



→ RIGHT The BMW 700 also conquered many women's hearts.





BMW 700



BMW 700 Coupé



50 YEARS AGO, BMW STARTED PRODUCTION OF THE BMW 700

# THE CAR THAT RAISED NEW HOPES

The start of production of the BMW 700 in the autumn of 1959 marked the beginning of a new era for BMW. Even before the company's independence was secured after the memorable Annual General Meeting in 1959, the BMW 700 had already raised new hopes – as it turned out, deservedly so. The launch of the BMW 700 brought a BMW on the market that reflected the style of the time; contributed, by its excellent sales figures, to the stabilization of the company; and laid the foundation for profitable, large-scale series production.

By Niklas Drechsler Photos BMW AG

In the middle of the 1950s, there was a big gap between the luxurious and expensive V8 cylinder BMW models and the small bubble car, the BMW Isetta. The economic boom in the 1950s – the so-called "Economic Miracle" – brought with it an increase in customers, and consequently an increased demand for a four-seated automobile. The development of a mid-range BMW car seemed to be the answer, but BMW lacked the necessary capital to be able to put the almost fully-developed vehicle into production. As a compromise, BMW came up with a temporary solution: the BMW 600. However, it soon became evident that this improved BMW Isetta was not going to achieve the desired production volume. This led to the development of a new production series, later designated as BMW 700.

An explanation given by all engineers who were then in charge of development described the starting signal for developing the BMW 700 as

follows: "At the time, the BMW Development Division was working at full capacity developing the engineering features of the mid-range car. Therefore, on 15 January 1958, the Chief Executive of the Board entrusted Mr Denzel, who had good connections to both Mr Michelotti and the Italian coachbuilder Vignale, to develop the first prototype of a small car for the 700 Series class featuring conventional body design". Wolfgang Denzel was a BMW importer and dealer in Austria, where he had a small design workshop for adapting BMW vehicles according to customers' requests. He had a very good relationship with the then Chief Executive of the Board of BMW AG, Dr Heinrich Richter-Brohm.

It was clear from the outset that BMW was going to develop a four-seated coupé from which a saloon version could then also be developed. At the end of July 1958, Denzel was already







BMW LS



BMW LS Coupé

able to present a roadworthy prototype of the coupé.

On 31 July, the vehicle was presented to the Board and all executive staff who were involved in the project. The explanation quoted earlier commented on this as follows: "On the whole, the vehicle made a rather good impression".

However, there remained some aspects that caused lively discussion. One particularly controversial point was the "strong emphasis on the overall Italian design line, which did not preserve enough BMW character". The Board further criticized that it was not clear wheth-

er the car introduced by Denzel was supposed to be a coupé or a saloon. The Board required that the coupé and the saloon be very different in order to justify the higher price tag of the former. Furthermore, they wanted the production of the vehicle to be more economical.

The Board decided to have BMW's department for bodywork development prepare alternative drafts for the coupé and the saloon. These new drafts were to focus on more economical production and on the integration of more stylistic elements accentuating BMW's distinctive character. However, these drafts, designated "BMW 600 Coupé", did not lead

to success; so on 27 September 1958, the Board decided "to further develop the Denzel version and to place his body design on the current BMW 600 chassis with a wheelbase extended to 2,10 metres. The body of the BMW Coupé is, of course, to be designed in accordance with the experience BMW has gained regarding simplifying production".

The final design of the production model was eventually specified in October 1958 and assigned the internal development number "Prototype 107". This decision laid the groundwork for BMW to develop both the BMW 700 Coupé and the BMW 700 Saloon at mass-production levels in Munich.



21 ABOVE: A BMW LS Luxus heading towards the mountains.



"For me, the BMW 700 marks BMW's second start. I always wanted to buy one for myself but have only managed to do so this year. This car not only looks great but also impresses with a fascinating manoeuvrability and sporting agility. Even though it only delivers 32 hp, it is so much fun driving it up and down the mountains."

Helmut Rasper, BMW AG employee, owns a BMW 700 LS (1962).



← TOP: A view of the production of the BMW LS Luxus in the Munich Plant.



