

BMW won't be left to rust in peace



**1981 BMW 323i
TOP CABRIO**
SANJAY SEETANAH

I CAN'T BELIEVE how much I am missing my Beemer. It is so easy for a project such as mine to escalate into a completely different ball game. The work on the BMW has started and Che Battick and his team from Automo have been busy taking the paintwork down to bare metal to inspect the quality of the body underneath.

We set ourselves a major challenge at the start of the project: to ensure that everything is of a standard that will keep this car on the road for another 35 years. A bare-metal respray is a good start but there are many other things to consider. How far do you go? The bodywork is peppered with patches of rust but do you replace entire panels or do you repair sympathetically? Is this going to be a restoration to try to preserve the car, or is it one where we are, in effect, building a new car?

After careful consideration, Che and I decided to go down the preservation route. Any major rot will be cut out and replaced with newly fabricated

sections in order to preserve as much of the original car as possible.

Next decision was the engine bay. Is there any point in respraying a car while leaving the engine bay untouched? Was she going to be Beauty on the outside and Beast under the bonnet? We decided the engine had to come out so we could see what the condition of the bodywork was like under the bonnet, too. Surprisingly good, as it turns out, and, as the pictures (below) show, it is almost completely rust-free apart from the battery tray – though we will sand every part of it to see if there are any other areas that need attention.

I took some advice from Jeroen De Laat, who runs the web forum 'bmwe21.net', an amazing site full of information about the model, with passionate members all over the world. Jeroen says that, in his experience, Baus (especially the 323i) did not suffer from rust as much as the saloons because they were used mainly in summer, which accounts for their typically above-average condition. Jeroen has kindly agreed to advise on the project and his help has been invaluable already. All cars tend to deteriorate in the same places so we are getting an expert insight on what to expect.

Body parts for the E21 are becoming increasingly difficult to find and prices are quite high. There are

some inferior products on the market so it's worth seeking advice before you buy. Jeroen says that many of his members are opting to look for donor cars, which would certainly save money if a large proportion of the parts are salvageable. We have had the bonnet, doors and wings shotblasted but, sadly, the bonnet and wings are too rotten to withstand repair and won't last another 35 years.

So far, though, I am very lucky in that BMW Classic Group has sourced the parts required. A new BMW bonnet costs £500, BMW wings cost £260 each and, while there are cheaper options costing less than half the price, is the quality as good? Thankfully my car's doors are fine and virtually rust-free, but the rear panel is also beyond repair and is now being replaced with a completely new rear section, at a cost of £450.

Despite the work having spiralled out of control somewhat, I am looking forward to getting the car back on the road. We have set ourselves a target to have it ready for the BMW Sharknose meeting on Sunday 22 May in Cuijk, just south of Nijmegen in the Netherlands. Can't wait!

THANKS TO Che Battick at Automo, www.automo.co; Jeroen De Laat at bmwe21.net; and BMW Classic Group, www.realoem.com.

