

TVR GRIFFITH

Power, looks and a glorious noise make the best traditional British sports car of the '90s a brilliant modern classic, reckons **Malcolm McKay**

PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER



'So close to greatness, it hurts,' wrote *Autocar & Motor*. The Griffith seemed an unlikely candidate for greatness: a glassfibre-bodied, separate-chassis sports car from a company with a chequered history, using an ancient V8 engine that first appeared in a glassfibre/steel British sports car (the Warwick) 30 years earlier. But the testers were right. The Griffith is a superb embodiment of all that is best in British specialist car production – if, that is, you find a good one. A neglected Griffith will be a nightmare, at least until you've spent a small fortune putting it right.

Like Sir William Lyons at Jaguar, TVR boss Peter Wheeler and his team styled their cars full size, in the foam. That, in part, is why the Griffith, styled by Wheeler with John Ravenscroft, can stand beside the XK120 and E-type as one of the most beautiful British sports cars ever.

TVR would paint the car any hue the customer chose, though blue with magnolia trim and green with a similarly light interior are the most common colour schemes, followed by red. One-off paint jobs may look great, but bear in mind the higher cost of repainting if it gets damaged.

Glorious styling, supercar pace, robust drivetrain, a clever roof and an exhaust note to swoon for: all contribute to making the Griffith as desirable today as it was when new. After as much as 17 years' use, however, some are getting tired.

Rust is now the Griffith's biggest enemy, because – incredibly – the chassis were never properly treated. Powder coating just isn't good enough: it gets chipped and flakes off, then rot sets in with a vengeance. Wishbones usually go first, which is bad enough, but they're not too expensive to replace if you spot it before they collapse. Chassis rot can lay you open to a £6k+ bill for a full rebuild on a new chassis if it's really bad. Before you buy a Griff, get it on a ramp and check that chassis really thoroughly. Look for accident damage, too – this is a powerful car that goes super-fast and can be a real handful in the wet, so quite a few have been crashed.

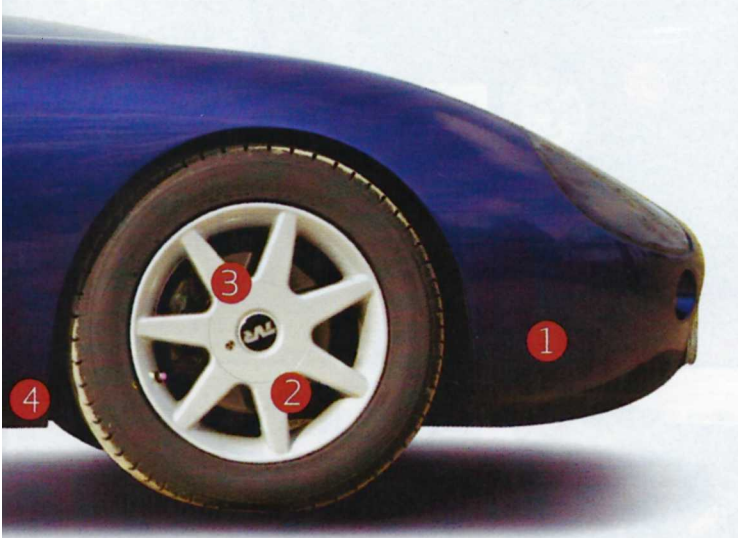
The engine is the next big potential bill, but thankfully most are cared for. Electrics can be unreliable if damp gets into them, particularly if the car is left unused, and moisture can ruin the fragile trim. But it's worth noting that a well-maintained Griffith is not the bundle of trouble many expect: it should be reliable and huge fun, with good parts supply at reasonable prices.



Griff chassis developed from that of Tuscan Challenge racer



Griffith-based Speed Six concept had TVR's own AJP engine



Rot spots

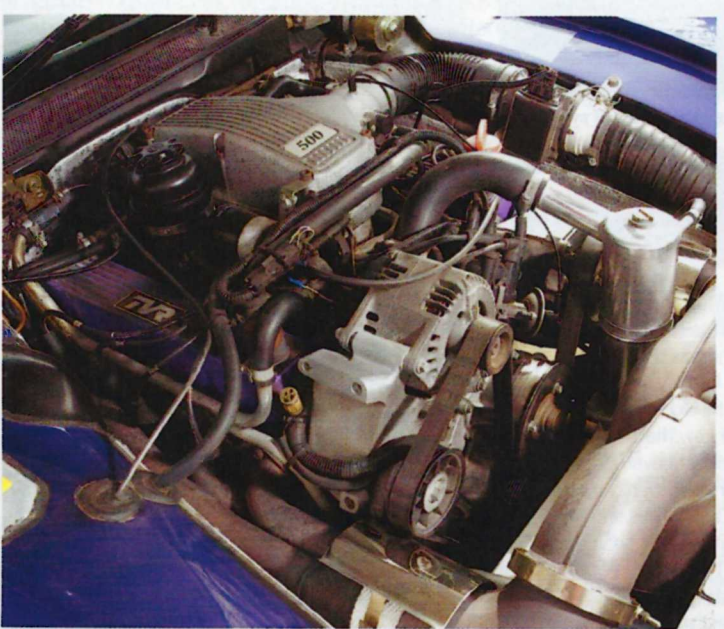
- 1 Chassis crossmembers at front; joints on main rails
- 2 Front wishbones
- 3 Chassis main rails at suspension mounting areas
- 4 Front outriggers behind wheels
- 5 Chassis main rails and side rails under doors
- 6 Body mounting points
- 7 All welded joints on chassis
- 8 Chassis outriggers ahead of rear wheels
- 9 Rear wishbones
- 10 Rear suspension mounting points on chassis



