

HIGH-CLASS HOLD ALL

Mercedes estates offer a winning blend of style, status and practicality, none more so than the W124, writes David Sutherland

There are plenty of strong arguments to back the case that the Mercedes E-Class was the car that made estates cool. Certainly, before it arrived in 1986, there was precious little else that would lug the load and look the part. The shortlist was the W124's predecessor, the W123 T Series, and the Audi 100/200 Avant. Okay, let's be generous and put the Volvo 760 in there too. The Citroen CX was interesting but weird to drive and horrendous to repair, and the Peugeot 505 too staid on the outside and too cheap on the inside.

So the W124 didn't invent the posh estate car. But it surely re-defined it. The mid-1980s was the dawning of the outdoors lifestyle era and didn't all that riding and sailing paraphernalia fit a treat in the back of the new Merc 'wagon. Down to the country on Friday night, back in the executive car park Monday morning, suitably streaked with designer mud.

It distanced you nicely from the Golf GTI-toting hoorays and the noveau in their BMWs, and was the wagon of choice for the restrained and well-heeled. Its depreciation was snail-like and it was pretty good as company wheels too, as in those happy days of lesser car perk taxes, you could run a 2.0-litre W124 estate and pay no more tax than you would on a 1.6-litre Escort.

Can it really be 18 years since the W124 estate began cluttering up the fancier streets in town and the double garages out in the sticks? Despite there having been two more E-Classes since, the car still looks surprisingly fresh. And there are probably two reasons: first, you rarely see a rusty or down-at-heel one, and second, the estate is, to most eyes, a better looker than the saloon it was derived from.

The best, and most recent W124 Ts (1996) go for up to £8000, the values of these cars supported by the strong demand for the successor, the double-headlamped W210. But even at this price the right car can be a sensible buy, because it will still have a long life ahead of it, six-figure mileage or not.

DESIGN, ENGINEERING

Flushed from the success of its first full-scale production estate car, the 1983 123 T, Mercedes got the W124 wagon into production less than a year after the saloon, launching it in early summer 1986. Unlike the previous W123 T, this estate had been planned from the outset, and was said to be slightly more aerodynamic than the saloon.

As with the W124 saloon, there were lots of clever things to admire about the T. Innovative safety equipment included advanced passenger cell rigidity and electronically tensioned seatbelts. There was an electrically adjustable steering-wheel and front headrests, and a rear headrest that flipped down at the touch of a button on the fascia. And how about memory adjustable front seats and that single, eccentric sweep wiper? Impressive for 1986.

The petrol engine line-up was 200T (carburettored 2-litre four-cylinder, 109bhp), 230TE (fuel-injected 2.3-litre, 136bhp) and 300TE (3-litre straight-six, 188bhp). To begin with there was one diesel, the 250TD, the five-cylinder non-turbo diesel giving a modest 90bhp. Mercedes did build a 3-litre turbodiesel W124, but for political reasons (fuel economy averages) this went to the US only for the next two years. Thankfully, perhaps, we in the UK didn't get the 75bhp 200TD. The 'TD' badge, incidentally, can be confusing, because as far as the UK market is concerned, it never denoted a turbodiesel engine.

**"SO THE W124
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Tony Oberhelman Trust



Clockwise from above: End-of-line E320 estate bettered only by very rare E36 AMG model (below).





☉ All cars used Mercedes' excellent four-speed auto shifter with standard S and economy E modes, the latter changing up earlier to save fuel. A five-speed manual gearbox could be ordered on any model, and although this option was largely ignored, it did in fact give a worthwhile improvement in fuel economy.

The Mercedes T was one of the first big estates with a sophisticated chassis. The rear suspension it shared with the saloon was a development of the multi-linked rear suspension first introduced on the 190E four years earlier, and securely located the axle and minimised camber change. Self-levelling was standard. This still being the conservative 'old days' at Stuttgart, steering was heavily damped recirculating ball.

The T Series for this country didn't quite parallel the saloon, the six-cylinder 260E and 300D diesel not being offered. But one thing they did have in common was an equipment level that was, even by mid-1980s standards, modest, ensuring that an already expensive estate got a lot more out by the time it hit the road.

You'd feel a bit poor if you ordered your fancy wagon without alloy wheels, anti-

Above: Unmistakable profile belongs to one of the most popular Merc estates.

lock brakes, electric sunroof, cruise control and metallic paint but these items would bump up the price of the £20,500 300TE by over £3000. And then you had to buy the radio, and also decide if you needed the rear-facing third row of seats. But at least a two-thirds split-folding rear seat was thrown in for all models.

MODEL EVOLUTION

The W124 estate's steady development began just a few months after launch, when in October 1986 the central locking became multi-point (in other words, worked from any door), and ASD (Automatic Locking Differential) became optional. This was essentially a more sophisticated, electronically regulated version of the traditional limited-slip rear differential, giving a more progressive, and complete lock-up, and allowing each rear wheel to better exploit available grip.

