

CITY SLICKERS

These days, the pinstriped brigade have small families and big debts. We took a Porsche 968, Audi S2 and BMW M3 to the City to see which fast coupe best suits the suits



In the days when the Iron Lady ruled, Porsches and Yuppies went together like cellphones and wine bars. No self-respecting wearer of red braces and a striped shirt was complete without one, preferably a 911 in Guards Red.

Now it's a sadder, wiser world. Our man has almost certainly waved bye bye to his Porsche and more than likely his job, too. And there are rumours of a backlash, that the shiny status symbol can't cut it in City circles any more, that

Porsche envy has gone the way of matt black desk accessories and Nigel Lawson.

We had to find out if that was true. So we took a Porsche and two of its gleaming German high-performance rivals to the centre of the City, the heart of the Beast, Mammon's own territory. The Broadgate office development.

But there's a twist. We didn't take just any German sports cars. Today's city slicker, even if he survived the recession, may well have dumped the Porsche anyway – because the Yuppie of the '80s has

more than likely become the daddy of the '90s.

Today, he needs startling performance, the very latest in German sports car technology – plus plenty of nappy room. Which brings us to our three two-plus-two Teutons.

They'll take Roger, Belinda and little Harry; they'll go awfully, awfully quickly; and they'll impress the boys at the merchant bank.

Our three contenders are pretty awesome cars by anybody's standards.

Audi's £30,495 S2 Coupe is an evolution of the legendary, world rally championship-winning, four-wheel-drive, turbocharged Quattro.

BMW's latest version of the stonkingly rapid, road-legal touring car racer, the M3, now has a sleeker body, a bigger and more powerful six-cylinder engine and a £32,450 price tag.

The third of this high performance trio, the only one originally conceived as a sports car, is the £36,720 Porsche 968. It's not the irresponsible sod-the-peasants two-seater of the Wall Street era; it's a softer, safer, more sensible Porsche with four seats and room for more shopping than six bottles of premier cru Chablis and a gram of coke.

But which one should our pinstriped family man, the Gordon Gekko of Mothercare, choose?

We parked them in the middle of the Broadgate Centre in the middle of a working day and grabbed passers-by at random, subjecting them to ruthless in-depth questioning.

They varied from Aston-owning boardroom bosses to pimply postboys – and they gave us some very interesting replies...

B M W M 3

The BMW M3 comes in two colours – sober dark metallic blue and bright screaming lairy scrambled-egg yellow. It almost seems as if you get two different cars, too.

In the sober blue, the super-quick (157mph) coupe is a real street sleeper, a Q-car for the man with a sensible reputation and a responsible job and a deep dark secret: that he's a speed junkie who sneaks out of Friday meetings to burn rubber on the M11 (you know, that long, sweeping 90mph corner just as you get to the top end) on his way to the weekend cottage.

In the banana yellow, on the other hand, this car is a statement – a car that really says something about its owner. What it says may, of course, be 'I am a complete pillock, I earn way too much money and all my taste is in my mouth,' but it definitely makes a statement.

However, we had the svelte blue model, and reaction from the city was very revealing. The silver-haired boardroom bosses loved it. Although one peered suspiciously and intoned "no... the yuppie image is just as bad with the BMW as it is with the Porsche."

The younger element, who you might think would find it all too subtle, were very impressed too. Except for the odd Kev or Darren who sneered "what? No spoiler?" the reaction was a big thumbs up from the lager generation. Which might seem odd for such an outwardly sensible car, but these lads are connoisseurs of detail. They can spot the wrong sort of alloy wheel right across Liverpool Street and the little M-Technic badge on the BMW was just, as they put it, the business.

In fact, all the detailing on the BMW was the business. Like every car that wears the blue-and-white propeller badge, it seemed to have been cast as one well-thought-out piece.

The interior, aesthetically and ergonomically, is pretty much state-of-the-art too, though there isn't a great amount of legroom for back seat passengers.

The seats, in particular, really look the part. We didn't rate them too highly for lumbar or lateral support when doing 157mph round the high-speed bowl at Millbrook; but at 35 on the way to Razzles wine bar in Chingford they would be very impressive indeed.

They are trimmed in a suede-like material referred to by BMW as Amaretta, and it didn't look as though it would fare too well in the baby-puke test – not to mention the eight pints of Hofmeister and a mutton vindaloo test. However, for our family financier, there was certainly plenty of room in the boot for the bumper pack of Pampers and the pushchair.

