

Alpina Peaks

Alpina has reached the pinnacle of BMW-related success over nearly four decades. We go behind the scenes at its Buchloe HQ.

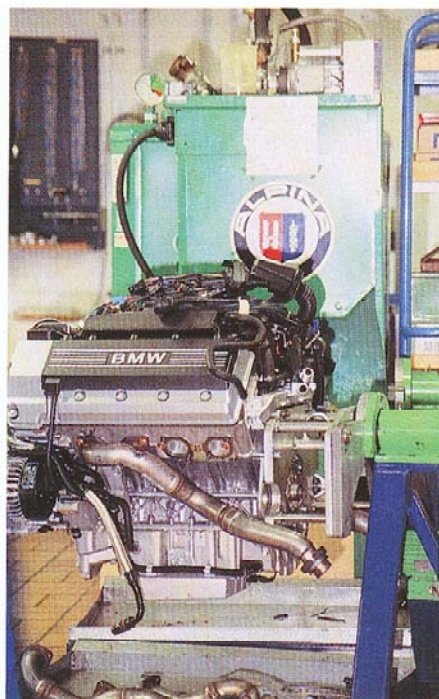


Alpina's 37-year history is well known, but for the uninitiated it goes something like this. Once upon a time Burkard, the son of Dr Rudolph Bovensiepen, buys a BMW 1500. This, as his son Andreas explains, "he found very slow. It was a car the size of a 5-Series, with 65 bhp. So he developed a twin Weber conversion for it". This was natural enough, as Dr Rudolph ran Alpina, an office machine manufacturer, and engineering was in the family bloodline. Burkard Bovensiepen favoured performance cars over type-writers however, and on January 2, 1965 Alpina began in earnest as an automotive venture.

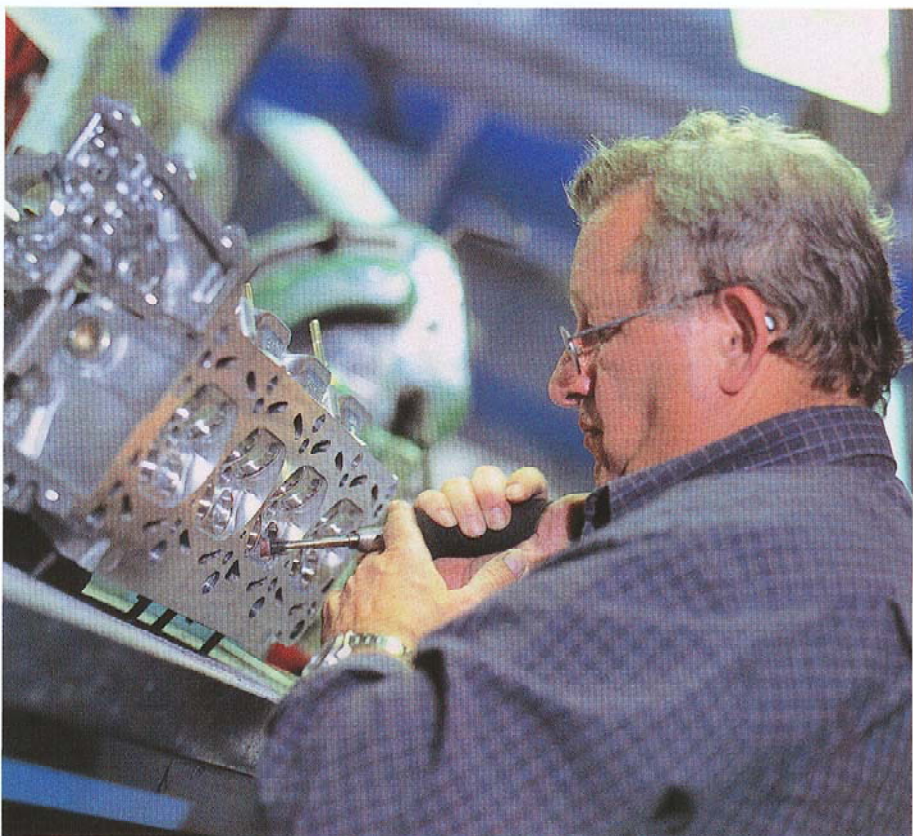
His great passion was motorsport, and from 1968-77 Alpina was a dominating force in saloon car racing, with world-class drivers, including Derek Bell, Harald Ertl, James Hunt, Jacky Ickx, Niki Lauda, Brian Muir and Hans Stuck.

Then throughout the '70s the company's relationship with BMW became increasingly close. The two outfits were only about 40 miles apart after all and Alpina was already moving towards what it does today — creating models which don't turn up in the BMW model line-up. By around 1974 it had created prototypes for a six-cylinder E21 3-Series, something which, explains sales director Günther Schuster, didn't at that point exist. This was the B6 2.8, and it was shown to the men from Munich alongside the B7 Turbo, which gave the 5-Series the obvious attraction of 300 bhp. Günther says they were impressed, but "asked for a 10,000 km test on the Nordschleife — the hardest test you can get". Both cars passed with flying colours.

From this point, Alpina was cooking on gas. It was a major player, capable of creating some of the most remarkable machines that ever turned four wheels. And from



In best Aston Martin tradition, Alpina engines are all built lovingly by hand.



When you work on cylinder heads and nothing but cylinder heads, you tend to know your stuff.



1983 it was officially a manufacturer in its own right. Despite this, it cooperated the following year with BMW South Africa on one of its all-time legends — the 333i. This big-engined E30 contained Alpina-developed suspension, brakes, wheels, instruments and engine components such as the inlet manifold.

We were at the company's Buchloe headquarters to see for ourselves how it produces its remarkable cars. We had visions of BMW cars being partially dismantled, then

Alpina hardware being created and installed by fleets of slow-moving men wielding spanners. And in some ways we were right, and in others we couldn't have been more wrong. Each Alpina head is machined by a chap with decades of experience, who can do the job largely by feel. A capacity test afterwards confirms just how accurately he has ground the combustion chambers.

The engines themselves are, naturally, assembled by hand by one man, taking

several days. The engine builder can, for some customers, take on immense importance. "One existing client came here to specify the options on his new car," recalls Günther, "and asked to see the engine builder of his last car. We looked through the records, and the man was in the building. He shook him by the hand, and demanded that he build his next engine."

The builders are supplied with the engine parts by a state-of-the-art stock control