Early 1988 saw a revised rear wiper system, and later that year it was goodbye to the 200T and hello to the 200TE, its injected engine up 9bhp to 118. At that

point, anti-lock brakes became standard across the range.

With the late 1980s, amid the peak of the on-road four-wheel-drive craze (you could even buy a 4WD Cavalier 2.0L), Mercedes introduced its own system, 4-Matic. In the UK it was available on the 300TE (and also the 300E saloon), a five-speed manual version being theoretically available as well as the four-speed automatic.

What made 4-Matic different to most other 4WD systems of the time was that while permanently engaged to all wheels, the Mercedes hardware only engaged the front wheels when the rear wheels began to lose grip. This was done via wheel sensors (those serving the anti-lock brakes), and a two-stage clutch set-up.

Depending on surface conditions, 4-Matic, when engaged, is in one of three modes: drive to the front engaged, but differentials unlocked; centre diff locked as traction reduces; rear differential locked up, for extreme conditions.

"THE 'T' WAS ONE OF THE FIRST BIG ESTATES WITH A SOPHISTICATED CHASSIS"



It was a complicated system, adding £6000 to the price of the car. However the driver had no Audi quattro-style diff levers to play with, merely a light on the fascia to advise that the front wheels were engaged.

The benefit, Mercedes claimed, of its 'intelligent' system, was that 4WD only kicked in when it was needed, thus minimising the penalties of heavier fuel consumption and loss of steering precision.

The 1990 season saw a facelift, these cars recognisable by the addition of the same kind of lower body mouldings attached mid-term to the 190 and S-Class cars. Some people like them, others say they clutter the shape. The interior trim was also tweaked, and redesigned seats fitted.

The revamp brought two new models. The 300TE-24 arrived as the go-faster version of the 300TE, its 24v engine (from the 300SL-24) developing 23 percent more power, at 231bhp. The diesels had been cleaned up recently, and at last a 300TD estate joined the 109bhp 300D saloon that had been around since '85.

It was at this point that the Sportline pack appeared on the options list, consisting of lower-profile tyres (205/55s instead of 195/65s, on 7x15in alloys), lower and

firmer suspension, and more direct steering. To this you could add the Sportline interior package sports seats, leather bound steering wheel (smaller, at 390mm diameter), and hide-trimmed gearknob.

Another important year in W124 evolution was 1992, when the rest of the petrol engines went four-valves-per-cylinder, the cars arriving in the UK in early 1993. The original M102 family 2.0 and 2.3-litre units were replaced by the M111 16-valvers, with power rising 12 and 10 percent respectively to 136 and 150bhp.

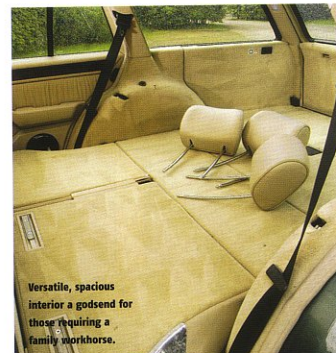
The 300TE was effectively replaced by the 193bhp, 2.8-litre 280TE (M104 engine), while the 300TE-24 gave way to the 320TE; with 220bhp, its engine was less powerful than the 3-litre unit, but it did have 15 percent more torque, 229lb/ft at 3,750rpm.

In 1993 the final evolution of the W124 estates took place. In common with the saloons, the grille and bonnet were made more similar to other Mercedes model lines, which meant the star was now mounted on the bonnet rather than the grille, and the grille itself was no longer fully chromed. The badging changed, the 'E' moving to the front of the numbering, and the 'T' disappearing. It was actually at this point that the W124 became known as the E-Class, even if we now use the title to describe the entire model generation.

By this stage the five-cylinder 2.5-litre diesel had been dropped, but still Mercedes-Benz UK refused to give us the turbocharged 3.0-litre option that would finally have provided reasonable diesel performance. However, with the diesels going over to four-valve heads, we did get the new 134bhp version of the E300D.

PERFORMANCE VARIANT

Saving the fastest W124 of all for last, Mercedes introduced the E36 AMG estate in 1993. Built by AMG, which Mercedes



Versatile, spacious interior a godsend for those requiring a family workhorse.

