

MERCEDES-BENZ E500 vs LOTUS OMEGA vs BENTLEY TURBO R vs BMW M5



*Serious performance and luxury
needn't be mutually exclusive terms.
Here are four cars that prove you
can have the best of both worlds*

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4 UP AND FAST



> The high-performance saloon is something of an automotive oxymoron: tuned and boosted engine, fat tyres and upgraded suspension, yet loaded down with power-sapping accessories, sacrificing luggage space and boardroom interior. But even if you're a stripped-out performance die-hard, the pull of these cars is hard to resist – settling into heavy-stitched leather sports seats, having more room for friends, and still knowing there's enough grunt under your right foot to frighten even serious sports cars. If that sounds like the machine for you, then this quartet of power players from the early Nineties pulls off the best performance/comfort compromise going.

The weights of the BMW E34 M5, Mercedes-Benz E500 and Lotus Elise (Carlton for the UK market) are all within 10-140kg of the flagship Porsche 928 GTS's 1640kg weight, and all offer similar performance themselves; not bad considering what they've got on board. The fourth contender, the heavyweight Bentley Turbo R, is the elephant in the room. But if you're juggling the words 'performance' and 'luxury' you've probably entertained the idea of owning Britain's biggest muscle car. Today depreciation has put this board room brawler in the same price bracket as the others and its abilities are hard to ignore.

Mercedes' S-class flagship models were once reserved for those at the peak of a successful career, but by 1990 the three-pointed star was facing a crisis of identity and market conditions and needed to sell cars to younger buyers. The marque needed new markets and models that would change people's perceptions of the brand. 'We are not forced to make boring cars,' sales and marketing director Joachim Schmidt told a board meeting.

Looking at the E500 with his words in mind, there are moments that give you cause for concern – from some angles it looks as bland as its airport taxi cousins. The car was based on the Mercedes W124 E-class of 1986. A functionally handsome rather than beautiful car, the body boasted one of the lowest drag coefficients of its time, 0.28Cd, but little in the way of sensuality. The E500, Daimler-Benz, saloons were sent to Porsche's Schwanenberger Strasse works in Stuttgart, where they received discreetly flared wheelarches and a lower, more purposeful stance thanks to shorter, stiffer springs, wider wheels and a hydraulic self-levelling system at the rear. The engine bay was modified, with the battery relocated to the boot to accommodate Mercedes' 322bhp M119 four-cam five-litre V8. This was basically the engine from the new SL,

'New turbo technology and old-school motor make a great team – floor the throttle and the Bentley grows under its breath, throwing itself down the road with alarming rapidity'



though with a shorter cylinder block. The intake manifold was redesigned and the Bosch KE Jetronic fuel injection system replaced by LH Jetronic, which helped to produce an extra 22lb ft of torque. The new saloon also used the SL's four-speed automatic gearbox.

Like Porsche, Lotus was looking to expand its consultancy and bespoke work. Now under the General Motors umbrella and having already successfully collaborated on Corvette's ZR1 supercar, it took on a project designed to showcase its own talents as well as create a 'halo' car for Vauxhall-Opel's Carlton/Omega 3.0GSI 24v range. Cars rolled off Opel's Rüsselsheim production line in Germany and were sent to Lotus in Norfolk. Before painting (all were dark metallic green), the only alteration made by the factory before dispatch was cutting vent holes in the bonnet. More cutting awaited them in Hethel's old DeLorean development shop: wings were sliced and wider wheelarches fashioned, and the floorpan and transmission tunnel reshaped to accommodate a new engine and gearbox housing.

Lotus developed a new engine based on Opel's capable three-litre 24-valve, increasing capacity to 3615cc by increasing the stroke. Other improvements that turned the engine into the Lotus Type 104 included a new crankshaft, induction system, throttle bodies and Mahle pistons. Hethel reversed the cooling system and improved the oil flow. Central to the engine's power boost were a pair of Garrett T25 turbochargers, and Lotus' patient tweaking and refinement made sure it delivered its



377bhp smoothly. To feed that and 419ft lb of torque to the rear wheels Lotus used the ZF six-speed gearbox from the 375bhp Corvette ZR1.

The forces transmitted through the Omega's 17in rear wheels also demanded a rethinking of the suspension: an extra link was added to the standard GM semi-trailing arm system as well as a self-levelling set up, like the Mercedes designed to keep the wheels square with the tarmac whatever the speed and payload.

