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DEUTSCHE BANKER

Sit down. Stay calm. This supercar and grand tourer rolled into one can be yours for 10 grand. Achtung, baby!

Story by Hilton Holloway
Photography by Barry Hayden

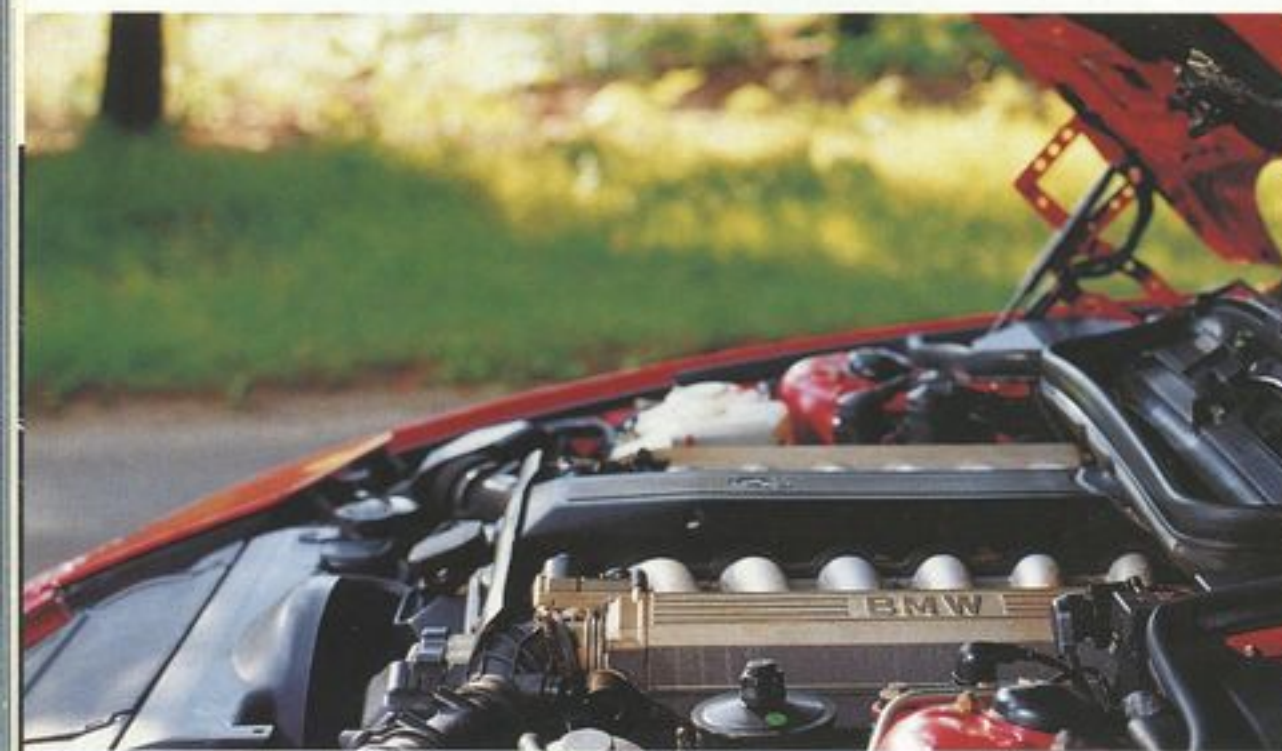
AS LOSS OF REPUTATION GOES, THE 1980s SEEMS TO BE A worst-case scenario. Any decade that began with the proto-communist winter of discontent and ended with the collapse of communism without a shot being fired can't have been all bad. And yeah, I *enjoyed* the '80s. My local smoke stacks might have started to subside without subsidy, but I took Tebbit's advice and looked to a better-designed, more rigorous, more international future. The 1980s was a peak time for high-quality motors, for good design, for pushing the art of the possible.