W124 ESTATE MILESTONES

MAY 1986

T range launched in UK, 200T, 230TE, 250TD, 300TE

APRIL 1988

300TE 4-Matic launched

SEPTEMBER 1988

Carburettor 200T replaced by injected 200TE

SEPTEMBER 1989

Range facelifted, 300TE-24, 300TD launched. Sportline equipment available

JANUARY 1993

16-valve 200TE and 220TE, 24-valve 280TE and 320TE introduced

AUGUST 1993

New badging, E36 AMG and updated E300TD launched

FEBRUARY 1996

Production ends

Well-equipped E320 interior is built to endure seven-figure mileages.



would later take over, the E36's 24-valve 3.6-litre engine produced 269bhp and 284lb/ft torque. A conservative output, maybe, but it did give you the chance to buy a tuned car and still get the Mercedes warranty, and at a touch over £47,000, it wasn't badly priced by Mercedes standards. It was quite a subtle looker, the visible racy bits limited to the 17-inch AMG alloys and lowered Sportline suspension.

After 10 years, W124 production ended in February 1996. A total of 340,503 T3 had been built, a sixth of all W124s. The W210 was waiting in the wings, and the estate version would go on to be as coveted as the W124 had been.

DRIVING THE W124 ESTATE

The first thing to appreciate is that the W124, saloon or estate, is not a sports car, and was never intended to be. Its rival, the BMW 5-Series is more responsive, more tactile.

What the W124 offers is the classic,

W124 T SERIES SPECIFICATIONS

Four-cylinder petrol

MERCEDES	200TE (1988-92)*	200TE (1992-96)	220TE	230TE
ENGINE	1,997cc	1,997cc	2,199cc	2,299cc
POWER	118bhp@5,100rpm	136bhp@5,500rpm	155bhp@5,500rpm	136bhp@5,100rpm
TORQUE	134lb/ft@3,500rpm	140lb/ft@4,000rpm	151lb/ft@4,000rpm	151lb/ft@3,500rpm
0-62MPH	12.5 sec	11.5 sec	10.6 sec	10.4 sec
TOP SPEED	110mph	125mph	131mph	124mph

* Carb 200T (pre-1988) has 109bhp

Six-cylinder petrol

MERCEDES	280TE	300TE	300TE-24V	320TE
ENGINE	2,796cc	2,962cc	3,796cc	3,199cc
POWER	193bhp@5,500rpm	188bhp@5,700rpm	231bhp@6,300rpm	220bhp@5,500rpm
TORQUE	229lb/ft@3,750rpm	192lb/ft@4,400rpm	200lb/ft@4,600rpm	229lb/ft@3,750rpm
0-62MPH	8.9 sec	8.3 sec	8.1 sec	8.0 sec
TOP SPEED	133mph	140mph	145mph	138mph

Diesel

MERCEDES	250TD	300TD*
ENGINE	2,497cc	2,996cc
POWER	90bhp@4,600rpm	109bhp@4,600rpm
TORQUE	114lb/ft@2,800rpm	136lb/ft@2,800rpm
0-62MPH	17 sec	14.1 sec
TOP SPEED	106mph	109mph

* Post-1993 cars have 134bhp

TRANSMISSION

Four-speed auto, five-speed manual; 300TE E-Matic has self-engaging 4WD
CHASSIS Front suspension McPherson struts, anti-roll bar
Rear suspension Multi-link axle, coil springs, anti-roll bar, self-levelling
Steering Power-assisted recirculating ball
Brakes Discs all round
DIMENSIONS Length 188in Wheelbase 110in Height 59in
Weight 1390-1590kg



relaxed Mercedes-Benz drive, where just being in the car makes you feel good. It's the solid quality of the interior (Mercedes just doesn't make 'em like this anymore), the great driving position and the view down the bonnet. Not to mention the respectful looks the car attracts, even an old one.

Part of the attraction of the W124's interior is its simplicity, even its sparseness. Perhaps a similar superior air to a fine old country house with minimal, but well chosen furnishings.

Judged solely as an estate car, the T lacks the ballroom-sized accommodation of the big Citroens and Peugeots of the 1980s, but this is chiefly because of the slanted tailgate. With a flat floor when the rear seats are folded, along with a bumper level sill, the 34.8 cu ft load space is very usable. The spare wheel is mounted at the side of the loadbay rather than underneath the floor, and this does reduce the width slightly, but that arrangement was essential to allow the third, foldaway seat.

There should be a pull-back security blind, which incorporates roller netting



Above: Classic eight-hole alloy an option on facelifted cars.
Top: Sure-footed handling is a W124 hallmark.

Below: Expect big numbers to appear on these dials.



preferred one. Some would find it painfully slow, but it was notably quiet and smooth at a time when most diesels were still pretty rough and noisy.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Mercedes engines have a reputation for longevity, but they do seem to suffer cylinder-head gasket problems, according to one of London's leading experts in this era of Mercedes, Wandsworth-based Richard Miles.

The M102 two-valve, four-cylinder engines suffer rotting gaskets, while on the 16-valve M111 units, the oil from the high-pressure feed which lubricates the cylinder head can seep through the gasket and dribble down the side of the engine; the same problem affects the six-cylinder units.

