

KERBOCRAWLER

Beautiful and luridly fast, a used TVR is always tempting. But finding a good one can be tricky. James Ruppert advises

UNTIL RECENTLY IT HAS BEEN difficult to take TVR seriously. After all, the company derived its name from TreVoR, hardly an appellation to conjure with. The cars weren't that great, either: ugly kits, made and marketed by a laughably inexperienced team of enthusiasts. The company also exemplified the boom-or-bust state of small-scale British manufacturing – complete with regulation boardroom musical chairs – until the Lilley family rescued it from the scrappers in 1965.

Nowadays, however, TVR builds one of the few 'affordable' sports cars that can get you hot under the collar: the Griffith is not to be sniggered at, nor is TVR. And the Peter Wheeler era has finally banished the rumour that the cars are made from left-over ironwork from the Blackpool Tower.

The gradual improvement in TVR's reputation has caused the company's older models to be reappraised, too. Some are considerably better used buys than others, however, so I would recommend you leave all that unreliable DIY stuff from the '50s and '60s to the classic mob.

If there has been one major criticism of TVR, it is that until recently – give or take a chassis change or an engine option – it built just the one model. From 1972, it was the 3000M – no barnstormer, but the 3.0-litre



Tasmin. It was too expensive, the styling was sadly '70s, and – shame! – Ford's 2.8-litre V6 lump was joined by a puny 2.0-litre Pinto four. Luckily, Wheeler's involvement brought Rover V8 power, creating the 350i, followed swiftly by the 3.9-litre 390SE. After the Ford V6 was dropped, 4.2- and 4.5-litre versions of the Rover unit were offered. The very dramatic 420SEAC, which sported copious amounts of Kevlar and

MAKE/MODEL: TVR Griffith 4.3 big-valve **YEAR:** 1992 **PRICE:** £26,750 **SOLD BY:** The TVR Centre **COMMENT:** Can't buy new 4.3s, so it has to be used. Red and rapid

the S, whose revised 3000M styling both recaptured the spirit of TVR and looked bang up to date in a reassuringly retro way. The Ford V6 (this time it was a 2.9-litre, dating from 1988) returned to do its duty. This entry-level TVR has been consistently updated. An S2 version followed, and in 1990 this was rebadged the S3 and given bigger doors; it then received a 4.0-litre Rover V8 and the tag S4.

This potted history has brought us right up to the present Griffith and Chimaera era that has been very well documented by CAR.

When going shopping for an old TVR, it has been stressed to me that there are no standard appraisal points. Every car is different. All the 'experts' reckon that most of your build-quality expectations should be dramatically lowered, so be prepared for plenty of annoying niggles. Listen out for squeaky trim on the move: it's hard both to trace and to cure. Also examine the upholstery very closely – especially on convertibles, whose cabins wear rapidly when exposed to the elements. Hoods habitually leak, so look for water damage.

Some of the more stressful problems can be traced to the traditionally thorny problem of getting a decent earth on a plastic car. Electrical glitches abound, especially if the system has to cope with power windows or an alarm. So check that

YOU PAY YOUR MONEY

£24,000 Lowest that a Griffith gets. Chimaera 4.0s

£18,000 V8s

£16,000 SEACs – rare and very rapid, the future collectible of the old-shapers

£14,000 S3s; also last-of-the-line 400SEs

£12,000-£13,000 S2s, plus the very nicest 350is

£10,000-£11,000 Going rate for decent 380is

£8000-£9000 S1s start around here; good 350is, too

£5000-£6000 Starting point for decent Tasmins, also 350is. 3000Ms, although Turbos in good nick will go for more

Under £5000 Old kit-car stuff, really. Granturas, Tuscans and reasonable 3000Ms and Taimars. Very poor Tasmins and 350is



Essex V6 propelled it to a 120mph maximum, and to 60mph in less than eight seconds. For serious performance, there was the Broadspeed-developed Turbo. Its figures (140mph and 6.0sec 0-60mph) provided Porsche 911 or Ferrari 308 fun at a fraction of the cost.