ESSENTIAL ADVICE FOR BUYING A NINETIES PERFORMANCE HEAVYWEIGHT

'It's easy to forget how old these cars are,' says BMW specialist Barney Halse of Classic Heroes (www.classicheros.co.uk). He's talking about the M5, but his advice fits the other three too: 'As values have gone down, many have fallen into the hands of people who haven't got the means to maintain what is essentially still a £70k motor. Be hugely careful.'

Of the BMW, he says: 'A usable,

fairly high-mileage 3.8-litre will cost around £5k-8k.' A 3.6-litre will be about £2k behind that. The best M5s go for £14k, though dealers try their hand at £20k-plus for low-milers.

Turning to the Mercedes, 'they have monumental build quality; Porsche took 14 days over each car,' says Jonathan Aucott of Avantgarde Cars (www.avantgardecars.com). Average cars cost about £12k, good ones £15k.

The Omega/Carlton commands higher values: '£12k-14k for even a shoddy car,' advises Dave Kember of the Autobahnstormers club (www.autobahnstormers.org). Rust can be a problem under the plastic bodywork, while brake calipers, clutch mechanism and timing chains are the three watch words of the service record. It's better to pay a mid-twenties price for a top-notch car

than to tackle all these issues.

Buying cheap isn't the way to happiness with the Bentley. 'A £5k smoker will give you grief,' warns Ray Hillier. 'Rust can be a problem in the lower bodywork, though all the panels are available.' He says a relatively high-mileage but tidy car can be yours for £10k, while £16k buys a good mid-mileage example, with the best making it into the twenties.



Mercedes' Q-car was launched as the 500E but renamed E500 when cosmetic changes included clear indicator lenses and a more integrated grille



Bentley Turbo R is even more akin to its heavyweight forebear, differentiated from the Mulsanne only by rear badging and a body-coloured radiator grille surround

The Omega is the most overtly sporting of the group, that deep front bonnet, louvred bonnet and thick boot spoiler marking it apart from its sedate Vauxhall stablemates. Conversely, the Mercedes is the ultimate Q-car; so understated it's almost in denial, though you do eventually notice the wider hips and bigger rubber. Yet the car with virtually no bodywork changes represented the most radical shift in marque persona among these four: the Bentley.

Bentley's 90-degree V8 had first appeared in the Silver Cloud II of 1959 but more than two decades later the design was robust enough to take the higher induction pressures imposed by turbocharging. Engine gaskets were beefed up and new pistons were made with steel struts cast into them below the gudgeon pins to prevent distortion in the skirts. Inlet valve quality was improved and heavier coil springs fitted. Final drive shaft diameters were also increased. Where Lotus had used two units, Bentley used Garret's largest turbine coupled to a comparatively small supercharger plus a four-barrel Solex carburettor (fuel injection followed in 1987).

Market research indicated a proposed performance Bentley was good for at least 150 sales a year and to meet this demand Bentley decided to create a performance variant of its standard model, the Mulsanne. In a decade spellbound by the word 'turbo' Bentley saw fit to set its new beast apart merely by painting its radiator grille the same colour as the body and adding a small rectangular badge to the boot lid.

While the makers of the other cars featured here were creating new markets or rediscovering identities, BMW appeared to be simply taking care of business – it had been making mid-sized sporting saloons for years with the 1988 E34 evolving from the E12 Five Series of 1972. But the M series cars, created at the Motorsport facility at Garching, were set up in performance even by BMW's high standards.

In essence the M5 was indeed an E34, sharing the same floor plan, subframe, MacPherson strut front suspension and semi-trailing arm rear set-up, but almost every component was upgraded. It had oil-filled Bilstein dampers, 25 per cent firmer springs, thicker anti-roll bars, thicker diameter drive shafts and a beefed-up differential.

The hand-assembled, double-overhead cam six-cylinder S38 engine, although a derivative of the M88 fitted in the hallowed 1978 M1 and first M5CSi, was an almost all new unit, first installed in the M5 as a

310bhp 3.6-litre but bored and stroked out three years later in an upgrade that brought it up to 340bhp.

Doesn't all this talk of uprated engines and tweaked suspension make you want to find a two-seater body to put them in? The words of Lotus Omega owner Michael Wright pull that thought up short: 'I got married.' Well, one way of getting nearly 400bhp past the missus is to sugar-coat it with a practical body, though his wife wasn't against sports cars in principle: 'But we had kids – we wanted a bigger car.'

It's true; even comparatively roomy GTs like the Ferrari 400 don't offer quite the same access and space. Climbing into the Omega you discover that the cabin is as determined to impress as the exterior. There are swathes of soft Connolly leather, thick-set Recaro-style seats for those in front and a decent and comfortable space in the rear. The only let-down is the instrument binnacle, which brings sudden and unsettling associations with your mother's Vauxhall Astra.

