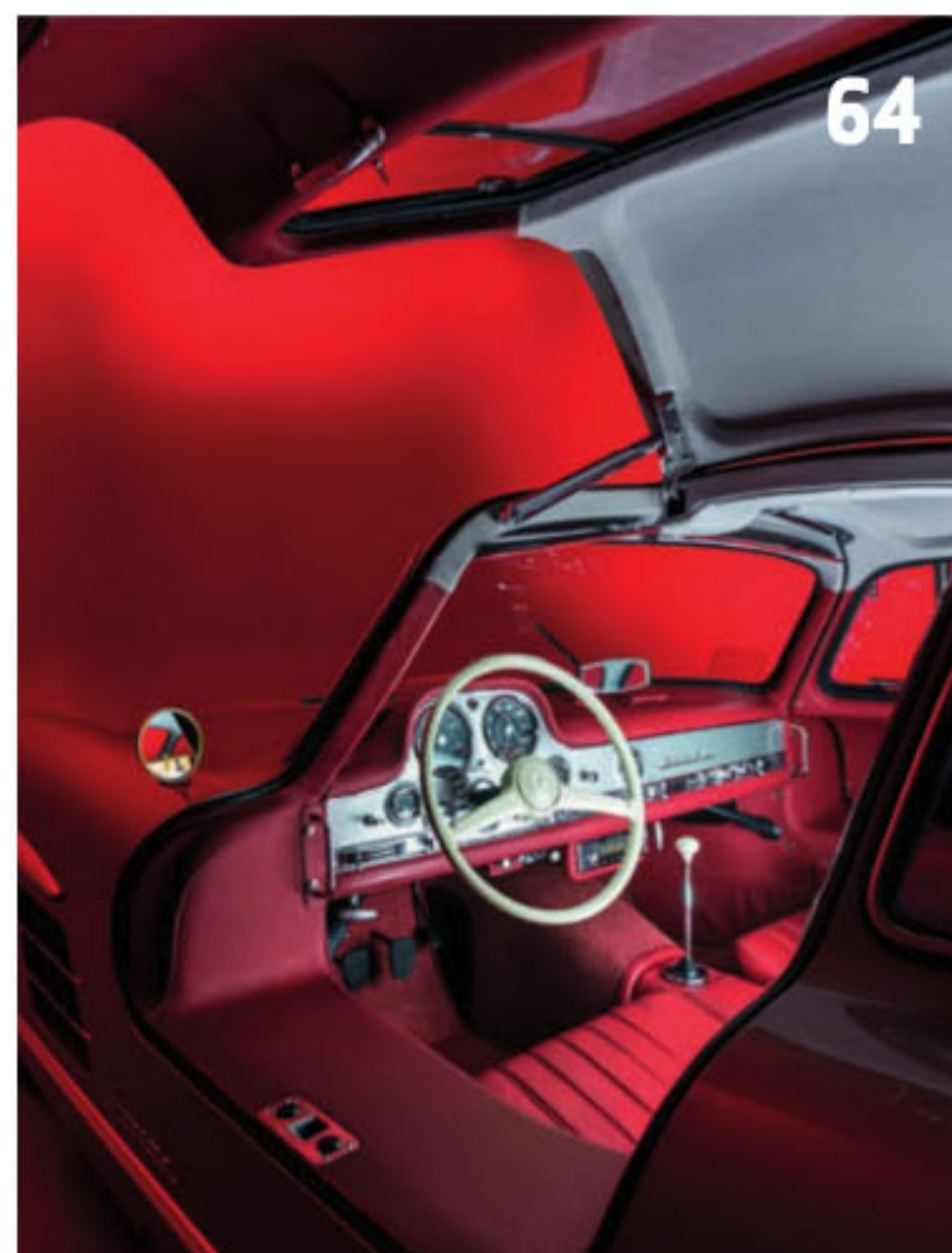
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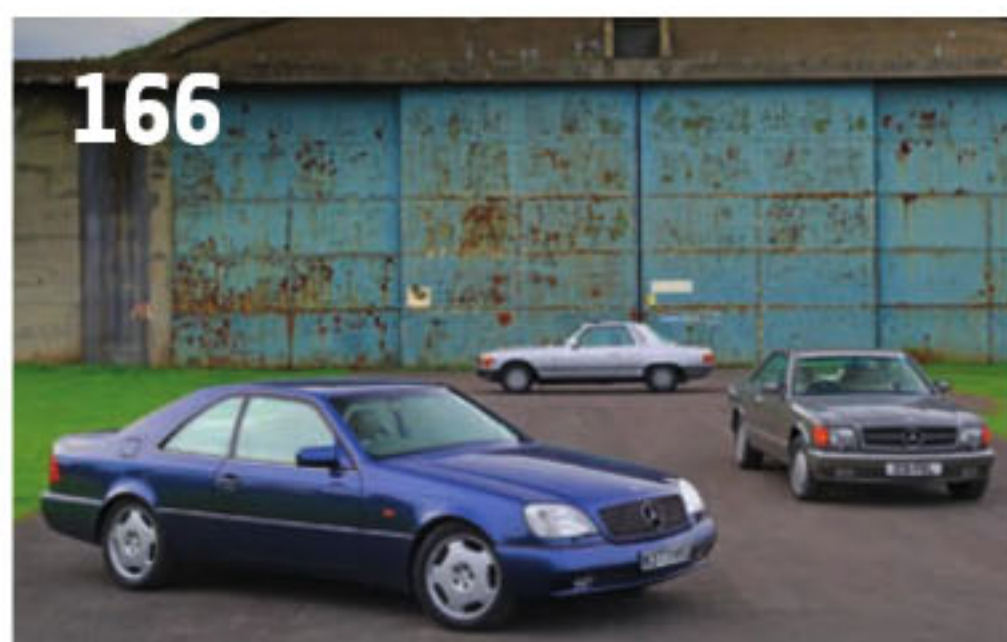


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THE ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES

The French city of Nice is almost as crucial in Benz history as Stuttgart itself. **James Elliott** has a hair-raising time finding out why

PHOTOGRAPHY **MERCEDES-BENZ CLASSIC**

Jochen Mass is in his element, refusing to allow his pulse to quicken even in a situation of high drama. Just minutes after calmly quoting Rudyard Kipling's *From Sea to Sea...* the German who triumphed at Montjuïc in 1975 – and subsequently became a mainstay in endurance racing – is sliding a 1903 Mercedes 60hp around a blind corner on the treacherous Corniche. Half a metre to his right – on tall, 12-spoke carriage wheels, just a brief hop over a low wall that appears more like a high kerb – is a 300ft drop into the Med, to his left is a terrified passenger, perched upright and hanging on for grim death as he slithers across the seat, sweaty palms threatening to loosen his grip for him.

A maniacal grin spreads across Mass' face and fixes itself as his eyes narrow and he attacks 'La Turbie'. He then yanks on the handbrake to retard this impressive, grunting nine-and-a-half-litre machine, dismissing the transmission footbrake as "ineffective" at hauling it up. He is revelling in the car, its tractability and its bucket-load of torque. "This is what a car is meant to be," he shouts over it. "The steering is heavy, but otherwise it is like driving any car."

And that is the point that the Daimler group is trying to make in arranging a unique gathering on the French Riviera, 115 years after the name Mercedes first officially appeared as a brand of car in its own right – that its remarkable 35hp, 40hp and 60hp deserve to be recognised as the first proper cars. It has a decent shout, too, if you consider what came before, and that these vehicles established the template of a single design with a multitude of applications – different bodies, engines and wheelbases transforming it





Considerably younger than the other cars reunited on the Riviera, the 45hp has functioning footbrake. Oil pressure is steady at 0.2bar



from all-conquering racer to practical workhorse to luxury tourer. That concept and the brilliance with which it was executed mean that few, if any cars have rewritten the rulebook as comprehensively as the Mercedes-Simplex.

The Simplex, as it was known from 1902 to 1905, had been conceived for Daimler – like its predecessor, the template-setting 5913cc short-stroke 35hp – by Wilhelm Maybach in Stuttgart. It was dubbed Simplex because of both the way it rationalised existing operating procedures and offered simplicity of getting anywhere via high levels of comfort. Longest lasting was the 6785cc 40hp, which was introduced in 1902 and developed annually until being discontinued in 1910, while shorter-lived versions of the initial variants were the 28hp (21/35) and 20hp. The following year, Maybach introduced the defining overhead-valve, single-cam 60hp range, which, with a displacement of 9235cc thanks to enlarged bores, gave 60hp at 1600rpm.

Technologically, they innovated via over-engineering, bringing simplicity and reliability, plus power to the car. Nothing else combined all the available science at that time in one machine, and the Simplex became both the birth of what we refer to as ‘German engineering’ and the death of steam and electric motive power.

The keystone was a light, powerful engine (made of magnesium-aluminium alloy), fed by Maybach’s own spray-nozzle carburettor and low-slung behind the front axle in a long wheelbase for a low centre of gravity, with a honeycomb radiator designed into the car’s nose.

The gathered cars have many points to make: the genius and purity of the concept, its place in Mercedes-Benz and motoring history, plus the success of its myriad applications.



40hp was brought back from South America, bodyless, in the 1970s. This car is thought to have been at Nice Week in 1902



But why Nice? Well, France's fifth largest city was home to Emil Jellinek, the man who gave his daughter's name to what had previously been Daimler. From the showroom in his villa on the Promenade des Anglais, Jellinek sold a disproportionate number of the company's cars, giving him huge power and influence in Stuttgart. A gifted marketer, it was he – driven by his customers – who governed the direction the company should take. If Maybach was the engineering genius behind the birth of Mercedes, Jellinek was the visionary who inspired the firm to make the transition from horseless carriage to motor car. But the Riviera was more than just where the cars were devised and sold: it was also where they were proven, by destroying all opposition on the epic La Turbie hillclimb.

Which is where Mass comes in, and he is taking no prisoners. With just four cylinders yet more than nine litres' capacity, you can almost imagine those dustbin-sized pistons thrusting in slow motion like the unstoppable force of a hydraulic press. "I love the car, but you need to plan ahead," says its pilot as he changes down through the four-speed 'box and the two vast chains tug harder still on the rear axle to propel less than a tonne of racer. "Because you use the handbrake to slow it, you must take it out of gear to keep momentum, but other than that there are no headaches. There is tremendous torque and it changed people's ideas of what a car could be – the Simplex was the first modern car."

Scottish F1 ace David Coulthard is rather less gung-ho. The Monaco-based ex-racer, who confesses that he is a disappointment to his

family because he is the only one who does not hold an HGV licence, is at the wheel of Daimler's own 1903 40hp, one of the oldest-surviving cars to bear the Mercedes name. "I don't think I have driven anything this old before," he says. "I've tested most of the Silver Arrows and enjoyed that experience, and this one is similar if a bit more leisurely. It is a very different sensation sitting on top of the car instead of in it and that makes you aware of your vulnerability, but there is that same connection with the car that has been eroded over time. The driving experience is fine because it does everything you expect it to except centre the steering wheel. It helps that I am familiar with the road!"

You may not have heard of the man in charge of the other two cars – a 1904 28/32hp and a wonderfully patinated 1910 45hp – but he is one of the luckiest motorists in the world. Having joined Daimler in the 1980s, Michael Plag is now in charge of all the company's pre-war cars (oh, and the Gullwings, too) and no one is more experienced in driving them. He says: "These cars really were revolutionary when they were new, the 60hp was the supercar of its day, but for me the others were just as important historically because they also took the concept of the motor car in new directions. You don't expect a tourer to drive like the sports car or the racer, but they are all superb at what they were designed for."

For example, the 45hp dwarfs the 60hp with its long wheelbase and tall body complete with dicky seat. It's also at least half a tonne heavier, but then it was built for Argentina where it was expected to cover huge distances on primitive



Group reflects the versatility of the concept. Above, left- right: mighty 60hp; its four vast cylinders total 9½ litres

Mercedes' French connection

Nice's explosion onto 'the scene' took place in the 19th century, led by Queen Victoria who popularised it as a British holiday resort rather than a fishing village. Then part of Savoy it became French in 1860 and joined the rail network four years later, its visitors eventually turning their attention to summer and the sea having previously gone there for winter and the mountains (the entrances of all the older, grander hotels face inland). Europe's elite gathered in this playground for months on end, not just the likes of Emil Jellinek and his family – who commandeered an entire train to get there from his villa in Baden, Austria – but also branches of the Rothschilds and many more.

Having been born in Leipzig in 1853, Jellinek was already wealthy via tobacco and insurance when he moved to Nice in the 1890s and lived there until 1914 before dying in Geneva in 1918. It was a natural place for the diplomat to the region to sell his cars from a showroom at his villa – you can imagine the sensation they would have caused amid the horses and carriages on the Promenade in 1898.

In a nascent version of 'race on Sunday and sell on Monday', he set about using them to dominate the Nice Week via his Mercedes team. Indeed, his first sale was a 35hp that in race spec and driven by Wilhelm Maybach won the sprint and then was instantly sold on to



Flamboyant Jellinek aboard his 16hp Daimler in 1899

Henri de Rothschild in road trim. Jellinek's importance to Daimler was huge – in 1900 he sold 72 cars, 60% of all production – and, as a result, so was his influence. His marketing brain and Maybach's engineering prowess were the cornerstones on which the company was built, but both left in 1907 when new management meant waning influence for the two men.

So what of the name? Everyone knows now that 'Mercedes' (which is Spanish by derivation) came from the Emil Jellinek's 11-year-old daughter, who ironically never drove, but that shouldn't be a surprise because he called everything Mercedes, from his various homes to all his yachts. From 1903, he even adopted it himself to become Jellinek-Mercédès.

It also forms his legacy in Nice, with roads and blocks of apartments still bearing the Mercédès name. As a result, there are signs of Jellinek's presence all over the town and the family tomb/mausoleum holds a prominent position on the upper (therefore most important) tier in the graveyard, with its spectacular views over the city.



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28/32 was supplied by a private owner and, although less powerful, is supremely comfortable, with plenty of space for four people on board

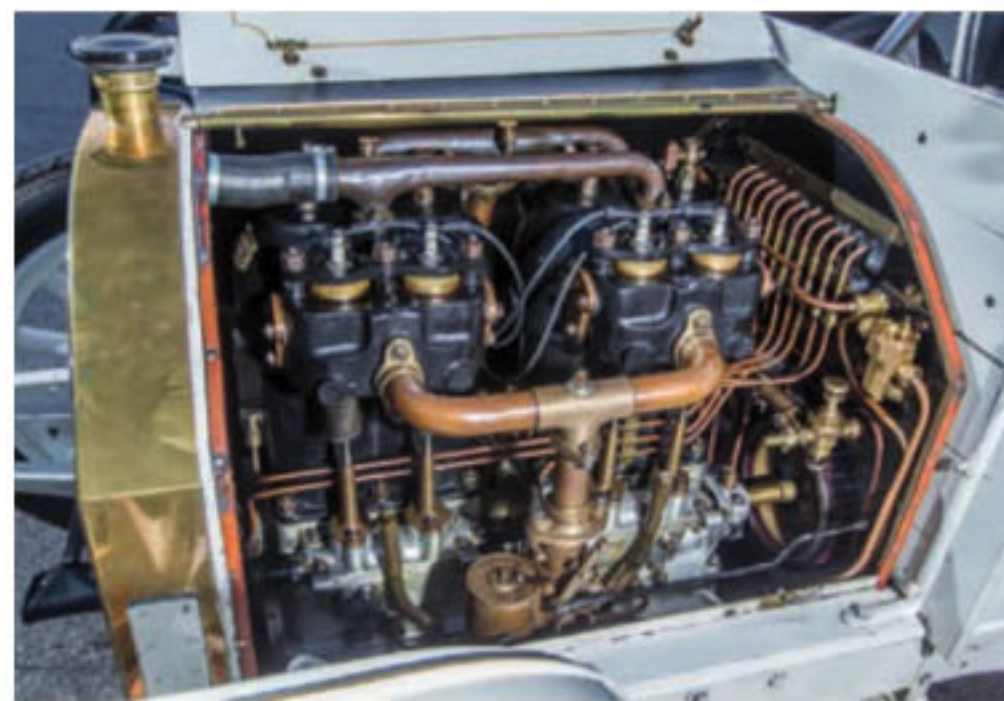


Baron Pierre de Caters on La Turbie in a 60hp in 1903

Nice Week and the La Turbie

At the dawn of the 20th century, for a week each year Nice became the epicentre of the motoring world. There were events along the Promenade des Anglais, 400km endurance races and more, attracting early hotshoes such as Camille Jenatzy. The showpiece was the La Turbie hillclimb, however, originally a 17km trail from the Riviera town up to a village on the Corniche via Raphaël Bischoffsheim's famous 1879 observatory. La Turbie is now most familiar for being the scene of Princess Grace's fatal 1982 accident and as a location in *Ronin*, but it became active in motorsport in 1897 and carried on sporadically almost until WW2, decades after Nice Week had disappeared.

Emil Jellinek ran a 12hp Daimler in its first year, entered Arthur de Rothschild on a Daimler Phoenix in 1899, and in 1901 his 35hp Mercedes cleaned up in the hands of Wilhelm Werner. The success was repeated in 1902 with ET Stead winning La Turbie as 40hp cars swept the podium, while Otto Hieronimus and Wilhelm Werner took the top two spots in 1903. Early fatalities included Count Elliott Zborowski, father of Brooklands racer Louis, and Wilhelm Bauer, both of whom perished on the first corner (in 1903 and 1900 respectively). After Zborowski's death, La Turbie was dormant until it was revived as a 9km course in 1909 and by 1936 the record on a further shortened route was held by Hans Stuck, who blasted his Auto Union up the hill in just 3 mins and 39 secs.



roads. Thanks to an 80-litre tank, it has a 300km range and would canter that distance in the height of luxury, one of its four pedals even operating the wildlife-scattering horn.

The short-wheelbase 40hp falls somewhere between the two, having a top speed of 111kph compared to the 45hp's 80kph and the 140 achieved by the 60hp with its hot camshaft, Maybach race carburettor and twin magnetos. If you had to pick one for everyday use, this would probably be it. Slowest of the quartet is the 65kph 28/32 on a low-voltage magneto system with ignition contacts rather than plugs, but this model was the most successful sales-wise.

So four very different cars built on a single foundation. Such versatility is the true gift of combining Maybach's engineering and Jellinek's vision. There have been many step-changes in motoring, but it is difficult to think of one so huge as the introduction of these Mercedes. And that's why those years at the start of the 20th century were called 'the Mercedes era'.

Clockwise from below:
long-wheelbase 45hp; twin
Bosch magnetos on 60hp;
28/32 ignition contacts;
'04 car is good for 65kph;
40hp has a single Magneto

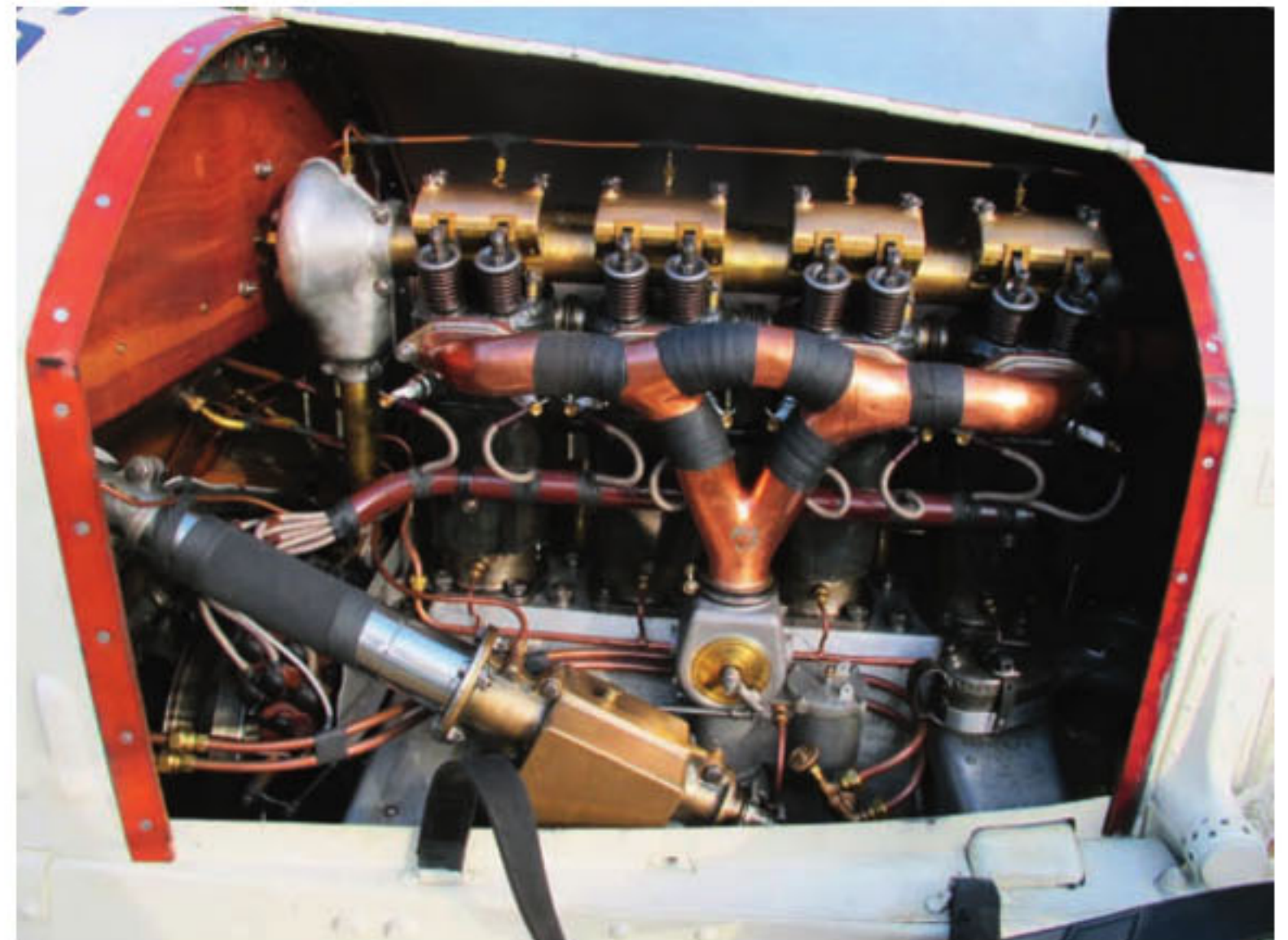
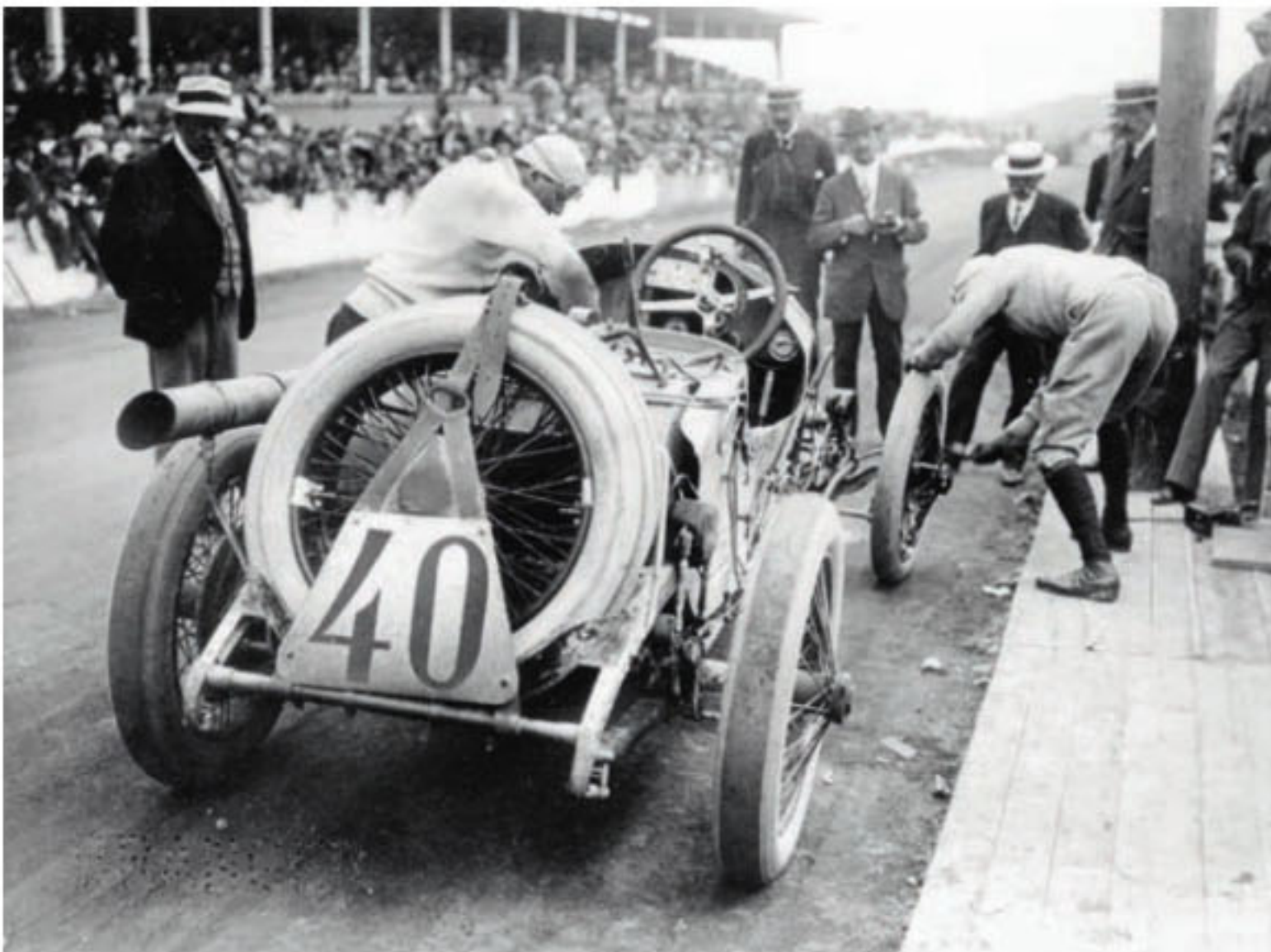


Anatomy of a masterpiece

The epic 1914 French Grand Prix was the last race before the Great War. **Mick Walsh** investigates Christian Lautenschlager's winning Mercedes

PHOTOGRAPHY MERCEDES-BENZ CLASSIC





Clockwise, from top left: Lautenschlager's car leaves a smokescreen; Pilette, the only non-German team driver; aero-engine design clear in Mercedes 'four', with tape to stop fractures; well-rehearsed pitstop for Wagner, second

If you imagine that the Formula One season was focused on a single race, then you'd begin to appreciate the intense excitement for the 1914 French Grand Prix. Little wonder that the 4 July event drew more than 300,000 spectators to the Lyon region to witness the spectacle of the greatest drivers in the fastest racing cars on earth. The fixture featured 14 factory teams, with 37 cars from six countries competing in the standalone race that demanded fresh designs, with newly imposed regulations limiting engine capacity to 4.5 litres and weight to 1100kg.

The sensation of the event was the five-car Mercedes equipe that the Stuttgart factory had spared nothing to build, prepare and test for the prestigious 20-lap, 467-mile challenge on public roads. The contest developed into a titanic battle between the dashing Gallic favourite Georges Boillot in a blue, dual-overhead-cam Peugeot and the wedged-nosed white chargers. Right until the last lap, the German team pressurised Boillot, who'd won for the past two years, until the Peugeot cried enough with a seized engine on the final run towards La Madeleine.

Christian Lautenschlager's leading Mercedes roared past, the Swabian ace and his mechanic Hans Rieger glimpsing their popular rivals for the first time in the seven-hour enduro. French

national pride was shattered by a German 1-2-3, and the stunned crowd quickly left the barriers and stands after the finish. Even the band declined to play the victors' national anthem at this extraordinary contest. Just weeks later, the horror of war engulfed France.

Of the three Mercedes team cars that actually raced at Lyon, only the winner survives and in 2014 it returned to the scene of its triumph to re-run the triangular, high-speed, 23-mile course 100 years on. At the wheel of the famous number 28 car was septuagenarian George Wingard, a passionate American enthusiast who has owned Lautenschlager's victorious machine for more than 30 years. Few know the 1914 design better than the Oregon-based collector.

"It's a dream to drive," enthuses Wingard. "The 1908 chain-drive GP car is a horse, whereas this is like a ballerina in comparison. The steering is beautiful and the handling is very balanced. It's also comfortable, which was important for a marathon race. The brakes are the main handicap on performance because you really have to think about the stopping distance. The Mercedes couldn't match the Peugeot into the corners, but it was quicker out of them."

When Wingard acquired the Mercedes, he was hugely disappointed by the initial driving experience: "It was difficult to start, it had the

acceleration of a slug and the gearbox was difficult to work. I thought I'd made a big mistake, because I'd always been advised that 'you only need to drive a car to know it's truly great'. This one turned out to be a mechanical dog, with the wrong pistons, while the missing pilot shaft in the flywheel made clean gearchanges impossible. But once we'd rebuilt it, including replacing the front axle, fitting new shock absorbers and refabricating the body using original factory blueprints, the car was transformed. It was the exact opposite of how it had been before – quick, smooth-shifting and as stable as a country rock."

The superb engineering of the 1914 Mercedes hugely impressed Wingard: "The steering is a work of art, with the worm-and-nut design using the entire box to bear the torque of the turning thrust. The four-speed, all-ball-bearing transmission shifts up and down with little effort. The spring-cam dampers on all four corners restrict wheel bounce to a minimum. It adds up to one of the most memorable drives of all time."

That opinion is backed up by former GP ace and sports-car legend Jochen Mass, who's driven a wealth of historic Mercedes racers. "I love it. The gearbox is fantastic once the thick oil is warm, and the engine really likes to rev," reports Mass after demonstrating the factory museum jewel around the Lyon circuit. "They used to rev



Clockwise, from above: aerodynamic lines protected occupants; Lautenschlager at 'Death Corner'; the winner, with bloodied hand, and mechanic Rieger walk to victory presentation; team cars; only driver got a stoneguard

to 3500rpm – we're limited to 2600, but there's lots of torque. It feels like a true racing car and is light years ahead of the 1908 Benz. Once up to speed, the steering is light. A child could steer it. It's much nicer to drive than an SSK, which is brutal in comparison. After testing the 1914 car, it's easier to appreciate why Mercedes won. They had the best technology matched to the best drivers and the best planning."

As well as rebuilding this important car to authentic specification, and demonstrating it at events all over the world, Wingard has written a superb history of the 1914 GP: "Every time I drive the car, I'm humbled by the efforts of Lautenschlager and his team. To race for seven hours must have taken superhuman stamina and concentration. The winning car suffered from extra vibration at maximum torque [see *Top ten* opposite] and, if you look carefully at historic photographs, you can see Lautenschlager's hand wrapped in a blood-stained handkerchief."

The former Oregon senator has been restoring old cars since rebuilding a 1915 Buick when he was a teenager, and has subsequently owned some of the finest early racers. That mechanical insight and driving experience has given him a unique perspective on the 1914 design: "The attention to every detail was key to its success. The ignition system was made failsafe by using

two magnetos and, with four plugs per cylinder, fouling was almost out of the question. Even the cooling capacity was double the amount needed."

Aviation influence is clear in both the engine and body design, notes Wingard: "With the vee-shaped radiator and body rising up around the drivers, its frontal area was far smaller than its rivals. Wooden vee-shaped fairings were fitted to the front axle, and the aluminium belly pan ran the full length of the chassis to further reduce drag. With a 4.5-litre engine limit, the designers really thought about maximising performance."

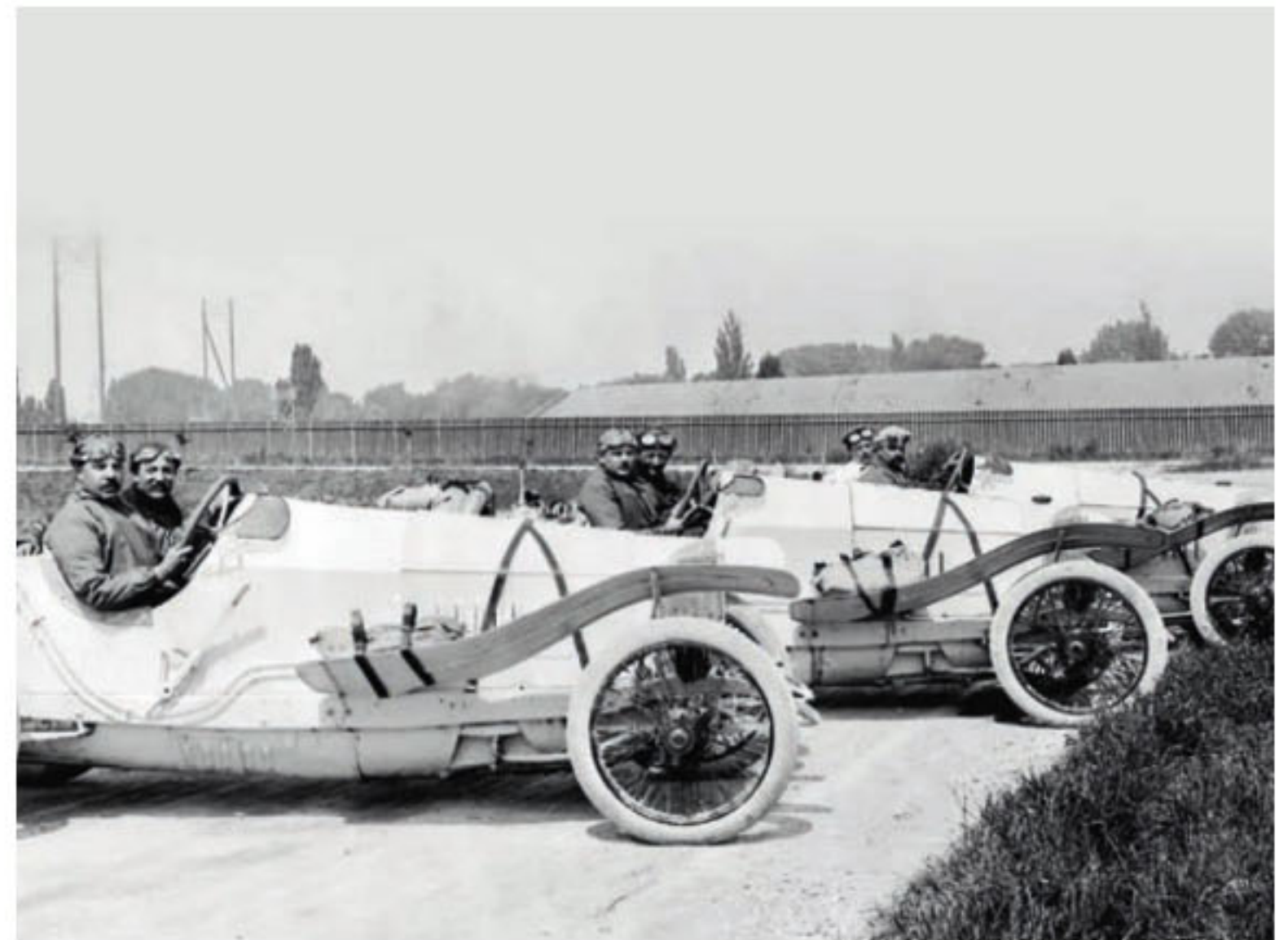
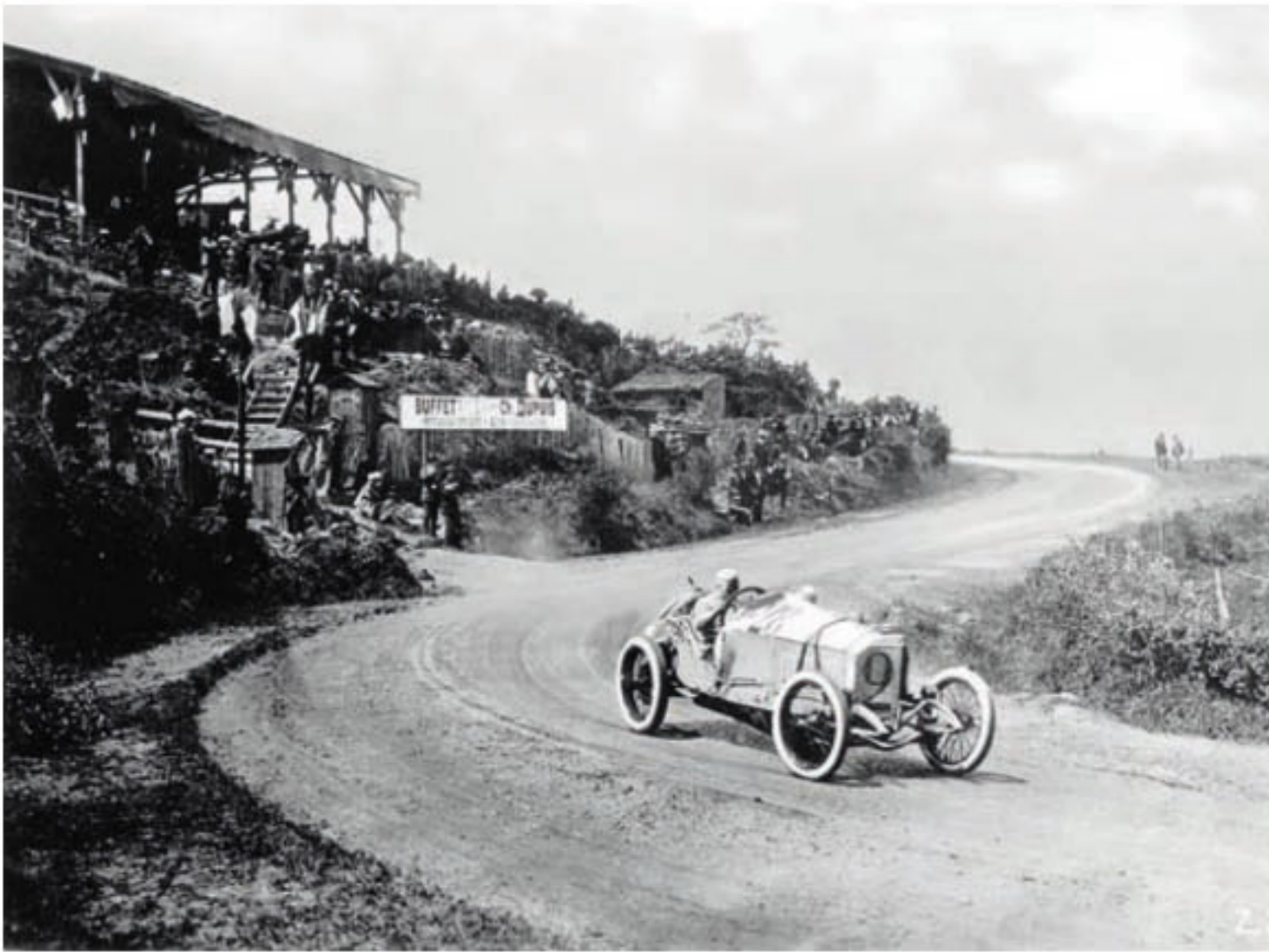
"Its other impressive details include the twin fuel lines in case one clogged up; there's a fuel-pressure gauge on the rear tank that only the mechanic can easily read; and the lap counter with brass numbered flaps in the cockpit. In a long race, it was easy to forget which lap you were on. On the floor is a little round pedal that the mechanic has to press every five minutes to lubricate the camshafts, valvegear and cylinder walls. The cars had a total-loss oil system – the pistons also had no oil rings – which is why they often smoked at high speed. For once, lubricant running over the chassis was a good sign."

Eddie Berrisford is also intimately familiar with the 1914 design after a five-year rebuild of the Collier Collection's car, which was used on reces but did not race: "The biggest surprise was

that Mercedes didn't fit front brakes, but there was a theory at the time that having only rear brakes was safer. Even the SSK has a 70% bias to the back. It's the weakest part of the design."

The four-pot engine massively impressed Berrisford, however. Each cylinder is individually forged with welded-on sheet-metal water jackets. A single overhead camshaft is driven by the crank through spur gears and a vertical shaft at the rear of the engine. "The four-valve heads breathe well, with good cross-flow," he explains. "Bentley copied this straight away. You can see it in his designs and the aero engines of Packard and Liberty. The bottom end, with five main plain bearings, is really strong. There's no oil pressure because lubricant is circulated by a beautiful pump. The factory experimented with alloy pistons and drivers were given the choice for the race. Most went for cast iron. The weakest point is the thin H-section conrod. The carburettor is a racing type with barrel throttle, while the manifold was made from flat copper and beaten into shape – a difficult part to make."

Berrisford agrees with Wingard about the team's preparation: "They used a lot of tape around the joints, which would suffer constant vibrations on dirt roads. Baffles were made for the front and around the magnetos to stop water seeping in. The cars were also spray-painted,



Top ten facts about the 1914 GP Mercedes and the team

1 When Lautenschlager's winning car was sent to London for display in July 1914, the carburettor and inlet manifold were removed to avoid the temptation of joy-riding while it was on loan.

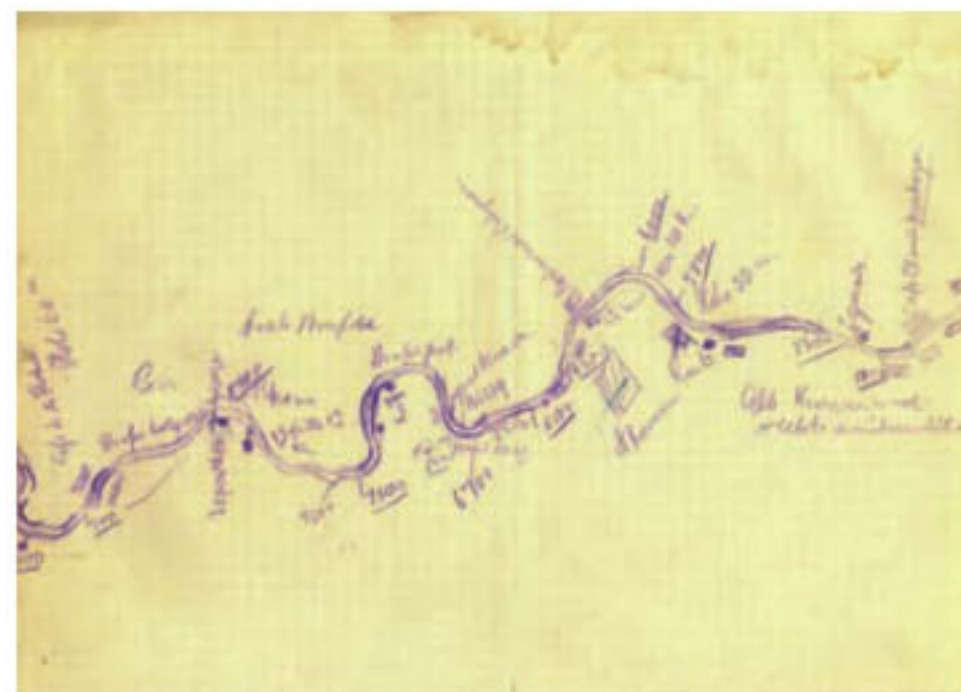
2 Christian Lautenschlager was 37 when he won the 1914 French Grand Prix, his second great victory on Gallic soil after his marathon 1908 drive at Dieppe. After WW1, though, his competitive edge was no match for the Belle Epoque years with a 10th on the 1922 Targa Florio his best placing. He continued to work at Mercedes in Stuttgart and died in January 1954.

3 As soon as the course was announced, all manner of exotic touring cars appeared around Lyon to test the dusty, undulating route. Mercedes arrived (having driven from Stuttgart) three months before the event and, with military precision, practised for a fortnight. Meticulous notes were made of the course by Alfred Vischer including elevation graphs. Early in April, the roads were closed to racing cars.

4 After a very wet scrutineering session, race day was hot and sunny. Cars were flagged off in pairs

at 30-second intervals, and it was Max Sailer's Mercedes that set the pace. An inexperienced racer, Sailer was nominated to be the hare to Boillot's Peugeot, but the leading Mercedes broke a conrod through the Gier section on the sixth lap. Sailer's only consolation was that he claimed the fastest lap, at 20 mins 6 secs (69.8mph).

5 Belgian Mercedes dealer Theodore Pilette lobbied hard for the 1914 GP designs to feature chain drive, but designer Paul Daimler opted for shaft over chain to save weight.



Thorough planning: Alfred Vischer's course recce notes

6 The four-wheel-braked Peugeots could go deeper into corners at Lyon, but the Mercedes could out-accelerate them on the exits. The extra braking also resulted in greater tyre wear and more pitstops to change wheels.

7 The well-drilled Mercedes pit used red cans for petrol, yellow ones for oil and white tins for water. The 1914 GP car's oil tank carried 25 litres and fuel consumption was 10-12mpg.

8 The 4.5-litre, four-cylinder Mercedes engine featured a single overhead camshaft and 16 valves. At a heady 3100rpm, it produced 105bhp with maximum torque of 209lb ft at 2000rpm.

9 A fourth 1914 GP team car (the runner-up) survived until WW2 but, along with a W25 and the advanced mid-engined Benz Trophen-Wagen, it was destroyed during Allied bombing.

10 "The sweetest music that I have ever heard is the song of this engine, but at 3500rpm the vibration is pure hell," reminisced Lautenschlager. During testing by Mercedes' aero-engine staff, the GP 'four' was run to destruction at over 5000rpm.



Clockwise, from top left: Lautenschlager (with laurels) and mechanic Rieger at reception; clever brass cockpit lap counter; photo-call on return to the Mercedes factory; amazing welcome back home in Stuttgart for the victors

probably a motorsport first, but that was simply to save time because a brush job would take eight weeks. The chassis is well braced and the springs are exquisitely made with Styrian steel.”

Berrisford also found that the corner load was perfect at 250kg each: “I reckon that the cars must have been overweight because you can see that features were changed from the prototype, and drilled parts such as the gearlever appeared.”

The survival of Lautenschlager’s winning car is one of the most amazing ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’ stories in automotive history. English enthusiast Philip Mann made the discovery of the century in 1961 when he pulled a tatty Mercedes with a Berliet tourer body out of a private garage in Essex, where it had been stored since 1932. Eighteen years earlier – after the landmark victory – the team had wasted little time in packing up and driving the cars, with mudguards rigged up over the front wheels, back to Stuttgart. By all accounts, the reception was at the local dance hall. Three weeks after the event, the winner, still sporting the number 28 painted on its bodywork, was shipped to London. Just days after Lautenschlager’s battle-scarred beauty – bedecked in laurel wreaths – went on display in the Mercedes showroom, war was declared, and the famous racer was stuck in the UK.

As the grim conflict developed in September,


with the battle of Marne and the sinking of Royal Navy cruisers in the North Sea, two young volunteers – WO Bentley and Leonard Geach – advised the Admiralty about the German Grand Prix car. The white two-seater was quickly commandeered from the London depot and sent to Rolls-Royce at Derby, where it was closely inspected, but with strict instructions that no patents were to be infringed and only the powerplant should be studied. Colourful stories that Bentley drove the Mercedes to Derby – or that Roy Feddon towed it the 200 miles – are not true. Story has it that the chassis was wrapped in brown paper so that it couldn’t be copied, but the design influence is obvious in Rolls-Royce’s engines, which later powered aerial combat against enemy planes with Mercedes motors.

After the war, the 1914 French GP winner was acquired by Count Zborowski and was still a front-runner in the early 1920s at Brooklands, where it regularly posted 100mph-plus laps. As the car became uncompetitive, it was converted into a tourer in 1923 by CG Brocklebank, and nine years later went into storage where it remained for the following three decades until Mann and Stanley Sears secured it for £800.

By studying old Brooklands photos, Mann confirmed the car’s identity and, after a thorough restoration, it became a feature of Vintage

Sports-Car Club events until Wingard acquired it from London dealer Charles Howard in 1984.

There was some confusion over which racer had the winning chassis because the factory sent out three cars for sales promotion to dealerships in London, Paris and Brussels – all numbered 28. Fortunately, the bodies differed slightly in detail and Mann noted that the Lautenschlager Mercedes uniquely had 10 louvres on the driver’s bonnet side, which matched the Brooklands images. Further evidence came to light when Wingard found ‘15364’ stamped on various parts, tallying with the factory records.

The brilliance of the 1914 design was confirmed by its competitive performance in later events. American hero Ralph De Palma drove a team car to victory in the 1915 Indianapolis 500, despite running the final laps on three cylinders after a conrod broke. Once they had been modified by the factory, the cars also went on to win the 1922 Targa Florio and regularly set fastest times at major hillclimbs across Europe. What better testament to the excellence of Paul Daimler’s engineering team? 

George Wingard’s history of the 1914 French GP is priced at \$100, with profits going to prostate cancer research: GP Mercedes Publishing, 2323 Fairmont Boulevard, Eugene, Oregon 97403, USA

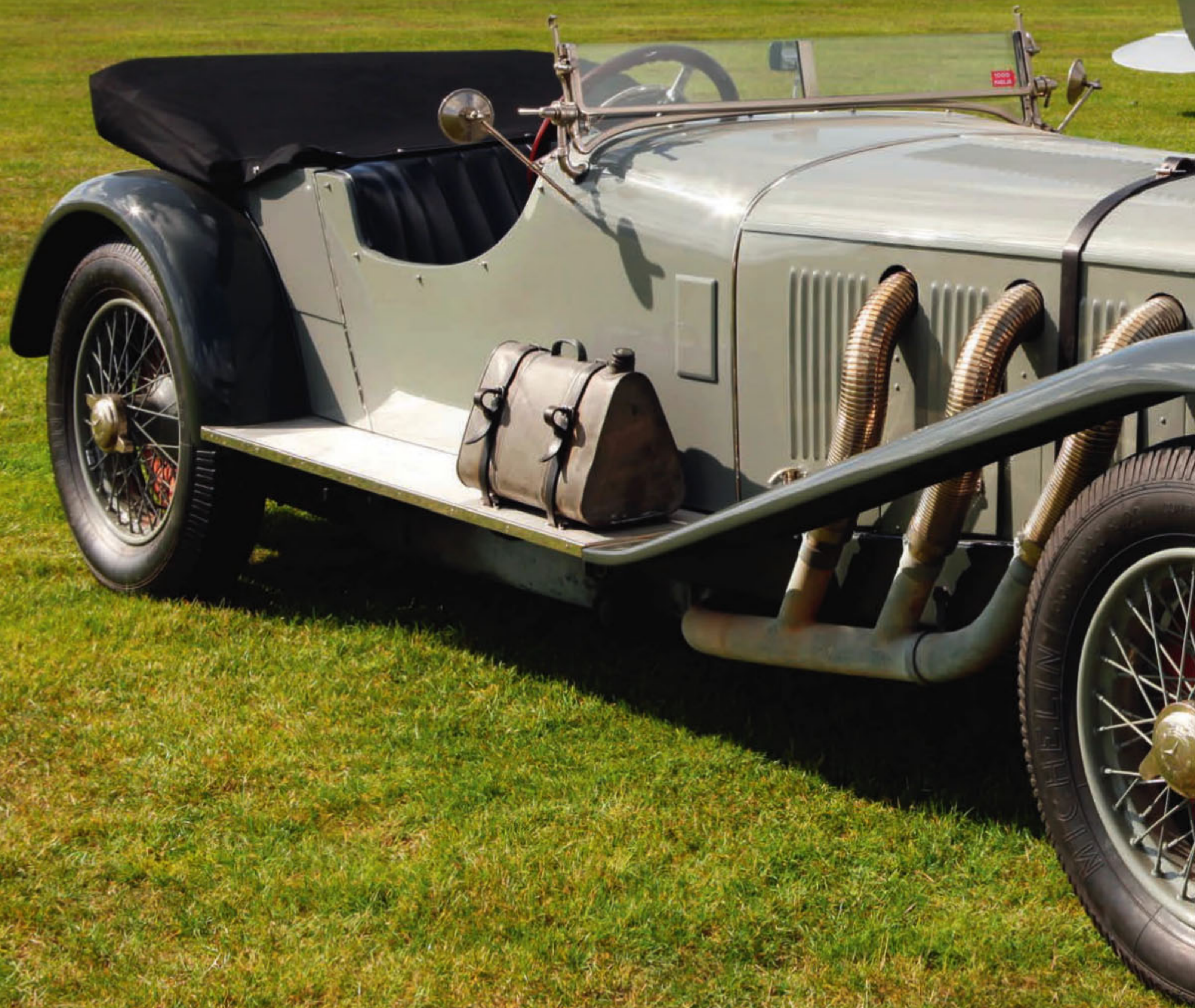
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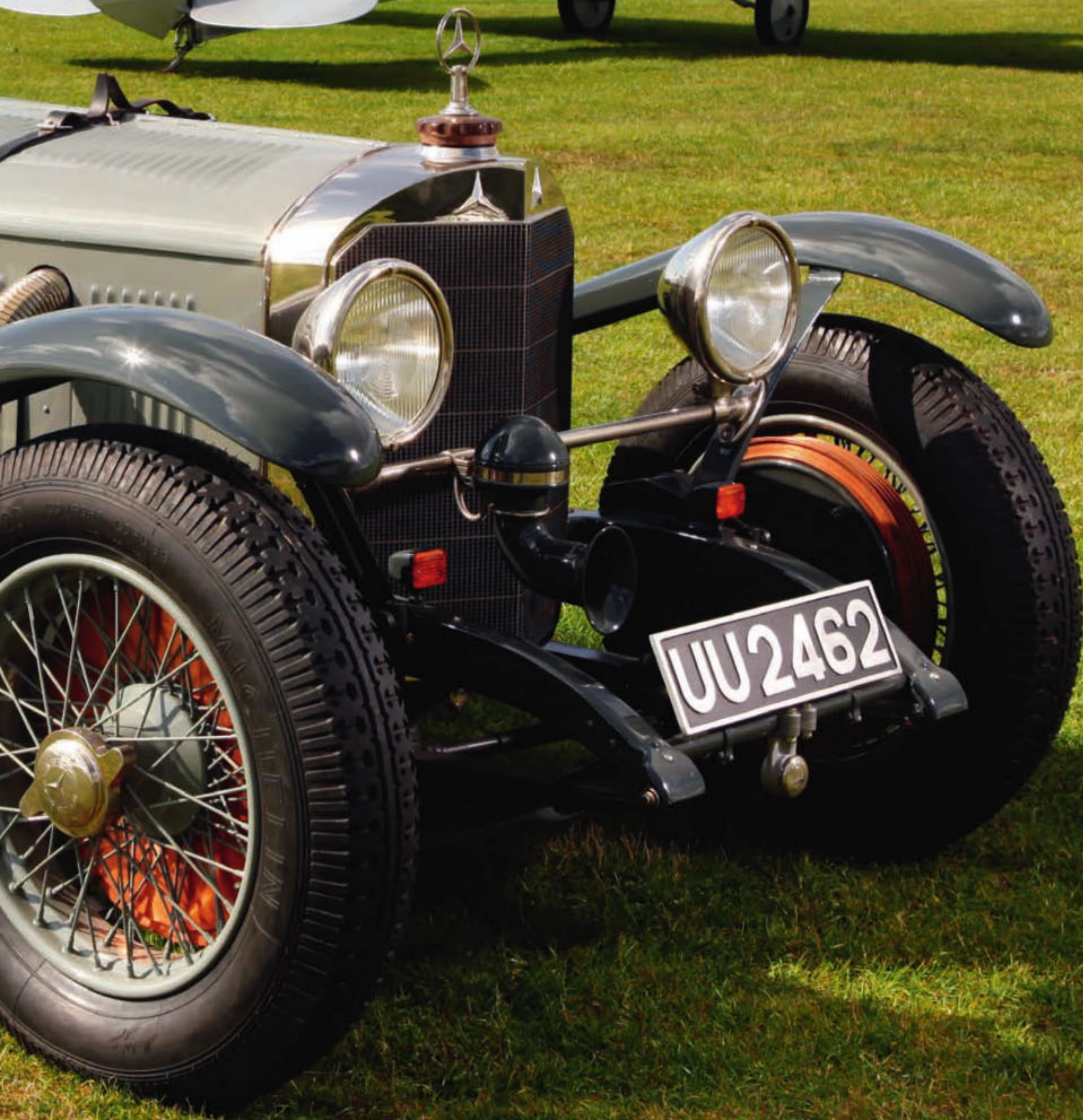


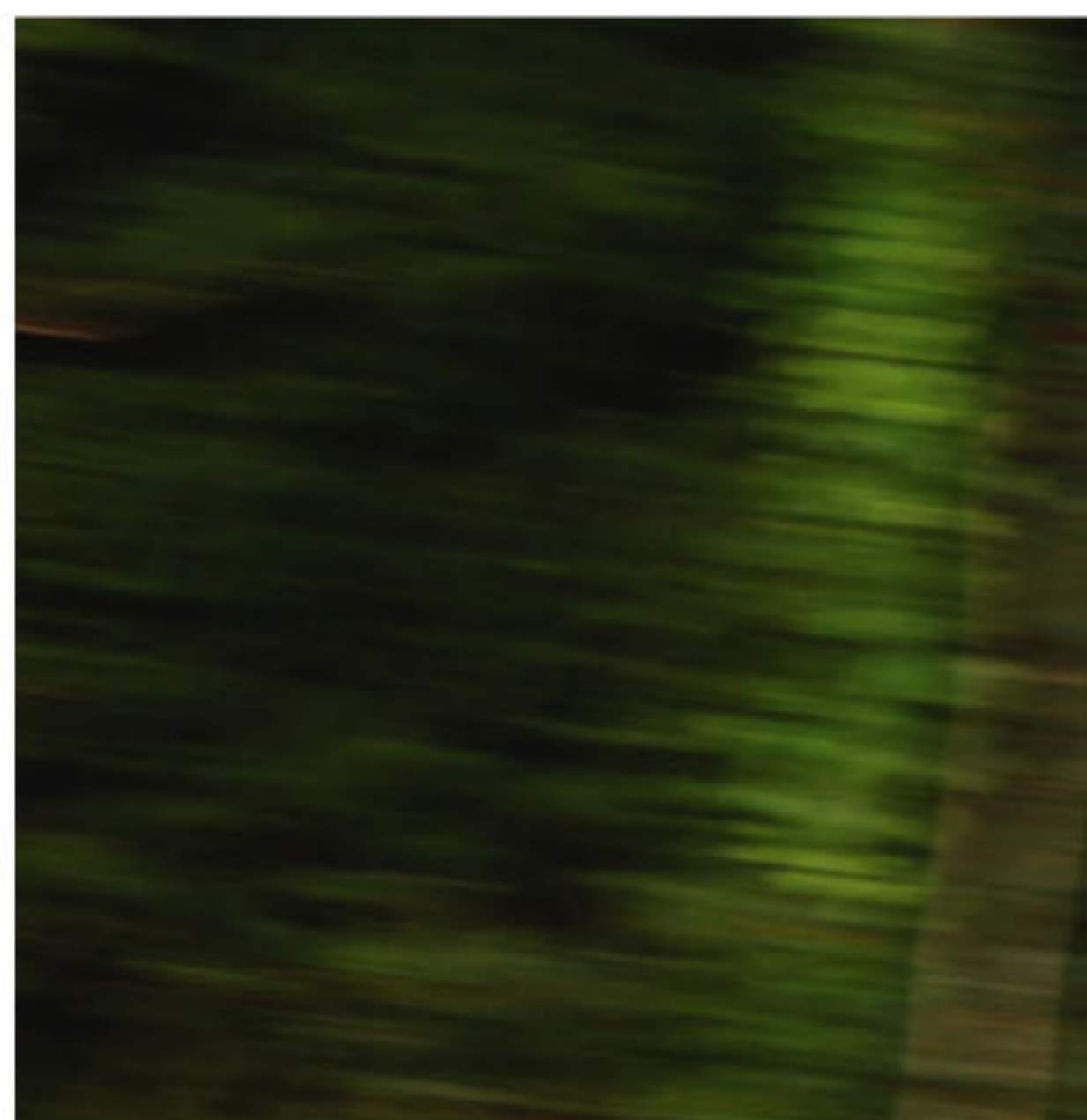
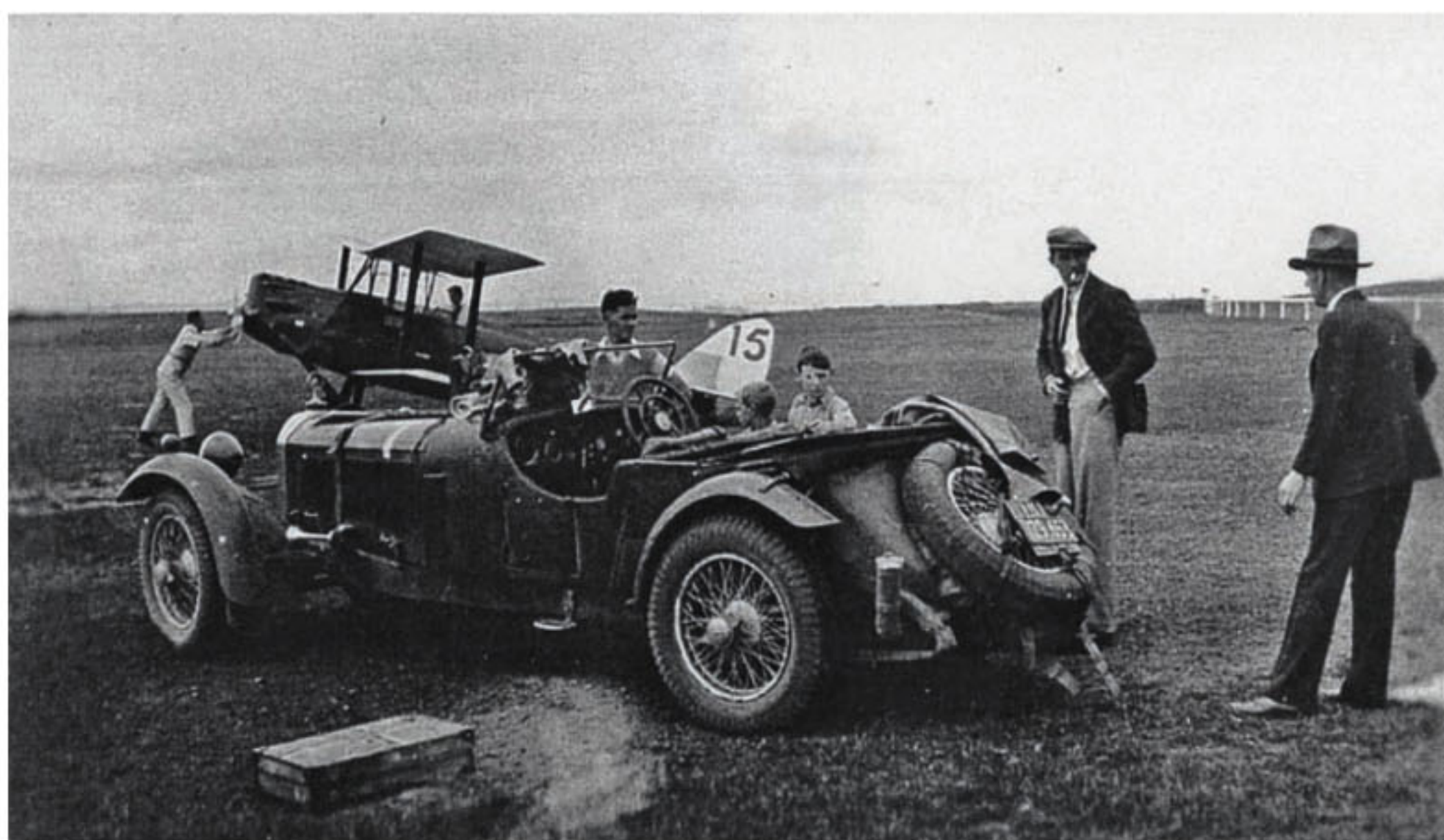
When only the best will do

Mick Walsh discovers the fascinating link between a Mercedes-Benz S-type and a De Havilland DH60 racer, reunited for the first time in 75 years at Goodwood

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**







Clockwise, from top left: Moth, Mercedes and 'HK' (in cap) attract attention at Auckland Aerodrome in 1934; 6.7-litre sohc 'six' packs the engine bay; HK at the wheel of the car in single-seater form



The rakish two-tone Mercedes-Benz S model burbles into the Goodwood paddock, the sun glinting off its radiator and copper brake drums. This 1927 supercharged sensation is over from Germany for a special reunion with a beautiful Gipsy Moth, one of the fastest British biplanes of the early '30s. Their connection? This spectacular pair was once owned by Home 'HK' Kidston, younger brother of Le Mans-winning 'Bentley Boy' Glen.

Born in 1910, the dashing Scot lived life to the full and didn't skimp on his personal transport. From a Morgan three-wheeler while still at Eton, HK went through a dazzling array of fast cars, racing planes and speedboats. Against his father's wishes, he joined the Royal Navy, where his war record reads like that of a *Boy's Own* hero: he commanded an MTB squadron, served with Mountbatten on *HMS Kelly*, the most famous

of WW2 destroyers, and skipped his own destroyer in the Western Atlantic. Yet service didn't prevent him indulging in fast cars: from a Bugatti Type 37 to a Porsche 911 2.7 RS – that's still in the family – via a Mini Cooper.