However, one thing united the management and the assistant deputy brokers – the price. Everybody thought that it was just a bit on the expensive side for what is, in most people's eyes, a heavily tweaked 3-Series BMW. Great car, they said – shame about the capital outlay □

A U D I C O U P E S 2

This was the car that had all the City thirty-somethings reminiscing into their low-alcohol lager. After all, the Audi Coupe is the most recent in the line of Audi four-wheel drivers that started with the legendary Quattro supercar back in the very early '80s.

Back when most of today's brokers were wheel-spinning their mum's Escort 1.3 round the local Costain estate, the Quattro was the dream car they all aspired to. It was virtually a rally car with

a heater, and its levels of grip and handling would embarrass almost anything around at the time, exotic supercars included.

If you want to read more about this all-wheel-drive icon, our man Clarkson has dug up an original example (and its Porsche and BMW counterparts) and written about it – and that starts in a few pages' time.

The present-day Coupe S2, however, is a different animal from that highly-strung thoroughbred. Like most of its executive admirers it has got rounder, less exciting and a bit more comfortable in the intervening years.

The example we took to meet the money men was bright red, but despite that, it certainly didn't look like a lean and hungry racer. Comments ranged from "dumpy" to a rather offhand "I wouldn't give the Audi a second glance".

Not the most auspicious of signals from what should be the S2's natural market. But among the real enthusiasts who still remember the original squarish Quattro with its air of flat-nosed aggression and hint of muscle round the wheel arch bulges there was a feeling that the car had, well, sold out. The softening and rounding-off of the car's lines seem to have softened its appeal to the grown-up hooligans, too; even when they are driving in something safe, solid and environmentally responsible (as the Audi is) they still want to be seen to be driving something fast, fun and a bit different. Which the S2 is too. But, as the pinstriped petrolheads kept complaining, it just doesn't look the part any more. Visually, the Audi's lost it.

However, one thing that hasn't changed is the feel of the interior. The first Quattro and its street-level counterpart the VW Golf GTI shared a dark, claustrophobic look. In the Golf that was mostly due to acres of black plastic; in the Audi the effect was similar but even more marked, thanks to the car's high waistline.

Today's Coupe is much the same. The effect of driving around inside a pillar box hasn't gone away at all. Some found it unpleasantly gloomy, others said that it was cozy and that it made them feel safe. Over to you, Sigmund.

It's the only car in our threesome with wood in the interior, though – and whether you find that very desirable, fairly all right or deeply irrelevant on a high-performance sports coupe is probably yet

another matter for your analyst. Our pin-striped guinea pigs were fairly unimpressed, but at least the wooden bits are high quality and nicely applied rather than tacky little bits of MFI-style veneer.

The seats, however, are by far the most comfortable of the three, matching the car's supple suspension and quiet ride in making it a very civilised autobahn cruiser. And, of course, its four-wheel drive makes high-speed wet-weather driving a possibility rather than a pain.

There's plenty of legroom in the back, though marginally less headroom than the M3, but the Audi unfortunately falls down on luggage space. Little Sebastian will have to leave a few teddies behind when the family go to the gîte in France – the spare wheel takes up most of the boot, though the split rear seats do fold down to allow larger or longer loads to be carried, a feature it shares with the other two cars in the test.

But one factor that could turn the head of today's rather less fat cat is the S2's price. At over six grand less than the 968 and a couple of thousand under the M3's price, it suddenly starts to look like seriously good value.

It might not be as awesome-looking or have as much techno cred as the original Quattro, but it is still fast and it is still fun. And even those who were unimpressed by its heritage or its acceleration were converted once they heard its price. Stuff history, the S2 is an absolute steal □

P O R S C H E 9 6 8

This is the one that got the most attention by a long way. Sure, the BMW is one of the fastest road cars around. Sure, the Audi offers pedigree performance at a great price.

But the hearts inside the city gents' suits all beat a bit faster when they saw the Porsche. It still has that certain something which sparks conversation across the Square Mile.

The surprise was that a lot of the comments were anything but polite. They ranged from "too flash" through "dated but flash" to "it's just a glorified 944" to the obscene but very succinct "w***er's cars".

It seems that the gloss has rather worn off the Porsche logo for many people. But possibly there's more than a hint of envy involved – because the sprinkling of Porsche owners who turned up in our vox pop added a far more positive note.

All were still faithful to the marque and some were seriously considering a 968 as their next purchase. The ones who can afford a Porsche will still, it appears, choose another one instead of, say, an S2 and a long holiday in the Bahamas.

Our driving impressions – see the last page of this test – didn't offer much in the way of reasons for that choice. The Porsche was fairly entertaining and a capable high-performance car, but no match for even the Audi or BMW in user-friendly fun – and the less than exhilarating noise it makes is no great incentive to a keen driver.

