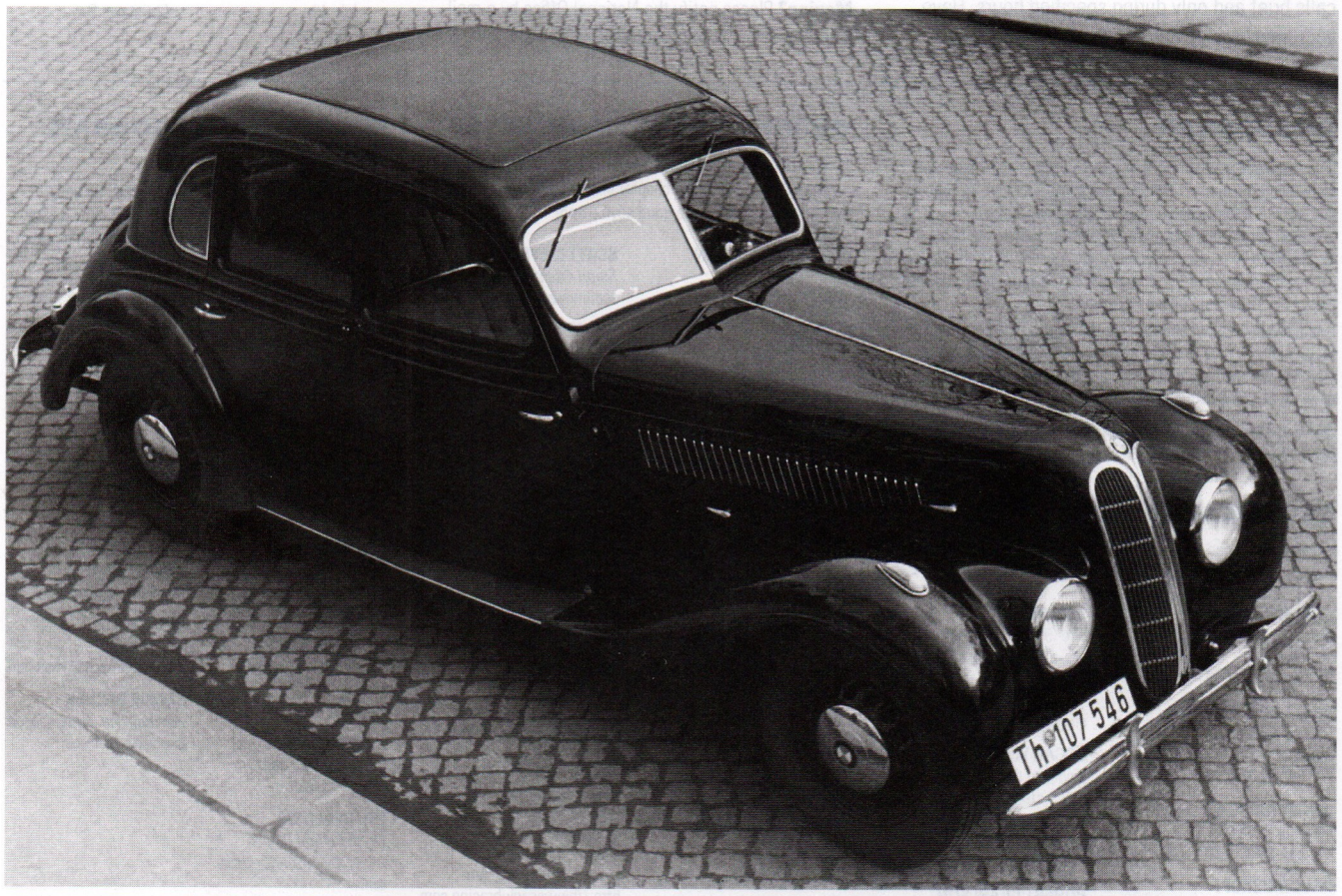
Jackie Jouret • jjouret@roundel.org

1941 LAST OF THE BEST

Story by Jackie Jouret Photographs courtesy BMW AG



In 1938 London, BMW debuted its top-of-the-line 335 sedan, powered by a 90-horsepower inline six-cylinder engine.