Electrics were a TVR weakness; water leaks and condensation affect the fuseboard in the passenger footwell while lack of use can wreak havoc



Odometers pack up often, especially on '95/'96 cars, so don't trust the mileage; switches are prone to failure and often pushed through the dash



Overheating is the V8's biggest enemy, resulting from neglect of the cooling system and leading to warped heads and seating problems that can lead to a rebuild. Excessive oil leaks indicate a tired motor; check for exhaust manifold cracks and leaking gaskets. A new Lambda sensor can cure MoT emissions failure



Full leather was a rare option and wears quickly, so not that desirable. Seats can collapse due to rusty springs and trim gets tatty if neglected



Simple and effective, the hood won't leak if rubbers are good and fabric waterproofed. Put it up for a while, then check for a damp smell inside



Like the chassis, wishbones were powder-coated and any chip can allow rust to start, quickly making them unsafe and even rotting right through



Wheels are 15in front, 16in rear with a space-saver spare (often missing). Early multi-spoke rims are no longer obtainable and can't be reconditioned



500s have a full air intake: early cars had a small slot beneath the number plate

On the road

A good Griffith is an absolute joy to drive, but don't get distracted: you're out to check for problems, not bask in the glory of admiring glances. So put the hood and side windows up!

You've just checked several vital points: hood fit and sealing, plus window operation. Now you can check for damp smells and demisting while driving, as well as for untoward clonks and rattles (if you can hear them above the exhaust, there's definitely something wrong). Grumbling from the back end means axle bearings are worn, which is common if the oil level is neglected.

Needless to say, engine performance should be brilliant on all models. Engines are strong if well maintained; crank failure on early 500s is mostly forgotten now. Expect 30-40psi oil pressure at speed, 10psi at tickover; less may simply be a faulty sender. Top-end noise, especially if combined with slightly lacklustre performance, indicates camshaft wear, common by 75,000 miles. High mileage is rare, but needn't be a deterrent: low-mileage cars suffer electrical problems and rusty brake discs. Check that all electrical components work properly: window and mirror motors are prone to failure.

Suspension should be taut: if not, new bushes and dampers will work wonders unless the chassis has been damaged in an impact or from severe rot. A chassis swap is feasible, but not cheap.

The brakes should be powerful. Brake parts are common to Ford models, and balljoints to Saab 900s, so parts are inexpensive. Check what wheels and tyres are fitted: not all work well with the car and original specs are best maintained.



Griffs can be a handful, but should be reliable if maintained

OWNER'S VIEW Bob Young



Advanced driving instructor Young had always liked TVRs, but believed the rumours about unreliability and high running costs until he went to the annual Griff Growl. "I learned how cheap they were to run," he explains, "and there are more parts available now than when TVR was building them. Despite the warnings, I bought the first car I saw and haven't regretted it. At first I would go for short runs and worry if I would get home, but it just kept working and has proved perfectly reliable – in 18 months it hasn't let me down yet! We won a prize at Griff Growl for the highest power recorded on the rolling road for a standard car – 276.9bhp. I just love the sound, the looks... I'll keep it standard – how much power can you use?"

The knowledge

WHAT TO PAY

Show/rebuilt	£20,000
Average early 500	£12,000
Restoration	£4000

PARTS PRICES (EXAMPLES)

Brake pads (axle set)	£17
Front lower wishbone	£180
Gaz damper and spring set	£518
Rebuilt engine	£3-6000
Water pump	£121
Soft-top	£328
Chassis	£3995

ON THE WEB

www.thegriffithpages.com
www.ballisticbanana.co.uk
www.griffith500se.co.uk

CLUBS

TVR Car Club 01952 822126; www.tvrcc.com

BOOKS

The TVR Griffith & Chimaera Steve Heath
TVRs Vol 2: Tasmin to Chimaera Graham Robson
TVR Performance Portfolio Brooklands

SPECIALISTS

Steve Heath 01908 375537; www.shengltd.com
 David Gerald 01386 793237; www.davidgerald.tvr.com
 TVR Power 024 7636 6177; www.powerstores.co.uk
 Fibreon 01384 262211; www.damagedtvrs.co.uk
 David Betty 01483 811995