At his son Simon's request, HK, aged 85, compiled a fascinating record of his motoring experiences. The Mercedes-Benz – a 36/220 as the model was known in Britain – was acquired secondhand from Kevill-Davies & March. Its showroom was in Berkeley Square, where Kidston had a house, and rumour has it that Freddie March, the racer, stylist and future founder of the Goodwood circuit, sold the car to him. Early in HK's ownership the Mercedes was shipped to New Zealand, where his vivid adventures with it began in ominous fashion.

Kidston's driving, be it competing or returning from a camping trip, was clearly of a press-on nature. With Paymaster Lieutenant John Bennett alongside, he skidded off the road and

1.5 tons of metal barrelled into a ditch and hit a tree. Both men were seriously hurt: HK suffered three broken ribs and a painful impact to his 'private parts'; Bennett's skull was fractured.

While recovering in an Auckland nursing home, Kidston had the bent Mercedes – and his design for a single-seater body – sent to a local specialist. Once car and owner were fully fit, the Mercedes was entered for the Muriwai Beach racing championships. Kidston had clearly lost none of his driving verve: he won, although he wrote honestly that the opposition, which included an Austin Seven, 'was very mod'.

Kidston's rapid driving regularly got him into trouble with the law. 'An Inspector Jones of the Auckland Police used to sit by the roadside with a tin of 50 Players cigarettes, waiting for me to pass so that he could catch me speeding,' he recalled in his notes. 'I tried to break the Auckland-to-Wellington record several times, but he never caught me. The supercharger only

'THE SUPERCHARGER ONLY CAME IN
WHEN YOU PUT YOUR FOOT DOWN.
IF YOU HELD IT FOR TOO LONG, THE
PLUGS BECAME INCANDESCENT'



came in when you put your foot down hard, but when you did this for any length of time, the sparking plugs used to become incandescent. Great fun on the whole.'

Such antics made local headlines. While dusting up open roads near Blenheim on the South Island, Kidston again had an off, and subsequently lost his driving licence. With his light cruiser *HMNZS Diomedé* based in Wellington on the North Island, he talked his solicitor into flying down in the Gipsy Moth to attend the court hearing. Although his licence was reinstated, the case was widely reported and led to headlines such as 'Nautical Road Hog', which the Royal Navy got retracted.

The Mercedes was eventually sold and an Essex Terraplane with a two-seater coupé body took its place. Although he noted that it was a more 'sedate car', HK couldn't resist competing in the standard class at Muriwai Beach.

Few enthusiasts can have owned the ultimate

vintage and post-war Mercedes from new. Like Lord Howe, Kidston was captivated by the 300SL when it was announced and he became the first British owner of a Gullwing. Twenty years after his adventures in the S-type, HK had clearly retained his passion for speed. After collecting his new coupé from the Sindelfingen factory in '55, he drove straight to the Nürburgring and thence to Italy to watch the Mille Miglia. Having witnessed its southern leg, he and his glamorous partner headed across the Tuscan hills to watch Stirling Moss' victorious 300SLR storm the Raticosa and Futa passes. On the way home the Gullwing's shapely style was besmirched by a wayward Fiat 500 Topolino, so Kidston called at Pinin Farina in Turin: 'Sergio organised for the dent to be fixed. I told silly jokes and the work was done for nothing!'

That enthusiasm for motoring never faded. Even in his 80s, HK would think nothing of flying to France to buy a Renault Twingo – they

weren't available in the UK – enjoy a great seafood lunch, and drive the 600 miles home.

Prior to Kidston's ownership, this historic S-type had enjoyed a dramatic life. It was ordered new by Baron von Loen as a rolling chassis from the Berlin showroom of German race ace Rudi Caracciola, but it is not confirmed whether the German aristocrat took delivery. By 1929, the car was in England, where Tom 'Scrap' Thistlethwayte commissioned Vanden Plas to fit an open touring body similar to the works cars but with a deeper cutaway side door. After competing at Southport Sands in May, where Thistlethwayte won the Golden Vase, the car lined up alongside the 'works' team at the Ards TT. Despite an unfavourable handicap against his 7.1-litre SS, *regenmeister* Caracciola underlined his reputation for wet-weather mastery by splashing through the flooded twists and sweeps of this Irish road course to beat the second-placed Alfa Romeo 6C-1500 of Giuseppe



Clockwise, from left: exposed cockpit with chunky Edwardian-style steering wheel; serious crash in New Zealand destroyed original body; Moth buzzes Mercedes on Goodwood's runway; racing DH60 has lowered Cirrus four-cylinder unit

Campari by two minutes after 30 laps. The car featured here was driven by AB Maconochie and was unplaced after running out of fuel.

Its next owner was legendary London-based Mercedes enthusiast Edward Louis Mayer, whose passion for the three-pointed star began with a 60hp in 1904.

After Kidston, the by then converted single-seater was stored at Brooklands with Thomson & Taylor during WW2, and in 1950 was sold to America as a chassis. Later owners included pop balladeer Roy Orbison.

A full restoration in the early 1990s resulted in a more authentic Vanden Plas style, and present owner Dieter Dressel acquired the car in 1997. It has been very active in recent years, completing several Mille Miglias, numerous laps of the Nürburgring, and the Klausenrennen Memorial in 1998. "It's very comfortable for long-distance runs, and wonderful through smooth, open corners," says Dressel.

As a boy, I craved to play with Dad's Matchbox Models of Yesteryear collection, particularly No 10, a white Mercedes S-type that captured the glamour of Caracciola's racers. Childhood fantasies of supercharged power and Bentley-versus-Mercedes at Le Mans bubble up, therefore, as I settle behind the massive wheel.

Compared to the 'Cricklewood lorries', this 6.7-litre straight-six sits well back and low in a long, leaf-sprung chassis. Producing 180bhp at 3000rpm, it remains a genuine 100mph-plus machine. With its signature vee radiator sited far behind the axle line and fronting an epic bonnet, this speed *wagen*, topped by its twin spare wheels, is the most exotic of the great vintage tourers. Its surprisingly lean look is capped by an abbreviated windscreen, while assertive flexi exhausts punch through the bonnet in a mighty declaration of power. *Doktor* Porsche's masterful touch had transformed the lofty Model K into the ultimate German sports

car of the 1920s, his clever revisions including an upswept frame over the rear axle that transformed the handling, and big finned drums and servo assistance to slow this 3696lb stormer.

The S-type's most famous feature is its Valkyrie screech when the supercharger is engaged. To minimise stress on the engine, Porsche conceived a multi-plate clutch on the nose of the crankshaft and step-up bevel gears to a blower operated by rods connected to the loud pedal. Only when the throttle is floored in true HK fashion does the supercharger engage. This extra push is ideal for overtaking or a long hill, although the DMG carbs gulp fuel at 5mpg with forced induction.

Our reunion is appropriately under the watchful eye of Freddie March's portrait at the entrance to the Goodwood Revival's aviation concours, in which DH60 Moth G-AAXG was entered this year. The pairing provides a rare insight into the most desirable high-speed toys



of the 1930s. Where the S-type was the ultimate of its day, prior to Alfa Romeo's 8C-2300 – which HK also owned – this DH60 was a much-modified model developed for Captain de Havilland, who selected Alan Butler to pilot it in the 1930 King's Cup Air Race. Like the Mercedes, it was finely tuned for extra speed, its Gipsy II engine lowered and enclosed in a sleeker fuselage with flush stub exhausts and a streamlined cockpit. Refinements to its wings, tailplane, undercarriage, struts and controls further honed its performance and agility. It might have finished second in the King's Cup, but at 129mph it was the fastest aircraft. And it continued to set the pace at events all over Europe, with Butler then Edward Bret at its controls. 'It was very different from the standard DH60,' recorded Bret. 'She was one of the most enjoyable aeroplanes that I ever flew, with perfectly balanced controls.' He rated it right up there with early Spitfires.


In 1933, Kidston acquired the Moth from

motorsport star – and de Havilland agent – the Hon Brian Lewis. After repainting it red to match the Mercedes, and remodifying its wings to allow them to fold for overseas transport, he housed it at Hanworth and early solo trips included a visit to the 1933 Le Mans 24 Hours. It was then dismantled for shipping to New Zealand, together with the S-type and HK's Vosper Jolly speedboat. He enjoyed daredevil flights Down Under before selling it in 1935.

After a stunning recent restoration in New Zealand, this historic aircraft returned to the UK in 2010 and is now back within the Kidston clan.

To witness this reunion is special – but to experience both of these remarkable machines on a glorious autumn afternoon at Goodwood is bliss. Whereas the tall Kidston felt uncomfortable and exposed in the Mercedes, it fits my short frame perfectly. Lord March generously allows us access to his Festival of Speed course, and *en route*, around the paddock and roundabouts,

it is hard work because of the tall gearing, heavy steering, dead brakes and tricky gearbox. But up the fast, familiar drive, this Stuttgart thoroughbred can unleash its horses. Past the house, I floor the central accelerator to trigger that signature scream. "All levers to loud," as Jochen Mass once said. But it's not just straights. Impressive speed can be confidently carried through fast bends, too, the handling reassuring thanks to the long wheelbase. Had the course been loose, like many pre-war routes, the steering would have felt more responsive and the chassis could have been drifted in Caracciola style.

Finally, as the sun dips, I'm invited for a short flight in the DH60. Even as a passenger I can sense that this famous biplane is a joy to control, from taxiing to climbing, diving and drifting over the Downs, then fluttering to a perfect and dainty landing. To have owned both – and a speedboat – in the early 1930s must have been an amazing experience. A lucky man, HK. 



Snow, ice and a supercharged race to the sky

Alpine passes don't come more spectacular than the Grossglockner. **Mick Walsh** carries out a dawn raid in a Mercedes-Benz SSK

PHOTOGRAPHY **HARRY STEININGER/GROSSGLOCKNER GP/MICK WALSH**





Fifteen kilometres and 92 corners, including 14 hairpins: there are few more challenging motoring workouts than commanding a mighty Mercedes-Benz SSK up the fabled Grossglockner pass. From the tollgate at Ferleiten, low in this scenic Austrian valley, to the lofty Rasthaus Fuschertörl at 2428m among the towering peaks, this is one of the ultimate mountain roads and matches Pikes Peak, Klausen and Mont Ventoux as a ‘must drive before I die’ route.

The Stuttgart marque has illustrious history here, with Hermann Lang crowned the mountain king at the final competitive event in 1939 after a mighty battle to control the fearsome W125 through rain and fog. The SSK, however, never competed here – the first event to celebrate the 26-month construction of the pass didn’t happen until 1935 – but this spectacular supercharged polar-white titan has a reputation as a successful vintage hillclimb machine.

The master of the S-type in both long- and short-chassis form was Remagen-born ace Rudolf Caracciola. As well as his magnificent 1931 Mille Miglia win for Germany, Caracciola muscled the 1.9-ton sensation to victories at the long, demanding Freiburg-Schauinsland and Klausenrennen events.



Top: vintage titan at rest as dawn breaks over the Hohe Tauern range. **Above:** the Grossglockner is one of Austria’s most popular tourist attractions, but snow closes the pass from October to May each year

Mercedes-Benz Classic has amazingly agreed to a pre-dawn raid up the Grossglockner pass to watch the sun come up over the Italian border. This natural paradise is overwhelming at any hour, but to see the first rays creeping over the famous mountain – the pyramid-shaped peak is second in height only to Mont Blanc in the Alps – is an amazing opportunity. Any dark drive up this famous route would deliver a buzz, but in an exposed pre-war supercar there’s a heady mix of excitement and trepidation. Much of the historic road is lined with only the occasional stone block, with a very long drop beyond.

At 5am, our base at Zell am See is silent, so it’s best that the SSK is woken underground because, even at low revs, the rude exhaust burble will echo around the narrow streets. With fuel consumption barely into double figures, the tank is filled for our early morning 50-mile excursion. As the mechanics make a last check, it’s evident how much the tall engine dominates this 15ft-long two-seater. Other than the proud vee-shaped radiator and signature trio of large-diameter flexible outside exhausts, the majestic short-chassis S-type has a supremely functional style. The long bonnet with the engine set well back, plus the rear body neatly shrouded around two seats and twin spare wheels – all finished off with Spartan cycle wings – gives the SSK a stark,



From above: the final section up to Fuschertörl gives the chance to use the SSK's power; hillclimbing Caracciola storms Klausen; the broad, high steering wheel dominates the Mercedes' cockpit



purposeful presence. Few sports cars have such a prominent national character, and you can imagine the dread when one of these intimidating machines appeared in the rear-view mirror of a sluggish BMW Dixi, or roared through a village with trailing cloud of dust *en route* to an event in the late '20s. Little wonder such brazen power was so popular with Hollywood movie moguls.

The dedicated Mercedes-Benz Classic crew is conscious of the noise level even in our underground hideaway and, once the temperature needle starts to move, I'm ushered into the imposing cockpit. The body sides are doorless and, once you've clambered on to the deep pleated bench seat and slid your backside down the tough black leather, the driving position is dominated by the huge, high steering wheel.

The exterior's white-and-black paint is complemented by polished and plated metals, and contrasts with the cockpit's dark wooden dashboard packed with gauges, switches and pumps. A little colour stands out on the steering boss because the marque badge, plus controls for advance/retard and mixture, are dramatically highlighted with a flash of red. Beneath the scuttle, the rev counter registering 4000rpm is prominent in the centre, while the tall gearlever and handbrake restrict passenger foot space. The priority here is elbow room for the driver,



particularly around the high hairpins ahead. Having seen Jochen Mass' raw, blistered hands after finishing the Mille Miglia, I know that gloves are essential, but the heavy steering and braking effort are always a rewarding challenge. Such physical input goes with the SSK's character.

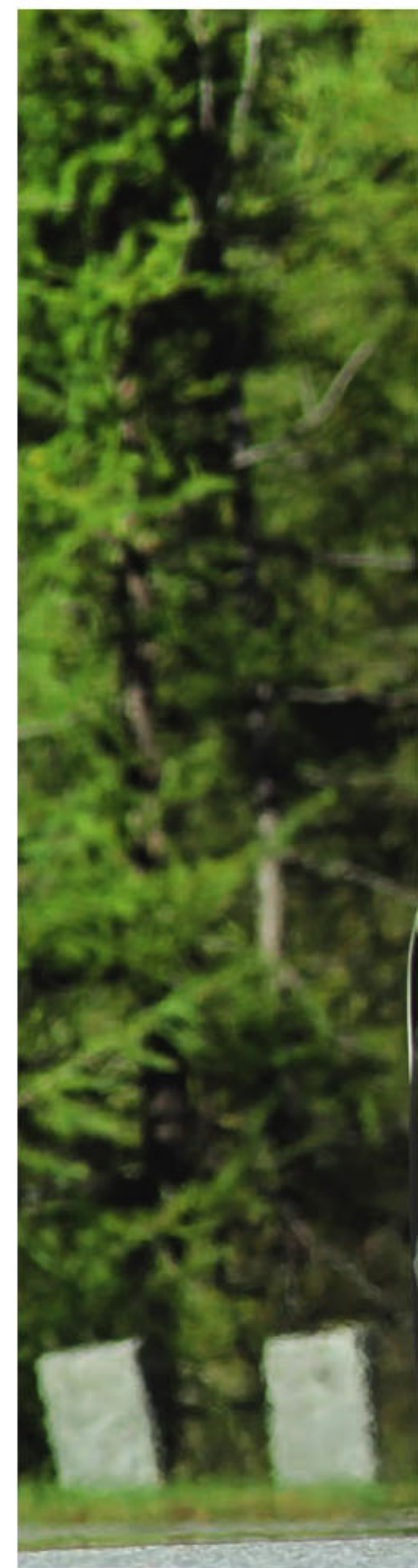
As I guide the Mercedes around the car park and up the ramp, the deep-chested exhaust tone reverberates around the concrete walls, but out on the freezing street level this special moment really sinks in. I've chased a gang of SSKs on the Mille Miglia at night and have never forgotten the spectacle. Here the road is bathed in a yellow glow from streetlamps and is totally deserted, and at low revs the strong torque pulls effortlessly in third as I try to be as discreet as possible at this early hour. Once clear of the town, the headlamps produce a reassuring spread of illumination, and, under a dramatic starry sky, I change up to fourth and charge forward to the pass. Only the bright moonlight picks out the lofty snow-laden peaks ahead but all else is black. The low windscreen offers impressive protection from the wind, but surprisingly there's negligible warmth from the huge engine.

The first drama comes as we roar up to the toll barrier at Ferleiten. Despite a pre-arranged access plan, no staff have arrived yet and after I switch off there's a cannon-like bang as excess

'AS THE ROAD GETS STEEPER,
THERE'S NO OPTION BUT TO
DEPLOY THE SUPERCHARGER
IN SHORT, NOISY BURSTS'







From above: the return run – top section still features original brick surface; the pass' opening in 1935; spectacular view down the bonnet; tall 7-litre 'six' with supercharger mounted at the front

fuel is burnt off. In the dark it sounds strident enough to cause an avalanche. A grumpy attendant finally arrives and the barrier is reluctantly lifted for our epic drive to really start.

The first few kilometres are deceptive, the road climbing through the woods in fast, wide curves, and the SSK quickly gets into its stride as we pound up in third, but beyond the Schleier Waterfall there's a string of tight hairpins. Here the hefty chassis weight soon becomes apparent and, even in second, it's working hard out of each tight apex. As the road gets steeper, there's no option but to deploy the supercharger in short, noisy bursts by pushing the accelerator down that extra stretch. In the darkness, the blood-curdling scream when the blower is engaged is even more eerie. The now fully pressurised system gulps fuel at 5mpg and the welcome shove really transforms corner exit.

Power figures for the glorious Dr Ferdinand Porsche-designed 7-litre straight-six range from 200bhp in standard specification to 300bhp in full-race tune with the blower working. To avoid over-stressing the motor, the supercharger is only occasionally engaged via a multiple-disc clutch in the nose of the crankshaft and I limit it to 10-second bursts, particularly when the SSK's charge bogs down. Story has it that Caracciola would use full power for the entire run in



hillclimb competitions, but preserving the precious engine is paramount today. I'm also more conscious of the long drops, but thankfully the good lights give me the confidence to carry speed on the faster open section to Piffkar.

The gearchange is slick and smooth at higher speeds, but the tight bends require a deft double-declutch and healthy revs for a clean slot. It pays to sort out the gears before entry because both hands are essential for the meaty steering input that is needed into sharper turns. The brake pedal feels dead but the impressive engine braking boosts confidence. Sitting almost over the back axle gives you a strong message about what the chassis is doing but, in the pre-dawn half-light, it takes commitment to push hard.

In contrast to the loose surface in the 1930s, with jarring *pavé* through many hairpins, the pass is now mainly smooth tarmac, but there are still a few surprise bumps. Despite the car's weight, you can feel the chassis flex as the rear hops and the steering kicks back.

By two-thirds distance, with Hochmais to the right, the corners are becoming wider but the drop is now even deeper and, other than a few old stone bollards, it's mostly unprotected. Into right-hand turns I'm happier to push on but I bottle out when I know there's a long plunge ahead. Closer to the top, the air feels definitely



sharper, and at Oberes Nassfeld the back of the car steps out as the blower is engaged – freezing temperatures have turned streams across the road to ice, but thankfully we’re exiting a turn and not ploughing into the apex. This final section, with three open hairpins before the blast to the Fuschertörl, is hugely rewarding and less intimidating. At the top, my shoulders ache from the effort, but the exhilaration is fantastic. Shrugging off my shaking as “just the cold”, I secretly know it’s from the massive adrenalin rush of this fabulous drive.

Barely have we switched off before I hear the familiar banshee wail of another supercharger. Just below, I see the S-type tourer of Thomas Kern storming up the pass to meet us. Parked together in the low light, the Mercedes duo looks majestic, their white paint almost luminescent as their engines cool and tick against the moody backdrop.


The view is spectacular at the summit as the dawn glow slowly spreads across the valley, and finally a tangerine sun pops over the southern peaks. We’re all pinching ourselves – none harder than me – that we’ve driven up here in these amazing machines.

“It’s one of the greatest cars in the world, but it’s that on-off supercharger switch of power that makes them really special,” says Kern over



Top: fatter tyres improve grip but increase steering effort. Above: Kern’s superb long-chassis S-type joins Walsh’s ride at the summit as the sun creeps over the mountains

a welcome *espresso*, whose father and brother both have a long association with the vintage thoroughbred. “We’ve had this factory-bodied S-type for 22 years and I love driving it through fast curves,” explains Kern. “The original Auto-vac system was too slow and used to be a real problem in mountain events because it would run out of fuel on the last corners. The supercharger would empty the pre-tank in a few seconds, but the pressurised design developed for the SSK changed that.”

As the valley below fills with blue light and creeping shadows, we head back down to Zell am See. Although I savour climbing drives, going downhill with such weight and uninspiring drum brakes makes me cautious, particularly in a car of this value. I let Kern lead, and watching the way that this experienced S-type driver carries speed through the turns, with the tail drifting smoothly out and barely a touch of the brakes, is an impressive lesson in how these big Mercedes should be controlled. Driving an SSK is a massive privilege at such a historic location, but to follow another commanded so confidently doubles the pleasure. 

For further details about the annual Internationaler Grossglockner Grand Prix retrospective, see www.grossglockner-grandprix.de



STUTTGART'S SILVER SENSATION

Eighty years ago, the debut of the fabulous Mercedes-Benz W25 changed the face of motorsport. **Mick Walsh** drives the only working survivor

PHOTOGRAPHY **HARRY STEININGER**



'EVERYONE BUT ME IS WEARING EARPLUGS, YET I'M RELISHING THE WILD, SHARP BLAST'



Moody, ominous clouds gather over Untertürkheim as dawn breaks on a Saturday morning. Not surprisingly, the Mercedes-Benz factory is deserted. Sitting in the only working W25 – the first of the Silver Arrows racing dynasty – I feel privileged and elated, but also guilty for getting up Gert Straub's crew from the Classic Centre to prepare this precious machine at such an early hour. The cockpit is tight, dominated by a broad wood-rimmed, non-removable steering wheel, while deep undercuts in the sparse, engine-turned dash offer a little extra leg space.

The test track in the heart of the factory is surrounded by modern architecture, so it's a challenge to relate the locality to the view down this streamlined beauty, but this is where – with immense pride – the W25 was designed and built. From the forged wishbones to the delicate bonnet hooks, you can see the dedicated precision in every fabulous detail.

It's also hard to detach the W25 from the dark political context that surrounded its creation, but this is the chassis that Manfred von Brauchitsch gunned for 15 laps around the Nürburgring to post the car's debut victory in May 1934. Germany had been hit hard by the Depression and Daimler-Benz's workforce was cut by half when the W25 was planned, so the euphoria at the new car's victorious arrival must have been amazing. In the Mercedes archives are photographs of von Brauchitsch and the winning machine on a parade through the factory, lost among workers but with Nazi officials and banners very evident for the hero's return.

Those vivid images were taken close to the

test track but there's little time to dwell on the W25's past, particularly when its straight-eight barks into life. The penetrating exhaust note combined with gear thrash and blower whine is amazing, and I can't imagine how it felt in the short-lived closed-cockpit record car. Once warmed, the plugs are changed as Straub advises that the throttle should be opened progressively to avoid flooding. The firm, bouncy ride over rough sections of the test track makes this a challenge, but the instant response from the delicate, bone-like centre throttle is fantastic. Everyone but me is wearing earplugs, but I relish the wild, sharp blast, and try to imagine von Brauchitsch's tension at the Eifelrennen start among the pack of three Auto Unions, while eagerly watching for Italian teammate Luigi Fagioli.

The upright driving position gives a good view to the front wheels but the bonnet looks shorter from the cockpit. Even from low revs, the acceleration is impressive, and the change up to second is soon required via the short lever in the drilled, beautifully fabricated gate to the right of the seat. In period, drivers reported that the transaxle gearbox could be rapidly upshifted but required careful double-declutching on the downchanges. The gears also had a habit of slipping out of engagement, which sent the revs sky-high, resulting in bent valves. It's a joy to work through the long gate, particularly when you gain the confidence to speed up the action and use more revs. Later, Straub recalls how impressed he was by Jenson Button during demonstrations, the modern Formula One star enjoying the challenge of the crash 'box.

For the first few laps, there seems to be hardly any travel in the independent suspension, and the narrow, extensively drilled chassis suffers



from flex, but the steering is superb. The very direct worm-and-nut design (2¼ turns lock-to-lock) is firmly braced on the clutch housing, and there's no hint of kickback. The light, direct action transmits plenty of feel, and the initial touch of understeer is easily adjusted via the super-responsive throttle. Compared to the light clutch and accelerator, the brake pedal feels heavy and dead, but once warmed the huge drums pull the car up strong and straight.

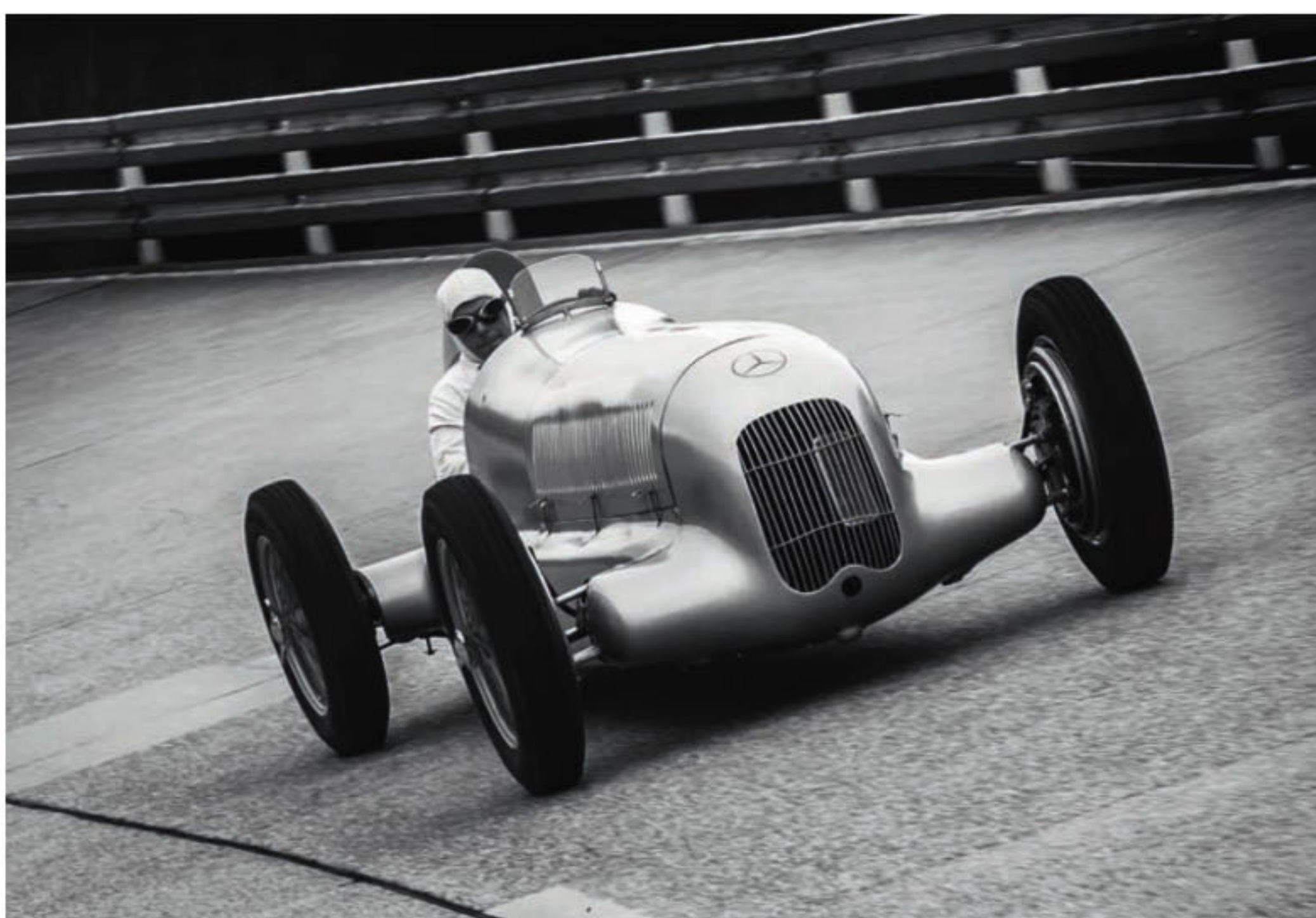
Unlike its spectacular W125 successor, the W25 feels a much more balanced package, and more modern in concept. As my confidence increases, it handles the tight turns like a big go-kart, only the tall 19in tyres limiting its speed. It rockets down the straights, but with 300bhp powering just 750kg, its raucous performance shouldn't have been a surprise.

With the engine noise still ringing in my ears, we spend a few minutes discussing the W25's details and history before it is loaded up. Michael Bock, director of the Classic division, points out a mysterious knob under the tail.

"That's an external fuel tap," he explains. "Even our mechanics have a reminder in their



Clockwise, from left: Lang waits for plug change at the 'Ring in 1935; tight cockpit with undercut dash; stubby gearlever and ratchet advance/retard lever; testing at Montlhéry for '34 French GP. Below: acceleration is spectacular. Top left: Straub lines up the remote starter



toolboxes. Story has it that an Alfa driver once jumped out just before the start and closed it.”

Straub relates that this chassis also gave Luigi Fagioli victory in the Coppa Acerbo, and was used by Hermann Lang during 1935 – including for the Swiss and Italian GPs – before being put into storage. This important car, born from a fresh brief under the direction of Hans Nibel, is amazingly original – right down to every body panel. Frustratingly, its sister W25 was lost during the war when it went into a secret hideaway far from the factory with the only surviving Benz Tropfenwagen.

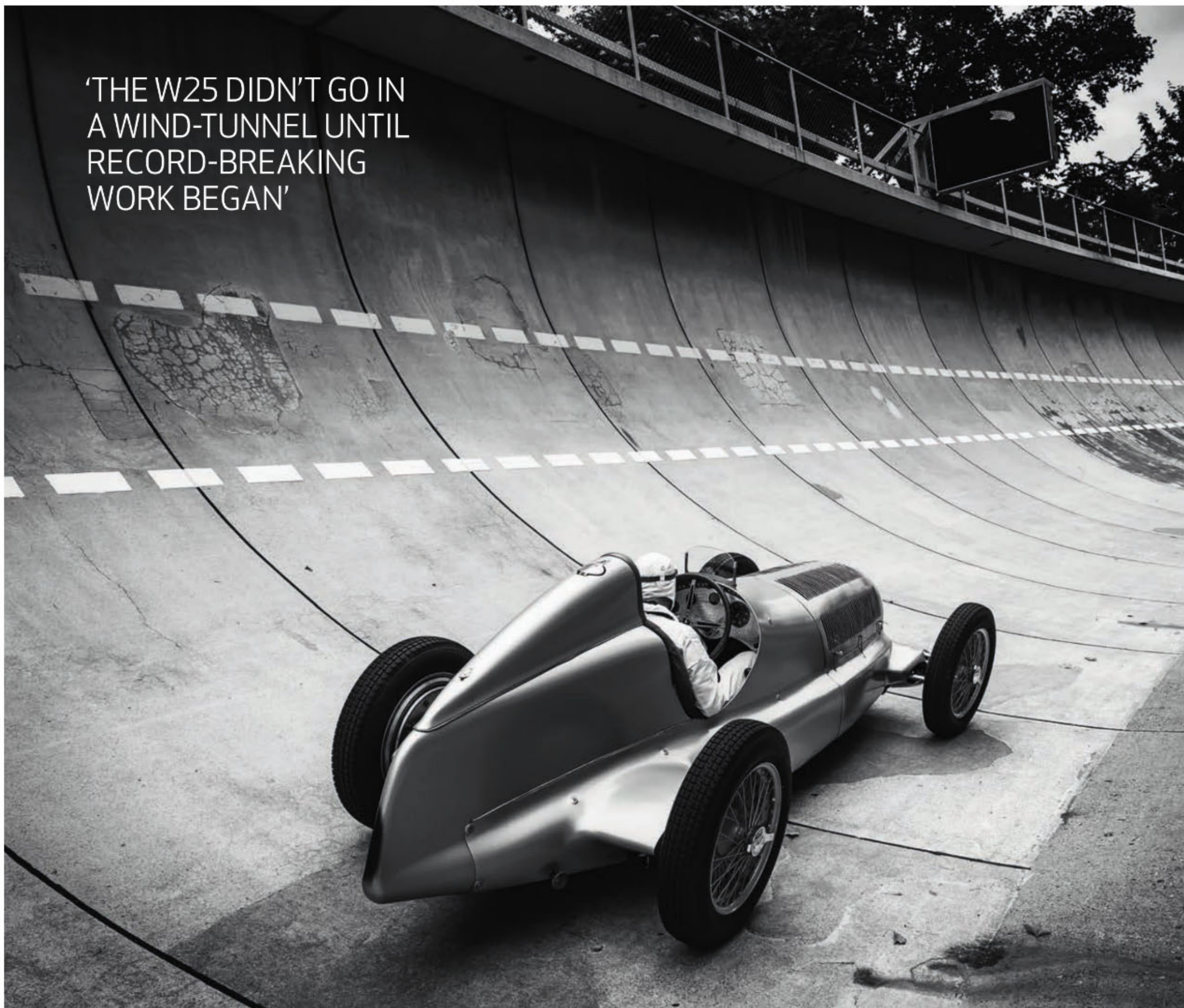
“Thankfully, the car wasn’t worn out,” says Straub. “Every engine part was covered in thick, hardened oil so had to be carefully cleaned, but the transaxle was good and we fitted new pistons and bearings. The springs were also set softer. We don’t use a dyno now – after we lost a W125 engine – and just test-run it carefully.”

Rudolf Caracciola, Germany’s biggest star, played a key role in the specification of the all-new W25. His enthusiasm for the impressive power of the Alfa Romeo Tipo B, which he’d raced in ’32, encouraged engine designers Albert Hess and Otto Schilling to go with a straight-eight configuration for the new M25A. Like Vittorio Jano’s design, it employed two four-cylinder blocks but with the twin-overhead camshafts driven by spur gears at the rear.

At the nose, bevells drove a vertical Roots-type supercharger at twice crankshaft speed and pumped pressurised air through a magnificent, heavily finned cast manifold to a pair of Mercedes updraught carburetors. Unlike in the SSKL, the blower was permanently engaged, but when the driver backed off for corners a linkage vented boost to the atmosphere. With four valves per cylinder and dimensions of 78x88mm giving a 3360cc capacity, the finished engine weighed 203kg and on the dyno gave an impressive 325bhp at 5500rpm.

The engine was fitted low in a box-section chassis united by tubular crossmembers. A compact, rear-mounted transaxle kept the driveline as low as possible, while everything was drilled for lightness – including the handbrake and the body frame. The all-independent suspension – coil and wishbone at the front, swing-axle rear with quarter-elliptic leaf springs

'THE W25 DIDN'T GO IN A WIND-TUNNEL UNTIL RECORD-BREAKING WORK BEGAN'



– featured advanced multi-disc friction dampers all round. Hydraulic brakes were another first for the racing department.

It's difficult to appreciate the impact made by the styling of both the W25 and the Auto Union P Wagen, but the streamlining looks as if it is from another era compared to rivals such as the Alfa Romeo Tipo B, Maserati 8CM and Bugatti Type 59. The task of covering the wonderfully engineered chassis and engine was given to Josef Müller while his boss Max Wagner was on holiday. Photos of Hermann Lang holding a steering wheel and sitting in the chassis with a mechanic measuring possible angles for the scuttle show the meticulous lengths that the team went to in designing the wind-cheating profile.

To guide the metalworkers, Müller made a full-sized mock-up of the body sections. When Wagner returned, he was stunned by the finished result and likened it to a rocket. Amazingly, the early W25 didn't use the Zeppelin wind tunnel at Friedrichshafen until record-breaking work was undertaken late in 1934.

In February that year, the first M25A engine was mounted in a white-painted prototype that

featured a conventional low tail with no head fairing, plus an exposed outside handbrake. Due to the severe winter in Stuttgart, the team headed to Monza with von Brauchitsch, but supercharger problems plagued the test before a tyre failure and resultant crash ended it completely. The prototype was rebuilt and returned to Italy in March, with Fagioli driving it at Monza as well as on the *autostrada* between Milan and Varese.

The straight-eight's sudden boost of power made the W25 tricky to drive, as Ernst Henne discovered when he crashed during testing at the Nürburgring. In back-to-back tests with the ex-Caracciola Alfa Monza, he also claimed that the differential badly affected the handling.

To improve drivability, the engine was detuned to 303bhp, while the body style was further refined with the addition of a shorter tail enclosing the fuel tank and topped with a hinged, streamlined head fairing.

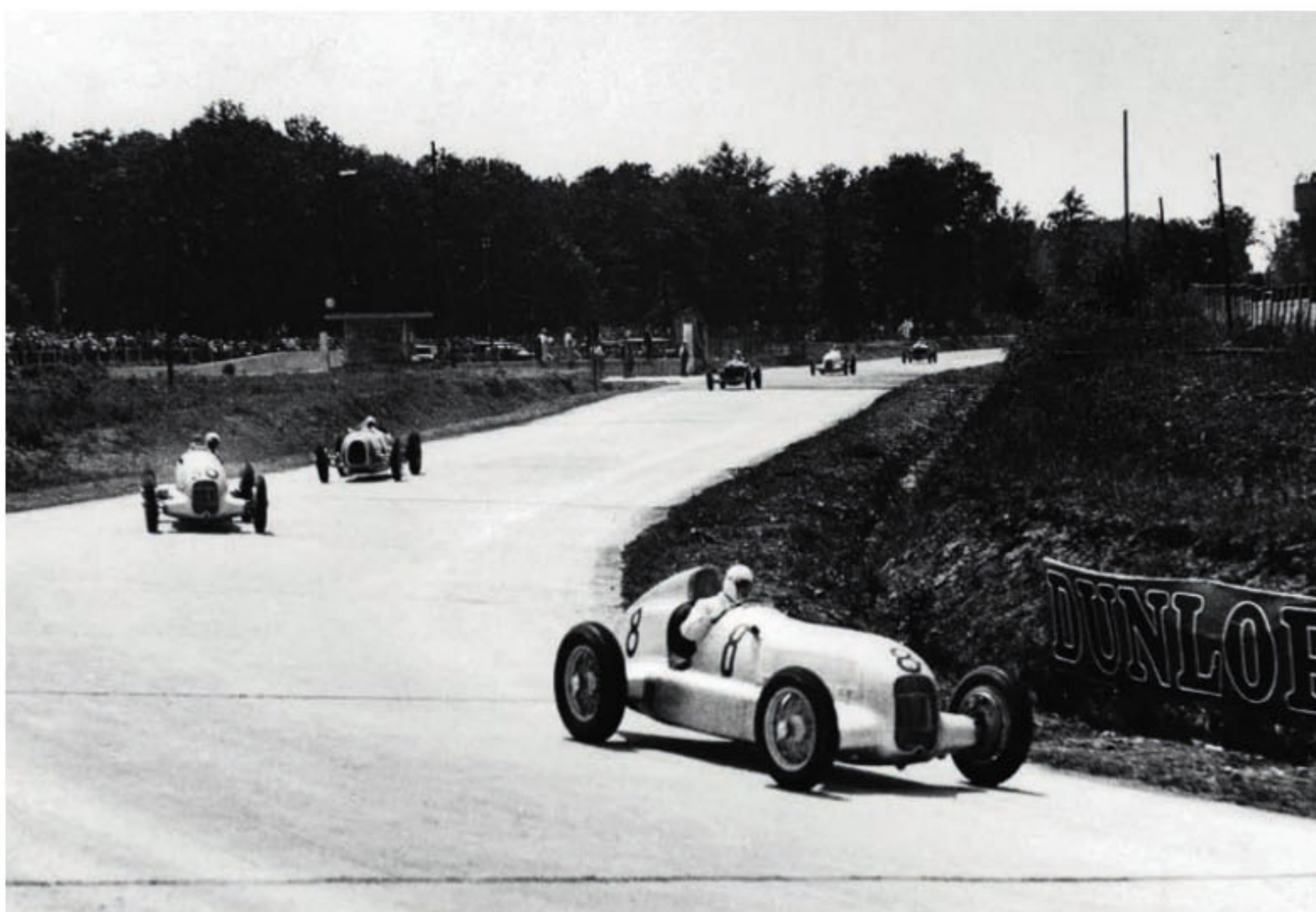
The W25's debut didn't come until well into the 1934 season. After missing Monaco, Mercedes entered the Avusrennen on 27 May, creating huge national interest with 200,000

people filing through the gates. On the Thursday, Caracciola settled into a W25 for his first racing-car test since his Alfa crash at Monaco the previous year. Suffering intense pain from his right leg, Caracciola was still faster than von Brauchitsch and Fagioli, but on the morning of the race the PA system announced that Mercedes had withdrawn. The unofficial reason was fuel-pump trouble on the ultra-fast circuit.

A week later, three W25s lined up with the Auto Union A-types at the Eifelrennen, but only von Brauchitsch and Fagioli started – Caracciola's injuries made competing too uncomfortable. This appearance triggered one of the most famous myths in motorsport. The story goes that when the W25s were formally weighed at scrutineering, they were found to be 2kg over the 750kg limit. Team boss Neubauer ordered the bodywork to be stripped of its white paint and filler, an idea supposedly suggested by a mechanic, and the bare cars were finally passed by the patient officials. As colourful as this story is, it's hard to believe that Neubauer would make a mistake with the weight because the cars were extensively lightened. Whenever it was first



Clockwise, from left: aircraft streamlining influenced W25's body design with faired-in suspension; magnificent straight-eight features glazed inlet manifold; bold rev counter; Caracciola leads Fagioli in the 1934 French GP before their disastrous retirements



applied, however, the nickname *Silberpfeile*, or Silver Arrow, stuck right through to the W154.

After the early dramas, the race was dominated by the W25s with Fagioli and von Brauchitsch leading Stuck's Auto Union. The Italian leader was instructed to allow von Brauchitsch through, which he reluctantly did, but at the next refuelling stop Fagioli made quite a scene, with heated gesticulation and shouting in front of the main grandstand. After another pitstop and continued protest, Fagioli eventually parked his W25 with a lap to go, claiming an engine misfire, letting Stuck through to take an unexpected second place.

The first full 310-mile Grand Prix came a month later on the Montlhéry long circuit, where the distinctive shriek of the W25's supercharger amazed spectators.

'Their streamlining, terrific exhaust noise, and astonishing acceleration was a complete surprise,' reported *The Motor*. 'The characteristic high supercharger whine was recognisable several kilometres away.'

To everyone's amazement, Louis Chiron's Alfa Romeo Tipo B rocketed away from the third row and took the lead from Caracciola (by then fully fit), Fagioli and Stuck. By the third lap, the Auto Union was in front but Chiron continued to stick with the leading group until the German challenge began to fade. By one-third distance, von Brauchitsch was out with supercharger problems, while Fagioli's race ended with brake failure. Mercedes' hopes were finally dashed when Caracciola stopped at Biscornes with a broken gearbox.

Just two weeks later, the German team sought revenge on home turf for the German Grand Prix, where even Chiron was invited to test a W25 during practice. The grid was allotted by ballot and, after 10 minutes, the huge crowd strained to see who would lead as the pack roared through at the end of the first lap. A huge cheer erupted when Stuck's Auto Union blasted past followed by Caracciola's screaming W25, which reporters described as 'the noisiest car on earth'.

After the first pitstops, Caracciola came out 8 secs behind Stuck but, following a succession of record-breaking laps, he performed the manoeuvre of the season by going around the outside of Stuck at Karussell. Sadly, his lead

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'IN 1935, THE FURTHER IMPROVED W25 WON FIVE OF THE SEVEN GRANDES ÉPREUVES'

lasted only until the next lap, when the engine cried enough. Stuck eventually won from Fagioli with mechanic Hans Geier – who deputised for an ill Henne – claiming fifth for Mercedes.

By the end of the season, the new order was established, with Mercedes and Auto Union sharing three victories apiece. Fagioli claimed the Coppa Acerbo at Pescara, the Italian Grand Prix at Monza – when he stepped-in mid-race for a suffering Caracciola – and the Spanish Grand Prix at San Sebastián.

The most dramatic W25 appeared in October when Mercedes attacked the Class C (3000-5000cc) world records on the Gyon road near Budapest. The closed-cockpit design featured a flip-up roof and a special body with no bonnet louvres and a much smaller radiator inlet. No front brakes were fitted. The idea was inspired by Henne, who had set motorcycle records for BMW. Two W25s were prepared with the latest 430bhp M25B engines. Henne found the coupé's aerodynamics so poor that it started to drift across the road at more than 300kph, and to make matters worse the canopy came loose.


To save face, Neubauer ordered that the canopy be removed and enlisted Caracciola. The car was transformed and Class C records were secured, including a staggering 197.23mph over the mile. Caracciola capped the first year with further records at Avus in December when – in an open-cockpit car with flared, screenless cowl and smaller air inlet – he set a new 5km flying-start benchmark at 193.9mph. The records were a fine tribute to design director Dr Hans Nibel, who suffered a fatal stroke on 25 November.

In 1935, the further-improved W25s took five of the seven Grandes Épreuves – as well as four lesser events. These included five one-two

results, plus a one-two-three at San Sebastián. Caracciola was on top form, and the national hero became European Champion.

Under the direction of Max Sailer, Mercedes' organisation was in a different league to rivals. Four cars were prepared while the team was out racing a matching set, the quartets alternating from race to race. The final W25s featured an improved chassis and ZF limited-slip differential, while power was raised to 402bhp at 5500rpm – plus, more importantly, 424lb ft of torque at 3000rpm – via longer blowers, a new crankshaft, and an increased stroke giving 4310cc.

With such domination, it's hard to understand how Mercedes got it so wrong for the '36 season. A revised, short-chassis W25 proved difficult to handle and suffered from engine problems. The team withdrew and restructured under the brilliant young engineer Rudolf Uhlenhaut. A talented test-driver, he personally sorted the W25 to the extent that Caracciola was able to lead its last race before Auto Union's invincible star Bernd Rosemeyer took control. Rear-axle failure eventually stopped Caracciola, which left Lang/Fagioli to claim the W25's final Grand Prix finish behind a trio of Zwickau's C-types.

More than 20 M25 engines were built, but the number of cars is unclear. Just two survive: one is on permanent display in the Mercedes-Benz Museum, while the other was rebuilt by Gert Straub and his team in the winter of 2008. After decades silent, that amazing supercharger shriek is again the talking point when this fabulous car makes a rare appearance. What a great era we've witnessed in terms of Silver Arrows preservation, restoration and recreation, but when you hear the W25 you know it's the real deal. I pinch myself every time I hear it run. 



From top: the W25's savage exhaust note echoes around the Stuttgart test track; a very happy Walsh after dream drive; pit crew and Alfred Neubauer cheer home the victorious Caracciola and von Brauchitsch at '35 French GP, which made up for the previous year's mishaps

A silver Mercedes-Benz W125 racing car is shown from a low-angle, rear-quarter perspective, driving on a dark asphalt track. The car is in motion, with a blurred background of a dense forest of tall trees. The track has yellow and white markings. A metal guardrail runs along the edge of the track. The overall scene conveys a sense of speed and power.

‘Even in top gear, the torrent of power is relentless as the exhaust ricochets off the trees’

Driving the fearsome Mercedes-Benz W125 is an honour, but to take it back to the fabled Nordschleife is the ultimate test. **Mick Walsh** lives his dream

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**



The guardian of the only working Mercedes-Benz W125 in the factory collection is chief mechanic Manfred Oechsle, a distinctive, mustachioed character who never seems to take off his Tyrolean hat. Few know more about the 1937 Silver Arrow because he's dedicated to its preservation and history. Amazingly, though, after years of fettling chassis 6, he has never driven the beast. That fact more than anything underlines the massive privilege of a chance drive in my all-time favourite racing car. Since childhood, I've fantasised about sitting where Richard Seaman commanded this muscular 580bhp single-seater. And nowhere could be more appropriate to try the W125 than the fabled Nordschleife – the challenging 12.9-mile circuit where it was originally tested, and where this sensational supercharged monster raced twice during its single competitive Grand Prix season in the final year of the epic 750kg formula.

Of the 11 W125s built, just five survive and, of the three owned by Mercedes, chassis 6 is the most original. Chassis 9 is a static exhibit in the Musée National de l'Automobile at Mulhouse, France, and chassis 2 belongs to Bernie Ecclestone but has never been seen working in public. "My dream is to restore the second W125 in the museum to running order," says Oechsle as he prepares and checks 'my' car for warming up. Just after dawn on a chilly, cloudy April morning, the W125 has been unloaded in a temporary paddock near Meuspath by the Nordschleife's

wooden spark-plug box that's shaped to fit neatly on the scuttle between the long, louvered bonnet and the 'screen. As well as holding the hard plugs that now replace the soft warming-up set, the box contains a few original pre-war items including a unique two-forked tool that releases the W125's clever flush panel-fasteners. Like every detail of this brutal beauty, the engineering and build quality are stunning.

As the last preparations are made for my run, I learn that rain is due and the north side of the circuit near Adenau could already be wet. Senior engineer Gert Straub looks apprehensive, but I assure him that I have no intention of making the headlines by crashing the prized machine. My refusal to wear a modern lid amuses the team, but I insist on a period cloth flying helmet, as worn by Mercedes aces Caracciola, Lang, von Brauchitsch, Seaman and Kautz at the W125's 'Ring debut for the Eifelrennen. But at Oechsle's insistence, I agree to fit earplugs. "It's important that you are smooth with the throttle, otherwise you'll oil the plugs," he advises. "Get into second before you really accelerate, but for the rest of the track you'll only need third and top. Double-declutch and don't drag the pedal. Don't pump the accelerator when you come back into the pits: just switch off immediately and let it coast."

Finally, I step over the low side and drop into the well-padded cloth seat. The sparse, spacious cabin suits my short 5ft 7in height, which contrasts with the lofty 6ft 3in Seaman who amazingly also felt comfortable here. As in other GP rivals, the broad, wood-rimmed, four-spoke

'IN THE COLD MORNING AIR, THE STRAIGHT-EIGHT WAKES WITH A DEAFENING ROAR'

long straight. The exotic cocktail of fuel is poured into the huge tank inside the W125's beautifully sculpted tail. It's not advisable to breathe in fumes from the mixture of 40% methyl alcohol, 32% benzol, 24% ethyl alcohol and 4% gasoline light. Just imagine the high-octane aroma that privateer Maserati entrant Laszio Hartmann must have inhaled while sitting at the back of the grid behind three rows of C-type Auto Unions and W125s at the Eifelrennen on 13 July 1937.

After the pre-start-up check, Oechsle climbs into the cockpit while his assistant aligns the external starter motor, which sits on a special platform box with a long shaft slotted through the hole in the grille to engage with the nose of the crankshaft. Oechsle gives the OK signal and the starter whirs away. Even in the cold morning air, the mighty straight-eight wakes instantly with a deafening roar that startles birdlife for miles around and alerts residents in the village of Nürburg. The W125's wild roar is mesmerising, and the devilish blast of massed 1937 titans thundering away from a Grand Prix start must have been incredible. When the oil is warm, Oechsle steps out and retrieves his specially made



Clockwise: W125 races up to Kesselchen; two-eared spinner; blown motor sucks mixture from its twin carbs; plate confirms type and engine number





Racing for the other side

British fans had little to celebrate in the pre-war GP years, but that all changed for the '37 season with the news that Sussex-born Richard Seaman had signed to drive for Mercedes. Better still, they'd also get a chance to see him race the awesome new W125 in the Donington GP. The season began with testing at Monza, but it seemed cursed after a succession of shunts including hitting a tree at Monza, a tussle with von Delius at the 'Ring and writing off another W125 at Pescara. His highest finish that year was second in the Vanderbilt Cup in America, but the biggest disappointment was being punted off by HP Müller's Auto Union on lap two at Donington. Seaman's last W125 drive was a demonstration at Crystal Palace on 9 October, filmed by the BBC.

"He tried to get to the top too quickly, and should have taken things a bit easier," reckoned Rudolf Uhlenhaut. "He always wanted to be as fast as Lang and Caracciola straight away. If you're always on the limit, you're going to have accidents." Seaman's loyal mechanic Giulio Ramponi said: "He should have had a season with a less-powerful car, such as the Ruesch Alfa 8C-35, before signing for Mercedes." To prepare for the W125s, Seaman fitted bald tyres to his Lincoln and drove around London on wet nights.



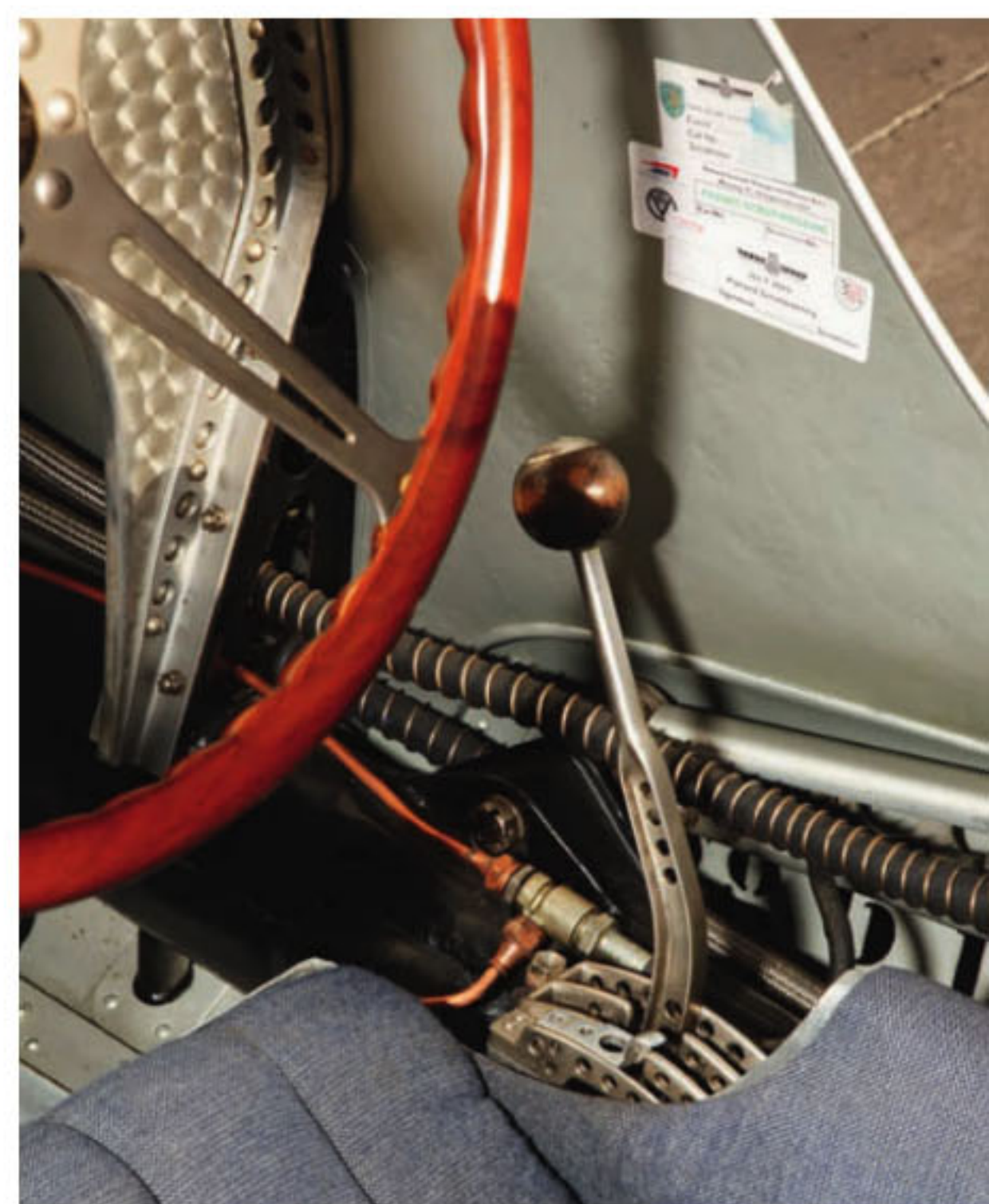
Seaman crashed at the 'Ring after tangling with von Delius





Lightweight Dural body.
Below right: bigger drums
than W25, twin leading
shoes at front and rear

Below: Caracciola en route
to victory in German GP;
slick four-speed gearbox
is largely redundant with
632lb ft peak torque
developed at just 3000rpm



steering wheel is alarmingly close to your chest, but more worryingly there's a mysterious open-ended tubular bar sprouting from the lower bulkhead that's aimed directly at your left shin.

The cockpit looks exposed but the round scuttle – topped with just an aeroscreen – effectively protects you from even high-speed draughts down the main straight. The flat, vertical, engine-turned dashboard has just three instruments: a large rev counter in the centre, flanked by smaller oil- and water-temperature dials. The lack of an oil-pressure gauge is surprising – Oechsle suggests it was to save weight, but I'm glad of one less distraction. There's also a small screw-in handle that feeds grease to the water pump. That would have been used on longer events such as the gruelling Grosser Preis von Deutschland, which ran to 22 laps of the 'Ring and 3 hrs 46 mins for winner Caracciola.

To the right of the seat is a beautifully made gearlever, with four ratios in a conventional H-gate. First is towards the driver and forward. The action is slick and easy, but the gears are almost redundant with so much torque – 632lb ft at 3000rpm. Following pre-war GP tradition, the throttle is in the centre – with brake to the

right – but there's little chance of getting them mixed up with such a responsive accelerator.

Briefing over, the starter is again plugged into the striking, streamlined nose and Oechsle gives the thumbs-up for me to push in and turn the ignition key for the magnetos. With covers over the front, the engine has retained some warmth during the plug change and it roars eagerly into life once more. The hairs on the back of my neck become charged as the strident 'eight' resonates through the 749kg racer. The mechanics quickly clear and I am finally waved onto the famous track. In first gear, the throttle response is fierce and, as instructed, I change swiftly up to second to ensure smoother control.

Clear of the pitlane, I push down deeper for the first time and the pick-up is staggering. With rear tyres spinning, we spear down the Tarmac. You'd need a '60s dragster or a Can-Am McLaren – both 30 years younger – to match this pre-war legend's surge. Traction from the de Dion rear end is surprisingly good, but the limitation is always the narrow crossplies fighting the monumental torque. Sitting near the back axle, you feel exactly what's happening. Jochen Mass, who drives the W125 more than most of the trusted



'READING THE CORNER AND FEEDING IN THE POWER SMOOTHLY PRODUCES A REWARDING DRIFT'



Walsh powers through Döttinger Höhe – radius rods control torque and brake reaction in de Dion rear set-up. Below: neat key to unlatch fasteners

driving team, says that you can spin the wheels at 120mph in top gear even in the dry. The prospect of the next 13 miles – and a wet track ahead – has my heart pounding faster. My right hand trembles as I slot through the gears. Power delivery is smooth and seamless from just 1500rpm to the instructed limit of 5000 – provided you can keep your foot from shaking. Quickly we arrive into the tight bypass link above the modern circuit and here, past the concrete pitwall, the harsh exhaust sounds furious as we accelerate towards the sharp left into Hatzenbach. This section is familiar from playing *Forza Motorsport* on my son's Xbox, but nothing prepares you for the physical thrill of following in the tracks of the Mercedes heroes. I was initially amazed by the lightness of the steering, but the action soon loads up as the pace quickens. Seaman and Caracciola never look particularly muscular in old photos, but their upper-body strength must have been immense to cope with three hours around the rolling, bumpy Nordschleife. Thankfully, the surface is smoother today.

Before unleashing the W125's fearsome power on the fast run to Flugplatz, I test the drum brakes hard into Hocheichen. Despite the

hefty push required on the far-right pedal (don't forget the centre throttle), their feel and stopping power are reassuring, particularly when matched to considerable engine braking as you lift off. After three kilometres of this awesome circuit, I start to feel more relaxed about this daunting machine. The key is definitely braking early because overconfident entry forces the nose to drift out – a nerve-racking development on such a narrow track, with so little run-off area.

Mass has told me that there's nothing nasty about the handling and that it's never caught him out – even in the wet. Reading the corner and feeding in the power smoothly from the apex produces a rewarding drift in the faster open bends such as Aremberg, where I know it's straight beyond, but it feels a handful through the twisty right-left-right. Every time I accelerate out of a clear bend, the ferocious mid-range punch has me shouting expletives in the cockpit. No pre-war car has ever had this effect. Historic racer Colin Crabbe – who won two VSCC Richard Seaman Trophy events in a W125 at Oulton – said that it felt as balanced as his old Maserati 250F but with twice the power. Little wonder he trounced the quickest ERAs first time out.



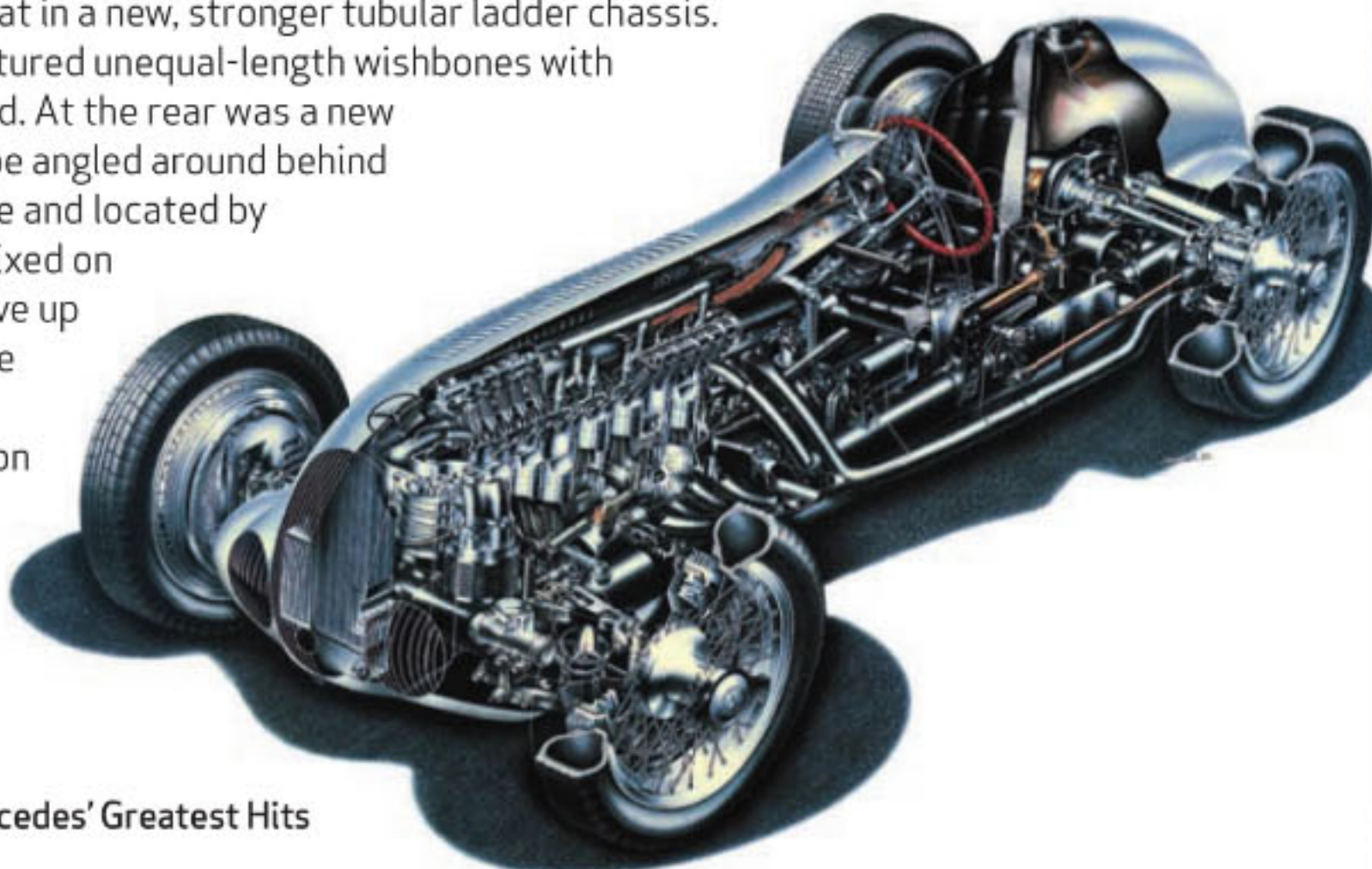


'THE W125 IS CLOSE TO 140MPH AT 4000RPM, BUT FEELS STABLE AND TRACKS SUPERBLY. NEVER HAS A CAR EXHILARATED ME SO MUCH'

Anatomy of a technical masterclass

Hidden under the W125's magnificent Dural bodywork, the engineering is a work of art. At its heart is the legendary roller-bearing F-motor, bored out to 94mm from the E-motor's 86mm to give 5660cc. The dry-sump straight-eight features twin overhead camshafts driven by a rear geartrain with four valves per cylinder. The fabulous one-piece Hirth crankshaft has nine main bearings instead of the W25's seven. The two-bladed Roots-type blower is mounted vertically at the front of the engine and driven by bevel gears from the crank. Maximum engine speed was still limited to 5800rpm, but output was transformed to 580 or 600bhp on the exotic WW brew. With 27 fewer horses but weighing 250kg less, the W125's power-to-weight ratio shames even a McLaren F1!

