

Driven



by STEPHEN DOBIE

BMW M2 prototype

The new M2 is bigger, heavier and more grown-up than before. Luckily, it's also kept its manual gearbox and rear-drive chassis

IT'S BEEN A BIG YEAR FOR BMW M already. You might think the return of the CSL badge would be enough to mark its 50th anniversary, but with the M3 Touring and XM SUV – the latter only the division's second-ever standalone model – the engineers have been kept truly busy. Which makes it all the more exciting that the M2 has been completely reinvented for its second coming.

'We wanted to create something now which is already on a similar level to the M2 CS,' says Markus Schröder, the project lead on the new M2. His team haven't been feverishly benchmarking rival sports cars, I'm told. They've used the outgoing CS as a 'jumping off point' instead.

The car as a whole sounds much more sophisticated than its predecessor. Its core components all come from the M3 and M4,

with the engine, suspension and braking system carried over, as well as staggered 19-inch front, 20-inch rear wheels (the M2 actually skips the M4's base 18/19-inch set-up and makes bigger rims standard).

'We are in a unique position in the M2's segment,' says Schröder. 'The most challenging part was to make the car more subtle and composed while not making it boring or less engaging than before. We will already be the fastest car in this marketplace so we don't need to find another second on lap times. We want to make it more of a driver's car.'

As the wild camouflage decals suggest, we're driving the M2 long before its development is complete. So hard stats simply won't be finagled out of the feverish engineers buzzing around the heat-soaked Salzburgring pitlane. No matter how





hard I try. 'In line with the M2 CS' is the official party line, so we're looking at the M4's current 'S58' twin-turbocharged 3-litre straight-six producing somewhere in the region of 450bhp and 400lb ft of torque at the rear wheels only. Those figures can't venture too high, as the M2 will come with the option of a six-speed manual or eight-speed 'M Steptronic' auto transmission, and M won't be altering the engine tune between the two like we've seen with the M3/4.

Yep, the manual remains, and Schröder assures me it's not been too tricky a task campaigning to keep a stick as standard, despite the extra investment it calls upon. Some markets, like the US, will see manuals account for 50 per cent of M2 sales. In Britain, it's more like 30.

'Clearly customers were asking for the car,' he says, 'which makes it easy from a financial point of view because it's a lot of volume.' Is there a manufacturing challenge in offering both transmissions? 'Not only production, but in development you more or less double everything you're doing. The base suspension set-up is the same, but you have to check it works on both versions. You have to do all the homologation twice. If the customers' take rate would drop below ten per cent, then the investment might





Above left: as with the M3/4 with which it shares its underpinnings, the M2's rear wheels are an inch larger than the fronts. **Left:** public demand has seen the six-speed manual retained, with an auto 'box an option

prove too big to do it for such a small volume.' It's a decision all too many carmakers have made recently – though one which Toyota has just reversed on the (BMW engined) GR Supra.

'We want to have the manual transmission in the M2 because it brings a different feeling to the car,' Schröder continues. 'Our main goal was for this to be a driver's car, making it easier for us to say "invest money on the manual". If the car was less focused on driving, we'd lose the manual and focus on something else.

'The only limit is on how much torque the manual transmission can handle; with the automatic, you aren't on the edge of the transmission's capability. Maybe you could develop a better manual but you'd have to spend so much money, you'd not have a good relationship between how much you spent and how many cars you sold. It's always a trade-off.' For what it's worth, Schröder's company car will be an auto because of how much time he spends in Munich traffic, but he assures me it'd be manual

if his commute was through the Alps every day...

As well as a 110mm shorter wheelbase than the M4, making it 54mm longer than the old M2's, the new M2 has got stiffer front springs and softer rears, with the rear dampers from the forthcoming M3 Touring transplanted in here. Adaptive damping is standard. The aim is for a more tenacious front end that's followed by a game – but crucially predictable – rear. In the words of Sven Esch from the M2's dynamics team, it'll be easier to drive quickly. 'It'll be more controllable. You also can have fun, but you should have fun when you want and not as a surprise.'

A bit more maturity to its demeanour goes hand in hand with a bigger, stockier car. Which means, yes, like the M4 it sits below, it's going to be somewhat heavier than any of its forebears. But Schröder really isn't fussed when I press him on the issue. 'The weight question is always coming up! I think it was relevant a few years ago, but today I'm not really sure that the weight figure tells the whole story of a car. There are so many things you want to do on the car – improving the rear suspension components meant gaining weight, but do I really care if the car drives far better afterwards?