But tossing my Filofax to one side and stretching my braces in contemplation, I have to admit that the designer decade became an embarrassment before its end. Even Maggie was led away within months. Serious environmentalism began to wash over Europe as New Left grew out of old. The discredited red flag was folded away to be replaced by green. Not a great time, then, to be launching a massive V12 super-coupé that seemed

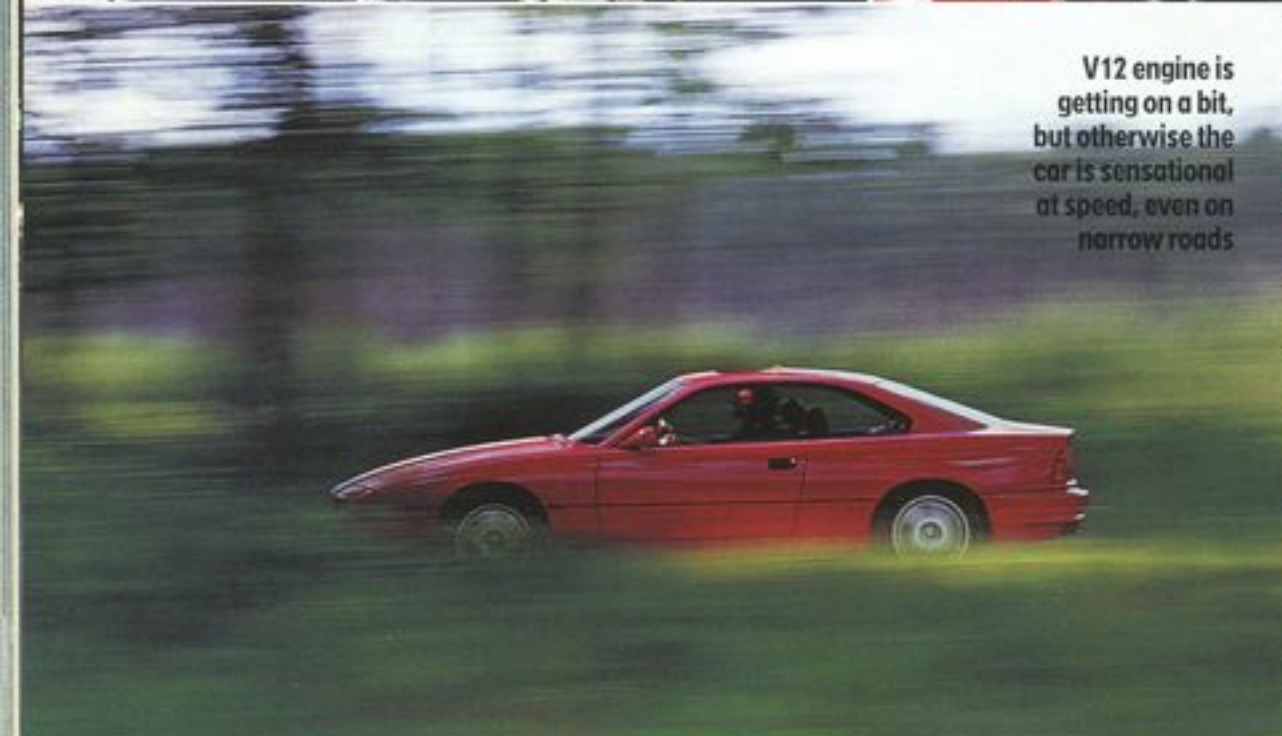
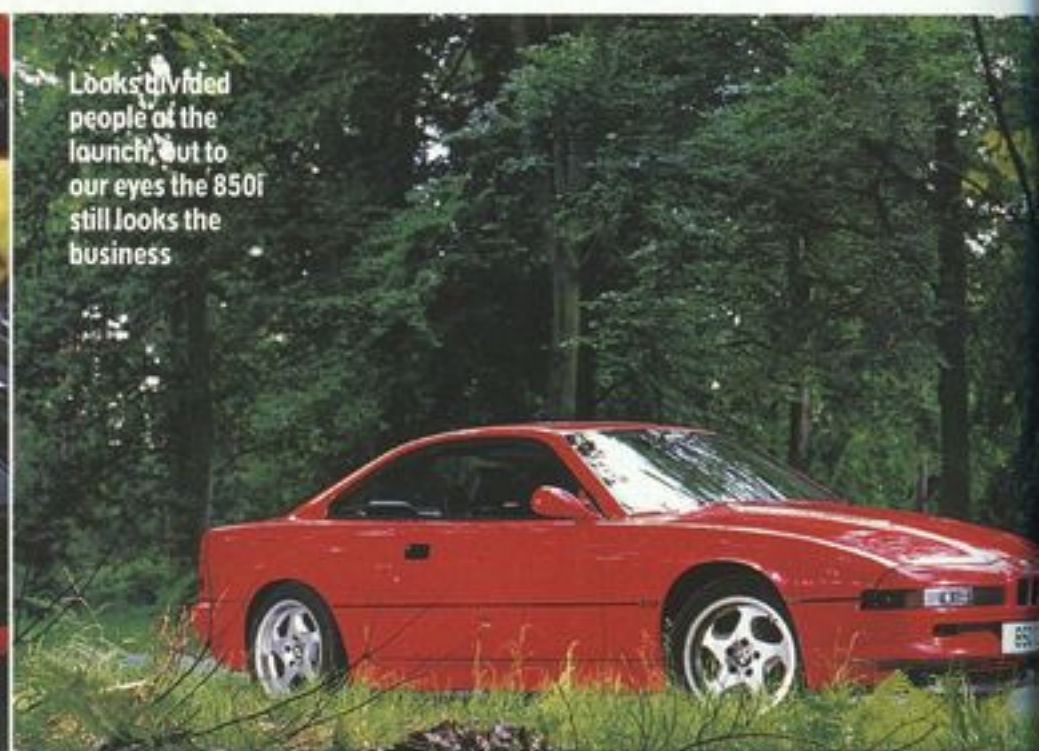
to be the very embodiment of chalk-stripe values.

