



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

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

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

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

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

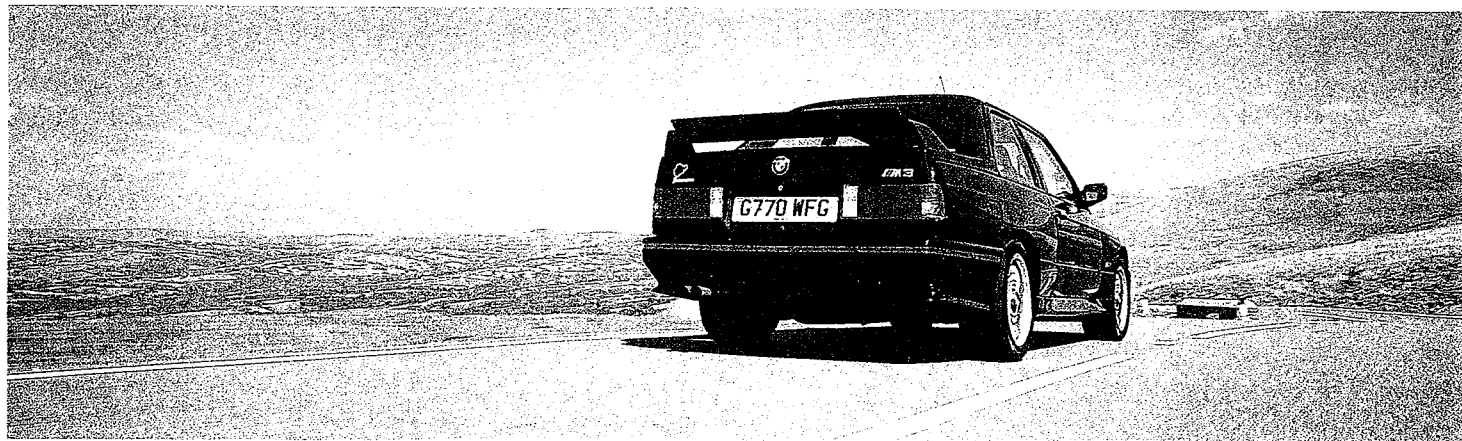
'I was worried I'd be disappointed after the

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

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

### E34 M5 (1992-95)

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



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



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

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

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

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

yardage a matter of taste or space.

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

### E36 M3 Evo (1996-98)

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

## M Coupe (1998-2002)

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

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

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

## E39 M5 (1998-2003)

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

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



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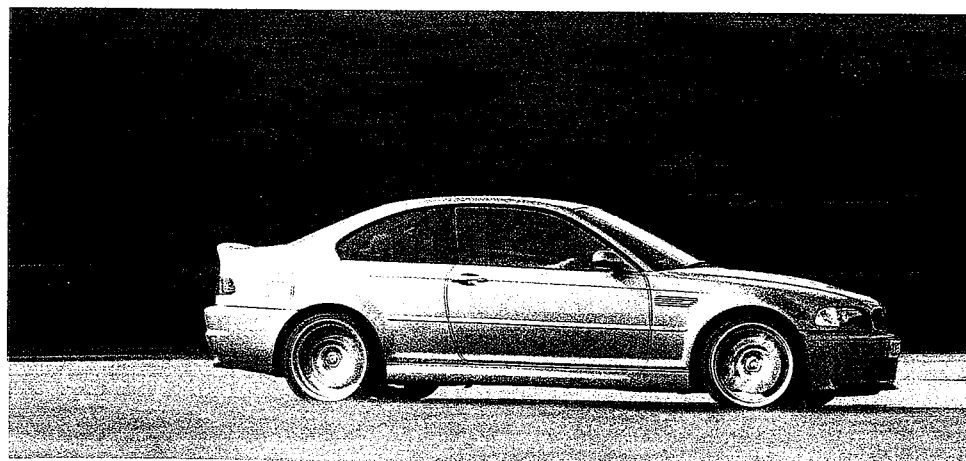
cold, filling the cabin with its rich rumble, the moveable outer band of the rev counter initially places the red line lower down.

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

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

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

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



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

gearbox and it cost a whopping £20K more.

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