↙ LEFT: The then Chief Executive of the Board of BMW AG, Heinrich Richter-Brohm (middle), with the Director for Technical Sales Planning at BMW, Ernst Hof (on the left), and Helmut Werner Börsch, BMW Sales Director, presenting the BMW 700 Coupé to the press, in Feldafing 1959.

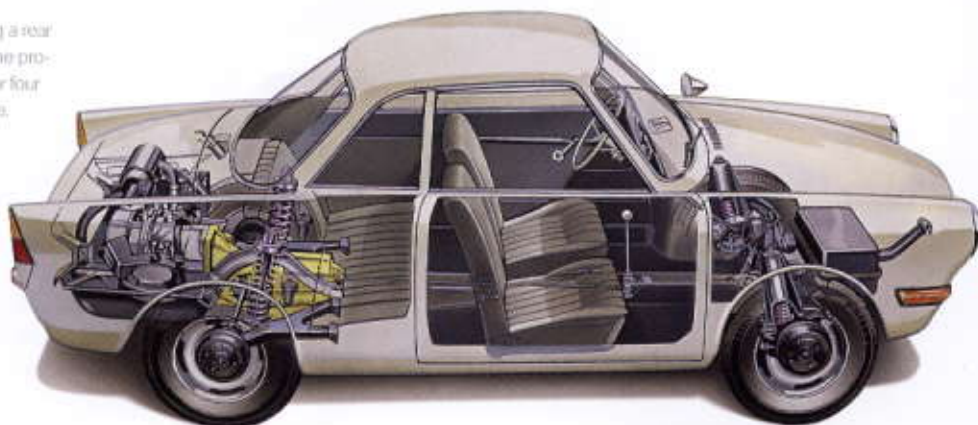
On 9 June 1959, the BMW 700 Coupé was presented to the press in Feldafing at Lake Starnberg, near Munich. The light, elegant bodywork was powered by a motorcycle engine, as were the BMW Isetta and the BMW 600. The air-cooled, two-cylinder flat twin (Boxer) engine enlarged from 600 to 697 cc displacement delivered an output of 30 hp. The engine was fitted behind the rear axle and featured rear-wheel drive. The 700 Coupé adopted the semi-trailing-arm rear axle suspension which had been tried and tested in the BMW 600, as well as further technical components from the undercarriage, drive unit, and transmission of that model. An outstanding feature was the monocoque body, which had its mass-production debut in the BMW 700 and reduced the vehicle's weight to only 640 kilograms.

Shortly after the BMW 700 Coupé had been presented to the press, it was the BMW 700 Saloon's turn to have its debut, in September at the IAA (International Motor Show) in Frankfurt am Main. Although the engineering was identical to that of the sportier coupé, the four-seated saloon boasted a far more spacious interior. Moreo-

ver, with a price tag of DM 4,760 it was almost DM 600 cheaper than the coupé, which had extra features such as heating. With steeper front and rear windscreens, as well as the modified roof, the saloon was considerably bigger than the dynamic coupé, despite the two having identical bodies. With a total length of just 3.54 m, the BMW 700 caught the eye with its excellent space arrangement, allowing for comfortable travel, even for several passengers with luggage. In February 1961, BMW launched an even-better-equipped luxury version of the BMW 700: the BMW 700 Luxus. At the beginning of 1962, the first BMW 700 was superseded by the BMW LS, featuring an extension of 32 cm in the wheelbase. The car magazine *Auto, Motor, Sport* praised its "sporty temperament" and distinctive road-holding. In 1959, the magazine had already commented on a test drive of the BMW 700 Coupé as follows: "A quite personal characteristic of the BMW 700 is its good handling at corners, which one might describe as eager cornering".

In addition to its driving qualities, the BMW 700 was also praised for its advantageous power-to-weight ratio of

↘ RIGHT: The BMW 700 featuring a rear two-cylinder boxer engine provided sufficient space for four passengers and luggage.





