

Why I bought a 500E

BY ROWAN ATKINSON

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN TOLD THAT IF YOU WISH TO BE financially prudent, car purchases should conform to three basic strategems. First, buy a car when it is two years old, and discard it at five. Second, always buy a car at the bottom of a manufacturer's range (plump for a cheap BMW in preference to a Granada), and third, buy approximately halfway through a vehicle's development life - ample time for the gremlins to have been excised, but with a few years to go before supersession by a new model.

It is sometimes thought that the latter strategy is redundant with mass-produced vehicles, because modern cars are so well developed before launch. Sadly, I am here to relieve you of that sentimental baggage, Madam. The Toyota MR2, the Audi 80, and (more surprising) the new BMW 3-series are all cars which were launched with serious and blatant deficiencies, which have only recently been addressed. When you think of the luxurious development time enjoyed by the Bavarian motor company, in particular, as a result of the unexpected longevity of the previous 3-series, the feeble trim quality and associated ghastlies at the launch of the new car were an outrage.

In the purchase, six months ago, of the Mercedes that is the subject of this article, I particularly conformed to the first strategem, completely ignored the second, but was able to enjoy the third, as I do think that the W124-series Mercs are neatly stroking the apex of their development, with only some multi-valve engines still in the waiting room. Nevertheless, very few British buyers opt for the top-of-the-range runt, the partially Porsche-built 500E. It's a shame, because the car is totally charming. I suppose that 326bhp and 350lb ft of torque could charm the socks off the most recalcitrant, but there's something about this whole package that really works.

It's my third Mercedes, one of which was a rather spacious bungalow called a 600, which I sensibly sold after three weeks having discovered what it's like to become Pope and then be told that you have to drive yourself around (it's embarrassing). The other was a 450SEL 6.9, to which the 500E is the undoubted spiritual successor - viz another eccentric express powered by

an oversized V8 shoehorned, at considerable development expense, into an engine bay that was never originally designed to accept it.

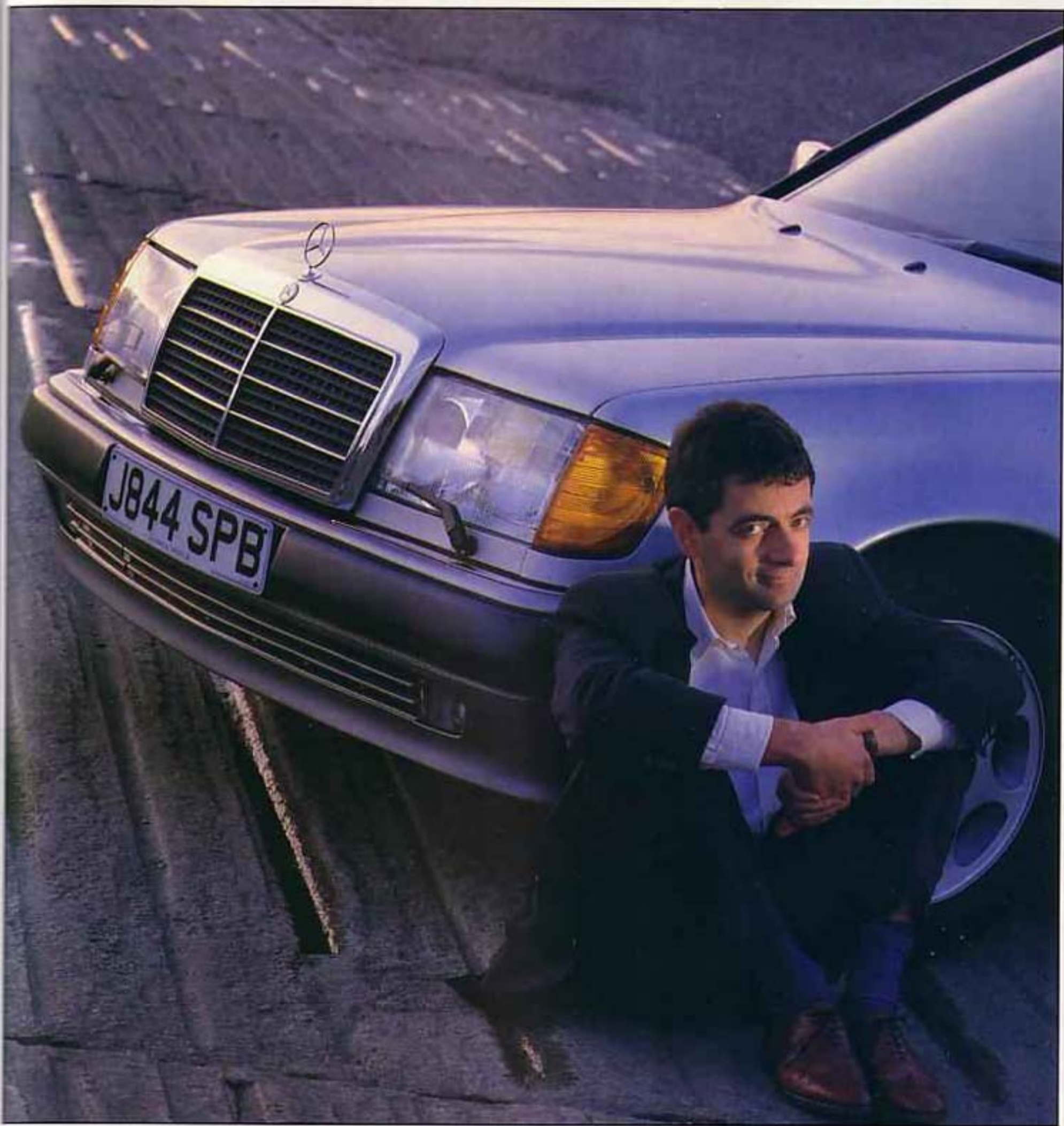
I have never dwelt on a car purchase for longer. I'd had a rather desultory experience with an Aston Martin Virage for a year, and I was determined to buy something that genuinely met a rather complex set of demands. It had to exhibit great versatility. It had to be usable every day of its life, it had to be able to carry four in considerable comfort, it had to be acknowledged that it was to be used almost exclusively in central London and on motorways, and was rarely going to be allowed to address a sweeping A-road. A traditional driver's car would be redundant. A heavy clutch would not be tolerated. I also wanted it to be very fast, very rare, and very discreet. It is the last three qualities which are a devil to reconcile: it used to be impossible, but not these days. The Lotus Carlton was carefully considered, and rejected. In the end, it's a Vauxhall, and not a very discreet one. Classless, but without class. The MG lingered in my sights for a while, but suddenly an automatic gearbox did seem to make a lot of sense, and as you know the BMW does not provide.