BMW was actually apologising for the 850i at the static unveiling in the autumn of 1989. Caught out by the sudden change in climate, project manager Hans-Peter Weisbarth told *CAR* that, while the 300bhp 850i might be the fastest car ever made by the company, 'we have a social responsibility. Somebody has to stop this nonsense. We have to stop the horsepower race.' The top speed was ostentatiously limited to 155mph.

Weisbarth's *zeitgeist* meter was working exceptionally well. Inflation was spiralling, petrol costs were rising and acid rain was becoming a household phrase. As the 47 pre-production 850s rolled out of the Dingolfing factory, the Berlin Wall fell and with it any chance the 850i might have had of serious success. All that said, both Bernd Pischetsrieder and Wolfgang Reitzle – the dominant figures behind BMW's rise and rise during the '80s and '90s – have 'special' 850s in their personal collections.



Looks divided people of the launch, but to our eyes the 850i still looks the business



V12 engine is getting on a bit, but otherwise the car is sensational at speed, even on narrow roads



Series production of the post-Iron Curtain 850i began in January 1990. It was a hugely complex car that incorporated some serious technology. It was the first BMW to get a multiplex wiring system and had powered everything, including seats, headrests and steering wheel. Even the climate control had a smog-sensing recirculation control. Today, the 850i is an absolute bargain, starting at just £10,000 and demanding no more than £15,000 for a pampered example. It's time to reassess this unsung supercar.

BMW INSIDERS SAY THE 8-SERIES SHOULD REALLY BE regarded as 'Wolfgang Reitzle's car' – then BMW's chief engineer, but a man who would later rise to the number two spot before being expelled and taking over at Ford's Premier Automotive Group. The 850i's complex rear axle was described as Reitzle's 'pride and joy'. It was an expensive five-link concoction that included a degree of passive rear steer. In time, the axle was to have incorporated intelligent hydraulic-activated rams that could give up to two degrees of movement in each direction to help keep the 8-series exceptionally stable during extreme manoeuvres. Also due to be introduced was an infra-red visibility aid, while electronic damper

control was an option. These systems would have gradually edged the 8-series towards intelligent active suspension – not bad for a car unveiled in 1989.

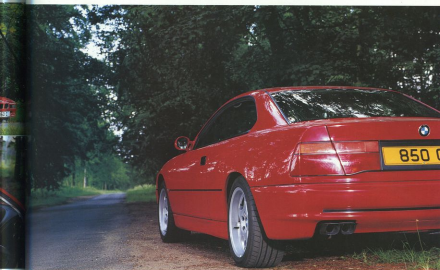
The 8-series was long, admirably aerodynamic (Cd 0.29) but cramped and very heavy, managing to be both less spacious and porkier than the 635 it replaced. This, it's said, was the upshot of endless soul-searching at BMW in the mid-1980s as to the nature of the project: was it a super-luxury car or a proper sports car? In the end, of course, it fell between two stools. A starting price of over £60,000 (when the 635 cost around £45,000) didn't help much, either.

On first sight, many hacks thought the 8-series' styling an odd mix of future and past: the blistered wheel arches, needle nose and lengthy overhangs (especially at the rear) seemed at odds with the smooth and pillarless glasshouse. The lack of a B-pillar means that all four side windows can be wound down to make the 850i fully open air. The intention, of course, was to also produce a cabriolet version. That was cancelled (although the prototype is in the BMW Mobile Tradition museum), as was the extravagant M8. Scoop shots showed this to be a wild machine with massive air intakes ahead of the wheels and a slatted bonnet. It

would have been powered by a 500bhp engine and much of the chassis' rubberware would have been junked to produce sharper driving characteristics.