“A quite personal characteristic of the BMW 700 is its good handling at corners, which one might describe as eager cornering.”

auto motor sport, 1959



"I was 18 when I got my first car – a BMW 700. I have remained faithful to the brand ever since. Seventeen years ago, I bought the BMW 700 Convertible. It still has both the original paintwork and engine and runs like clockwork; this car attracts everyone's attention. The other day, a random driver blocked me, forcing me to brake. When I stopped, an elderly gentleman got out of the car and told me enthusiastically that he was the one who had hand-sawed all dashboards for all BMW 700s delivered in Munich."

Robert Betz, fund manager,  
owns a BMW 700 Convertible.



BMW 700 Cabriolet

only 21 kg per hp, as well as the acceleration values, which at the time were very impressive for a car of this size. The 700 Coupé accelerated from 0 to 100 kph in 25.9 seconds, the 700 Sport in just 19.6 seconds. Today, even though these acceleration values would not be considered exceptional – no BMW needs longer than 10 seconds to accelerate to 62 mph – the BMW 700 would still be considered an efficient vehicle. Boasting a gas consumption of remarkably 47 miles per gallon, the BMW 700 was, compared to its contemporary competitors, in a class of its own. This was especially true of the BMW 700 Sport: soon after its debut at the Nürburgring race track in August 1961, its fans nicknamed it "the little fighter". Back in the early 60s it was a very popular motor sports model, involved in some exciting duels on the racetrack against competitors such as Steyr-Puch and Abarth. Thanks to an increased compression ratio, a more dynamic cam-

shaft, and a Solex twin-carburettor system, the two-cylinder flat twin engine now boasted 40 hp. This sporting package was completed with an optional sports gearbox and a harder suspension with firmer dampers and an anti-roll torsion bar. A surcharge of merely DM 550 over the price of the conventional BMW 700 Coupé made it an attractive offer. In January 1963, the 700 Sport was renamed BMW 700 CS. The same engine was also fitted into the BMW 700 Convertible, featuring a body designed by the coachbuilder Baur that was in production from 1961 to 1964.

Soon after the first coupés had left the production line in July 1959, it became clear that BMW had made the right decision with the BMW 700. In 1960, BMW sold more than 35,000 units and the BMW 700 accounted for almost 60 per cent of the company's total turnover. As a result of the great demand, customers had to wait several months for their car to be delivered. In coun-



◀ LEFT The BMW 700 was also very successful in motor sports.



"When I was 18, I had a Lloyd Arabella and most of my friends drove Isettas or Goggos. Only one of them had a BMW 700 Coupé and it was always superior to all of our cars with regard to speed as well as road-holding. Back then I swore to myself that one day I was going to buy one of these "working class Porsches" for myself. In 1991 I finally bought two convertibles. One of them I have been able to reconstruct. With all the chrome it is a real eye-catcher."

Karl Goeb, former BMW AG employee, owns a BMW 700 Convertible (1964).



of the company this will, however, remain wishful thinking: characterized by the typical two-cylinder engine rhythm and cooling-fan noise, it will always remain bound to the small car class, at least much more so than those successful four-cylinders of this class with their entire automobile character looking up more than down".

Once again this highlighted that the BMW 700 was not really capable of

filing the big gap between the big V8 models and the small car class. Despite all its success, the BMW 700 had merely affirmed that BMW really needed to add a fully-fledged, medium-sized saloon car to its model range. The first representative of this "New Class" was the BMW 1500, presented at the IAA in 1961.

tries with high import duties on automobiles BMW only delivered assembly kits to assembly plants; this was how the BMW 700 came to be built in Belgium, Italy, Argentina, and Israel. By 1965, BMW had produced a total of 188,121 units of this production line. At the end of the day, the BMW 700 successfully led the company through and out of the crises of 1959.

Despite all the success the BMW 700 had achieved, a certain hint of bitterness remained. The car magazine *Auto, Motor, Sport* conceded a point to those BMW development engineers who, although appreciating the BMW 700 and aware of the company's limited possibilities at that time, would have preferred to see a four-cylinder in-line engine in that model. In the issue 21/1959 the magazine wrote: "One might actually wish for this excellently designed Coupé to feature an engine having more than two cylinders. In view of the particular situation

