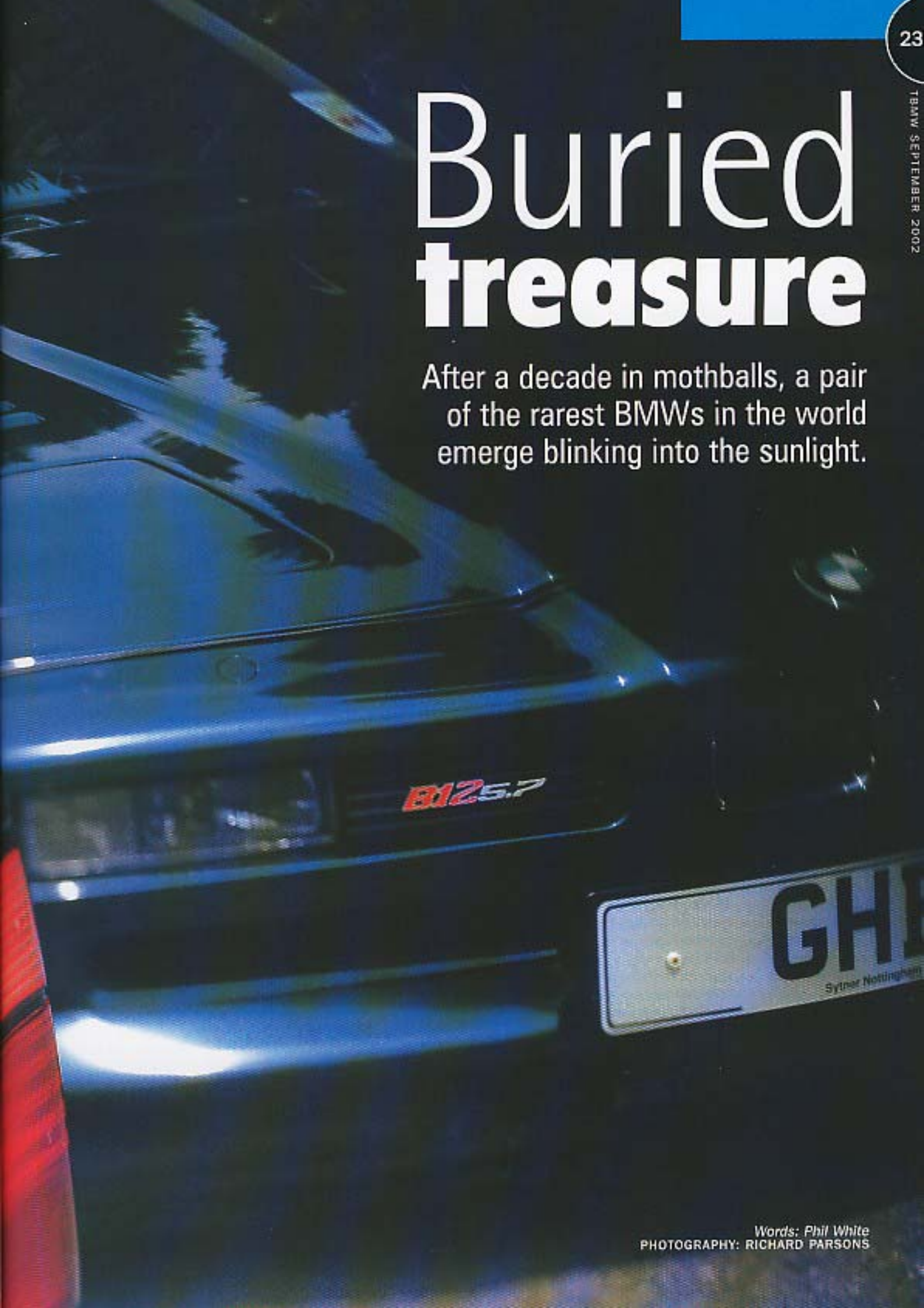




B12s

Buried treasure

After a decade in mothballs, a pair of the rarest BMWs in the world emerge blinking into the sunlight.



