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Sublime BMW 328 at 75
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IS THIS THE FIRST MODERN SPORTS CAR?



The gorgeous 328 established BMW's reputation for performance – and created a new template for the two-seater genre. **Mick Walsh** drives the Bavarian wonder on its 75th birthday

PHOTOGRAPHY **MALCOLM GRIFFITHS**



The specification of a BMW 328 does not look too innovative on paper – particularly its engine – yet this 2-litre German beauty has a strong case for being the first sports car of the modern era. There were faster, more powerful machines in the late '30s, but none matched its total package, that brilliant combination of engineering lightness, driving refinement and refreshing style. Most post-war sports cars owe much to BMW's compact marvel; William Lyons clearly had a good gander at it before he finalised his Jaguar XK120 a dozen years after the 328's launch.

This olive-green example, the fifth completed in 1937, is the oldest in the UK. First looking at its sleek, curvaceous form – streamlined nose, faired-in headlights, shapely rear with inset and exposed spare wheel – it's easy to see why BMW was swamped with orders after the car's startling Nürburgring debut (see panel). The leavening undercut of the front wings that swages seamlessly with the valance, and the clever single-piece rear-hinged bonnet, are typical of the attention to detail throughout this standout design. Other than the subtle mouldings that sweep along the bonnet and plunge to the rear mudguards, it's clean and functional. Nothing escapes this philosophy: the split 'screen is mounted on cast-aluminium posts; the Kronprinz disc wheels, with neat four-pin location and Rudge-Whitworth centre-lock spinners, are stylish, easy to clean and quick to release. It's all so resolved. A modern word for a futuristic car.

Open the door and slide your legs beneath

with its original motor and early ZF 'box. Owner David Cottingham has upgraded the engine to Bristol 100D2 specification, the hotter cam profile and increased compression of which releases around 140bhp compared with the original's 80bhp. Other than that, and a set of Dunlop Racing tyres, this is very authentic.

The key to any car's lasting appeal is great steering, and the 328's rack-and-pinion set-up is superb. Alongside the worm-and-sectors of most of its contemporaries, its action is precisely weighted and pinpoint accurate. Close your eyes and it could be a '60s sports car. Kick-back, even on rough roads, is well suppressed, and just a small input is required to change direction. No sawing elbows, just precise, wristy actions as you direct and control this inspired machine.

This is perfectly matched to a balanced and stiff tubular chassis fitted with independent front suspension that imbues the car with a rewarding nimbleness: slight understeer on entry, a whiff of oversteer on the exit. The only clue to its age is the leaf-sprung live rear axle, which feels jittery

Clockwise, from right:
drilled Kronprinz disc
wheel; pretty rear;
mystery photo
of chassis 85017



a distinctive, cream three-spoke steering wheel, and that sophisticated Bauhaus style becomes even more evident. The painted dash's spread of handsome, bright dials by VDO and Veigel is a total contrast to the wooden fascia and black-faced instruments of its British rivals. As an early chassis number of the 462 built, this dazzling example's layout has only two dials in its centre cluster. Even more advanced are the locking steering column and glovebox.

The from-the-cockpit view also counterpoints most pre-WW2 sports cars. There's no rad cap sitting proud of a chrome shroud, no visible headlamps, just a tapering bonnet with a short group of louvres and double leather straps.

With three tricky-to-tune downdraught Solex carburettors, this BMW is easy to flood and can be a reluctant starter from cold. But once the straight-six with single camshaft and hemispherical combustion chambers barks into life, the crisp and rorty exhaust drowns the busy top end. Numerous 328s have been chopped and changed over the years in order to remain competitive, so it's a privilege to be trusted with a car fitted

over the more severe bumps but is both relaxing and rewarding over smoother surfaces. "Many have been converted to Konis, but I've stuck with the original BMW hydraulic dampers, which are tiny," says Cottingham. "Even with the 328's light suspension and low unsprung weight, they're not really man enough to cope."

