

# 4 times the fun

**The chance to drive four E36 AMG's back to back was too good to miss for David Sutherland**

**T**o the casual observer the picture below shows a proud owner with his quartet of 124 Mercedes-Benzes, a saloon, coupé, cabriolet and estate. But those with a deeper knowledge of Stuttgart's 1990s output will appreciate that this is a very special collection. Possibly a unique one.

In the space of less than six months AMG enthusiast Colin Richards has managed to track down an example of each of the four variants of the E36 AMG, the rare 268bhp W124 E-Class prepared by Mercedes' now in-house tuning division. Tiny numbers were officially imported to the UK by Mercedes between 1993 and 1997, and Colin has four of them, all in excellent condition.

The E36, in all its forms, was the carmaker's answer to the BMW M5, which in the early 1990s had caused Mercedes considerable embarrassment with its blend of rocketship performance, superb refinement and suitably discreet styling. The E36 wasn't the first hot E-Class (the Porsche-built 500E/E500 was offered from 1990 to 1994 and AMG had itself produced numerous W124 variants), but with the AMG branding it was clearly intended to be a more recognisably sporty model. And more accessible to UK buyers too, being available in right-hand

**"THIS IS A VERY SPECIAL COLLECTION. POSSIBLY A UNIQUE ONE"**

Proud owner and E36 enthusiast Colin Richards with his impressive fleet.





drive, unlike the E500. The E36 was, in effect, the first 'official' AMG Mercedes, the C-Class C36 following in 1994.

Actually the word 'sporty' doesn't quite describe the AMG cars' appearance. Apart from the handsome, five-spoke 17-inch AMG alloy wheels (with 225/45 tyres) and AMG hoodlid badge, there's little to distinguish the cars from the E320 equivalents. The coupé seen here does wear an AMG bodykit, but that was optional. Inside, only E36 logos on the leather-bound gear selectors mark the cars out as the high performers they are.

## HOT STUFF

However there was no reluctance in evidence in the mechanical department. AMG – then in the transition from independent tuner to the Mercedes subsidiary it is now – enlarged the 3.2-litre, 24-valve E320 engine to 3.6-litres. There were also hotter camshafts, resulting in outputs of 268bhp and 284lb/ft torque, both figures some 20 per cent up on the E320.

No E36 used Mercedes' then new, electronically regulated five-speed automatic gearbox. AMG instead opting to harness the extra torque to the proven four-speed autobox. The springs and dampers were firmer than standard, firmer indeed than Mercedes' regular Sportline chassis option.

The saloon was on sale until 1995, the estate and coupé until 1996, and the cabriolet a year longer. True to Mercedes form, the cars were expensive. In 1994, for instance, the saloon was £44,700 (£9,600 more than the E320), the estate £47,150 (£9,700 more), the coupé



Mercedes E36 AMG	Coupé	Cabriolet	Estate	Saloon
ENGINE	3,604cc straight-six	3,604cc straight-six	3,604cc straight-six	3,604cc straight-six
POWER	268bhp@5,750rpm	268bhp@5,750rpm	268bhp@5,750rpm	268bhp@5,750rpm
TORQUE	284lb/ft@3,750rpm	284lb/ft@3,750rpm	284lb/ft@3,750rpm	284lb/ft@3,750rpm
TRANSMISSION	4-speed auto	4-speed auto	4-speed auto	4-speed auto
WEIGHT	1,540kg	n/a	1,640kg	n/a
0-62MPH	7sec	7.2sec	n/a	n/a
TOP SPEED	155mph	155mph	149mph	155mph
YEARS PRODUCED	1993-96	1993-97	1993-96	1993-95
OFFICIAL UK IMPORTS	24	14	7	12

**Clockwise from main:** Classic straight-six power from AMG; not many W124s wore this badge; brand new gear selector.

£48,700 (£8,100), and the cabriolet £54,450 (£6,000). That was, of course, before any extras, this coupé's bodykit costing a hefty £4,000 alone.

These prices, along with the specialist nature of the conversion work, ensured

exclusivity. In the UK, according to reliable figures, 24 coupés were sold, along with 14 cabriolets, 12 saloons and seven estates.

In what was more by accident than design, Colin assembled his AMG



**"ONLY E36 LOGOS ON THE LEATHER-BOUND GEAR SELECTORS MARK THE CARS"**

## E36 AMG ESTATE



**From top:** The estate's graceful lines are the least likely guise for AMG performance; pale interior is pristine; proof that practicality doesn't have to be compromised.

collection between July and December of last year. But the foundations for his position as unofficial UK curator of AMG 124s were laid back in 1997 when he bought his first Merc, a C124 220 Coupé (coupés gaining a 'C' prefix to the model code in place of the usual 'W'). "On the day I went to collect it from the Mercedes dealer I saw a black W210 saloon [the range following the 124]," he recalls. "I asked what it was and they told me it was an E55."

