

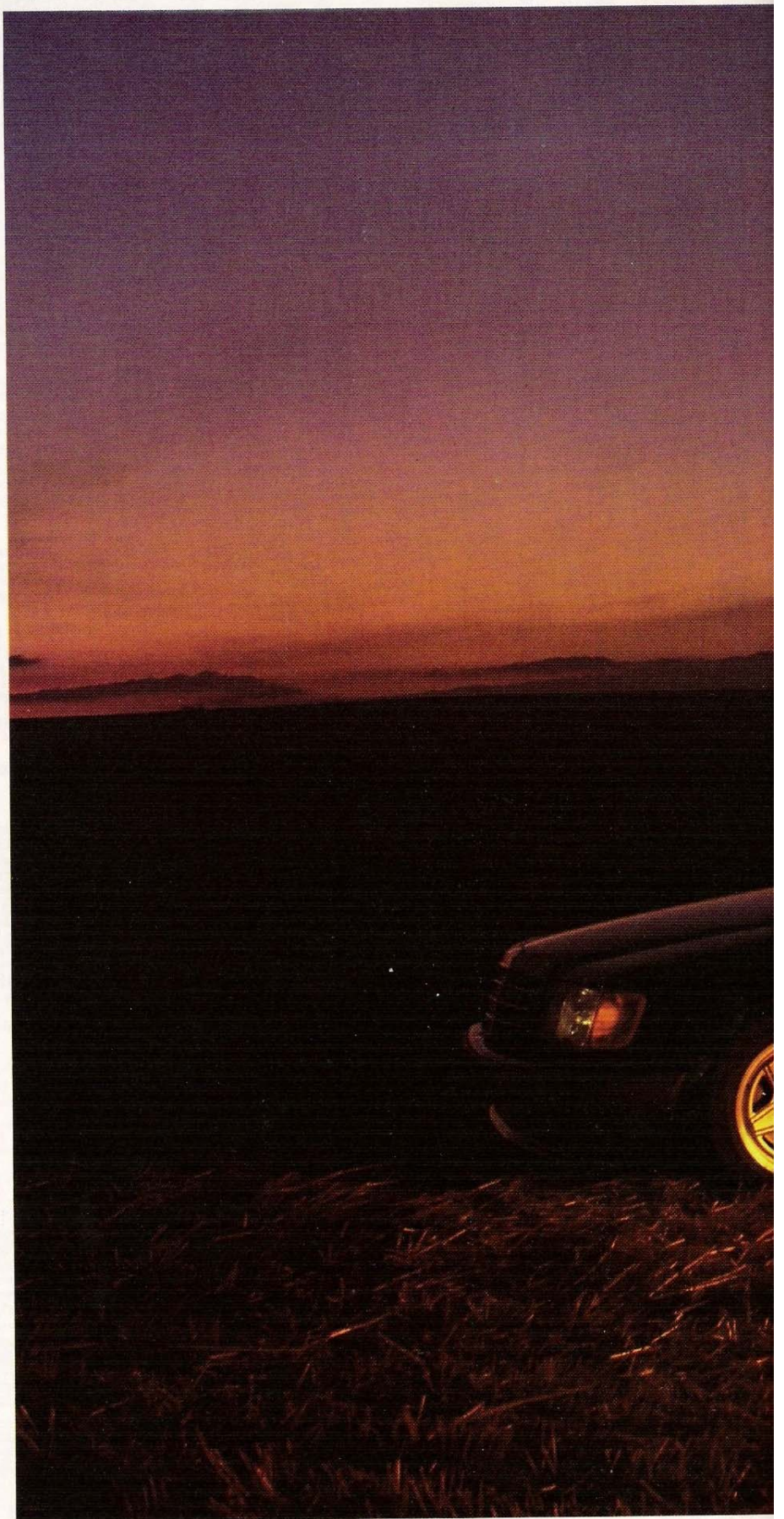
FIRE BRAND

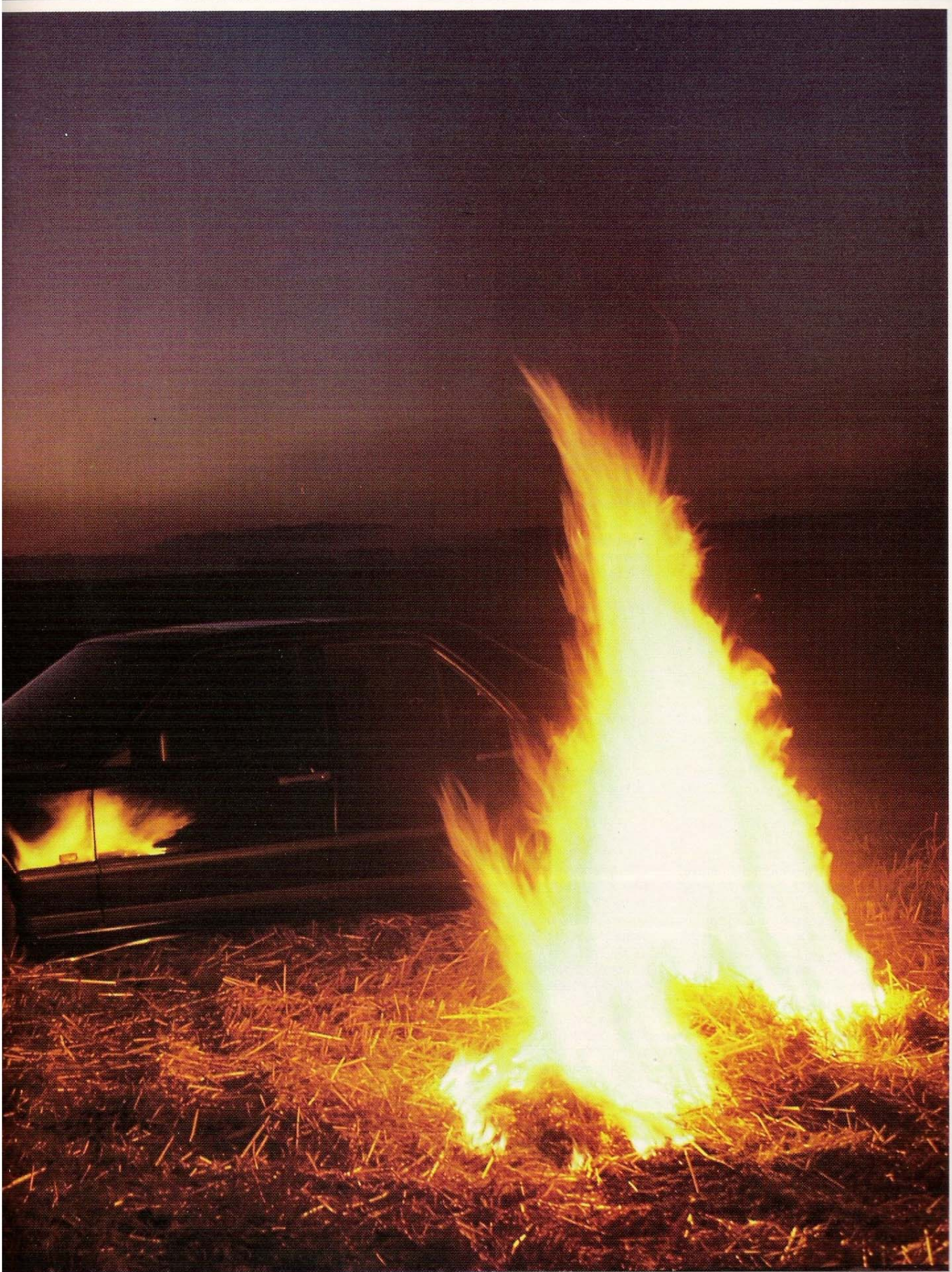
*Spend your 50grand here
if you want four-door,
five-seater civility
bolted onto performance
that is little short of
blinding/LJK Setright*