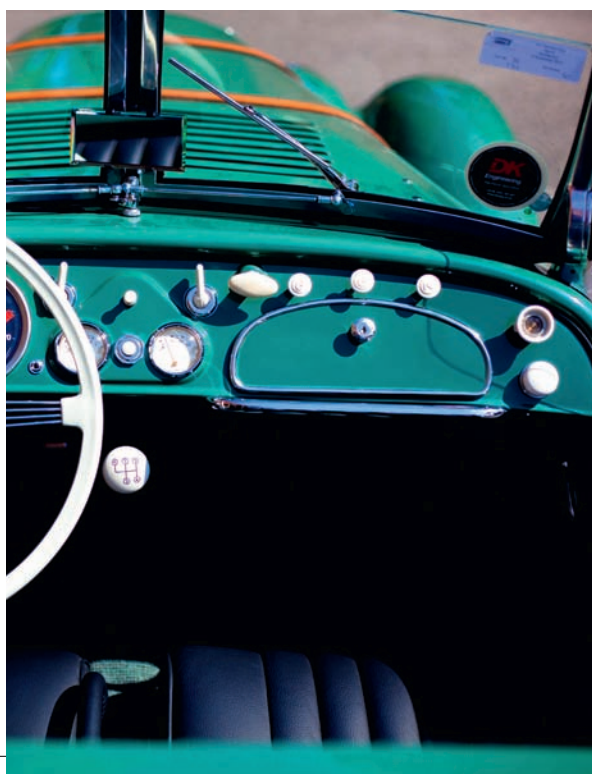
The hydraulic drum brakes are as good as anything of the period, pulling up strongly and straight with no hint of locking despite the necessity of a hefty shove. The gearchange, via a long, curved stick, is slick and precise, double-declutching downchanges triggering a glorious rasp. Given an open country road on a bright summer's morning, this car comes alive. Anyone thinking of designing a sports car should be made to drive a 328 to focus their objectives. Modern performance is principally derived from greater power and wider tyres, whereas the BMW utilises a blissful harmony of feel and flair that few have matched.

Cottingham's motoring started, as it did for many, with an Austin Seven. His indoctrination to BMWs came by chance at his local cinema





Sleek lines enhanced by body's bottom-edge curves and angles. Styling was done in-house at BMW and not credited. Below left: painted dash; rev-counter is not original



BMW motorbike star's vital role

Victory first time out, around the ultimate circuit, was the dream launch for the BMW 328 on 14 June 1936. Engineers Rudolf Schleicher and Fritz Fiedler were understandably apprehensive when their prototype lined up with 34 other sports cars for the 2-litre race at the Eifelrennen. Eagle-eyed enthusiasts would have spotted how different the new white roadster looked, its curved front, kidney-shaped air intakes and rounded rear end contrasting with the familiar 315s and 319s on the grid. Unique features of this lightweight newcomer included doorless cutaway sides and a low 'screen.

The chosen driver was world-record motorcyclist

Ernst Jakob Henne (below), who, after a dry practice, faced a wet and foggy race. The man nicknamed 'Straight-line Jack' stormed away from the off and rapidly overhauled the earlier-starting wave of blown Alfa 6C-1750s and

Bugattis. Holding the lead to the finish, he won by a huge margin: 2 mins 27 secs. It had been a sublime performance in slippery conditions. Henne's 63.5mph average around the unforgiving 14-mile Nordschleife created more excitement among the 250,000 spectators and assembled press than Bernd Rosemeyer's victory for Auto Union in the feature race. 'First start, first victory. What a car, what a driver,' reported a gushing *Motor-Kritik* magazine.

This dramatic debut resulted in a rush of orders for the 328.



in Kenton, north-west London: "The car park behind our local Odeon had a few lock-ups and they were being used by Mick Wilson, a lighting engineer. Apart from a few matinées, he'd didn't do much during the day and was often found working on his cars. During my summer hols in 1958, I spent most days watching and helping him on his BMW 327 cabriolet. I remember being impressed by the torsion-bar suspension, the lightness of the parts, and the freewheel on each gear. When I was 18, I bought that car from him. Cars were cheap and I only kept it for a year before moving on to Jaguar XKs. But those teenage days started a hankering for a 328."

Cottingham's chance came through a Jaguar-dealer friend, Paul Webb: "I'd sold his dad my 327 in the '70s; Paul knew I wanted a 328. In 2007, he called from California to say that he'd found one among a collection of Jaguars. The owner had died and the family wanted to sell."

