

A Touch Of Class

You don't need all that new-fangled techy stuff to have a good time in a BMW — as this rebuilt Alpina E21 proves.

Years ago, a guy who specialised in Jaguars told me a story that will make your hair fall out. "In 1972," he said, "I bought a 1969 XJ6 2.8 with a blown engine. Back then you could buy an old Jag anywhere, so I bought a 3.8 E-Type roadster for £80. It was rusty and horrible but the engine was superb. I put that engine into the XJ6, cut the E-Type up with an axe and threw it into a skip along with some rubble. I was doing my extension at the same time."

The same nearly happened to this Alpina A4/3. Possibly the only one in the country, it's a reminder of what cars used to be like. No iDrive, no electronic fog sensing ashtrays, this is a car with less overall electronics than the new 7-Series fog lamp switch. And it's fast, fun and very reliable.

Alpina didn't take long to doctor the new E21 3-Series, and this car was built at the Buchloe premises in late 1975. It's reckoned that the original E21 was a bit of a softie, but there was far more potential in the car. Computer design meant that the shell was no heavier than that of the '02, but much stiffer — proper ventilation, too.

Alpina launched the A4/3 in November 1975 and the 170 bhp Alpina 2002 engine was used with a gas-flowed head, four-choke Kugelfischer injection, a spiky cam and a four-branch tubular manifold plus a big bore system. A five-speed, close ratio, dog leg box sat behind this along with an Alpina limited slip diff, fatter front anti-roll bar, Bilsteins with tun springs and 7x13 inch 20-spoke alloys.

And the usual steering wheel and instruments

and this 170 bhp E21 was a rapid motor for 1975. No performance figures are available, but with 325i power and 250 or 300 lb less weight it would have been a bit brisk.

Owner Kev Robinson came into the story in 1997, when he acquired the remains of the car. "The previous owner wanted the engine and gearbox for his 2002 and I didn't pay money for what was left — I painted the bonnet and boot on his '02 and he gave me the rest!" Kev says.

Minus the engine and 'box, there didn't seem to be much point in owning it — ➤





Power now stands at 195 bhp — that's just 10 bhp shy of an M3 and it drives as easily as a cooking 316



Rubber boot spoilers are common on old E21s. But how many boast 195 bhp to back it up?

even the original wheels had been replaced with nasty 15 inch alloys. But with only 120 made, it's a rare car and the original Alpina plaque was still on the dash.

"Body-wise, it wasn't too bad," Kev recalls. "The main shell was still very good, apart from a horrible glass sunroof. I fitted new wings, second-hand doors and bootlid, plus other small repairs, filled in that sunroof hole and painted it BMW Verona Red."

To get the car up and running, Kev built an Alpina spec 2-litre from an original four-cylinder 320 engine with a flowed head, 316 degree Schrick cam and a four butterfly Alpina-style inlet manifold made by Geoff Weeks.

With the original Alpina exhaust manifold and a new exhaust copied from the rusty Alpina original, it developed 170 bhp and this was mated to a five-speed overdrive gearbox and a 320 limited slip diff. Alpina wheels were found, restored and fitted, along with an original Alpina Momo steering wheel. Luckily the original front and rear spoilers and Bilstein suspension were still there.

A minor prang a year or so ago meant another new wing and another repaint. At the time the paint was BMW Top Red (a Z-car colour) and there were to be no Alpina stripes. "It looked too 'boy racer' and my body wanted to have a go," Kev laughs.

By the end of last year, Kev decided he wanted to use the car for serious sprints and thought about building a better engine. "I knew you could make M3 bits fit an M10 block, and I was looking for a short engine so cheap it would have been rude not to buy it," Kev says.

The M3's 2.3 crank was machine-bored and the excellent original pistons cleaned and fitted with new rings. They needed to be pocketed to clear the valves and the block bored out from 89 mm to 93.4 mm. Apart from that it went together nicely. The 2-litre's big valve head and four-chamber combustion went back on, along with the 2-litre distributor. Power now stands at 195 bhp — that's just 10 bhp shy of an M3 and it drives as easily as a cooking 316. Add a Momo cooler, 45 mm chokes for the throttle, fat alloy trumpets and it's M10 heaven.