'If a customer fully specs some cars with every

option then maybe they end up 100kg heavier than on the spec sheet. Most M2 CS customers opted for the Harman Kardon sound system; it added weight to the car but the owners didn't care. It's the same for electric seat adjustment, so in this version we didn't develop a manual version. If the car drives perfectly I wouldn't be too worried about another 15 or 20 kilograms.' I suspect the finished M2 will be a bit more than 20kg heavier than the car it succeeds, mind, though Adam Towler's experience of the M240i xDrive (**evo** 297) suggests a weight figure north of 1.6 tons doesn't necessarily stifle satisfaction.

Time to find out how it drives, via a dozen laps of the Salzburgring split evenly between the two transmissions. While my sighting lap should be focused on getting a feel for a circuit I'm completely fresh to, I instead get flustered trying desperately to work out how to blast ice cold air from the climate control. It's a mid-30s heatwave in Austria and the temperature controls are buried not only in the large touchscreen of the M2's new wraparound digital display – which we'll also see in the facelifted M3 and M4 – but beneath the unhelpful sheath of a large black camo curtain. As if ditching a row of buttons wasn't counter-intuitive enough already.



The pace car pulls in and with a moderately temperate cabin, I can focus on what really matters. I've started in the manual and the shift action is standard BMW fare, right down to the Munich maker's tried-and-trusted knob shape. It makes for a great pairing with this engine, a gratifying (if not scalpel-sharp) shift action to go with the huge muscularity of the twin-turbo delivery. The fiddlier turns leave me with a decision to change down to second and have to meld an upshift brusquely into my corner exit or stick in third and commit more speed on entry.

Going with the latter plan confirms Schröder and Esch's claims: this is a much more trustworthy car than its predecessors. The front end turns and grips with incisiveness and zero fuss, but the rear is endlessly faithful behind it. I loosen the ESC quickly but the car simply never springs a surprise, nor does it easily nudge into power oversteer when I start cajoling it. Perhaps it's the sticky heat on track today. I'm sure a more inclement British trackday would be giving me a heap more to do, however finely tuned that rear damping now is.

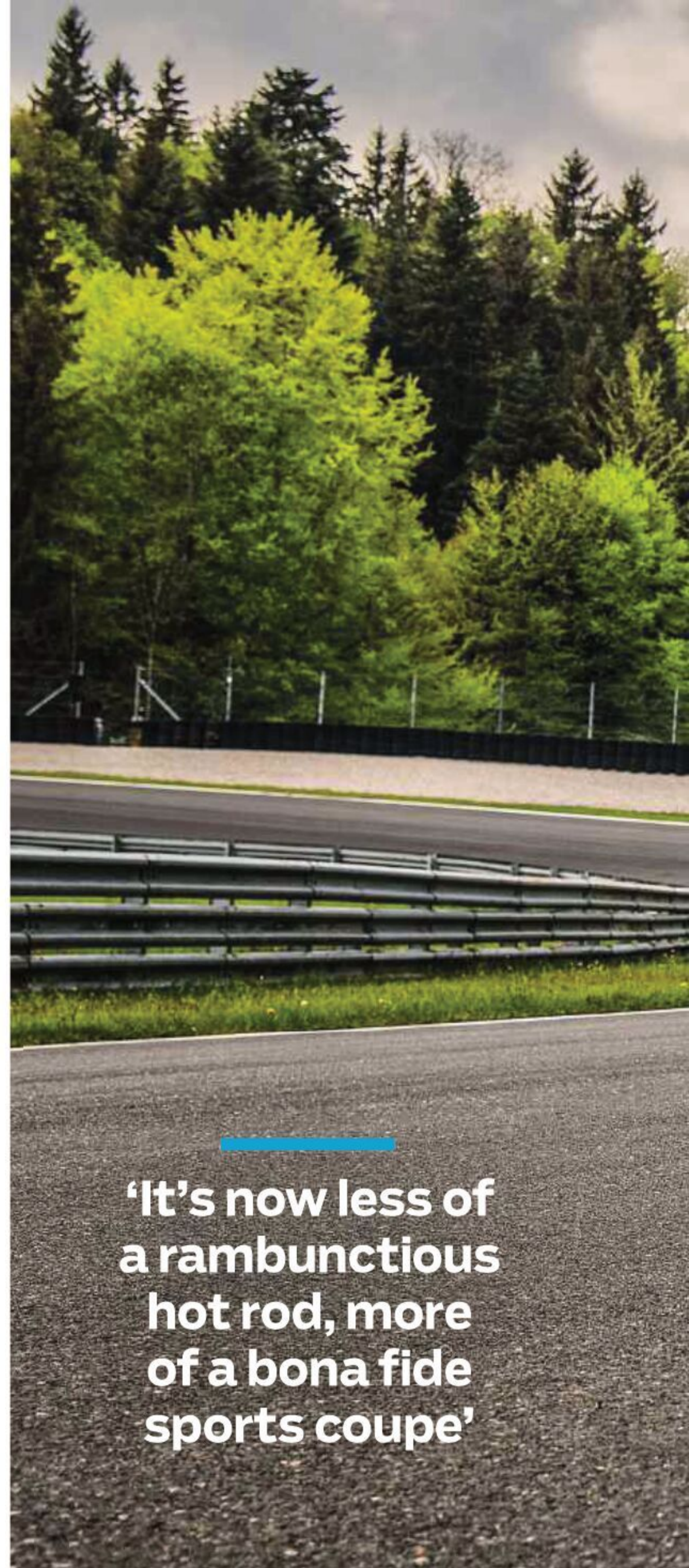
The overall impression is that the M2 is now less of a rambunctious hot rod, more of a bona fide sports coupe. It feels like its whole handling mood board has been drawn up on the circuit's final 'Schikane'; braking deep to point its sensibly sized kidney grilles into the apex, I can get straight on the power to punch onto the pit straight with no scurry for grip (and boy, does its engine punch