Words: Phil White
PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD PARSONS



As the sharp right-hander confirms, the early '90s brakes are, in this age of instant deceleration, shocking

The circuit is a mile long and threads its way past a lake. If we'd known, we'd have taken a picnic. That said, why loaf when there are toys like these to play with? Because we're here to pay homage to two of the rarest BMWs on earth. These Alpina B12s, moreover, are looking great for their age, because they've covered only delivery miles.

So, high time more digits flickered up on the odometer. Because these were born to scorch the tarmac. The Alpina B12 5.7 was for those who found the BMW 850 too tame. It was only 36 bhp ahead of the 850CSi, but torque and mid range response are in a higher league. The engine design involves bore and stroke increases, raising capacity from 5.6 to 5.7 litres. Alpina cams, tubular exhaust manifolds and an Alpina exhaust system are new hardware, and the ECU was remapped to make the new spec deliver.

Which it does with aplomb. Drivers of the B12 have 416 bhp at their disposal, and 420 lb.ft torque at just 4000 rpm. No top speed limiter is fitted to the B12, giving the car a terminal velocity of 186 mph. This is fast now, but in 1993 was shocking. Especially as

this 1865 kg monster could shake off 62mph within 5.8 seconds. Impressed? You should be. It remains a very capable car on paper.

Equally laudable is the suspension. In fact, Alpina only made subtle design changes to the underpinnings, content with installing light 18 inch alloys and playing with the front springs. Trouble is that the B12/850 will never be nimble until somebody invents gravitational and centripetal force repulsion devices more sci-fi than tyres. 245/40 front and 285/35 rear Michelin MX3 tyres grip well, but they're being asked to hold a two-tonne object that's 5 metres long and 2 metres wide. This is physics, not miracle working.

The track we are on highlights this limitation — it's narrow and tight in the bends. The suspension does an admirable job of controlling roll and allowing a positive turn-in but unlike, say, a current M5, the bulk of the car is undisguised. It's ponderous and, even equipped as it is with ASC+T traction control, hints that the rear could pendulum out if you overstep the mark. As I wing through the curves, I recall a scene from *The Italian Job*. The camera is behind the coach driver as he

escapes through the Alps, laden with Mini Coopers and a pallet of gold. That's how big the B12's steering wheel feels, and the sensation of immensity the car communicates.