Turn the key and the Omega is still playing the executive family car as it moves away calmly with no fuss. As the road unfolds it shows great poise and fluidity as the speed builds; there's a beautiful linearity to the way the turbochargers spool up, engaging almost seamlessly. The car is more likely to jolt if you change too low in the rev range, spoiling its stride. Stay with the gears up to about 6000rpm, then flip through the gate and the ZR1 box rewards with an unspoiled transition of power. By now you're almost into Ferrari Testarossa territory, taking long sweepers and quite tight bends with a disarming poise and neutrality. It's a terrific road-burner, and the flat-out fastest of the group. Joe Ellis, who runs a business providing parts and servicing for these cars, has raced his own on the 90-mile Silver State Classic in Nevada. 'It did it in 33 minutes,' he says. 'It was the sixth fastest out of 200 runners, and the fastest four-door.'

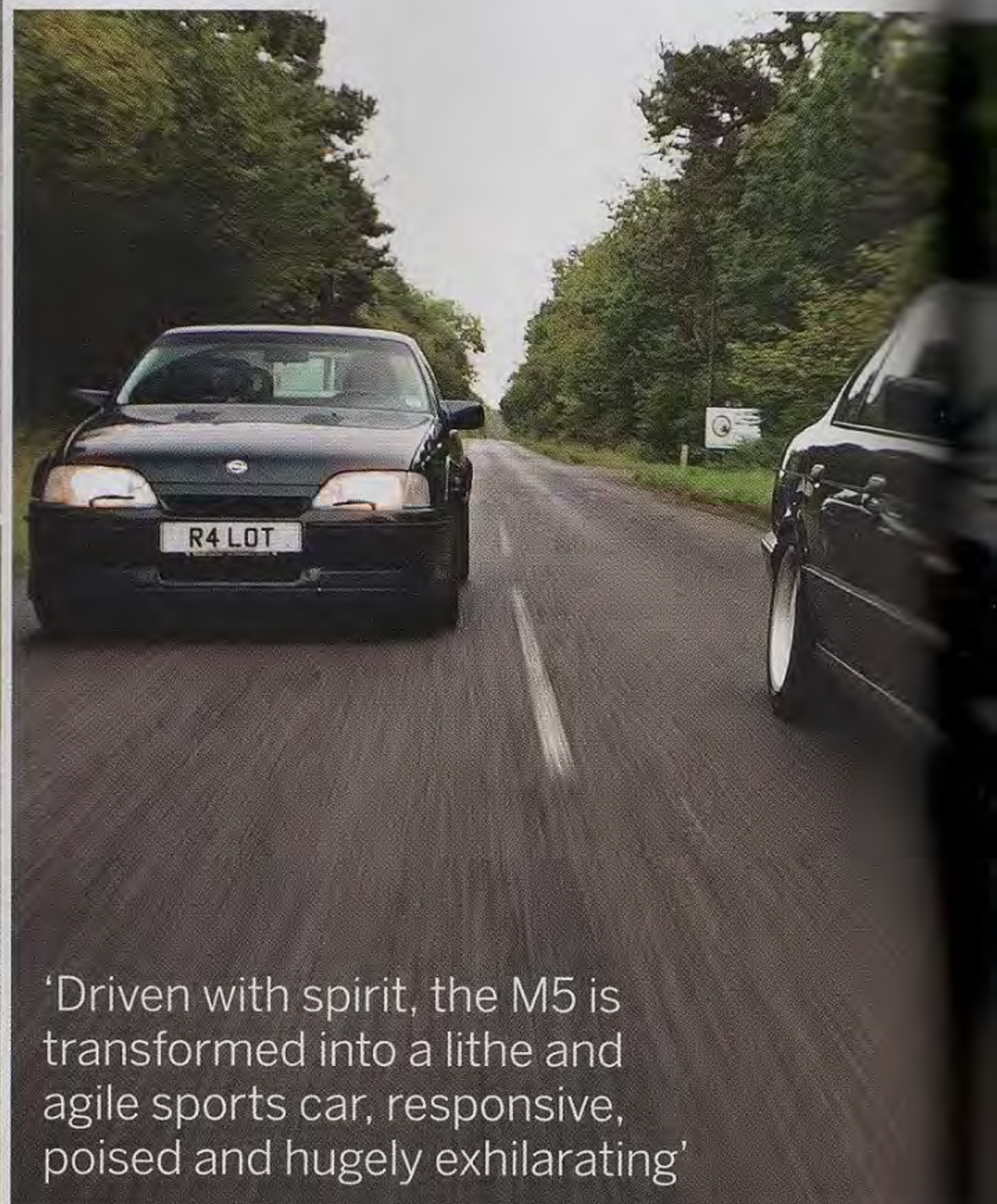
Getting behind the wheel of the Mercedes brings the realisation that all these cars emphasise different aspects of a given theme. The Lotus is about going fast, the Mercedes is about making rapid progress. Maybe it's the four-speed automatic, leaving the car to make decisions – very good ones as it turns out, but still you're one level removed from the action. Even so your mind had better be on the road ahead because pushing your right foot down reels in the horizon rapidly. Kickdown sends the tachometer needle snapping round the dial, bouncing off the