"The car had been dismantled for many years and initially we couldn't find its chassis number. It should be stamped on the bulkhead, but finally number 6 was discovered on all the body panels and we realised that it was an early car. Historian Rainer Simons, who was a great help, informed us that early production cars didn't receive the bulkhead stamp. The car was complete right down to its French plates. The only alterations were VW Beetle headlamps and bumpers."

Simons also confirmed that chassis 85017 was sold through George Fetzer, a BMW motorcycle dealer in Gingen an der Fils, just east of Stuttgart. Its first registered owner was Dr von Hofer, a successful dental professor from Geislingen. This area was extensively bombed during WW2 and records were lost, but the car's strip-down revealed the possibility of a competition history. Its high-performance factory options included ventilated magnesium backplates and twin-leading-shoe front brakes. "The engine also had special oil take-offs that 328 specialist Helmut Feierabend identified as supercharger fittings," explains Cottingham. "Von Hofer lived near Solitude and may have raced it there."

The next owner was Flight Lieutenant Bobby G Blaylock, who drove it in France while he was stationed with the USAF at the Chaumont-Semoutiers airbase. Among the paperwork with

the car was a letter he sent to BMW in 1959 to enquire about parts for his 22-year-old sports car. 'As the factory in which this car was produced is situated in the Eastern Zone of Germany, we have no parts available,' was the official Cold War response.

The car was at some point imported into the USA, where Dr Hartley Turpin of Newport Beach, California acquired it and kept it for 25 years before being forced to sell it as part of a divorce settlement. It then went to Robert L Morand of New Jersey for \$6000 in 1986. At no point was it registered in America and the lack of wear and tear indicated that its mileage was low. Morand subsequently moved to California and never completed the rebuild.

Cottingham was not so lax. Specialists Keith Roach and Chris Reynolds were enlisted to sort the steel-and-aluminium bodywork and engine respectively, and the final assembly and detailing was done at Cottingham's DK Engineering.

Since the rebuild's completion, he has enjoyed the 328 on road and track. As well as its race

debut at the 2009 Goodwood Revival, he's driven it in two sprints at the historic Sussex track, where several 328s competed at the inaugural meeting in September 1948. Other highlights have included a road rally with wife Kate around Fougères in northern France.

So, as a world-renowned Ferrari specialist, how does Cottingham feel the 328 compares to an early 166? "The Ferrari is heavier but more powerful. The brakes are similar, although they're bigger on the 166. The Ferrari doesn't really handle. On a track, it just wants to understeer until you fit an anti-roll bar; the 328 on the other hand is superbly balanced. Its lighter steering and gearchange are much better, too."

He refuses to commit to which he would choose for a road trip, but I would take the keys to the 328 every time. A match for any pre-war rival, the joy of this car is that it will also outpace many younger machines. Imagine your understandably smug feeling as you informed your breathless chasers that their uncatchable quarry is 75-years young.



Clockwise, from above:
quick-release leather
straps; original engine
tuned to give 140bhp;
owner Cottingham;
balanced handling

BMW 328

Sold/number built 1936-'40/462

Construction tubular ladder-type steel chassis with steel/aluminium body

Engine iron-block, aluminium-head 1971cc 'six' with two valves per cylinder operated by a single side-mounted camshaft via pushrods and rockers (inlet valves directly, exhaust valves by crossover pushrods); three downdraught Solex carburettors

Max power 80bhp @ 4500rpm

Max torque 93lb ft @ 4000rpm

Transmission four-speed manual, driving rear wheels **Suspension: front** independent, by lower wishbones, transverse semi-elliptic leaf spring **rear** live axle with longitudinal semi-elliptic leaf springs; telescopic dampers f/r

Steering rack and pinion **Brakes** hydraulic 11in drums **Length** 12ft 10in (3899mm)

Width 5ft 1in (1549mm) **Height** 4ft 1in (1245mm) **Wheelbase** 7ft 9in (2362mm)

Weight 1638lb (743kg) **0-60mph** 9.5 secs

Top speed 103mph **Mpg** 17-26

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