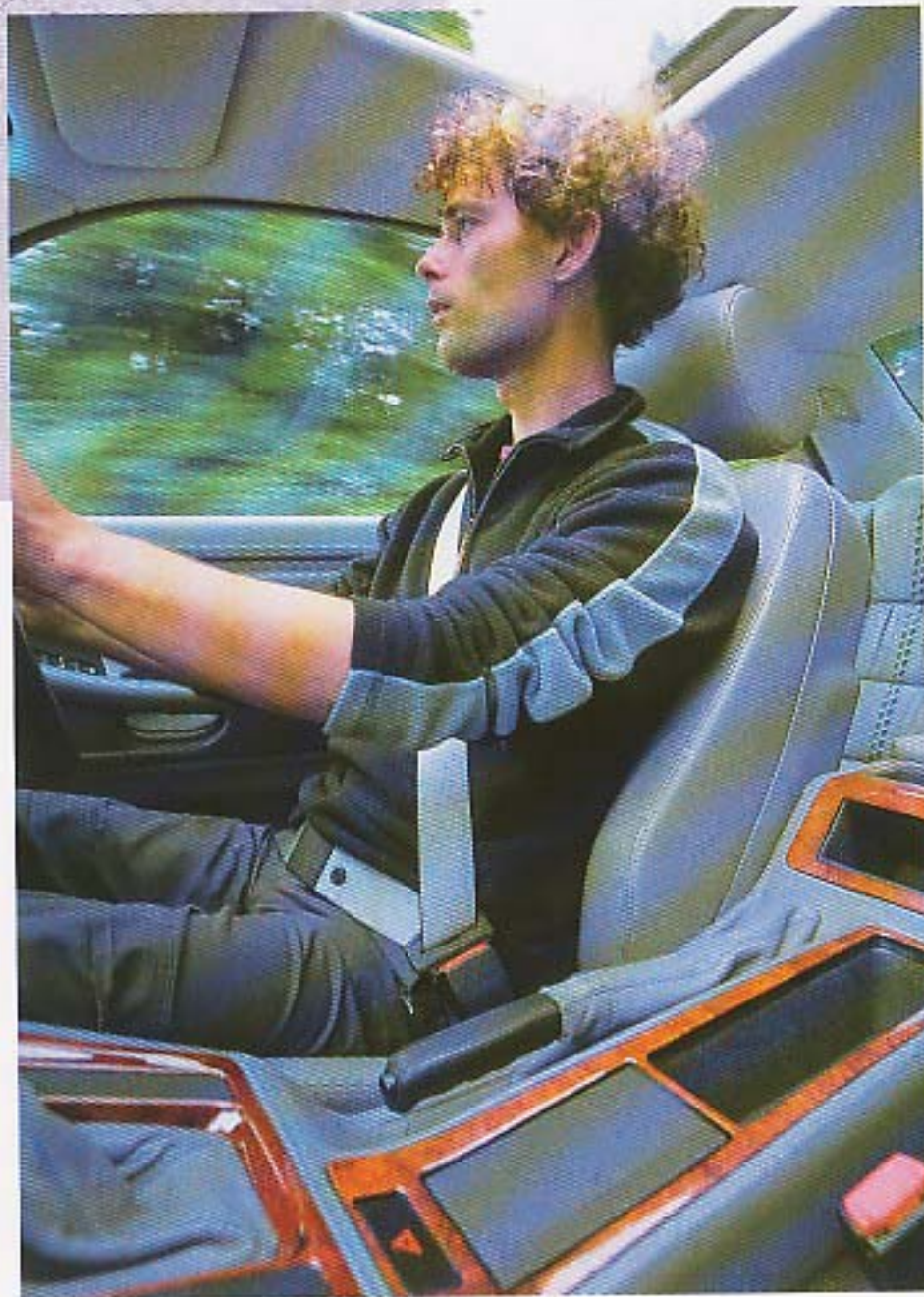
I have no wish to end this day as the film finishes, with my car teetering on the edge of the track. Because its owner could justifiably dispatch me if I did. These are rare vehicles. Of the 54 B12s created by Alpina, only eight were right-hand drive. Until Nick Godfrey and Richard Groat of Sytner in Nottingham imported this pair, there was only one in the UK. And that has 100,000 miles on the clock.

Unlike these, which are barely in treble figures. Richard discovered them, unused, in the Far East, where they were in the Sultan of Brunei's collection. However, despite not parking his regal behind in the driving seat of these, the Sultan seems to have had a soft spot for the 850i, as he ordered four B12s. I also suspect that the one 1993 850 CSi listed in the production figures as an estate, and the 1999 car down as a convertible, may well have something to do with His Excellency.

Nowadays, the B12s are in the hands of a UK collector. Sytner spent hours getting the



The dramatically ducted Alpina bonnet is carbon fibre over the original steel frame.



Left: White plays at being Sultan for a day — "Which way to St Tropez, mate?"

cars ready to be driven, as almost a decade in a humid climate had taken its toll on certain components. Even though, as Richard says, they were "still in their delivery wax". But now the pair is here, unnaturally youthful and gleaming in the sunlight. The black one is a 1992 car, based on the 850 Ci, while the blue car has as its heart a 1993 CSI. This isn't earth-shattering, as the only difference it implies is that the blue car has the CSI's rear-wheel steering mechanism.