The monster engine sat in a new, stronger tubular ladder chassis. Its front suspension featured unequal-length wishbones with a coil spring interspersed. At the rear was a new de Dion axle with the tube angled around behind the magnesium transaxle and located by a vertical ball that was fixed on the tube, but able to move up and down in a track in the back of the axle casing. Torque and brake reaction on the rear set-up were controlled by radius rods. As revolutionary as the suspension were the hydraulic dampers.

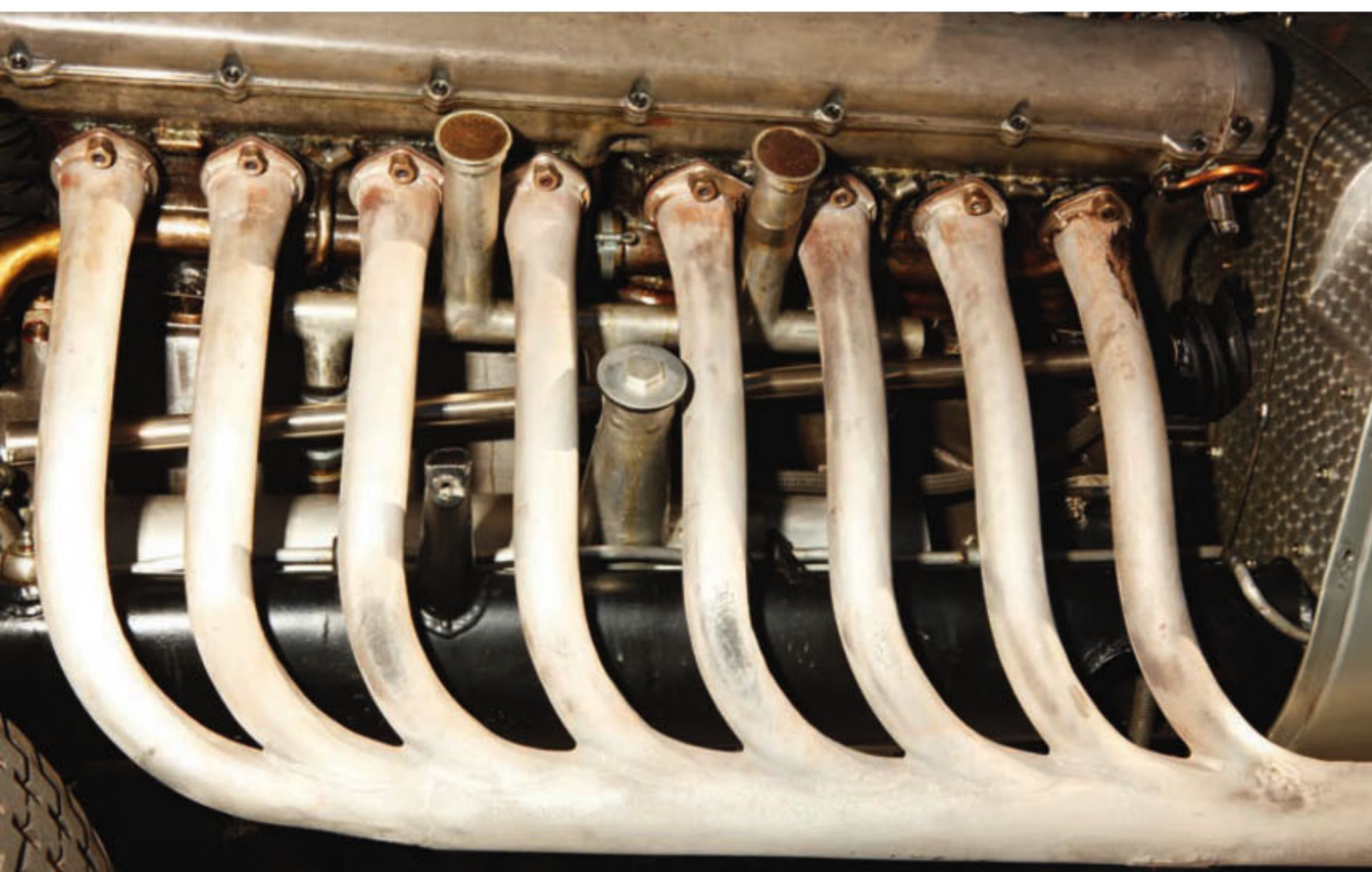




Clockwise: magnificent side profile of last 750kg titan; Oechsle's bespoke plug box holds warm-up and race sets; straight-eight weighs 250kg, a third of car's total; oil- and water-temperature gauges either side of rev counter

After the tricky-handling W25, the stiffened chassis and more compliant independent suspension of the W125 must have been a revelation. No doubt the brilliant direction of Rudolf Uhlenhaut, a gifted young engineer who joined in late '36, was the key to the team's turnaround. The new recruit could really drive, too. Frustrated by the limited technical knowledge and poor feedback from the racers, Uhlenhaut began to evaluate the cars himself. Around the 'Ring – he'd spent years here pushing production cars to the limit – Uhlenhaut discovered that he was almost as quick as the aces, which earned him huge respect. Early testing revealed that the '36 car suffered from a weak chassis and stiff damping, causing it to jump all over the place. "On one occasion, I lost a rear wheel at top speed on the straight," Uhlenhaut recalled to Silver Arrows historian Chris Nixon, "and the chassis was so stiff that nothing happened. It was just like driving a motorcycle combination."

Uhlenhaut's revisions, with softer, longer-travel front suspension, a new de Dion rear set-up and an improved gearbox, were the critical developments that made the W125 much less challenging. Hermann Lang's early success at Tripoli must have shaken up rival Auto Union. When the W125s arrived at the 'Ring for the first of two major events in '37, they'd also beaten the rear-engined C-types at the Avusrennen. With Uhlenhaut's vast testing experience at the venue, it would have been fascinating to have seen him race, but his talents were far more valuable in the design department to risk him in action.




As I blast along the fast run to Kallenhard – and the midway drop to the Adenau bridge – I try to picture two Silver Arrows chasing through this difficult section. A nip-and-tuck battle played out between Caracciola in the new W125 and Auto Union star Rosemeyer in a C-type in the early stages of the Eifelrennen. The two masters chased clear of the rest – and swapped the lead several times each lap – but Caracciola tried too hard and his rear tyres were down to the canvas by lap five. He just managed to limp to the pits, leaving Rosemeyer to a clear win – much to the frustration of the Mercedes-Benz directors and friends in specially booked seats. Rosemeyer was to prove the only challenge to Mercedes-Benz during the '37 season.

The Eifelrennen was the debut race for the *Saugvergasermotor*, which sucked mixture from the carburetors rather than blowing pure air into them (*Druckvergasermotor*). The new engine was fitted only to the W125 of fresh Swiss recruit Christian Kautz, while the others used the older engine for the last time. Never again would the signature banshee wail of the supercharger exhausting through the flap-valve into the atmosphere be heard in action.

With miles of the Nordschleife Tarmac now spattered with unsightly graffiti – and lined with Armco in place of the original dense thicket – it's hard to connect with moody images of the '37 races. But as the course rapidly climbs from the double apex at Bergwerk through the sinister woods and morning mist to the Karussell, the track at last looks more authentic. Here, on the straighter stretches, it's safe to unleash more grunt, and the torrent of power is relentless even in top gear – particularly when enhanced by the furious exhaust ricocheting through the dense woodland. It's close to 140mph at 4000rpm, but the chassis feels stable and tracks superbly. Thankfully, rain hasn't reached the circuit as we spear into the bumpy dip of the unmistakable banked hairpin. From here my focus is a smooth line through such legendary turns as the blind right Wippermann, and the fearsome descent of Brunnchen. I savour that glorious surge of power for the final corners. Too quickly the main straight appears and, as I blat into the last mile, I start thinking about Seaman's tragic battle with Auto Union rival Ernst von Delius.

Seaman made a poor start, but by the seventh lap he had caught and passed von Delius for fifth yet couldn't shake him off. As they slipstreamed at about 170mph, approaching the Antonius Buche bridge, von Delius pulled out to pass. The airstream deflected the German, who brushed the hedge and, after over-correcting, shot clean across Seaman's bow. The C-type went through a field and ended up on the road outside the track, while Seaman looked to have sorted the situation before the W125's nose struck a hidden post. The resulting spin hurled Seaman out on to the track. At the point where I end my lap to coast in, their dramatic crash unfolded. Von Delius died that night in hospital, but Seaman was lucky to escape with a badly scarred face, heavy bruising and a broken thumb. His Mercedes was wrecked.

As the magnificent W125 cools beside the transporter, I sit quivering in the cockpit. Never has a car exhilarated me so much, and to drive it around the Nordschleife is as good as it gets. One lap here was overwhelming, but I couldn't imagine how Caracciola felt after averaging 82mph for 22 laps to win the German GP. 

MID-ENGINE MAVERICK

After 60 years sitting silent in the Mercedes museum, the radical Type 150H is back on the road. **Mick Walsh** drives a forgotten star

PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES MANN





Name the first production mid-engined sports car. It's a tricky automotive quiz question that probably has the 1960 Bonnet Djet as the listed answer. Porsche anoraks will claim that the 550 Spyder predates it, but few recall that Daimler-Benz developed the idea 75 years ago for a 1500cc roadster.

For most, the pre-war image of the German giant is *grosser* state saloons, glamorous super-charged roadsters and exotic Grand Prix racers, but the Stuttgart manufacturer was just as serious about its bread-and-butter ranges, which included the advanced Type 130H (*Heck*) launched in 1933. 'Heck' stood for rear, because the 1308cc 'four' was mounted behind the rear axle. This two-door four-seater was being built six months before Ferdinand Porsche signed a contract with Hitler to develop the Volkswagen, which didn't enter production until 1940. The handling was tricky, with its rear swing-axle and pendulum engine position, but the car bristled with innovation. More than 4000 were built during those tough economic times and, to promote the lower-range models, in November 1933 chief engineer Max Wagner proposed the idea of a mid-engined sports GT to compete in the 2000km durch Deutschland trial.

Unlike the Type 130, the new streamlined W30/Type 150 two-seater followed the layout of the advanced 1923 Benz Rennwagen Heckmotor, better known as the Tropfen-Wagen (teardrop-car), with engine and gearbox turned through 180° and mounted ahead of the back axle. Ex-Mercedes man Porsche was developing a similar layout for his Auto Union P-wagen GP car in his Stuttgart-based Konstruktion Büro.

The body for the T150 'Sportlimousine' was built in the custom division of the Sindelfingen works. The design looked very Beetle-esque, with large twin scoops on the roof to draw cool air into the engine, while restricted rearward vision was improved by a central roof depression with a specially sited mirror. Unlike the production L-head 'four', the new sports model featured a neat single-overhead-cam 1498cc engine that produced 55bhp at 4500rpm with a single Solex 30 carburettor. Above the transaxle sat a huge double-core radiator, through which air was forced by a big squirrel-cage blower that directed air to the carbs, too. The engine was also used in several front-engined Type 150 cross-country trials cars during the 1930s.

Management was concerned that the 500-vehicle homologation requirement for the event would be a struggle to meet, but the use of many T130 production parts made the figure realistic. The tubular backbone chassis with Y-shaped rear to carry the motor followed the ideas of Hans Ledwinka at Tatra, and featured twin transverse leaf springs at the front and coil-sprung swing-axes at the back. Six Type 150 coupés were ready for the 2000km trial from 21-27 June, the route encircling Germany from the start/finish at Baden-Baden. Two cars were forced to retire, but the surviving four all took gold medals, including 25-year-old race mechanic Hermann Lang in his first competitive car event.

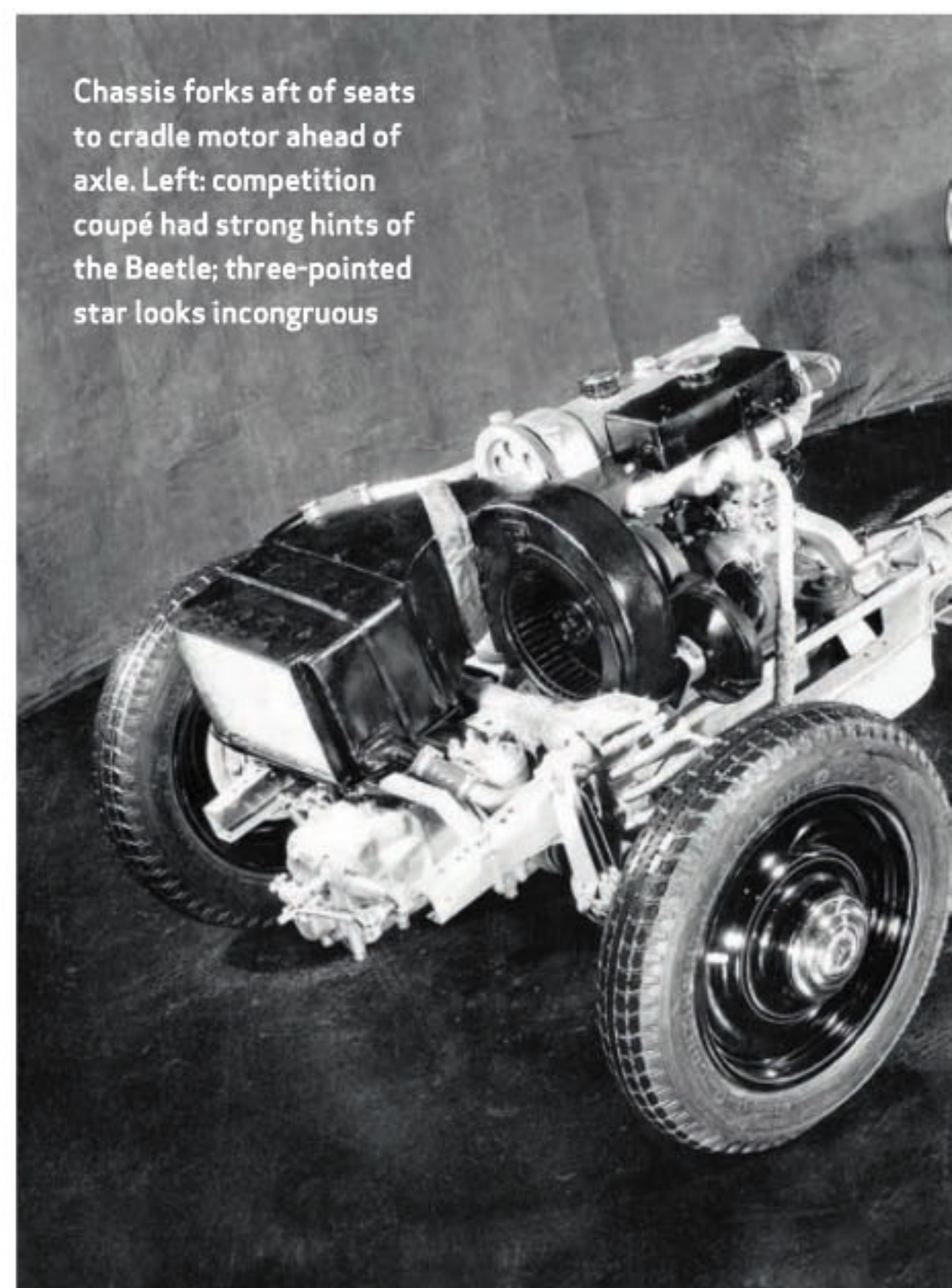
The Type 150 coupé also impressed in the 1934 Liège-Rome-Liège Rally when Hans-Joachim Bernet set the pace, leading the event at Pisa. The Berlin-born driver finished penalty-free and took the award for the highest-placed

closed car on the rally. It's believed that just 25 Type 150s were built, but sadly none of these innovative competition coupés survive.

After the firm's success in the 2000km trial, Daimler-Benz director Wilhelm Kissel insisted that it was "absolutely essential to produce a streamlined sports car" and in November 1934 the board agreed that two T150 roadsters would be built for the Berlin show. Again the design was produced in-house, but the mid-engined roadster dramatically contrasted with the rather functional coupé. To increase luggage space, spare wheels were mounted on either side just behind the cockpit, while the mid-mounted layout was accentuated by a long, pointed, boat-like tail with illuminated numberplates fitted flush with the body. The cab-forward nose, with no radiator shroud, looked like no other Mercedes and featured triple headlights including a 'Cyclops' central lamp. A speedboat-style split windscreen and cutaway doors emphasised the sporty character of this bold new model.

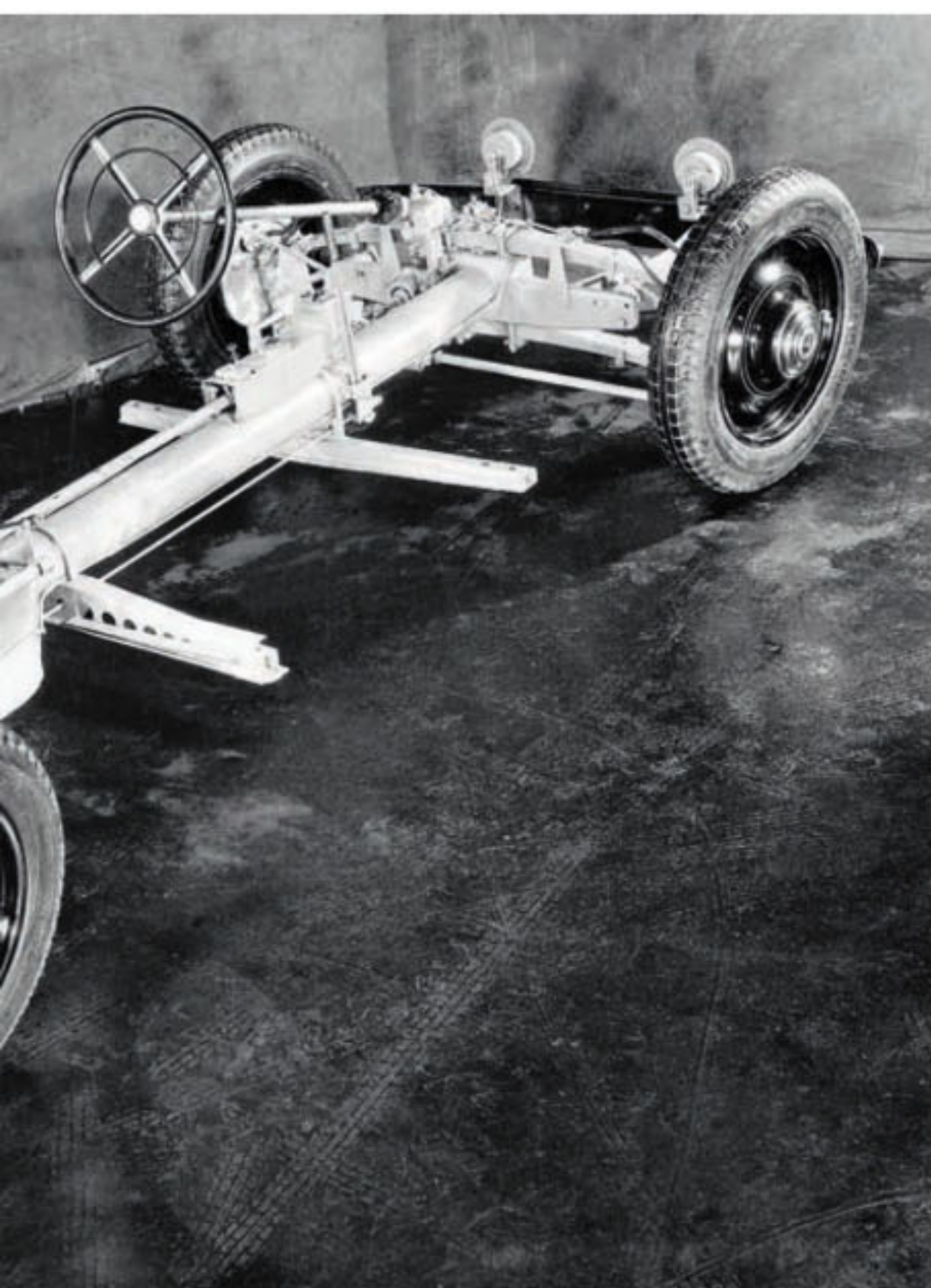
Two cars were completed for Berlin, one for display and the other for journalists to test. How many were built remains a mystery. Factory figures suggest 20, but Sindelfingen records state five – one in '34 and four in '35 – and order books report only two sales. Of these, just one survives. It was found in the early '50s and, thanks to the intervention of DMG (Daimler Motoren Gesellschaft) board member Jakob Werlin, this rarity was saved for the factory collection. Some believe it to be a rebodied 2000km team car.

Right: broad, close, four-spoke wheel makes it tricky to get your legs into the footwell. Below: artwork for stillborn brochure gave Type 150 a sleeker look



Chassis forks aft of seats to cradle motor ahead of axle. Left: competition coupé had strong hints of the Beetle; three-pointed star looks incongruous





If the Type 150 looks unusual today, imagine its impact in Berlin. Some reports suggest that the first roadster was painted yellow, others light blue, but whatever the colour the snub-nosed drop-top was too radical to tempt buyers – particularly when matched against glamorous front-engined sports models. Even today the slug-like form provokes surprising reactions, with photographer Mann saying it reminded him of the Messerschmitts in the movie *Brazil*. Mercedes certainly planned production, because it made a stylish brochure with artwork of a red roadster that, thanks to artistic licence, was more rakish with a lower body, sleek 'screen and wire wheels with whitewall tyres. The model's biggest problem, however, was association with the mass-produced Type 130 and 170H.

After the T150 had spent many years as a static display, the idea to rebuild it came about by accident when historian Karl Ludvigsen asked to visit the museum to research the engine. "There were no drawings available and I was fascinated to see how the overhead-cam layout was driven," says Ludvigsen. "The T150 was not part of the permanent display in the new museum, so it was wheeled into the workshop and we took the valve cover off. There was nothing exotic, just a neat helical drive, but it looked in good shape so the exciting idea to get it running was proposed."

With the Classic department focused on restoring the W25 racer, the Type 150 was sent to its California facility in readiness for the design's 75th anniversary. The timing was tight, but manager Michael Kunz and specialist Nate Lander relished the project. "It was a thrill to be trusted with this unique car and we were sad when refitting the body that so few had seen the stripped car, but the pressure was on to meet the deadline," says Lander. "The main chassis tube has extruded ends, with front and rear riveted together. The loom runs down the centre, which was a challenge because we had no diagram. The engine still has original pistons and bearings, but the long gear linkages were tricky to set up. Thankfully the wood frame was in good shape, so the body went back on with little work."

No matter how long you've studied the Type 150's profile, it's still an odd feeling as you unlatch the rear-hinged door and climb aboard. Never has that illustrious three-pointed star been so close to the driver. As with the BMW 328, you feel part of the car rather than sitting on it. Even without side deflectors, the 'screen offers good protection and it's a snug, comfortable cockpit. The comprehensive spread of instruments includes a large 140kph speedometer and a 5000rpm rev counter, flanked by gloveboxes at the dash ends. The gearbox gate is clearly



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'IT'S AN ODD FEELING AS YOU CLIMB ABOARD: NEVER HAS THE THREE-POINTED STAR BEEN SO CLOSE TO THE DRIVER'



Unique roadster was found in the '50s, showing 44,500km; long tail due to the mid-mounted 'four'



Steeply raked 'screen offers good protection; Type 150 with T130H and T170H siblings outside California Classic Center

defined, with the lever close to your right knee.


Like the Type 130, the roadster has a four-speed gearbox. First is on a dogleg, with second and third in the same plane, but fourth is a clutchless change not unlike a pre-selector and takes practice to perfect. First move the gearstick directly to the right from third, then forward, before briefly lifting off to select the ratio. For the downchange, again the lever is moved back and sideways before you feather the throttle to engage the lower gear. As with the Type 130, the idea was to save the clutch and provide a swifter change for overtaking on the new *autobahns*. The action is stiff, possibly down to linkage alignment, but the hardest discipline is to stop yourself pressing the clutch for the top changes.

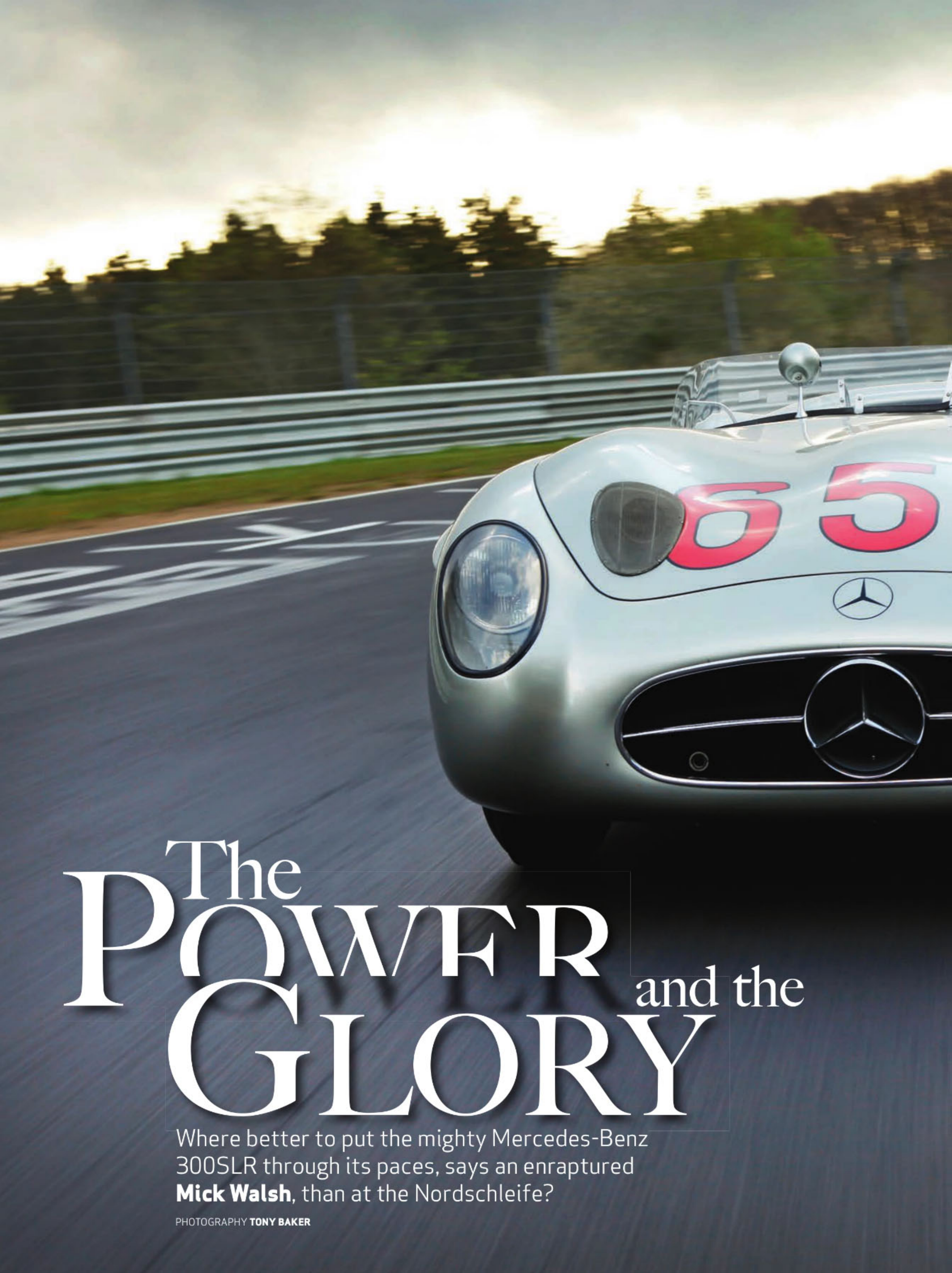
The steering is a disappointment after the light, direct action of the Type 130 and 170. For some reason, engineers switched from rack and pinion to recirculating ball for the T150, but it feels lifeless and surprisingly heavy considering the weight bias over the back end.

The engine, too, despite its extra horsepower, isn't as willing as the smaller cars and struggles up steeper sections of Lawrence Canyon Road. The throttle's short travel demands slick footwork to avoid abrupt acceleration, but the clutch action is smooth and light. The strangest sensations are the hot air that blows through the rear

vents on to your back, and the effect of wind rush drowning out the engine's thrum at speed.

Pushing the T150 harder through the bends along a twisty route at the base of the Santa Ana mountains, there's little roll and the roadholding feels sure-footed compared to contemporary sports cars. There's a bias towards understeer, but in faster, open bends the car feels impressively neutral with no hint of oversteer, although if you backed off abruptly the rear might start to take control. Combine the light, sharp steering and more responsive motor of the T130 with the mid-engined layout and precise gearbox of the T150 and you'd create something really special.

You have to applaud Mercedes' engineers and management for taking such a bold direction, but ultimately the Type 150H just didn't fit the company image. The short nose and back-to-front styling made it look a misfit, but was copied by some influential specials. Ferdinand Porsche continued to pursue mid-engined designs, including the stillborn Cisitalia Type 370 coupé, but it was another 30 years before the layout was properly developed for high-performance road cars. Little wonder Daimler-Benz marked the 75th anniversary of this non-conformist sports car, but just imagine what could have happened if it had developed the car further as a Le Mans streamliner with a detuned GP motor. 



The POWER and the GLORY

Where better to put the mighty Mercedes-Benz 300SLR through its paces, says an enraptured **Mick Walsh**, than at the Nordschleife?

PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER



Fifty-eight years on, it's remarkable the effect that the magnificent Mercedes-Benz 300SLR still has on the locals. On a chilly, overcast morning at the Nürburgring, there's a hushed reverence as the ultimate 1950s sports-racer drops down on the lift from its secure hold in the back of a huge Mercedes transporter, in total contrast to the exposed supertruck that once carried it here. Back in May 1955, thousands turned out to see the victorious Mille Miglia team run in the non-championship ADAC Eifelrennen and cheer the 25-year-old English ace Stirling Moss as he took on 'El Maestro' Juan Manuel Fangio, the veteran almost twice the age of his gifted young teammate. In a perfect world, the German equipe would have preferred a national to be leading the victory parade, but Hans Herrmann was still recovering from his Monaco smash, so matching the wise old Fangio with the

eager British sensation was the publicist's dream pairing in the exotic silver prototypes.

Even now, Daimler-Benz is selective about outings for these magnificent spaceframed wonders, thus ensuring maximum effect with enthusiasts. All conversation stops as the curvaceous rarity rolls out into the open paddock. It's not beautiful in the sleek, lean mould of a Jaguar D-type or a Maserati 300S, but it has a dominant, majestic presence with its gaping grille, straight flanks and signature wheelarch eyebrows.

Racing cars in the '50s had distinctive nationalistic styles that went beyond team colours, and the 300SLR's neat, purposeful design contrasted with its Italian and British rivals. The stunning profile is deftly enhanced by instantly recognisable details such as the stubby twin exhausts that exit right through air vents just short of the cockpit, the long flip-up headrest and the offset air-intake bulge for the plenum chamber. The flowing form, with horizontal chrome arrows

over its side vents, cleverly evoked the 300SL production models, but under its super-light magnesium-alloy skin, the SLR's running gear was state-of-the-art Formula One engineering evolved from the W196. Like many of the greatest sports-racers – namely Alfa Romeo 8C, Bugatti Type 55 and Talbot-Lago – the 300SLR was basically a two-seater Grand Prix car.

The powerplant closely followed the W196's straight-eight desmodromic unit, although the two blocks of four cylinders were cast in silumin instead of fabricated in steel. The square, 2979cc engine – 78x78mm bore and stroke – was canted over in the chassis and featured essential sports-car additions such as a generator and a starter. With Bosch injection, its power output varied according to fuel and anticipated event demands, but it's good for up to 302bhp at 7500rpm on pump petrol, rising to 340bhp on alcohol brews. Every aspect – from its massive inboard drum brakes to the W196 transmission with ZF 'box in

'THE SLR'S STUNNING PROFILE IS DEFTLY ENHANCED BY SIGNATURE DETAILS'





Clockwise: SLR blasts up the ultra-fast Kesselchen, where Fangio would have been flat-out; precise selector for ZF five-speed; huge intake for plenum; high fairing is clear in the dramatic profile



unit with the final drive – combined to make up the ultimate specification. The 300SLR could have been ready in 1954 after early testing at Monza proved that it was three seconds faster than the single-seater, but the management and team leader Alfred Neubauer considered it better to focus on the return to Grand Prix competition.

The confidence of the team was confirmed by its chosen debut event, the Mille Miglia, though Mercedes was even more in the spotlight with its position as the only non-Italian marque to have won the fabled enduro. Moss, aided by his fearless bearded navigator Denis Jenkinson, aka 'Jenks', won in heroic style at a pace never to be beaten. Three weeks later a large crowd turned out to see the SLRs in action in the Eifelrennen. Fangio had more experience than Moss at the 'Ring and, in his Mille Miglia car (chassis 3), he took pole at just over 10 mins, which was 6 secs quicker than Moss in the prototype (W196S-1).

Pub-quiz facts about the SLR

1 For the Targa Florio – the last race of the '55 season – the vast Mercedes pit team used radio control with a link to the mountains so that timekeepers could keep track of the three 300SLRs. Jenks reported that Moss loved the free team orders of the sports-car events, because Fangio always had priority in the GPs. The team arrived in Palermo with eight racers, 10 private cars, eight lorries and 45 mechanics.

2 The first 300SLR Coupé was originally built to compete in the Carrera PanAmericana road race for Moss and Jenks, but the Mexican epic was cancelled in '55 after the Le Mans disaster. "We had hoped to repeat our Mille Miglia performance," said a disappointed Jenkinson.

3 During the '55 Mille Miglia, Moss was given a rev limit of 7400rpm, which equated to 170mph, but Neubauer said he could go over that figure downhill. Jenks reported that Moss exceeded 8000rpm in the lower gears in the heat of the moment, but that the engine was running as sweetly at the finish as it was at the start.

4 The 300SLR was thoroughly tested three months before the Mille Miglia. As well as practising at Hockenheim, the cars were taken out on the *autobahn* for high-speed running.

5 Mercedes had problems finding a suitable oil for the roller bearings until Castrol offered samples of its R lubricant, which proved perfect. Imagine the aroma through the Tuscan hills!

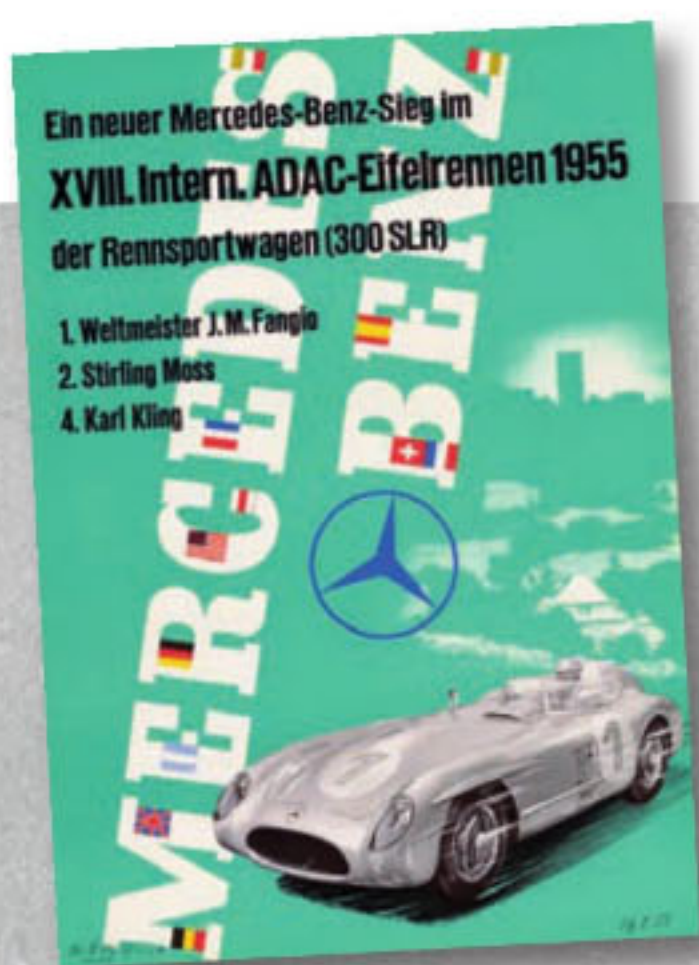
6 Although not permitted to compete, designer Rudolf Uhlenhaut regularly tested the racers. At Monza after the '54 Italian GP, the English-educated engineer lapped in 2 mins 3 secs in the prototype 300SLR, while his best in the streamlined 2½-litre W196 GP single-seater was only 3 secs slower.

7 Fangio was scheduled to take his old Alfa Romeo mechanic Giulio Sala with him on the Mille Miglia, but the passenger caused uncomfortable buffeting at speed around the full-width 'screen, which gave the Argentinian neck pains so he opted for the single-seater configuration. A disappointed Sala had to ask for his old job back at Alfa.

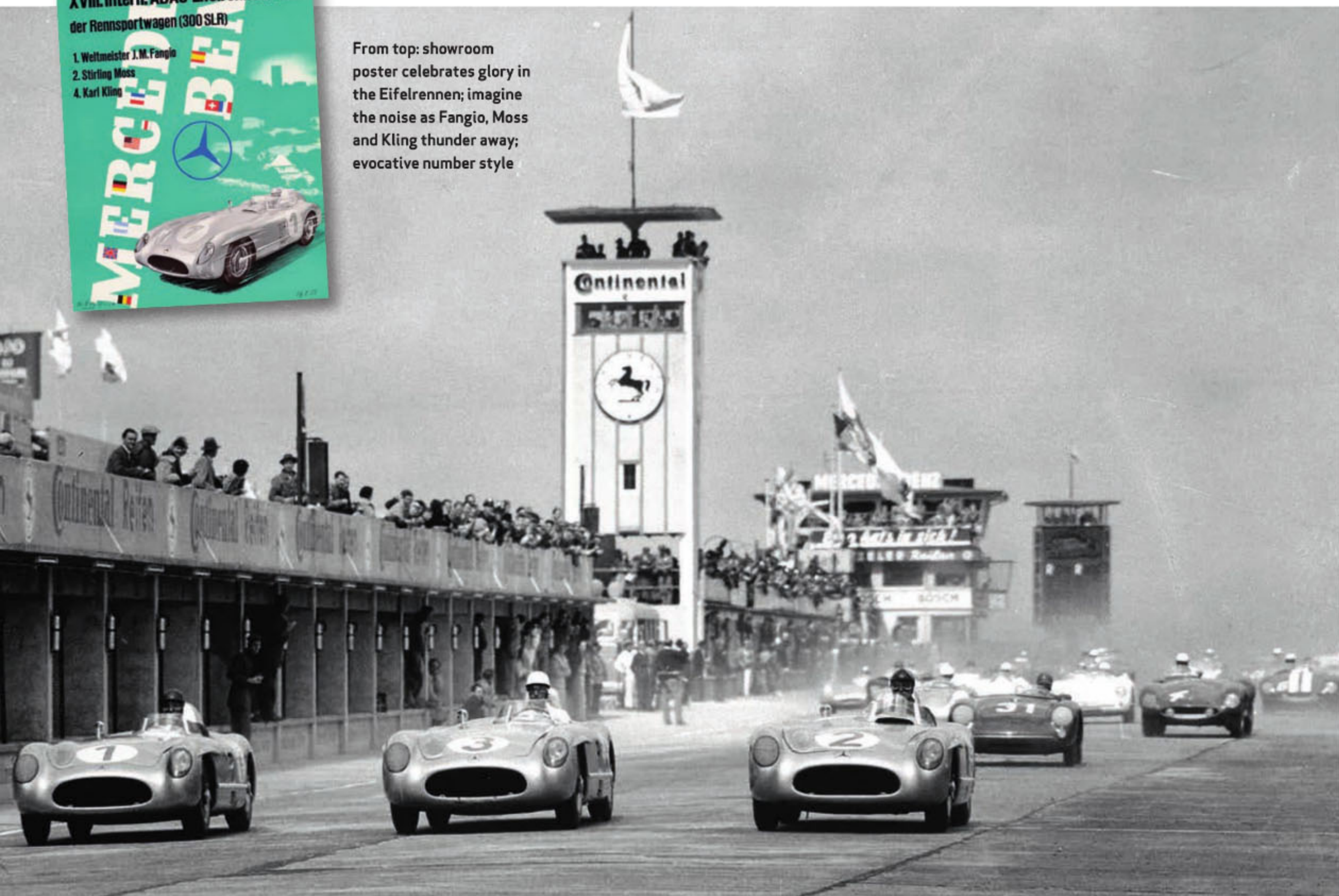
8 The original prototype SLR featured a curved 'swan's neck' ram pipe with a smooth bonnet, but for the '55 season straight ram pipes required a substantial bulge and a mesh-screened inlet.

9 Fuel-tank sizes varied, but a vast 77-gallon reserve was fitted for the Mille Miglia. Moss averaged around 8mpg for the Italian event. The best fuel that the 300SLR ran on was the Ternaire blend used at Le Mans, which included 75% petrol with 10% methanol and 10% benzol.

10 The Jaguar D-type's top speed on the Mulsanne during the tragic 1955 Le Mans was 185mph, while the 300SLR peaked at 179mph.



From top: showroom poster celebrates glory in the Eifelrennen; imagine the noise as Fangio, Moss and Kling thunder away; evocative number style



Karl Kling was 18.2 secs further back, hounded by a gaggle of Ferrari Monzas and struggling Ecurie Ecosse D-types. Under threatening skies, the silver train dominated the 10-lap race as Moss began to gain confidence around the Nord-schleife by setting a new lap record at 83.53mph (10 mins 10.8 secs) to take the lead from Fangio. The Argentinian reclaimed first place on the final tour – maybe to team orders – and led his colleague across the line by just a 10th of a second. German fans would never again see the SLRs run in anger on home soil, although Moss became a megastar at the Nürburgring with triple wins in Aston Martins and a Maserati.

The awesome noise of the three SLRs leading the pack on the opening lap back in '55 – sounding like a fighter-plane attack – must have been heard long before the cars came into sight, but just one starting up for our test is exciting enough. The harsh roar from the twin side pipes no doubt rings out right across to Quiddelbach, attracting more enthralled bystanders. With the bonnet raised during the warming up, the loud shriek has a backing score from its exotic heart of roller bearings, gear trains and desmodromic valvegear, all building to a Wagnerian chorus.

The door hinges up vertically over the wide sill, and the only way to get aboard is to step on to the tartan seat and slide your legs into the strange footwell layout. The wide, offset transmission splays your legs, with your left foot working the hefty clutch and right to the other side for the closely positioned throttle and brake. Unlike in the W196, the accelerator is on the



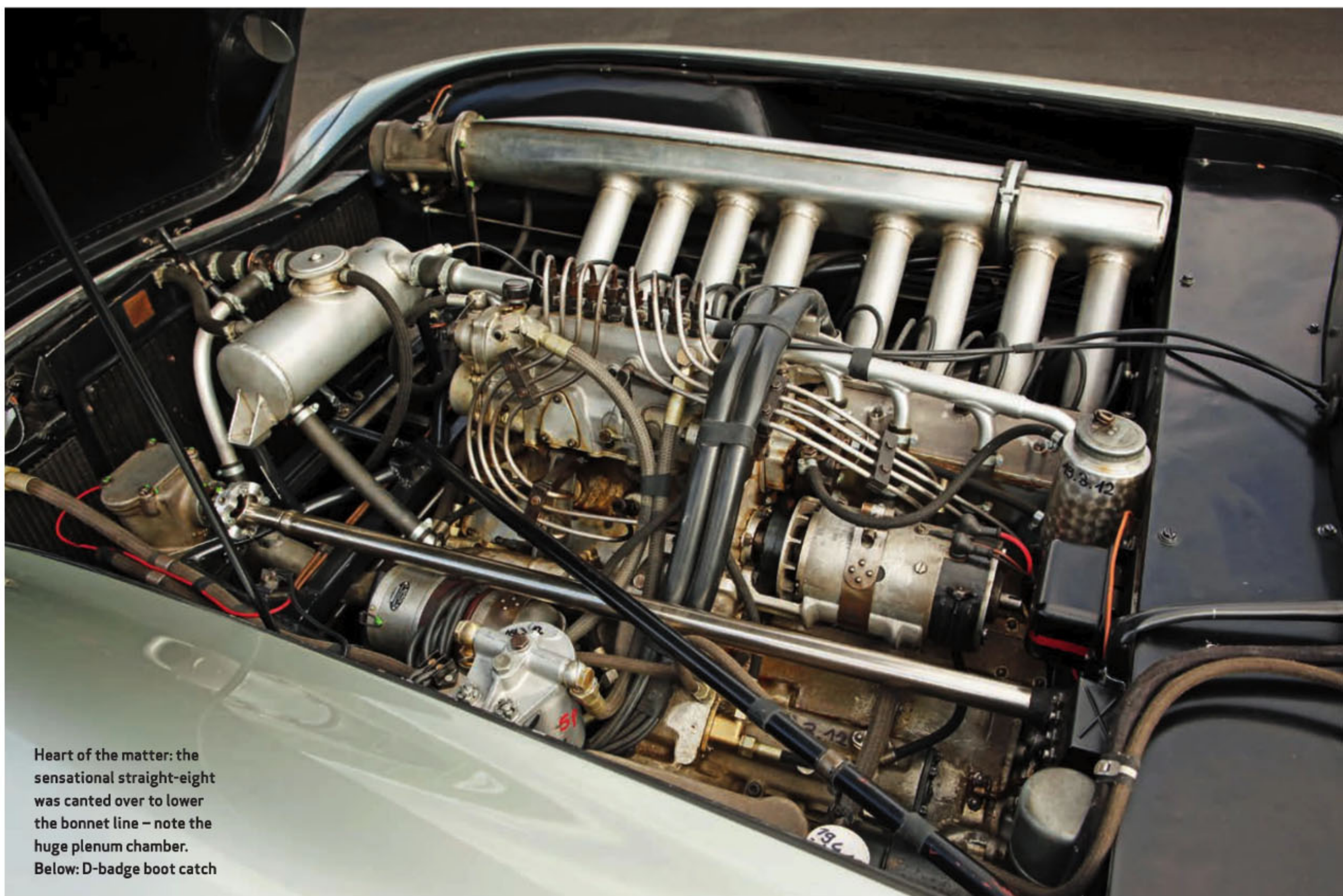
far right, much to Moss' relief because he was never comfortable with it in the centre. Left-hand drive seems strange for a '50s sports-racer and the position – once the elegant four-spoke detachable wheel is locked into place – is very upright, with a long stretch to the wooden rim. Typical of the well-thought-out cockpit, the seat, with its back close to the rear axle, offers great leg support and your upper body is well braced by the high sill. There's even a flask holder.

Compared to a rival D-type, 300S or DB3S, the Mercedes feels big from the driver's seat –

a sensation underlined by the view down the expansive bonnet, with the wing peaks making it difficult to judge the extremities. Its instruments are basic, with central rev counter marked to 11,000rpm flanked by smaller gauges for oil pressure and water temperature. There are short rows of switches under the binnacle, including lamps, fuel pump and choke, while two red warning lights signal low oil and indicators. And, as if the SLR with its raucous exhaust bark needs one, there's a horn button in the middle of the broad wheel. Straddling the offset driveline must have been familiar to Moss and Fangio after a season with the W196, but it's weird for me and leaves little room for a passenger. Jenks, with his box-roller notes, must have been shoehorned in.

It's cold today, so it takes a while for the engine to raise the oil-temperature gauge, but it's switched off while I clamber in. Starting any great machine gives you such a buzz, so I'm nervously jubilant about firing it up again. You push the key to activate the pumps and turn for the magneto, then it's time to thumb the starter. Even after listening to the warm-up, the dramatic rousing of the SLR still produces major elation. Tease the throttle and the response is fabulously progressive, the exhaust snarl blasting out far over to the right sill.

The six-slot gear gate, with slender steel lever, takes some acclimatistion with its right-hand change. The back-to-front pattern – with dogleg first inside and forward – feels awkward, yet it doesn't take long to master the shift thanks to the strong spring bias for second and third. To select



Heart of the matter: the sensational straight-eight was canted over to lower the bonnet line – note the huge plenum chamber. Below: D-badge boot catch

first you have to press a button in the centre of the alloy knob, and I'm warned that it's easy to slot it into fifth rather than third when down-changing. Despite the long, deliberate throw, the action is light and slick, yet the heavy clutch takes the most concentration to avoid slipping when moving off. Torque peaks at 5620rpm, so the response isn't as instant as a D-type or a 300S, but let the revs stretch beyond 4000rpm and the performance really starts to punch.

If you were to race one today, the developed engines and suspension of its more numerous rivals would have the edge – so perhaps it's best that the SLR's revered standing is protected, with only headline-grabbing demonstrations. Weighing less than 2000lb, it feels quicker than the figures clocked by journalist Gordon Wilkins in the 300SLR Coupé – 0-60mph in 6.8 secs and 0-100mph in 13.6 secs – but the open version is lighter and swifter. The power is turbine smooth, with the unburstable character that you'd expect from this Teutonic masterpiece, and it certainly sounds quick with that outrageous roar.

Having done about 20 laps of the Nordschleife (plus endless sessions on a PlayStation), I am now respectfully familiar with this intimidating challenge, which gives me enough confidence to start stretching the precious 300SLR. Its seemingly viceless character – even with swing-axes at the back (fortunately the low-pivot type) – helps to wipe away those initial nerves. The handling feels remarkably forgiving, with a touch of understeer into tighter corners that's easily neutralised when accelerating out



thanks to the impressive traction and linear delivery. You never see past heroes in lurid drifts in period photos of the Mercedes, which rewards with measured, line-perfect control. Its steering, too, is marvellous, and even feels light at low speeds. The faster you go, the more that direct and precise action communicates with you.

If you combine that relentless performance and responsive character with a reasonable ride, then Moss and Jenks' spectacular thrash from Brescia to Rome and back in 10 hrs 7 mins 48 secs becomes all the more comprehensible. Even

over the Nordschleife's worst bumps, the relatively compliant torsion-bar springing and telescopic dampers protect the driver. You feel every pulverising concrete rib at the Karussell and the back end skips about through the roughest bends, but, like the finest endurance racers such as a GT40, the tough SLR always feels on your side. My limit is 6000rpm, which still gives around 130mph in top on the straights, and the 2km run back to the start gives a safe opportunity to push this priceless machine. The driver is well cosseted by the thick aeroscreen at high speeds, and the Benz feels superbly planted with no hint of nose lift. Although the 300SLR appears to be the fastest car from the '55 season going by the outright results, it was outqualified at Le Mans by Eugenio Castellotti in a Ferrari 121LM.

Like the clutch, the brakes require strong muscle and don't provide much feedback at first. The huge drums were moved outboard at the front in the last SLR built, so at least it saved the driver a blackened face from the dust that filtered into the cabin with the inboard set-up. Mercedes went to great lengths to keep the anchors cool – with massive fins on the widest drums, and a dash-operated system that squirted lubricant on to the mechanism if it was beginning to grab was tried for certain races. They deliver more feel as you adjust to the heavy pedal, and even one rapid stop doesn't induce a lock-up. The inherent limitations of drums prompted Rudolf Uhlenhaut to develop the hydraulically activated air brake for Le Mans, to upstage Jaguar's advanced but problematic discs. Moss recently told me that the air

brake had significant downforce effects when approaching corners from high speeds. Both D-types suffered problems at the Eifelrennen and went off at the same corner after the pedal had gone to the floor under heavy braking.

The 300SLR might not have been the fastest car on the straights, but nothing could match its balanced handling and advanced construction. American hotshoe John Fitch made his European debut in a major international event for the Ferrari factory squad at Le Mans and vividly recalled the impression made by the Mercedes team. "I was in awe of the marque and remember Moss in the 300SLR getting closer and closer 'til I just let him go by," he said. "I followed for a number of laps in my 4.4-litre Ferrari, which was faster on the straights, but was particularly impressed with the neat and precise way that the Mercedes moved. It was one of those rare race cars that seemed to do all things well."

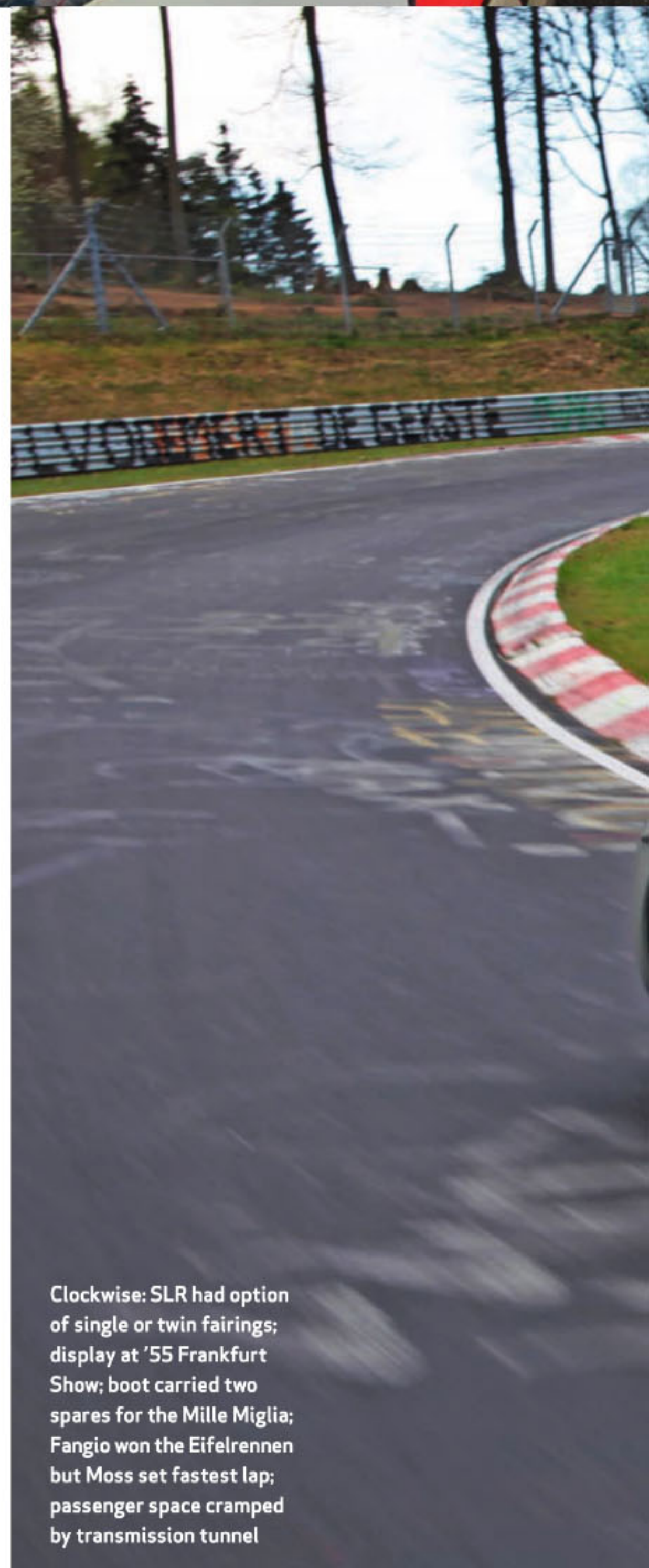
Of the nine SLRs completed (a 10th chassis was unfinished), eight survive. Chassis 6 was



destroyed in Pierre Levegh's horrific accident at Le Mans in '55, on the darkest day in motorsport history. The euphoria of the Eifelrennen couldn't be more opposed to the grim French event 13 days later. The freak crash claimed 83 lives when the French driver's car was launched into the crowd after hitting Lance Macklin's Austin-Healey 100S. The tragedy happened at 6:28pm, but it wasn't until 2am that Neubauer was given the order to withdraw the team as Fangio, teamed with Moss, stormed through the darkness, two laps clear of the opposition.

Although clearly not directly responsible for the crash, Mercedes came under strong condemnation because some critics argued that the explosion was so severe due to the 300SLR's exotic metallurgy and the use of dangerous, unauthorised fuel. One by one, Neubauer disproved the theories with conclusive evidence of legal fuel, that magnesium does not explode easily on impact, and that the SLR had greater strength and rigidity than other cars in the race. Poor circuit safety, leader Mike Hawthorn's reckless driving and Levegh's inexperience with the SLR were the more rational contributing factors. Prior to Le Mans, Mercedes had already announced that its racing activities would be terminated at the end of the year, and the disaster reinforced the management's decision.

The next outing was nearly two months later at the Swedish Grand Prix on 7 August, where Fangio in chassis 3 and Moss in 4, both still fitted with Le Mans air brakes, were again the class of the field, while Karl Kling was in his repaired Mille Miglia car, chassis 5. The narrow Kristianstad circuit featured a breathtaking high-speed crest – over which the SLRs were airborne at 150mph – and, as at Le Mans, the extra brake



The sky's the limit

Most specialists agree that if a 300SLR were to come on to the market, the vendor could name their price and it would blow away all of the records claimed by the likes of the Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic and Ferrari 250GTO.

Daimler-Benz amazingly donated three SLRs to museums after it withdrew from motorsport. Chassis 001, the development car, went to the Ford Museum, Dearborn and nearly sold in 2011 after Adrian Hamilton almost set up the deal of a lifetime. "Sir Jackie [Stewart] made the introduction and we discovered that it could be exchanged, so I gathered a dozen cars that represented the history of US motorsport," recalls Hamilton. "But at the last hurdle, the curator found a letter from Neubauer stating that Daimler had the first option to buy it back. Today an SLR is worth at least \$50m."

Chassis 3 is displayed at the Deutsches Museum in Munich, while the only one in private hands is no 5, which is part of an amazing set of Mercedes racers at Cité de l'Automobile (home of the Schlumpf Collection) in Mulhouse.

Clockwise: SLR had option of single or twin fairings; display at '55 Frankfurt Show; boot carried two spares for the Mille Miglia; Fangio won the Eifelrennen but Moss set fastest lap; passenger space cramped by transmission tunnel


gave a critical advantage into corners. Moss was quickest in practice, plus he and Fangio both tried the SLR Coupé – driven up from Stuttgart by Uhlenhaut – which lapped as fast as its open sisters. Amusingly, a diplomatic row later blew up when a marshal refused Neubauer entry to the pits after he'd forgotten his pass, and the team had to resort to involving the German ambassador to diffuse the atmosphere. Fangio and Moss sped away at the Le Mans-style start, and so close was the 1-2 formation pace that a stone kicked up by the Argentinian's car smashed Moss' goggles and cut his eye. Moss surged back despite his injury, making impressive use of the air brake to close to just three-tenths of a second behind his respected team leader.

Stuttgart's dominance continued in the Tourist Trophy around the demanding Dundrod road course on 17 September, where Moss won with Fitch as co-driver. Moss was 90 secs clear but had to pit with a flat after clipping a hedge that tore

the bodywork. Hawthorn went past, then Moss resumed control after the rain came, heading a Mercedes 1-2-3 with Fangio/Kling runners-up in 5, and 'Taffy' von Trips/André Simon third. The spectacle was clouded by the deaths of three drivers and a serious injury to Jean Behra, all of which forced the end of the event at that circuit.

Motivated by the chance of victory in the sports-car championship to match its GP laurels, Mercedes sent three cars to Sicily for the Targa Florio, where Moss again set the pace with Peter Collins sharing the hot seat around the tortuous mountain course. The glamorous English pair's blistering charge – Moss set a lap record on the opening tour from a standing start in the pits – nearly came to grief when the Mille Miglia winner had another off. A 100mph spin on mud left him stranded on a rock. Locals eventually manhandled the car on to the ground before it took an excursion across a ploughed field to get back on to the track. The mangled Mercedes

dropped two positions before Collins took over for one of his finest drives. Moss made up for his mistake after the final changeover and reclaimed the lead with another devastating 100kph lap. After 9 hours 43 mins, the English superstar duo won at a record average speed of 59.8mph, ahead of a cautious Fangio partnered by Kling more than 4 mins behind in second, with Desmond Titterton and Fitch fourth.

Mercedes clinched the manufacturers' championship by one point from Ferrari, despite not entering at Buenos Aires or Sebring and withdrawing from Le Mans. But the undoubted star of the ill-fated season was Moss, who dominated the results after three commanding drives in the finest sports car of the era. No company has ever repeated that total stranglehold in Grands Prix and sports-car racing in just one season. Technically brilliant, fabulously fast and gloriously loud, the legendary status of this supreme machine is guaranteed for all time. 





The Benz that belongs in a gallery

The Mercedes 300SL blends sophisticated engineering with unforgettable styling, says **Malcolm Thorne** as he charts its development

PHOTOGRAPHY **TIM ANDREW/LAT/MERCEDES-BENZ**



When Laurence Pomeroy of *The Motor* reported spotting a group of Mercedes veterans spectating at Le Mans in 1951, few of his readers could have imagined that a legend was in the making. In spite of the firm's pre-war motor-sport dominance, there were scant clues to suggest that in 1952 Stuttgart would score a series of victories that would seal its place among the emerging new order. Mercedes-Benz was a manufacturer of well-engineered vehicles of excellent quality, but, having barely survived the bombing that had destroyed its home town, the name was no longer the synonym for racing success that it had been a dozen years earlier. More significantly, in a dollar-hungry Europe, Mercedes certainly didn't offer a rival to the exciting new models from Jaguar and Ferrari. That, however, was all about to change.

Early proof came the following May, when Karl Kling and Hans Klenk finished second on the Mille Miglia driving an oddly shaped UFO dubbed W194, or 300SL. Although much of the componentry had been borrowed from production models, light weight and fine aerodynamics made it a highly effective weapon. The Italian event was the only occasion in 1952 that the W194 failed to nail top spot. The Bern GP ended in a Mercedes 1-2-3, while Stuttgart would take the first two places at Le Mans, plus an emphatic 1-2-3-4 at the Nürburgring. In the season finale, the perilous cross-Mexico dash that was the Carrera Panamericana, the W194



once again seized a 1-2 – and this in spite of a hair-raising high-speed altercation with a large bird that smashed through the windscreen of Kling's winning car at 140mph.

Over the winter, an improved version – smaller, lighter and more angular – was prepared under the leadership of legendary British-born engineer Rudolf Uhlenhaut. But with finite resources, and having done the groundwork for its forthcoming assault on Grand Prix racing, Mercedes retired the W194. It had performed its task with aplomb, but was no longer needed.

The story might well have ended there, had it not been for the firm's recently established US importer, Max Hoffman. Having generated huge interest when he turned up at a Long Island race meeting with Kling's Mille Miglia car, the Austrian-born entrepreneur was convinced that he could sell a production version. Mercedes management resisted his overtures, but, not one to be discouraged, he famously convinced the factory by placing a firm order for 400 cars. Then, as now, money was a persuasive force, and the roadgoing variant – the W198 – was unveiled at the International Motor Sports Show

in New York on 6 February 1954. Strikingly futuristic in appearance – even without those signature doors it would be a breathtaking thing to behold – it was tautly sophisticated in a way that the utilitarian W194 simply hadn't been.

The racer's W154-inspired grille was gone, in its place a broad opening with a vast three-pointed star as its focal point. Cooling vents on the flanks improved underbonnet airflow – a W194 weakness – while strakes over the wheelarches were claimed to provide further aerodynamic benefit. Never before or since has the science of airflow looked this good.

"The 300SL embodies timeless design," says Gordon Wagener, Mercedes' current styling chief. "It is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful cars ever, and I'm sure that I'm not alone in including it in my top 10 automotive designs. It still serves as inspiration. Current design language is of course different – today we live in a different time – but I like to borrow elements from the past and let them flow into the styling



Clockwise: from racer to road car – note different doorhandles and windows of pre-production version on right; lovely details abound; Rudge wheels were a desirable option

Selling the dream



"I first saw a Gullwing in 1955 at the age of 23," says long-term 300SL owner and former salesman Ivan Page-Ratcliff. "I was working at Brooklands of Bond Street, which was a

distributor for Aston Martin, Lancia and Jensen, as well as for Mercedes-Benz. When the first 300SL arrived, I was appointed to demonstrate it to potential customers – a task I performed with some enthusiasm!

"It was really the first supercar, and so far superior to anything else I had driven. There was a good deal of sales resistance, though, not least because it was available only in left-hand drive and the price was the same as a Rolls-Royce. Also, the war had finished just 10 years earlier and there was still considerable animosity towards Germany. I think we sold only about 15-20 at Brooklands, out of perhaps 50 cars in the whole of the UK.

"The engineering and build quality were far in excess of any other car, but it was the shape – and, of course, the door configuration – that was the most striking feature. The 300SL was suitable for daily driving, but the enormous capacity of the dry-sump engine meant that it was difficult to achieve a good working oil temperature: the car was designed to maintain 6000rpm for hours on end without blowing up.

"I have owned mine for 20 years and it has only once tried to bite me. That was my fault for taking my foot off the accelerator in a fast bend on a greasy surface. The best adventure I've had was on the 2004 Classic Adelaide Rally. It was the 50th anniversary and there were more than 20 Gullwings there from all over the world. Between us, we clocked up about 50,000 miles – mostly flat-out – and none of the cars had any mechanical problems; what a tribute to the original design and engineering excellence."