BMW M5 outwardly resembles the E34 on which it's based, but almost every component was upgraded.



Lotus Omega, with deep front apron, louvred bonnet, big boot spoiler and aggressively low stance, is the most in-your-face option here



'Driven with spirit, the M5 is transformed into a lithe and agile sports car, responsive, poised and hugely exhilarating'

redline for another go as the car bolts forward. The V8 snarls into a muffled rasping growl, always muted but rich, insistent and determined. In the corners it feels as planted and flat as the Omega, if lacking that final edge, but the Mercedes – with its sober black leather interior and real Recaros – is more research physicist in a hurry than four guys blasting through Arizona.

The BMW is the meeting point between these two, its cabin accoutrements more sportingly lean than the others. The 'M'-script cloth, hugging seats and all-black console all promise dash and fire, but at low speeds you're not feeling the 'M'-ness; it could be a 525. In the Omega you're soon aware of the car's capability – not surprising considering around 70 per cent of its power is available at 2000rpm. Even the Mercedes seems to have a latent menace down low – a big-capacity V8 thing. In the Bavarian you could go along for ages, the car just going through the motions until you decide to do something about it and put your foot down. *Then* it comes alive, because that S38 engine loves to rev. At more than 4000rpm the straight-six turns and burns; sonorous, torquey, animated. With these tall gears you spin the motor out to 6000-7000rpm before snicking through the Getrag five-speed.

Driven with spirit, the M5 is transformed into a lithe and agile sports car, responsive, poised and hugely exhilarating. Its throttle response is the best of the group and the fact that its raw power is less than the Lotus also means you drive it a harder.

The Bentley appeals to the driver who wants pace and serious luxury. 'Just because I want good performance, it doesn't necessarily mean I want my arse 2in off the road or my kids having to sit with their knees up by their ears,' says Richard Olde, who owns a Turbo similar to this one. His words could apply to the whole group.

Roomy and practical though it may be, its intention is speed *and* handling: turbo technology and old-school motor make a great team. Floor the throttle and the great car growls under its breath, throwing itself down the road with alarming rapidity. When you steer into a corner you're not waiting for the body to catch up with the chassis' intention – it moves as a purposeful solid block, the weight and centre of gravity properly placed to make bends a delight. It stays pretty flat and grips the road stubbornly, with steering that let lets you know that minor adjustments are actually noted by the suspension, which itself



has to be working pretty hard to allow the Bentley to take lines that would flatter much lighter machines.

What all of these cars emphasise is that a full four-seater can be a fine-handling driver's car – no excuses. But would running costs put you off owning any of them?

'The Turbo is a pretty rugged car that will keep going despite huge abuse,' says Ray Hillier of Rolls-Royce and Bentley specialist Hillier Hill (www.hillierhill.com). 'Budget £2000-3000 a year to look after a Turbo R.' That's a typical figure across the group. Hillier adds: 'One year it might only be a £500 standard service, but a job like the hydraulic rear suspension service (every 60,000 miles) will cost around £2k. The good thing is that people are making parts for them – you can get everything you need and plenty of people know how to work on them.'

It's a similar story for the Mercedes. 'They were based on the W124, which was bulletproof,' explains David Bradley, a technician at Mercedes service specialist Andy Gayle (www.andygayle.com). 'The rest of the parts, like the engine and gearbox, are R129.'

Carlton/Omega buyers don't have it so easy. 'Some engines suffered from cracking around the cylinderhead bolts,' says Joe Ellis. 'Also, the pivot mechanism on the clutch bell housing was susceptible to snapping. It was beefed up on later cars. In fact, there were updates and improvements even while they were being made.'

Problems can be exacerbated by a lack of parts. 'There weren't that many made,' says Ellis, whose determination to keep his own Lotus

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Carlton going prompted him to form his business, Agamemnon (www.racecar.com/lotuscarlton). 'The market for spares is limited and they're not that well supported by Vauxhall. What spares can be got are often at supercar parts prices.' Whereas the Bentley and to a large extent the Mercedes can be serviced by regular garages, the Omega owner needs to know a model specialist and, where necessary, those who can remanufacture parts. (Ellis has the moulds for the body kits.)