Kev replaced the overdrive 'box with a dog leg close ratio M3 unit. "E30s don't have a speedo drive so I had to fit a





speedo drive gear," he says. A 316 automatic propshaft mates to a modified output shaft on the 'box and feeds that 195 bhp to a 323i's 3.45 ratio limited slip diff.

Cooling is taken care of by an original spec 320 radiator with a 7-Series electric fan and E30 header tank — and it doesn't get too warm even under a quick blast up the A2 at 115 mph. "This engine's only done 1000 miles but it feels so much stronger at the bottom end — it's got 200 lbf.ft of torque, which is amazing," Kev says.

The suspension needed some sorting out too. Kev modified the front crossmember to give more negative camber by welding up the existing bottom arm location holes and redrilling them 10 mm outwards. TAS in Wiltshire supplied a 2.5 turns quick rack kit, where you have to rebuild your existing rack with the new high ratio rack-and-pinion. The result is go-kart steering that's almost two turns faster lock-to-lock.

The inner and outer track control arm bushes were replaced with nylon items and the rear end is secured with Alpina solid axle mountings, whilst the anti-roll bars are the original 23 mm Alpina front bar with a 323i rear. Kev made the strut braces with an alloy front one and a weird-looking rear brace that looks like a bad zimmer frame accident. Springs are Apex 430 lb fronts

and 220 lb rears with new Bilsteins, and Kev still finds buying those painful. "Just the rear ones were £250," he moans.

Lowered by 3 inches, the Alpina looks fantastic and handles the same. What a pity BMW didn't set the originals up like this.

Yokohama tyres help any cause, and it's no surprise to find the classic 20-spokes wrapped up in 205/60 A509s. Kev finds the standard 323i brakes with Kevlar pads more than good enough, and doesn't think the much-vaunted E23 7-Series conversion is worth it. "It's only a light car and you're not going to do 150 mph in it," he says.

The rest of the car is pure detail. That roll cage isn't there for show but that Alpina extra instrument pod on the dash top? "That started life as an old E12 door pocket which I cut about and made up," Kev says.

A Yazaki voltmeter and a Racetech oil pressure gauge look just the part, though. M3 replica mirrors, smoked lamps and a single wiper are obviously not original, but the OMP seats are spot-on and the Britax harnesses look as old as the car. Kev made that alloy footrest and although the carpet and rear seats are still there, he removed all the sound deadening to save weight.

Dechroming the side windows suits the car, and those hopeless headlamps were replaced by plastic bumper E30 ellipsoid



units which Kev managed to graft into the steel E21 backing plates. Those numberplates came from America, and not only do they have fake German TÜV and emissions test stickers, but they use the correct typeface for German numberplates as well. "I had white and black ones front and rear but I got stopped for the white rear one," Kev says.

Starting this year, Kev's aiming to do all eight sprints at Lydden Hill with the Rochester Motor Club and the South East Motor Enthusiasts' Club. It's nice to see a proper BMW when all the rage seems to be driving a bodykitted E36 around town with the front fogs on and the stereo thumping. Yes, I want one and I want it now.

ENGINE

2.3 M3 short engine in M10 block, gas-flowed 320i head, Schrick 316 degree cam, Alpina four-choke Kugelfischer injection, 2002 Tii distributor, Alpina manifold and copy exhaust system, oil cooler, electric fan, power 195 bhp

TRANSMISSION

M3 Getrag 265 gearbox, 316 auto prop, 3:45 ratio 323i LSD

SUSPENSION

Bilstein dampers, Apex springs, negative camber front crossmember, quick rack, Alpina solid rear beam bushes, nylon bushes in front, 23 mm front anti-roll bar, 323i rear bar, front and rear strut braces