## SLIPPERY SLOPE

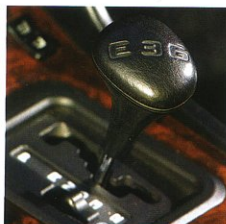
In the middle of 1999 that very car was traded back to the dealer and Colin, who also had a 124 E300 D by then (a normally-aspirated diesel estate), part-exchanged the coupé for it. The E300D estate subsequently was changed for a 210-generation E230 Estate, itself later swapped for an E320 CDI wagon with a Brabus-power upgrade. In 2002 he sold the E55 and treated himself to a 2000-model CL55 AMG, one of the modern generation AMG-style Mercs.

But 2004 was to see Colin have a total re-think of his Mercedes stable. He'd sold the CL55 in August 2003 because

he wasn't using it much and it was costing a huge amount in depreciation. And having by now owned plenty of 124s and 210s he was convinced that the former, despite its age, was a better car to own.

**Although the least sporty of the bunch the estate is still fun.**

"It was after the 124 that build quality started to deteriorate," he insists. "And the 124s are still modern enough to be usable, they're good performing cars and you don't have to be too hands-on with the maintenance."







Thus, in the course of last year, he opted to go all-124. The first to arrive was the 1995 cabriolet. His wife Lesley, though not a car nut like Colin, had decided that of all the Merces she'd driven, the 124 was the one she liked best, so Colin decided to buy her one. She said she wouldn't mind a convertible, and I saw this E36 convertible at an independent Mercedes specialist," he says. "It was ideal, it gave her a convertible, and the interest of AMG for me."

Offered by Mercedes specialist Charles Ironside in Hampshire, it was a particularly good example. Only one owner, and with a comprehensive equipment specification, including heated and electrically adjusted leather seats, climate control air-conditioning, a leather/wood trimmed steering wheel, cruise control and headlamp washers.

The one aesthetic imperfection was a set of scuffed wheels, so these were refurbished. Colin also noticed a knock from the engine on start-up, which was found to be worn engine mounts. Although the mounts have an in-built oil damper, replacing them was a relatively modest £160 job, and one that Colin has in mind for the other three AMGs. "It makes a huge difference, it's the biggest

**The saloon's sharp styling keeps it looking fresh.**

## "WITH TWO AMGS ON THE PREMISES, COLIN WAS GETTING INTO THE COLLECTING MOOD"

**Without bodykit (red car) the E36 looks near standard while styling mods (silver car) add visual drama.**



single improvement you can make to these cars," he says.

Experience with the cabriolet obviously wised Colin up considerably on E36s, so when in October Charles Ironside offered him a coupé he could see it was a good one. Indeed, despite the December 1994 car being the oldest AMG of his four, and with the highest mileage (112,000) it is the best one. It drives without a single rattle, the interior is almost unmarked (even the leather on the steering wheel wheel rim has yet to go shiny), and the silver bodywork is immaculate.

But ironically, it was the superb condition coupé that gave him his first taste of how expensive AMG parts can be. A week before our photo session, while he was driving the coupé, a fox ran out on to the road and was struck by the car's lower front spoiler. The injury to the fox turned out to be less than that to Colin's wallet. Although in the rear-view mirror Colin saw the animal pick itself up and run away, the spoiler was badly split, too much so to be plastic welded.

### LUCKY ESCAPE

Luckily the driving lamps and bits of trim and mounting brackets were undamaged, so all Colin needed was the bare bumper section minus the centre panel. It arrived from Germany in five days – but cost nearly £1,000. Then it had to be painted. Even a new AMG badge was close to £20.

## E36 AMG SALOON



**From top: Saloon made for right-hand drive markets only; car needed work but now meets Colin's exacting standards; bodykit adds a welcome degree of visual muscle.**

With two AMGs on the premises, Colin was getting into the collecting mood. "I had a convertible and a coupé, and they were lovely, but I thought how nice it would be to have an AMG saloon as well." And when, in November 2004, one was advertised in *Mercedes Enthusiast*, he had to take a look.

What he said didn't please him. "It was not in great condition," he says. "There were blisters on the paint, and stone chips, and inside the wood console for the centre console wasn't there, and ☹



☹ had been replaced by a black plastic surround. The car had been in storage for 18 months, but it looked like it had been put away when it was damp."

Nonetheless, Colin knew it might be a long time before he saw another saloon for sale, and reckoned that, if not perfect, it would do. "All the ingredients were there, it was alright to drive," he says.

By this point Lesley might be forgiven for wondering just how many more 124s were going to turn up on the driveway. Just one more, was the answer, the metallic green estate that was for sale with – you've guessed it – Charles Ironside.

**Coupé has the highest mileage but looks and drives the best.**

**Below: Interior quality always a W124 strong point. Bottom: Cabriolet's smart interior is plush and luxurious.**



The estate was sound but not immaculate. At some point someone, either in ignorance or balking at the price, had replaced the middle section of the AMG exhaust with what looked like a standard, and much thinner 124 pipe. Hence the existing rear AMG pipe had been crimped to accept the smaller diameter middle pipe.