OH, BUMBLERS! YOU KNOW HOW frustrating, how infuriating they can be, the mimsers, the dodderers, the halt and the lame. You know that mounting tide of impatience and irritability when, on a road that is perhaps ordinary but not at all difficult, your ordinary comfortable gait is impeded by unreasonably slow, unbelievably slow, creepers and crawlers clogging the way. Pathetic or apathetic, they clutter the road in their undisciplined and impenetrable chaos of error and stupor, when all the time it would have been perfectly easy to get along at a decent pace, by all means moderated to suit the circumstances, but not this dopey denial of automobility.

Then one of them, too dull to maintain his obstructive station, allows a gap to open. As you see it develop, you slip the transmission lever back from D to 2, easing the throttle a trifle wider to make the transition smooth. When the anticipated chance has grown to a safe invitation, you are ready: with throttle kicked wide, your car leaps through the gap and away from the befuddled pack, out onto the clear open road ahead where it can settle to a relaxed stride –

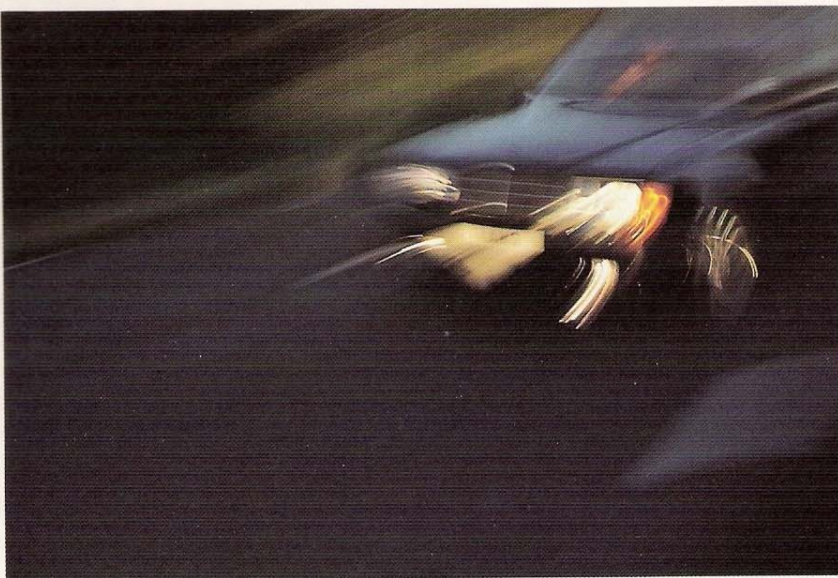
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JERRY YOUNG





AMG mods not limited to engine and body panels; suspension, drive-train and brakes are up to task imposed; but lights are feeble

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nothing exceptional but twice as fast as those ditherers left behind – your freedom and ease won by a little spurt of acceleration that has taken only 10sec.

You can forgive those bumbling sluggards now. You are admittedly driving a four-door saloon, not a sports car; but what liberated it from that crowd was not its original suave six-cylinder engine. This one is a 5.6litre V8, with four camshafts, 32valves, 360bhp, and a price tag which makes these or any other numbers appear trivial. What is not at all trivial is the car's ability to sprint from 60 to 120mph in 10seconds flat: a 911 Carrera would take 20seconds, a Countach at least 12, and even a good motorcycle could need eight. The thought that a current grand prix F1 turbocar passes from 60 to 120 in about three seconds may restore a sense of proportion; but if you had had a sense of proportion you would not have bought a car like this in the first place.

This is one for those whose terms are absolute, not relative. It is for those customers who want the latest, the fastest, the costliest, the most distinctive, the most far-fetched. There are plenty of them, it seems – notably around Manchester, as well as in the London area. Some of them do actually drive quite quickly, some of them drive quite well, but for most of them the main cause for pride is simply the ownership (or the demonstration of the means for ownership) of the most extravagant car that without spared expense can contrive.