'EVEN WITHOUT THOSE DOORS,
THE MERCEDES WOULD BE A
BREATHTAKING CAR TO BEHOLD'

Beautifully finished cabin
has wonderful detailing,
although switchgear is
scattered haphazardly.
Note the spaceframe
tubes below the fascia

Broad grille with central star has remained a Mercedes styling cue to this day. The driver's-side bonnet bulge is there for symmetry's sake only



of current models. For example, [look at] the long bonnet with vertical grille, the long wheelbase and short overhangs of the AMG GT – all perfectly balanced attributes. As a sports car, the Gullwing is definitely a work of art.”

Yet this was no veneer of visual artifice. Unlike the racer, only the doors, bootlid and bonnet were made out of aluminium, although 29 special-order alloy-bodied cars would eventually be constructed. What lay beneath the largely steel skin was breathtakingly sophisticated.

Where rivals – and, indeed, the lookalike 190SL roadster – relied upon mundane ironmongery, the W198 featured the same radical construction as its progenitor. There would be no heavy steel girders weighing down this most super of cars; instead, a beautifully engineered spaceframe – described by *Motor Sport's* Bill Boddy in 1954 as bicycle tubes! – provided strength in abundance, in spite of its paltry 80kg weight. A forward-thinking application in a racing car, it was nothing short of revolutionary in a model intended for the road.

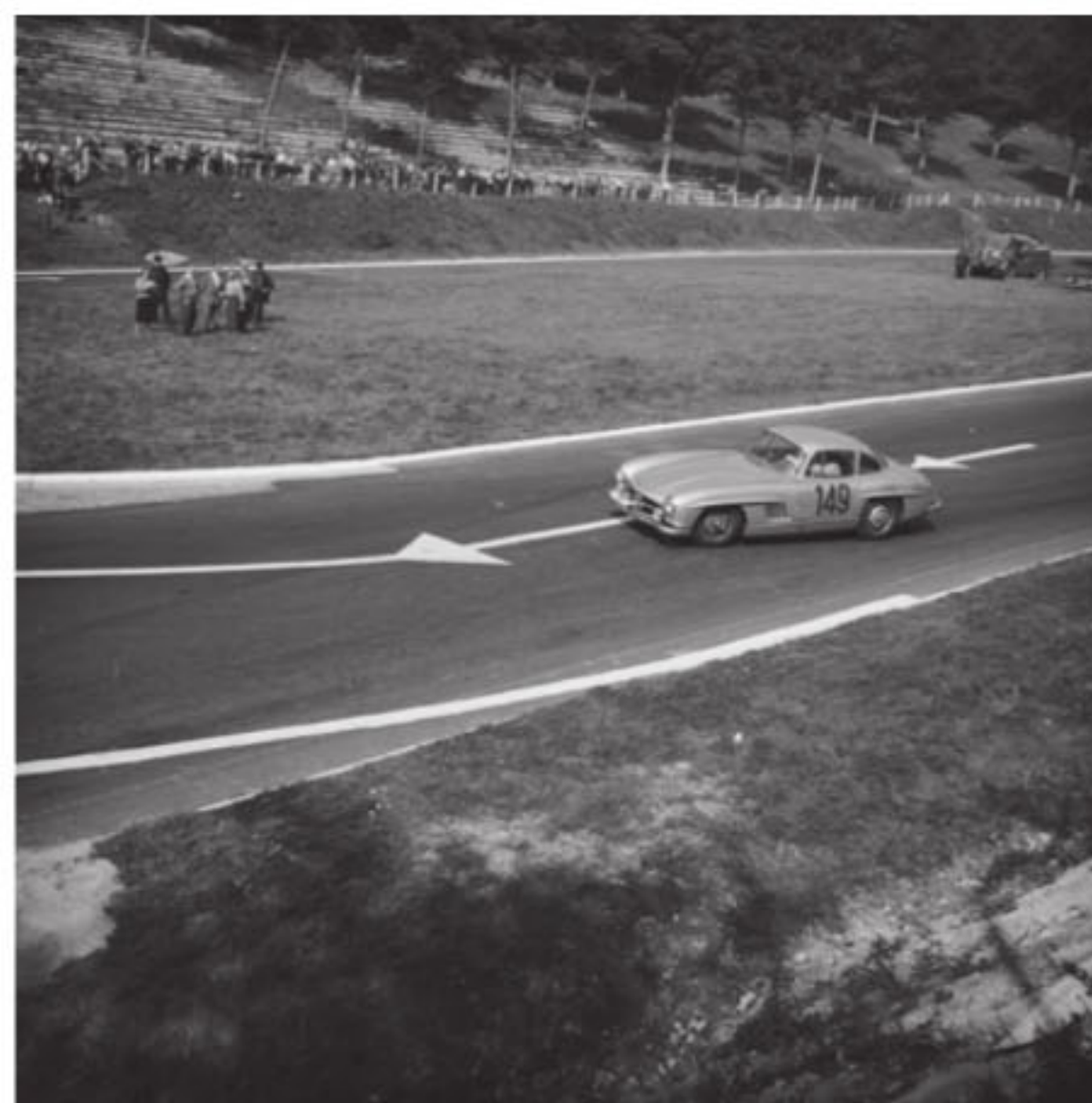
The future didn't end there, either. Nestling among those slimline tubes was a gloriously avant-garde powerplant. It was hidden beneath an improbably low bonnet, the humped strakes on which are a corollary of the panel being pulled tightly over the engine. The left-hand one is a dummy, added for symmetry.

A development of the iron-block in-line 'six' that had powered the W194 (itself an evolution of the unit to be found in the 300 'Adenauer'), it nonetheless broke exciting new ground. Gone were the W194's carburettors, to be replaced by an aviation-inspired direct-injection system – a world first on a four-stroke production car.

Competition class

Although the W198 was an evolution of the racer that had so dominated the 1952 season, it was first and foremost a civilised road car. With its astonishing performance, however, it lent itself beautifully to competition use. Stirling Moss and Denis Jenkinson used one to learn the route ahead of their famous victory on the Mille Miglia in 1955. Perhaps less well known – no doubt overshadowed by Moss' record-breaking performance in the 300SLR – is that the roadgoing model scored an impressive 1-2-3 class win on the gruelling Italian event in the same year.

The Gullwing was also a successful rally car: Olivier Gendebien drove one to victory on the 1955 Liège-Rome-Liège enduro, while Werner Engel won the European rally championship in the same year. In 1956, 'Wild' Willy Mairesse repeated his Belgian compatriot's victory on the Liège-Rome-Liège, and Walter Schock matched Engel by claiming the European crown. Stirling Moss, meanwhile, brought a Gullwing home second on the 1956 Tour de France. Encouraged by the result, he returned in 1957 but struggled against a vast Ferrari works entry, eventually finishing a creditable fourth.



Left: Moss approaches the hairpin at Rouen en route to second place on the '56 Tour de France. Above: waiting to start the final driving test at Montlhéry

Remarkably, the work that had gone into the dry-sump M198 unit meant that, in spite of it being incredibly docile, at a quoted 240bhp it was more powerful than the competition version that had won at Le Mans two years previously. Here, in 1954, was a car that – with the optional 3.25:1 axle – could pull all the way from 15 to nigh-on 160mph in top gear.

Think about that in the context of the time. Britain's cheapest new car in 1954, the sit-up-and-beg Ford Popular – which came in at only £390, compared to a whopping £4392 for the Mercedes – offered its patient owner a largely theoretical top speed of just 60mph. In standard form, meanwhile, even an Aston DB2/4 or Jaguar XK140 would have struggled to exceed 120mph. Of course, in pre-motorway Britain – the first section of the M1 wouldn't open until 1959 – it's unlikely that the majority of motorists had ever exceeded half of that figure, so a race-bred *bolide* that could cover two and a half miles a minute must have offered all the exoticism of interplanetary space travel.

That the Gullwing featured drum brakes may sound rather less science fiction, and at odds with its futuristic build and lightning pace, but if truth be told, the vast Alfin drums were more than up to the job of arresting the 300SL from speed. Indeed, in 1955 John Bolster commented in *Autosport* that the brakes were plenty powerful enough to lock the wheels at 140mph, 'with all the accompanying drama that one might expect'.

And drama was the operative word, because for all its delectable sophistication, the Gullwing also had an attention-grabbing characteristic that you ignored at your peril.

Just like those other perennial German favourites, the Volkswagen Beetle and Porsche 356, the Gullwing is blessed – or blighted – with swing-axle rear suspension. General consensus

is that, driven with a modicum of sense, the 300SL is a magnificent thing. It gets a bit hot inside, but balances that by making a wonderfully inspiring noise. Yet legend also has it that anyone foolish enough to provoke the car – especially with values currently topping £1million – is either fearless in the extreme, or desperately lacking in imagination.

In period, SCH Davis wrote in *Autocar* that he 'did not think that such a car should be available to the inexperienced for ordinary road use', while John Bolster opined that 'very few drivers would be at home in it without a great deal of practice'. Suspecting that perhaps they were just being overly cautious, I asked a trusted source.

"In standard form, the 300SL was not a car that you took any liberties with at all," said no less an authority than 1964 Formula One World Champion and long-term Gullwing owner John Surtees. "I first drove one in 1956, when I had just won the motorcycle World Championship. I took it home and the local doctor was very keen so I asked if he would like to come for a run. He eagerly agreed, so we took it to a section of road that I knew quite well. Coming out of the speed-restricted area, I accelerated and came to a left-hand curve just as it started to rain. I ended up going down the road

with a lot of opposite-lock as the back end broke away.

My passenger was speechless until we got back home, at which point he beseeched my mother not to let me buy one because he thought I would kill myself!

"These days, uprated springs and different

Specialist's view

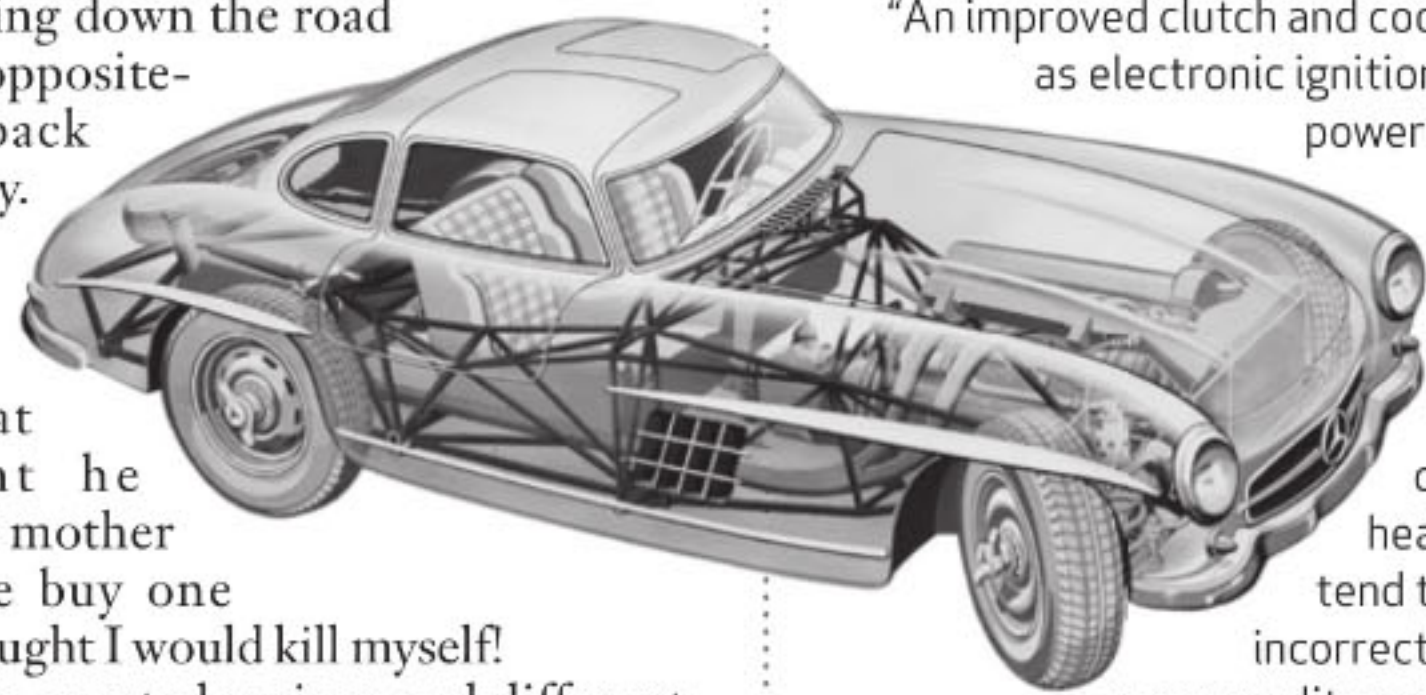
"Demand for the 300SL is strong," explains Marc Kienle of German specialist Kienle Automobiltechnik. "The market is stable, and prices for the best cars – with good history and either in original condition or perfectly restored – are still increasing.

"You would be looking at £1.25-1.5million* for an excellent example, depending on history and whether it's fitted with the desirable Rudge wheels. You would get an average car for £700-950,000, with projects in the region of £450-650,000. There are very few of those around, though – even average examples are now often being restored. A full rebuild will always take at least 1500 hours and can go up to 2500 hours, depending on the condition of the car beforehand. That equates to a bill of about £270-350,000 – plus VAT...

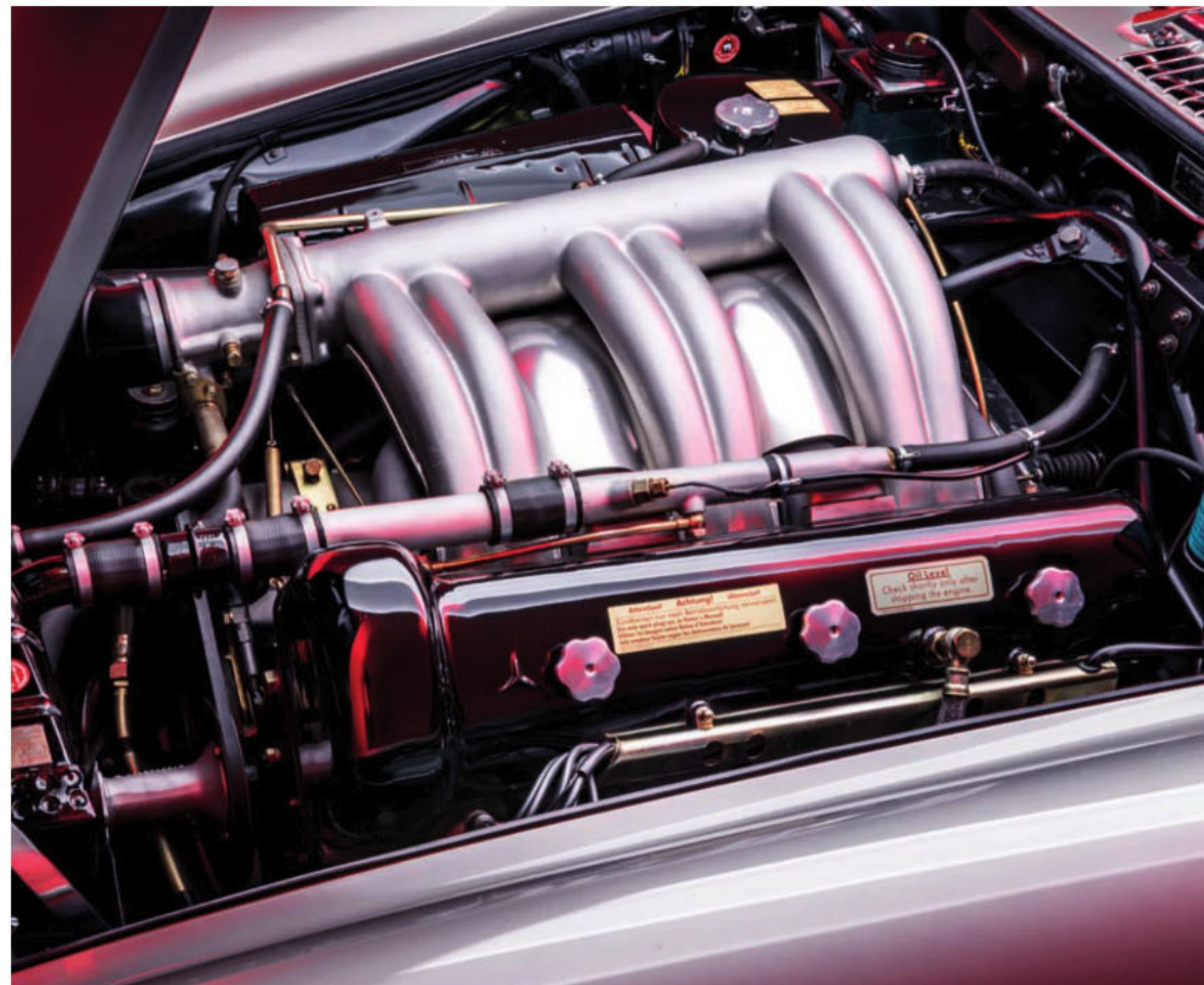
"The 300SL is a wonderful car to drive and to use, and reliable as long as it's restored and maintained correctly. It is very stable and, for a 60-year-old sports car, is quite comfortable. It can get hot in the summer but there are modifications that can help to cool it down.

"An improved clutch and cooling fan, as well as electronic ignition and a more powerful alternator,

are popular modifications among owners. Overall, though, it is a super car. In general, headaches only tend to arise from incorrect repairs and poor-quality restorations."



Clockwise, from above: spindly gearstick; custom luggage goes behind seats because spare and tank fill the boot; fuel-injected 'six'. Inset: spaceframe is visible in ghost view



*PRICES CORRECT AT DATE OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

“YOU NEEDED TO GIVE IT
YOUR TOTAL ATTENTION
IF YOU WERE GOING TO
DRIVE IT QUICKLY”

JOHN SURTEES





Above, from far left: slots in the roof improve ventilation, but cabin still gets warm; cooling duct on flank; even speaker grille looks good; pop-out handle has notch for locking mechanism



damper settings make the car more predictable, and with the tyres that are now available you can make further improvements. Without them, you needed to give it your total attention if you were to drive it quickly and be very aware of its ability to lose the rear end. It wasn't until the Roadster was introduced that the lessons from the race track were incorporated."

"If I'd designed it, I would have used either a de Dion or fully independent rear suspension," says Gordon Murray, the legendary engineer who was behind the car that was arguably the Gullwing's 1990s equivalent – the McLaren F1. "The swing-axle rear was a dreadful choice. It was the most advanced road car of its time and had great styling, but it was a flawed design. I also would have worked much harder on packaging the fuel tank in a position that had a less dramatic effect on centre-of-gravity shift."


"It was an extremely brave decision to put the 300SL into production because the fuel-injection system was underdeveloped and true spaceframes are difficult to produce in volume. Although it was a bad decision to use the latter, its inclusion helps to make the SL a great classic today. That, plus the relatively light weight, were great engineering achievements, and the aerodynamic work deserves a place in history. Those facts are backed up by the racing connections with the design – always a sign of a great car. Also, I think the styling was very influential in the 1950s, and remains so today."

"There are some similarities between the Mercedes and the McLaren," he reflects. "Both were the fastest cars of their era, were light and used advanced chassis technology – and both featured dramatic doors!"

Far from being a stylist's whim, the 300SL's gullwing design was an engineering necessity that was dictated by the need to provide reasonable access to the cabin. Observe a naked 300SL chassis and you'll notice that Boddy's bicycle frame has its crossbar running right across what would normally be the door aperture. Unlike the countless aesthetic imitations that have followed, without its trademark feature, entry to and egress from the car would be all but impossible.

After just three years and 1400 examples, the Gullwing was withdrawn from production in 1957, to be replaced by the 300SL Roadster. A more predictable machine to hustle, the new variant benefited from improved rear suspension and easier access thanks to its conventional doors, but, for many, the original remains by far the more charismatic of the two.

It is the sort of car that leaves you itching to embark on a high-speed pan-European blast. Who cares that the gearbox whine might become tiring? I want nothing more than to stretch the 300SL's legs in homage to the racers whose achievements behind the wheel of the W194 went on to give us one of the greatest and most iconic designs ever.

"Despite its problems, the car is still a very special one," concluded Surtees. "Not only because of its history and how it came about, but also because of the way in which it was constructed. Sitting there in that cockpit and starting up the engine is always the beginning of a special experience." 

Thanks to Robert and Tanya Lewis; Kienle Automobiltechnik (0049 7152 901 630; www.kienle.com); Mercedes-Benz

SPORTS



Mercedes SLs are famed for effortless pace, beauty and bulletproof reliability.

Alastair Clements and **Martin Buckley** meet five generations of the world's most desirable roadster

PHOTOGRAPHY **JULIAN MACKIE**

To understand the appeal of the Mercedes-Benz SL – or *Sports Leicht* in Stuttgart-speak – you just have to turn on the telly. It might have been born of a highly successful racing programme, culminating in wins for its competition forebear at Le Mans and on the Carrera PanAmericana, but in roadgoing – and particularly roofless – form it's a beautiful car inextricably linked with beautiful people.

From the 300SL's appearance alongside Elvis and Ann-Margret in *Viva Las Vegas*, to Bobby Ewing's 450SL in *Dallas*, to the driveways of

Wisteria Lane in *Desperate Housewives*, the open Benz oozes wealth, taste and glamour. This is a car to aspire to, to dream about – and when you achieve that fantasy it's *the* car to be seen in along the boulevards and avenues, everywhere from Cannes to California.

And the best news is that today it isn't an impossible dream. The 300SL is out of reach to all but a lucky few, but you can pick up a later example of these superbly built sports cars for the price of a decent Morris Minor. Buyers are waking up to their qualities, however, and one by one their values are creeping up. So what are you waiting for? Buy now, while you still can!

LEICHT



Mercedes-Benz

300SL



Stuttgart set a new style benchmark when it lopped the top off the W198 Gullwing



Clockwise, from main:
deep sills for tubular
spaceframe that gave the
SL its strength; restrained
luxury inside; race-bred
fuel-injected 'six'; the
three-pointed star's most
famous product of all?



The 300SL Roadster was a much more mature product than the Gullwing that preceded it. By almost any measure it was a better and more rounded car, one that showed the direction the Mercedes sports car concept needed to go as a commercial proposition. Launched in 1957, it usurped the three-year-old Gullwing not only as the glamour car of the Daimler-Benz range, but also as the pride of the West German motor industry.

It was such a thoroughly reworked development of the closed model that it should really be regarded as a separate car, sharing only general ideas with the Gullwing. Apart from the lack of a closed roof (though a pretty hardtop was available), the most obvious visual change was the lozenge-shaped front lights that would become a trademark of Mercedes styling in the '50s. The revisions went much deeper, however, to the extent that not even the front grilles – much the same at a glance – are interchangeable.

Importer Max Hoffman had coaxed Mercedes into building the Gullwing for his North American customers and the Roadster was even more astutely tuned to the requirements of that constituency: still an unashamed super-fast road car, but slightly less of a road-racer compromised for civilian use. The open car was as quick as the coupé, but required less expert handling thanks to its revised swing-axle rear suspension. With the pivot point below the final drive, and with a transverse compensator spring, the aggressive lift-off oversteer of the earlier car was replaced by a far more progressive character.

Daimler-Benz mastered fuel injection in a road-car application decades before it was

routinely available. The mechanical injection was at the heart of the engine's sweetness and smooth urge, its six-plunger pump – powered by an eccentric shaft with six cams – delivering exact quantities of fuel to each cylinder. Canted over to keep the bonnet line sleek, the in-line 3-litre 'six' gained 10bhp over the Gullwing with a sports cam and higher compression, but any advantage was negated by an extra 200lb, mostly accounted for by the chassis.

The tubular spaceframe was beefed-up around the centre to take account of the fact that the roof had gone, but also to make the sills much less obstructively deep. Thus this extraordinarily rigid open two-seater, as well as being more refined and roomier than the Gullwing, was also a lot easier to get into and out of.

We can only speculate as to why Mercedes didn't build both versions side by side, but

presumably there was a finite number of people with four times the price of an Austin-Healey to spend on a car. But that did buy you what was probably the most technologically advanced road

car in the world, a 250bhp fuel-injected *autobahn* king that was so much faster than anything around it (top speed was up to 155mph, depending on which of the five axle ratios you chose) that its headlamps had a continuous flashing mode to sweep lesser vehicles out of its path.

Hand-finished and luxurious in detail but very much a production car compared to contemporary Ferraris, the Roadster sold 1858 units to the Gullwing's 1400, but then the open car stayed in production two years longer through to 1963 and the introduction of the W113 'Pagoda'. **MB**

Thanks to Mercedes-Benz World at Brooklands: www.mercedes-benz-world.co.uk

'IT USURPED THE OLD GULLWING AS THE PRIDE OF THE WEST GERMAN MOTOR INDUSTRY'

First of the line

The 300SL 'Gullwing' (never an official title) was introduced in 1954, developed from the Le Mans and Carrera-winning works SLs. It left such an imprint on the popular imagination that nothing Mercedes has built since has truly replaced it. Although not without its shortcomings (sometimes-unruly handling, hot cabin, weak brakes) the 300SL was the greatest sports car of its generation because it took the competition so long to catch up. By the time they did, Mercedes had moved on, switching its attentions to a more populist type of SL and making the Gullwing an instant collector's piece. The famous doors were not a gimmick, but a way to accommodate the massive, strength-giving sills.



FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1957-'63/1858

Construction steel multi-tubular spaceframe chassis, steel body **Engine** iron-block (alloy from '62), alloy-head, sohc 2996cc straight-six, with Bosch mechanical fuel injection

Max power 250bhp @ 6200rpm

Max power 228lb ft @ 5000rpm

Transmission four-speed manual, driving rear wheels **Suspension** independent, at front by unequal-length wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar

rear low-pivot swing axles with compensator spring; telescopic dampers f/r

Steering recirculating ball **Brakes** finned drums, with servo (discs from '61)

Length 15ft (4572mm) **Width** 5ft 10in (1778mm) **Height** 4ft 3in (1295mm)

Wheelbase 7ft 10in (2388mm)

Weight 3000lb (1362kg) **0-60mph** 7 secs

Top speed 136-155mph **Price new** £5703

WHAT TO PAY*

The Roadster lags behind the Gullwing at the very top of the market, but it is a bona fide super-exotic – with prices to match. A drum-braked car might be had for as little as £250,000, but £350-400k asking prices are the norm – particularly for the more desirable disc-braked models – and a concours car will be costlier still.

TIMELINE

1952 W194 SL racer wins Le Mans

1954 300SL launched at New York Motor Sport Show: Bosch injection, choice of five axle ratios, up to 160mph, £4329 in the UK

1957 Roadster introduced at Geneva: 250bhp, improved low-pivot swing axles

1958 Optional hardtop available for an extra DM1500. Roadster is \$11,000 in US

1961 Dunlop discs replace bimetallic drums

1962 Modified engine with alloy block

1963 W113 230SL replaces 300SL



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The compact 190SL is certainly pretty, with neat proportions. Below, l-r: stylish cabin; signature 'eyebrows' over the arches; overhead-cam 1.9 'four'

Mercedes-Benz

190SL

Here was the baby 300SL, in looks if not performance

It would be hard to claim that the 190 is anything other than the underdog of the SL series. It was announced along with the 300SL in 1954, and even then was felt to be a bit of a poseur's conveyance. Here was a car with the general look of the 300SL, but a prosaic four-cylinder engine. Similarly, the unitary chassis was closely related to the Ponton saloon. It seemed anaemic and flabby beside its musclebound brother, but in fairness to the 190 it *was* pretty (although the 13in wheels were a little overwhelmed by the bodywork) and nicely made, plus Mercedes was not suggesting you should go and race one.

The three-bearing engine didn't lend itself to tuning, but at half the price of the 300SL this was a chic, accessible car that found a ready niche in the increasing wealth of the West German economic miracle. It is also unfair to criticise the 190 on the basis of its performance: 109mph was very respectable for a '50s sub-2-litre car, yet it didn't have the speed to get its driver in trouble.

Production didn't get into its stride until 1955 – the cars shown in 1954 were prototypes with a different front-end treatment – and it was not until 1957 that colours other than grey were available. The 190SL came as a roadster with wind-down windows or a coupé with a removable aluminium hardtop. It was a car that was rarely seen in the UK but, with 25,881 examples sold up to 1963, it had to be deemed a success. It was modified in many small ways during its career, including wider chrome trim strips above the doors, 220 saloon-type rear lights, and a larger rear windscreen.

In West Germany, the 190SL's image was tarnished by its connection with successful Frankfurt callgirl Rosemarie Nitribitt. When she had the misfortune to get herself murdered, it was revealed that she owned one and used it to solicit clients. As the case unfolded, the 190 became known as the 'Nitribitt Mercedes'. **MB**

Thanks to 190SL owner Matthew Webb

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1955-'63/25,881
Construction steel monocoque
Engine iron-block, alloy-head, sohc 1897cc 'four', with two Solex 44PHH carburettors
Max power 105bhp @ 5700rpm
Max torque 107lb ft @ 2800rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, driving rear wheels
Suspension independent, at front by double wishbones, anti-roll bar rear low-pivot swing axles; coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering recirculating ball
Brakes Alfin drums, with servo
Length 13ft 10½in (4229mm) **Width** 5ft 8½in (1740mm) **Height** 4ft 4in (1321mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 10½in (2400mm)
Weight 2557lb (1160kg) **0-60mph** 13 secs
Top speed 109mph **Price new** £2896

WHAT TO PAY*

Prices for the 190SL are mirroring those of its Pagoda successor and, if anything, outstripping the later model in recent years. Project cars start in the mid-teens, while £25-30,000 is the going rate for an average car with an MoT. Restored examples command upwards of £65,000.

TIMELINE

1954 Prototype 190SL shown at New York International Motor Sport Show
1955 Production W121 unveiled at Geneva
1957 Full colour palette becomes available; rear numberplate lamps move to overriders
1960 New shape for optional hardtop
1963 Build ends to make way for Pagoda

*PRICES CORRECT AT DATE OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION



Mercedes-Benz

PAGODA

Named after its distinctive hardtop, this SL was a change in direction for Stuttgart

The W113 set the tone for all future generations of SL, with a gentle touring temperament but also real ability for those with the inclination and the skill to exploit it. Although the 120mph 280 is the fastest, the original 230 was probably the sportiest of the series and, on its specially designed Firestone or Continental ultra-wide tyres, Mercedes' development chief Rudolf Uhlenhaut could lap the firm's short and twisty Montroux test circuit in France only 0.2 secs slower than Mike Parkes in a Ferrari 250GT SWB.

The broad tyres largely disguised any remaining shortcomings of the swing-axes that M-B remained so doggedly committed to, although too much braking at the wrong time could make the nose dive and the tail twitch. But few owners drove their SLs like that: if the Gullwing summons images of Steve McQueen getting speeding tickets on location for *The Great Escape*, then the 230 conjures Julie Christie in *Darling* or Audrey Hepburn in *Two For the Road*.

Paul Bracq's slim, wide-track shape has proved to be the most enduringly elegant SL profile, with hints of the 300SL in its front end and upright lamp units, while also having a close family relationship with the upcoming generation of de-finned W108 S-Class saloons at the rear. It takes its 'Pagoda' tag from the dished roof of its tall, airy and very heavy hardtop, which turns the car into an instant coupé. This top affords the occupants great views all round and was part of a safety-conscious specification that included crumple zones at each end. Apart from the wheeltrims and badges, it was unchanged during eight years of production.

All versions were heftier than they looked, in spite of the aluminium doors, bonnet and bootlid, and even the 280 was no hot rod – rather a brisk and comfortable two-seater that was as refined in finish and manners as most sports cars of the day were rough-hewn and uncouth. Inside it maintained an SL tradition of rather glitzy US-style dashboards, but the seats were superbly supportive and the hood, nicely hidden under a lid when retracted, was easy to erect. Automatic W113s are undergeared, while manuals are scarce and, unless five-speeds (very rare), suffer from an odd set of ratios and a notchy feel.

Volume production meant sharing major drivetrain components with the 'Fintail' so,

as well as using a shortened and stiffened version of the saloon's floorpan, the fuel-injected overhead-cam 'six' and the rear suspension were also familiar items. Less expected on a sports car were the four-speed Daimler-Benz auto transmission and power steering, which were options on the 230SL but became very much part of the specification and character of a Mercedes that was part sports car, part all-weather GT.

The brief to the engineers who created the Pagoda was to replace both the 300SL and the 190. That they succeeded admirably is evidenced by the eight-year production run and the healthy numbers sold – although, in truth, the W113 had neither the macho appeal of the fierce 300 nor the slightly effete personality of the 190. **MB**

Thanks to M-B World at Brooklands:
www.mercedes-benz-world.co.uk

'THE AUTO WAS KEY TO THE CHARACTER OF THIS PART SPORTS CAR, PART ALL-WEATHER GT'



Wonderfully restrained Pagoda shape has aged brilliantly, and appeals to all ages. With prices rising fast, watch out for bodged cars with pretty paint



Above, clockwise from main: huge wheel and auto 'box don't scream sports car, but Pagoda is a deft handler; detailing is exquisite throughout; short-lived 2.5-litre 'six' is the rarest engine

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1963-'71/48,912
Construction steel monocoque, aluminium panels **Engine** iron-block, alloy-head 2281/2496/2778cc straight-six, Bosch mechanical fuel injection; 150bhp @ 5500rpm-170bhp @ 5750rpm; 144lb ft @ 4200rpm-177lb ft @ 4500rpm **Transmission** four/five-speed manual or four-speed auto **Suspension** independent, at **front** by double wishbones **rear** low-pivot swing axles; coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r **Steering** recirculating ball, power-assistance standard on 250/280 **Brakes** discs front, drums rear, with servo (all-disc on 250/280) **Length** 14ft 2in (4318mm) **Width** 5ft 11in (1803mm) **Height** 4ft 5in (1346mm) **Wheelbase** 7ft 11in (2413mm) **Weight** 2905-3490lb (1318-1583kg) **0-60mph** 10.5-9.3 secs **Top speed** 116-121mph **Price new** £3865-4876

WHAT TO PAY*

There are plenty of Pagodas on offer, but few really good ones because they are tricky and expensive to restore properly. £15,000 buys a project or a tired US import (circular headlamps). There's a premium for the 280 because it's a later car with a bigger engine – £25k is routine, rising through £50k to as much as £100,000 for the best. But there's a school of thought that says the 230 is the sportiest, with nice, early details. Coupés (rear seats, but no hood) are cheaper.

TIMELINE

1963 230SL introduced at Geneva show: front discs only, 150bhp
1966 250SL with 150bhp seven-bearing engine, power steering and discs all round
1967 280SL replaces 250SL: 170bhp (spot one by its one-piece wheeltrims)
1971 Production ends as 280SL is replaced by 350SL of the R107 series

Did you know?

Stirling Moss had a 250SL road car, and when the 280 engine came out in the W108 saloon he insisted on having one fitted – contrary to factory advice. The 280SL was announced shortly afterwards
A 230SL, complete with automatic gearbox, won the 1963 Marathon de la Route, driven by Eugen Böhringer
 In 1970, the 280SL cost £4876 – the same as two new Triumph Stags and more than £1000 costlier than a Porsche 911T
If you really needed four seats then Mercedes would sell you a variant called the Coupé, fitted with a hardtop and a small rear bench seat taking up the space where the hood usually lived



*PRICES CORRECT AT DATE OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION



Mercedes-Benz R107



Elegant lines and huge solidity have given *der Panzerwagen* a dedicated following



Clockwise, from main: sober but comfortable cabin; iron-block V8 was replaced with all-alloy unit in 1980; 'self-cleaning' tail-light clusters





Rare Inka Red (metallic orange) paint was only offered for three years; 'Mexican hat' alloys were little altered from those used on some Pagodas

Family man's SL

After the patrician elegance of the W111 coupés, the C107 SLC seemed refreshingly modern at its 1971 Paris Salon debut. This was the only model in a long line of large, four-seater Mercedes coupés to be based on the contemporary SL rather than a big saloon. It shared front panels, some interior parts and drivetrain with the SL, but on a 360mm longer wheelbase that allowed for four real seats and a usefully large boot. The *cognoscenti* held it in higher esteem than the SL as a driver's car (the long wheelbase meant more progressive handling), but it didn't have the exquisite, hand-finished appeal of the old 3.5 Coupés with their fat leather armchairs and beautiful veneers.



The R107 was in production for 18 years, making it by far the longest-lived and most numerous SL of all. Powered by two types of 'six' and umpteen V8s (from 3.5 to 5.6 litres), 237,387 were built from 1971 to 1989.

Within Daimler-Benz the R107, in development since 1967, was referred to as *der Panzerwagen* for its hefty construction. Far more substantial than the Pagoda, it was a crumple-zoned, crash-safe and thoroughly padded response to the American Department of Transport safety requirements for the early 1970s.

In fact, it was the first Mercedes to be designed almost entirely with regard to the US market, a wise decision because the R107 was a car the Americans loved above all. Some two-thirds of the production run went to North America.

For better or worse, this generation of SL will be forever associated with US trash TV – think of the opening credits of *Hart to Hart* – but at least in Europe we didn't have to put up with massive safety bumpers and power-sapping emission controls.

Even in slim-bumper Euro form it was handsome rather than pretty, a bit thick-set and chunky after its light, delicate predecessor. Yet the 107 resisted all attempts at facelifting other than some modest spoilers and flat-faced alloys. So-called 'Mexican hat' alloys or, even better, colour-coded hubcaps, look more appropriate for a car designed in the late '60s.

Its wraparound indicators and subtle wedge profile were a Mercedes constant for the '70s while the (optional) dished hardtop gave the car a visual link with the Pagoda. With the iron-block M116 3.5-litre V8 it was not much quicker than the old 280SL, but it was more refined and

easier to drive with its anti-dive front suspension and semi-trailing rear set-up from the latest 'new generation' saloons. The 70-profile tyres meant that power steering was obligatory and, although the official standard gearbox of the 350SL was a four-speed manual, automatic was the transmission of choice on this luxury-focused SL. Autos became non-negotiable on larger V8s, but it was later possible to opt for a five-speed manual on the twin-cam straight-six 280SL, a variant that was only briefly available in the UK. The 300SL used the single-cam 3-litre M103 engine best known from the W124 range.

The 450SL was the quintessential (and most popular) '70s R107, a torquey but thirsty variant replaced by a range of more efficient all-alloy, overhead-cam V8s at the turn of the '80s. The largest of these was the America-only 1986-'89 560SL, conceived to put a stop to grey imports of the Euro-spec 500.

The interior stayed pretty much the same throughout. It was a functional exercise in plastic, livened with wood veneers from the '80s and always with a conspicuously large

wheel. Early cars are likely to have wind-up windows and utilitarian MB-*Tex* trim. Surprisingly, the hood was always manually operated.

The genius of this generation of SL was that it was a blend of sports car and two-seater saloon, which just happened to have a removable roof. It was as beautifully built and thoroughly usable as any other 1970s or '80s Benz and for many it represented the ultimate symbol of personal achievement. It was a huge image-builder for Mercedes, and never really seemed to face any serious competition. **MB**

Thanks to Mercedes-Benz World at Brooklands: www.mercedes-benz-world.co.uk

'THIS WAS THE FIRST BENZ TO BE DESIGNED ALMOST ENTIRELY WITH AMERICA IN MIND'

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1971-'89/237,387

Construction steel monocoque **Engine** iron-block, alloy-head dohc 2746cc or sohc 2962cc 'six'; iron-block, alloy-head, sohc-per-bank 3499/4520cc or all-alloy 3818/3839/4196/4973/5547cc V8, all with fuel-injection; 180bhp @ 5700rpm-240bhp @ 5000rpm; 176lb ft @ 4500rpm-297lb ft @ 3200rpm

Transmission four/five-speed manual or three/four-speed auto **Suspension** independent, at front by wishbones rear semi-trailing arms; coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r

Steering power-assisted recirculating ball **Brakes** discs, with servo, optional anti-lock from 1980 **Length** 14ft 3½in (4390mm)

Width 5ft 8¾in (1790mm) **Height** 4ft 2½in (1300mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft (2460mm)

Weight 3307-3781lb (1500-1715kg)

0-60mph 9.3-7.1 secs **Top speed** 126-140mph

Price new £6995 (350SL, 1973)

WHAT TO PAY*

Because so many were built over such a long time, there's a huge number of R107s out there. They are great value, ranging from less than £4k for a roadworthy 350SL to £18k-plus for a low-mileage, high-spec 500. More adventurous traders ask up to £25k.

TIMELINE

1971 R107 350SL introduced with 3.5 V8 engine, hard and soft tops, power steering. Badged 350SL 4.5 in USA with 4.5-litre V8

1973 450SL joins 350SL in Europe and soon begins to outsell it. Automatic only

1974 280SL introduced with twin-cam M110 fuel-injected straight-six (arrives in UK in the early '80s)

1981 380/420/500 replace 450 and 350

1985 300SL replaces 280SL

1986 560SL range-topper launched

1989 All R107 SLs replaced by new R129

*PRICES CORRECT AT DATE OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

Mercedes-Benz R129

The SL for the 1990s was a technical *tour de force* and a paragon of refinement



Fewer grille bars, smoked front indicators and rear high-level brake light for second facelift of 1998.
Left: belts part of seats



If the time taken to put a model into production is a measure of its quality on arrival, the SL that was launched in 1989 can have few peers. Work on the car began a decade before its launch and the basic outline – penned in-house under styling supremo Bruno Sacco – had been resolved by the mid-'80s. After such a thorough job, it's no wonder that it managed to remain in production for over a decade, with little more than a spit 'n' polish to keep it fresh.

Yet this was to be no revolution. The designers might have been computer-aided extensively as they worked to ensure that the new car would cleave the air efficiently, and there's little doubt that it looked almost impossibly rakish after the upright R107, but the idea of a mid-engined SL was swiftly rejected. Instead, the R129 followed the familiar recipe of having its rear wheels powered by front-mounted 'sixes' and 'eights' – plus, later, a deep-lunged V12 flagship. It also built further on the reputation for rock-hewn solidity founded by its predecessor: this was one model that managed to avoid succumbing to the much-publicised dip in quality of late-'90s products from the three-pointed star.

So well built was the new model that it made a brick outhouse look like a house of cards. Mercedes justifiably made the claim that the R129 was the safest roadster ever. It was even able to make a virtue of one inept hack barrel-rolling a car at the Estoril circuit launch, by explaining how the crash demonstrated the effectiveness of the SL's flip-up roll-over and super-strong windscreen pillars.

On the road that natural strength translates into a sense of massive sturdiness. The Bremen-built R129 feels like the very best '90s Merc

'IT WAS SO WELL BUILT THAT IT MADE A BRICK OUTHOUSE LOOK LIKE A HOUSE OF CARDS'

limousine, with a superbly authoritative ride, near-unbelievable refinement and an uninspiring but supremely comfortable cabin. Fit the aluminium hardtop – which self-anchors, using the fully automated hood's hydraulics – and so quiet is it that you could be forgiven for thinking it was born a fixed-head.

So we've established that it's safe and comfortable – but is it a sports car? You can see where the naysayers were coming from: after all, in the UK you couldn't buy a manual 'box (and only on a 'six' even in mainland Europe) and the suspension was developed from the W124 E-Class. This was a car beloved by Lady Di (a 500SL owner), and golf-club members impressed by its two-tone paint (a neat way of disguising its bulk) and ability to swallow two bags of clubs.

But select 'Sport' on the automatic 'box, let the revs rise to overcome the refinement – particularly rewarding with the snarling quad-cam, 32-valve V8 – and there's plenty of entertainment to be found here, not to mention impressive grip levels and superb natural balance. With

the right pedal floored, the 326bhp 500SL could lift its skirts to top 60mph in under 6 secs and hit 100mph in 14 secs. It could also dispatch a twisting B-road with aplomb – with the Acceleration Skid Control ready to prevent an agricultural excursion should overexuberance behind the wheel take you beyond the car's high limits.

While more high-octane petrolheads would always yearn for a little more driver connection, nothing else offered a better brilliant blend of performance, comfort and reliability than this, the machine that *Autocar* magazine tagged 'the world's greatest convertible'. **AC**

Thanks to 1998 SL500 owner Dale Minton



Right, from top: sweet quad-cam V8 is both sonorous and refined; subtle vents among the few nods to the past

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1989-2001/204,940
Construction steel monocoque, aluminium hardtop **Engine** alloy, ohc 2960cc 'six'; dohc 2799/2960/3199cc 'six'; qohc 4966/4973cc V8; qohc 5987cc V12, all with electronic fuel injection; 190bhp @ 5700rpm-394bhp @ 5200rpm; 192lb ft @ 4500rpm-420lb ft @ 3800rpm **Transmission** four/five-speed auto, driving rear wheels **Suspension** independent, at front by MacPherson struts rear multi-link; coils, telescopics, a-r bar f/r (hydropneumatic springs on 600SL) **Steering** power-assisted recirculating ball **Brakes** discs (vented front), with servo and anti-lock **Length** 14ft 8in (4470mm) **Width** 6ft 7½in (1811mm) **Height** 4ft 3¼in (1303mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft 3in (2515mm) **Weight** 3630-4519lb (1650-2050kg) **0-60mph** 9.3-5.9 secs **Top speed** 142-155mph **Price new** £18,295 (500SL, 1989)

WHAT TO PAY*

Few cars offer more for your money than an R129, with high-mileage examples now being sold for as little as £3000. Smart, post-'95 cars with fair mileages and full history hover in the £7-12k zone, while the very best later models fetch up to £17k. Be wary of cars calling themselves AMGs: fewer than 1000 genuine ones were built (SL55/60/70/73) and these command a serious premium.

TIMELINE

- 1988** Early production begins in May
- 1989** Full production from March; unveiled at Geneva as 500SL, 300SL and 300SL-24
- 1992** V12 600SL launched
- 1993** Name designation reversed; SL280 and SL320 replace 300SL/300SL-24
- 1995** Facelift, with new hardtop; five-speed auto for 500/600, optional panoramic roof
- 1998** Second facelift; new 24-valve V8
- 2001** R230 replaces R129 in the summer

A 190 for the '90s

The SL's climb upmarket was all very well, but what if you didn't have a hedge-fund manager's income? Learning a lesson from the past, Mercedes created a new model with 90% of its big brother's glamour, plus a fair portion of its performance, for a fraction of the cost. The R170 SLK – adding *Kurz* (short) to the moniker – arrived in 1997. Its weight, slow steering and notchy manual 'box stopped it being a Boxster-beater, but that didn't matter: it was better to drive than a BMW Z3, looked a million bucks – but didn't cost it – and had a trendsetting electric folding hardtop. A supercharged V6 AMG came in '01, but the real dynamic upheaval was the much-revised R171 of 2004.

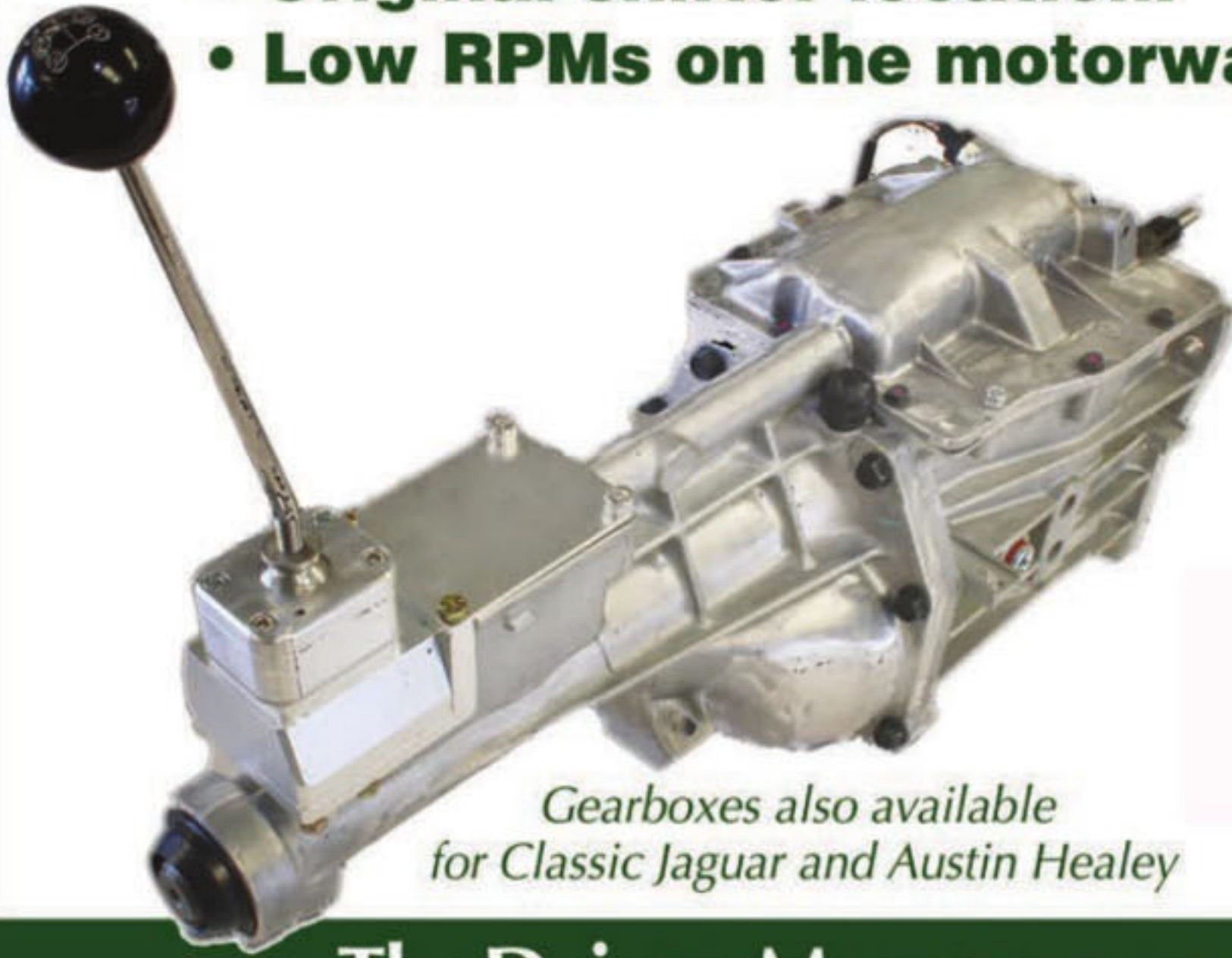


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Echoes of W198 in grille and side vents; '08 car is less friendly than original four-light face. Bottom, l-r: sportier feel inside; clever roof; entry-level V6

Mercedes-Benz

R230

The flagship Benz is a decade old, but still seductive

One of few criticisms of the R129 was that Mercedes' engineers had rather forgotten the meaning of the SL name in their mission to create the ultimate luxo-roadster. It wasn't hugely sporty, and it certainly wasn't light. Add in that it looked pretty long in the tooth, and that to remove its hardtop for wind-in-the-hair motoring required two strong men, and the designers had a pretty detailed checklist to work to.

Few of those boxes were left unticked by the R230 of 2001. And while the R129 was hardly archaic, its replacement bristled with new tech, from its folding 'Vario-roof' to its Sensotronic electronically controlled brakes, sophisticated stability control system and Active Body Control hydraulics replacing conventional anti-roll bars. Away from such electricravery, the new R230 looked – and felt – a whole lot sportier than its predecessor. The styling was a neat blend of R129 proportions, modern curves, plus a few

cues from SLs of the past for good measure. This facelifted 'Night Edition' car is more macho still, with a distinctive dose of muscle that helps to distinguish it from the dainty SLK.

It's a strict two-seater and you sit lower, wearing the car rather than riding on it, and facing a traditional pair of cowled, chrome-rimmed, dials. Though still supple, the ride has a firmer edge and the shell feels taut and stiff. It's still heavy, but extensive use of aluminium means that the R230 weighs in at around 50kg lighter than the equivalent R129 – no mean feat when you consider that it also manages to incorporate a roof that folds neatly into the boot in just 16 secs (albeit at the expense of golf-bag space).

To complete the sporting makeover, the R230 got rack-and-pinion steering and the AMG badge went from being a bespoke rarity to a full production model. First came the sublime supercharged V8 SL55 – probably the sweet spot of the range – followed by the SL63 V8 and the bonkers twin-turbo V12 SL65. **AC**

FACTFILE

Sold/no built 2001-'11/166,433 (to end 2010)
Construction steel monocoque, aluminium panels **Engine** alloy, qohc 3498/3724cc V6; 4966/5461cc V8; 5439cc blown V8; 5513/5980cc twin-turbo V12; 245bhp @ 5750rpm-670bhp @ 5400rpm; 258lb ft @ 3-4500rpm-738lb ft @ 2200-4200rpm **Transmission** 6-speed automated manual or 5/7-speed auto **Suspension** multi-link, coils, telescopics, Active Body Control (SL350 a/r bar) **Steering** power-assisted rack and pinion **Brakes** vented discs, servo and anti-lock **Length** 14ft 11½in (4562mm) **Width** 5ft 11¾in (1820mm) **Height** 4ft 3¾in (1317mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft 5in (2560mm) **Weight** 4023-4508lb (1825-2045kg) **0-60mph** 7.2-3.9 secs **Top speed** 155-199mph **Price new** £67,790 (SL500, 2002)

WHAT TO PAY*

Even early cars aren't cheap: expect to pay £15k for a high-miler. Good, low-mileage cars are nearer £20k and prices vary little between 350s and 500s, but SL55s rarely drop below £25k and V12s are £30k-plus. Facelifted models start from £35,000.

TIMELINE

2001 R230 replaces R129 in the summer, as SL500 and SL55 AMG
2002 V6 SL350 and V12 SL600 added
2004 SL65 AMG and SLR McLaren supercar
2006 Facelift, new engines, 7G-Tronic auto
2008 Aggressive makeover; SL55 replaced by SL63 AMG; SL65 Black Series unveiled
2011 Production ends, replaced by the R231

*PRICES CORRECT AT DATE OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION





Driving '50s cars can be a disquieting history lesson in ponderous and unappealing behaviour, but this pairing shows how sorted and together the better vehicles of 50 years ago can be. Few allowances need to be made for the way these expensive 2.2-litre, 3000lb luxury coupés conduct themselves in modern driving: they accelerate briskly, stop and corner with assurance and require no more than an average amount of concentration to drive. If the slack-jawed modern hatch driver would only need a few miles to acclimatise to their characteristics (even if he or she did not have the cultivation to enjoy them), then the original and very fortunate owners of the 220S and 406 must have had a feeling of effortless superiority in '50s traffic.

For these are flavoursome vehicles offering pleasure on diverse levels, way above the base desires of most drivers both then and now. They make pleasing straight-six noises and, while their

drivers are expected to know how to use a gearbox, both change ratios so nicely that keeping some momentum going is never a chore in either car. Neither is about outright speed, yet both cruise so happily with the flow at anything up to 100mph that you begin to question the need for the bigger, thirstier V8 engines that characterised successive variants of both cars.

What they are about is refinement. They ride serenely on their tall, skinny tyres – with no need for power steering – and have all the basic requirements of civilised habitation without being overburdened with power-assisted decadence. The luxury character of these cars comes from exquisite finish and detailing, and the sense that you are driving something very rare.

The Bristol trumps the Mercedes massively in the exclusivity department, with just 174 cars to 2178 220S Coupés. For its capacity, it must have been one of the most expensive cars in the world at £4244 in 1958. Having said that, the Mercedes' eye-watering £4000 price-tag ensured its rarity

Bachelors anonymous

A luxury car needn't be ostentatious, says **Martin Buckley** as he enjoys the subtle delights of the Bristol 406 and Mercedes-Benz 220S

PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES MANN**





Lively and sweet-handling Bristol is the saloon that thinks it's a sports car and delights in twisty B-roads

in the British motoring landscape, where it was the preserve of the likes of Lionel Bart, plus a handful of wealthy and enlightened buyers who had put the war behind them.

Launched in 1957, here was a German glamour car created for the American market, a flagship of the 'Ponton' range based on shorter, stiffer underpinnings, but with the same double-wishbone front suspension – on the 'Ponton' subframe that earned the model its nickname – and low-pivot swing-axle rear. Stylist Friedrich Geiger redistributed the volumes to give a longer tail, squatter roof and extended doors. The look was intended to convey something of the prestige and elegance of the massive 300S but on a more manageable scale, with a similar level of fit and finish. The rich use of bird's-eye walnut, leather and chrome was way above the ambitions of the relatively humble saloons.

Upmarket Becker radio sets and fitted luggage were regularly specified by customers, who were no doubt satisfied by the creditable 100mph the car's M180 straight-six managed from 105bhp. For those who were not, from 1959 there was a 220SE version with Bosch injection and 115bhp.

But, despite the many parallels that can be drawn, the Benz and the Bristol appealed to very different people. The 406 was a cerebral engineer's car for the man who understood that it would last a long time and revelled in the skills that allowed him to exploit it. The 220S was a bit 'showbiz', with its liberal use of chrome, white-wall tyres and (often) two-tone paint schemes. You almost had to be a bit of a cad to want one; the fact that Dr Wernher von Braun had a 220S Coupé while working on the American space programme conforms to every dearly held cliché about 1950s Mercs and their at times slightly

dubious owners. In fairness Jon Voight, the Nazi-hunting hero of *The Odessa File*, rescued the model's reputation (at least in my eyes) by using a Cabriolet version in the 1974 film.

In fact, the W180 Coupé and convertible have been fashionably collectable for decades, whereas enthusiasts have only recently woken up to the subtle appeal of the Bristol 406. For years, this interim model that linked the 2-litre era with the Chrysler V8-powered models of the 407-411 generation seemed to be the forgotten Bristol, with neither the enthusiast appeal of the earlier six-cylinder cars nor the lazy power of the V8s. When values were really low in the '70s, a lot of 406s lost their engines and even now few have been comprehensively restored.

Yet the 1958-'61 model has an appeal all of its own as the last Bristol to be conceived within the aerospace group before the car-making activities were sold off. With its four-wheel Dunlop disc brakes and Watt linkage on its live rear axle (to lower the roll centre), it is the most highly specified and thoroughly sorted of the six-cylinder Bristols that were developed directly from the pre-war 2-litre BMW range. With its bigger, 105bhp 2.2-litre Type 110 unit, it was intelligently improved to give a maturing ownership demographic a more flexible and relaxing car. It had room for four full-sized passengers in a replanned interior, and could pull a generously high top gear; the self-cancelling Laycock overdrive gave nearly 25mph per 1000rpm.

There were few changes to the chassis frame, which was made in the Bristol works at Filton and still used a transverse leaf spring at the front and torsion bars at the rear. The 406, however, marked a return to two doors after the four-door, wood-framed 405, and was bodied outside of



Bristol by Jones Brothers of Willesden, which clothed the steel frame with alloy panels.

The result is, to my eyes, not only the last really good-looking Bristol but also one of the best-looking overall, with lots of items of detail quality (such as the screw-on Knave plates on the wheels) that were lost on later V8 versions. Incidentally, you can instantly tell a 406 from a V8 407 by the roof-mounted repeater flashers.

You only think of the plump but elegant 220S Coupé as being just a little gaudy when you see it next to the lean simplicity of the delightfully unadorned 406 – it's like comparing a one-armed bandit with a classic piece of furniture – and the effect continues inside. The glossy veneer, plush seats and twinkly details of the Mercedes leave a curious impression of American design values executed with a level of craftsmanship you would never experience in a post-war American car. Everything suggests expensive hand-finishing: the way the wood on the fascia flows into the door rails, the lavish use of chrome for door furniture and the smooth-functioning switchgear.

The Bristol is equally inviting, but more complete and far less frivolous. In the 406 cabin Bristol hit on a pleasing formula that it carried through until the Blenheim, clustering a proper set of instruments in a handsome nacelle behind a classic Blumel's wheel with spokes that suggest aircraft controls. The wood is much quieter than that in the Mercedes; there is more light, more headroom and more legroom for passengers.

The Benz is undeniably impressive to drive. Its engine is flexible and its column gearchange is not to be despised. You can whip it through



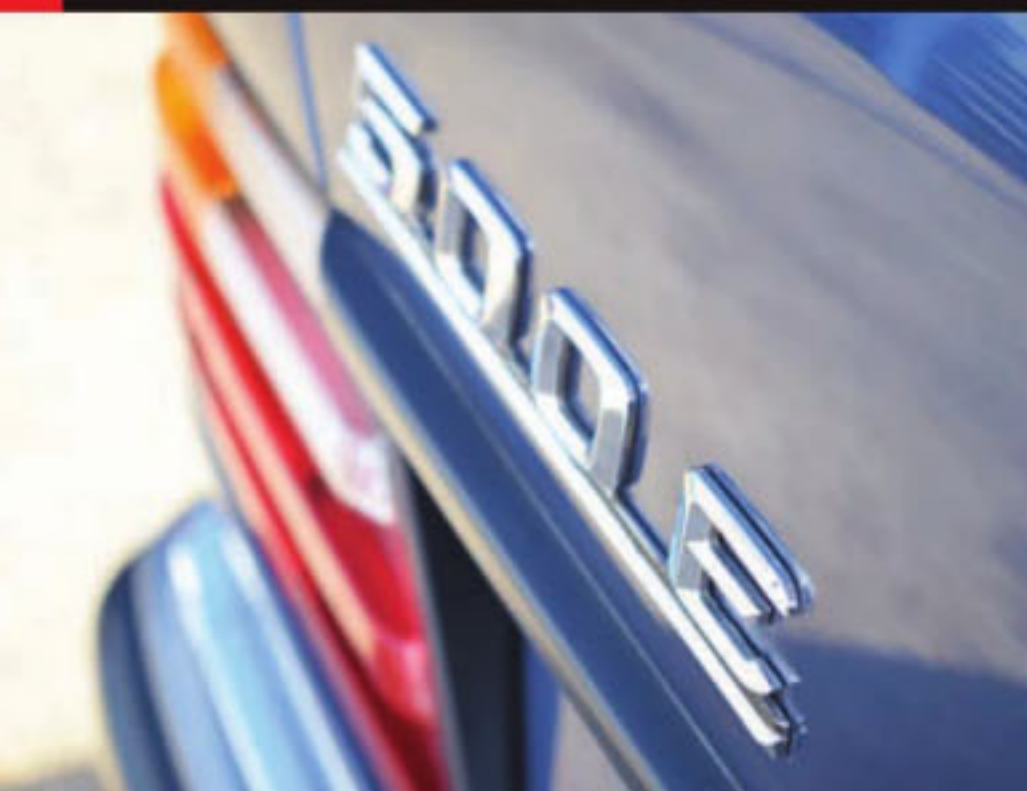
Left: the 220S would look restrained in any other company, but here it's almost showy. Below: chrome horn ring doubles as an indicator switch



Above: distinctive wheel and central indicator switch front traditional cabin. Left: high roofline gives generous headroom for four full-sized adults



Benz is less overtly sporting, but wishbone/swing-axle set-up is capable and composed



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Left to right: complicated valvegear of the Bristol's BMW-sourced 'six', with cross-pushrods topped by triple Solexes; smooth, torquey sohc Benz lump

aggressively or let it flop into its slot according to mood. It picks up speed eagerly, with a healthy snarl from the overhead-cam 'six' and a pleasing surge when the second downdraught Solex cuts in. Low gearing adds to the impression of liveliness, but the short-stroke unit doesn't complain when you rev it hard and remains smooth.

On A- and B-roads it strikes a good balance between refinement and driver appeal, feeling substantial but never heavy when hurried through curves; there is some initial roll and understeer, but you can maintain a good pace without consciously extending yourself.

It's a very good car, the Mercedes, yet there is a real element of joy about the way the Bristol conducts itself that makes the 220S seem rather routine. Much of the initial appeal centres around the driving position. The 220S seats are fat and soggy (and leave you pining for armrests); the Bristol's handsome and supportive chair, with its delightful pop-up headrest, seems to say "I was made for you" and leaves you instantly well disposed to driving the car properly.

You start the 406 with a tiny Yale key and, once the oil is warm (essential with these engines), the long-stroke 'six', with its hemispherical combustion chambers and complex cross-pushrods, is ready to wind out eagerly to 5500rpm with a throaty blare that sounds expensive yet somehow unburstable. It is not quick in any overall sense, yet the four closely stacked gears make the 406 feel more like a sports car than the chairman's luxury carriage that Bristol intended it to be.

Steering, gearshift and brakes feature in descending order of brilliance as the Bristol slowly reveals itself to you. Its rack-and-pinion system (the Mercedes uses a box) is smooth and absolutely accurate, with no looseness or excessive heft in a corner. Eventually the back of the 406 wants to step out, but it's all so evenly balanced that there is nothing clumsy or messy involved in getting the Bristol to that condition. The ride is firmer but more controlled than the Mercedes and the central gearchange a delight: light, accurate and quiet, with the short throws of a giant switch. The brakes feel initially uninspiring in their dead pedal feel, but further investigation reveals them to be both powerful and well balanced where the Mercedes' finned, servo-assisted drums can be snatchy.

