

Ah, the anticipation. The first new BMW coupé for 13 years, successor to the fabled 635CSi. Great looking, sporty yet elegant. Powered by a 300bhp 5.0-litre V12. Bristling with advanced electronics. Laden with luxury goodies. A top speed of 156mph. The first new BMW of the Nineties. So much promise. Great expectations.

And within a couple of months of the BMW 850i pillarless coupé being launched at the 1989 Frankfurt International Motor Show, the first three years' production – from a line claimed to run at between 10,000 to 12,000 units per year – was sold out.

Such was the hype surrounding the big coupé. We all wanted a go in it. This was the era when the men from Bavaria were truly getting into their stride. The 3-series had already established itself as the aspiring yuppie's wet dream, the 5-series was winning every group test going, and the 7-series was trading blows with the Mercedes-Benz S-class for the title of 'best car in the world'. If you caught sight of it on the stand at the Frankfurt show or flicked through the press hand-out photographs, you could only assume that this latest BMW was about to become the greatest BMW.

But then, oh dear, journalists did get behind the wheel. German journalists initially, who, if we're to be honest about this, were sometimes prone to let the warm glow of national pride get in the way of cold, objective judgement. Yet even these guys were saying that the 850i wasn't all it was cracked up to be. ▶

CAPABILITY BRAUN



Designed to change the motoring landscape and sold by BMW as the 'ultimate driving machine', the 850i failed to excite reviewers when it appeared in 1989. Now that the 13-year old car can be bought for a quarter of its original £60,000 price tag is it any more appealing?

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PICTURES: MALCOLM GRIFFITHS



Depending on which options are fitted, the centre console boasts as many as six different push-buttons

LIKE AN AIRCRAFT PILOT YOU FIND THE CONTROLS YOU NEED MOST OFTEN AND MOST CRITICALLY



They were claiming the unthinkable – that here was a BMW that simply wasn't much fun to drive. Great at many things, certainly, but inadequate in the driver enjoyment area. The strap line on BMW's UK advertising read, 'The Ultimate Driving Machine'; disappointingly this was the missing strand from the 850i's DNA.

As a youngish, keen road tester in the early Nineties, I tried not to let other folk's opinion unreasonably influence my own. I thought the styling of the car – created by an in-house design team led by Claus Luthe – was fantastic. Despite the flak, I wanted to like the 850i, was prepared to give it the benefit of the doubt, despite its flaws or two. Maybe my first drive of it shouldn't have been in the company of the aggressively manic Porsche 911 GT3, a V8-engined thug of a car that made the 850i seem feeble and sterile. Now if the BMW had been on its own... sadly, I think the result would have been the same – a very expensive luxury sports coupé with all mod cons but no soul.

Ten years on from my first drive of it, there's now a chance to view the 850i with the advantage of hindsight and a broader perspective. A decade down the line hype and expectation – and with them false hope – have faded and can no longer rattle at the subconscious and perhaps distort views on the big blower. At the time, what with the way the 850i looked and BMW's constant banging on about how great its cars were to drive, we'd all convinced ourselves that this was supposed to be a genuine sports car, after ten years of growing into itself, the 850i's true identity should now be revealed. There's another factor that has shifted the goalposts in assessing this car – in 1992 this was a 650,000 motor car, whereas now a figure in the mid-teens will get you a serviceable one.

Tim Spicer's red 850i (the same colour as the first 850i I drove, incidentally) is a 1991 car but



wears later model optional door mirrors and optional 17in rather than 16in alloys. Tim is a qualified BMW technician and runs an independent servicing and repair outfit from opposite Dundrod air museum, and his obsession with vehicle condition means that this car is as well presented and blemish-free as most modern BMW press test cars; it's like stepping back in time when I'm handed the keys.

The shape has worn well. Flared wheelarches lend a taut muscularity to its flanks, while its tall-light treatment is bold, crisp, Germanic. Others are critical of the 850i's nose, accusing it of not being as decisively pinned as the rest of the car's lines, but I'm a fan. It's an evolution of the mid-engined M's front end, and similar, too, to that of an earlier BMW supercar concept. It's low-slung and menacing, and when new made the 850i clearly distinguishable from any other BMW. And while some cars with pop-up headlights can look awkward in night-vision mode, the broad, double super-ellipsoid units of the 8-series rise to a modest height only and don't mess with the proportions of the nose.

A feature you won't so easily spot is how clean the 850i's profile is. Sure, there are a couple of protuberances in the lower sections of the front and rear bumper units, but there are no high-rise wings or jutting spoilers. This big coupé

cleans the air with a Cd 0.29 drag coefficient, yet is express train steady at 150mph.

How well do you remember the Eighties and Nineties? German domestic appliances of the era were almost clinically efficient looking and we bought them because we felt reassured that that was how they would operate. It's a bit like the 850i's interior. You can sense the ergonomic precision of it all, marvel at the level of equipment at your command, know deep in your heart that everything you see will continue to operate in exactly the way BMW intended for decades to come, what you won't get is a sense of cosseting luxury, of pampering or passion. I'm not saying that's bad, just that it helps explain why people often feel cold towards the 8-series.