The M5 has issues of its own. 'The E34 M5 did everything exceptionally well,' says Stuart Draper of BMW specialist Munich Legends (www.munichlegends.co.uk), 'but they were a lot more complex than other 'M' cars and there isn't a lot of technical information out there.' Like the Omega, quite a few parts are peculiar to the model. 'The suspension was hugely modified,' Draper adds.

Some parts can give quite a shock even to experienced technicians. For example the gearbox was assembled in such a way that, once stripped, it can't be rebuilt in the same way. 'It's almost as if the components were heat-shunk,' says Draper. 'Some of the bearings were integral to the housing. Most specialists won't warrant a rebuild.'

The engine too can throw some monumental wobblers. 'There were quite a few failures – putting a con-rod through the cylinder block for instance.' He says those that reach high mileages have probably gone past the danger period, but adds that many were scrapped or simply run into the ground because of the paucity or expense of parts and well-informed servicing.

But none of the above will deter the true pilgrim. All these cars have the character and abilities to make any owner feel rewarded in their stewardship – so long as you go in with your eyes open as to what the real trade-offs to practical performance are, and which car offers what combination of qualities. In all of them is the road burner, point-to-point sprinter, intercontinental express and seaside special, but it's only in driving these cars that you'll realise where their balance lies and it's out on the road that you'll discover which is your alter ego. **CC**

Thanks to: Alan Archer for the BMW M5; Michael Wright for the Lotus Omega; Ray Hillier for the Bentley Turbo R; Jonathan Aucott for the Mercedes-Benz E500

**1991 MERCEDES E500**

Engine 4973cc, V8, dohc per bank, Bosch LH fuel injection **Power and torque** 326bhp @ 5700rpm; 354lb ft @ 3900rpm **Transmission** Four-speed automatic, rear-wheel drive **Steering** Rack-and-pinion **Suspension** Front: independent, MacPherson struts, wishbones, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar. Rear: independent, multi-link, hydraulic self-levelling, coil springs, telescopic dampers **Brakes** Vented discs front and rear **Weight** 1781kg (3919lb) **Performance** Top speed: 155mph; 0-60mph: 6.3sec **Fuel consumption** 21mpg **Cost New** £57,000 **Value now** £9000-18,000

**1992 LOTUS OMEGA**

Engine 3615cc, in-line six-cylinder, GMP4 fuel injection, two Garrett AiResearch T25 turbochargers **Power and torque** 377bhp @ 5200rpm; 419lb ft @ 4200rpm **Transmission** Six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **Steering** Rack-and-pinion **Suspension** Front: independent, MacPherson struts incorporating twin-tube dampers, anti-roll bar. Rear: independent, multi-link coil springs, hydraulic, self-levelling, twin-tube dampers **Brakes** Vented discs front and rear **Weight** 1655kg (3641lb) **Performance** Top speed: 175mph; 0-60mph: 5.1sec **Fuel consumption** 24mpg **Cost new** £48,000 **Value now** £12,000-24,000

**1992 BENTLEY TURBO R**

Engine 6750cc, V8, Bosch KE-Jetronic fuel injection, Garrett AiResearch T04 turbocharger **Power and torque** 330bhp @ 4000rpm; 450lb ft @ 3800rpm **Transmission** Four-speed automatic, rear-wheel drive **Steering** Rack-and-pinion **Suspension** Front: independent, coil springs, telescopic dampers, wishbones, anti-roll bar. Rear: independent, self-levelling, coil springs, semi-trailing arms, Panhard rod stiffener, three-stage telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **Brakes** Vented discs front, discs rear **Weight** 2234kg (4926lb) **Performance** Top speed: 143mph; 0-60mph: 6.5sec **Fuel consumption** 15mpg **Cost new** £91,000 **Value now** £10,000-27,000

**1993 BMW M5 (E34)**

Engine 3795cc, in-line six-cylinder, dohc, Bosch Motronic fuel injection **Power and torque** 340bhp @ 6900rpm; 295lb ft @ 4750rpm **Transmission** Five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **Steering** Rack-and-pinion **Suspension** Front: independent, MacPherson struts, coil over telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar. Rear: independent, semi-trailing arms, self-levelling, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **Brakes** Vented discs front and rear **Weight** 1727kg (3800lb) **Performance** Top speed: 165mph; 0-60mph: 5.6 sec **Fuel consumption** 21mpg **Cost new** n/a **Value now** £10,000-14,000