While I can imagine almost anyone being very happy with the pretty, luxurious 220S as an all-rounder, it was never intended to be an uncompromising enthusiast's car in the same way as the 406. I'm not sure that Bristol ever made a car with a better balance of virtues than this once-unloved gem.

Thanks to Edward Checkley; Brian Wright; Richard Biddulph (www.vintagerollsroycecars.com); Andrew Blow (www.amjblow.co.uk)



Discreet fins aside, the Bristol relies on simplicity for its elegant shape. Wraparound rear screen gives the Mercedes a touch of modernity



BRISTOL 406

Sold/number built 1958-'61/174
Construction alloy body over tubular steel frame, steel box-section chassis
Engine iron-block, alloy-head, ohv 2216cc straight-six, triple Solexes **Max power** 105bhp @ 4700rpm **Max torque** 129lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, overdrive on top, RWD **Suspension: front** upper wishbones, transverse leaf spring, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, torsion bars, torque arm, Watt linkage; telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion **Brakes** Dunlop discs, Lockheed servo **Length** 16ft 4in (4978mm) **Width** 5ft 8in (1727mm) **Height** 5ft (1524mm) **Wheelbase** 9ft 6in (2896mm) **Weight** 3010lb (1365kg) **Mpg** 26 **0-60mph** 14 secs **Top speed** 100mph **Price new** £4244

MERCEDES-BENZ 220S COUPÉ

Sold/number built 1956-'59/3429 (inc SE)
Construction steel monocoque
Engine iron-block, alloy-head, ohc 2195cc straight-six, twin Solex carburettors
Max power 105bhp @ 5200rpm
Max torque 127lb ft @ 3500rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, with optional Hydrak clutchless operation, RWD
Suspension: front double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar **rear** low-pivot swing-axles, coil springs; telescopic dampers f/r
Steering recirculating ball **Brakes** ATE drums, with servo **Length** 15ft 5in (4699mm) **Width** 5ft 10½in (1791mm) **Height** 5ft (1524mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft 10in (2692mm) **Weight** 3065lb (1390kg) **Mpg** 25 **0-60mph** 15 secs **Top speed** 100mph **Price new** £3976



My dutiful LANDAULET

Martin Buckley samples the state of the art in regal transport – a glorious Mercedes-Benz 600 built for German government service

PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES MANN**



Daimler-Benz AG never suffered from any lack of ambition or dearth of confidence when it came to its W100 cars, better known as the 600s. The sales brochures for these vehicles are wonderful documents, written in sombre tones, weighty with the gravitas of the car. They leave the reader in no doubt about who the 600 was aimed at: not merely rich people, but important rich people. Tycoons, diplomats, cultural figures and world leaders – the kind of individuals who would project the 600 on to a world stage as *the* international car of state. ‘You can sleep in this car,’ it observes in a late-’60s edition, ‘you can rule from it – some do.’

Born in ’63, the 600 came into the world without technical antecedents. Notionally it replaced the 300 series, but in size and ambition it was really the spiritual successor of the 770 Grosser. It was an entirely new luxury car so coldly exacting in every detail and so capable that it set standards that others were still struggling to equal when it went out of production in 1981.

Here was a high-speed conference room that cornered like a sports car on the biggest wheels and tyres (made specially for it) of any post-war German automobile up to that time. The 600 was packed with high-pressure hydraulics and hydropneumatics to make life quieter and more comfortable. It had the world’s best ride, mated to effortless American-style performance thanks to an oversquare 6.3-litre V8, twice the size of anything that Mercedes had built for a passenger car since before the war. This now-legendary M100 overhead-cam motor, with mechanical multi-point injection, made the 600 quicker than any other German saloon. Over a quarter-mile, this 6100lb leviathan could out-drag a 230SL.

The build quality added even more polish to the 600’s stature: it was a fully tooled production model, but finished by hand to the highest standards. Fifty of the most trusted Mercedes-Benz technicians built each car strictly to order.

It was also more visually arresting when new than we now give it credit for, carefully proportioned and detailed by Paul Bracq and Bruno Sacco to look simple and timeless but with a natural authority that allowed it to square up to any other car. Its deep, angular glasshouse, its vertical headlamps and its neatly yet majestically resolved tail set the agenda for Mercedes styling throughout the ’60s and beyond. The 600 resisted attempts at updating it: a proposed ’70s revamp that brought the front and rear into line with the W116 S-Class ended up looking like a ZIL.

For the high-flyer who could afford to spend as much as a house (or 10 Beetles) on their car, the ‘normal’ five-seater was more than adequate. They could be chauffeured in it, or just as readily take the wheel at weekends when the 600 became a giant 125mph family sedan. This model represented most of the production run, at 2190 cars.

The Pullman, however, was all about business. From the start, this 600 was designed as a ‘representative’ car, with an extra 700mm between its wheel centres and a division behind the driver. It was intended that this 20ft 6in-long luxury office (for many years listed in *The Guinness Book of Records* as the world’s longest production car) would have a higher roofline. But by keeping the saloon’s profile, the Pullman looked extraordinarily low-slung. It came as a four-door with rearward-facing occasional seats or a six-door

with forward-facing (fixed or folding) extra seats. Mercedes suggested that these might be used by interpreters for the dignitaries in the back.

Out of 487 Pullmans, just 59 were Landaulets, making these drophead 600s the most prized of all. Like the closed version, they came with four or six doors and the same seating options. On most, the folding roof extended as far as the front edge of the rearmost doors, on others it finished just behind the division. Each Landaulet took 18-20 weeks to build, the same as a Pullman.

This Landaulet could tell some tales. Built in ’72, it is one of a set of 600s that Mercedes maintained for the German government. It has stood on ceremonial duties with leaders of all political hues, in the days when it was deemed safe for such people to wave at crowds from the back of open cars. I tried it from both sides of the division. Getting into the back, the doors open wide and you relax into the mottled tan leather of the rear seat, which is hydraulically adjustable, sits higher than in most cars for a good view of what the chauffeur is up to, and gives a sight-line through the oversized three-pointed star on the bonnet. You could even manually adjust the height of the floors for perfect comfort.

Not much else is manual. The roof eases slowly but silently back on the same 150bar ring

‘OVER A QUARTER-MILE, THIS 6100LB GERMAN LEVIATHAN COULD OUT-DRAG A 230SL PAGODA’



M100 motor has seven auxiliary drives off its crank pulley, including two alternators to feed its electrical demands

main of hydraulics that operates the windows, quarterlights, seats, fuel-filler flap, central partition and bootlid closing/release. Don’t get your fingers or chin in the way of that. The boot is mostly filled by the spare and (long-defunct) radio-telephone transmitter. M-B favoured ‘comfort hydraulics’, with specially made (and now hugely expensive) switches and tiny pumps, for their silence and lack of bulk compared to the electric motors that were then available. The system’s accumulators mean that its various functions can be used with the engine off.

In this Landaulet, famously pictured taking the Queen through Berlin, each switch – and even the doorhandles – are labelled as to their function. By 600 standards, this car is not loaded, but Mercedes boasted that, as long as the car’s integrity wasn’t compromised, it could accommodate any extras that the buyer wanted.

The Landaulet feels lively, accelerating with

Stars and salutes

It would be easier to list who *didn’t* own a 600, such was the car’s potency as a status symbol for the international elite in the ’60s and ’70s.

John Lennon famously had a white Pullman to replace his Phantom V and, in fact, of The Beatles only Paul McCartney failed to succumb to its charms. Actor William Holden liked to do navigation rallies in his 600 sedan, while Peter Fonda loved his Grosser for the ferocity of the hydraulic powered windows. ‘You could drag a cop for 200 yards with that sucker!’ he told me.

When Francis Ford Coppola earned his first big pay day after the success of *The Godfather*, he asked for his bonus to be paid in the form of a new Pullman: one of only a couple ever built without a division. Jack Nicholson is thought to be another delighted 600 owner to this day.

Actor/director Bryan Forbes bought one new, as did Alan Clark (who found it unreliable), Elizabeth Taylor, Hugh Hefner, Aristotle Onassis and Coco Chanel. In 1965, Mercedes built a special Landaulet with a raised roofline and a central rear ‘throne’ for the Pope (below).

The Pullman was virtually a default choice for despots and dictators. Mao Tse-Tung had between 13 and 38 of the things, depending on which story you believe, while Idi Amin, Tito, Ferdinand Marcos, Pol Pot, Ceauşescu, Castro and many others owned multiple 600s.

I’m not sure if David Bowie owned a 600 but he gave it one of its most unsavoury moments of publicity in ’76. He’d been flirting with right-wing politics in interviews at the time, and on arrival at Victoria station ‘treated’ his fans to a Nazi salute, standing in the back of a Landaulet.



relentless urgency and a muffled burble of alternating V8 grunt – there’s a balancer pipe running between the twin exhausts to reduce ‘throb’. I can feel dappled spring sunlight and a warm rush of sweet air that mixes pleasantly with the smell of the still-taut leather beneath your bottom as this massive black limo surges along a country road. The detailing, the flawlessness of the car’s veneers, its fixtures and fittings in this first-class compartment would be moving were it not for that feeling of almost overpowering opulence.

The silent, swift action of the window lifters is always a delight. Riding on four hydropneumatic air bags – with compressed air-controlled adjustment that could raise the ride height by 5in, plus special variable-rate dampers – the Landaulet takes any surface in its stride with supple composure. These open versions suffered scuttle shake in tests, so they were fitted with damper weights under the body, individually tuned to each car.



Despite its 20ft 6in length, the limo handles and stops superbly – with a sublime ride, too. Below: exquisite detailing inside and out; built-in bar-cum-Becker radio and air-con in rear; only room is compromised up front – it's just as plush



Maybach in anger

By reviving the long-dead Maybach brand in a 21st-century conveyance for the filthy rich, this car is undoubtedly the 600 of our times, yet it shows how times have changed. The 600 looks important, the Maybach – in this case a Landaulet – merely self-aggrandising, although its sheer size is impressive. It is as white as an Essex girl's stiletto, both inside and out, which doesn't help. But even in more subdued tones it would still appear a bloater, with that cheap-looking front grille.

The formality and beauty of the 600's rear cabin has been forsaken for the lolling informality of a pair of reclining white chairs. With the roof down, though (it takes 16 secs), it is a pleasant place to sit as long as your driver is not deploying too much of the car's gargantuan thrust. Being powered by the twin-turbo, AMG-fettled 604bhp V12, the Maybach is absurdly quick, continuing to accelerate strongly at 140mph. In the front – with the division raised – the Landaulet is totally silent and rides smoothly on air suspension.

I'm sure many are owned by industrialists and other serious folk of affairs, yet the car is more *X Factor* than summit meeting in character. But let's not dwell on the looks or make too many unflattering comparisons with the 600. The Maybach – hugely impressive in everything it does – was simply born into a different world.



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'AN AMAZING 42 CAME TO THE UK IN '65, WHEN A 600 COST FOUR TIMES AS MUCH AS A JAG MkX'

Nice as it is back here, you sense that the driver is enjoying himself too much and it's time for him to move over. There's no slackening of standards in the way the walnut, the chrome and the leather flow together around the handsome instruments and the smooth-acting switchgear. Again, it looks a little heavy yet it's beautifully done. Hydraulic power adjusts the steering reach but it can't disguise the compromised driving position, inevitable with the division.


Into '4' on the column selector and the parking brake releases automatically. Under way, the Landaulet feels as lusty as it did from the rear, picking up briskly on a fat torque curve that peaks at 2800rpm. The muted growl from beyond the bulkhead reminds you that the M100 has solid lifters because Mercedes was not yet satisfied with the reliability of hydraulic tappets.

Foot to the floor, it pulls away in first but second is normally deemed adequate. Gear-changes are executed quickly in a transmission that was much the same as lesser '60s Mercs – a four-speed with a fluid coupling rather than a torque converter – but beefed-up to take twice as much torque as the 300SE's six-cylinder engine.

There is nothing intimidating about driving the 600. Its impressive lock makes it surprisingly manoeuvrable, but the fat hood, once lowered, blocks your view when reversing. The torque, plus the light, smoothly accurate steering and the car's potent, progressive brakes (twin calipers at the front) mean that it is quite up for being hustled along, should the mood take you.

Just 2677 of these cars were ever built, yet the 600 – and the Landaulet in particular – has a reputation out of all proportion to the number made. Some 126 examples came to the UK, the last new one being sold in '78. Its best year was 1965, when an amazing 42 found homes here. At nearly £9000, it was ferociously expensive, yet you can't help wondering whether Mercedes made any money out of them.

It would be wrong to judge the 600 a failure on the basis of that production total. Its creators never intended it to sell in large numbers. It was designed, giving no real consideration to cost, as an ambassador for Mercedes-Benz and its engineering skills, perhaps even as a feel-good product for German industry as a whole as the economic miracle began to gain momentum.

With nothing left to prove in racing after its withdrawal in '55, the need to build a new Grand Mercedes had an irresistible psychological pull. The W100 was a chance to produce 'the best car in the world' and create a playground for engineers' imaginations to, relatively, run riot. The 600 was eight years in the making, its development interrupted by more pressing commercial models such as the W111 coupés and 190 Fintails. Yet its arrival in autumn '63 was as seismic as the Mini and E-type had been. The 600 bludgeoned its luxury-car rivals into submission with an overwhelming display of excellence the like of which we won't see again. The Maybach, its nearest modern equivalent, has never achieved anything like the same aura of authority. 



Beautifully crafted cabin: leather has barely aged because this 600 has done just 28,000 miles. Below: mic in chauffeur's cabin

MERCEDES 600 LANDAULET

Sold/number built 1963-'81/59 (2677 all 600s) **Construction** steel monocoque
Engine iron-block, alloy-head, sohc-per-bank 6329cc V8, Bosch mechanical fuel injection
Max power 250bhp @ 4000rpm
Max torque 369lb ft @ 2800rpm
Transmission four-speed automatic, driving rear wheels via a limited-slip differential
Suspension: front double wishbones
rear low-pivot swing-axles, trailing arms; air bellows, constant-height levelling, telescopics, anti-roll bar f/r **Steering** power-assisted recirculating ball **Brakes** power-assisted ATE-Dunlop discs, with twin calipers at front
Length 20ft 6in (6240mm) **Width** 6ft 4³/₄in (1950mm) **Height** 4ft 11¹/₂in (1510mm)
Wheelbase 12ft 9¹/₂in (3900mm)
Weight 6108lb (2770kg) **0-60mph** 12 secs
Top speed 118mph **Mpg** 10
Price new £17,000 (1972)



Mercedes, meet thy maker

A 'Pagoda' is the ultimate everyday classic, says **Martin Buckley** after an 1100km trans-continental run to meet its legendary designer, Paul Bracq

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**







Bracq with feline muse: at 75 he still spends eight hours a day in his studio; shelves are stuffed with models of his favourite Mercs, BMWs, Peugeots – and more besides

We are humming along an anonymous stretch of *paysage* in a chilly squall of sheeting rain. It's late November and it's getting dark, but if I had to be driving a 40-year-old soft-top then I'm glad it's this one: a factory-prepared Mercedes-Benz 230SL. There's a reassuring slap to the clap-hands action of the wipers, a busy but robust thrum from the engine and welcome heat from under the dashboard as the icy fingers of winter pull at the resilient hood.

We've put 400 miles under this Merc's wheels today and, while I could list all manner of physical requirements I will be looking forward to when we finally find a hotel (pizza and beer, mainly), I don't feel that the journey has been a chore. The civility of the W113 SL is at the heart of its appeal. There were, and are, any number of cheaper, faster sports cars, but I can't think of one that would feel so reassuringly capable hastening along this gloomy stretch of asphalt. It was a cleverly conceived car, which recognised that comfort didn't have to come at the expense of driver appeal. Here was a car that struck an ideal balance between the performance of the 300SL and the user-friendly character of the 190SL, while at the same time almost inventing a new kind of luxury two-seat Grand Tourer that

could serve as a snug coupé or a breezy roadster.

And then there was the shape, so fresh and youthful and glamorous that it has never really dated or gone out of fashion. It was as relevant an icon with Audrey Hepburn in *Two for the Road* as it was with Helen Mirren in *The Long Good Friday*. Mercedes SLs have come and gone over the past 40 years, but none has come close to the elegant simplicity of the W113, so skilfully fashioned around its wide track and, for the time, impossibly fat tyres. I suspect the dish-topped 'Pagoda' hardtop looked something of an oddity in 1963 – even Mercedes engineer Erich Waxenberger said, "It looks like a tree has fallen on the car" when he first saw the 230SL – yet it became a much-loved trademark that gives the shape a light and airy feel, plus a kind of dignity.

Whatever the headgear, the SL looks good; the fact that we have been dispatched without the Pagoda is no hardship because the hood is superbly weathertight and easy to erect. To be honest, we have not lowered it yet. Our appointment with the father of the Pagoda, Paul Bracq, is still 500 miles away in Bordeaux, which means driving as fast as we can on the *autobahn* to break the back of the journey on the first day.

That was Tuesday. I'd collected the car from the Mercedes-Benz Classic Center in Stuttgart on Monday morning. After a quick run through the controls I'd then gone off – in completely the

Although often accused of not being a real sports car, the SL feels grippy and stable in spite of the body roll. The assisted recirculating-ball steering gives plenty of feel, too

MERCEDES-BENZ 230SL

Sold/number built 1963-'67/19,831

Construction steel monocoque, with aluminium doors, bonnet and bootlid

Engine iron-block, alloy-head, sohc 2306cc straight-six, with Bosch mechanical injection

Max power 150bhp @ 5500rpm

Max torque 144lb ft @ 4500rpm

Transmission four-speed manual or auto, driving rear wheels; optional ZF five-speed

Suspension: front double wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** low-pivot swing-axles, radius arms, compensator spring; coils, telescopics f/r

Brakes discs front, drums rear, with servo

Steering power-assisted recirculating ball

Wheels & tyres steels, with 185x14 radials

Length 14ft 1in (4293mm) **Width** 5ft 9in (1753mm) **Height** 4ft 4in (1321mm, top on)

Wheelbase 7ft 10½in (2400mm)

Front track 4ft 10in (1473mm)

Rear track 4ft 9½in (1461mm)

Weight 3100lb (1406kg) **Mpg** 18

0-60mph 10.5 secs **Max speed** 115mph

Price new £3868



American-style 'milk bar' dash divides opinion. Leather is rare in an SL – most featured M-B Tex

wrong direction – to make an appointment to do some research at the firm's archive. Even on auto-pilot, I spotted straight off that Mercedes had kindly found me one of the rare five-speed manuals – a real bonus on a long journey.

The Mercedes factory at Untertürkheim is a forbidding, futuristic sprawl and even the archive seems vast. The archivist wheels out a large trolley containing 20 box-files of photos and info on the 600, but I'm only able to have a quick scan of the contents and photocopy some of the more bizarre styling proposals. Afterwards, there's just time for a few pictures before the light goes and the SL is tucked up in the underground car park of the Schlossgarten Hotel opposite the central station in Stuttgart.

In the wet rush-hour crawl the next morning we spot a 280SL in the traffic, but its driver is far too cool to acknowledge us. Heading out towards the A5 *autobahn*, the 230SL makes a courtly city car: compact, easy to see out of (even with the hood up) and with a tight lock and light controls. But you have to almost slip the clutch slightly to get a smooth pull-away and seamless changes. It is eager and sprightly rather than especially fast, and you slightly miss the torque compared to the 280SL. The wheels pad and paw gently at bumps in the composed manner of a good saloon and there is hardly a suggestion of shudder from the dashboard.

The doors are long and the sills shallow, so even the fattest of 40-somethings can hop in and out without looking as if they've bought a mid-life-crisis car. There's ample space in the boot for photographer Baker's gear and my bag, despite the fact that the 230 has an upright spare instead of the lay-flat type. There are various other interesting differences – driven by safety requirements and cost – between this and the 250 and 280.

Outwardly, the only real identifying features are the slightly bulbous wheeltrims with separate trim ring rather than a one-piece wheel cover.

'ONLY LOTUS OFFERED A BETTER BLEND OF SUPPLE SUSPENSION AND ROADHOLDING'

Inside, the 230SL has proper loop-pile carpet not found on later versions, and nicer detailing for the door furniture, sunvisors and the Perspex heater controls, which illuminate – later types are designed to snap off in an accident, but don't look as nice. The 230 seats are slimmer and more elegant and – in this car – trimmed in red leather, which is rare and looks good with the white body. But the glitzy architecture of the Espresso Bar dashboard is identical to later cars, as is the big, moulded-plastic steering wheel.

With drum brakes on the back and 20bhp shy of the 280, the 150bhp 230SL sounds a less exciting proposition than the bigger-engined cars. In fact, the main thing you notice is the freer-revving nature of the injected straight-six, which has fewer main bearings and counterweights on the crankshaft to thwart it. Combined with the five-speed 'box – introduced as an option towards the end of the 230SL's run – it's easy to appreciate why the early cars are seen as the sportiest of the W113s, yet I think it's quite marginal. I like the

SL as an auto, but it's hideously under-g geared for cruising. Fifth in the ZF 'box, in contrast, is a geared-up overdrive that gives you 100mph at a very reasonable 4000rpm. Even better, if you want to drive hard, it closes the huge gap between third (70mph) and top (120mph).

From Stuttgart we travel south to Strasbourg, skirt the Alps to Lyon, head west to St-Étienne then loop off the *autoroute* and cross the misty hills of the Auvergne, where there are some relatively quiet D and N roads. The SL sits square in corners, rolls somewhat but not alarmingly and mainly feels collected and tenacious, without the power to get itself into difficulty. Of its contemporaries, probably only Lotus offered a better blend of supple suspension with real roadholding than the W113 SL. Its power steering is light, direct and high-g geared, with enough feel to give you confidence. I like the commanding feel of the admittedly too-large wheel. The seats are well shaped to keep you in place, but the cushions begin to feel hard after a long stint.

Around Clermont-Ferrand we find a Novotel, a pizza and that beer. The next morning it's sunny enough to lower the roof for the final push to the meeting with Bracq in his home town. It takes only a minute and a half and the whole thing disappears neatly under a metal cover to maintain the SL's clean profile.

Aiming for a lunchtime appointment with Maître Carrossier Bracq, we cut across the wine country of the central part of the Dordogne. The five ratios in the manual 'box make good use of the engine's torque characteristics on the curves and inclines but it is a gritty, slightly unsatisfying instrument. The Pagoda feels neutral in its steering and great fun here, only unsettled on its swing-axles if you lift off too suddenly. The car's limits are not there to be transgressed – it just feels vague and out of its comfort zone if you try to drift the back wheels. The brakes are strong but over-servoed and, like all swing-axle Mercs, there is a tendency towards nose-diving.

It's sunny and almost warm by the time we hit Bordeaux around noon and the sat-nav takes us directly to Paul Bracq's gate. He lives with his wife Alice in a comfortable late-'60s apartment



Who needs a modern? It's cosy, warm and quiet with hood up; signature M-B wheel is too big, though



230SL only packs 150bhp, yet it feels almost as quick as later models with five-speed ZF manual; Bosch mechanical injection was a constant. Left: clean lines look fresh, 46 years on

block in the suburbs. He was born in this town in 1933. After a year working for Philip Charbonneaux in Paris and three years' military service in Germany, he joined Mercedes-Benz in 1957. Over a decade he styled not only the Pagoda but also the 600, the W111 coupé and the W108 saloon, plus the 'New Generation' W114 range. Prolific as he was at Mercedes, Bracq didn't become a 'name' until he did the 1973 BMW Turbo concept car. By the time that his new 3, 6 and 7 Series production models emerged, he had already left BMW to begin a 20-year stint at Peugeot as chief of interior design.


Always dapper, Bracq receives us wearing his signature white silk scarf. He's a lively, good-natured character, devoted to Alice: "We did our courting in the prototype of the 220SE Coupé!" Which prompts me on to the Pagoda, and its famous roof: "A designer called Béla Barényi was working on a roof with a built-in rack that would take a load; you could even sleep on it. That was the origin of the idea, but we were looking for bigger door openings and better visibility."

And, after 700 miles in all weathers, that was just about all we got on his ageless masterpiece. Bracq is clearly proud of his past, yet doesn't dwell on it. Instead, he's busy with paintings, posters for exhibitions, interpretations of how classic brands

such as Rolls-Royce might look or ideas for a 600 pick-up, the El Benzo. "I spend eight hours a day in my studio," he tells me proudly. "Just because I'm 75, it doesn't mean that I have to spend my days watching TV and waiting to die."

Over lunch we look at photos of the young, dark-haired Bracq with the prototype glassfibre Gullwing that he crashed and his Porsche 356. "I loved that car," he says wistfully, "I cleaned it every day. It was ruby red; I chose that colour for the BMW Turbo show car in memory of it."

As a parting shot, I dig about in my holdall for a special item that I've been nursing all the way from England. When my friend and Pagoda fanatic, former *C&SC* art editor Nick Kisch, heard that I was meeting his hero, he disappeared into his garage and spent 40 minutes unscrewing his car's glovebox lid. I offer it to Bracq to sign, which he does graciously.

All too soon there's a plane to catch and we have to say goodbye not only to Bracq, but also the white 230SL that the ever-helpful man from Mercedes will be collecting from Bordeaux in the morning. It's a long way back to Stuttgart, yet I'd happily save them the bother. 

Thanks to Mercedes-Benz Classic Center:
www.mercedes-benz-classic.com

Buckley is enthralled as Bordeaux man Bracq explains the thinking behind the Pagoda. Bottom: hood disappears under neat metal cover



During the 1950s and '60s, most patriotic Italians would have told you that the four-door Lancia Flaminia was their biggest and best car, working on the basis that a Ferrari or a Maserati was really a thinly disguised racing machine – a vehicle so absurdly expensive and rarefied that people couldn't relate to it. A Flaminia sedan, in contrast, was an approachable glamour car, not only the favoured transport of church and state, but also industrialists and even the occasional Grand Prix star, such as Juan Manuel Fangio and Peter Collins.

Introduced in 1957 as a 102bhp 2½-litre, this was Lancia's luxury statement for the following decade, taking up where the Aurelia B12 had left off with a more refined (and heavier) version of the V6 concept. It still ran a four-speed transaxle and leaf-sprung de Dion tube, but with unequal-length wishbones at the front replacing the earlier cars' shimmy-prone sliding pillars.

The early Flaminia saloons had Aurelia B20-type drum brakes (discs all round were standardised after the first 500 had been built) plus a bizarre inner and outer wiper set on the rear window, working off the same vacuum system that opened and closed the rear quarter windows. The invention of the heated element for the rear glass banished the quad wipers at about the same time that Lancia boosted the power of the all-alloy, wet-liner V6 to 110bhp in 1961. It quickly followed this in '62 with a 129bhp 2.8-litre version. Amazingly, the last Flaminia saloons were sold in 1970, although when they were actually built is anyone's guess.

The flagship Lancia was, in effect, usurped in the hierarchy of Italian saloons by the Fiat 130 V6. Although it still commanded respect, the Flaminia had always suffered from a desperate lack of development, never getting the power steering, automatic transmission and effortlessly powerful engine that the market demanded.

Sales figures neatly tell the story. The sedan sold briskly in its first year of production (2600 cars), but nose-dived at the beginning of the '60s, probably as a result of the introduction of the faster, more compact and prettier Pininfarina



Left: almost unfeasibly chic Flaminia epitomises *La Dolce Vita*, while the stylish but ferociously efficient Mercedes also came as a long-wheelbase version, the 300SEL, with complex air suspension



ENGINEERED FOR EXCELLENCE

The Lancia Flaminia and Mercedes-Benz 300SE were both high-water marks in the world of prestige European saloons, says **Martin Buckley** as he attempts to choose between them

PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES MANN/LAT

Coupé, which outsold it handsomely. Total saloon production was just over 4000 examples, including 75 with the oddball Saxomat semi-automatic gearbox and a handful of 140bhp Speciale police cars with twin Webers.

For the purposes of this comparison, perhaps only Mercedes-Benz could furnish a continental six-cylinder saloon of equivalent finish, dignity and technical excellence. In Germany, the 300 badge – which went back to the early 1950s (see panel) – certainly had a similar resonance and commanded similar respect among buyers. Introduced in '65, Paul Bracq's masterful W108 is reminiscent of his W111 coupé, with deep windows, slim, sloping roof pillars and a flatter roof. Half an inch lower and wider than the 'Fintail', with a larger glass area (and curved side windows to increase space inside), for me it is the best-looking Mercedes saloon of them all.

It doesn't have the head-turning power of the Lancia, though. While the 300SE has a familiar outline, few people have encountered a Flaminia sedan. Derived from Pininfarina's Florida prototypes of the mid-'50s, this brilliant design – with its headlights out in the corners of its straight-through wing line and wide horizontal grille – was a styling sensation: simple, clean and architectural rather than sculptural. It was, in many ways, the first modern three-box saloon, to which most four-door cars of the 1960s owed a debt.

This left-hand-drive 1966 example (one of fewer than 600 2.8s built) belongs to Maserati Club chairman Nick Heywood-Waddington, and shares garage space with an array of Italian exotica that would make anyone drool. He bought the Lancia a couple of years ago and, after a little sorting, is delighted with it.

Who wouldn't be? Its deep blue paintwork forms a dignified contrast to its tasteful stainless-steel bumpers, bold grille and handsome chrome-on-brass window surrounds. Open the front-hinged aluminium bonnet and its V6 looks compact and purposeful, almost overwhelmed by the massive radiator with its thermostatic shutters. The rubber-trimmed boot, meanwhile, is huge (with a trapdoor to access the inboard brakes), its length taking precedence over rear legroom, which is surprisingly tight.

The doors open wide over a deep, chunky sill and shut with a precise solidity that puts even the Mercedes to shame (they share anti-burst safety locks). That feeling flows through to everything about the car, be it the satisfying twist-click action of the chunky dashboard switches or the silky accuracy of its unassisted steering.

The Lancia feels quite formal, with a big steering wheel and an upright driving position on the wide West of England cloth split-bench front seat; leather or vinyl were options. There is good visibility all round – with slight distortions in the corners of the wraparound windscreen – and a beautiful body-coloured dash with handsome, almost dinner-plate-sized speedometer and rev counter. The chromed buttons for the vacuum rear windows are to the left of the wheel, and further evidence of the obsessive attention to detail can be found in the warning light for the manual choke, the red lights in the doors and the windscreen-washer button that also automatically sets

'ONLY MERCEDES COULD FURNISH A SALOON OF EQUIVALENT FINISH AND TECHNICAL BRILLIANCE'



off the wipers. Was that a first on a European car?

Once warm, the pushrod 60° V6 is sweet, flexible and 'soft' in tune, its single Solex carburettor enabling you to drive it unobtrusively down to low speeds in third and top with the minimum number of changes. It will pull smoothly and quite strongly from almost nothing to 70mph in a particularly versatile third gear, while the short and quick movement is totally at odds with most people's perceptions of what a column change is supposed to be like.

The servo-boosted Dunlop disc brakes are fairly heavy, but reassuring, balanced and resilient – and the Lancia's firm, flat ride deals quietly and disdainfully with everything. Sounding well bred and discreetly throaty, the V6 gives brisk and evenly paced acceleration up to 90mph, thanks to its flat torque curve, although the combination of gearing, weight and aerodynamics limits the top speed to about 110mph.

If not exactly fast, the Flaminia puts a smile on your face with its combination of enthusiasm for the task in hand, pleasing refinement and the fact that such an eminently dignified car – on such skinny tyres – can be hustled so quickly through corners, diving in slightly at the front but clamping its de Dion rear to the road with absolute tenacity. The steering is low-geared, a little heavy at slow speeds, but seems to gear up as

From top: Lancia's rear lights meld into bumpers; Merc has lower waistline; similar cabin treatments, with two main gauges, but it's Latin style and cloth vs the trad wood and leather of the Swabian machine



Elegant Bracq lines of the 300SE look younger next to the exquisite Flaminia, which has its roots in the Florida show prototypes



lock increases, so that you never feel as if you are endlessly twirling the wheel.

In short, the Flaminia is magnificent, but very much an experience of the late '50s or early '60s. It is not a casual machine, but one that demands you drive it with proper attention – a curious mixture of sedate sports car and lusty limousine.

The Mercedes, in contrast, feels entirely a car of the mid-1960s that, in many respects, would not have been out of place in the mid-'70s. Its power steering means you can palm it around town with ease, while the automatic transmission – although unrefined by modern standards with its punchy shifts – means that you don't have to work hard to extract the ample performance.

It is also beautifully made, but in a more rational, 'productionised' way that doesn't suggest the laborious hand-work that must have gone into the Lancia. Apart from the elegant inlet manifold for the Bosch mechanical fuel injection, the M189 engine looks very conventional, but physically more imposing than other six-cylinder Benz units of the time.

From inside, the delightfully low waistline makes the 300SE appear even more open and

Evolution of the Mercedes-Benz 'six'

In 1951, the large and patrician W186 300 saloon (as used by Chancellor Adenauer) had put Mercedes back on the post-war map as a maker of luxury saloons. At the heart of its appeal was the M186 straight-six, a versatile 3-litre unit that would be developed through to 1967 as the firm's top-of-the-range passenger-car engine. Variants of it were used in five basic shells (including the 300SL), and it should not be confused with the smaller M180 'six' that was superficially similar but entirely different in detail, with almost no shared components.

The introduction of a top-spec 3-litre 300SE 'Fintail' (right) in '61 brought about the second and final phase of this engine's development, having been redesigned for the smaller car with an alloy block featuring press-fit dry liners. With 160bhp, it could take the air-suspended 300SE up to 112mph, but in 1964 Mercedes engineers (irked by the arrival of the new 120mph Opel Diplomat) found another 10bhp by fitting an improved six-piston injection pump.

After the W108 body arrived in 1965, there were no more 3-litre Fintails. The M-B petrol-engined saloon hierarchy was split into four- and six-cylinder Fintails (with carbs and no more than 2281cc), and this new 'square tail' body in 250S, 250SE and 300SE/SEL form. The W108 featured several technical improvements, such as four-wheel disc brakes (with twin-diaphragm servo), bigger 14in wheels and a clever hydropneumatic self-levelling unit between the swing-axes to keep the rear level under load.

You could order the 300 'six' in this latest model in standard 300SEb form with coil suspension (such as 'our' W108) or as the stretched SEL with air springs (W109). M-B dropped the M189-engined 300 in '67, but, confusingly, went on building a 300SEL-badged W109, although powered by an M180 2778cc unit.





Clockwise, from main: big Lancia grips better than you might expect; lovely detailing but the switches aren't marked; V6 sits well back in bay; rear seat isn't that roomy, although it's beautifully appointed



'THE FLAMINIA EVOKES BARDOT PURRING UP TO THE KERB BY A CAFÉ ON THE VIA VENETO'

spacious than the Lancia, and there is more legroom in the rear. It must have just about the finest visibility of any 1960s saloon, a factor that makes you feel good straight away, as do the firm but orthopaedically correct front seats. Its dashboard, with a narrow slash of plain semi-matt wood, is slightly joyless compared to the Lancia, but it is also simpler and more logically laid out. You don't have to guess which switch is for the lights or the wipers. In fact, many functions are combined in a single column stalk.

There is no undignified fiddling with choke levers in the Mercedes. The automatic enrichment of the injection takes care of everything and the car is ready to go at once, hot or cold. Even in modern terms, this '67 300SE is quite fast. There might not be enough power to smoke

LANCIA FLAMINIA 2.8

Sold/number built 1957-'70/4023

Construction steel monocoque

Engine all-alloy, overhead-valve 2775cc 60° V6, with single Solex 40 PAAI carburettor

Max power 139bhp @ 5000rpm

Max torque 187lb ft @ 5300rpm

Transmission four-speed manual transaxle or Saxomat semi-automatic, driving rear wheels

Brakes discs all round, with servo

Steering worm and roller

Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones, coil springs **rear** de Dion axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, Panhard rod, anti-roll bar f/r

Length 15ft 9in (4801mm)

Width 5ft 8in (1727mm)

Height 4ft 10in (1473mm)

Wheelbase 9ft 5in (2870mm)

Weight 2750lb (1247kg)

0-60mph 13 secs

Top speed 106mph

Price new £2946

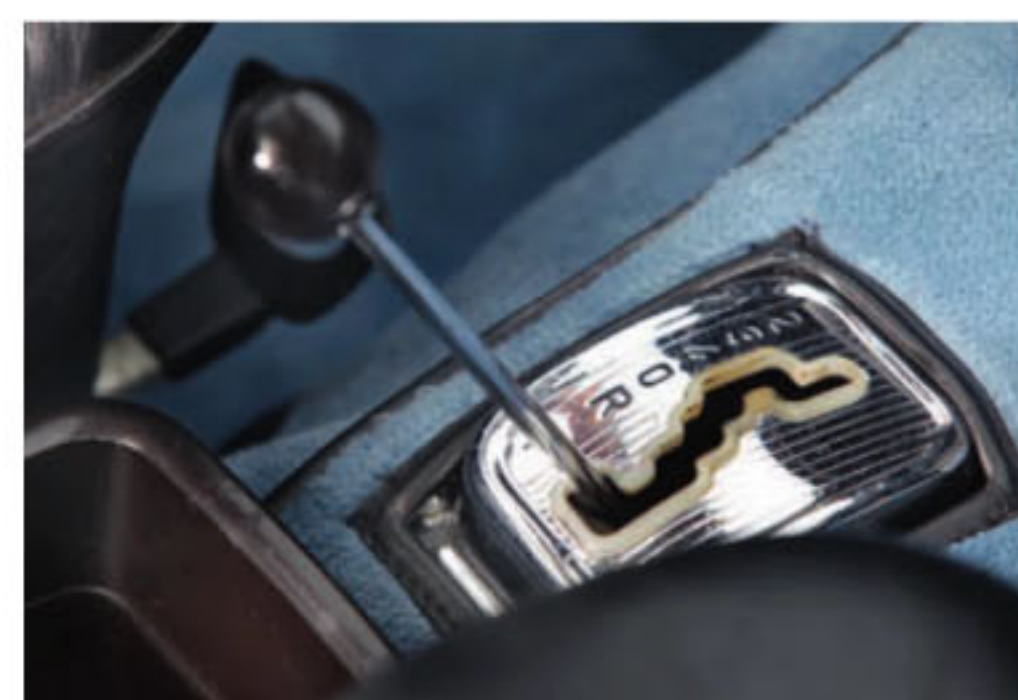
the tyres, but it has a lot more urge than the Lancia. With 195bhp it could not fail to be quicker, although it is interesting to discover that the German is 500lb heavier. It's not so much the off-the-mark acceleration that is impressive, but the mid-range strength between 60 and 90mph that will surprise quite a few modern cars. It's delivered with a gloriously visceral howl that is 300SL-like in timbre.

I used to own this very car – it now belongs to Jeremy Banks, who also has a pair of Touring-bodied Flaminias – so I know that it will cruise at 100mph and top 120 if you're feeling brave. Like all Mercedes of its generation, it's low-g geared (18.8mph per 1000rpm, compared to the Lancia's 20mph) and there's no rev counter. Yet the 3-litre 'six' feels tireless and was designed to sit flat-out on an *autobahn* all day long with no more noise than the Lancia. God help you if you do blow it up, though. Even in the world of Mercedes, these are notoriously expensive units to work on.

The handling is not as involving or rewarding as the Flaminia's, but its total competence cannot be denied. It feels squat and supple on the road: the 300SE's coil-sprung ride is so beautifully



Clockwise, from main: 300SEb, über-rare as a right-hooker, corners and rides well; four-speed auto was built by M-B; injected 'six' is more powerful than Lancia V6; cabin is roomier than the Flaminia's, too



'IT RIDES SO WELL, WHY WOULD ANYONE WANT THE TROUBLESOME AIR SUSPENSION?'

soft, you seriously wonder why anyone wanted the SEL's troublesome air suspension. Plus, the power steering is a boon rather than a hindrance to placing the Mercedes accurately. In a straight line, it has all the stability of the Lancia, and when you are moving quickly you pretty much forget it has PAS. It doesn't wheeze or snatch or deprive you of feel, but just unobtrusively assists.

Once you have the measure of its cool efficiency, the 300SE invites you to drive it quite hard; there is a crisp authority to the engine's sound and delivery that can bring out the Uhlenhaut in some drivers. Holding the big steering wheel and looking out over the three-pointed star, the 300SE has a sense of purpose and command that is always impressive.

It would prove an easier car to live with than

MERCEDES-BENZ 300SE

Sold/number built 1965-'67/2737 (including long-wheelbase SELs)

Construction steel monocoque

Engine iron-block, alloy-head, single-overhead-cam 2996cc straight-six, with Bosch mechanical fuel injection

Max power 195bhp @ 5500rpm

Max torque 203lb ft @ 4100rpm

Transmission four-speed automatic, driving rear wheels

Brakes discs all round, with servo

Steering power-assisted recirculating ball

Suspension independent all round, at front by double wishbones rear single-joint, low-pivot swing-axes; coil springs f/r (SEL has air bags)

Length 16ft 1in (4902mm)

Width 5ft 11in (1803mm)

Height 4ft 9in (1448mm)

Wheelbase 9ft 1/4in (2750mm)


Weight 3440lb (1560kg)

0-60mph 10 secs

Top speed 118mph

Price new £4085

the Flaminia and has many practical advantages over the Italian that clearly illustrate Stuttgart's much more highly developed understanding of the requirements of the 1960s luxury saloon market. You could buy it with your head and heart and never look back, but personally I could never walk away from the sophisticated charms of the Flaminia. If the Mercedes conjures images of ruthless German businessmen tearing up an *autobahn* in the name of the economic miracle, then the Lancia evokes Bardot purring up to the kerb outside a café or a club on the Via Veneto. I know where I'd rather have found myself.

Most Lancia fans secretly acknowledge that the saloon variants of their favoured model usually offer the most undiluted driving and ownership experience. On that basis, the Flaminia sedan is possibly the best 'real' Lancia of the lot – if you judge it on technical pedigree and refinement. It represents the apogee of the firm's reputation as a maker of outstanding four-door cars. Lancia might subsequently have built several more obviously exciting machines, but never one so exquisitely engineered – perhaps even over-engineered – as this. 

Top-down and out in BEVERLY HILLS

Mercedes-Benz and California are a perfect fit, as **Mick Walsh** discovers at the wheel of an effortlessly cool 280SE 3.5 Cabriolet in Los Angeles

PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES MANN**





Mercedes-Benz has always been held in high regard in multicultural Los Angeles. Tough, fast and exclusive, its stylish 280SE 3.5 V8 could handle all of LA's driving conditions, be it gridlocked rush hour, Pacific-front freeway or its famous boulevards. It's tailored, we reckon, for a tour of the metropolis and its automotive attractions.

Mike Kunz, manager at the Mercedes-Benz Classic Center USA, is taken with our plan and generously entrusts us with 'Tina', an unmo- lested, low-mileage, one-owner 280SE 3.5 that occupies a special place in his affections. "It was my introduction to classics," he explains. "It's always been in Mercedes-Benz ownership. The first owner, Tina Nortman, was the wife of a company CEO. She drove it around New York's Upper West Side and, in the summer, took her kids to the beach in it. We bought it for \$60,000 in 2000, with a promise never to sell it.

"280SE Cabriolets have never been cheap, but thankfully nobody is cutting up saloons any more; today's buyers are wiser. A low-mileage example such as Tina, with just 50k on the clock, will make around \$120,000, while really special versions can fetch up to \$200,000."

If you're a *Mad Men* fan, you'd love the place.

No motoring pilgrimage to LA would be complete without a visit to the Petersen Auto- motive Museum on Wilshire Boulevard in the heart of the sprawling SoCal conurbation. Its curator, Leslie Kendall, has kindly agreed to open the doors to its basement storage, the contents of which would upstage most museums. Many of the cars here have had famous owners: Steve McQueen's Hudson Hornet, Rita Hayworth's Cadillac, Henry Ford's Ferrari 166 and Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson's Duesenberg to name just a few. But it's the California Benzes that we're interested in. Jack Nicholson has recently donated his 600 – there's a car that could tell some stories – while tucked in a corner is the 1923 28/95 roadster of NBC Orchestra band leader Don Ricardo. This special-order short- chassis was modelled on the Targa Florio team cars, and must have been one of the fastest cars in 1920s LA. Ricardo had a lifelong passion for Mercedes greats and later owned a 500K Spezial Phaeton and a 300SL Lightweight. He gunned the latter across the Bonneville salt at 150mph in 1967 – before a gullwing door blew open.

From the Petersen, we aim the three-pointed star north and head to Fairfax for a twilight cruise down Hollywood Boulevard. With the



Inside the MBCC's dazzling, clinical Irvine workshops, a 1956 300C Station Wagon catches my eye. This coachbuilt beauty was a special order for Caroline Foulke, a wealthy American with pads in Paris, Palm Beach and New York. Created by Binz in Lorch, a firm better known for its ambulances and hearses, the bespoke order was originally graphite grey with red door stripes to match Ms Foulke's yacht club colours. Rumour has it she loved the car so much that she air-freighted it from home to home.

Saying our goodbyes, we pack the 280SE's cavernous boot and head north in search of a groovy 1960s Eichler estate in Orange. It's dusk when the gold Mercedes purrs into the development, and it looks so right amid these passionately preserved Modernist homes. Their owners are clearly committed to a retro lifestyle: Mustangs, a Pontiac GTO and even a Volvo P1800 grace the driveways, while sneak living- room views reveal period furniture and décor. It's little wonder that this timewarp community is regularly used for advertising and film shoots.

top down and the superb Becker Europa radio tuned to a college station playing 1970s soul, our Mercedes is the sharpest car on the famous strip this evening. The traffic is jammed and we crawl past the Roosevelt Hotel, where the first Academy Awards were staged in '29, and on to Mann's Chinese Theater. Locals and tourists shout compliments and continually ask if I've seen *The Hangover*. I haven't, so am confused by the reference until told that a silver 280SE Cabriolet features extensively in Todd Phillips' 2009 comedy. Story has it that five cars were used for the movie and that several of them were Coupé chops built by Cinema Vehicles in North Hollywood. Further along the boulevard, the 280SE is again in its element outside the Capitol Records Tower, where no doubt a few hotshot music execs parked them in the day.

The American market was essential to the model's success – particularly for the Cabriolet – until stringent emissions and safety requirements killed it off. First shown at the 1969 Frankfurt Motor Show, this flagship exemplar





Clockwise, from above: dream tourer, dream house – 280SE parked by an Eichler Home in Orange; Googie-style coffee shop; on Santa Monica’s pier; ascending the mountains of Southern California



had a long list of luxury options – including a six-piece set of fitted luggage – and only the 600 limo was more expensive. Stylist Bruno Sacco did a subtle job of revising the styling from the 300SE: a lower bonnet, wider grille and rubber bumper strips confidently brought this classic into a new decade and provided it with a more muscular stance to match its V8 power.

By the time we head back to our Santa Monica hotel for a drink with auctioneer David Gooding, we’re impressed by the 280SE’s surprisingly compact turning circle – nifty U-turns are not a problem for this 16ft tourer – and efficient heater. The hood’s operation is slick for its size, but there is no need to deploy it until we park for the night. Only the buzzing reminder for keys left in the ignition annoys us. That’s impressive given that we have spent the day in LA traffic.

We wake at dawn and head along Highway 1 to visit collector Ray Scherr. Sun up, hood down, Tina effortlessly cruises along the famous coastal route as we search for a breakfast stop. Early surfers distract our journey. Spotting a group

unloading classic longboards, we have to stop for a chat. These dudes are as taken with our “beautiful” Merc as we are with their old-style kit. “We like vintage longboards,” explains ‘Topper’, who is rightly proud of his Terry Martin-shaped board. “They are more than 9ft long, thick and heavy, with a single fin. Also, we don’t use a leash. There are some fantastic spots in southern California – Malibu, Rincon and San Onofre – but here at Sunset is a great place to learn.” It’s heartening to discover youngsters with a keen sensibility for surfing history.

From the coast, we cut across the scenic Santa Monica Mountains to Westlake Village to meet Scherr. The fuel-injected V8 storms the steep pass, its brawny torque never struggling to haul the weighty Cabriolet – at 3850lb, it’s 180lb heavier than the Coupé. Its chunky double-deck bumpers and pram-style hood make it look like a barge, but it’s actually rewarding to hustle. The silky action of its broad 16in steering wheel could be sharper, and the auto ’box is sluggish to begin with, but, once rolling, the 280SE romps



'THESE SURFER DUDES ARE AS TAKEN WITH OUR "BEAUTIFUL" MERC AS WE ARE WITH THEIR OLD-STYLE BOARDS'





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along at the pace of most moderns. It leans when cornered hard, but its handling is impressive and only a handful of bonkers 'bikers blitz us as we ascend the canyon route.

We pull up to Scherr's garage and he gives the thumbs-up to the Mercedes. "I've had several 280SEs and love them," says the founder of Guitar Center. As he slides back the doors of his secret storage I spy a metallic chocolate-brown 280SE that he's driven more often than many of the cars in his dazzling collection. With a concours Bugatti Type 57S Atalante, an Alfa Romeo 8C-2900 Touring Spider and a Ferrari 275GTB 'Four Cam' for company, that says it all about the W111's lasting appeal. Having never previously been charmed by post-war Mercs, I've been gradually converted by the 280SE. Even its prodigious thirst – when pushed, its consumption dips below 15mpg – is tolerable at California's \$3.60 (£2.23) a gallon.

On our final day we're keen to sample LA's early-morning breakfast gatherings, guided by hot-rod aficionado Bruce Meyer. We stop at the Warner Center in Woodland Hills, and the car park is filled to capacity with a hugely diverse group of machines. Where else but California would you discover a mint Triumph Vitesse slotted next to a Ferrari F40?


Again I'm drawn to a classic Mercedes. When I spot an immaculate silver 600 drawing into the lot, I can't resist chatting to its owner. Lagos-born Ede Ibekwe plays the part as he smokes a fat cigar after gliding down the freeway from central LA. "My dad had one in Nigeria and I remember riding in the back as a kid," he says. "It was always my ambition to own one. I bought this car two years ago and it's been very reliable. I try to drive it as much as possible. You can imagine the reaction I get when I take it to work."

There's a car gathering somewhere in LA all

year round, so Meyer is out most weekends in a choice vehicle from his stunning selection. "My favourite event is 'Cars and Coffee' at the Ford Design Studios in Irvine," he enthuses. "It's every Saturday morning, from 6am to 8:30am, and you get more than 400 incredible cars there."

Meyer is another Mercedes fan – he owned a 280SE in the 1970s – and his Beverly Hills garage contains a Benz with a rich Hollywood history. A young Clark Gable indulged in fast cars – a race fan, he was a regular Indianapolis 500 attendee – but in his latter years he was proudest of the tobacco-brown 300Sc Cabriolet with cognac leather that he purchased for \$12,500 from Auto Stiegler, the Beverly Hills dealership. Only he was allowed to drive it. For the 1956 premiere of *Giant*, Gable and his fifth (and last) wife, Kay Williams, refused the customary Cadillac limousine and instead rolled up to the red carpet in their new Mercedes. Still unrestored, this car now lives alongside Meyer's hot rods and Ferraris.

Our final site of LA automotive worship is the Jack Colker Union 96 Gas Station. This astounding triangular structure on Beverly Hills' Crescent Drive is on our return route to Irvine. Originally designed as part of the 1960s update of LAX airport, it was later deemed surplus to requirements and relocated. At night, when neons highlight its curved fly-away roof, it's easy to imagine George Jetson docking there to refuel his flying car.

We hit the freeway for one last time and are immediately surrounded by busy Sunday traffic. Yet again the 280SE scores as it coolly deals with impatient 21st-century motorists. Photographer Mann and I have fallen for Tina and are reluctant to give her up. After three days and 600 miles, we can clearly see the allure of these superbly engineered Swabian cruise-ships. 

MERCEDES-BENZ 280SE 3.5

Sold/number built 1969-'71/1232

Construction steel monocoque

Engine iron-block, alloy-heads, sohc-per-bank 3499cc 90° V8, Bosch fuel injection

Max power 200bhp @ 5800rpm

Max torque 211lb ft @ 4000rpm

Transmission five-speed manual or four-speed auto, driving rear wheels

Suspension independent, at **front** by double wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** low-pivot swing-axles; coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r

Steering power-assisted recirculating ball

Brakes discs front, drums rear, with servo

Length 16ft 2in (4923mm) **Width** 6ft ¾in (1848mm) **Height** 4ft 8in (1422mm)

Wheelbase 8ft 11½in (2731mm)

Weight 3850lb (1746kg) **0-60mph** 8.4 secs

Top speed 128mph **Mpg** 17

Price new £7000



Top: lower body gives the Cabriolet a leaner line, and panels are unique.

Above: taking in the drama of the jet-age Jack Colker Union 96 gas station



Luxury, with a sporting twist

In a quiet corner of the Peak District, **Simon Charlesworth** tries to pick a winner from three landmark executive saloons by BMW, Mercedes-Benz and Jaguar

PHOTOGRAPHY GERARD HUGHES



PBX 633J

When the junior executive car's second chapter began, the instigators behind the story – Rover and Triumph – were already disappearing into the BLMC abyss. The keen-eyed Germans, though, had realised the potential of this new sector and were quick to respond: Mercedes-Benz with the W114/5 and – continuing its astounding recovery from seemingly certain financial ruin in the late '50s – BMW with its E3.

The new generation of British junior executive saloons, meanwhile, was represented by just one car: the Jaguar XJ6. Rover and Triumph would revise their 1963 progeny, but both the P6 Series 2 and the 2.5PI Mk2 were merely new brews in old bottles.

If 1967 witnessed bountiful crops of hippies, frolicking naked with butterflies while discussing the cosmos with a semolina pilchard, then '68 was the summer of love's skull-cracking hang-over. The newspapers were peppered with gloom: a legion of protests heaving with kaftan-clad baby-boomers; the Wilson government's balance of payments problems; and The Beatles, with rumoured internal tensions, would only follow up their seismic LP *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* in November.

Who would have been interested enough in these cars to visit Earls Court for the 53rd International Motor Exhibition, pay 2s 6d for a catalogue and spend the day prowling beneath the manufacturers' signs and thick cigarette smoke? In the midst of the schoolboy brochure collectors' scrum, dollybirds and full-scale cutaways, you could admire the glittering machinery.

Well, Mr 1968 Executive was probably a

30-something, a go-getting family man and a suburban *émigré*. He would desire quality garnished with competition kudos and, in keeping with the prevalent egalitarianism, his new motor car would show that he had turned his upwardly mobile back on his parents' outdated 'know your place' credos. Doubtless he would conclude the day mulling over this tantalising trio, all of which would suit his port-and-lemon, middle-class status with its G-Plan furniture, Old Spice and stereophonic Sony TC-530 reel-to-reel tape player accoutrements.

Beneath the chic, Paul Bracq-designed body of the *Strich Acht* ('slash eight', referring to the W114's 1968 ID plate), Mercedes proved that even Stuttgart wasn't immune to the period's appetite for modernity with the Fintail's replacement. Under its crisply tailored tin was a new beginning. Bye-bye low-pivot rear swing-axes and hello semi-trailing arms, plus all-round disc brakes and a choice of four- and six-cylinder petrol engines (with diesels arriving later).

The 250 *Neue Generation's* absence of rattling sootiness means that the owner of a W114 'six' shouldn't be mistaken for a jobbing Stuttgart taxi driver. Arguably, it is more difficult for him not to be regarded as a middle-management henchman on the Bond villain company-car scheme.

The superb interior of this 250 – powered by the larger 2778cc 'six', which superseded the original 2496cc in 1970 – is a bright and airy tonic after today's fat-pillared behemoths. Being a 1974 W114, it comes with the post-'73 revisions, the most obvious from the driver's seat being the headrests and large four-spoke wheel. Enthusiastic drivers, however, will smart at the lack of a rev counter and clutch pedal.

Moving from the Merc, your ears register a

pleasing thunk behind you. Inside the BMW 2500 there is an even lower waistline, greenhouse visibility and a cloth-trimmed interior that is in remarkably original condition. Its VDO instrumentation is clearer and more comprehensive than the 250's and its ergonomics are unashamedly driver-centric. The tachometer wears a 6400rpm redline and, glory of glories, there's a four-speed manual gearbox – though it also came with a three-speed ZF automatic.

Sitting here, inhaling 1972, the differences in quality between Stuttgart and Munich are scarcely detectable – unlike the disparity in these two competing designs. This is the reason why a bullish BMW launched a feisty attack on long-held Mercedes-Benz territory with the ambitious 2500 and 2800 – sportier interpretations of the straight-six powered, rear-drive, four-door luxury template. Designed under Wilhelm Hofmeister in the tradition of the '61 *Neue Klasse*, the E3 is what everyone now imagines an upmarket BMW to be: stylish without whimsy, and involving to drive. It was powered by Alex von Falkenhausen's superb M30 'six'.

Stylistically, the German two are elegant, unfussy and confidently modernist – the XJ not quite so. The Jaguar's front bears clear 420 cues, with quad headlamps bookending an updated grille. Its feline rear, with flexed muscular haunches, is far more athletic than the *à la mode* Teutons with their clean, crisp, uncompromised 'edge line' profiles. Continuing the British tendency to lag slightly behind the aesthetic times, the XJ6's mid-'60s appearance refuses to be pigeonholed, save to say that it is unmistakably Jaguar – and undeniably beautiful.

The ultimate William Lyons Jaguar has a driving position that is more reclined, a higher



Clockwise: fresh dampers ought to improve this W114's handling; a proper Merc has colour-coded hubcaps; twin-carb 'six' is smooth but sluggish with automatic 'box; famous three-pointed star motif





Clockwise: elegant E3 features the signature 'Hofmeister kink' on the C-pillar; twin kidneys, or *nieren*; clever hinged rear plate hides fuel-filler cap; Zenith carbs on this 2500; it grips and rides well, but isn't as supple or as well-damped as the Jaguar



| | MERCEDES-BENZ 250 | BMW 2500 | JAGUAR XJ6 2.8 DE LUXE |
|--------------------------|---|---|--|
| Sold/number built | 1968-'76/412,968 (all W114s) | 1968-'77/92,415 | 1968-'73/98,527 |
| Construction | steel monocoque | steel monocoque | steel monocoque |
| Engine | iron-block, alloy-head, sohc 2778cc 'six', twin Zenith 35/40 INAT carburettors; 130bhp @ 5000rpm; 159lb ft @ 3200rpm | iron-block, alloy-head, sohc 2494cc 'six', twin Zenith 35/40 INAT carburettors; 150bhp @ 6000rpm; 155lb ft @ 3700rpm | iron-block, alloy-head, dohc 2792cc 'six', twin SU HD8 carburettors; 142bhp @ 6000rpm; 182lb ft @ 3750rpm |
| Transmission | four-speed automatic, RWD | four-speed manual, RWD | four-speed manual with overdrive, RWD |
| Suspension | independent, at front by wishbones, coil springs rear semi-trailing arms, coil springs; telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r | independent, at front by MacPherson struts rear semi-trailing arms, coil springs, telescopic dampers; anti-roll bar f/r | independent, at front by coil springs, semi-trailing wishbones, telescopics, anti-roll bar rear lower wishbones, radius arms, twin coil-over telescopics |
| Steering | power-assisted recirculating ball | power-assisted worm and roller | power-assisted rack and pinion |
| Brakes | discs all round, with servo | discs all round, with servo | discs all round, rear inboard, with servo |
| Length | 15ft 4 1/4in (4680mm) | 15ft 5in (4699mm) | 15ft 9 1/2in (4813mm) |
| Width | 5ft 9 3/4in (1770mm) | 5ft 9in (1753mm) | 5ft 9 1/4in (1760mm) |
| Height | 4ft 8 3/4in (1440mm) | 4ft 9in (1448mm) | 4ft 6in (1372mm) |
| Wheelbase | 9ft 1/2in (2750mm) | 8ft 10in (2692mm) | 9ft 3/4in (2762mm) |
| Weight | 3075lb (1395kg) | 2938lb (1335kg) | 3388lb (1537kg) |
| 0-60mph/top speed | 12.7 secs/108mph | 9.3 secs/121mph | 11 secs/117mph |
| Mpg | 19 | 22 | c20 |
| Price new | £3495 | £3058 | £1958 7s 3d |



E3 facelift in '71 brought matt-black nose inserts – Jaguar would lose its full-height grille in 1973 when Merc's bonnet height was also reduced. Below: plain wood fillets in German dashes, perforated PVC trim in Merc, cloth in BMW, veneer and leather in Jag

shoulder line, a deeper, slightly narrower footwell and interior fittings that are bordering on the nostalgic. A parade of Smiths dials is affixed to a sober wooden dashboard, there's a two-spoke wheel with horn-ring, and opening quarterlights – in 1968... Such is its quaint cosiness compared to the Continental competition, the Jaguar feels like an elderly relative's parlour.

The XJ, however, is the exception to the rule that precious good comes from corporate rationalisation. Designed to replace Jaguar's unruly range of saloons, the XJ was endowed with engines that – in Series 1 form – would include 2.8 and 4.2 'sixes' and eventually a range-topping 5343cc V12 in 1972. Its underpinnings used an anti-dive evolution of the MkX/420G double-wishbone suspension and Bill Heynes' splendid four-coil independent rear set-up.

Refinement was the XJ's mantra, as was a degree of excellence that would keep Jaguar at the top of the class until the arrival of its replacement, the XJ40, slated for 1975 (it was 11 years late!). For the XJ to receive sufficient funding to be put into production, however, Lyons had to sacrifice his troubled firm's independence by merging with BMC and Pressed Steel in 1966.

Musing, pontificating and snapping done, we head back up to the speed-camera-neutered section of the A537, the Cat & Fiddle. First up is the Mercedes. Its driving position is excellent, it cruises effortlessly with that 2.8-litre 'six' and it is considerably refined. The all-round discs are impressive: powerful with plenty of feel and nicely weighted. The W114 even corners well, and responds to mid-corner adjustment without

complaint as David Evans notes when an errant HGV attempts to canoodle with the 250's offside front wing. In fact, *Autocar* observed of a similar model in '73: 'The car exhibits little roll and the adhesion is of a high standard indeed.'

Yet the Mercedes' stiff throttle lacks progression and the automatic 'box is about as responsive as a snoozing peer post-luncheon. Kickdown is sluggish and begrudging, smothering the 130bhp the straight-six can muster in exchange for greater levels of engine noise. While its ride is comfortable, this car's rear dampers have seen better days, plus its over-assisted and low-geared recirculating-ball steering is a touch vague.

In many ways, like an orthopaedic sandal, the 250 makes good sturdy sense but it also has all the sassiness and excitement of said footwear. Its lexicon includes core Mercedes virtues – solidity, longevity and integrity – yet its vocabulary lacks a capability to express entertaining emotion.

The other two, though, are fish sourced from a different kettle – one powered by a flexible, rev-happy 'six'. Indeed, their closeness is such that Evans remarks: "I'm glad you're writing this and not me. I'd struggle to pick between them."

If BMW's mission was to build a machine with greater verve than established Mercedes-Benz practice then it clearly succeeded, for this sweet 2500 is an enriching experience.

While the 1971 Jaguar's cabin has a soothing 'there-there' ambience, which is as relaxing and cossetting as its ride/handling compromise, the BMW's is a modern, informal yet comfy place of work that encourages its driver to press on. It sparkles, is finely honed, balanced, poised and



responds willingly to the throttle's attitude. Body control is well governed, the brakes are good, and then there's the steering. If, like me, your foremost automotive fetish is decent steering, the 2500's power-assisted ZF-Gemmer worm and roller axes this criterion. The slim three-spoke wheel slithers and caresses as it passes through your hands. It's positive, well-gearred, nicely balanced and full of feedback.

Rapid though the BMW is – its 9.3 secs sprint to 60mph is almost as quick as a 4.2 XJ6 – it can't compete with the Jaguar's dynamic excellence. The XJ6 has higher levels of grip, with an unsurpassed ride for something *sams* hydropneumatics, and it seems blissfully unwilling to roll on this snaking road. Indeed, after returning to the 2500 from the Jaguar and going through a tightening left-hander, a swift wide-eyed lesson in Bavarian understeer is more than enough to illustrate its Coventry rival's exemplary composure.

As we climb up from Buxton, not once does the grip from those arch-filling 205/70x15 tyres become threatened – even when the well-weighted manual-overdrive gearbox works the 2.8-litre into a sweat, filling the cabin with one of the most distinctive vocals in classicdom. Keep

the revs above 3000rpm and the baby XK comes on cam, reaching for the red region at 6000rpm.

Aside from performance, where the BMW really counters is with its responsiveness. The only chink in the XJ6's armour is its over-assisted Advest rack-and-pinion steering; like the Mercedes it is undergeared, but it is lighter and almost completely incommunicado when compared to the 250, let alone the 2500. There just isn't any pretence of weighting or feel at the wheel, instead the driver has to rely on judgement accrued over yards, furlongs and miles.


So which would Mr 1968 Executive have bought? The Jaguar: it is the best, most beautiful car here, and it was the most affordable. As *Motor* noted in its 2500 automatic test: 'Unfortunately, the price of such sporting affluence is high... The £2475 4.2 XJ6, bogey of all lush Continental imports and in our view still bettered by none on overall merit, accentuates the burden of import duty and, perhaps, the fact that Jaguar can still teach the world something about costing.'