Thanks to the low weight of the Alpina cotton reel alloys, the older model turns in as crisply as the newer one, and holds a line just as well. And both go like bullets. The immensity of torque available means you're going to be travelling at about 110 mph by the time the next significant bend requires negotiating.

The car accelerates inexorably as long as your foot is on the right-hand pedal and, bearing in mind that six ratios are on hand, that stratospheric top speed is likely to be attainable. Suddenly, its purpose becomes clear. As Richard comments, "what this car is all about is covering massive distances at huge speed, in utter luxury". If you want to spark down to Cannes, in magisterial serenity at 170 mph, the B12 should be your



**ENGINE**

5616cc V12, Alpina camshafts, tubular stainless steel manifolds, exhaust system, reprogrammed ECU
 Max power: 416 bhp at 5400 rpm
 Max torque: 420 lb.ft at 4000 rpm

TRANSMISSION

Getrag 286 six-speed manual gearbox, 25 per cent limited slip differential

SUSPENSION

Standard system, Bilstein dampers, Alpina front springs, rear-wheel steering system on later car

BRAKES

Standard vented discs all round, four-pot front callipers, sputred pads, ABS

WHEELS & TYRES

Alpina 20-spoke alloys, 9x18 in front, 10.5x18 in rear
 245/40 front and 285/35 rear Michelin MXX3 tyres

BODY

Alpina front chin spoiler, M3-style mirrors, Alpina vented, louvred Kevlar bonnet

INTERIOR

Alpina stitching and leather inserts to dash, door trims, steering wheel and seats, Alpina steering wheel and gearknob





Interior is unmistakably BMW but unmistakably '80s. As usual, Alpina work included its trademark retrim.



transport of choice. And let's face it, what chance does any hapless gendarme have of arguing with your inalienable right to do so?

And you're not going to be able to stop to chat to him anyway. As the sharp right-hander at the end of the straight confirms, the early '90s spec brakes are, in this age of instant deceleration, shocking. Alpina fitted the stock 850 callipers with competition spec pads, but pedal pressures bordering on the desperate are required. This truly is a vehicle for places with distant horizons and few surprises.

In Europe or Marlboro country, therefore, I could seriously fall for it. The leather and wood-festooned cabin is dated, but does have lovely Alpina stitching and leather inserts. And from it, you look out with a feeling of well-being through smug-tinted glasses. In the US, too, you could shrug off the car's mid-teens fuel thirst figures.

These are two remarkable cars with a unique history — it was a privilege to drive them. They even retained a whiff of brand-new BMW, despite the years of standing



untouched. And they look beautiful. The alloys really suit the cars' lines, and Alpina made two cosmetic changes that add spice. Firstly, naturally, is the obligatory front spoiler, embossed with the company logo and claimed to enhance cross-wind stability and reduce nose lift. Both virtues are, I assume, appreciated at over 150 mph. There are the CSI's M3-style mirrors as an extra touch.

Then there is the bonnet, a Kevlar item developed at huge cost. It weighs less than the stock item, but most importantly, it lets significant amounts of air in and out of the engine bay. Alpina discovered its enhanced engine boiled the fuel lines during hard labour. So a central nacelle duct feeds cold



Below. Four tailpipes live on the end of the Alpina exhaust system which gives the V12 a fruity edge.



Below. Grey leather interior has lasted amazingly well, feels and smells new despite lengthy storage

air through the central cover in the engine's vee to keep things cool between the heads. Large slatted vents on each side of the bonnet let warm underbonnet air escape too.

Admittedly, the Alpina stripes aren't to everybody's taste, but they are part of the B12's heritage. These, two of the most special of this flagship Alpina model, have plenty to boast about. They are stunning, viciously kinetic cars that anybody should want to drive, despite their shortcomings in the bends. As Sytner's Nick Godfrey wrote in an affidavit during their importation, "these cars must be registered and used sparingly. They will, for the future, remain consequential in automotive history".