It's hard not to be impressed by the solidity and quality of the thing. Pulling the doors shut is like tagging on the Ark Royal's anchor chain: hard work. The switchgear, column stalks, electric seat controls, even the stereo knobs, move with a robust precision. It was during this era that BMW defined what top-class automotive plastics should look like, and the 'elephant hide' texture of the fascia and door trims is still unsurpassed.

Sat behind the wheel, though, mind on the road ahead rather than the ambience within, you do get a sense of where BMW was coming from. Like an aircraft pilot you instinctively find the controls you need most often and most critically. The instruments are clean and unambiguous; the exception is the trip computer that requires a member of the PlayStation generation to operate. Dial in a temperature to the climate control and that's where it will stay. Look around you and the roof pillars are unobtrusive, the mirrors suitably revealing. Then you begin to appreciate the subtle touches. The way the side windows drop an inch or so when you open the doors, then shoot back up again when you shut them, to effect the most efficient seal between

BMW 850i

Taut shape is handsome and interior has every feature you could wish for, but it's all a bit too coolly efficient to engender passion



1991 BMW 850i

Engine 4988cc, front-mounted, all-alloy V12, Bosch Motronic combined ignition and injection system, dohc, water-cooled **Power and Torque** 300bhp @ 5200rpm, 325lb ft @ 4100rpm
Transmission four-speed ZF automatic, rear-wheel drive **Brakes** discs all-round, vented at the front, ABS **Steering** rack and pinion, power assisted **Suspension** Front: independent, MacPherson struts, coil springs, dampers, anti-roll bar. Rear: independent 'integral' axle – a multi-link arrangement comprising one upper transverse arm, two lower transverse links, one longitudinal arm, one integral link connecting the lower longitudinal and the upper transverse arm; subframe-mounted **Weight** 3938lb (1786kg) **Performance** Top speed: artificially limited to 156mph (claimed), 0-60mph: 7.2sec (claimed) **Cost new** £61,495 **Value now** £15,000 (approx) for an example as immaculate as our test vehicle. Ropier models can be bought for as little as £8000, but costs can be high

glass and rubbers. Or the nearside door mirror that automatically dips to reveal the kerb when you engage reverse. And how about the speed sensitive wipers that also give a final 'flick' a few seconds after you'd last used the washers to sweep away any dribbles?

The V12 fires up with a flourish and a growl before settling into a smooth, quiet idle. It's the same 5.0-litre lump found under the bonnet of the 750i saloon, and later rumours of unreliability (completely unfounded, according to Tim Spicer) are part of the reason that neither of these two big Beemers enjoyed the sort of success and acclaim you might assume given their overall specification. Designed from the outset to work with catalytic converters on the exhaust, this engine is the first of the super-sophisticated BMW powerplants. An all-alloy unit, it weighs just 529lb complete with injection system, alternator, steering pump and air-conditioning compressor; a comparable Jaguar V12 is 40 per cent heavier.

Low friction bores and a seven bearing crank employing a dozen counterweights help with the smoothness, while a third generation Bosch Motronic combined injection and ignition system is assigned to each bank of cylinders. Another novelty of the engine is that it has a fly-by-wire throttle; electric motors operate the throttle butterflies rather than cables or linkages.

The technology is impressive, but the results it brings are mixed. There's no doubting this is a gutsy engine, yet it lacks the tingle and rush you'd expect from 300bhp and 325lb ft of torque. Of course, a kerb weight of 3938lb does nothing to help the cause. It is peaceful in the

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cruise, though, and seemingly able to sustain high speeds all day if required. And coupled with the four-speed, multi-mode ZF automatic gearbox, it places no demands on the driver whether he wants to go swiftly or slow.

That's when it dawns on you – we've long criticised the 850i for not being enough of a sports car, when it was never intended to be, it was always just a grand tourer. To be fair to some contemporary road tests, they did point out the coupé was more suited for touring than sprinting, but BMW never seemed to come out and say, 'that's what we built it for.'

Viewed as a GT, the rest of the 850i makes more sense. It doesn't matter that its steering isn't supercar sharp. Nor is it then an issue that the suspension can feel a tad soft and floaty at very high speeds; you're now free to marvel at how good the ride is the rest of the time for a car that will hit 60mph from standstill in 7.2sec.

And when you're content just to schmooze along rather than tank on, you tend not to care that the ultra-sophisticated multi-link rear



The 5-litre V12 has low friction bores, a seven bearing crank and Bosch Motronic injection and ignition

suspension, in tandem with an electronic stability control system, won't let you play the tail-out hero. Nope, what will blow you away is how surefooted the 850i's chassis is.

Relax into the 850i's stolid persona and you'll enjoy it far more than if you attempt to scuff the tread pattern off its broad boots. This car won't ever engender passion, but I defy you not to feel a deep respect for its all-round efficiency. It will never rank as one of the great BMWs but it's worthy of a better press than it's had to date. **DS**

Thanks to: Tim Spicer, owner of the 850i and specialist BMW engineer (01223 833392); Nick Baron of WorldPay for location.



BRETT FRASER

'FIRST TIME AROUND THE 850i WAS A HUGE DISAPPOINTMENT; IT SEEMS TO HAVE IMPROVED WITH AGE'

Brett Fraser was a road tester with *CAR* magazine when the 850i was current. Now freelance, he writes for *The Daily Telegraph* and *Evo*, among others