Stratton, the dealer enjoying the Wilmslow mandate from Rolls-Royce,



Ferrari, Honda and Daimler-Benz, caters for that custom with all the punctilio it demands. The showrooms, the service areas, the personnel, all are spotless, as is every car that emerges from its portals. The service is equally impeccable, tailored to the desires of each several customer: if (as has happened) a client's idea of a demonstration is to be driven in the car along the King's Road while he examines from the passenger's seat the reactions of the Chelsea populace, to see whether the car really attracts admiring looks, then such a demonstration can be arranged.

If it be the inside rather than the outside of the car that is to be treated, then Stratton has craftsmen who are competent to do the most beautiful and fitting things with all manner of woods and woollens and hides, to install cabinets and computers, telephones and television. The things they do to make the interior of a Mercedes-Benz look less perfunctory are exceeded only by those whereby that of a Honda can be made to look less plebeian.

When it comes to mechanical alterations, virtually all the work is on Mercedes-Benz, using the hardware and experience licensed to Stratton by AMG. I am not sure what those initials represent, but the original 1967 partners in the business (Hans-Werner Aufrecht, an ex-employee of Daimler-Benz, and Erhard Melcher) doubtless contribute the first two.

It is easy to accuse AMG of excess, but every commercial product is susceptible to improvement, and every customer working with absolute standards and cash on the nail is perfectly entitled to his own interpretation of what constitutes an improvement.

There must be some who reckon that what the W124 saloon really needs is to have its elegant in-line six-cylinder engine replaced by this remorselessly powerful V8. The standard 560 Mercedes-Benz V8 is clearly not good enough: AMG, with its special twin-camshaft four-valve heads, raises the maximum bmep to 170lb/in², between 4000 and 4500rpm,



and to 153 at 5500rpm where the power curve peaks. Since the standard 300E with 190bhp can reach 143mph, it ought with 360bhp to manage something like 176mph, and that might be good enough for the time being.

Actually, AMG claims to achieve that speed with its 5.0litre conversion; the 5.6, according to the brochure, will do 186. Stratton, handing over the sample for me to try, made no such claims, and in my few days of tenure I was never able to find a road empty enough in the daytime for me to exceed 150. The car did that with contemptuous ease, and with enough revs in hand to suggest that it might well go very much faster. At least I was able to check the AMG claim of 5.8sec from standstill to 100km/h: on a surface less than ideal, I managed 60mph (2.1mph less than 100km/h) in that time. That was near enough, I thought; it showed that the gearing had not been compromised for useless bottom-end acceleration at the



expense of top-end performance.

Where performance really counts is in the middle. Hitherto I have used the 60-90mph time as a convenient measure of really useful acceleration, judging that a truly fast car should do it in less than 9.0sec. This Stratton-AMG car took only 7.8sec to go from 100 to 130mph: it set completely new standards of its own, to which those of nearly all other cars seemed irrelevant – and that, I should think, is exactly what the customer expects.

I can only advise him not to choose a Friday morning, as I did, to fly up to Manchester to take delivery. The drive south on the M6 was unspeakably slow, crowded traffic never exceeding 40mph anywhere between Manchester and Coventry. For me, merely anxious to be home in Surrey in good time, it was just a shade worrying; for someone who had just disbursed over £50,000 for the privileges of ownership, to be thus denied the exercise of most of them would have

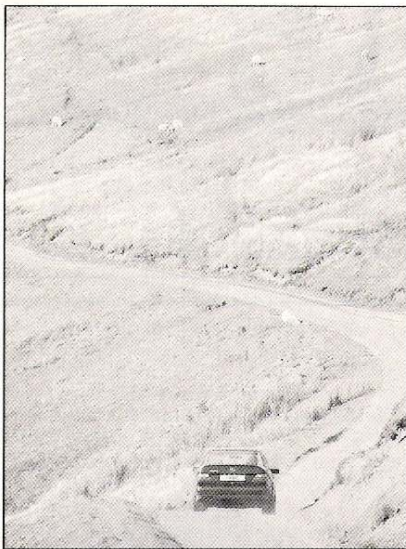


Thrust from 360bhp 32valve 5.6litre Merc V8 ensures AMG auto saloon will out-accelerate Countach from 60-120mph. Top speed is

claimed to be 186mph. Roadholding helped by vast 225/45 and 245/45 VR P700s.