The XJ6 would also tap into those glorious Le Mans memories from his youth, as well as the E-type's celebrity-endorsed glamour from the decade's debut. Doubtless it would even enable

him to support Wilson's patriotic economic policy, the 'I'm backing Britain' campaign.

Today, though, the classic choice is not so clear. The XJ6 is still a superb machine that gobbles up miles with the appetite of Monty Python's Mr Creosote, yet there's always something about the BMW. Its capabilities are not all that far behind the Jaguar in purely objective terms, but it is perhaps more willing to play due to its modest 175x14 footwear, greater degree of body roll and better power-to-weight ratio.

Palm that precise short-throw Getrag four-speed 'box, experience the free-revving M30's husky howl, feed the steering just so and delight in a nimble, sporting chassis that is eager to show you a good time on your favourite road.

In due course, it all depends on your priorities: sometimes the hushed calm of refinement is everything, and sometimes it isn't. 

Thanks to Jaguar owner Steve Elnor; 4Star Classics for the BMW (www.4starclassics.com); Classic Cars Manchester for the Mercedes (www.classiccarsmanchester.co.uk); the Jaguar Enthusiasts' Club (www.jec.org.uk); the Jaguar Drivers' Club (www.jaguardriver.co.uk)



Clockwise: front end of XJ6 clearly harked back to its 420 predecessor, but its road manners were in a different league – few cars ever matched its ride, yet it corners better than the BMW, too; 2.8 version of XK twin-cam suits manual gearbox; big cat badge



WHICH IS THE BEST HOT-ROD BENZ?

It's like picking a favourite child for **Martin Buckley**, as he compares the two most potent Stuttgart muscle cars, the Mercedes SEL 6.3 and 6.9

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

Because they share a big-block engine and a certain 'factory hot-rod' sensibility, it has always felt natural to talk about the Mercedes 300SEL 6.3 and its successor the 450SEL 6.9 in the same breath. But when you have the opportunity to jump from one car to the other, you start to wonder just how similar they really are. Fairly evenly matched against the clock in terms of urge, yes, yet the earlier vehicle is as raw and thrilling as the later one is suave and accomplished. The thoroughly engineered 6.9 is much more what you expect of a Mercedes-Benz, whereas the 6.3 feels like an anomaly, the product of a series of happy accidents.

In its defence, Daimler-Benz AG of Stuttgart has never tried to pretend otherwise. Yet the oft-recounted story of development engineer Erich Waxenberger slipping a 'spare' 600 engine into a 'spare' W109 shell in his own time rings more hollow with every retelling, unless you happen to believe that a firm run along severe, almost military lines would allow a relatively junior engineer to get away with building a special. The truth about the creation of the most exciting Merc of the '60s is simply that the huge and forbidding 600 wasn't selling in anything like the numbers envisaged, and consequently the board was looking for ways to amortise development costs and use spare production capacity by finding a second home for its 250bhp V8.

Enter, in 1968, the 300SEL 6.3 saloon, a sales and image-building success story for a company





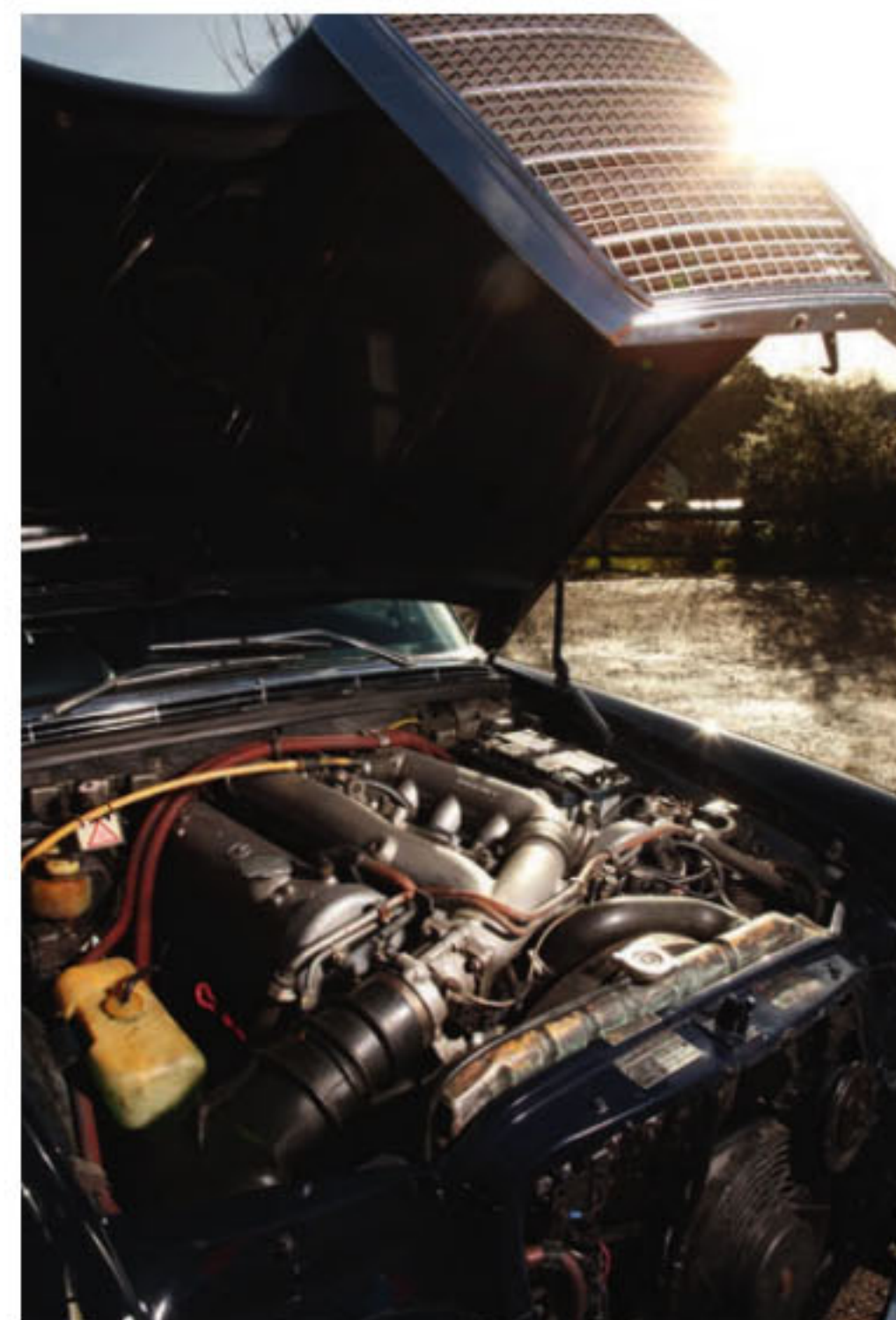


From top: the 6.3 is remarkably agile for a car of its size; 450SEL 6.9 loses out to the earlier car in pure performance, but is crushingly competent





Clockwise: cabin is among the last of the 'classic era'; complex mechanical fuel injection; huge rear bench; ride is soft, with plenty of roll; four-speed auto



that was beginning to lose its reputation as king of the *autobahn* under an assault from quick new cars from BMW and Opel. Based on the air-suspended, long-wheelbase 109-series shell – which had previously had nothing more potent than a 170bhp straight-six – the 300SEL 6.3 had more acceleration than had ever been available in a saloon before; enough to humble any 911 of the time and most roadgoing Ferraris.

Everyone loved it, particularly the Americans – *Road & Track* famously subtitled its road test: 'Merely the greatest sedan in the world.' In Europe, the 6.3 was the favoured road transport for half of the grid at most Formula One meetings. There was simply nothing else quite like it.

When production of the 6.3 ended in 1972, a replacement was eagerly anticipated as part of the new W116 S-Class range, but initially V8 thrills only extended as far as the 4.5-litre unit in the long-wheelbase shell with ordinary steel springs. In fact, Mercedes had the 450SEL 6.9 ready for the market in 1974 but decided to delay the introduction until May 1975, thus avoiding the worst of the public relations fallout from launching a 145mph, 14mpg boardroom express in the aftermath of the Fuel Crisis.

The W116, with its trademark double bumpers and big dirt-resistant tail-lights, was stronger but necessarily heavier model-for-model than the old S-Class, with greater roll-over stiffness and side-impact protection. Apart from the badge on the bootlid and the wider tyres, the 6.9 was visually identical to the 450SEL and thus satisfied those who enjoyed the covert nature of the older car.

But Daimler-Benz was not of a mind to sanction another hot rod; if the 6.3 had been an

uncouth motor car by Mercedes standards in certain matters, then it was immediately evident just by reading the specification that this new SEL was a more thoroughly designed machine, created from the start to take the big M100 engine – by then bored out to 6.9 litres and featuring a dry sump (to keep the bonnet line low) and hydraulic tappets. Another significant improvement was a change from frighteningly complex and expensive mechanical fuel injection to the all-new, Bosch-designed low-pressure continuous-flow K-Jetronic system.

Power was up from 250 to 286bhp, and on 98-octane fuel with its 8.8:1 compression ratio the heftier, higher-g geared 6.9 didn't have quite as much acceleration as the 6.3, but 0-60mph in 7.3 secs was still immensely quick for a car of this size. Perhaps more importantly, it could cruise faster than the older car – and it was probably of more than academic interest that it had another 11mph of top speed in hand. At 140mph, the 6.9 was pulling just 5000rpm and independent tests of European-specification cars regularly recorded top speeds of close to 150mph. To put the 6.9 fully into context, it had roughly comparable performance to a Maserati Khamsin and could keep in touch with uncompromising sports cars such as the Lancia Stratos, the Ferrari 308GTB and the Porsche 911 Carrera.

This new car had to be about more than just speed, of course. Additional technical refinements were required to justify the model's existence and huge price-tag. Improved suspension – something to give it an additional dimension of luxury over and above the standard 450SEL – was the obvious answer, but what Mercedes couldn't do was revisit the unreliable

'THE 6.3 HAD ENOUGH ACCELERATION TO HUMBLE ANY 911 AND MOST ROAD FERRARIS'

MERCEDES-BENZ 300SEL 6.3

Sold/number built 1968-'72/6526

Construction steel monocoque

Engine iron-block, alloy-head, sohc-per-bank 6332cc V8, Bosch mechanical fuel injection

Max power 250bhp @ 4000rpm

Max torque 369lb ft @ 2800rpm

Transmission four-speed automatic, RWD

Suspension independent, at **front** by wishbones **rear** low-pivot swing-axes; Bosch self-levelling air springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r

Steering power-assisted recirculating ball

Brakes 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ in (273mm) front, 11in (279mm) rear ATE discs, with servo

Length 16ft 5in (5000mm)

Width 5ft 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ in (1811mm)

Height 4 ft 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ in (1410mm)

Wheelbase 9ft 4in (2845mm)

Weight 3820lb (1733kg)

0-60mph 7.1 secs **Top speed** 134mph **Mpg** 16

Price new £8115



Clockwise: W116 feels a generation newer; vast V8 is up to 6.9 litres; optional leather adds to opulence; few saloons keep up with 6.9; auto has three speeds



air-spring system as used on the 6.3. So for the 6.9 the coil springs were thrown away and replaced by gas-filled reservoirs connected by hoses to damper units. Pressure – 2100-2900psi – was applied by a small accumulator identical in design to the spring units and controlled by valves that were in turn actuated by linkages to the front and rear anti-roll bars. The gas behaved like a progressive spring, becoming harder the more it was compressed, while the amount of oil in the system determined the ride height.

Mercedes was quite proactive in getting F1 drivers into 6.9s as road transport, in the days when most of them still drove themselves to circuits. Tellingly, the 6.9 was the preferred transport of the likes of Emerson Fittipaldi, Niki Lauda, Ronnie Peterson and – most famously – James Hunt, who had two.

Ian Keers, chairman of the Mercedes-Benz Club, can trump all of the above, however, because he owns both a 6.3 and a 6.9. He acquired the beautifully original silver 450SEL from its first owner in 2005, and has doubled the mileage since then to 44,000. Keers says that it's the cheapest car to run that he owns – but then his other car is a 6.3...

And the 6.3 in question, sold new in Glasgow in 1969, came along as a 'running project' in 2007, its mid-blue paint bubbling in places (it has since had a bare-metal repaint). Keers has suffered the usual expensive problems with the air suspension but, its owner having chased through the system replacing 'O' rings, air bags and valves, the 6.3 now retains its ride height even when left unused for long periods.

Of the two I find it much the prettier – so simple and slender – yet the 6.9's authoritative

shape looks better with every passing year. The W108/W109 saloons dating from 1965 are always pleasing places to sit, with their low window sills and great visibility. The 6.3 has a slim, large-diameter plastic steering wheel and broad seats with low backs: somehow your neck feels vulnerable without the optional head restraints. In the 6.9, the seats are more figure-hugging, the steering wheel almost as big but with a fat and grippy padded rim, the ridges still well defined thanks to this car's low mileage. Both cars have multi-function column stalks, but the W116 is a product of the science of ergonomics, with clear views across the rational heater controls, three large main instruments and the typical Mercedes light switch operating the powerful Bosch head- and foglamps behind their rectangular covers.

There is a good view out of the 450SEL, but it's not in the airy league of the W108; the hefty safety pillars of the W116 shell were a portent of the gloomily enclosed cabins of today. There is much more plastic to be found inside the 6.9 compared to the 6.3, and less evidence of hand-finishing (although the optional leather seats help), but neither car is in the Rolls-Royce class. Somehow the Germans have never been able to do wood convincingly.

Warmed up and on the move, both cars have contemptuously effortless acceleration, superb throttle response and, even in a world where 300bhp is routine in a big luxury car, these M100-engined Benzes still feel potent.

Both are low-revving overall, but develop huge torque at low speeds for that delectable feeling of power to burn. Yet where the 6.3 makes your neck-hairs tingle with giant lunges

'WARMED UP AND ON THE MOVE, BOTH HAVE CONTEMPTUOUSLY EFFORTLESS PACE'

MERCEDES-BENZ 450SEL 6.9

Sold/number built 1975-'80/7380

Construction steel monocoque

Engine iron-block, alloy-head, sohc-per-bank 6834cc dry-sump V8, Bosch K-Jetronic electronic fuel injection

Max power 286bhp @ 4250rpm

Max torque 405lb ft @ 3000rpm

Transmission three-speed automatic, RWD

Suspension independent, at front by wishbones rear semi-trailing arms, Watt linkage; self-levelling hydropneumatic spring/damper units, anti-roll bar f/r

Steering power-assisted recirculating ball

Brakes 11in (279mm) discs, with servo and optional ABS on later cars

Length 16ft 9½in (5118mm)

Width 6ft 1½in (1867mm)

Height 4ft 7½in (1410mm)

Wheelbase 9ft 9in (2972mm)

Weight 4060lb (1842kg)

0-60mph 7.3 secs **Top speed** 145mph **Mpg** 14

Price new £21,000



Only a dedicated spotter will pick out the tiny badge and wider tyres that give away the iron fist beneath the W116's velvet-glove exterior

of Wagnerian thrust, the 6.9 delivers a sort of restrained excitement with the rough edges knocked off. It's not really any slower, it is just more refined and makes less fuss about things.

In the earlier car, gearchanges are well defined because they are not smoothed by a torque converter. They aren't rough, just very positive with four gears to the 6.9's three. You can hold the 6.3 in the lower ratios by pushing the delightfully spindly lever forward, whereas pulling the 6.9's chunky plastic grip back through 'D' and 'S' into 'Low' feels more natural. Even under full throttle the 6.9 melds one gear into the next with a barely discernible flick of the rev counter and subdued thunder from beyond the bulkhead.

The 6.3 sounds fantastic but is understandably noisier in terms of wind as well as engine din. Not that the 450 is perfect: even in the late '70s it was not regarded as an outstandingly quiet car for its class in terms of either tyre- or wind-generated noise. What's more surprising, and plays against type, is that the earlier car has the softer, more refined ride, demonstrating how good the air springs can be – when they work.

The power-assisted steering of these cars was perhaps the best to be found in any saloon of their respective eras. The 6.3's helm feels only slightly woolly and uncertain after you have experienced the deft 2.6 turns between generous locks (for a 38ft turning circle) of the 6.9 which, like all W116s, had zero-offset geometry. Even the modestly talented could usually retain their dignity in this remarkably agile limousine.

Not that the 300SEL has an especially tricky reputation for a 250bhp 1960s car with swing-axle rear suspension. You can corner it very fast, very safely in a state of gentle understeer and

never take up too much road. The air springs self-level in all the right places and compensate for the fact that the 6.3-litre V8 is an immense lump of an engine. It was no accident that all of the M100-powered Mercedes cars needed a form of pressurised springing to compensate for the sheer heft concentrated in the nose, which would otherwise have meant an unacceptable compromise in favour of either handling or ride on conventional coil springs.


The 6.3 requires more of your attention than the 6.9 to drive quickly, but also feels a more specialist device than the later car – which is all part of its appeal, and in part the reason why prices of the few really good examples are firming up daily. Values are second only to Pagoda SLs and 280SE 3.5 Cabriolets in the hierarchy of perceived desirability, and some are now getting nut-and-bolt restorations that must absorb huge amounts of time and money. You can even get many of the bits new from Mercedes, but the prices would give most people heart failure.

Although the 450SEL 6.9 is probably the best (or at least the most practical) of all the M100 Benz saloons, it is easily the least appreciated. That said, the cult appeal that built up around the model after its tyre-shredding appearance in John Frankenheimer's sparingly scripted and ambiguous post-Cold War thriller *Ronin* should not be underestimated.

Even so, it has yet to achieve the status that was predicted for it when production ended in 1980 because it is perceived as neither as obviously 'classic' as the 6.3 nor as conspicuously grand as the 600. As a consequence, it is not widely understood just how special and rare this car really is. If you merely want a large, grand,

older-looking 'chrome era' Mercedes, there are many less financially ruinous ways of achieving this ambition than buying a 450SEL 6.9. The technical subtleties are lost on too many people who might anyway get frightened off by parts and servicing requirements that are less exacting than the earlier cars but still scary – especially if they relate to the engine (noisy timing chains, smoky top-ends, problems with the ECU) or the suspension system. These factors tend to depress the value of any 6.9 that looks anything less than pristine; fails to come with a service-history file the size of the Magna Carta; or cannot list a famous racing driver, a member of royalty or God among its former keepers.

Other factors, however, look certain to secure the 450SEL 6.9 a place among the seriously collectable Mercedes of the near future. For a start, it will get rarer as a natural culling process sifts out the rusty, poorly maintained examples, leaving only the shiny, well-brought-up cars to elevate the model's image.

Secondly, it will move into the purchasing orbit of a generation of wealthy people coming into their 40s and 50s who dreamt about owning the ultimate saloon of the 1970s when they were children, but couldn't get any closer than a begged sales brochure, a game of *Top Trumps* or – if they were lucky – a rare glimpse of the real thing in town traffic or a motorway fast lane: the well-recalled thrill of seeing the famous digits on the right-hand side of the bootlid and the silky boom of dual exhausts. Potent memories such as these will open minds and wallets, and make the 450SEL 6.9 the most hotly pursued Mercedes saloon of its generation – and a worthy alternative to a 6.3 if you can't afford one. 

**'NEVER BEFORE HAD
SUCH FAST AND FANCY
CARS BEEN SO SORTED
AND SENSIBLE'**





In his greatest dilemma, can **Martin Buckley** pick between his favourite BMW, Fiat, Mercedes and Daimler coupés?

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

CSi, 130, SLC and XJ 5.3C: for a child of the 1970s, the bootlid badges still resonate powerfully. To be honest, trying to choose between them is like trying to nominate a favourite child. To favour one over the other would be a betrayal, because these are the cars that I swooned over in my formative years; a jet-set dream team that blended the traditional *gran turismo* sensibilities of continent-crunching driver appeal with the latest in technical and aesthetic refinements, plus good taste.

Good taste? Aesthetic refinement? Big words and bold statements, but for me car styling really did peak in the late '60s to early '70s and these cars make the point admirably. The successors to this generation of coupés were unnecessarily bigger, usually uglier and sometimes slower cars that seemed to lack their predecessors' panache.

Here were four of the most exclusive coupé flagships available, imbued with special hand-finishing and refinements that lifted them way above the rabble. Never before had such fast and fancy cars been so sorted and relatively sensible. If the '60s had been the era of the specialist GT car – hammered out over a tree stump, powered by an American engine and produced in piffling numbers by a company forever on the brink of bankruptcy – these machines were the antidote.

They were accessible status symbols that must have made even the wealthiest buyers think carefully before they splashed out on an Aston, a Jensen or any four-seater Ferrari, Maserati or Lamborghini. You didn't need a riding mechanic, a fuel bowser or a diploma in auto electrics to run one of these vehicles. Wrought from saloon-car mechanicals and built on production lines by big firms that also sold much cheaper family or executive cars, the Fiat 130 Coupé, BMW 3.0 CSi, Mercedes 450SLC and Daimler Double-Six Two-Door were not truly exotic. Yet they were rare enough, fast enough and sophisticated enough to be hugely desirable.

I admired these cars from afar in period, but only really caught up with them in the '80s when they became attainable objects I could aspire to owning (or persuade my dad that he needed to). The BMW and the Fiat gravitated into the Ken Buckley stable circa '78 and '81, and thus have an unfair emotional advantage; the experience of seeing them on our drive for the first time, sitting in them and smelling them was something akin to religious back then. Even now, the sight of either vehicle on the road gives me a frisson of excitement. Not that I would ever dismiss an SLC or a Double-Six out of hand: I could concoct a convincing reason to own and love any one of this quartet. Yet, were I governed by price, I would have to conclude that the BMW is relatively overvalued. Or are the Fiat, Daimler and Mercedes-Benz just remarkable bargains?

Daimler Double-Six Two-Door

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1975-'78/1873

Construction steel monocoque

Engine all-alloy, sohc-per-bank 5343cc V12, electronic fuel injection; 285bhp @ 5850rpm; 304lb ft @ 3500rpm

Transmission three-speed automatic, RWD

Suspension: front wishbones, anti-roll bar
rear lower wishbone/upper driveshaft link, radius arms; coils, telescopic f/r

Steering power-assisted rack and pinion

Brakes discs, with servo **Length** 15ft 10½in (4845mm)

Width 5ft 10in (1770mm)

Height 4ft 6in (1370mm) **Wheelbase** 9ft ¾in (2769mm)

Weight 3885lb (1762kg)

0-60mph 7.6 secs **Top speed** 148mph

Mpg 11-15 **Price new** £5291

With 5.3 litres and 285bhp, the Daimler Double-Six Two-Door seems like an absurd and glorious piece of British overkill even now, rather like Concorde. In '75 – when the first of the 150mph, fuel-injected Jaguar/Daimler V12 coupés began to emerge from the troubled portals of Browns Lane, Coventry – it must have been a proud moment. There was little dissent from the opinion that, taken all round, these were the finest cars in the world. Nothing could match the V12 for velvety, whisper-quiet power in the world of luxury cars, and not even Rolls-Royce could equal the ride offered by the XJ Jaguars in terms of softness, control and isolation.

You sit low inside the Double-Six Two-Door, its walnut fascia pleasantly familiar from other species of Series 2 XJ saloon and the centre console sweeping up between two fairly dainty-looking leather chairs. There is a gauche brittleness to some of the detailing in here that always let down Jaguars and Daimlers in the mid-'70s, and seems to link the car with less noble companions in the British Leyland stable. All is forgiven once under way, though.

Even now, driving Fredrik Folkestad's Double-Six, there is an eerie silence about it that could make the acceleration seem almost ordinary until you see how fast the needle rises and feel how hard you are being pushed into your seat squab. The adoption of the disciplined GM400

automatic transmission in place of the jerky Borg-Warner 'box appeared to complete the perfection at the time, and only the lack of ultra-high gearing really blights it as you are wafted along by turbine force. The thin wheel connected to featherweight power-assisted steering tends to mask the Daimler's supple agility as it flows easily from corner to corner, though it refuses to lurch or founder on its fat tyres.

Some air playing with the pillarless window seals reminds you how Jaguar struggled to get this right but, with the windows lowered and the weak, wintry sun glinting off the GKN Kent alloys, it is an undeniably pretty car and, allegedly, was Sir William Lyons' favourite. I don't think that I will ever really get on with the vinyl roof, because it seems to undermine the seriousness of the Daimler/Jaguar as a high-speed express rather than a pub landlord's *barouche*. And yet, when you see an XJ coupé with the vinyl top removed, it doesn't look quite right.

Image could be this car's only problem. You just have to think of it in the right way. The Double-Six seemed, and still seems, more grounded in domestic reality and the grubby world of BL – until you remember that it was powered by the world's only series-production V12 engine. With some yellow headlamps and a discreet Italian numberplate, it would suddenly be super-cool in the right environment.

Nicely balanced shape was based on same wheelbase as S1 XJ6 shell. Below, l-r: sublime, almost inaudible V12; signature GKN Kent alloys; reasonable room in the back; veneer of class in finely appointed cabin



BMW 3.0 CSi

As far as I'm concerned, the 3.0 CSi just looks right – from every angle. BMW has never made a better-looking car than these E9 coupés of the 1968-'75 generation, and I include the 507 in that judgement. The CSL is the pin-up car of this distinguished line of two-doors, but for me the CSi is the one to have, its muscular lines free from the boy-racer stripes and wheelarch extensions that always looked slightly daft. With manual gears and 200bhp from its injected, canted-over straight-six, it had the same mechanical specification as the lightweight plus, where the UK market was concerned, was hardly any heavier and thus equally as rapid as the CSL; 139mph from 3 litres was something quite special in the '70s. These coupés were among the best sellers in their class, but the all-steel CSi is rare here because the importer dropped it in favour of the CSL for most of its production run.

With its aggressive snout forming a leaded one-piece apron with the front wings, its tightly tucked-in stainless-steel bumpers and long, heavy doors (containing the world's most glacial electric-window mechanisms), the E9 shell has a hand-finished feel. That aura continues inside, with a dashboard formed by a sweep of Germanic wood, hefty front seats (unusually vinyl-trimmed here) and extensive use of chrome to make the coupé buyer think that the price premium over the 3.0 Si saloon was justified. It is a generous

2+2 rather than a four-seater, with a wonderful feeling of airy cheerfulness about the cabin.

In pure figures, the BMW should go almost as well as the Daimler, beat the Mercedes-Benz and easily outrun the Fiat, but you have to work it quite hard to extract the performance. With the sweet, throaty timbre of its engine and the need to shift gears through a pleasant though not quite flick-shift gearbox, the BMW is a more physical motor car than the others here and perhaps the most rewarding if you give it the attention it requires. The engine will pull hard to 6000rpm – with wheelspin in third if you want it to as the tail squats – or just loiter around in the high gears; third takes the car from 10 to 100mph. The CSi feels compact and aggressive in a way that the others don't, and there seems to be an imperative to drive it hard and well wherever you can.

The power steering is not super-sharp, but it does have enough weight to give you confidence so that setting up the BMW for corners is instinctive and satisfying. It is at its best through long sweepers, slight understeer keeping it stable, body roll more evident to onlookers than occupants. The semi-trailing-arm rear suspension and lusty torque give the CSi a hooligan element to its character if you go looking for it in tighter, slower bends. It feels more intimate, less remote than the other cars, with a persona that is part brawny masculinity, part svelte femininity.

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1971-'75/8199

Construction steel monocoque

Engine iron-block, alloy-head, sohc 2985cc 'six', Bosch D-Jetronic fuel injection; 200bhp @ 5500rpm; 200lb ft @ 4300rpm

Transmission four-speed manual, RWD

Suspension: front MacPherson struts

rear semi-trailing arms, coils; telecopics, anti-roll bar f/r

Steering power-assisted worm and roller

Brakes vented discs, with twin servos

Length 15ft 3½in (4658mm)

Width 5ft 6in (1676mm)

Height 4ft 6in (1361mm)

Wheelbase 8ft 7in (2624mm)

Weight 3030lb (1376kg)

0-60mph 7.5 secs

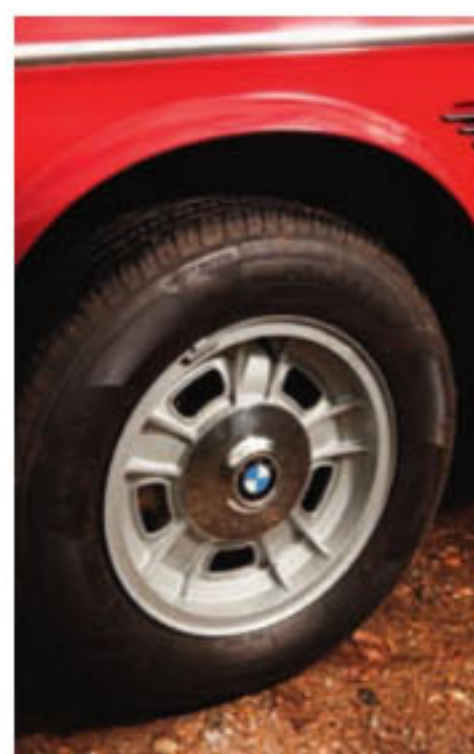
Top speed 139mph

Mpg 16-20

Price new £7399



Fantastic all-round vision with slim pillars. Below, l-r: injection raised output of 3-litre M30 'six' by 20bhp; 195/70s on factory 14in alloys; sculpted seats, but least roomy of four; trim is vinyl (usually velour)



Fiat 130 Coupé

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1971-'77/4491

Construction steel monocoque

Engine iron-block, alloy-heads, sohc-per-bank 3235cc V6, twin-choke Weber carb; 165bhp @ 5600rpm; 184lb ft @ 3400rpm

Transmission three-speed automatic, RWD

Suspension: front MacPherson struts, torsion bars **rear** coils, semi-trailing arms, lateral links; telescopic, anti-roll bar f/r

Steering power-assisted worm and roller

Brakes vented discs, with servo **Length**

15ft 10in (4826mm) **Width** 6ft (1829mm)

Height 4ft 5¼in (1353mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft

11in (2724mm) **Weight** 3528lb (1600kg)

0-60mph 10.5 secs **Top speed** 115mph

Mpg 14-20 **Price new** £5531

The Fiat's appeal is more difficult to quantify. Current from 1971 to '77 – to the tune of fewer than 5000 examples – it has rarity and, for me at least, sheer beauty on its side. Cool and chisel-edged, with a perfect ratio of glass to metal, it descends from a line of architecturally elegant Pininfarina designs that began in the mid-'50s with the Lancia Florida. It is a majestic thing in the way an ocean liner has presence, and it's still large enough to carry a certain authority when surrounded by hideously bloated modern cars. Interestingly, when out and about, it is the one that gets the most attention from the uninitiated. But their features register a mixture of disappointment and incredulity when you tell them this big, aristocratic-looking car is a mere Fiat.

Further points in the favour of the 130 come from a superbly crafted interior that completely upstages the other cars here. Rich, tasteful and truly spacious front and rear, it is almost regal in its air of luxury, shutting off its occupants from the outside world in a riot of velour and wood. It has features the others lack, too, such as vertical adjustment of its front seats, a steering column that moves up and down as well as in and out, plus town-and-country horns and rear blinds. It seems Fiat was determined to make the 130 the most thoroughly equipped and engineered car in its class. When you glance underneath, you will find properly sorted suspension with

torsion bars at the front and semi-trailing arms at the back (with the struts separate from the coil springs), plus a ZF limited-slip differential.

The 130 Coupé feels substantial on the road, and you begin to realise that it is in effect a sort of Italian Rolls-Royce Corniche: elegant, inconspicuously brisk and easy to control. Its single-carburettor Aurelio Lampredi V6 – unique to the 130 – will rev freely but was really designed to give smooth, low-down torque. In combination with the automatic 'box and the low overall gearing, it wafts effortlessly off the mark with an imperious snarl from its dual tailpipes. It will cruise with the other cars at the ton happily enough, but there is only another 15mph in hand – an entirely academic point if the gearing in top were not so low, to the detriment of fuel consumption and refinement.

The Borg-Warner transmission is not the Fiat's best facet because it tends not to be that smooth under pressure, though its sensitive mid-range kickdown succeeds in making the 130 feel surprisingly lively in most situations, if not exactly exciting in terms of outright speed.

But it was never about that. What impresses more is the graciousness of its overall manners, the weighty feel of the ZF power steering and the way this big car – substantially shod for its day on 205/70 tyres – swoops and flows through fast corners in such a stable and unflustered fashion.



Stunning Pininfarina lines, with neat Carello lamps. Below, l-r: free-revving V6 works hard in a car as heavy as this; 205/70x14 tyres on Campagnolo alloys; opulent cabin is the roomiest here



Mercedes 450SLC

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1972-'80/31,739

Construction steel monocoque

Engine all-alloy, sohc-per-bank 4520cc V8, Bosch electronic fuel injection; 225bhp @ 5000rpm; 278lb ft @ 3500rpm

Transmission three-speed automatic, RWD

Suspension: front wishbones **rear** semi-trailing arms; coils, telescopics, anti-roll bar f/r

Steering power-assisted recirculating ball

Brakes discs, with servo

Length 15ft 6½in (4737mm) **Width** 5ft 10in (1778mm)

Height 4ft 3½in (1302mm)

Wheelbase 9ft 3in (2819mm)

Weight 3515lb (1594kg)

0-60mph 8.5 secs **Top speed** 136mph

Mpg 14-18 **Price new** £10,435


The SLC is as bullish and rugged as the Daimler is silky and fragile; as ubiquitous and as ordinary as the Fiat is rare and exotic; and as sensible and sober as the BMW is flamboyantly elegant.

The 450 is the most commonplace member of the family of coupés that began with the 350SLC in '72 and ran through to 1980, latterly with the new, all-alloy 5-litre engine. A stretched, fixed-roof, four-seater version of the R107 SL (and thus a departure for a Merc flagship coupé that had always taken its lead from the contemporary saloon), the 450SLC was hideously expensive. It cost £14,750 in '77, against £11k for the Daimler, but proved popular, with 31,739 sold; the Americans were particularly fond of them.

SLCs have always left me slightly unmoved, but I sense that the tide is turning for them. The styling – with that pillarless side view and slatted blinds – looks prettier than it did 10 years ago, and I can now see the appeal of its robustness and usability. I recall being nonplussed when I first drove one – it seemed like another big, fast, quiet Mercedes – but I see now that I lacked the maturity to exploit what is an extremely vigorous and capable car. There is plenty of urge, in a lazy, almost transatlantic way, yet the 225bhp overhead-camshaft V8 is free-revving, smooth and well matched to a fantastically versatile three-speed auto that encourages you to flick it around its staggered gate like a clutchless manual.

The 450SLC is not an unruly muscle car like a 450SEL 6.9 saloon, yet it gets close to the performance of the Daimler. Its recirculating-ball steering is the best compromise here, but they can feel horrible when worn. Plus, its road-holding proves amusingly skittish in the wet – and always easy to hold in a slide for lurid entertainment value – but is never anything less than forgiving, progressive and totally safe in the dry.

If, in the end, a car is just a machine – a balance of well-judged compromises wrapped in sheet steel, glass and chrome – then I suppose we can name the 450SLC as the best car here. It is not the prettiest of this group – or the fastest, or even the most refined – but, as a way of covering the ground effortlessly and reliably in a piece of 1970s engineering it is the only choice if you are determined to wear your sensible hat. I think it is a great, rather underrated car in the world of classic Benzes. And yet, in this particular set, it is the one that I would, regretfully, send home first.

I say this after spending a blissful two days in its company, searching in vain for the chinks in its armoury of steely competence, yet somehow always dreaming of being behind the wheel of the Double-Six, the 3.0 CSi or, best of all, the 130 Coupé. But then, I'm biased – I own one. 

Thanks to Fredrik Folkestad; Owen Lloyd; Clive Winstone; The SL Shop (www.theslshop.com)



Big Merc is deceptively good to drive. Below, l-r: all-alloy V8 sits well back in the bay; M-B alloys have same-sized tyres as Fiat; light lenses are designed to resist dirt; plush velour and decent space in cabin





Built for

Sunset Boulevard

In the mid-'80s there were few ways for quality car buyers to mess up their hair. **Russ Smith** samples the two main rivals, Jaguar's XJ-SC and the Mercedes-Benz 300SL

PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER



C 294 LOH
SLS-10P

When buying a car for 'best', it seems a shame not to make the experience that bit more special and let some sunshine in. I'm surely not alone in seeing a full-length Webasto sunroof as a minimum requirement in a classic. And the more – and easier – the top drops, the better life is. There's a premium to pay, of course, but it's worth every penny, even if we only get around six days a year to enjoy it to the full.

All of which made the late 1970s and early '80s something of a barren wasteland for fresh-air freaks, especially in the well-to-do corner of the market. If you couldn't make the price-tag of a Volante or Corniche, the choice was either one of the dwindling collection of ancients that were struggling on with the automotive equivalent of Botox injections, the new halfway-house trend of 'targa' tops... or a Mercedes-Benz SL.

Even Jaguar, which had an extensive and impressive open-topped back catalogue, built its last in 1973 with the demise of the E-type. It would be a full 10 years until the comeback, the XJ-SC, a year after Porsche finally relented and properly chopped the roof off the 911.

Some might also point out that the R107 breed of Mercedes SL was knocking on a bit by then, having been introduced in 1971. But there's something timeless about the SL. The styling – by Paul Bracq and others – started out conservative and carved its own niche, protected from the whims of fashion for the 18 years it stayed in production, and remaining to all but trained eyes the same throughout that time.

Our featured example is a 1987 300SL, the famous name last used in 1963 having been revived for the smallest-engined of the four models for the 1986 model year, which coincided with the final significant changes to the cars before production ended in July 1989. Those included slightly firmer suspension, better brakes and a swifter-changing auto 'box than on earlier models. No surprise, then, that the 300SL has become the most sought-after of R107s, at least in petrol-price-obsessed Britain, with the perfect balance of performance and frugality plus the knowledge that it enjoys the fruits of 15 years of steady technological improvement. There was even galvanising on some of the panels. Spotters will want to know that they are distinguished by deeper front spoilers, in body colour rather than black.

Of course, the Jaguar XJ-S was no spring chicken itself by the time the cabriolet-roofed SC model was launched in 1983. But losing those controversial rear buttresses breathed new life into Malcolm Sayer's design, even if the XJ-SC's strength-retaining roof framework did remind everyone of the Triumph Stag. For its first two years, the XJ-SC could be had only with the 3.6-litre 24-valve AJ6 engine that Jaguar also introduced in 1983, broadening the coupé's market in an affordable direction. Not only was it around 10% cheaper than the V12 model, but it also drank a lot less – and without being appreciably slower in most circumstances. *Motor Sport* rated it: 'Even more appealing than the brute power of the V12.'

Despite all of that, and unlike the SL, the XJ-SC remains a rarefied creature, especially in 3.6-litre form. Only 714 were built with right-hand drive, and Graham Greenwood's Nimbus

Unusually, the XJ-SC looks even better with the roof on. Below, l-r: sumptuous wood-and-leather interior; traditional 'barrel' gauges





White example is one of a mere 85 of those to have been ordered with an automatic gearbox – a four-speed, as is that of the Merc.

The Jaguar's targa-style roof arrangement was a compromise born of necessity: at that stage the basic structure simply wasn't strong enough to support a full convertible. When, five years later, Jaguar did manage that, it was only after a hefty 60kg of strengthening had been engineered into the bodyshell. That difference is enough to make the XJ-SC feel more nimble than its successor, though that alone has never been enough to excite buyers. Nor does the simple truth that, when driving an XJ-SC with its top down, it *does* feel like a convertible; you barely notice the roof bar, and most of us drive 'touring' ragtops with the windows up anyway. The only grumble, which also applies to the full convertible, is that the lowered hood stands proud of the deck and restricts rearward vision.

That's not a gripe ever aimed at the Mercedes SL, whose cleverly designed top folds out of sight under a panel ahead of the bootlid. The

Merc's roof takes just as long to lower and erect as the Jaguar's, but pulls very taut and is free from any of the flap or ballooning suffered by some soft-tops at speed. Thumbs up for the XJ-SC on that score, too: the two lift-out solid panels bypass that problem completely.

You'll get a little more hair-ruffling from the Mercedes with the top down, but with hoods erected both cars' cabins are equally civilised places to be. And with decent-sized windows, particularly on the Jag, neither suffers from that closed-roof drop-top claustrophobia.

A more marked difference in character comes from the cars' relative seating positions. In the Mercedes you sit high and quite upright, on seats with firm and flat bases but supportively rounded backs. It's comfortable and gives a commanding view that makes the car feel smaller and easier to place. In the Jaguar, you're lower and it feels sportier, more laid-back in the seat. That's nice in its own way, but comes at the expense of any idea of where the car's corners are – perhaps it might better suit a taller driver.



'WITH DECENT-SIZED WINDOWS, NEITHER SUFFERS CLOSED-ROOF CLAUSTROPHOBIA'

Superbly engineered hood is flap-free, but a powered option was never offered. Above, l-r: cloth and vinyl inside; superbly clear dials





Losing buttresses pleased the anti-XJ-5 lobby, but SC lacks clean look of '88 full convertible. Below: neat chrome mirror controls; attractive twin-cam 'six'

Greenwood's XJ-SC is also unusual in having factory-fitted rear seats, like those in the hardtop 'Princess Diana' SC that lives in Jaguar's Heritage collection. Because chairs in the back were never approved for this model, Browns Lane will tell you they were all sold with luggage racks in the rear rather than seats, but Greenwood knows of three others. They might only suit small children, but that does offer the Jag some advantage over this Benz, which has only a luggage platform in the back. SLs had the option of token rear seats, but they are only of much use if the driver and passenger are short enough to slide the seats forward a decent amount.

With accommodation dealt with, which of these cars is going to appeal more to the enthusiast? The flowing, swoopy lines of the Jaguar border on elegance so, along with that extra 600cc under the bonnet, that surely makes it the driver's favourite here. But is that enough?

More upright and square, the SL packs a lot more 'bling' than the Jag, but in a way that makes it appear expensive – a Rolex of a car. At the same time, it looks more at home in a sports-club car park than a sports-car race. Mercedes had long before given up the pretence that SL meant 'lightweight sports'. By the R107 era, those letters had more meaning as a brand, and at nearly one and a half tonnes the 300SL is neither light nor sporty – nor that tactile, either. What it is, however, is a very pleasant and easy car to drive, with sufficient power to make it enjoyable but not enough to challenge its chassis and get you into trouble. Frustratingly, there's no feel to the light power steering, but the car goes exactly where you point it, so is hard to fault. A little safe understeer eventually comes into play, but only



beyond the limits that most drivers will push it to; the majority will find it delightfully neutral.

Not that the Jaguar has much to shout about with regards to tactility. Initially, you get a false impression from its more heavily weighted steering, before realising you are being asked to work harder without the reward of any extra feel. The iPod inside my head starts playing Pink Floyd's *Comfortably Numb*, a title that sums up the handling perfectly. It's a match for the Merc on most roads, but the narrower and twistier they become, the less you want to tackle them in the XJ, despite the benefit of the more lithe ride that is a Jaguar trademark. The greater length – which seems to be mostly bonnet – combined with extra effort and less awareness of where the car's extremities lie, are stresses the SL doesn't subject you to. Even with its lack of feedback, the Mercedes has a crispness of reaction that enables you to place it with inch-perfect precision.

You also start to appreciate that, while the SL is no lightweight *per se*, it is in comparison to the XJ-SC, which, metaphorically speaking, is no stranger to Coventry's pie shops. Packing an



JAGUAR XJ-SC 3.6

Sold/number built 1983-'87/1148

Construction steel monocoque

Engine all-alloy, dohc 3590cc 'six', Bosch D-Jetronic fuel injection

Max power 225bhp @ 5300rpm

Max torque 240lb ft @ 4000rpm

Transmission four-speed automatic

(or five-speed manual), RWD

Suspension independent, at **front** by semi-trailing wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers

as upper links, twin coil/damper units

Steering power-assisted rack and pinion

Brakes discs, vented at front, with servo

Length 15ft 7in (4765mm) **Width** 5ft 10½in

(1790mm) **Height** 4ft 2in (1265mm)

Wheelbase 8ft 6in (2590mm)

Weight 3660lb (1662kg) **Mpg** 20

0-60mph 7.8 secs **Top speed** 130mph

Price new £22,395

Thanks to Graham Greenwood, Steve Jordan, Jaguar Drivers' Club: www.jaguardriver.co.uk

MERCEDES-BENZ 300SL

Sold/number built 1985-'89/13,742

Construction steel monocoque

Engine iron-block, alloy-head, sohc 2962cc 'six', Bosch KE-Jetronic fuel injection

Max power 188bhp @ 5700rpm

Max torque 192lb ft @ 4400rpm

Transmission four-speed automatic (or five-speed manual), RWD

Suspension independent, at **front** by double wishbones **rear** semi-trailing arms; coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r

Steering power-assisted recirculating ball

Brakes discs, vented at front, with servo

Length 14ft 5in (4390mm) **Width** 5ft 10¼in (1780mm) **Height** 4ft 5in (1340mm)

Wheelbase 8ft 1in (2460mm)

Weight 3248lb (1475kg) **Mpg** 24

0-60mph 8.4 secs **Top speed** 126mph

Price new £24,840

Thanks to Sam Bailey and Andy Bufton, The SL Shop: www.theslshop.com



extra 400lb in weight takes away just about all of the Jaguar's 37bhp advantage. It might still hold sway in outright top speed and 0-60mph sprint, but in most mid-range acceleration measures the SL matches or betters the SC.


Part of that is down to the Mercedes engine's greater willingness to rev, combined with a smarter response to throttle inputs. It also feels better matched to the automatic gearbox, which benefits from a 'Sport' mode to sharpen shifts and hang on to each gear for longer. In contrast, the Jag momentarily pauses for thought when asked to do something. Not the twiddle-your-thumbs wait of turbo lag, but a kind of Hugh Grant stutter before the powertrain heaves into action. Once it does, you feel the push of greater torque, but by then you are playing catch-up. Much of it seems to be down to the automatic 'box, and indeed tests prove the more common manual 3.6 XJ-SC to be a quicker animal.

The transmission boot is on the other foot with the SL; most were sold with automatic gearboxes in the first place and, in particular

with post-1985 models such as this, there is no real advantage to having a manual 'box.

The Jaguar does bite back when you open the bonnets. The Mercedes 'six' merely looks big, a black lump with quite possibly the largest air-filter housing ever made that doesn't have a big-block V8 beneath it. You'll maybe check the oil and quietly close the bonnet without calling your petrolhead friends over for a look. Jaguar made a bit more effort to dress up its replacement for the legendary XK unit – as if it's going out on the town. There are polished fins on the cam covers and a prominent Jaguar logo for starters, and all the fuel-injection gubbins is on show. It's a bonnet you can lift with confidence until you tire of explaining why the 3.6 really is a better choice than the V12.

The answer in our quest to decide which of these cars is better should be pretty clear by now. A few years ago I refereed a similar match between these cars' predecessors, the E-type and 'Pagoda' SL. That proved a walkover for the English team, but the Germans have pulled one back in the second half: the 300SL is simply a nicer car to drive, and feels better built, too.

There is a small flaw in the argument, however, and that is price. Despite a recent renewal of interest in open-topped XJ-Ss, a good 3.6 SC will still cost you around 40% less than a 300SL in similar condition. After a brief pause for thought, my answer to that financial conundrum would be to settle for a slightly less good SL, perhaps picked up at auction, where bargains can still be found. So there you are; I'm finding excuses to choose the Mercedes. It's a car that leaves its mark on you like that. 

With no T-bar and the hood hidden beneath a body-coloured cover, the SL is an elegant roadster.

Above: sweet-revving 'six'; chunky details



Easy as 123

Rugged, long-lasting, but also handsome and rewarding to drive, the W123 is among the best cars Mercedes-Benz ever made, says **Martin Buckley**

PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER





The Mercedes 123 series has outlived its '70s and early '80s contemporaries so comprehensively that it has become emblematic of everything that was once so admirable about Daimler-Benz engineering.

Although the last cars were built 23 years ago, the W123 is still a regular sight on the world's roads, where lesser cars in its class of 1976 have long since been recycled into fridge-freezers.

From basic taxis to fully-loaded coupés and wagons, all W123s mixed this now-legendary durability with a Teutonic refinement that made them among the best cars in their class. There was a waiting list for the W123 to the day that it went out of production, despite the fact that, even in its most austere form, it was an expensive car. More than any Mercedes before, it was a car for all reasons – as well suited to leafy Hampstead avenues as it was to the unforgiving terrains of the developing world. In parts of north Africa, half of the cars on the road are still 240Ds.

Work on the new model began in 1968, the aim being to produce a safer, stronger, easier-to-service and better-handling replacement for the just-released W114/W115 'New Generation' models. Its eight-year development, during which components were tested to destruction, probably accounts for the model's amazing longevity. Many of the building blocks of the W114 were carried over into the W123, which, with its slight wedge profile, was styled to have a direct visual relationship with the latest S-Class.

From launch the W123 was available only as a saloon, but it quickly evolved into a complete range. The pillarless, short-wheelbase C and CE coupés arrived in the spring of 1976, the long-wheelbase Lang factory limousines in August 1977. The Lang was also offered in chassis form, for ambulance and hearse bodywork. Testing of the estate version began as early as 1973.

Mercedes had been resistant to the idea of a factory station wagon, so was determined to get it right first time. It did: the T and TE (T for 'Touring' and 'Transport') introduced at Frankfurt in '77 became an instant hit with well-heeled families across the world. It offered the option of seven seats via a fold-out bench in the load area, and the 120mph 280TE was the planet's fastest production estate. TEs were made not in Stuttgart, but alongside Benz vans in Bremen.

Over its nine-year production run, the W123 was available with 17 different petrol engines and 12 diesels, depending on the market it was being sold in. There had been uprated diesels from 1979, with the option of a turbo on the 300D, but these were not offered in the UK. Of the petrols – 200/230/250/280 – at first only the 280E twin-cam M110 came with fuel injection, a new mechanical system called K-Jetronic. The UK never got the 280 carburettor engine, but we did get the only new engine, the single-overhead-cam 2525cc M123 straight-six.

With WW2 30 years in the past and Britain in the common market, the W123 was well placed to give Mercedes a mainstream foothold in the UK. It introduced the brand to a wider audience as an 'entry-level' model ahead of the smaller 190, although even the 'poverty' 200 was £1000 more than a Peugeot 504. Its W124 replacement was an excellent car in many respects, but there was no disguising the fact that it was a much less substantial vehicle than its predecessor.

From autumn 1982, the rectangular headlamps that previously denoted the 280 models became standard across the range

200 saloon

This is your basic petrol-engined 2-litre W123, with single carburettor and, in this case, the later crossflow engine that makes it appreciably more lively than the earlier version. It's still pretty pedestrian but, as the current custodian of a 200 myself, I can attest to the fact that there is something curiously satisfying about thrumming along in a car that exudes honest, unpretentious solidity. Mine is a manual version, but this lovely 50,000-mile automatic still wafts along with the traffic serenely and quietly. Its owner, Tony Zaidman of Enfield, north London, is a real Benz enthusiast: his collection includes a 'Pagoda' 230SL and a 230CE, plus his wife runs a 300TD.



Crossflow head boosted entry-level 200 from 93 to 108bhp



Even the most basic W123 models offer understated luxury



Spacious rear bench makes the 200 a practical family car

240D saloon

The 240D comes from a time when diesel motoring was in its infancy for private users, so its only real competitors came from Peugeot (the 504 and 505) and Citroën (the CX) or, if you wanted to spend a lot more money, the 88bhp 3-litre 300D.

This timewarp example, recently on display at Mercedes-Benz World at Brooklands, is the demonstrator for specialist W123 World. Mark Cosovich bought the car from the widow of a NATO worker stationed in West Germany, who collected it from the factory as a tax-free diplomatic sale. Cosovich has fully recommissioned it to condition 1, with the floorpan detailed and all-new, original-specification suspension and brakes. It was even returned to an official Mercedes dealer for a full pre-delivery inspection, just like a new car.

As you might expect, it feels like a new W123 to drive, despite having covered more than 90,000 miles. Once you have readjusted your performance expectations, you can appreciate the 240D for its useful torque, which makes it a better town car than an open-road one. Keeping momentum going is the key to getting along on 65bhp, but the rare five-speed manual gearbox helps. Given enough road it might do 90mph, but 70 is a more realistic cruising speed – and even driven hard you would struggle to get less than 35mpg.

Lowly power output means that 240D is no fireball in a straight line, but sweet handling makes it easy to keep up momentum



MERCEDES-BENZ W123

Sold/number built 1975-'84/2,696,915 (2,397,513 saloons, 199,518 estates and 99,884 coupés)

Construction steel monocoque

Engine all-iron 1987/1997/2307/2299cc sohc 'four', 2525cc sohc 'six', alloy-head 2746cc dohc 'six', 1988/2399/2402cc sohc diesel 'four', or 3005cc sohc diesel 'five', with single Stromberg or Solex carburettor, or Bosch K-Jetronic mechanical fuel injection (3-litre diesel turbocharged in some markets)

Max power 54bhp @ 4200rpm-185bhp @ 5800rpm **Max torque** 83-181lb ft @ 2400rpm

Transmission four- or five-speed manual, or four-speed automatic, driving rear wheels

Suspension independent, at **front** by double wishbones with anti-dive geometry **rear** semi-trailing arms; coil springs, telescopic dampers and anti-roll bar f/r **Steering** recirculating ball with zero-offset geometry and optional power assistance (standard from 1982)

Brakes discs all round, with servo and optional ABS from 1980

Length 15ft 3in-17ft 6½in (4655-5343mm)

Width 5ft 10¼in (1786mm)

Height 4ft 7in-4ft 10¼in (1397-1480mm)

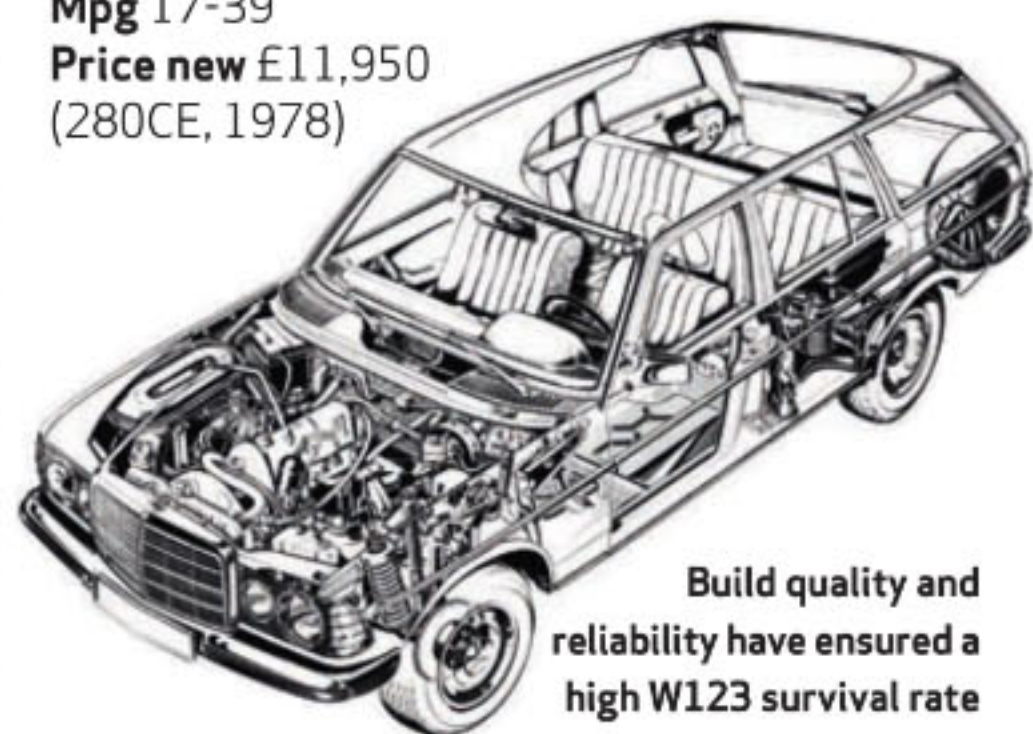
Wheelbase 8ft 11in-11ft 2¾in (2715-3420mm) **Weight** 3031lb-3593lb (1375-1630kg) **Top speed** 78-118mph

0-60mph 33.2-9.5 secs

Mpg 17-39

Price new £11,950

(280CE, 1978)



Build quality and reliability have ensured a high W123 survival rate



Fuel-injected twin-cam 2.8 offers a free-revving 182bhp



Despite the wheelbase chop, CE is still a proper four-seater



Pillarless side windows are a Mercedes coupé hallmark

'THE M110 IS ONE OF THE BEST-LOOKING AND SOUNDING ENGINES MERCEDES HAS MADE'

280CE coupé

This was the glamour car of the W123 range, and part of a long tradition of pillarless coupés that Mercedes has always done particularly well. With that squat roof and long, heavy, frameless doors, they have something of the appeal of the big W111 coupés but are a more practical size. Inside, it's a full four-seater with a cosy aura and a sense of quality to the fixtures and fittings that justified its huge £11,000 1978 price-tag – £2000 more than the 280E saloon or the woefully underpowered 99mph 230C, the carburetted antecedent to the 230CE.

The twin-cam straight-six puts the performance into another league and I've often thought that the M110 is both one of the nicest-looking and best-sounding production engines Mercedes has ever made. It will rev freely to 6000rpm or more, with a turbine quality accompanied by perfect automatic changes. As in all of these cars, the big steering wheel does feel slightly ponderous and, being connected to a box rather than a rack-and-pinion system, the feel is partially masked, but the handling is otherwise sure-footed and undemanding.

Richard Sturman of Croydon is a retired senior police officer and has owned this superbly original former concours-winning CE, with a desirable full-leather interior, since 1995. Sturman also owns a 230SL and is restoring a 280SE 3.5 Coupé.



Torquey naturally aspirated 2.4 diesel majors on frugality



Huge boot; W123 World demonstrator is in mint condition



Effortlessly elegant 280CE added a dose of glamour to the practical W123 range; diesel coupés didn't make it to the UK

230E saloon

The date to remember for the four-cylinder petrol W123s is June 1980, when the new crossflow units arrived with fuel injection as standard on the 230E. In some ways, the 230E offers the best balance of performance and economy across the W123 range. It is not an exciting engine, but has plenty of torque, revs freely, and is a fine match for the four-speed Mercedes-Benz automatic transmission that most buyers wisely opted for. Left to its own devices, this gearbox endows the 230E with relaxing yet sprightly performance, but the gear selector lends itself readily to manual use.

Having covered only 30,000 miles, this example drives as new and has a beautifully preserved velour interior, which is now rare to see. W123 World recommissioned it for Pat Ryan of Limerick and it is considered to be one of the best survivors: the durability of the W123 tends to mean that most have been driven to high mileages with minimal upkeep. The specification of this car shows how you could option your W123 to almost limo levels of luxury, with illuminated vanity mirrors, orthopaedic seats, ABS, cruise control, town-and-country horns, rear headrests, factory fire extinguisher, headlight wash/wipe and alloys. The first owner could probably have bought an S-Class for what this 230E set them back.



Top-spec interior includes rare and desirable velour trim



Peppy injected 2.3 produces 134bhp and 148lb ft of torque

With items such as leather, self-levelling dampers and air-con on the options list, it was possible to double the price of the basic car



Mercedes' first factory estate was a truly stunning debut: handsome, brisk and amazingly capacious, it was a family favourite



230TE estate

It is probably true to say that the TE is the current star of the 123 series. Handsome, useful and timeless in their appeal, their upmarket look fits in anywhere: you look just as cool at a car-boot sale in a TE as you do going out to dinner. Prices have been on the up for a while, so this high-spec 230TE may well repay the £10,000 owner Meg Wynne-Mayfield spent having it rebuilt. The only trouble with estates is that they tend to be driven into the ground, and super examples such as this are at a premium. TEs drive as quietly and ride just as well as the saloons and coupés, with vicelessly progressive handling. Mercedes-Benz Club concours judge Wynne-Mayfield also has a 200T and a 280TE.



Vast load bay could be enlarged with split/fold rear seats



Auto 'box perfectly suits load-lugging W123's character



Chromed roof rails were a pretty – and practical – fitment



300D Lang

These long-wheelbase seven-seater models were mostly used for diplomatic purposes – you could opt for a flag-holder rather than a three-pointed star – and later tended to be demoted to airport taxi work. They had much longer rear doors than the standard saloon, an optional pair of occasional seats, plus most had divisions that rather limited the range of adjustment on the front seats.

Like the estates, the limousines had self-levelling rear suspension as standard. You could have 240 or 300 diesel power (the latter with a turbo in Germany) or the 250 petrol so there were no performance aspirations, just a capacity for hard work. When the 230E usurped the 250 straight-six engine in the standard cars, it continued in the limousines where its refinement was deemed more important than its lack of thrift. An automatic transmission and M-B Tex trim were part of the usual limousine specification. Bigger 15in road wheels were also used to take the extra weight.

Not much is known about the history of this low-mileage 300D, on offer with Classic Mercedes Dorchester, but it is now a rare car in the UK because many have been exported to other right-hand-drive territories such as Cyprus. These were the dearest models in the W123 range and, depending on options, late cars were listed at around £25,000.



Lang looks ready for flag-holders and a despot in the back



Subtle wheeltrims were a feature across the whole range



Occasional middle row of seats tumbles down from behind the front pair; cloth trim is both hard-wearing and attractive

Did you know?

Hopeful German dealers would wait outside the Sindelfingen plant to persuade workers to part with W123s bought on the staff discount scheme.



Early cars in particular suffered from rust; due to shortages, M-B was forced to use recycled Polish steel. Later cars used better steel plus had wax injection and wheelarch liners.

Saloons were built in South Africa, with parts shipped plus 40% local content. Some say they were better built than German cars, with superior trim, heat-resistant glass and balanced engines. Such is the appetite for the cars in Africa that W123s are still stolen to order from the UK.

John Lennon had the first 300TD in America, while Anita Harris, Franz Beckenbauer and Kevin Keegan also had W123s. The Queen Mother owned a 280TE, Bonnie Tyler bought a new 230TE in 1978 and Tony Hadley of Spandau Ballet was given a black CE by his record label.




German taxi drivers were so dismayed by the drop in quality and reliability for the W123's replacement, the W124, that they drove in convoy to the Daimler-Benz factory to protest.

The rarest variant was the 280C coupé on twin carburettors rather than fuel injection. The most numerous was the 240D, with 454,780 built.

The UK only got a cross-section of models. One oddity is the 3-litre diesel CE, pre-empting the current fashion for coupé oil-burners by 30 years.



A 280E crewed by Andrew Cowan, Colin Malkin and Mike Broad won the London-Sydney rally in 1977 ahead of another 280E. The cars were entered by the UK M-B concessionaire 

Thanks to W123 World (01792 846888); M-B World (www.mercedes-benz.co.uk); Classic Mercedes Dorchester (01305 851928)

'EVEN MERCEDES CONSIDERED ONE 2670-MILE STRETCH TO BE IMPOSSIBLE'



Martin Buckley tells the story of the Stuttgart firm's return to rallying with a factory-backed assault on the epic from Covent Garden to Sydney Opera House

PHOTOGRAPHY LAT/TONY BAKER/REX FEATURES

Above: Johnson Wax car turns on to the Strand on way out of London. Main: kicking up the dust in the mountains above Makarska in what was Yugoslavia



In 1977 a Mercedes 280E won the world's toughest rally, the 20,000-mile London-Sydney. It was prepared by the factory under the guidance of Erich Waxenberger, but – like all five 280Es on the event – it was a privately sponsored car, in this case by The Rank Organisation, which paid for crews, fuel and travel expenses.

The driver of the winning 280E (three others finished in the top 10) was 1968 London-Sydney victor Andrew Cowan, a 38-year-old Scottish farmer from Duns, with co-driver Colin Malkin and navigator Mike Broad. They won by 55 minutes from the Johnson Wax-backed W123 of Tony Fowkes and Peter O’Gorman.

The cars were prepared to the finest detail, while the same attention was paid to logistics and reconnaissance. Waxenberger put in place 26 service points along the route between London and Singapore alone, and a support crew followed behind in a works 280E. Other Mercedes W123 teams included Achim Warmbold with Hans Willemsen and Jean Todt. Warmbold dominated the early stages but the car shed a driveshaft while comfortably ahead in Iran, which left them stranded for 24 hours and they were later disqualified.

The strong field also featured four Total Australia Citroën CX 2400s (one crew led by Paddy Hopkirk, who came out of retirement), 10 Peugeot 504s and an Abarth-prepared Fiat 131 diesel. But the only car to give the 280Es any problems was the Porsche 911 of Polish three-time European Rally Champ Sobieslaw Zasada and Wojciecj Schramm, who took over up front from Warmbold but their 3-litre Carrera was dogged by suspension problems and retired.

All of the 280Es were four-speed manuals, on 15in wheels to raise the ground clearance to 8in, sporting substantial underguards and circular, 200/230-style 100W headlamps. One of the main concerns was poor-quality fuel – particularly in Afghanistan – so the rally cars were fitted with low-compression engines, plus twin petrol tanks

that ranged from treacherous gravel tracks to muddy lanes and mountain passes. The weather was not always on their side – there were monsoon rains in India and Pakistan – and even Mercedes-Benz considered a 2670-mile stretch between Darwin and Perth to be ‘impossible’. It included 300 miles of dust trails with compacted earth and 4in-high rocks where much of the surface had been washed away. The conditions were stated to be much worse than anything at the firm’s Untertürkheim test track.