TIMELINE

1990 Griffith first shown at British Motor Show, based on a TVR S chassis
1991 Re-engineered Griffith on Tuscan Challenge racing chassis shown
1992 Production starts: 4.0 (308 made, 240bhp); 4.3 (303 made, 280bhp, 305lb ft, 161mph, 4.7 secs 0-60mph); 4.3BV (big-valve, four made); 4.5 (10 made)
1993 Production ends on launch of Chimaera
1993 Oct: Griffith 500 arrives; 340bhp, catalytic converters (1640 made)
1994 Borg Warner T5 gearbox replaces Rover Vitesse unit; Salisbury LSD replaces GKN
1997 Engine revised for improved idling and low-range power, top end drops 20bhp
2001 Special Edition 100 cars mark end of Griff; Chimaera dash, round rear lights, new mirrors
2002 Last 500 SE built

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1992-2002/2265
Construction steel chassis, glassfibre body
Engine all-aluminium ohv 3948/4280/4500/4988cc V8, with multi-point fuel injection
Max power 240bhp @ 5300rpm to 340bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 270lb ft @ 3750rpm to 350lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, driving rear wheels via limited-slip differential
Suspension: front/rear independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers; front anti-roll bar **Steering** rack and pinion, optional power assistance (rare until 1999)
Brakes discs, ventilated front, with servo
Length 13ft (3962mm) **Width** 5ft 8in (1727mm) **Height** 3ft 11in (1194mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2161-2337lb (980-1060kg)
0-60mph 5.2-4.1 secs **Top speed** 148-167mph
Mpg 26-15 **Price new** £34,595 (500, 1997)

INSURANCE

E254, based on a 30-year-old London-based driver with full no-claims and a clean licence on a 1993 Griffith 4.0 as a second car, agreed value £10,000, garaged overnight, 5000 limited mileage. Richardson Hosken: 01277 206911.

THE ALTERNATIVES



MG RV8

Softer and more traditional than the Griff, the RV8 revived the MG name but was

never meant to be a world-beater. As the final development of the MGB it's of great classic interest, but it couldn't match its contemporaries.

Sold/no built 1992-'95/2000 **Mpg** 19-28
0-60mph 6.9 secs **Top speed** 136mph
Price new £25,440 (1995) **Price now** £10,000+



PORSCHE BOXSTER

The Boxster was a big change for Porsche, moving from rear to mid-engined layout,

though the agile Boxster became its best-ever seller. It doesn't have the pace or noise of the Griffith, but is well made and now good value.

Sold/no built 1996-'04/100,000+ **Mpg** 26-32
0-60mph 6.5 secs **Top speed** 139mph
Price new £33,950 (1997) **Price now** £7000+

One to buy £10,995

Year of manufacture 1992 **Recorded mileage** 47,264 **Vendor** Offord Motor Company, St Neots, Cambs; tel: 01480 811484 **For** Reasonably priced; full history **Against** Cracked tyres; scuffed alloys

With seven keepers since December 1992, this early 4.3 might sound unloved but a bulging file of invoices and a fully stamped service book are testimony to cherished ownership. It has been known to the vendor since the late 1990s – and sold by OMC three times before – while a complete set of MoTs backs up its mileage.

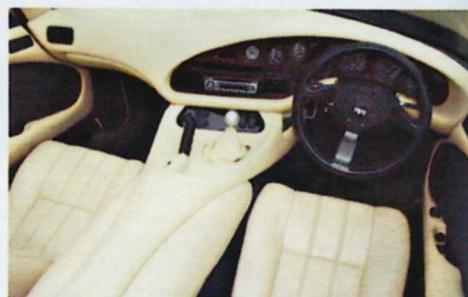
Overall, it is in very presentable condition with no sign of the accident damage that many Griffiths have suffered. The paint appears original and is perfect with the exception of some small stonechips on the nose, a crack to the top of the nearside-rear wing and a more noticeable crack to the edge of the driver's-side mirror. Underneath, some surface rust on the outriggers could do with wire-brushing and fresh paint. The remainder looks sound, but it would be worth a thorough chassis check on a ramp.

The cream leather interior is original and patinated in line with the mileage, but the passenger seat is lightly stained. The hood is recent, but the tyres are cracked and urgently in need of replacement, while the nearside alloy wheels could do with refurbishing.

On the road, the 280bhp Griffith's performance is electrifying and the 4.3-litre engine is super-smooth, with no crunching from the five-speed Rover SD1 'box. Oil pressure is 45psi at 3000rpm and the chassis is taut, the body rattle-free and the all-disc brakes strong.



Lacquer is looking tired on nearside five-spoke alloy rims



Slight stain on passenger seat may respond to hide cleaner



Engine bay not immaculate, but leak-free and fluids to level

Gorgeous to look at, thrilling to drive: the Griffith is TVR's best



Our verdict

Let's face it, a Chimaera is 90% of the car for 60% of the price, but it just doesn't stand on the pedestal of Greatest Cars Ever beside the Griffith. For looks, noise, excitement and ultimate performance, the Griffith warrants the premium. Just watch out for the chassis rot and neglect that can make ownership a disaster rather than a delight.

FOR

- Stunning looks that no other TVR has equalled
- Performance to match, from rugged Rover V8
- Practical – large boot and space behind seats
- Accommodates tall drivers as well as small

AGAINST

- Body vulnerable to accidents and stonechips
- Roof section difficult to fit in boot
- Painted chassis rots; expensive to repair