What also made a lot of sense was the price at which this 500E was being proffered: it had done only 900 miles, but was available at a very encouraging £17,000 off list from Bramley, near Guildford, Surrey. Mercedes buyers are a pretty conservative bunch, and they seem to have declared the 500E *persona non grata* for daring to be available only in left-hand drive: hence the depreciation. Daimler-Benz makes quite a play in its advertising of the depreciation-proof nature of its products, but of course it is dependent on your following Strategem Two. You must buy lower down the range to benefit. I think it can reasonably be claimed that the 200E and the 500E experience depreciation in proportion to their performance: there's very little evident with the four-cylinder, but there's an avalanche with the eight. It's a shame, really: Ihd has never bothered me a bit. I like getting out of a car onto the pavement, instead of oncoming traffic.

The car has been reliable, although not angelic. There have been a few squeaks and rattles, and a strange clunkiness in the steering that still has not been fixed. Things got off to a poor start when the traction control failed on the second test drive.

Curiously, it was exactly the same fault that blighted my first drive ever of a 500E, a year previously. The warning light comes on (containing a silhouette of the mysterious acronym ASR), and the throttle slips into a mode which can only be described as unco-operative, when the first two inches of throttle travel solicit absolutely no reaction from the engine whatsoever. Some black boxes were replaced under warranty (the parts alone cost £1500), and the car was delivered in good order. This traction control seemed at one time to be the Achilles heel of the 500E, much criticised by the motoring press at the car's launch for the manner in which it contained the journalists' natural desire to be photographed on opposite lock with smoking rear tyres, and other equally mature pursuits. It does obviate that kind of behaviour, except in the wet, when it allows considerable deviation from the intended cornering line before electronically restraining the throttle. In my view, it is an excellent device, perfectly calibrated, and perfectly suited to this particular car, with this particular gearbox. With manual transmission, you can always exercise fine control of the power feed, but powerful automatics in sport mode can be an absolute swine, kicking down at unexpected moments in the middle of wet corners, and the ultimate restraint that the traction control affords makes a lot of sense. I have found it a boon far more often than I have found it a hindrance, and if you want to get picky about it I also have good empirical evidence that it can make you go quicker. I went with McLaren tester and BBC pits commentator Jonathan Palmer (Motto: 'I am the Pits') to Bruntingthorpe, where JP runs his Performance Course, with two 500Es. First, I chased him around the circuit for a couple of laps just to confirm the maximum speed. After just half a mile of the long straight we had both reached our governed maxima of 158mph.

Unfortunately, I was followed a little too closely on a fairly coarse surface, and loose chippings were flying at an unparalleled velocity, gouging great holes in the paintwork, and in the fog lamp lenses (both lamps had to be replaced and the bonnet still awaits a respray). An expensive couple of laps. What followed was of more interest. We parked my car, and doctored that of JP. We discovered that it is possible, with judicious placement of a paper clip into the electronics, to short out the traction control and the ABS (in Benzes, the traction control cannot normally be overridden). We were therefore able to compare the performance of the car with or without interference from computers. Conveniently, it had started to rain, so we set up a short slalom course, and a 30ft diameter circle to simulate



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continuous corner. We both did runs against the stopwatch, with and without paper clip, and although RA was considerably slower than JP, we were both consistently a couple of seconds faster with the traction control than without it. I think this surprised Mr Palmer even more than it did me; his supreme car control just could not match the cleverness of the chip. Let us hear no more about traction control being to the detriment of performance. It may lessen the fun, but not the velocities.

However, in my heart of hearts, I know that the 500E is not a true driver's car. It is a sporting saloon, not a sports saloon. It rewards you as only a thunderingly fast road-going Benz can, but it is no M5. As a city dweller, I prefer it that way. The ride is soothing and the progress is effortless, with only a determined twitch of your right foot required to release the massed hordes. You could almost call the 500E a poor man's Turbo R, if you could rapidly acquire a warped view of the concept of poverty.