The car also wore 18-inch rather than the correct 17-inch wheels, and the edges of the front wings had been less than expertly rolled back to avoid the tyres scuffing them. There was also the problem that the spec-list lacked a near essential 124 luxury, electrical seat adjustment. But it was the same story: the car would be okay after some TLC, and when might another come up? Hence it was purchased, and the last of Colin's non-AMG hardware, a W124 E280 Saloon and 124 E300 Estate were sold to pay for it.

### EVERY-DAY EXCLUSIVITY

Although immaculately maintained all Colin's cars get used – be it for business, pleasure, the school run or load lugging. The one time he or Lesley doesn't use one of them is when at their holiday home in Spain where Colin drives a locally purchased W124 E500.

The arrangement is working well. The cars are all taxed and insured, so it's a question of jumping into whichever car is most suitable. Colin does over 20,000 business miles a year, but because he spreads it over the four cars none is accruing a massive mileage. "Because we're swapping round we put about 8,000 miles a year on each car, allowing for my wife's mileage," he says.

But mileage isn't an issue. The average mileage of the four cars isn't exactly low, at 91,000, and Colin knows that provided they're cared for properly they're not going to deteriorate in a hurry.

## E36 AMG

## E36 AMG COUPÉ



**From top: Bodykitted coupé is the raciest looking of the four; interior has shrugged off intensive use; pillarless W124 coupé always looks good, the AMG trimmings add spice.**

Notwithstanding its celebrated durability, a decade-old Mercedes is going to need a fair amount of care. Multiplying this by four sees a near constant rota of maintenance and minor repair. For example, as the coupé was in for its new spoiler, the passenger window on the cabriolet decided to stick down.

## "ALTHOUGH IMMACULATELY MAINTAINED, ALL COLIN'S CARS GET USED"

The saloon's radiator fan was suspected of sticking on the whole time, and both it and the estate needed a replacement headlamp washer. Just as well then that Colin's local dealer has a very reasonable labour rate of £45 an hour!

"I don't like things not working properly, but I prioritise the work," says Colin. But if keeping his fleet up to standard isn't exactly cheap, it's nothing compared to the depreciation he'd be suffering if he still bought new or nearly new Mercedes. If his AMGs do lose any value, it will be very little and over a long period of time.

Not only is a 124 AMG a very desirable car to own, the economics of ☹

## E36 AMG CABRIO



From top: Cabriolet was the first E36 in Colin's collection – a present for his wife; smart interior is very classy; only badge and wheels give away that this is an AMG car.

☺ it verge on the sensible. But it's sheer enthusiasm, not financial considerations, that has made Colin quite probably the UK's foremost 124 AMG connoisseur.

### DRIVING THE AMGs

Colin's collection gave us a one-off opportunity to drive all four E36s back to back, a fascinating experience given the nuances of each one. All have identical engines and transmissions, apart from the estate's final drive ratio being slightly lower, but each feels subtly different to drive. Not

**Cabrio is all about style and on this front it's a winner.**

least because individual AMG engines of this era could sound and feel different.

What's delivered is classic straight-six power and torque. And unlike today's breed of AMG cars, with their clinical, computer-regulated engines, the 124s feel like traditional tuned cars, machines built by a manufacturer at the top of its game and then breathed on by a bunch of talented performance obsessives.

Smooth and quiet at normal revs, the 3.6-litre unit takes on a much more gruff tone when the throttle is squeezed hard and revs shoot up as the gearbox lurches down a ratio under

kickdown. Then you're pinned to the back of the seat until the gearbox decides to change back up again.

The coupé feels the sharpest and most willing in the powertrain department. Not surprisingly, it also feels the tautest and most composed when cornering, not least because of the total lack of squeaks and rattles from within the car; amazing for a car almost 11 years old and with 112,000 miles under its belt.

The cabriolet feels a little less potent, and even with its additional body strengthening, it feels far less rigid when shaken by poor road surfaces. Understandably the estate falls short on pace and poise, but it's good to know

that you're behind the wheel of one of the quickest load carriers in the business.

The firmed up suspension on all gives a harder ride than regular 124s, but it's acceptably compliant, if only just. However in this respect the E36s are more forgiving than the AMG C-Class of the time, the identically engined C36, which gave a board-hard ride.

### TAILOR MADE

Despite their pace, you could not say any of these feel especially sporty. The steering is the usual well-weighted but comprehensively damped recirculating ball system, and the brakes are powerful but with a pedal that tells you little. Clearly Mercedes knew its customers well enough to appreciate that they would want a fast and responsive car, not a highly-strung one.

For many, the 124 is the favoured Mercedes generation, and the cabin quality alone justifies that. Besides the well-shaped seats and perfect driving position, the switchgear and furnishings are the classic neat, understated Benz style, and so beautifully made. Mercedes-Benz quality may be returning, but whether we'll see a model as solidly made as the W124 is another matter. ↗

**Photoshoot was Colin's first chance to see his cars together.**

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