Body changes are pleasingly unextravagant

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been downright mortifying.

Matters improved as I approached the latitudes of fast living, so I did reach home in time – and not without exercise of some of the roadholding with which this car was so richly endowed. It is not Ron Stratton's policy, whatever his customers may say, to allow a car's power to be increased without also giving it everything it might conceivably need in the way of suspension and running gear. This car was accordingly shod with vast Pirelli P700 tyres on light alloy wheels carefully selected for the correct offset (which is the last thing that most bolt-on operators consider), its springs and dampers were AMG specials, so were the huge brakes, and also the aerodynamic aids to stability – a little spoiler on the tail and modest skirts all around, there being none of the flaunted wheel-arch expansions to be seen on more shamelessly voluptuous styling exercises. Apologies were tendered in advance for the noisiness of the limited-slip differential, due to be replaced by the latest from AMG, a very robust torsen diff which should be better, as well as quieter.

Not that quietness is very high on the list of priorities in this conversion. The

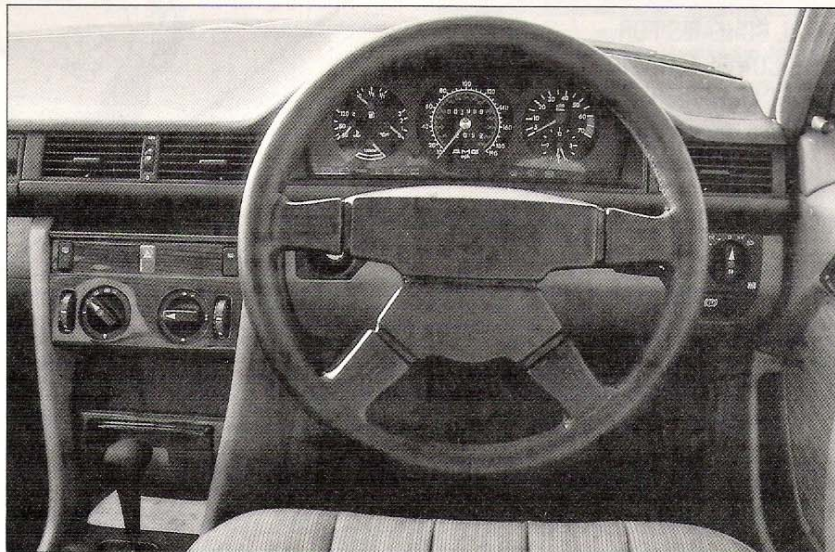
noise is never unpleasant or obtrusive, but it is there, at most a muffled bellow redolent of the power that a customer will want proclaimed. Does nobody defer to a lion until it roars? People are silly, really: they will not believe a man strong unless he displays big muscles.

At least this is not one of those ghastly tough-guys' cars, in which the driver has to do almost as much work as the engine. The steering requires a little more effort than the standard 300E's, but with taut suspension and top-of-the-crop tyres it also feels faster. Direction change, even at very high speeds, is always a firm roll-free iron-reined deflection which the car follows in its entirety; there's never a doubt about whether one end will prove more willing than the other.