In both cases there's an easy check: look in the radiator header tank to see if oil is present. "Sometimes you can get blobs of oil floating round," warns Miles.

Otherwise the engines tend to be reliable, though Miles is worried by some neglectful owners of older cars who don't seem to think that oil and filter changes are necessary. He reckons, incidentally, that the injected 2.0-litre engine is more likely to give uninterrupted service than the original carburettor unit. "Carburettors are usually more trouble than fuel-injection where Mercedes-Benzes are concerned," he says.

"THE SIX-CYLINDER MODELS ARE SMOOTHER, SWEETER AND OF COURSE FASTER"

The transmissions, automatic or manual, are generally trouble-free, though it's worth listening out for clunks when moving from forward to reverse gear and vice versa, as this can indicate worn rear differential mountings or worn propshaft couplings, or both.

There are various chassis issues, usually coming to light at about the 10-year stage. The rear suspension arms have a

collection of rubber bushes that can rot after years covered in dirt and salt; if you notice a slight self-steering from the rear, the bushes need to be replaced. And at about the same time, the rear wheel bearings may go, a rubbing noise being the tell-tale sign.

The front outer suspension ball joints can seize due to corrosion, and the front springs can actually break at the bottom, mainly on the more nose-heavy 300TEs. Neither condition makes the car feel any different, and indeed might not even fail an MOT but the problems can be spotted when a wheel is removed. "There are probably quite a lot of cars driving round with these two problems," says Miles. Another common breakage is the bracketing locating the front anti-roll bar, the cure involving welding in reinforced brackets.

The self-levelling unit for the rear suspension is another possible trouble spot. Hydraulic fluid maintains ride height, this being pumped to the rear by means of an engine-mounted pump and hydraulic fluid reservoir, while the suspension movement is achieved by Citroen-like gas-filled spheres.

There are two possible problems: firstly the reservoir can become contaminated with engine oil which has found its way into the pump, and secondly the spheres can leak, leaving the car with no suspension travel and therefore an almost solid-feeling rear end.

One of the most impressive aspects of the W124 is the bodywork's rust resistance. You might see some on the wheelarches of the very first cars, but otherwise little else.

There's one possible problem on the tailgate, that being the electrically-operated catch that pulls it shut. Repeated slamming of the tailgate eventually breaks it, making closing quite difficult, but as the unit is quite expensive, it's something owners might not feel like having fixed.

PRICES

When you first start looking at W124 T prices you may be surprised at how low some are. Even though the estate is worth more than the saloon, these old Mercs are practically being given away.

The cheapest model is, naturally, the 200T/TE, and a £1,500 spend gives a choice of pre-facelift (late 1989) cars. Six-cylinder cars of the same age cost more, but not a great deal more, and £2,000 should be enough for a 300TE.

The first of the re-badged cars from 1993-94 are generally in the £3,000-£5,000 range, again with only limited differentials between high and low models – about £300 between a 1994 E220 and

WHAT YOU'LL PAY

UNDER £1,500 1986/87 200T, 230TE

£1,500-£3,000 Tidier versions of above, also 1986/87 300TE

£3,000-£5,000 1990 facelifted cars and 1993 rebadged cars

£5,000-£7,500 1995/96 cars

£7,500-£10,000 Top condition E280, and E320, possibly E36 AMG



Mercedes made 340,000 W124 estates and most are still going very strong.

an E320. The decidedly rare 300TE 4-Matic fetches no more than £300 more than the 300TE.

Just about the most you should spend on a W124 T would be £7,500, for a 1995 E300D, a late oil-burner being worth roughly £500 more than the E320. Any car above this level would have to be something exceptional, in near mint condition and with low mileage, or perhaps an E36 AMG, this being so rare in the UK that valuation depends on the individual car.

With W124 prices so modest, equipment levels don't make that big a difference, so aim for the top here. A lot of 200s and 220s were a drab spec, with cloth and

steel wheels, but equally a lot came with plenty of toys. Generally speaking, the six-cylinder cars were better appointed, so there's little need to accept one without leather, along with the excellent electric seat adjustment. Air-conditioning wasn't such a common option, however, probably because it cost over £2,000.

VERDICT

There are plenty of good reasons for buying a W124 T, and not many for avoiding it. It's comfortable, refined and, as a bonus, a useful load carrier. It's still a lovely car to own and one that doesn't feel nearly as old-fashioned as a 20-year-old design ought to.

And few cars can be such great value when quality and life expectancy – and of course the Merc's unique aura – are taken into account. If there's a downside, it's that the high-spec models carry a lot of equipment, all of which starts to wear out as mileage mounts. But have the car independently inspected, and you aren't likely to go far wrong.



Thanks to Richard Miles at RJ Miles Technical Specialists Ltd TEL 020 8874 1588 and Karden for the loan of the E320 TEL 01732 883113