At the Berlin show of February 1936, BMW introduced its first four-door sedan, the first in a new line of touring cars built atop a robust and rigid box-section frame designed by Fritz Fiedler. The 326 spawned the affordable short-wheelbase 320 and 321, the sporty and elegant 327, and the majestic 335, BMW's first true luxury car.

Halwart Schrader wrote that BMW had completed the 335's development by autumn of 1936, but delayed production thanks to British importer HJ Aldington's inability to settle on order volumes. Aldington's reservations were probably justified, given the 335's retail price: At 6,700 Reichsmarks ($2,680), it cost RM1,200 more than the 326. The world hadn't yet recovered from the Great Depression, and the audience for such an expensive car was limited.

While Aldington dithered, BMW moved its automotive engineering department from the factory at Eisenach to the company's headquarters in Munich. At the same time, Fiedler was given overall responsibility for automotive development, including that of the engine. Fiedler had already shown himself to be a genius with regard to chassis design. He'd pioneered the concept of lightweight construction with his tube-frame chassis for the 303 introduced in 1933, and his 326 chassis was equally revolutionary.

For the 335, that box-section frame would gain 4.5 inches from axle to axle, and the wheel tracks would be widened from 51.2 inches front and rear to 51.3 inches front, 55.3 inches rear. As a result, the rear passenger compartment became much more spacious, gaining five inches of legroom and ten inches across the back of the rear seats. That required new rear body panels from AMBI-Budd's stamping plant in Berlin, although the side and front pressings were identical to those of the 326, according to prewar BMW expert Tom Graham.

As you can see in the photo of the 335 sedan seen here, the car's roof wasn't stamped from a single sheet of steel. "The

326 got a solid top starting in 1939, but I don't think the 335 ever did," Graham told me. "The top has a kind of heavy oilcloth in the center, and underneath that is a layer of chicken wire over a wood framework. The headliner was nailed to the wood frame as well."

The 335's body construction may have been old-fashioned, but its engine was state-of-the-art. While Fiedler was moving his offices from Eisenach to Munich, BMW decided to upgrade the six-cylinder engine from three liters to 3.5 (actually 3,485 cc). That wasn't all: The M335's cast-iron crankcase was designed to accommodate larger bore diameters in future iterations, with extra metal and water passages around all six cylinders, fed by an external tube that ran the length of the cylinder head. Its overhead valves were activated by pushrods and rockers, the block-mounted camshaft driven by Novotex composite gears for quiet operation. The combustion chambers were shaped like a bathtub around the intake and exhaust valves, with the fuel-air mixture delivered by a single Solex 35 MMOVS carburetor.

The goal was to deliver 90 horsepower at 3,500 rpm, which Dr. Karlheinz Lange says was exceeded in the engine's first iteration. Fiedler's team thus revised the camshaft for less radical valve timing, giving the engine abundant torque—166 pound-feet at 2,000 rpm—relative to horsepower. To make the drivetrain even smoother, the 335 got a fully synchronized four-speed gearbox, BMW's first. Lockheed hydraulic brakes were fitted to all four corners, powerful enough to slow the 2,865-pound 335 from its top speed of 90 mph.