Animals were another hazard in the Outback, where Cowan killed three kangaroos and destroyed his front lights. The past master of Aussie rallies said: “This was certainly the toughest marathon I’ve ever done.” Nevertheless, his 280E was the first car across the line outside the Sydney Opera House on 28 September.

The 280E you see here came second. Both of the cars now live in the

factory collection but, thanks to specialist Mark Cosovich and the Mercedes-Benz Museum, we reunited Fowkes and O’Gorman with the Johnson Wax W123 at MB World, Brooklands.

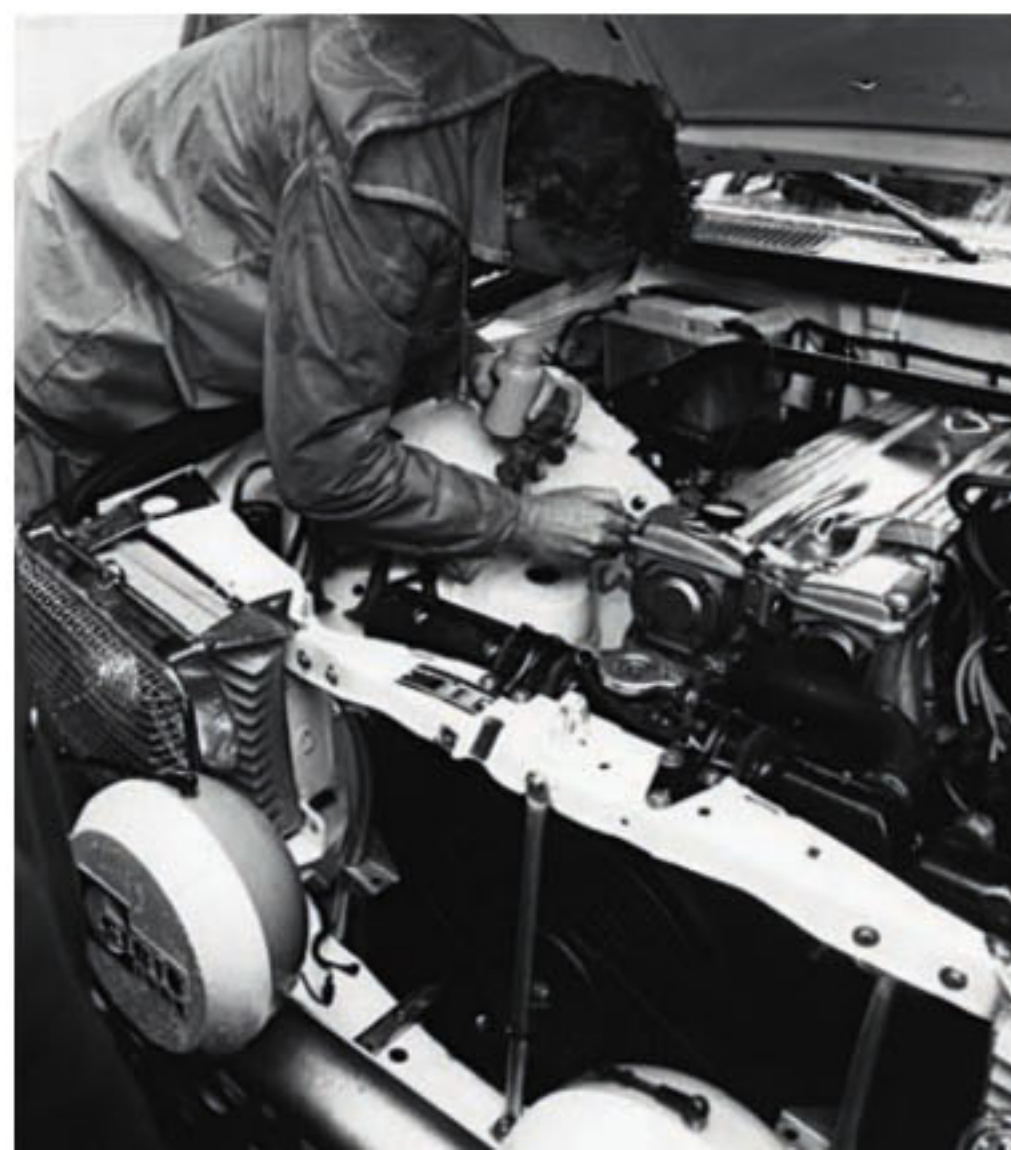
“The last time I saw the car was when I drove it into Sydney,” recalls Fowkes. “It is pretty much as I left it in 1977 and it’s great to see it again.”

Among its many modifications is a passenger seat that fully reclines. “We built an extension so that you could really stretch out and sleep,” says Fowkes, who was 41 at the time and had started rallying a 450SLC with Jonathan Ashman from Mercedes UK on the 1976 Texaco Tour of Britain. “We came 10th overall and won our class. Jonathan was very pleased and suggested to Erich Waxenberger that he prepare some cars.”

“Waxenberger was the team manager and the driving force,” adds Fowkes. “Without him leading, it would not have happened. He always seemed to be in the right place at the right time.”



Clockwise: O’Gorman and Fowkes hadn’t seen the car since ’77; cabin largely stock; official checks Rank 280E; Thermos for cold drink; regs and programme



and they carried a spare can of premium fuel.

There was an alloy rollcage inside and a low-ratio diff to boost acceleration. The bonnet and bootlid were aluminium to save weight, while the side windows were Perspex for the same reason. Power steering was retained, although the brake linings were harder (some of the cars were testbeds for ABS). A lot of work also went into beefing up the suspension with stainless-steel check-straps to control ‘droop’ – experiments at Longcross test track in Surrey revealed that the rear set-up could be persuaded to break – plus dampers from the 450SEL 6.9 at the back.

The event took 46 days – 32 on the road and 14 at sea – and the front-runners were doing up to 600 miles a day, averaging 60mph on roads

Irishman O’Gorman had been on the maps for some years. “Peter was a deep-thinking navigator,” says Fowkes. “He would sit down every evening discussing what we would eat; what we would wear; that we would be only a two-man crew; and he worked out the sleeping arrangements. Yes, he was a good co-driver, feeding you snippets of information. He’d even jump in the boot to give the car traction!”

Both were well up to the physical challenges. “I used to go running along the Grand Union canal,” explains Fowkes. “I was into keeping fit at the time. I happened to mention to my bank manager that I was doing this rally and he gave me lots of suggestions on what I needed to eat and how to train. We took prepared snacks and a special drink called Dynamo, which was something like Lucozade. And – unlike a lot of other crews – we didn’t become ill because we were self-contained, especially in places such as Pakistan where the climate and food were strange.”

The London-Sydney was quite different to anything he had done before, though: “I was used to going fast on sprint rallies, whereas on this you had to go reasonably quickly but not flat-out. The most critical thing was keeping the car together – maintaining a steady pace without sustaining any damage. With our car, it was also important to keep it as clean as possible because

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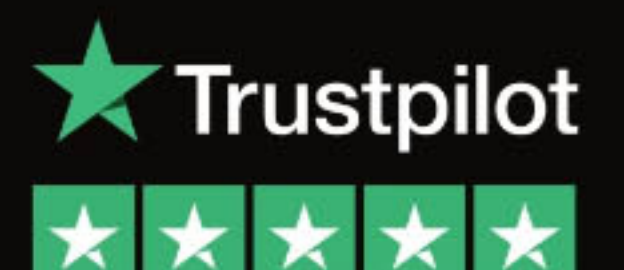
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we were sponsored by Johnson Rally Wax. So in any spare moments we were washing it!”

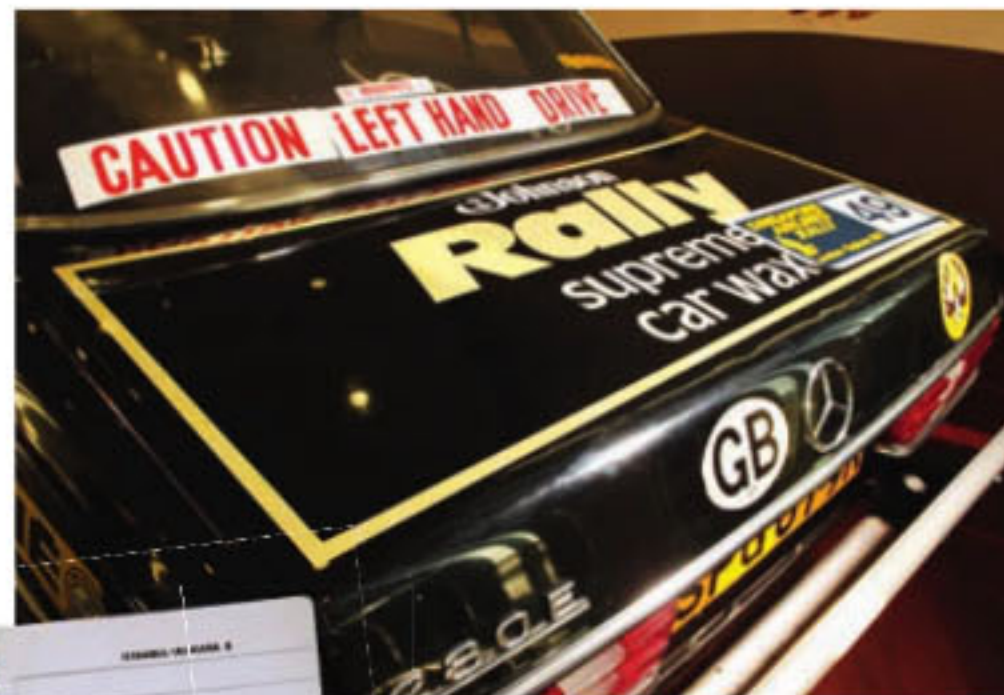
The low point was in Australia: “We got extremely tired, forcing ourselves to keep going at night in the dust. I remember hitting a boulder so hard that it pushed the wheel back into the arch, but somehow we strapped a wire to a rope around a tree and then reversed back. And I don’t think that we even lost any time.”

The problems had come about when the boat carrying the competitors from Singapore was delayed and the organisers cancelled all the rest halts: “We then had to drive non-stop and lost the lead at Alice Springs. We managed to clear the section but signed in early and got a double penalty.” Cowan told *Autocar*: “Since Perth we went for eight days with just five hours’ rest out of the car.” And that was with a team of three.

O’Gorman and Fowkes were an efficient two-man crew, but the sheer fatigue could get the better of them at times. “I thought that we’d broken a shock absorber on a rough section,” says Fowkes. “Peter took a wheel off one side and I jacked up the other... Yet somehow you forced yourself to keep going. My physicality did help, but you’d get past caring and just keep driving. We were lucky that we didn’t have a big accident, although we did hit a kangaroo.”

As Fowkes concludes: “Afterwards, we were flown over to a press conference in Stuttgart; we were wined and dined. It was the first time that the Mercedes works had really got involved in motorsport since the 1955 Le Mans disaster. And that was a big moment for them.”

Thanks to Mark Cosovich (01792 846888; www.w123world.com); Mercedes-Benz Classic



From top: low-compression twin-cam; *Autocar* readers named 10 most important things the crew should take; sponsor required that car was kept clean; time penalties and roadbook; Fowkes and O’Gorman took lead in Malaysia

A dictator’s Merc

An interesting footnote is the 280E ordered by Ugandan president Idi Amin, presumably inspired by its London-Sydney success. Amin participated in rallies in a Peugeot 504, 604 or Citroën SM, often co-driven by his young bride Sarah Kyolaba Amin. But he was always a DNF case according to Jack Wavamunno, a trainee at the main M-B agent: “The 280E was flown to Entebbe, having come via Stansted as per Amin’s instructions. He was not at ease with it docking at Mombasa port.”

The factory even supplied a pair of overalls, although Ashman judged them too small for the giant, 20-stone Amin and they were removed at Stansted to save any embarrassment.

The car was black with Recaros, a rollcage, a tiny steering wheel and off-road tyres. Apart from that, the only loose items inside were two front dampers, which were distinctly bigger and heavier than the normal W123 Bilstein units.

The 280E was prepared for delivery, but Amin never drove it because he was deposed in April of the following year (’79). An eyewitness reckoned that the 280E – together with Amin’s 450SEL 6.9 (above) and SM – was taken across the border, with Amin driving one of the three as they entered Jula (now the capital of South Sudan). His Cadillac and Mercedes 600s were recovered at Nakasongola Air Force Base, but the whereabouts of the 280E are unknown.





'HERE WAS A BREED OF RACING CAR THAT WAS ALSO AVAILABLE IN THE SHOWROOMS'

On racetrack or road, the BMW M3 and Mercedes 190E 2.5-16 were the tin-tops to beat during the '80s. **Alastair Clements** picks his favourite

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**



G462 VYE



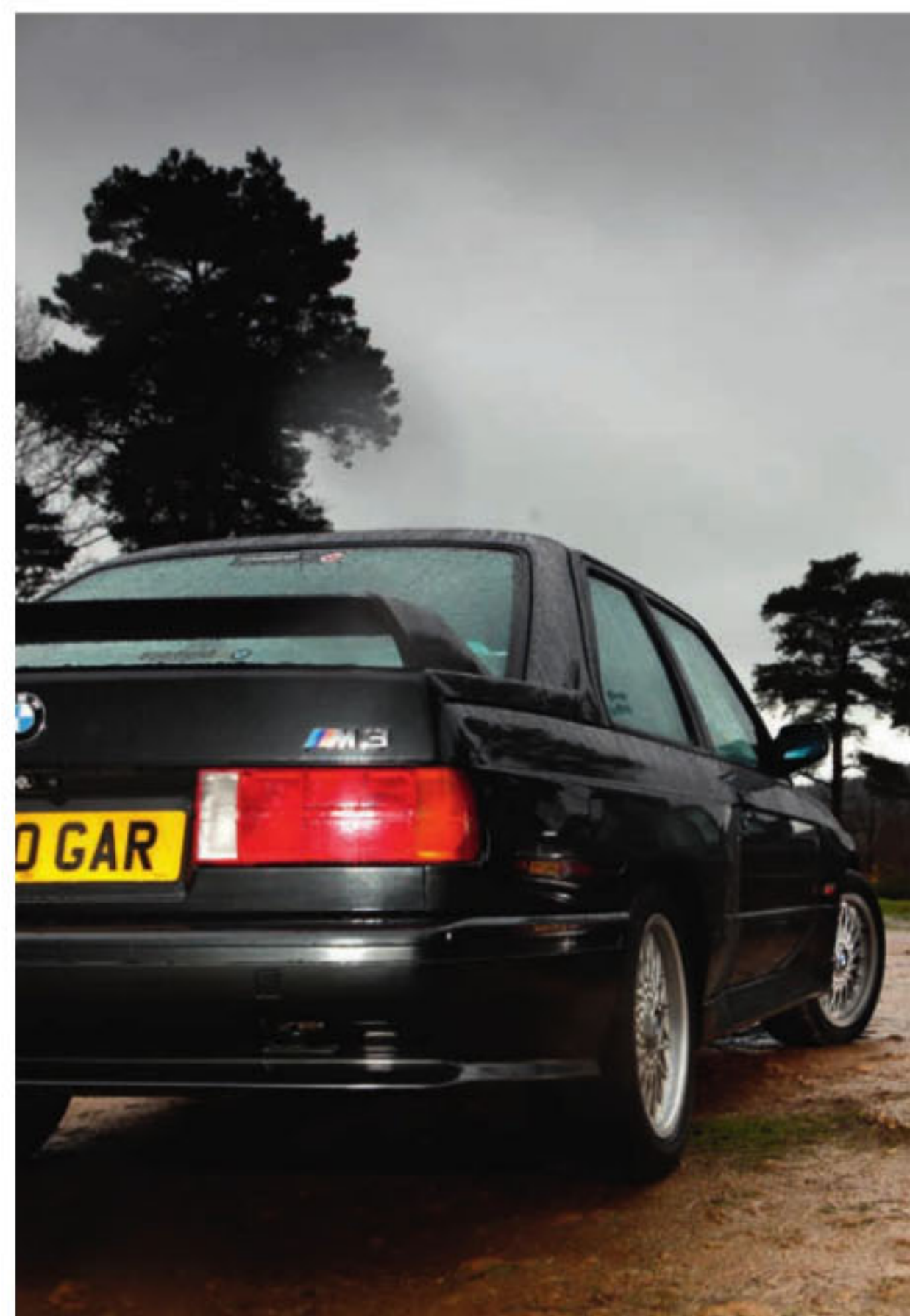
As one who grew up decades after the deaths of Clark, Collins and Hill, I've never had much time for Formula One. The reason those names now seem special is that they were so much more than just single-seater heroes – they drove 'real' cars, too. You see, canoes with wheels – and latterly wings, barge-boards and over-sophistication – have never captured my imagination, because it's a pretty safe bet that I'll never drive one, let alone own one. Look at the lasting appeal of Touring Cars, be they British, European, World or – most evocatively for children of the '80s – *Deutsche*, and it seems I'm not alone. Here was a breed of racing car that not only looked like Dad's commuter, but was also available in the showrooms in a lightly diluted homologation version of the very cars that rubbed doorhandles and exchanged paint on circuits across Europe most weekends.

And it wasn't just mainstream manufacturers that saw the advantage of a track-developed halo model; prestige car makers wanted to be in on the act, too. By the dawn of the 1980s, Mercedes-Benz was better known for limousines than chasing lap times, despite its illustrious motorsport past. The 1982 launch of the compact 190 saloon, however, not only gave the three-pointed star a new 'entry level' model with which to lure younger buyers onto the bottom rung of the

Stuttgart ladder of affluence, but was also a handy starting point for a bit of spiced-up brand extension. Enter, a year later, the 190E 2.3-16, a car for Golf GTI owners to aspire to.

Although the racers would be campaigned by AMG, Merc's performance arm wasn't responsible for the staid 190's transformation. That task fell, surprisingly, to Cosworth Engineering in Northampton, England. Actually, that news is less of a surprise when you learn that Mercedes decided to pursue performance not through forced induction or extra capacity, but sophisticated head work, a Cosworth speciality. The standard 230E block got four valves per cylinder, chain-driven double overhead cams, 'pent-roof' combustion chambers and flat-topped high-compression pistons, boosting power to 185bhp. That figure was raised to 197bhp in 1989, when the engine grew to 2.5 litres in the model's one major revision apart from the Evolution and Evo II limited-edition homologation cars. A Getrag close-ratio five-speed gearbox sent power via a limited-slip diff to the rear wheels, which were kept in check by Mercedes' multi-link system boosted by self-levelling struts.

To give the expected grown-up-boy-racer looks, the Bruno Sacco-designed three-box gained a boot spoiler, wider wheelarches, lower skirts all round, plus a subtle set of alloy wheels shaped to push air onto the brakes. Those tweaks weren't simply for show: the drag coefficient





DTM showdown

The M3 became a familiar sight in British Touring Cars, but it was back home in Germany's Deutsche Tourenwagen-Meisterschaft that the Munich vs Stuttgart battle was at its bloodiest. First to appear in the DTM – for the series' second season – was the Mercedes, in 2.3-16 form, but its 1985 scorecard made depressing reading, with three retirements for Leopold Gallina. In its first full season the following year, the Benz took Volker Weidler to second in the drivers' championship behind Kurt Thiim in a Rover Vitesse, with wins at the 'Ring and Avusrennen. Just as Mercedes looked to be in the ascendancy, however, BMW launched the M3 and swept the 1987 championship with four of the top five spots including overall honours for Eric van de Poele. The 190s were back on the pace in 1988, but were bridesmaids again as Klaus Ludwig's Ford Sierra just pipped Roland Asch.

Despite the arrival of the 190E 2.5-16 Evolution, Mercedes could only manage fourth for Kurt Thiim in '89 as Roberto Ravaglia took

The Mercedes' bodykit looks a bit cheesy 20 years on, while the M3 retains a superb blend of aggression and square-jawed handsomeness – albeit less discreet with those fat wheelarches



Roberto Ravaglia heads for 1989 honours with the M3

the title with the Schnitzer team BMW M3, but even the new M3 Sport Evolution wasn't enough to stop debutant Audi from stealing the 1990 championship with Hans-Joachim Stuck and the mighty Audi V8 quattro. The introduction of the Evolution II 190E took Mercedes up a place to second (driven by Klaus Ludwig) the following season, with Johnny Cecotto's M3 pushed back to fourth, but once again Audi was unstoppable for overall honours. After seven years in the DTM, the 190E finally came good in 1992 with 16 wins and a dominant championship 1-2-3 headed by Klaus Ludwig – with Cecotto's BMW languishing in fourth. The new Alfa Romeo 155 arrived to take the victory in 1993 under fresh Class 1 regulations, with Mercedes getting the last word against its old rivals in second, third and fourth places, while BMW's ageing E30 was outside the top 10 in its final season.

dropped from 0.33 to 0.32, while lift was said to be cut by 47% over the nose and 40% at the rear. To prove the new car's credentials, pre-production prototypes went to Nardo in August 1983 to set high-speed distance records at over 150mph, while the car's 1984 launch was marked with a 190-only 'Race of Champions' at the Nürburgring, won by a certain young Ayrton Senna.

Having already adopted the boast of 'The Ultimate Driving Machine', BMW couldn't really take any half-measures with its track campaigner. So the Munich offering unveiled at Frankfurt in September 1985 was no re-clothed repmobile, but a purpose-built racing car that had been nearly five years in development and left behind little from its donor. The suspension was beefed-up and given thoroughly revised geometry plus a quicker steering rack, there were bigger brakes from the 5 Series, and in the search for stiffness and aerodynamic improvement only the bonnet remained from the stock 3 Series' panelwork. The 'screens were bonded-in – and the rear one raked to aid airflow; the (plastic) bootlid was raised; and the shell was finished to dramatic effect with a fantastic set of 1980s-archetype blistered arches that made the M3 look every millimetre the Group A racer.

Like the Mercedes, the BMW does without turbos and extra cubes – it has a smaller engine than a 325i – and its little slant-four can trace its roots back past the '02 series to 1961. Not that it's low-tech, far from it: there was a baffled alloy sump and siamesed pistons, while topping that angled iron block was a chain-driven twin-cam, 16-valve head, created by lopping a third off the item shared by the M5 and M635CSi. That meant less weight – to aid performance and handling – and a Merc-beating 200bhp, or 215bhp from 1989. Further development – and race-car homologation – created the Evo I, II, Cabriolet and, finally, the 238bhp, 2.5-litre Sport Evo. In the process, a legend was born.

For all of its legendary status, however, it's initially hard to get to grips with the M3. It's left-hand drive (only), the clutch is weighty, the gearlever boingy and, as in the Merc, the Getrag 'box has first on a dogleg to the left and back. It's not *bad*, it just all feels a little bit, er – dare I say it? – uninspiring. The nose is heavy, while the engine – whose lumpy, rumbling idle promised so much – sounds flat and unexciting, not to mention rather strained at around 5000rpm. And with such a close-ratio 'box (fifth is a direct-drive gear rather than fourth on lowlier 'Threes), this certainly isn't a motorway cruiser.

But then it never claimed to be, did it? After a bit of searching, we find a stretch of Surrey lane that does a fair impression of the more tree-lined parts of the Nürburgring, and suddenly it all clicks into place. More than that, it's a genuine revelation. Push the 2302cc 'four' past 5000rpm, then on to its redline a little over 2000rpm later, and it's a screamer, delivering a sudden injection of pace that seems far out of proportion to its compact dimensions. Does it sound any better? I think so, but I'm afraid I was concentrating too hard on the rapidly approaching bends to take much notice. As the strident engine is given its head, it's as if the rest of the car starts to sit up and take notice: those heavy controls feel precise and reassuring, the steering via that fat three-spoke M-Sport wheel is fluid, perfectly weighted and surgically precise, the pedals the best I've ever experienced for heel-and-toeing. Add in damper



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sophistication and body control that's out of this world – without destroying the ride – plus seats that are both comfy and supremely supportive, and you have a true B-road weapon that inspires utter faith in the machine from its driver.

Talk about a tough act to follow, and on our undulating, rain-soaked Surrey-schleife the Mercedes struggles at first. The sense of weightiness and refinement that make it a more pleasant companion at lower speeds – or indeed on the motorway – rob the 190E of the alertness and agility that so define the M3. The huge wheel is cumbersome – plain daft in a performance car – and the suspension, though restful over small bumps due to its softer damping, allows more body movement so the car bounces uncomfortably as you really start to press on.

But accept that the BMW will always have an advantage in a Tarmac dogfight and you'll find much to admire. Inside the 190 is handsome and, like the M3, impeccably finished. There are wonderful touches of Teutonic logic, too – the driver's mirror is manually adjusted, the passenger's, which is a different shape, electric. Then there's the sweet-sounding engine. Give the rev-counter needle some exercise to overcome its low-rpm refinement and the 2498cc 'four' emits an urgent twin-cam thrum that's rather kinder on the ears than the BMW's blare. It's flexible, too, so you rarely feel the need to wring it out. If you do, you're rewarded with pace to match the M3, or perhaps even beat it if you can get to grips with the notchy gear linkage. No wonder plenty of buyers opted for the auto 'box that somehow seems a more natural companion for a Mercedes engine, even one as sporty as this. Get over an initial deadness and the steering is accurate, while the brakes are powerful with a fantastically feelsome pedal. Both of these cars have ABS, but it's tuned to kick in late, and



From top: bootlid, spoiler and bumpers were plastic, big arches steel; seats have manual adjustment and superb lateral support – but why no oil-pressure gauge? 'Four' gives 93bhp per litre; fantastic poise



BMW M3 (E30)

Sold/number built 1986-'91/17,184

Construction steel monocoque with plastic bootlid and bumpers

Engine iron-block, alloy-head, dohc 2302cc 'four', Bosch ML Motronic fuel injection

Max power 215bhp @ 6750rpm

Max torque 170lb ft @ 4600rpm

Transmission Getrag dogleg five-speed manual, driving rear wheels via LSD

Suspension independent, at **front** by MacPherson struts **rear** semi-trailing arms, coils, telescopic dampers; anti-roll bar f/r

Steering power-assisted rack and pinion

Brakes ventilated front, solid rear discs, with servo and ABS **Wheels & tyres** 7Jx15in alloys with 205/55 VR16s

Length 14ft 3in (4345mm) **Width** 5ft 6in (1680mm)

Height 4ft 5½in (1365mm)

Wheelbase 8ft 4¾in (2562mm)

Weight 2760lb (1252kg) **0-60mph** 6.8 secs

Top speed 143mph **Mpg** 20.3

Price new £23,128 (1987)



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subtly. The Benz also has early traction control, not that you'd know it because the limited-slip diff permits indulgent tweaks of the tail.

Similar on paper and identical in objective, these tin-tops provide disparate experiences. One quality they share, however, is genuine driver appeal. These are the last of the old guard, largely unfettered by nanny electronics and demanding commitment to extract their high-revving best. They certainly require too much effort for today's lazy supersaloon drivers, for whom every electrical acronym under the sun is a must, along with vast engines. These cars' modern equivalents both sport large-capacity, multi-cylinder motors and forced induction rather than high-revving 'fours'.

Before you decide that this is going to be a 'we're all winners' cop-out, let's get one thing straight: the BMW wins. It even wins when you take into account that the M3 you see here was on sale for double the price of the Mercedes. The Munich baby is a gem of a car: exciting, inspiring, brilliantly engineered and even a good investment. Because the E30 M3 is among the fastest-appreciating 'Youngtimer' classics on the market while the 190, despite its comparable spec, continues to be overlooked.

Before we dole out the laurels, however, there is a proviso. A little part of me can't help thinking that the novelty of the BMW might just wear off if you tried to use it every day rather than as a weekend treat. And, when it does, you might just be tempted to spend a small portion of the profit on a Cossie Benz. It doesn't offer the instant thrills of the M3, or its depth of talent, but you get the feeling that it might just prove a more rewarding companion in the long term. 

Thanks to 4 Star Classics (01483 274347; www.4starclassics.com)



From top: the Mercedes handles sweetly, but lacks the M3's outright grip and precision; cabin feels more luxurious; Cosworth-tuned twin-cam; downturned twin pipes are concealed beneath the rear apron



MERCEDES-BENZ 190E 2.5-16

Sold/number built 1984-'93/25,000 (inc 2.3)

Construction steel monocoque

Engine iron-block, alloy-head, dohc 2498cc 'four', Bosch CIS-E III Jetronic fuel injection

Max power 197bhp @ 6750rpm

Max torque 173lb ft @ 5000rpm

Transmission Getrag dogleg five-speed manual, driving rear wheels via an electro-mechanical LSD

Suspension independent, at front by struts, lower wishbones rear multi-link with hydropneumatic self-levelling; coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r

Steering power-assisted recirculating ball

Brakes ventilated front, solid rear discs, with servo and ABS

Wheels & tyres 7Jx15in alloys with 205/55 ZR16s

Length 14ft 6½in (4430mm)

Width 6ft 4in (1930mm)

Height 4ft 5½in (1361mm)

Wheelbase 8ft 9in (2664mm)

Weight 2863lb (1299kg)

0-60mph 6.7 secs

Top speed 143mph

Mpg 24.7

Price new £31,520 (1990)

'BOTH OF THESE CARS DEMAND COMMITMENT TO EXTRACT THEIR HIGH-REVVING BEST'





The best supersaloon you've never heard of

So says **Richard Heseltine** after an uphill charge in the E500, the M5-baiter from Mercedes that wraps its iron-fist power in the velvet glove of anonymity

PHOTOGRAPHY LYNDON McNEIL



'THIS IS A BENZ MADE BEFORE BUILD QUALITY FAMOUSLY TOOK A DIVE, AND OH-SO COMFORTABLE WITH IT'



In the cold light of retrospect, this wasn't a bright idea. It's early, it's chilly, and a tree-lined former hillclimb in Poland's Jelenia Góra valley isn't the ideal place to become acquainted with a V8 supersaloon. The Mercedes-Benz E500 isn't at all happy being thrown about at low speed, that's for sure. Damp cobblestones and grip are mutually exclusive, resulting in a couple of what might euphemistically be referred to as 'moments'. Traction-control lights flicker on and off as grip is lost and found, and then lost again. It's taken a turn for the *Disco Inferno* in here and we're not even at the halfway point.

Scroll forward an hour and initial misgivings have made way for something else altogether. You see, the E500 may be the best supersaloon you've never heard of. Heck, it may be one of the best cars, period. It defies expectations as much as gravity, the real surprise being that it doesn't feel like a factory hot-rod despite packing 316bhp. It's still a Benz, one made before build quality famously took a dive, and is oh-so comfortable with it. That does rather beg the question: why does it barely register in the UK when BMW's equivalent M5 is routinely touted as a copper-bottomed, blue-chip classic?

There are so many reasons, it's hard to pinpoint where to begin. Scroll back to March 1991: when the first 500E (note the use of 'E' as a suffix rather than a prefix – more on that later)

arrived in Blighty, it cost a whopping £56,000. The equivalent BMW was £10k less. Not only that, but the suits at Mercedes also reasoned that there would be insufficient demand to justify the expense of tooling up for right-hand drive, so it was only ever offered as a left-hooker. And then there's the styling. To the initiated, it looks much like any other E-Class; the sort of blandmobile once found parked in the cab rank outside a terminal at any Continental airport. You had to *really* want a Q-car to justify ownership.

Strictly speaking, however, Mercedes never considered it an M5 rival. The 500E existed in its own little niche, it insisted, and there is an element of truth to that. The thing is, this is as much a product of Porsche as the three-pointed star. These days, Porsche has a controlling interest in Volkswagen, and therefore also in Audi – one of Mercedes' fiercest challengers. Back in the late '80s and early '90s, however, Porsche's financial state was anything but rosy. Landing a contract to engineer and then partially assemble a prestige performance car for Mercedes represented a much-needed injection of cash.

That said, the idea of building a hotted-up E-Class apparently stretched back to shortly after the W124 series first appeared in 1984. The original intention was to lightly tweak the flagship 300E, only for the project to take a turn for the ambitious. Despite its outer appearance, the 500E production car shared only its roof,

front doors, bootlid and glass with a regular saloon. Beneath the skin, the all-alloy, 32-valve M119 V8 was carried over from the R129 500SL, but with a modified block, crankcase and conrods. The horsepower rating was the same as the roadster: 322bhp, but it boasted a 7% hike in torque to an elephantine 354lb ft.

Shoehorning the V8 into the E-Class hull wasn't without its problems, mind. It was a tight fit, so the battery had to be relocated to the boot – which, if nothing else, helped with weight distribution. The transmission tunnel also had to be reworked to accommodate the 500SL's rear differential. The engine came with the four-speed auto from the SL, which was switchable between 'Standard' and 'Economy' modes; a manual 'box wasn't on the agenda. Mercedes' electronic hardware of the period was carried over, not least ASR (Acceleration Skid Control), as was self-levelling rear suspension. The 500SL also gave up its ventilated-disc braking set-up, while the suspension was lowered by 23mm relative to the donor saloon, and the front and rear tracks were widened ever so slightly.

Inside, there were Recaro-made sports seats with pronounced side bolsters, and individual rear chairs with a stowage compartment between them (due to the enlarged transmission tunnel) rather than the usual W124 one-piece bench arrangement. Cloth/half leather was offered as standard, with a full leather cabin available as an



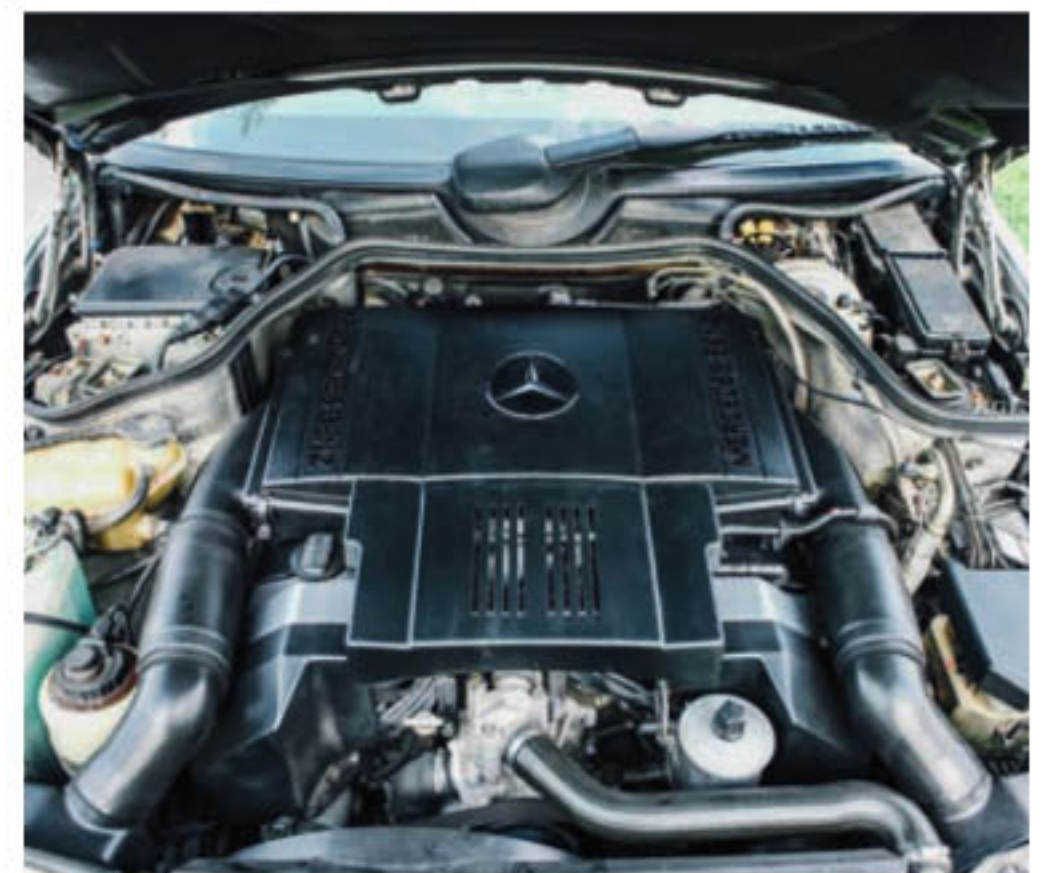
Right: it might have a switchable sport mode, but the automatic 'box is a clear statement of the Mercedes approach to performance; bonnet-mounted three-pointed star for facelifted E500



option, as was walnut-veneer trim between the front and rear seats. Porsche was responsible for most of the re-engineering, its contract with Daimler-Benz extending to installing the V8s in its Zuffenhausen factory. Cars were then transported back across Stuttgart to be checked and painted, whereafter they returned to Porsche for final assembly before arriving back at Mercedes for a last once-over and dispatch to customers. It was a tortuous process, but it worked.

Unveiled at the October 1990 Paris Salon, the 500E remained in production until April 1995, with each car being handbuilt over the course of 18 days. Two years in, the V8 lost 6bhp (but gained 2lb ft of torque), while the brake discs were enlarged in February 1993. Later that same year, the 500E became the E500 following a makeover. Physical differences stretched to a relocated three-pointed star (on the bonnet rather than atop the grille), and clear rather than amber indicators front and rear. A final run-out edition, the E500 Limited, featured silver paint and 17in DTM-style alloys, but none of the 500 built was ever officially imported into the UK. Few of any description were: all told, only 29 of the 10,479 cars made were sold by British dealers, although a number more have arrived in recent years, mostly from Japan.

Which, naturally, brings us back to Poland. 'Our' late-model E500 doesn't look out of place against a backdrop comprising mostly slate-grey



Clockwise, from left: alloys are very '90s; left-hand-drive only, with column-mounted cruise control; spacious cabin sacrifices no luxury in the search for performance; quad-cam V8 from the SL

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'BURY THE PEDAL AND THE NOTE CHANGES FROM A FAINT RUMBLE TO A MORE GUTTURAL, TUNEFUL GROWL'



skies, plus the occasional castle and blink-and-you'll-miss-it village. Quite the opposite. It looks like the aged minicab that ferried us to our hotel. And therein lies much of its appeal. Save subtly flared wings and very '90s rolling stock, there's little to give the game away that this is anything other than a regular W124-series E-Class. Discretion is key, here.

The same is true inside. It doesn't feel or look overtly sporting, or any other kind of sporting for that matter. Sumptuous leather embraces you, the seats cradling rather than clinging to your anatomy, while the timber looks more real than the simulated plastic found in many saloons of the period. This sense of non-threatening civility doesn't ebb once you turn the ignition key, either. The quad-cam, 32-valve powerhouse doesn't erupt into life. Instead, it emits the subtlest burble before settling to a barely audible idle. It's only when you flex the throttle and the car gently rocks from side to side that you get some impression that this isn't just another old-school Mercedes, with all that implies.

Release the footbrake, ease off the line and the E500 wafts along just as Mercs once did. This is not your traditional big-horsepower supersaloon. The torque curve is on the flat side, with the 346lb ft peak arriving at 3900rpm. It's only when you bother to consult the speedometer that you realise you're heading for a jail sentence. It might be nearly 30 years old, and weigh some

No, it isn't a Berlin taxi returning to the rank, but a Porsche-engineered 316bhp V8 supersaloon. Boot was reprofiled as part of late-'93 facelift

Much of this is down to the ride, which wasn't sacrificed at the altar of high performance. These days, 'sports suspension' often equates to 'no suspension', but the E500 acts as a reminder that a payoff between comfort and sportiness is possible. There's no crashing over calloused asphalt, just infinitely better body control than the wrapper might suggest. On the flipside, it isn't happy being hustled at low speed.

The steering is light and nicely weighted, and the 245/45 ZR17 tyres proffer decent grip, but chuck it into a tight corner and the dashboard lights up as the power of the engine overcomes the balance of the chassis. Period road tests complained bitterly about the traction control, and three decades later it seems to be either on or off. The rear end will step wide long before the ASC decides to wake up; it isn't remotely scary, but it does focus your attention.


The E500 really shines on proper roads with nice, wide curves and long straights. The power is instantaneous, and it's only when you bury the right pedal that the engine note changes from a faint rumble to a more guttural, but still tuneful

1708kg (3767lb), but it can sprint to 100mph in less than 15 secs and on to an electronically limited 155mph. It just doesn't feel dramatic. Not even close.

growl. It handles broad sweepers with aplomb: there's honest-to-goodness poise here, to the point that you would swear it can't possibly have been made two and a half decades ago.

It isn't exactly economical, though. Driven with decorum, as much as 27mpg is possible if you believe the period PR bumf. Indulge yourself and you can expect mid-teens if you're lucky. But that does rather go with the territory.

It's hard not to gush about the E500. It's a car that is understated, but charming with it; blisteringly quick for its vintage, yet for the most part benign. You feel as if you could cross a continent in a single bound, and not be averse to a return journey following a hearty lunch. The BMW M5 may be its natural rival on paper, but it is a very different animal. After all, no M-car in period came with a torque converter. The E500 is about cosseting its driver and getting places very quickly, without making a big show of it. There's nothing 'motorsport' about this Benz.

And the best bit? You can still pick one up for around £15k, maybe a bit less... assuming you can find one. An ultra-low-mileage example will probably be twice that, but even that isn't excessive for what it buys you. Of late, enthusiasts have started to wake up to the 500E/E500, yet it remains widely ignored by all but the marque faithful. Expect that to change, and soon. 

Thanks to Piotr Frankowski and Filip Blank



PILLARLESS COMMUNITY

Mercedes carved out a successful niche with its executive coupés, but does **Martin Buckley** prefer the 450SLC, 560SEC or S500?

PHOTOGRAPHY JULIAN MACKIE



Clockwise: viewed from the front, SLC is almost indistinguishable from the R107 roadster; velour trim gives cabin a lift; straight-six was available, but most customers went for V8 option; signature slatted windows disguise the fixed rear quarterlights



Large, pillarless two-door coupés in many ways form a genre of automobile that Mercedes-Benz has always done best, perhaps even made its own. Inspired by the American idea of the ‘personal’ car, Daimler-Benz AG found that it could sell these flagship two-door hardtops at a handsome premium to those buyers who wanted a prettier, more individualistic vehicle than an S-Class saloon. These status-hungry individuals were the ideal customers: wealthy enough to be relatively insensitive to the price differential as long as the luxury, exclusivity and a certain dignity were maintained.

It is a concept that had its origins in the truly handbuilt 300S models of the ’50s, but which crystallised in the hand-finished W111 range from 1961 onwards. For me, there has never been a better-looking Mercedes-Benz than those long-tailed hardtops and, in a way, the sheer beauty of the things made the size of straight-six engine that powered the various models immaterial. Be it 220 or 300SE, here was a Mercedes in which you just swept along majestically, absorbing the admiring glances. The two-door W111 literally made anyone look good.

The coming of the 280SE 3.5 in the late ’60s upped the W111 coupé’s game dramatically, of course. Here, at last, was the suave, effortless eight-cylinder power that it had always needed:

suddenly the combination of aesthetic near-perfection and 200bhp turned an expensive two-door trinket into one of the most desirable Mercedes passenger cars of the post-war period. That is not just my opinion: the amount now being asked for the 3.5-litre coupés – cabriolets went stratospheric ages ago – seems to bear it out. In fact, for the price of one 280SE 3.5, you could probably own a good example of each of its immediate successors, with change to spare.

The 450SLC, 560SEC and S500 are desirable cars on their own terms, but they do demonstrate, to me at least, how Mercedes-Benz has struggled to recapture the romance of the W111. Somehow, the C107 SLC missed the mark because it took its visual lead from the SL rather than the contemporary S-Class saloon; it was probably the unnerving success of the BMW E9 CS/CSi that convinced Stuttgart it needed a more youthfully aggressive coupé, with 14in let into the R107 platform to create rear-seat legroom. Buyers of a more sedate inclination were directed to the straight-six CE coupés on the W114 platform. Tax-dodging SLC purchasers could get a 280 version, but most preferred the 350 and 450 with their injected V8s.

With 56,330 built from 1972-’80, the SLC could not be considered anything other than a sales success, yet it has always had a bit of an identity crisis as a classic. It had neither the glamour of the soft-top SL that begat it, nor the

rarefied, bespoke flavour of the W111 that it replaced. Until recently, the SLC was a car that seemed to dither on the fringes of widespread desirability. Only the dearth of good examples, and the perception that the shape looks better now than it did at, say, 15 or 20 years old, seems to have opened people’s minds to its possibilities.

Launched in 1981 (as the 380/500SEC) and built to the tune of just over 74,000 examples in 10 years, the exclusively V8-powered C126 coupés have had a somewhat smoother passage from secondhand smoker to collector’s car. They were being talked up almost from the moment they went out of production in the early ’90s. Really good, sub-100,000-mile examples of the late 560s (post-facelift, from ’85) have been making strong money for a while.

The appeal is not difficult to understand. They are beautifully built, reliable and – with the possible exception of the C124 hardtop – the best-looking car that Bruno Sacco ever put his name to. Certainly no flagship Mercedes-Benz coupé produced since has blended such harmoniously timeless styling with such a reputation for durability and quality. At a distance of 30 years, the C126 SEC now looks like the last gasp of a pre-digital Mercedes motor car that did not throw in its lot with the needlessly complex electronics that blighted later models.

And when you think of ‘needlessly complex’ Mercedes, it is the W140 series that comes to



mind. Announced in coupé form in '92, these were the most complicated Benzes since the 600 of 1963, developed at a cost of DM1 billion and fitted with all kinds of labour-saving devices that you didn't know you needed: 'close assist' doors, rear head restraints that fold themselves away electrically, heated mirrors... it seemed that no gadget was off limits to the men who created this double-glazed plutocratic conveyance.

That said, the C140 pioneered many of the features that we now take for granted on ordinary modern cars. These absurdly complex but intriguing vehicles boasted such firsts as parking sensors (this one has the earlier 'kerb finders' – two chromed sticks that emerge from the wings when you select reverse), retractable mirrors and rain-sensing wipers. The options list seemed endless and, if you weren't satisfied with the 322bhp 500, there was always the V12 600 with just over 400bhp. For the purposes of this assessment, however, we will content ourselves with the 5-litre version, which is not exactly slow with 0-60 in 6.7 secs and (an electronically limited) 155mph. With 14,953 made, the 500 was by far the most numerous of this range, which lived through a couple of name changes before M-B settled on the CL nomenclature in 1996.

The C140 comes off a poor third in any beauty contest, all bloated and porcine. The less

said the better about what must be one of Sacco's least-happy designs, with its bug-eyed front and paunchy stance, although from dead side-on it has a certain chubby grace redolent of an over-fed C124, its much prettier smaller sister. The lack of buyer acceptance is clearly reflected in the sales: just 26,000 were built through to '99. Owner Edward Checkly plans to sell this one but keep his 300CE, which he finds more usable.

In fairness, the handsome, square-jawed C126 was always going to be a tough act to follow, although it's not perfect. As owner John Antonaki points out, the rear wheels look slightly lost in the arches, which is presumably why so many owners (of a less discerning disposition) fit bigger alloys.

The SLC is an altogether smaller, more dainty machine (although I never thought that in period), with slim bumpers and lots of chrome. And, of course, those Venetian blinds in the extremities of the side-windows – a very un-Mercedes compromise that enabled the quarter glasses to disappear flush into the body.

All three cars have long, hefty frameless doors (with what look like fridge handles on the SEC), big steering wheels and a slightly sterile, impersonal attitude to interior luxury that speaks of the boardroom rather than the boudoir. Inside, the SLC seems almost austere compared to the later coupés but, apart from air-conditioning, it has

'THE SLC IS ALTOGETHER MORE DAINY, WITH LOTS OF CHROME AND THOSE VENETIAN BLINDS'



MERCEDES-BENZ 450SLC

Sold/no built 1972-'80/31,739

Construction steel monocoque

Engine all-alloy, single-overhead-cam-per-bank 4520cc V8, Bosch D-Jetronic fuel injection

Max power 225bhp @ 5000rpm

Max torque 278lb ft @ 3000rpm

Transmission three-speed automatic, driving rear wheels

Suspension independent all round, at **front** by double wishbones **rear** semi-trailing arms; coil springs, anti-roll bar f/r

Steering power-assisted recirculating ball

Brakes discs all round, with servo

Length 15ft 6½in (4737mm)

Width 5ft 10in (1778mm)

Height 4ft 3¼in (1302mm)

Wheelbase 9ft 3in (2819mm)

Weight 3515lb (1594kg)

0-60mph 8.5 secs

Top speed 134mph

Mpg 15

Price new £11,500

MERCEDES-BENZ 560SEC

(where different to SLC)

Sold/no built 1985-'91/28,929

Engine 5547cc V8, Bosch K-Jetronic fuel injection

Max power 279-300bhp @ 5000rpm

Max torque 325lb ft @ 3750rpm

Transmission four-speed automatic

Brakes discs all round, with servo and ABS

Length 16ft (4877mm)

Width 6ft (1829mm)

Height 4ft 6in (1372mm)

Weight 4023lb (1824kg)

0-60mph 7 secs

Top speed 155mph (limited)

Mpg 16

Price new £52,185

MERCEDES-BENZ S500 COUPÉ

(where different to SEC)

Sold/no built 1992-'99/14,953

Engine dual-overhead-cam-per-bank 4973cc V8, Bosch LH-Jetronic (later ME) fuel injection

Max power 304bhp @ 5500rpm

Max torque 347lb ft @ 3900rpm

Transmission five-speed automatic

Suspension multi-link rear

Steering speed-sensitive assistance

Brakes dual-circuit, ABS

Length 16ft 6in (5029mm)

Width 6ft 2in (1880mm)

Wheelbase 9ft 6in (2896mm)

Weight 4938lb (2239kg)

0-60mph 6.7 secs

Price new £93,500



Clockwise: 560SEC is surefooted, with neat handling; seatbelts that extend automatically are among the model's high-tech gadgets; V8 develops a vast 325lb ft of torque, equating to effortless performance; airy cabin is beautifully finished



everything you realistically need – including the traditionally glacial 1970s electric windows. It is also a lower-slung, narrower car in which rear passengers have to negotiate for legroom, despite the ‘full four-seater’ aspirations.

There are lots of little things in the C126 and C140 that you could come to like, such as heated, electrically adjustable front seats and the ‘butler’s arm’ that offers you your seatbelt when the ignition comes on. In the SLC, you fumble for your belt in the old-fashioned way, having bumped your head on the low roof on the way in.

You almost walk into the grand C126 and C140, and positively lounge on their back seats. Cabin detailing is a matter of taste, but I would probably prefer the severe, shiny injection-moulded plastics of the SLC to the ruched hide of the S500 that hints at the American golf-trouser market it was conceived for. The plethora of switches is still mostly a mystery to me, although the most important functions are handy enough. Tick every option box on a C140 and you could be looking at 44 different buttons and wheels spread across the dash of this two-ton four-seater.

On balance, the SEC offers the most pleasing mixture of materials inside – this one has the rare Alcantara trim, which grows on you (apparently) – although there is a lot to be said for the thick blue velour of the SLC, which has a feel and smell that harks back to ‘60s Mercs.

You don’t have to be in the company of these

three generations of coupé for very long to form the opinion that there is a much larger conceptual and technological gap between the SLC and SEC than between the SEC and S500. On the road, this idea gains momentum. The wind rustles around the C107’s side windows and the drone of the road hums through its floors in a manner unknown to the C126 and C140 driver.

The 560SEC and S500 are simply very fast and very quiet, eerily so in the case of the C140, whose four-camshaft M119 V8 has a fabulously smooth, silent tickover. The two newer cars feel about equally matched in acceleration. Level their heavy, slightly dead throttles and the horizon is reeled towards you in one of those long, meaty lunges of seamless power that leaves you impressed but somehow unmoved.

The S500 has the silkier, more sophisticated edge to it, whereas there is a hint of muscle-car V8 woofle about the husky 560SEC. Gears flick through unnoticed in both, their shifts beautifully modulated even when changing up at full throttle. There is a feeling of absolute command and impenetrability about them, and you can take it as read that both vehicles will cruise at 125-130mph with ease.

At that speed, the 450SLC would be running out of steam. Having said that, it canters along at 100mph/4000rpm quite happily: this Benz is still a car in which you could do many, many miles while feeling quite relaxed. The driving position

seems naturally correct without the need for electric adjustment and, while it is not truly fast in any ultimate sense, it has the well-judged levels of urge in all the right places so that the overall impression is satisfying.

Initial acceleration seems quite promising, yet it doesn’t feel as if it’s pulling really well until you are doing 80 or 90mph, by which time that low, three-speed gearing (compared to the interstellar ratios of the later coupés) seems to keep everything in the engine’s sweet spot for a pleasing sensation of sustained and unburstable thrust.

You are equally aware that you are working just fractionally harder to hold a straight course in the SLC than in the newer cars, which, as you might expect, can also tackle a twisty road with much less drama. Which is not the same as saying that they are more fun. They might have more ultimate grip and less roll, but their sheer size works against them. The S500 is as wide as a Diablo with its mirrors unfurled; the slender SLC, in comparison, feels almost like a lithe sports car rather than a cut-down saloon. Its light responsive throttle and nicely weighted (if not exactly pin-sharp) power steering give it a feel and supple progression to its handling that allow you to indulge in its limits at will, a facility not really available with the later models.

If anything, there is a whiff of the barge about the gentlemanly 560SEC, which never puts a wheel wrong yet doesn’t truly relish being



'THE S500 HAS THE SILKIER EDGE –
THERE IS A HINT OF MUSCLE-CAR V8
WOOFLE ABOUT THE HUSKY SEC'



thrown around in a hooligan fashion. I like the solid feel of its steering, its speed and air of dignity – and highly evident quality – but somehow it is not a car that goes about its business with any sense of joy. This one has particularly impressive brakes – a lovely firm pedal compared to the other two – but also has the most ordinary ride. It doesn't feel 'expensive' for all the supposed

From top: 560SEC has a functional beauty to its lines, marred only by oddly bulky doorhandles; out on the road, the SLC feels like a far more compact car than its younger stablemates

sophistication of its self-levelling rear end.

The S500 is a minor revelation in that it has a superb ride combined with a nimbleness about it when pressed into a corner that totally belies its obesity; an athlete disguised as a couch potato, if you like. Its brilliantly embracing front seats play a big part in making this a car that you feel happy to throw around right away. It turns in cleanly, offers enormous grip and everything about the way that it conducts itself speaks of good balance and drama-free progression, with the clever damping and multi-link rear set-up doing their thing. This one doesn't even have the optional ADS Adaptive Damping System and I'm not certain whether it has traction control; if it does, it's pleasingly unobtrusive.

Such refinements were unknown to the SLC, of course, but the point about the 450 is that it has a feeling of adventure about it. So often dismissed as the sensible choice in the world of 1970s flair, it feels positively raffish in this company. Unlike the newer models here, it does not seek to hermetically seal you in a world of absolute luxury. If hours of your life could float away unremembered amid the brutal competence and refinement of the S500 and 560SEC, the 450SLC seems to be on a mission. From the masculine hum of its V8 to the chunky precision of its gearchange, it is a car that is fully equipped to engage in whatever GT fantasy you have in mind. It's a sort of Teutonic Jensen Interceptor,



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'NO GADGET WAS OFF LIMITS TO THE MEN WHO CREATED THIS DOUBLE-GLAZED PLUTOCRATIC CONVEYANCE'



lacking the boutique feel of such exotica but with many of the sensible attributes of a W123. In a way, it is a near-perfect combination.

Yes, SLC prices are hardening – the fact that this low-mileage 450 sold for £32,000 tells you everything you need to know about shifting attitudes – but overall they are still cheap, albeit hard to find in really nice condition. It's great that the 560SEC is having its day. They are fine cars but, somehow, I could never fall in love with one.

The same goes for the S500, an awe-inspiring machine in many respects, but about as romantic as a mid-week break in a Travelodge next to the M6. But who knows? With 8573 of the V12s built – making it almost as rare as a 300SEL 6.3 – it could be one to keep an eye on in the future. I'm not holding my breath, though. 

Thanks to John Antonaki; Edward Checkley; Sam Bailey, The SL Shop (www.theslshop.com)



Clockwise, from above: parking guides pop up when reverse is engaged; slippery profile echoes that of the smaller C124 coupé; high-tech yet stark interior; gargantuan S500 lacks the grace of earlier cars but has real presence; unobtrusive quad-cam V8

MERCEDES-BENZ 'PONTON'

Mercedes' first monocoque was a best-seller and now makes a stylish, practical buy, says **Malcolm McKay**

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**



Mercedes' family car for the 1950s was – as you would expect – meticulously engineered. Immensely strong, its bodyshell was insulated from vibration because the engine, suspension and steering were fitted to a rubber-mounted box-section subframe, slung across the front a bit like a pontoon bridge – hence the nickname 'Ponton'.

Full-width styling was in vogue at the time, but the Mercedes' imposing radiator grille made it stand out against more plebeian rivals. Though it started with a pedestrian sidevalve engine, its all-synchromesh four-speed gearbox and fully independent suspension were carried-over Mercedes features that were still well ahead of most opponents. Separate driver and passenger heating controls with powerful through-flow ventilation and a laminated windscreen were advanced, but 6V electrics, no passenger sunvisor and rubber floor mats were not.

More upmarket models soon appeared and, while rubber floor mats continued, 6V electrics were only fitted on the sidevalve cars. The straight-sixes were phased out before the 'fours' because their successor came first, but not until

the 220SE had become the first mid-range car to be fitted with fuel injection, giving a massive boost in torque as well as more power.

Saloon numbers have been destroyed, to the point where you now see almost as many convertibles for sale. But find a good survivor and they are wonderfully endearing cars, feeling refined and supremely reassuring. Coupés are rare and perhaps not as well-proportioned as the delightful convertibles, which have become enormously desirable, with prices soaring in recent years.

While bodyshells do rust, their solidity means that problems are usually quite localised, unless the car has suffered extreme neglect such as being left in a garden or a damp garage for decades. In those circumstances, you can expect rot almost anywhere, on any car.

Parts availability is good, with Mercedes itself still stocking most bits, and everything else can be sourced via specialists. There is no point being insular – a few firms exist in the UK, but if you want to find rare parts you have to look to Belgium, Germany, the USA and beyond. Components are not usually outrageously expensive, though chromework can be costly – especially if you need a lot of it – and wood interior trim on those that have it is also tricky.



Fritschy/Ellis won their class on 1960 East African Safari



The 220S – here in coupé form – was introduced in 1956



Rot spots

- 1 Front wings
- 2 Front inner wings
- 3 Footwells
- 4 Sills
- 5 Door bottoms
- 6 Floor chassis sections and crossmember
- 7 Jacking points
- 8 Rear wheelarches
- 9 Boot floor and rear chassis rails
- 10 Rear valance



All six-cylinder cars had wood interior **trim** on the dash and door cappings. If the former needs to be restored or changed, it is a windscreen-out job



Cabrios came with bench or individual front **seats**, and proper or folding rears. Woolcloth or leathercloth were offered at first, with MB-Tex coming later



Specialists say that it's rare to find a Ponton with **engine** problems, so robust are these units. Neglect will cause any motor to wear out, though, so look out for excessive oil breathing/consumption, leaks, rumbling and knocking. Cars with aluminium cylinder heads can suffer expensive corrosion and head-gasket failure



Most cars have Solex **carburettors**, but diesels and late 220SEs had Bosch mechanical injection – it's well built, but not always understood by mechanics



Brakes gained wider linings, finned drums and even Alfins during the car's life to reduce fade. Seized hydraulics are common on rarely used examples



Kingpins wear, as do steering idlers and, to a lesser extent, steering boxes. Front wheel bearings have a limited life, too. All last longer if regularly greased



Swing-axle **rear suspension** was hairy on early cars, but improved on 'sixes' (all from '56). Driveshafts and bearings wear, and beware a leaky/noisy diff

Cabriolet is the most desirable Ponton, and the trim level improved over the car's production run



On the road

Pontons offer a comfortable ride with sophisticated suspension for their time, a solid feel and one of the nicest column shifts you will find: as slick as a good floor change. By modern standards, sidevalve and diesel cars are sluggish, really suitable only for those who enjoy a relaxed lifestyle. If you prefer to have more poke, go for an overhead-cam petrol 'four', or any of the 'sixes' – all of which are quite capable of mixing it with today's traffic. Late injected straight-sixes give the strongest performance, saloons being lighter than coupés, with cabriolets the heaviest of all.

Check for evidence of regular maintenance and beware a leaky engine – oil or water – or one that breathes heavily when hot. Except for the diesels, the overhead-cam units have an alloy head that corrodes if inhibitor has not been used in the coolant, and can crack. Check carefully for signs of oil and water mixing, and of overheating.

Sidevalve four-cylinder cars have 6V electrics. If you plan to drive at night, an upgrade to 12V is desirable and even cars equipped as such from new often have an alternator conversion. A large number of grease points need regular attention on suspension and steering: if it's done, the parts will last for ever, but they will wear if not. Kingpins, steering idler, rear driveshafts and wheel bearings are usually the first to go.

When you are buying components, be sure you get the right ones because the huge range meant many variations. For example, Pontons came with four different wheelbases: four-cylinder cars were shortest, then the coupé/cabriolet, the 219 and, finally, the 220 was the longest.



Twin-carb 'four' or injected 'six' offer decent performance

OWNER'S VIEW Alan Cross



M-B Club register captain Cross already had a Pagoda when he fell for a Ponton cabriolet: "It's an elegant, smart car – very different from anything else on the road. I bought my silver left-hand-drive example in 2007 from Silver Arrows. It's a 220SE, but had been converted to 220S specification in the days when people were scared of fuel injection. It runs beautifully and has been to Germany many times.

"We've tidied the paintwork, changed the wheel bearings, converted it to an alternator and went to Holland to have EZ power steering fitted. It's a fabulous drive, and if it breaks down we can usually fix it. Wherever you stop, people want to talk about it. Parts availability is great if you know where to go: we buy lots at Essen."

The knowledge

| WHAT TO PAY* | 'four'/six'/cabrio |
|--------------|------------------------|
| Show | £25,000/40,000/125,000 |
| Average | £10,000/15,000/70,000 |
| Restoration | £2500/5000/20,000 |

PARTS PRICES*

| | |
|-----------------------|-------|
| Front wing | £500 |
| Inner and outer sills | £300 |
| Rear chassis rail | £600 |
| Water pump | £60 |
| Recon steering box | £1100 |
| Brake master cylinder | £300 |
| Fuel pump | £200 |

CLUBS

Mercedes-Benz Club 08456 032660;
www.mercedes-benz-club.co.uk

BOOKS

Mercedes-Benz Since 1945 Vol 1 James Taylor, MRP
Mercedes-Benz The 1950s Vol 2 Bernd Koehling, CreateSpace
Das Grosse Mercedes-Ponton-Buch Matthias Röcke, Heel Verlag

SPECIALISTS

Gratt Motors 0161 223 0284 **John Haynes** 01903 500000
Classic Mercedes-Benz 07850 983128
Silver Arrows 020 8789 8525
Autobarn 01892 771321 **Avantgarde** 01827 288177
Ponton Manufaktur 0049 89 52 03 24 48
Werner Karasch 0049 2 09 27 20 78
Geert Vanderburgh 0032 56 421233
Miller's Inc 001 800 338 7787

*PRICES CORRECT AT DATE OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

TIMELINE

1953 Sep 180 saloon with 52bhp sidevalve 'four'
1954 Mar 180D arrives (44mpg); 220 'six' with improved IRS, finned drums, 12V, 85bhp
1955 Sep 180D up to 43bhp; 220 gets servo and Alfin drums; 220A/C coupé and cabrio launched
1956 Jan IRS from 220 fitted to 180 and 180D
1956 May 190 – better trim, ohc engine, 12V, 75bhp, 86mph, finned drums; 220 replaced by 219; 220S with twin carbs, 100bhp
1956 Jul 220S cabrio manufacture begins
1956 Oct 220S coupé now available
1957 Aug 180a replaces 180 (52,186 sold) – 65bhp, 12V; 219 – 90bhp; 220S up to 106bhp
1958 Apr 180a gets 190 quarterlights, better trim
1958 Sep 190D – 50bhp; 220SE – Bosch injection
1959 Sep facelifted 180b (68bhp), 180Db, 190b (80bhp), 190Db replaces earlier 'fours'; 220b is the only 'six'; finned drums on all; optional servo
1959 Oct six-cylinder saloon discontinued; 120bhp 220SE coupé/cabriolet only continue
1961 Jun 180c; 180Dc – 1988cc, 65bhp
1962 Oct Production ends

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1953-'62/559,369

Construction steel monocoque

Engine all-iron, sidevalve 1767cc/ohc alloy-head 1897cc/all-iron 1897cc/1988cc 'four'; iron-block, alloy-head ohc 2195cc 'six'; Solex carburettors or Bosch fuel injection

Max power 40bhp @ 4000rpm to 115bhp @ 4800rpm

Max torque 75lb ft @ 2000rpm to 152lb ft @ 4100rpm

Transmission all-synchromesh four-speed man, optional Hydrak auto clutch (219/220S), RWD

Suspension independent at **front** by wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** swing-axles; coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r

Steering recirculating ball

Brakes drums

Length 14ft 8½in-15ft 7in (4485-4750mm)

Width 5ft 8½in-9½in (1740-1760mm)

Height 5ft ½in-1½in (1530-1560mm)

Wheelbase 8ft 8½in-9ft ½in (2650-2820mm)

Weight 2595-3241lb (1180-1470kg)

0-60mph 39-c14 secs

Top speed 69-103mph

Mpg 15-44

Price new £1793 (190, 1956)

THE ALTERNATIVES



LANCIA AURELIA

Technically advanced, with alloy V6 engine giving up to 118bhp. Available as unitary

saloon, coupé or convertible, it's highly complex, but still feels remarkably modern to drive.

