



larger engines. There was debate about whether this new generation of powerplants should have a big four-cylinder, a V6 or straight six configuration. It was decided that the straight six delivered more power throughout the rev range compared with a V6 and would be smoother than a four.

The M60 engines were different from the big-block sixes. They still had aluminium cylinder heads, cast iron blocks and deep crankcases. However the cylinders had thinner walls, the crankshaft was cast iron rather than forged steel and the single overhead camshaft was driven by a cogged belt. This was a lightweight unit at 170 kg and made up for the E21's podginess.

Available from September 1977, it was fitted to the 320/6 and the 323i. The 320 delivered 122 bhp courtesy of a single Solex carb and the 323i made 143 bhp with Bosch K-Jetronic injection.

Then BMW boss Von Kuenheim was so impressed by six-cylinder sales which rapidly accounted for 50 per cent of 3-Series production, that he considered dropping four-cylinder production altogether until Dr Radermacher over in Marketing pointed out that the lack of a true entry-level model would be unwise.

The 323i was BMW's attempt to emulate the 2002tii with a 0-60 mph time of just over eight seconds. Rear end grip though was minimal. It was fun or frightening, depending on your mood or ability. At least the 323i had four disc brakes to bring it to a halt. The 320 was less charismatic, no less thirsty and dear to maintain.

Roy Lichtenstein's interpretation of the E21 in Group 5 racing form made one of the most famous of BMW's 'Art Car' collection.

Motorsport E21

In track terms the E21 didn't have the success of the 2002s or E30s. One exciting development though was the creation of a three-car 320i team. Stripped out, bespoilered and with bulging bodywork, they were powered by F2 engines and entered for the German Touring Car series in 1977.

Called the BMW Junior Team, drivers Eddie Cheever, Marc Surer and Manfred Winkelhock all went on to get F1 drives.

They were good value, but crashed a lot, and old hands like Ronnie Peterson and Hans Stuck were drafted in. Attempts were made to turbocharge the 320, which were not completely successful despite 600 bhp output because they were never reliable. However Schnitzer's 1.4-litre 320 Turbo developed an astounding 380 bhp and won the German Championship in '78. The next stop for a development of that engine was F1 glory, but that's another story.

Underrated, understated

Not a lot happened to the E21 over the years apart from some detail changes that are too insignificant to mention. British-spec 3-Series though were always better equipped and by 1980 an electric driver's door mirror, tinted glass and locks on the fuel cap and glovebox were standard.

In September 1980 the 1766cc European 318 engine was fitted to the 316,

Racing 320i's culminated in awesome 500 bhp turbo form (top), good for 186 mph. Bizarre Alpina 318i economy test car (above) made 106 mpg.

which retained its badging. Briefly the UK got a batch of 316i cars which had the 1766cc unit producing 105 bhp with Bosch K-Jetronic injection. It remained on the price lists even when the E30 arrived. Five-speed gearboxes as standard on the six-cylinder cars from 1982 was a good move.

From 1977 to 1983, Baur built their targa versions of the 3-Series which were referred to as 'hard top cabriolets'. Not the most elegant open top solution, although Karmann who built the 6-Series Coupé bodies produced a full convertible prototype which never made it to production.

Meanwhile, some 4600 Baur models were built and it was still pretty much the classiest and best small open car anyone could buy in the late '70s and early '80s. In general terms, the E21 isn't regarded as a classic just yet. A late 323i with five-speed box has to be the pick of the bunch, while any Baur will make a tough open top.

The Special Edition model run-out sixes with Recaro seats and two-tone paint are worth finding not least because the 320 had gas-damped sports suspension. Even a 316 is a characterful and durable banger that should cost buttons to run. Hopefully this proves that an E21 is worth saving.

Historically it was the cradle of the M60 engine, spawned the F1 engine and was the catalyst for Alpina series production. It also defined what the 3 series was all about and established a dynasty. ○



1980

British-bound E21s received improved spec levels but the newly-launched Vauxhall Astra was hardly a threat. Bigger news for the UK motor industry was the launch of the new Mini Metro, supposedly the Mini's high-tech replacement but ultimately outlived by the older car. And of course we all know who ended up building the Mini's real replacement...

