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All Clear

More scratches than a Burt Bacharach vinyl? Cloudier than the British summer? Then you need our guide to cleaning products for your plastic rear window.

By and large when German car manufacturers do something they tend to do it properly and their convertible cars are no exception. While British and Italian manufacturers were turning out mouldy MGBs and rusting Spiders, Karmann had quietly been turning out the Beetle cabrio with its triple-lined hood since 1949 and Baur BMW convertibles have been with us since the 2002 Cabrio in 1967. Successive generations of open BMWs have seen the roof improve to the point where it's often warmer and quieter than its tin-topped equivalent. But one thing still let the open BMWs down until recently: the plastic rear window.

Where the Golf Cabriolet, the Mazda MX-5 and even the Beetle all came with glass rear windows sewn into their convertible roofs, BMW made do with a fragile plastic window. In the days of the 2002 and maybe even the E30 3-Series this was almost acceptable but when they were asking a cool £32,160 for a 328i convertible in 1998, it was a bit much. The Z3 and even the £80,000 Z8 also came with the plastic window and it was only with the introduction of the current 3-Series convertible that BMW switched to glass.

If you've ever owned a convertible with a plastic window you'll know how difficult it is

to keep them looking decent and most Z3 owners will be only too familiar with the yellowing these windows suffer from, as well as the swirling scratches they develop no matter how careful you are.

Complain to your BMW dealer and he'll sell you a tube of 'Original BMW Cabrio Hecksheiben-Reiniger', which is essentially a plastic polish, but just how much can you do with polishing compounds to restore your plastic window?

We rounded up five different products and put them to the test using one very well-worn M3 roof and a pretty scratched Z3. Here's what we found.

THE PROBLEM

Here's the main problem you're looking at with both the 3-Series and the Z3. The horizontal scuffing is a result of the way the window folds against itself when it's lowered and unless you clean it meticulously each time you lower it this is unavoidable.



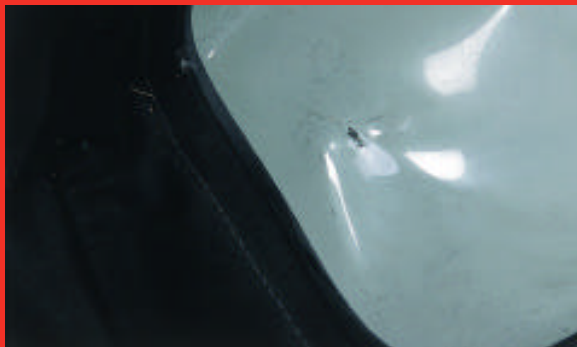
The yellowing you can't do much about — unless you only drive the car at night. It's all down to the reaction of the plastic to UV light from the sun. And summer was what you bought a convertible for.



The swirling scratches are a result of general road dirt and even from washing the car. No matter how careful you are, it's difficult to wash off the gritty dirt without adding minute scratches.



No matter how many miracle cleaners you use, you can't do much about this. Major damage like this will leave the plastic permanently distorted and even when the window heats up in summer sun it won't regain its original shape.



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1 This is the official BMW product, the snappily-titled Original BMW Cabrio Heckscheiben-Reiniger. Most dealers will keep it in stock and it's only around £6. It looks much like toothpaste and applying it is as easy as... well, brushing your teeth.

2 This is the other end of the scale. The high-tech Hindsight cleaner is a two-part process which was developed as a result of research in the medical industry. At £39 for a 70g kit, it's more expensive than the other products but

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puts the essential waxes back into the plastic so offers more long-term benefits in restoring the flexibility to the window. The real benefit of Hindsight is in improving the light transmission through the screen. We'll spare you the details behind the science but suffice to say, if you're cleaning clear plastic products designed to enter the human body, you need something which works. I feel a bit queasy now.



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SAFETY

The first rule of working on cars and using tools of any kind is don't take risks:

- If you're using power tools, protective gear is essential.
- Never work under a car without supporting it using axle stands first.
- When cars catch fire, they burn fast. Always have a fire extinguisher to hand.
- If you're not completely confident in your own ability to complete any task safely, don't even start it. Leave it to the experts.

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3 Another British-made product is the Renovo cleaner, which retails at £16.20 for 100 ml or £5.59 for 30 ml. Simple to use, it's a single-stage cleaner which was recommended to us by MGF and Mazda MX5 owners, both cars which suffer from a similar problem.

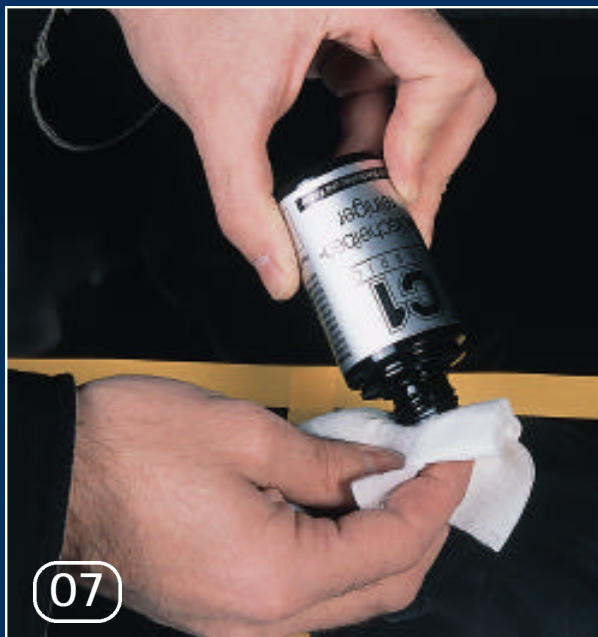
4 The C1 Cabrio cleaner is manufactured by the firm 'Dr O K Wack Chemie' in Ingoldstadt and sold in the UK by iAuto. This product is recommended and sold as an own-branded cleaner by at least one car maker. It's a solvent-free formula

which also seals the window to make it water repellent and prevent dirt from adhering to the clean surface. You're looking at £6.18 for a 100 ml container which is enough for several applications.