BRAKES

323i vented disc brakes with Kevlar pads and original servo

WHEELS & TYRES

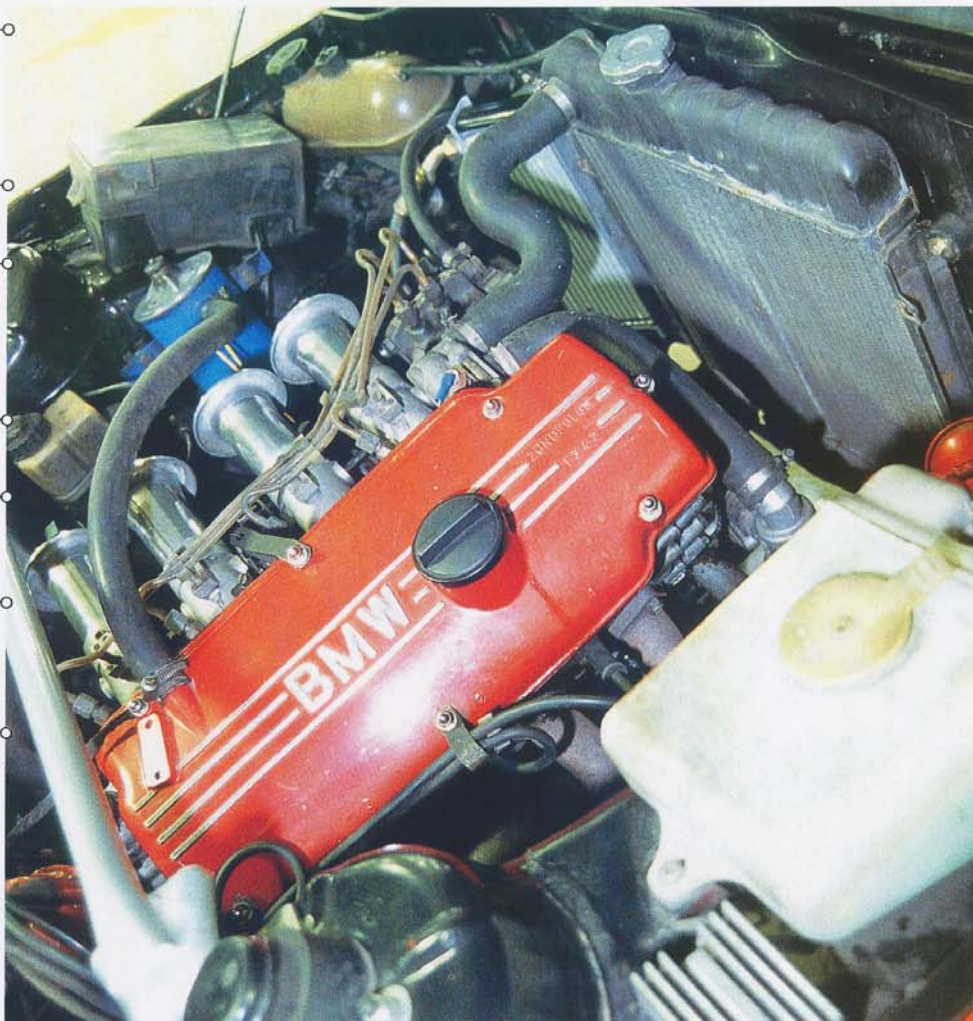
Alpina 7x13 inch 20-spoke alloys with Yokohama A509 205/60 tyres

BODY

Original Alpina A4/3, restored and repainted Top Red, smoked lamps, M3 mirrors, single wiper, Alpina spoilers and badges, dechromed, ellipsoidal E30 headlamps

INTERIOR

Aleybars rollcage, OMP seats, Britax harnesses, original Alpina instrument pod, additional oil pressure and volt meter gauges in pod, Momo Alpina wheel, alloy footrest



Full cage, racing seats and harnesses mark it out as a serious sprint and track day contender.



Alpina lettering on bootlid remains but Kev decided against the sidestripes: "too boy racer," he reckons.