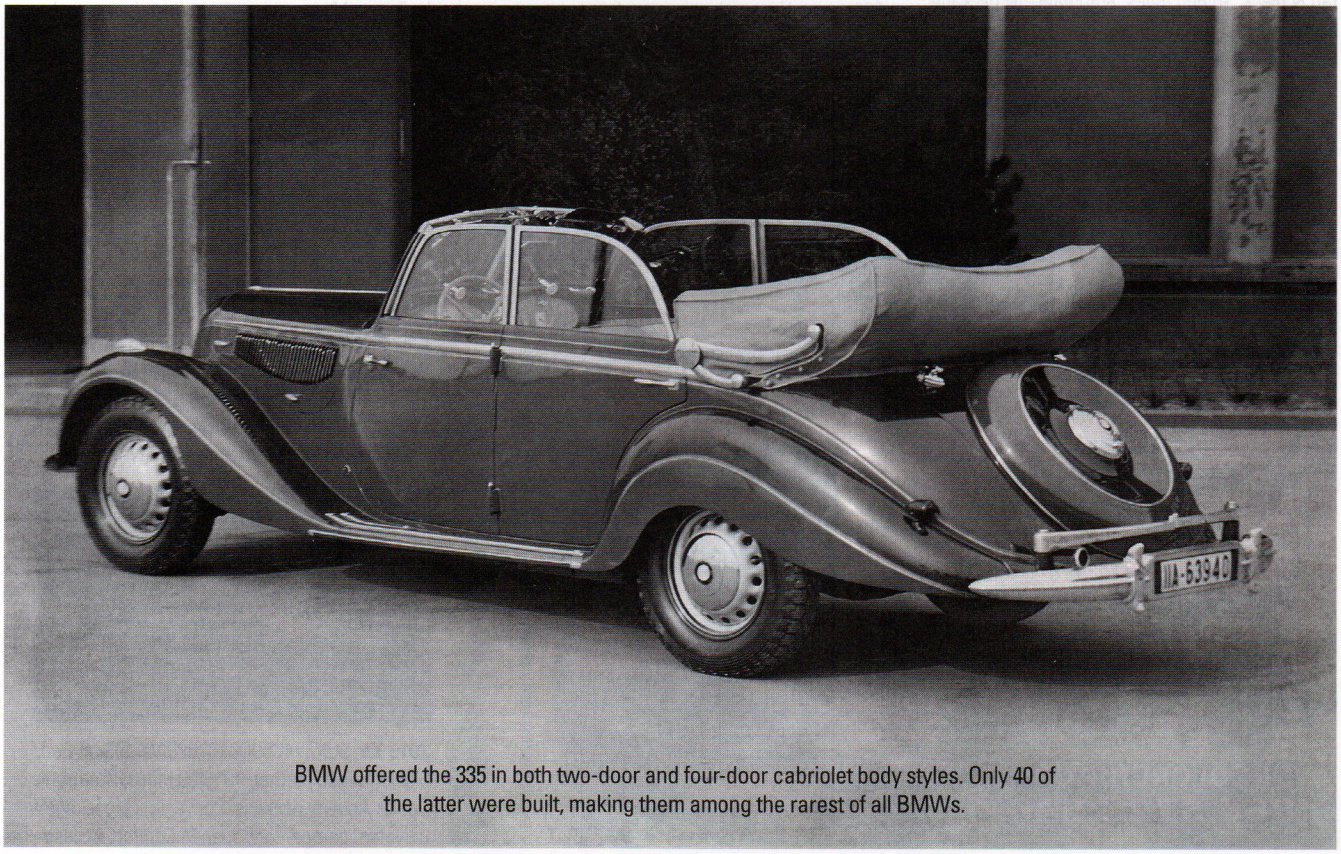
Perhaps as a favor to HJ Aldington, the 335 debuted at the London motor show in 1938, one of three prototypes built that year, but 1939 saw production of 301 examples in sedan and cabriolet versions.

BMW undoubtedly had high hopes for its new Autobahn cruiser, but the Fates had other plans. Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939 set off World War II, and shortages of raw materials meant that 335 buyers had to procure their own tires before taking delivery. Soon only those with the proper credentials—denoted by a red chevron on a car's license plate—could buy a new automobile, and most of those went to people who were well-placed in the military or vital industries. (Notoriously, one 335 cabriolet went to top-ranking Nazi Heinrich Himmler, the architect of the Holocaust.)

In 1940, BMW built just 85 of its flagship 335s, and only twenty more were built in 1941. That year, BMW stopped building cars altogether on orders from the Reich Air Ministry, which demanded that BMW devote its full capacity to military production, namely aero engines and R75 motorcycles.

The last new BMW introduced before the war, the 335 arrived just before everything changed forever. BMW wouldn't build another car for more than a decade, although Fritz Fiedler built several for Aldington's Bristol and Frazer-Nash marques. But that's a story for another day, perhaps when BMW's production lines restart after falling silent for the first time in decades.

We know what came next in 1941. What awaits us in 2020 remains to be seen.



BMW offered the 335 in both two-door and four-door cabriolet body styles. Only 40 of the latter were built, making them among the rarest of all BMWs.