The only time stability hints that it may be having a hard time keeping pace with requirements is when one brakes to a standstill on a curving path, as when making a high-speed approach to a roundabout. As the speed drops and the radius tightens towards the line where right of way must be yielded, so the steering lock has to be increased. When that happens, the castor angle introduces

a visible increase in wheel camber, summoning extra cornering power from the outer front tyre – which is loaded so that it responds better anyway. At the rear, where the tyres are being unloaded by braking, the much-vaunted 10-link suspension can do nothing to help. No disasters ever happened, but always I felt in these circumstances that the car could easily go into a spin. So could many another; indeed the truth is that very few are likely to approach at so high an initial velocity...

What did I say about a sense of proportion, of relative values? This is still a saloon car, and at over 130mph one is conscious, even on the easiest of motorways, that it is not a purpose-designed sports car. It is very good, very stable, very predictable, very firm – to the point of banging its boots, in the sternest strapped-down tradition of *furor Teutonicus*, on every road ripple, just as though it were a Porsche 928. It was a 928, its driver suddenly incensed by this challenge to his rule of the road and giving unprovoked (or at least uninvited) chase, which prompted me to muse at 145 that his was probably by a very slight



Muscle not needed by driver, steering is not overtaxing; direction changes are reassuring, roll-free, purposeful. No traps for the unwary

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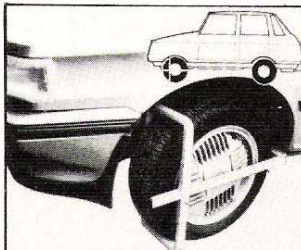


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margin the easier task, the more reassuring ride. The difference might be no more than psychological: in the Porsche one sits nearer the road.

Yes, one does enjoy a better view when sitting higher. I just wish it had some effect at night. In one respect the AMG gubbins do not cater for the increased speed of the Merc: the lighting is unaltered, and inadequate. German lights are usually pretty awful, though things are now changing: the new Hella lamps, with deep ellipsoid reflectors and bullseye lenses to minimise diameter, have already found their way onto the BMW shelves for the new 7-series. Bosch has the same type in readiness, and I saw the same sort of thing on the desk of a French manufacturer two years ago. But the glim which gets through the glass at the Merc's prow is not even enough for the standard car, not even enough for 110mph on an unlit road, never mind being enough for a 360bhp pocket battleship. That is why I could only hope to try for top speed in the daytime; I did go out at night to look for empty roads, but I could never be sure they were empty, nor always sure which way they went.

I am not sure how I feel about the car as

a whole, either. Sometimes I absolutely revelled in the gloriously inimitable urge of the thing, making full and free use of all the engine, all the tyres, and all the gear-holds and modes of the wide-ratio automatic transmission. It is not, incidentally, an overdrive transmission in the mechanical sense; fourth gear is direct, the two ratios beneath it are just the same as in a Chrysler Torqueflite or a GM Strasbourg, and it is bottom gear that is really the additional one.

Perhaps it does not matter; after all, the car goes so very fast in any of them. Yet it does not always inspire glee: sometimes it felt more appropriate to drive it unemotionally, in a coldly calculating frame of mind, albeit as hard as possible. If it were truly the summation of the miracles of modern science, one should drive it scientifically, *nicht's wahr?* Sometimes I wondered whether it were worth going to such extremes, wondered whether some of the rich-businessman speed might profitably be traded off for the serenity of a proper gentleman's car. And sometimes (Hush! Not in front of the children, they are too young to understand) I wondered whether AMG had managed to do anything that Chrysler

had not done with its Hemi, a quarter of a century earlier.

Perhaps none of this matters. I have seen the face of a man in a 560SEL crumple, seen his expression plummet from smug pride to corrosive envy as he realised what I was driving in the adjacent lane to his, and realised that it was something even more quick and costly and covetable than his new toy. Perhaps that is all that matters about such cars as these; and if it is so, then I was wrong to be impressed by the one and only surprise that the Stratton car gave me. You can tell the children this, though Chrysler might find it hard to take: the blessed thing did 19.4 miles per gallon! Even the bumbler would have applauded.



This car not yet Stratton-modified inside; still has unexciting standard Merc fittings, but tailor-made possibilities are limitless



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