5 The BMW cleaner is a simple single-stage application and is applied with cloth like any polish. We found it removed a great deal of the general cloudiness in the plastic and it seemed to do a really good job — that is, until we tried...



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6 ... the Renovo cleaner. Like the BMW product, it removed much of the cloudiness but seemed to pull far more dirt out of the window too, with the rag turning black after just a few seconds of rubbing. The surface didn't feel quite as waxy afterwards as with the BMW polish, although that's a very subjective judgement.

7 Next up was iAuto's C1 Cabrio cleaner. Again, the cloth quickly turned black with the dirt removed from the plastic and it was certainly the equal of the Renovo cleaner. Like Hindsight, it also includes waxes to penetrate the plastic.

8 Now for the Hindsight, which comes in a box with the two components, a polishing cloth and dire warnings about skin contact. The two-stage process makes it hard work to apply but the results are worth the trouble — it removed minor scratches just as well as the other products but the area cleaned with the Hindsight did feel softer and more flexible afterwards. One of the product's main advantages is that it protects the window as well as cleaning it and the makers recommend using it in very cold weather to reduce the risk of the plastic splitting as it becomes brittle. Hindsight 1 dulls the screen but does protect it, while Hindsight 2 adds a bright shine to the plastic.

9 The result? All the products do what it says on the packet and all of them produced an amazing difference on a window we really thought needed replacing. The deeper scratches couldn't be removed of course, but the scuff marks had all disappeared along with the yellowing.

Our Z3 driver summed it up like this: "In the dark now you can see details in the mirror instead of just vague shapes".

You want a verdict? We're not out to do a product comparison here, rather find out what can be done to revive a tired window, but here are our impressions anyway. The BMW cleaner is good, but the aftermarket products do seem to have the edge on cleaning the ingrained dirt out of the plastic, and of the cheaper products we found ourselves arguing between Renovo and C1 Cabrio. Rest assured, you won't be disappointed with either. As for the Hindsight, it's much more expensive than the others but did seem to make the plastic more flexible so offers useful long-term benefits. If you're restoring the window on an older car then it would be worth spending the extra cash to bring back some flexibility and lengthen its life.

THE REST OF THE ROOF

So you've got the window looking good but now the rest of the roof suddenly looks a mess. What can you do about it? BMW used a high quality fabric on its roofs but you can't just scrub away at them with detergent and scrubbing brush. Cars which live outside will also tend to develop mould in the exterior seams and, on the 3-Series especially, at the base of the rear quarters.

Fresh from our success with the window cleaners, we looked into cleaning the rest of the roof and both Renovo and iAuto offer fabric cleaners suitable for the 3-Series fabric. Again part of the Wack range, the 'Verdeck-Reiniger' is a spray-on foam cleaner at £10 per can, while Renovo offers an extensive range including dry cleaner (£11.95), reviver (£16.95) and proofer (£11.95), all available in a kit with the plastic window polish at £47. We tried iAuto's C1 foam cleaner in a quick and dirty test and here's what we achieved.



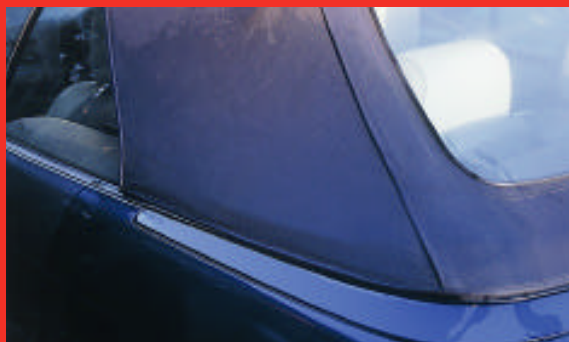
Here's your problem. This car hadn't been washed for a while but even in just a few weeks this green mould had appeared on the rear quarter. It washes off but always reappears a few days later.



Using the cleaner couldn't be simpler. You basically just rinse off the worst of the dirt with a sponge and then...



... spray the cleaner directly on to the roof. We held our breath at this point but the instructions made no mention of faded cloth and sure enough, the colour of our blue roof was unaffected.



Let the cleaner work for a few minutes, rinse it off and here's the result — a mould-free roof, which gave us the enthusiasm to go on and clean the rest of it. Use the cleaner every couple of months and the roof should stay rot-free and last longer. At a tenner for a can, that's money well spent.

REFURB OR REPLACE?

It's amazing what you can do with these plastic polishes to revive a tired window, but what do you do if your window has well and truly had it? On the 3-Series you're looking at big money but on the Z3 the zipped-in window can be changed without removing the roof from the car.

You're looking at £200 for the part from the dealer but fitting it is really quite straightforward. Essentially you need to prise out a retaining clip at the bottom of the window, after which you can remove the sealing tape and then open the zip all the way around the window and zip in the new one. You'll need to use a fair bit of strength and the ambient temperature needs to be above 20 degrees C for you to have any hope of doing the job but it's a whole lot cheaper than a new roof. Find links to more details posted at www.zroadster.net.

If you've got a 3-Series with a really scruffy roof, then one course of action is a specialist dismantler. Regular Total BMW advertisers Leicestershire BMW (01530 811212) and FAB (01594 860325) both have a selection of roofs in stock and replacing the entire roof complete with frame can be a lot easier and a lot cheaper than fitting a brand-new roof to your existing frame. FAB wants around £300 for the electric M3 roof used in some of our photos and now we've cleaned it up for them it's well worth the money.



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