hard). Again, full judgement should probably be reserved until a misly morning at Bedford Autodrome, but the signs point to a newly astute attitude towards traction.

The Steptronic car feels a step up, at least on track, its eight ratios catering better for a bit of braking-zone indecision while the usual trope of a paddleshift car significantly upping your commitment with the other controls rings very true... or perhaps I've just finally figured how to drive without sweating mercilessly onto all the black sheeting. Still I can't seem to outfox the M2's smarter chassis. BMW may say it's not been benchmarking rivals, but there's definitely a whiff of the unfailing dry-weather predictability in the M2 that also permeates through a Cayman.

This is only the start, of course, and a harder cored CS version will duly follow. Given I'm told this stock M2 is already at the performance level of the outgoing – and eCoty winning – CS, that's quite some thought. It's hard not to wonder whether Schröder and his team have to leave some wiggle room to ensure future versions present a notable step up.

'I could raise the horsepower to 550 right now but it's not our aim to have this "one-hit wonder" and destroy everything,' he says. 'It should be a very good car at this point in time. We think about future projects, definitely, but it's not like we worsen the damping a bit here to improve it with the next one. If we offer something in a few years' time we can look at what to improve. And maybe



'It's now less of a rambunctious hot rod, more of a bona fide sports coupe'

Right and above left: finer details of the cabin are still disguised, but the scale of the new extra-wide display panel is plain to see; carbon buckets (pictured) are an option, while standard items are more conventional

it's a chance to fit expensive options as standard. You could have the carbon buckets on every M2 now, but then its price level will be much higher.'

Indeed, the M2 will launch with a relatively simple configurator, leaving the M3 and M4 as the core M models you can personalise to your heart's content. Chief on the options list here will be the same carbonfibre buckets as its siblings as well as a carbonfibre roof. All M2s will be rear-wheel drive, and the spec doesn't change between manual and automatic transmissions, besides the latter getting some aesthetically questionable carbon paddles. There's no carbon-ceramic brake option and all cars wear Michelin Pilot Sport 4 S tyres.

Less spec variation will lower manufacturing



costs and bring a lower entry price, which feels crucial in properly differentiating the M2 from an M4 when the cars share so much architecture – though the offer of a manual gearbox to us British buyers might already give the seemingly more driver-focused M2 a vital USP. 'It was definitely a target in the project to keep this joy of driving to the car,' Schröder concludes. Even if the M2 has very tangibly developed some manners, this first evidence is certainly positive. M division's big birthday might just have gained a newly subtle star guest. ✕

Engine In-line six-cylinder, 2993cc, twin-turbo
Power 440bhp (est) **Torque** 405lb ft (est)
Weight 1640kg (est) **0-62mph** 4.5sec (est)
Top speed 155mph (est) **Basic price** TBC

- + First signs of the new M2 show matured handling
- Perhaps a little too grown up? And it'll be heavier, too

evo rating ★★★★★