Should have. Could have. The recession of the early 1990s put paid to an expansion of the 8-series family. As the cabriolet and M8 went west, so did a 230bhp, 3.2V 3.0-litre 830i (just 13 prototypes were made). A 400bhp 5.4-litre version also failed to make it. What the Brits did get was the 300bhp 850i and the 286bhp V8 840i. Over a near 10-year production run, just 30,597 8-series were made: 22,776 850s and 7803 840s. Perhaps the pick of them is the 850 CSI, a six-speed manual powered by a 380bhp 5.6-litre V12 and enlivened by some of the chassis modifications developed for the M8 – but just 585 were made in right-hand drive.

TIME HAS BEEN KINDER TO THE 850i THAN IT HAS TO the 1980s. It's a magnificent-looking machine that attracted admiring comments from all who saw it. The car featured here is a 1991 850i with just 57,000 miles on the clock. In the seven years that expert independent BMW technician Tim Spicer has owned it, the car has travelled only 17,000 miles. It's as close to a new 850i as you're likely to find. He says his 850i cost him



£37,800 seven years ago and the '850C' plate another £5k. Today, it wouldn't fetch much over £15k-16k even in its condition. He admits that the 8-series is 'fairly unaffordable' as a day-to-day car for the ordinary driver, however, as a cherished second car it fits the bill.

My favourite aspect of the 8-series is the magnificent interior. Deep doors that flow out of the dashboard and the superbly angled centre console add up to one of the best-planned, driver-focused interiors ever. As befits a car no-object '00s machine, the 8-series switchgear is beautifully manufactured and the whole interior has an air of indestructibility. The rear jump seats are near useless, but the cockpit is very wide and extremely comfortable. There's a touch of the period hearse-brick mobile phone about the expensive design, but with the windows rolled down the feel-good factor is high.

Spicer says the 850's V12 is, in some ways, an old-fashioned design (two-valve heads, single cams and twin distributors), work on which started in the 1970s. It's smooth enough, but not notably so, and can't propel the 850i's hefty particularly rapidly. Compared with the Mercedes SL500 I've just driven, the 850i isn't as vital, but let's get it into perspective: the 850i can still hit 10mph in under seven seconds and run to 155mph.

With 525lb ft of torque at 4100rpm, it can be wound up well and there's a useful 25l on tap at just 1000rpm.

Pull the beautifully placed auto shifter into 'D' and the 850i noses off up the road eagerly. The ride is exceptional and it encourages the driver towards a fair clip straight off. After a few miles on an A-road, I swung the 850i onto the B-roads of north Hertfordshire and kicked down through the gears. It might be wide, but the 850i is superbly planted and, partly thanks to the excellent visibility, very easy to wind along at speed. It doesn't encourage the driver to drive up to the limit, but it's more than capable of lifting its skirts. The sense of calm is enhanced by the exceptional body control: undulating country lanes cannot out-think BMW's springing and damping mix, even at high speeds.

As expected, it's fast and relaxed on the motorway, and even in London the 850i was very easy to thread down narrow streets. It could do with a bit more bite in the brakes and on average 20mpg is very stiff, but even by today's standards it's hard to fault the 8-series within its brief as a traditional GT car. And as one of the last re-compromise engineer's cars, where else could you find such a deeply satisfying bit of kit as this when £15k buys a minicar?

THE INSIDE LINE ON USED 8-SERIES

BMW expert Tim Spicer says the 850i is difficult to re-assemble after a big smash – so look for ill-fitting panels around the nose. Aftermarket security could have deranged the extensive electrics; the wiring looms will have been spliced. Lack of proper coolant and auto gearbox oil changes will kill the head gasket and transmission. Avoid EDC-equipped cars, as 'it always fails. One new shock is £500 and the control box £290.' The 850i has two EDUs, three exhaust silencers and two batteries, so costs add up.

BMW mechanical lifts are not excessively expensive and should always be used. He reckons the V8 840i was more prone to oil leaks. It took him three days to change a sump gasket. However, the main servicing items are easy to get to and Spicer has nothing but praise for the quality of the car. The difficult bit is finding an 8-series that has not already fallen into the wrong hands.