It is, however, a 'real' sports car rather than a saloon-based coupe, which is a mixed blessing. It brings prestige and the true fast car image that both of the others to some extent lack. And, of course, there's that name, which may go in and out of fashion but which has been a favourite among the real car enthusiasts ever since the silver Spyderys of the '60s.

But it also means compromises. Luggage space is painfully limited and the boot is very shallow indeed under its pull-over cover. The rear seats are suitable for very tiny people only, and though they fold back some way it doesn't increase their usefulness much beyond taking some of the shopping that won't fit in the boot. Buying a giant pack of Pampers nappies is not a good idea.

The side supports on the front seats are a substantial obstacle to hopping in and out elegantly; but once in they hold the driver and passenger into the firm cushions no matter what manoeuvres may be attempted. It's another of those sacrifices you make for the sake of driving a real sports car.

The interior is less plush than the other two's, too, and dials and switches are scattered around the dash haphazardly, with the speedo and revcounter half-hidden by the leather wheel rim.

But, after all, it's a Porsche. It's expensive, it's a little spartan, but it does have that name.

It inspired love and hate in more or less equal quantities – but at least nobody ignored it.

D R I V E R ' S V I E W

You've heard what they think in banking circles – now here's our view, gleaned from driving round the Millbrook banking in circles.

If, God forbid, cars were electronically limited to the UK's residential speed limit then the Audi would be king. It rockets

from standstill to 30mph in under two seconds, making the S2 not just quickest off the line in this test, but faster to 30mph than all the supercars in last month's BBC *Top Gear* magazine, Porsche 911 Turbo and TVR Griffith 500 included!

The M3's 286bhp engine will effortlessly wind this car up to 157mph. But peak power is at 7,000rpm – bang on the red line – which means the fast M3 driver will need to be determined.

In the real world of urban jams and clogged motorways the Audi's mammoth torque makes it the most relaxing. There's instant pickup in any of its six gears and the S2 requires little effort to stay ahead, especially if it's raining.

The five-speed M3 and the six-speed 968 are both civilised considering their near-supercar capabilities, but the Porsche stalled occasionally when pulling away – the clutch action was not to everyone's liking, and first is right next to reverse. Reversing away from traffic lights gets you a plaque at the Annual Plonker Awards.

As far as handling goes, remember that just one of this trio was conceived as a true sports car: the 968. It gives the enthusiastic driver all the grip, responsive steering and on-the-limit control he or she could wish for. The ride is harsh and road noise intrusive, but cornering is secure. Initial understeer gently transforms into controllable oversteer if liberties are taken.

The rear-drive M3 and four-wheel-drive S2 have fantastic levels of grip, but both will understeer terminally when pressed hard. The M3 will kick its tail out if severely provoked, but by that time any onlookers will have pulled out their mobiles and dialled 999.

The M3 gave us one worrying moment – on our first top speed run on a damp, banked two-mile Millbrook track, our testers touched 140mph and chickened out; it felt nervous and twitchy. After the track dried out they made a second, successful attempt, though not feeling overly confident at 150mph-plus. Neither the S2 or the 968 gave any such cause for concern.

If it was our option, there's no doubt which dealer we'd be ringing. The Porsche may be the best handling of this trio, but it is also the runner up. The M3 gets second place as we felt it didn't offer quite as much all round ability as the Audi. The S2 wins as it is the most versatile yet virile car of this group □

B M W M 3

Price	£32,450
Engine	6cyl, 24v, 2990cc
Power	286bhp @ 7000rpm
Torque	236lb ft @ 3600rpm
0-60mph	5.97secs
0-100mph	14.5secs
Standing quarter mile	14.5secs (99.7mph)
Max speed	156.5mph
Braking 70-0mph	158.5ft
Fuel consumption during test	24.9mpg

A U D I C O U P E S 2

Price	£30,495
Engine	5cyl, 20v, turbo, 2226cc
Power	230bhp @ 5900rpm
Torque	258lb ft @ 1950rpm
0-60mph	5.8secs
0-100mph	16secs
Standing quarter mile	14.5secs (94.8mph)
Max speed	146.5mph
Braking 70-0mph	188ft
Fuel consumption during test	20.7mpg

P O R S C H E 9 6 8

Price	£36,722
Engine	4cyl, 16v, 2990cc
Power	240bhp @ 6200rpm
Torque	224lb ft @ 4100rpm
0-60mph	6.4secs
0-100mph	16secs
Standing quarter mile	15secs (96.6mph)
Max speed	151.7mph
Braking 70-0mph	168ft
Fuel consumption during test	22.6mpg