



E21 3-Series

Bridging the gap between the spartan-but-sporty 2002 and the compact executive E30, the E21 invented the 3-Series and gave birth to a dynasty.

Wassat? Despite the BMW 3 series being the world's favourite compact executive car, those not familiar with model codes might struggle to remember that there was ever a Three before the E30.

You don't see so many E21s these days and although the design is 26 years old they're recognisable as a BMW in general and 3-Series in particular. The all-new E21 3-Series proved there was a demand for a small two-door saloon with superb build quality, understated styling and a range of great engines. The decision to put in a short, silky six-cylinder engine was inspired.

The E21 is the vital link between the sporty-but-spartan '02 series and the sophisticated compact executive E30. It was also the key in BMW's aspirational model line-up that saw customers progress from the entry level Three through to the Five, Six and Seven. The E21 became BMW's cash cow and the blueprint for a new niche model that every other manufacturer has copied, but as yet, has never bettered. The E21 is the forgotten hero of the BMW range and as the original 3-Series, ought to be celebrated. Without the E21 the E46 would be nothing, honest.

2002 Updated

In the '70s, BMW realised its core market customers in Germany, the USA and UK were getting richer. We were demanding more from our cars in performance, safety, comfort and equipment. The '02s were basic, sporty cars which almost by accident became iconic compact saloons but BMW aimed the E21 at a different kind of buyer.

Certainly the design and engineering aims had new priorities. The product chief Bernhard Osswald wanted more interior space, improved ride, better fuel economy and greater levels of passive safety. So after

1975

The E21 was launched in the year the British Leyland Motor Corporation became single British Leyland and Reliant lurched towards what would be the first in a string of bankruptcies. Meanwhile, US firm International Semiconductor bought the troubled Rover Works and the government refused to bail out Triumph any longer. Domestic competition to the new 3-Series seemed to consist of little more than the newly launched Vauxhall Chevette.