Sold/no built 1950-'58/18,197 **Mpg** 18-30

0-60mph 20-12.3 secs **Top speed** 84-115mph

Price new £3471 (B20 GT, '55)



ROVER P4

Plentiful wood and leather, and choice of lumbering four- or silky six-cylinder

engines. As durable as a Mercedes, with most parts significantly cheaper: an appealing option.

Sold/no built 1949-'64/130,342 **Mpg** 17-30

0-60mph 26.5-15.4 secs **Top speed** 77-100mph

Price new £1298 (60, 1956)

One to buy £29,950*

Year 1958 **Recorded mileage** 37,745km

Vendor VSL, Garstang, Lancs; tel: 01995 601500;

www.vslnw.com **For** Rare and in splendid fettle

Against Cosmetics, but they're easily sorted

This 190D Kombiwagen is one of only 136 built. Latterly in Portugal and being UK-registered, it seems solid under a thick repaint that has cracked in a couple of places, with some microblistering on the tailgate. The offside door pillar has a few rust pinholes in the jamb but they're only minor. There's the odd scratch on the radiator shell and bumpers, but all of the door furniture and trim is in place. It has well-treaded Gislaved snow tyres.

The reclining front seats wear velour covers and the factory rear bench has a few repairs and a couple of small tears to the vinyl, but the headlining is fine. The gauges are all good and the horn ring intact, the dash having been refinished in matt that looks okay. The overmats are decent, but the rubber mats beneath them are perishing.

The motor is tidy and its diesel pump appears newer than the rest of it, with green coolant topped up and oil dark but to the top mark.

It is a joy to drive once you've cranked the diesel into life with the combined starter/glow-plug lever. It is incredibly low geared but goes in that fluid way that only old Mercs can pull off. Its oil pressure is a constant full-deflection 3bar, with temperature a steady 80°C, while the column shift is easy and the brakes pull up square.

Though it no longer requires an annual MoT, it needed one for registration. You could enjoy the car as it is or it's an ideal basis for a cosmetic restoration to concours standard.



Saloon rear doors identify this as a conversion by Miesen



Cabin is excellent, but front recliners may not be original



No leaks from diesel engine, but it could do with a clean



Our verdict

Find a well-maintained Ponton and you are almost guaranteed a reliable family friend with few weaknesses. Just beware neglected cars dressed up to look better than they are. Overhead-cam engines, especially twin-carb or injected 'sixes', perform well and cabriolets are increasingly sought-after; there are still worthwhile projects if you have the skills.

FOR

- Exceptional build quality
- Most models are remarkably usable
- Last for ever if well maintained
- Virtually all parts can be found

AGAINST

- Spares can be expensive if a rebuild is required
- Sidevalves and diesels are very slow
- Neglected cars may need extensive work
- Corroded aluminium heads are bad news

MERCEDES-BENZ SL (W113)

The charm and practicality of Stuttgart's 1960s Pagoda sports car has led prices to soar over the past few years, cautions **Malcolm McKay**

PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER



Paul Bracq's styling masterpiece, the Pagoda-roof W113 SL was built to exceptional standards, from cast-aluminium door shells to individually numbered alloy bonnet, bootlid, hood cover and door skins. Way ahead of its time in the combination of sporting performance and touring comfort that it offers, it seems delicate but is a masterful endurance rally car – as proven by winning the gruelling 1964 Spa-Sofia-Liège.

All three engines give a near-identical top speed, though the 250 and 280 have significantly more torque than the 230SL. The 280 also has softer seats and suspension, and 90% were sold with an excellent four-speed automatic, whereas 75% of 230s were manual. The W113 was always glamorous and expensive (twice as much as a 4.2 E-type), with Charlton Heston and John Lennon among star owners in period. John Travolta, David Coulthard, Jason Orange and Kate Moss have added more recent flair to the model.

Most were sold with both hard- and soft-tops, but some were soft-top only. Beware the 230SL 'California Coupé' with removable hardtop but the hood well replaced by a drop-down bench, giving a 2+2 configuration. Though rare, these

are not sought-after, a soft-top being useful in case of sudden showers. This should not be confused with the optional side-facing 'jump seat' available for cars equipped with the hood, and fitted to the 250SL in our photographs.

As values rise, US-market cars are returning; they make good projects if rust-free from a dry state, but factor in the cost of upgrading to Euro spec. American cars had separate sealed-beam headlamps (with flashing disconnected), rubber-tipped overriders, a lower axle ratio, milder cam (from late '68), headrests, side wing reflectors and hazard warning lights. There were data/emissions plates in the door frame, but no mirror in the passenger's sunvisor and less chrome trim, while many had air-con. RHD conversion is not viable. Inspect the condition of all rubber seals.

Solidly built, with all-welded panels, a rotten SL is costly to repair properly, so there are many superficially shiny 'restored' cars around. Look for consistent panel gaps, smooth spot-welds on the front outer-to-inner wings and an unfilled panel join seam below the headlights. Brightwork is pricey, too, so ensure it's all present and undamaged – likewise the valuable toolkit and jack. White with black top was the combination of choice when new; silver is now most favoured.



Eugen Böhringer won the '64 Spa-Sofia-Liège in a 230SL



W165 'Tripoli' car at Normand customer test day, Brands



Rot spots

- 1 Front panel and collapsible bumper subframe
- 2 Front wings, notably behind lights; box-section inside
- 3 Front chassis rails
- 4 Windscreen-pillar bases and heater plenum chamber
- 5 Floor crossmembers & rear pans/trailing-arm mounts
- 6 Sills (behind screwed-on covers), inc jacking points
- 7 Rear base of hardtop (right)
- 8 Chassis rails, ahead of axle
- 9 Boot floor
- 10 Rear valance



Test that **hood** erects, folds and latches correctly, fits well around door windows (which shouldn't be loose) and material is still flexible. A new soft-top costs £600+



Not all W113s were sold with a **hardtop**, but each was numbered and matched to the car originally. Adding a missing hard- or soft-top puts £5000-plus on the value



Though durable if well maintained, the **engines** are not bombproof and should be carefully inspected. Blue smoke on acceleration is likely to be hardened/worn valve-stem seals. Expect near-instant starting; neglect or lack of use can cause rust in the pipework to block injectors. Dirty oil can damage the pump –£1000+ to rebuild



Lots of nipples on 230/250 need regular **greasing** to avoid rapid wear. Suspension and engine are subframe-mounted: failed mounts transmit harshness



M-B Tex **trim** is durable but horsehair stuffing can disintegrate and door cards warp; leather is not a desirable upgrade. Check screen base for water damage



Head gasket can fail, notably on cars idle for long periods: a misfire or overheating are warning signs. It will soon recur if not properly repaired by an M-B specialist



Rear suspension is robust but costly to overhaul. Look for seized splines, worn UJs, loose bolts and worn rubber mounts transmitting axle noise to the cockpit

Clever soft-top design folds out of sight, hidden under a cover, and doesn't affect vision with the Pagoda roof in place



On the road

The 230's M127 straight-six had a four-bearing crank, the 250-280 units seven-bearing. Engines get swapped with saloons, so check: 127.981 stamped on the nearside of the block is a 230; 129.982 a 250; and 130.983 a 280. The body number on the VIN plate on the adjacent inner wing should also appear on the hood frame, hood cover, hardtop base and gearbox support.

No more power was claimed for the 250 than the 230, but its useful band was much wider, with a substantial torque boost. Corrosion inhibitor in the coolant is vital to avoid the system silting up, causing overheating and head-gasket failure. Check the oil level, listen for rattles and, ideally, avoid stainless-steel exhausts, which sound tinny compared to the M-B mild-steel type.

An auto 'box suits the 280 and 250, and the Mercedes four-speed manual is a gem, though for competition and relaxed cruising the rare ZF five-speed is the ultimate and boosts values. The fluid-flywheel four-speed auto is no slower-accelerating than the manual – test for slipping or jerky changes and inspect the colour of the oil, which should be red, not black or brown. Power-assisted steering, which came with a quicker ratio, is a plus and commands a price premium.

Taller final drives can be fitted, but it is an expensive job and best suited to tuned 250/280 engines – it's not a cheap unit to uprate, either.

Check that the heater and all the electrics work correctly, because issues are common and usually dear to sort. Look as far as you can see inside the fuel filler for rust – tanks can corrode in cars that have stood for a long while; a repro item is £500+.



Beautifully crafted interior with signature large wheel

OWNER'S VIEW Paul Badman



"Wanting a convertible with a hardtop, I bought the 250SL in 2002," recalls Badman. "I'd intended to buy a 280 and even had one surveyed by [late W113 guru] Roger Edwards. When I learned that his own car was a 250, I widened my search.

"I liked the looks and understood that Pagodas were reliable, and practical for European tours. It has always started first time, except when the points failed – it now has electronic ignition.

"It cruises all day at 80mph with the factory wind deflector, but is blustery any faster than that. I will drive at 110mph on the *autobahn*, but it gets thirsty! I get 20-22mpg, depending on the speed.

"The car has more than quadrupled in value, but that doesn't stop me driving it all year round. I intend to keep it as long as I'm allowed to drive."

The knowledge

WHAT TO PAY*

| | |
|--------------|---------------|
| Show/rebuilt | £100-125,000+ |
| Average | £50-70,000 |
| Restoration | £10-15,000 |

PARTS PRICES*

| | |
|--------------------------------|--------------|
| Front wing (repro) | £780 |
| Full outer sill (repro) | £321 |
| Grille chrome surround (repro) | £544 |
| Full engine rebuild | £7500-10,000 |
| Brake master cylinder | £209 |

CLUB

Mercedes-Benz Club 03456 032660;
www.mercedes-benz-club.co.uk

BOOKS

Mercedes W113 The Complete Story Kornblatt, Crowood
Mercedes-Benz The early SL cars Koehling, CreateSpace
Factory-Original Mercedes SL Taylor, Herridge

SPECIALISTS

M-B www.mercedes-benz.com **Roger Edwards** 01494 766766 **John Haynes** 01903 500000
Jacksons 01202 668509 **Forest Fine** 01273 891660 **Kevin O'Keeffe** 01883 626721
T&D Heaney 028 7940 1660 **SL Shop** 01386 791070 **Silver Arrows** 020 8789 8525 **Schmitt** 020 8450 5088 **Crewe Engines** 01270 526333
Greenvale Services 0161 796 2666 **SLS** 0049 40 656 939 **Silchester Garage** 0118 970 1648

*PRICES CORRECT AT DATE OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

TIMELINE

- 1963 Mar** 230SL launched at Geneva
1964 Oct Vertical spare wheel moved to horizontal; larger fuel tank resulting in less boot space
1965 Sep Closer-ratio manual gearbox and lower axle ratio
1966 Jan ZF five-speed manual gearbox offered as an option
1967 Jan 250SL replaces 230SL (19,831 built): redesigned engine with seven main bearings (formerly four), 150bhp, rear disc brakes and wider wheels
1967 Dec 280SL supersedes 250SL (5196 built): water passages between the cylinders deleted; thinner anti-roll bar
1968 Oct US cars get emissions kit, less power
1971 Mar 280SL production ends (23,885 built), replaced by R107 SL and C107 SLC

FACTFILE

- Sold/number built** 1963-'71/48,912
Construction steel monocoque
Engine iron-block, alloy-head, overhead-cam 2306/2496/2778cc straight-six, with Bosch six-plunger mechanical fuel injection
Max power 150bhp @ 5500rpm to 180bhp @ 5900rpm
Max torque 159lb ft @ 4500rpm to 193lb ft @ 4500rpm
Transmission four- or five-speed manual or four-speed auto, driving rear wheels
Suspension independent, at **front** by double wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** swing-axles, semi-trailing arms, transverse compensating spring; coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering recirculating ball, optional power assistance with quicker ratio
Brakes 10in discs front, 9in Alfin drums rear, with servo; all-discs (10.7in front, 11in rear) on 250 and 280
Length 14ft 1½in (4285mm)
Width 5ft 9¼in (1760mm)
Height 4ft 3½in (1305mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 10½in (2400mm)
Weight 2856-3124lb (1298-1420kg)
0-60mph 10.7-9.3 secs
Top speed 118-124mph
Mpg 18-25
Price new £3611/3806 (Roadster/Coupé-Convertible)

THE ALTERNATIVES



JAGUAR E-TYPE SI/II

The E-type sports car gradually became more of an all-rounder, with comfier seats,

2+2 and auto options. It remained much faster than the SL, but may be more tiring on a long trip.

- Sold/no built** 1961-'70/57,228 **Mpg** 18-22
0-60mph 8.9-6.9 secs **Top speed** 136-150mph
Price new £1967 (roadster, 1967)



LANCIA FLAMINIA

With 150bhp from a 2.8 V6 in its final form, the GT and cabriolet were stylish and rapid.

A transaxle and de Dion back end gave confident handling, plus it was a superb tourer, if rot-prone.

- Sold/no built** 1957-'67/8101 **Mpg** 19-26
0-60mph 13.6 secs (2.5) **Top speed** 106-121mph
Price new £2990 (Coupé, 1967)

One to buy £49,750*

- Year** 1968 **Recorded mileage** 68,615
Vendor Silchester Garage, Berks; tel: 0118 970 1648 **For** Solid driver; reasonably priced
Against Cosmetics; one to improve at home

This rare manual 280 came to the UK from Japan in 2014. It's not clear where it was first supplied to because it has Federal side markers and Euro headlights. It's solid, having had £1000-worth of new metal in the floors and front inner arches. It's had patches to the rear chassis legs, but the sills look good. The boot floor was done in the past.

Door fit is pretty good and the front wings are probably replacements because the swage lines inboard of the headlights have gone. The chrome is smart and the paint okay: presentable from 10 paces, but with a few small blemishes. The hard-top is sound and so, we are told, is the hood (it was starting to rain and we didn't want to lift the roof).

The motor is dusty and the dark, emulsified oil needs changing, but its coolant is green. The add-on air-con doesn't work, and needs sorting: Jubilee clips on its pipes are no longer acceptable.

Inside, the dash is excellent, the driver's seat vinyl has a split and a hole, plus the carpets are a bit tired. It fires easily with no nasty noises and drives quite well, showing full-deflection oil pressure and 170°F when up to temperature. There's a little blue smoke on take-off, but that could be because it wasn't fully warm and it had been standing. The brakes pull up straight and there's no steering play, but the four-speed gearbox has a wide throw, suggesting tired bushes. The exhaust clatters, and has worn through the rear skirt, although this should be fixed before sale.



Tidy 280 has a few chips, decent tyres and full MoT on sale



Nice dash and gauges; MB-Tex has a couple of minor flaws



Straight-six could do with steam clean and some fresh oil



Paul Bracq styling was barely altered over the years and looks just as elegant now as it ever did

Our verdict

Buy the best you can afford and don't ignore the sportier manual 230: top examples of each model command similar prices, with full spec being most important. A good Pagoda will reward with decades of service, but beware neglected running gear, missing hardtops, and the tarted-up rusty cars hidden behind new sill covers and badly fitted front wings.

FOR

- Exceptionally usable touring cars
- Great versatility and practicality
- Durable, with superb build quality
- Well supported by the manufacturer, a raft of specialists and clubs across the globe

AGAINST

- Bodywork extortionate to restore properly
- Engine expensive to rebuild if neglected
- Many poorly restored with non-original parts

MERCEDES-BENZ SE (W111/112)

These luxurious two-door coupés and cabriolets deserve top classic billing, as **Malcolm McKay** explains

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**



This flagship Mercedes range was all about style and sophistication. Less car for more money than the saloon (a lot extra for the Cabriolet), it was the choice of wealthy drivers wanting to make a statement – and to have

reliable, high-quality transport. Paul Bracq, working in Karl Wilfert's design studio with Bruno Sacco, deftly dispensed with the fins of the W111 and W112 saloons and added chrome highlights to produce a remarkably elegant and timeless classic design.

Fuel-injected six-cylinder engines gave decent performance – distinctly brisk with the 300 – and Mercedes' own four-speed automatic 'box was the popular choice. Progressive improvement from 1961 to '71 raised the base engine option from 220 to 250 in '65 (when the wheels grew to 14in) and to 280 in '67. Two years later, this became the first model to offer M-B's new 3.5-litre V8, making it the most sought-after of the range. These now command far higher prices than the underrated 'sixes' due to their relative rarity and exclusivity, plus more conventional underpinnings using rubber auxiliary springs in place of air suspension. They also



From top: two-tone 220SE Coupé; saloon's pioneering safety cell also featured in two-doors; 280SE 3.5 Cabrio

benefit from the fact that the V8 was built in huge numbers so spares are readily available.

Mercedes still supplies many parts for these cars, while others can be found from independent firms and specialist breakers – thanks to the large numbers of 'Fintail' saloons built, sharing many parts with their more exotic cousins.

All were undersealed from new, but rust can eventually take hold and, while you're unlikely to see a really rotten example, it is easy to be taken in by shiny paint that can hide any amount of filler and poor repairs. These are expensive cars to restore properly, so a thorough examination of the bodywork – especially in the indicated problem areas – is vital. Correct, even panel gaps are a good guide to a well-kept or well-restored car: anything out of line is a warning.

Cabriolets are more involved to rebuild after severe corrosion, with the added grief of an intricate hood that also needs careful inspection for operation, fit and rot of its components.

The extra chrome that was fitted to these models is now all hard to source, and costly if you do find it, so beware of missing or rusty parts. Interior trim, though durable, is equally difficult to track down. Individual bucket seats front and rear was a rare and desirable option.



Rot spots

- 1 Inner/outer wings, notably at corners or above headlights
- 2 Front chassis legs
- 3 Front bulkhead, particularly under the brake servo, and crossmember over gearbox
- 4 Sills, especially at the ends and adjacent to the wings
- 5 Floors
- 6 Door bottoms
- 7 Inner and outer rear wheelarches
- 8 Chassis legs at rear, including over the axle
- 9 Boot floor
- 10 Around rear light housings



Hood is complex, with a wooden rear bow and steel fittings, which can all rot or be damaged: check it carefully, and if cover is there. Hood alone is £1000+



Hide was standard for seats; headrests optional. **Trim** is hard-wearing but dear to refurbish, so look out for damage; a restored coupé wood set costs £800+



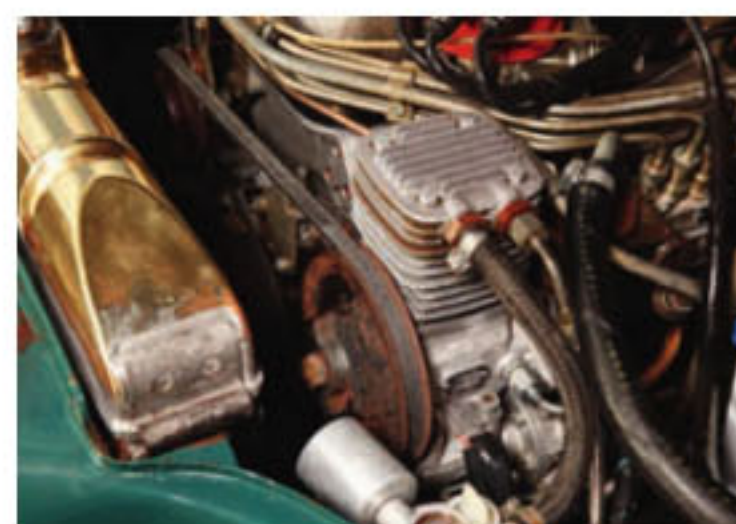
Engines are generally strong and should be able to rack up 250,000 miles without needing major work if properly maintained, but oil smoke on the overrun indicates worn valve guides. If it's worse under acceleration, bore wear is likely. A rattly top end suggests that the timing chain has stretched and/or the camshaft is worn



Fuel injection (mechanical on 'sixes,' electronic on V8) is reliable, but needs specialist tools to repair and set up. A good used mechanical pump is £400+



Brakes are all-disc with servo except on 220s, which have rear drums, and should pull up fast and straight. Check that the handbrake holds on hills



An engine-driven compressor, a sphere (that can rust) at each wheel and some complex valving give a smooth ride, but **air suspension** is expensive to overhaul



Though sturdily built, the suspension and **steering** have plenty of joints to wear out (and maintain), so look for evidence of regular servicing and care

Beautifully appointed interior is supremely comfortable, though the steering lacks precision



On the road

There is no doubting the intended market for these cars: with their soft ride, wallowy handling and slightly vague steering, they have a US feel. Performance should be adequate on all but the 220, which can feel gutless, and noticeably lively on 300s, 280s and especially V8s. The oil-pressure gauge should sit at around 30psi (2bar) at tickover when hot. Poor starting is more likely to be due to the rotor arm and distributor cap (fit genuine M-B parts) than anything more serious.

The harsh gearchanges from the Mercedes-Benz four-speed auto come as a surprise (and were criticised in the US when new); V8s with three-speed 'boxes are smoother. Check that the gearbox doesn't flare between changes, indicating an imminent rebuild. The optional manual gearbox doesn't really suit the cars, especially with the usual column shift (a floor change was an extra-cost option, like many things on a '60s Mercedes), but is extremely durable if fitted. In all cases, check for smooth running in every gear.

If the car is equipped with air suspension, make sure that it rides level and doesn't crash or bump. Also watch to see if it sinks to the floor when turned off (it should hold up overnight). There are plenty of joints to grease, so check that the car has a good service history. And with many links, the recirculating-ball mechanism may lack accuracy: play in the steering box can usually be adjusted out – if not, the unit can be rebuilt.

Discs are fitted all round across the range bar the 220, which has rear drums (and smaller front discs). They should pull up smartly with little effort; if not, it's time to rebuild the calipers.



Air suspension, standard on 300SE, gives a smooth ride

OWNER'S VIEW Jonathan Aucott



"I love Mercedes of this era and anything low-mileage and original appeals to me," explains Aucott of Avantgarde. "This 300SE has only done 55,000 miles – I'll never find another like it. I've had it for two years and use it sparingly; I drove it to a wedding in the summer. They are fantastically well built and, if you get a good one, it will be really reliable. They are excellent value compared to the V8s, because people are nervous of the air suspension, but if the car is well looked after it is unlikely to give any problems. If it does, it can be costly to put right, though you can get all the parts from Jacksons. The soft-top and interior are also expensive to restore, which is why I was so pleased to find this low-mileage, immaculate car."

The knowledge

WHAT TO PAY*

| | |
|--------------------------------|----------------|
| Show V8 cabriolet (average) | £200k (€125k) |
| Show 300 cabrio | £80,000 (€40k) |
| Show V8 coupé or 220/250 cab | £60k (€40k) |
| Show 220/250 coupé | £25k (€20k) |
| Restoration six-cylinder coupé | £5000 |

PARTS PRICES*

| | |
|------------------------|----------|
| Front wing | £1412 |
| Outer sill | £450 |
| Brake master cylinder | £120-326 |
| Good used auto gearbox | £600 |
| Fuel pump | £847 |
| Water pump | £364 |

CLUB

Mercedes-Benz Club 08456 032660;
www.mercedes-benz-club.co.uk

BOOKS

Mercedes-Benz, the 1960s, Vol 1 Koehling, CreateSpace
Essential Mercedes Coupés, Cabriolets & Saloons 53-67 Taylor, Bay View
Original Mercedes-Benz Coupés, Cabriolets & V-8 Sedans 1960-1972 Slade, MBI

SPECIALISTS

John Haynes 01903 500000 **Avantgarde** 01827 288177 **Derrick Wells** 01449 774222
Jacksons 01202 641855 **Charles Ironside** 01420 520635 **Classic M-B** 07850 983128
The SL Shop 08444 142116 **Silver Arrows** 020 8789 8525 **Starpartz** www.starpartz.co.uk

*PRICES CORRECT AT DATE OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

TIMELINE

1961 220SE Coupé and Cabriolet announced
1962 Mar 300SE Coupé and Cabrio launched: extra chrome, burr walnut, auto, 109-124mph
1963 Aug Dual-circuit brakes on all models
1964 300SE up from 160bhp to 170bhp
1965 250SE replaces 220SE (16,902 built): 150bhp, 115-118mph; 300SE gets bigger discs, stronger rear axle; all get 14in wheels, full trims
1967 Dec 280SE (5187 built) replaces 250 (6213) & 300 (3127): 160bhp, 115-118mph
1969 280SE 3.5 added (4502 built): electric windows, air-con, stereo, auto change on tunnel; all get lower, wider grille, rubber bumper inserts, new wheeltrims, leather instrument surround
1971 Production ends

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1961-'71/27,767 coupé, 8164 cabriolet **Construction** steel monocoque
Engine iron-block, alloy-head, sohc 2195/2496/2778cc or all-alloy 2996cc 'six' with mechanical injection, or iron-block, alloy-head 3499cc V8, electronic fuel injection **Max power** 120bhp @ 4800rpm to 200bhp @ 5800rpm
Max torque 140lb ft @ 3900rpm to 211lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual or automatic, RWD; optional limited-slip diff or five-speed manual on 300; optional three-speed auto on V8
Suspension: front wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** swing-axes; coils, telescopics f/r; 300 has air springs f/r, optional on rear of 220 from Aug '63; 250/280 hydropneumatic self-levelling; 280SE 3.5 has rubber auxiliary springs f/r
Steering power-assisted recirculating ball (optional on 220/250/280), 3.2 turns lock-to-lock (3.75-4.1 unassisted)
Brakes 273mm discs front, 279mm rear, with servo (except 220: 253mm discs front, 230mm drums rear)
Length 15ft 10in-15ft 11in (4880-4905mm)
Width 6ft (1845mm) **Height** 4ft 6in-4ft 8in (1395-1445mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft 11in (2750mm)
Weight 3102-3630lb (1410-1650kg)
Mpg 16-28 **0-60mph** 12.8-9 secs
Top speed 103-130mph
Price new £5283/5684 (300SE coupé/cabriolet, 1967)

THE ALTERNATIVES



LANCIA FLAMINIA COUPÉ/GT/CABRIO

Derived from the Aurelia with superb V6, de Dion rear and

all-disc brakes, the desirable Flaminias were the 2+2 Coupé and two-seaters. Great driver's cars that lacked the Merc's durability, and rotted.

Sold/no built 1958-'67/8101 **Mpg** 18-28 **0-60mph** 13.6-10 secs **Top speed** 106-121mph **New** £2990 (Coupé, 1967)



CADILLAC ELDORADO

The Eldorado Coupés and soft-tops went through three models

from 1961-'70. Huge and packing 6.4-8.2 V8s, they dwarfed the Benz and featured far plusher fitments, but drank and wallowed like old soaks.

Sold/no built 1961-'70/100,603 **Mpg** 8-18 **0-60mph** 13-9 secs **Top speed** 115-128mph **New** £5853 (Coupe, 1967)

One to buy £25,950*

Year 1965 **Recorded mileage** 26,227

Vendor Cheshire Classic Benz, Macclesfield; tel: 01625 260913 **For** Super, lightly mellowed condition; a lovely drive **Against** Dulled tail-lights

This 220SE is the property of CCB proprietor Peter Lewis, and he's only selling because he has too many other cars to use. It was restored from 2003-'06 and is still near-perfect; only concours judges would notice that the rear window seals are a little perished, there are minor scratches on the windscreen trim, a few ripples in the sill trims and that the rear-light plastic trims have lost their chrome. The 14in wheels widen tyre choice (currently new Goodyears all round), look better and slightly raise the gearing, but the factory 13in steels with tyres and trims are in the boot.

The leather is as it left Stuttgart – just taking on small cracks and creases – plus the carpets and headlining are good. The timber is superb, and there's the original clock and Blaupunkt radio (both working), plus inertia-reel belts all round.

The engine was rebuilt during the restoration, and has covered only 9000 miles since. It's clean and tidy, still with cadmium plating to the fuel linkage and lines, no leaks, plus clean oil and coolant to the correct levels. Oil pressure is the usual maximum 45psi on the gauge, with temperature settling at 180°F. Lewis drove the car 600 miles on the day he bought it in 2009, and it feels as if it could do it daily. It's sweet and supple with a fine ride, no slop in the steering and nice firm brakes that pull up straight. The gearchanges are smooth, but with the typical Mercedes-Benz lag to the kickdown.



Burgundy paint superb; bumpers rechromed during resto



Fantastically patinated hide is also in excellent condition



Rebuilt 2.2 straight-six now runs 123 electronic ignition



Elegant Bracq lines of the W111/2 two-doors formed the basis of the W108/9 saloons

Our verdict

There are still bargains to be found among six-cylinder coupés, but you should check rot and repairs carefully. Missing/incorrect parts can be pricey to replace; look for detailed history from a recognised specialist and evidence of long-term care. V8s are highly valued and desirability will ensure their prices continue to rise, while 'sixes' stand to appreciate equally well.

FOR

- Guaranteed classic status
- Exceptional build quality
- Comfort and performance
- Outstanding spares/specialist back-up

AGAINST

- Costly to restore if neglected
- Air suspension is not to all tastes
- Some bits are expensive and/or hard to find: a good used bumper set at £2500+, for example

MERCEDES-BENZ SL (R107)

This stylish and solid Stuttgart-built grand tourer makes a canny classic buy, says **Malcolm McKay**

PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER



These SLs hail from an era when Mercedes-Benz was a watchword for bulletproof reliability and understated elegance. Manufactured to the highest standards, and so strong that Mercedes' own engineers dubbed it *Der Panzerwagen*, the R107 enjoyed an 18-year production run with engines ranging from silky-smooth 2.8-litre straight-sixes to stonking 5-litre V8s, or a 5.6-litre for the USA.

Built to last they undoubtedly were, but that doesn't mean there's nothing to worry about when buying: neglect and the elements, not to mention careless drivers, can wreak havoc. Rot is an issue, especially on the earliest cars, but you can still find seriously corroded 1989 examples, even though rustproofing was improved in '76, cavity wax was injected from '80 and wheelarch liners were added in '86, along with galvanising of the doors, wings and parts of the shell.

The worst areas are not easily visible: water gets trapped in the heater plenum chamber and rusts through the bulkhead, then leaks into the passenger compartment, rusting the floors. Undo the screwed-on cover to check: removing everything for access to effect repairs is hugely

expensive. Sam Bailey at The SL Shop has produced resin trays that can be inserted into the offending areas, after which new drainpipes are fitted. The job costs between £850 and £1450 (less if you do it yourself). Another costly rot spot is the front wishbones, which are £1080 each new. Water getting into the boot can be cured by sealing around the rear lights.

Remarkably, virtually all parts are still available from Mercedes-Benz, though for service components it pays to shop around for identical items from Bosch, Boge and so on. Components are made in batches by Mercedes and some, especially chromework, are very expensive.

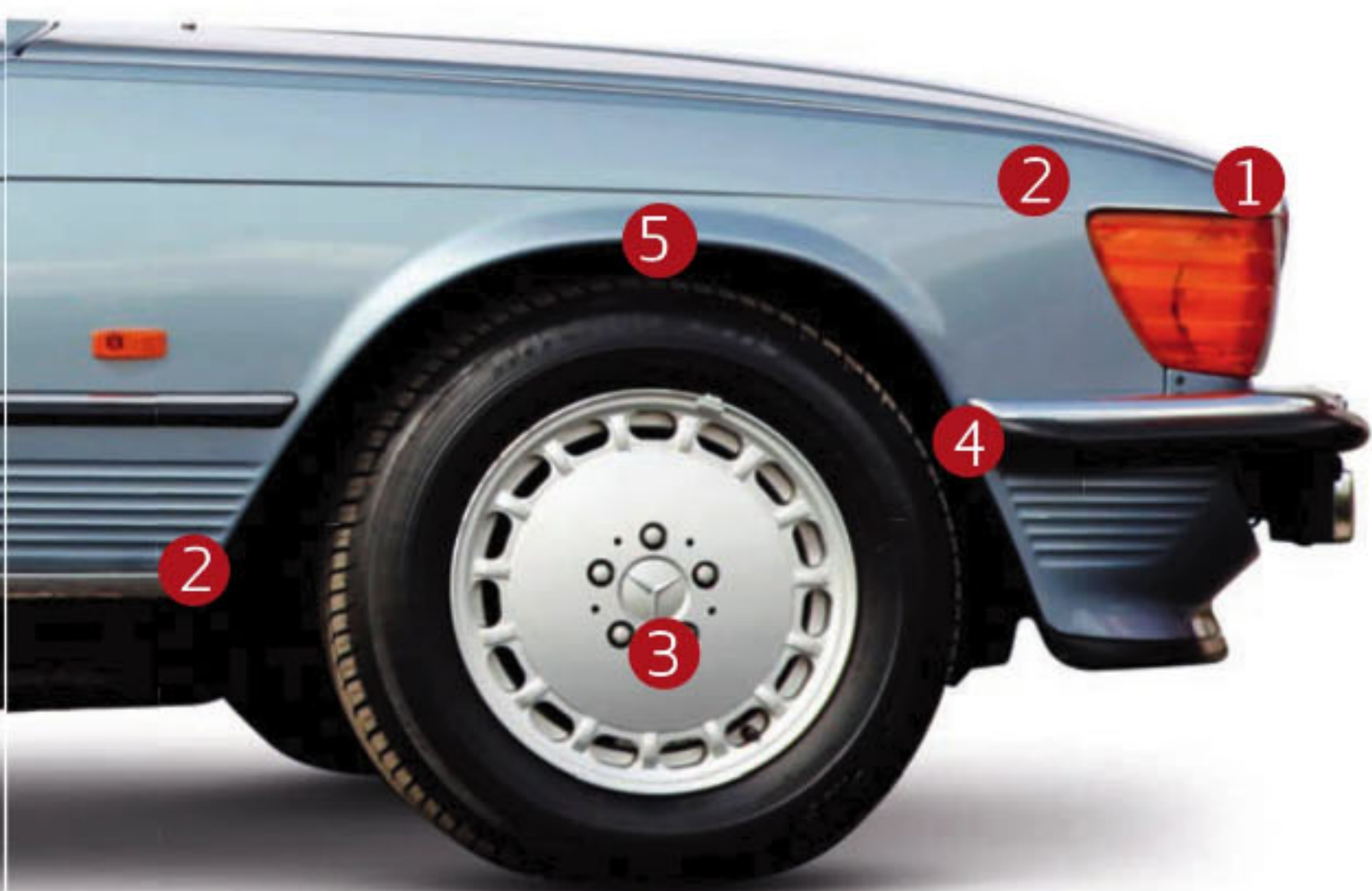
Post-'86 cars with all the bells and whistles are the most sought-after. Engine spec makes little difference to price, but be prepared to pay 10-20% more for desirable colours (blue, black, silver). About 75% had rear seats fitted; rear lapbelts are standard, but three-point harnesses can be added for c£200. Low mileage commands a premium, but well-used SLs can drive better if they've been properly maintained. Pre-'86 cars are around 30% cheaper, but a shrewd buy if you find an outstanding example. As ever, it's better to buy a good car, because you will spend more money trying to improve a poor one.



F2 pack follows 450SL course car at Hockenheim in 1972



Wheelbase was increased by 14in for the fixed-head SLC



Rot spots

- 1 Aluminium bonnet around the grille area
- 2 Wings, particularly above headlamps & behind wheel
- 3 Front wishbones, just outside damper mounting
- 4 Chassis legs within the engine bay
- 5 Front wheelarches
- 6 Bulkhead, notably heater plenum, centre and corners
- 7 Sills and jacking points
- 8 Floors
- 9 Rear wheelarches
- 10 Rear valance



Hood frames are really strong, but avoid aftermarket electric operation. Inspect fit, condition and operation of the top and check its well for corrosion



Interiors are extremely durable and most trim is available, if not cheap. Handbrake covers are unobtainable, but can be refurbished for c£190



Engines will do more than 300,000 miles without a rebuild if properly serviced, though all suffer from valve-stem seals hardening, which can make them smoky when cold. V8s are sensitive to missed services because the oil feed on top of the cams gets blocked: listen for a ticking sound. It costs £720+ per side to sort



Hardtops feature the chassis number on a hidden face beneath the nearside window. Remove the top to check, and look for rust around the lower face



Rear-axle problems are rare, but new subframe mountings transform feel. Brake calipers can stick if cars are left standing, and ABS sensors play up



Despite its vast size, the **radiator** does silt up, which can lead to overheating and even head-gasket failure. Look for signs of boiling and oil/water mixing



It's rare that balljoints or springs need replacement, but **dampers** wear out, as do the steering box and rubber mountings for subframe and engine



Build quality is unrivalled, and any Mercedes R107 is a comfortable choice for longer journeys

On the road

Although they excel as relaxed cruising cars, SLs are extremely capable in all conditions and handle hard driving with remarkable poise and minimal scuttle shake. If the car shudders over bumps, new engine and subframe mountings (£500 including labour) can transform the feel. With softish suspension the steering never feels sharp, but there shouldn't be noticeable play; if there is, the box can be adjusted (more easily on the 'six' than the V8) or, if too worn, rebuilt.

Engines are robust and a bottom-end rebuild is almost unheard of. Expect oil pressure of 3bar when cold; if it drops below 2bar at tickover when hot, be wary. A misfire and poor starting is usually down to a failing distributor cap and rotor arm (£126 for genuine parts – pattern ones don't last). ECUs rarely fail, though a very slow tickover on six-cylinder cars may indicate this: it's in the passenger footwell and can get damp. If a 'six' is difficult to start and the ABS light is on, it's a failed 'overprotection relay' (caused by jump-starting), which will be £60 to replace. Check that the heater works – and turns off: if not, new vacuum valves (£42 each) should fix it.

Automatic gearboxes are extremely strong, but do need an oil and filter service every 75,000 miles: check that it's been done. A clonk from the drivetrain is likely to be worn propshaft doughnuts – inexpensive to replace. The infrequent use given to many SLs has a detrimental effect on brake calipers, and they tend to seize: check for poor/inconsistent braking and brake drag. Four-pot calipers were fitted from 1986, which means you can't fit early 14in wheels on later cars.



SL is remarkably composed when pressing on in corners

OWNER'S VIEW Colin Goodwin



Motoring journalist Goodwin bought his 1985 280SL for his wife, but it has become his daily driver: "She would have loved a 'Pagoda', but we didn't have £40k. I sort-of liked R107s, but now I *really* like them! Ours has done 196,751 miles and I do around 5000 per year. It's easy to live with and rides better than most modern cars. You can run one fairly cheaply because they tend not to go wrong. I do all of the work on it myself and everything is easy to get at – that's why I didn't get a V8. There were a few problems to start with – silly stuff such as the cold idling – and bits are quite expensive, but you can get everything. A genuine new front wing was £350 – and it was much heavier than the £900 wing for my old Porsche 911."

The knowledge

WHAT TO PAY*

| | |
|--------------|----------------|
| Show/rebuilt | £17,500-25,000 |
| Average | £8-15,000 |
| Restoration | £1500-2500 |

PARTS PRICES*

| | |
|----------------------------------|----------|
| Brake caliper (pattern, 2/4-pot) | £100/150 |
| Rebuilt steering box | £354 |
| Soft-top, OE quality, fitted | £840 |
| Used hard-top, painted to suit | £950 |
| Rear corner-bumper top chrome | £371 |
| Full genuine headlamp | £780 |
| Seal kit, all exterior seals | £400 |

ON THE WEB

r107restoration.blogspot.co.uk;
www.mbclub.co.uk/forums

CLUB

Mercedes-Benz Club 08456 032660;
www.mercedes-benz-club.co.uk

BOOKS

M-B 280-560SL & SLC Essential Buyer's Guide Bass, Veloce **M-B SL & SLC 107 Series** Long, Veloce **Mercedes SL Series** Noakes, Crowood

SPECIALISTS

The SL Shop 08444 142116 **Silver Arrows** 020 8789 8525 **Autobarn** 01892 771321 **Starpartz** www.starpartz.co.uk **J Haynes** 01903 500000 **D Wells** 01449 774222 **Schmitt** 020 8450 5088 **R Edwards** 01494 766766

*PRICES CORRECT AT DATE OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

TIMELINE

1970 Nov First three 350SLs built
1971 350SL V8 launched – 200bhp, 211lb ft, 0-60mph 8.1 secs, 128mph, electronic fuel injection; US market gets 350SL 4.5 – 200bhp
1972 Jul Auto drops from four- to three-speed
1973 450SL introduced, with 225bhp V8
1974 Jul 280SL – 185bhp straight-six
1977 350 down to 195bhp, 280 to 177bhp
1979 K-Jetronic mechanical injection fitted
1980 Mar New all-alloy V8 – 240bhp, 142mph
500SL replaces 450 (66,298 sold); 218bhp 134mph 380SL replaces 350 (15,304 sold)
1981 380 adopts US-spec 3839cc engine, 204bhp; 500 reduced to 231bhp
1985 May 188bhp 300SL replaces 280 (25,436 sold); 218bhp 420SL instead of 380 (53,200 sold); 230bhp 560SL for US
1989 Aug Prod ends – 500SL, 11,822 sold; 420SL, 2148; 300SL, 13,742; 560SL, 49,347

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1971-'89/237,287

Construction steel monocoque

Engine iron-block, alloy-head, overhead-cam 3499/4520cc V8, or dohc 2746cc 'six', or all-alloy 3818/3839/4973/5547cc V8, or 2962cc 'six', Bosch electronic/mechanical fuel injection

Max power 177bhp @ 6000rpm to 245bhp @ 4750rpm

Max torque 176lb ft @ 4500rpm to 294lb ft @ 3750rpm

Transmission four/five-speed manual or three/four-speed auto, RWD (optional LSD)

Suspension independent, at front by double wishbones rear semi-trailing arms; coil springs, anti-roll bar (optional at first at rear), telescopic dampers f/r

Steering power-assisted recirculating ball

Brakes discs all round, vented at front, with servo; ABS optional from 1980

Length 14ft 4½-4¾in (4380-4390mm)

Width 5ft 10½in (1790mm)

Height 4ft 3¼in (1300mm)

Wheelbase 8ft 1in (2460mm)

Weight 3300-3780lb (1500-1715kg)

Mpg 15-25 **0-60mph** 9.5-7.1 secs

Top speed 121-142mph

Price new £21,425-29,080 (1985)

THE ALTERNATIVES



JAGUAR XJ-S

Massive performance per pound, with great specialist back-up and plenty of inexpensive

used parts. An affordable super-GT, but beware – a bad one will drain your wallet in weeks.

Sold/no built 1975-'96/115,413

Mpg 13-24 **0-60mph** 8.7-6.3 secs

Top speed 134-159mph

Price new £21,495-26,995 (1985)



CHEVROLET CORVETTE C4

Still a GRP body on a steel chassis, but with electronic dash and

optional T-bar roof, plus 5.7-litre V8 tuned from weedy (190bhp) to wild. *The bargain Corvette.*

Sold/no built 1983-'96/358,180

Mpg 12-22 **0-60mph** 6.6 secs

Top speed 142mph

Price new c£19,000-22,500 (1985)

One to buy **£15,000***

Year of registration '83 **Recorded mileage** 61,157
Vendor Village Green, Holt, Wiltshire; tel: 01225 783388; www.villagegreengarage.co.uk **For** Lovely interior, drives well **Against** Lack of recent use

This one-owner 280SL was in dry storage before being recently recommissioned, since when it has covered only around 1000 miles. The service book is full of Mercedes stamps, so it was obviously well cared for when it was originally on the road and, judging by the interior, it was carefully stored, too. The later stereo looks a bit out of place and the plastic trim over the base of the handbrake is a slightly different colour, but other than those minor quibbles it is immaculate.

Bodywork-wise it's pretty solid, with good shutlines. The paint has some faint polishing marks showing through, but it's otherwise fine. There's a tiny nick in the rear of the driver's door that has been touched-in. The only signs of corrosion are some minor bubbling underneath both of the front indicators, plus the front valance is slightly flaky in places. All four wheelarches are solid, and the tyres – Pirelli 195/70 R14s all round – look almost unworn. The supplied hardtop is also in good condition.

The straight-six starts instantly and idles smoothly. This example really does drive very impressively: there are no squeaks or rattles, everything works, and the engine is all but silent. The oil pressure was strong on our short test drive, showing 3bar throughout. Gearchanges from the automatic transmission are near-imperceptible, and it kicks down very smartly should you feel the need to press on.



Bodywork is solid; original plate will be sold separately



Beautiful interior is testament to years of careful storage



Twin-cam 'six' runs smoothly and quietly; fluids to level



Our verdict

There are plenty of Mercedes SLs around that have led pampered, charmed lives: find one of these at a sensible price and you can look forward to many years of trouble-free fresh-air fun (and closed-roof comfort), while you smile as values gently appreciate. Buy a grotty one, however, and it could cost you a fortune to make it even half-presentable.

FOR

- Highly usable and durable
- Stylish and practical
- Good performance and handling
- Almost all parts available

AGAINST

- Some parts are very expensive
- Rot can be awkward to cure
- Economy is not a strong point
- Bad ones will cost a fortune to fix

MERCEDES-BENZ SLK (R170)

The first modern-generation sports car with a steel folding roof has great classic potential, reckons **Malcolm McKay**

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**



The SLK is sometimes seen as a 'hairstylist's car' – but with a 0-60mph time of 7.4 secs and 140mph for the 230K in 1996, plus fine handling, that's hardly fair. And if you really want to astonish the critics at the lights, go for the silky-smooth 320 V6 – or the scorching SLK32 AMG, good for 0-60mph in 4.9 secs.

Entering the compact roadster market for the first time, Mercedes wanted to stamp its mark with a model that exuded the marque's reputation for engineering. How better than to build a car that was both a snug, solid fixed-head coupé and at the same time an attractive, sporty convertible – while still retaining an acceptable amount of luggage space? The answer – alongside an exceptionally rigid structure – was the 'vario-roof', a complex but effective powered folding integral metal hardtop that still left a portion of the large boot free when folded. With the roof up, more luggage could be carried – the mechanism would not retract unless the space was cleared and the divider screen was in place.

The range of models available in the UK was a fraction of what Mercedes offered elsewhere. While others had a relatively gutless (but lighter)

200 and a surprisingly lively supercharged 200K as well as the 230K, all sold with a five-speed manual or five-speed automatic, the UK just had the top-of-the-range 230K five-speed auto.

From the February 2000 facelift, the unsupercharged 200 disappeared, replaced by a detuned blown 200 that did reach the UK, alongside the 230K and V6 320 – with a six-speed manual transmission or a five-speed auto. They were joined by the storming supercharged SLK32 AMG in 2001, great value now even though just 263 came to Britain out of a total of 4333.

Electronic problems are the SLK's bugbear, particularly as cars get older, are left outside and are used infrequently. Damp gets into delicate components and wreaks havoc. A lack of proper servicing, now that prices are hitting rock bottom, takes its toll. Rust can be significant and requires major expenditure to put right. With so many cars to choose from, it's just not worth buying a rough example – though you may have to search long and hard to find the best.

Unusually for a relatively modern car, club membership is vital. Tony Leach, the Mercedes-Benz Club's SLK guru, has come across just about every wart and wrinkle in the model and has inexpensive solutions for many of them.



AMG transformed mild-mannered SLK into a bit of a beast



Crash tests demonstrated the strength of the structure



Rot spots

- 1 Four tubular stiffening struts, under front and rear
- 2 Front wing edges to bumper, around indicator repeaters and wheelarches
- 3 Front and rear sill closing panels in wheelarches
- 4 Windscreen frame top (stone-chips)
- 5 Transmission tunnel stiffening plate
- 6 Pre-facelift sill trims
- 7 Rear window frame, notably seal retainer plates at top
- 8 Rear subframe and fuel-pump bracket
- 9 Rear wheelarches



Open and close the **roof** with the engine ticking over: windows open, roof folds and windows close if the switch is held. Failure is usually simple microswitches



Check that **interior** wear tallies with the mileage; colour-coded plastic console is easily damaged and costly, but touch-up paint is available from Viponds, Australia



Given basic maintenance, all **engines** are capable of 200,000-plus miles (except perhaps highly tuned AMGs). Remove the oil-filler cap and look inside for telltale tar deposits (lack of maintenance) or white emulsion (head-gasket leakage). Get a Star Diagnostics computer 'Quicktest' done to reveal any latent or intermittent faults



Test everything **electrical**, from heated seats (if fitted) to air-con. Faults are often due to water ingress to items such as the pneumatic pump module (in boot)



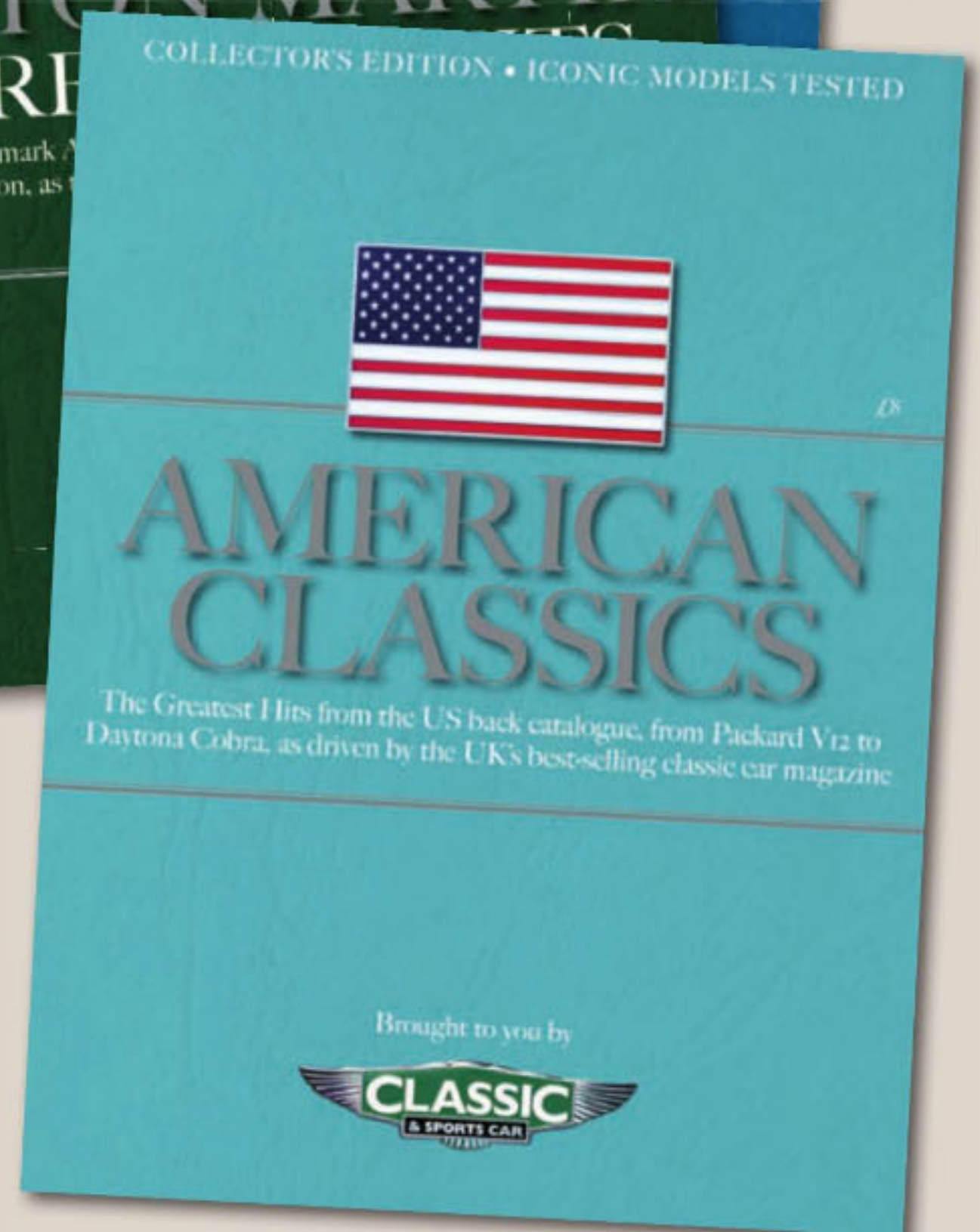
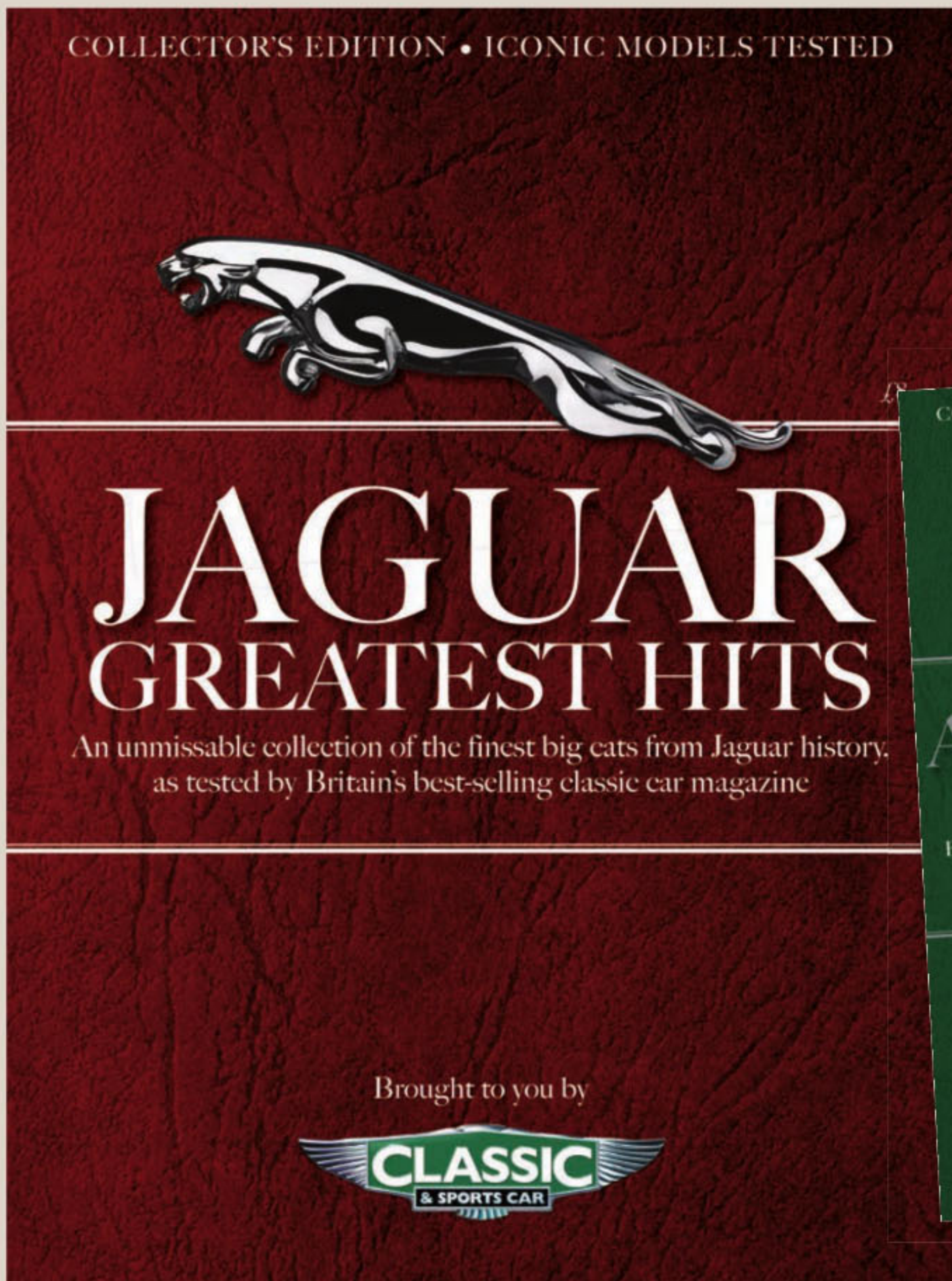
Roof hydraulic reservoir should be full: check when half-open for leaking struts (£180 each). It can be operated manually using the key provided, if de-pressurised



Watch the engine while someone gently revs it: the **supercharger** should engage at c2000rpm. Listen for noisy bearings and failed intercooler pump on AMGs



Check for **diff** oil leaks from front and sides. Clunks when going into reverse usually indicate rear bush wear. Alloy wheels are prone to rampant corrosion



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M-B trim is generally hard-wearing, but try to verify that condition agrees with mileage; seats are comfy

On the road

The 'four' does feel a bit rough when revved, but the 3.2 V6 is much smoother and still capable of 30mpg. Provided the engine has been regularly serviced (insist on seeing a full service history), it should be the least of your worries, though check for neglect, overheating and oil leaks. Inspect the mild-steel exhaust, especially the costly catalytic converters as well as all the brackets and joints.

Comprehensive electrical checks are critical: anomalies can be expensive to trace and to cure. For example, both brake lights should be bright, and equally so – if not, you may end up replacing the entire light units. Ensure that the alarm functions properly and that all keys are present. These are just two examples: try everything!

All SLKs handle competently with a firm ride. Knocks and clonks from the suspension and an insecure feel are likely to be down to worn dampers, lower balljoints, track-rod ends and anti-roll-bar bushes. The tyres should be 205/55 fronts and 225/50 rears on standard 16in wheels.

The automatic transmission is electronically controlled and complex; it is a pleasure to use, with slick sequential manual changing post-facelift. It's officially a sealed unit, but an oil change every 40,000 miles will extend its life significantly. Assess the offside oil-cooler pipe for corrosion and look for oil leaks, which get into the wiring loom and cause the 'box to adopt limp-home mode; this often occurs at c100,000 miles and costs about £400 to have repaired.

Try the (£360) boot lock on pre-facelift cars: it can seize and is costly to replace. Test-drive roof up, to listen for wind noise from poor sealing.



It's not as sharp as an MX-5, yet the SLK still handles well

OWNER'S VIEW Marie Greetham



"This is my first SLK and I've owned it for four months, replacing a Nissan Figaro," explains Greetham. "It was my husband Bruce's idea – he's the general manager at The SL Shop – but I've always liked the SLK: it's not dated, it's zippy, and I like the way it runs. It had to be black with a beige interior. The roof is so easy to put down, much easier than on the Figaro.

"The car attracts attention and it's interesting that when men come to look at SLs, their wives head to the SLKs! I use it for commuting but we also go away in it at weekends – there's enough space in the boot. I'd like to keep it for a few years at least. It's only done 66,000 miles; we paid £4300 for it and have had the wheels refurbished and the paint touched up."

The knowledge

WHAT TO PAY*

| | |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| Show 200-320/AMG | £5500/8000 |
| Average 320/AMG | £3000/6000 |
| Average pre/post-facelift 230 | £1750/2000 |
| Restoration pre-facelift | £750 |

PARTS PRICES*

| | |
|-------------------------------|----------|
| Front wing | £240 |
| Chassis crossbar | £120 |
| Lower wishbone bushes | £50 |
| Second-hand engine | £350 |
| Engine/auto gearbox ECU | £400/600 |
| Exchange starter motor | £105 |
| Radiator (early) | £143 |
| Brake master cylinder (early) | £84 |

CLUBS

Mercedes-Benz Club 08456 032660;
www.mercedes-benz-club.co.uk
SLK Club www.slk-club.de

BOOKS

Mercedes-Benz SLK – R170 Series Veloce, Long
Faszination SLK Heel Verlag, Engelen
Mercedes CLK & SLK Brooklands Books

SPECIALISTS

The SL Shop 08444 142116 **Starpartz**
www.starpartz.co.uk **John Haynes** 01903
500000 **Derrick Wells** 01449 774222
Haden 0121 440 4411 **DW Leisure** 01474
564494 **Hertfordshire Merx** 01462 672458
Viponds Paints 0061 3 9350 4188

*PRICES CORRECT AT DATE OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

TIMELINE

1996 Apr Turin launch of 200, 200K and 230K
1996 Nov Introduced in UK, as 230K auto only
1997 Sep US sales begin
1998 Air-con & adjustable steering column for UK
2000 Feb Facelift brings new bumpers/skirts, plus indicators in the door mirrors; 200 dropped; 200K and 320 launched in the UK: 320 has 215bhp, 0-60mph in 7 secs, 149mph; 200K has 163bhp, 0-60mph in 8.2 secs, 139mph; 230K now 197bhp, 0-60mph in 7.3 secs, 147mph
2001 Aug SLK32 AMG with 349bhp blown V6, five-speed auto
2002 Jun Limited edition: 7.5x17 alloys, black nappa hide and brushed-alloy dash/door trim
2004 Jan Special edition: 16in alloys, grey or red nappa and brushed-alloy trim
2004 Jul Second-generation SLK introduced



FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1996-2004/311,222
Construction steel monocoque
Engine iron-block, alloy-head, dohc supercharged (except base 200) 1998/2295cc 'four', or all-alloy, sohc-per-bank 3199cc 18v V6 (twin-spark heads and blower on AMG), with electronic fuel injection; 136bhp @ 5500rpm-349bhp @ 6100rpm; 140lb ft @ 3700rpm-332lb ft @ 4400rpm
Transmission five/six-speed manual or five-speed auto, driving rear wheels
Suspension: front double wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** multi-link (anti-roll bar on AMG only); coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering power-assisted recirculating ball; 3.1 turns lock to lock on 230; 2.7 on 320; 3.0 on AMG
Brakes discs all round, front 288mm ventilated (300mm on 320), rear 278mm, with servo and anti-lock; AMG ventilated f/r 334/300mm
Length 13ft 2in (4010mm)
Width 6ft 5½in (1969mm)
Height 4ft 2in (1270mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 10½in (2400mm)
Weight 2794-3289lb (1270-1495kg)
0-60mph 9.7-4.9 secs
Top speed 129-156mph **Mpg** 15-35
Price new £24,790-43,000 (200K-AMG, 2001)

THE ALTERNATIVES



BMW Z3
 BMW reacted to the success of the MX-5 with its own roadster. Its 3 Series Compact-

based chassis lacked the SLK's finesse, but the M Roadster was a fair AMG rival. Great value.

Sold/no built 1996-'02/298,735 **Mpg** 16-34
0-60mph 8.4-4.8 secs **Top speed** 123-157mph
Price new £18,990 (1.9i, '01)



PORSCHE BOXSTER
 The flickable handling and fine mid-mounted flat-six made the Boxster the sporting

driver's choice, but it wasn't as solid or practical as an SLK. Grew from 2.5 litres to 2.7/3.2 in 2000.

0-60mph 7.3-6 secs **Top speed** 139-161mph
Sold/no built 1996-'05/c160,000 **Mpg** 21-33
Price new £31,450 (2.7, '01)

One to buy £2484*

Year 2000 **Recorded mileage** 131,016
Vendor Motor Store, Amersham, Bucks; tel: 01494 809505; www.motorstoreltd.co.uk
For FSH; drives well **Against** Bubbling wing bottoms

This SLK320 is cheap – with seven keepers over the past two years on its V5 – though it does have a full service history. The body is straight, save a tiny ding behind the passenger door, but it has some bubbling and rust in the usual areas at the wing bases, at the lower edge of the nearside front corner and under the bonnet's front edge – visible only when it's open. The paint is slightly dulled and surface-cracked on both door tops and rear flanks, worse on the nearside. The roof, with all of its attendant flaps and quarterlights, works perfectly and the cabin is almost pristine, bar buckle marks on the passenger seat and a few shiny areas on the otherwise matt centre console.

The rear alloys aren't scuffed, wearing two-thirds worn Avon ZZ3s, while the lightly kerbed fronts have half-done Marangoni Versos. The exhaust looks in good shape, the motor is very tidy and the battery was new in December 2012. The front discs are well worn, which was an advisory on the last MoT test, current until the end of July 2014; the rears are better. The service book is up to 110,266 miles at May 2011 and the indicator shows 7500 miles to go until the next one.

It starts instantly, soon settling to a slower idle and driving nicely, pulling straight, with silky gearchanges in the automatic 'box and smooth brakes – all with that trademark solidity. Coolant temperature is steady at 80°C, but the air-con doesn't work. The tax runs until August 2014.



Paint is a bit tired, but car has been properly maintained



Interior much better than exterior, with excellent leather



No obvious leaks, cleanish oil and coolant to right levels



Black is much less common than silver; note facelift skirts and indicators in mirrors

Our verdict

First, decide which model will suit you best – pre/post-facelift, engine size, auto or manual. Finding a good first-generation SLK can be a soul-destroying and time-consuming exercise now that many have been neglected. But persevere and you should end up with a sophisticated and fun machine that, given regular care, will reward you with many years of pleasure.

FOR

- Practical two-seater coupé/cabriolet
- Stiff bodyshell, great handling
- Excellent performance (except the rare unsupercharged 200)
- Prices are unlikely to go much lower

AGAINST

- Complex electronics gives complex problems
- More corrosion issues than on most moderns
- Full service history is vital – few now have it

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