However, this muscular little range, which included a hatchback version (the Taimar) and a convertible (the S) was replaced in 1979 by the ridiculous, razor-edged

MAKE/MODEL: TVR S3 **YEAR:** 1990 **PRICE:** £12,995 **SOLD BY:** The TVR Centre **COMMENT:** Best of the V6 versions. Black and beautiful

carbonfibre, was hailed as the fastest TVR ever. Even today's extremely rapid Griffith 500 may not be quite as quick.

The 1989 400SE brought welcome bodywork and cabin changes. But although it looked better by the end of its life, this series always had a rather unfortunate chest-wig image. So it was a smart move to introduce

everything works. The bodywork won't suffer from rot, but the paintwork can still craze with age or damage. Look for cracks around stress-bearing areas such as A-pillars. Accident damage is the biggest worry, as the quality of the repair job is paramount. The bonnet takes most of the punishment – so if it looks badly out of line, start investigating. If you can get a look at the chassis, check for work that suggests prang damage. Top-rail rust should affect only older examples.

You don't have to worry about the engines: all are well proven lumps and only with old age or neglect will they start complaining. With the Essex V6, look out for rattling tappets, smoky valve guides and low oil pressure. With the Rover V8, look out for ... exactly the same

STREET TALK

THIS MONTH IT'S FOCUS ON Ford, which has finally twigged that there's money to be made in approved-used schemes. Ford Direct is in its early stages, and relates only to cars of less than a year old. Included in the deal are an RAC check and a 30-day exchange option.

If you believe everything you read in the papers, you might think that tracking down a used Mondeo is difficult. Not true: there are plenty about, but most are at Ford dealers just waiting for you to snap them up on the Direct scheme. The most numerous are 1.8 LXs; aim to pay £10,000 or less. If you fancy a 2.0 Si, £12,000 is about right. Negotiate hard, because trade-book prices are falling as the number of used examples increases.

The really hard Fords to find are the fast ones. It's no surprise that the XR moniker has been dropped; try finding a dealer demo, or a newish XR3i. Sales managers have been telling me that they dare not register these beasts, as they are otherwise unsaleable – so big discounts ought to be in order. It's worth boning up on the Ford VIN-plate alphabet to find out how long the XR of your dreams has been clogging up the storage pound.

However, Escort Cossies are in demand; despite the garish addenda and the lousy image, buyers in the know reckon they're decent motors and will pay retail money for them. Around £12,000 buys a standard 30,000-mile car, more than £13,000 the luxury-kitted version.

things. The ancillary components work the hardest, and you can find out on the test-drive whether the diff, gearbox, brakes and clutch are still holding up; if they're not, they'll whimper loudly. Incidentally, a full service history is always very reassuring as it indicates the enthusiastic, caring owner that every TVR needs.

So where are all these not-to-be-sniggered-at TVRs? Well, the vast majority of the more recent cars can be found at TVR dealers. The TVR Centre in Barnet (081-440 6666) has plenty of late-model stock. It was impossible to miss a



gorgeous red Griffith big-valve, which even on a cold, dismal morning raised my body temperature by several degrees. Like most Griffiths, it hadn't done many miles (6000, in fact), having been bought for fun and part-exchanged for another Griffith. Apart from a few stone chips, there were no cosmetic upsets. However, I did notice how little remained of the paint between the grooves on the TVR badge, obviously shot-blasted by speed. Yours for £26,750.

A bit lower down the price scale and no less brutishly attractive are the S models. If I were asked to choose between a 1989 45,000-mile S2 and a 1990 29,000-mile S3 (both on G-plates), I'd come down on the side of the later car – at £12,995, just £1000 more expensive. The S2 was awaiting preparation, but I spotted only a few stone chips and scratches around the doors. I didn't like the light-coloured, half-leather trim sported by both cars (Doeskin and Magnolia): it always looks a bit tacky once the creases get dirty.

Over at the Chequered Flag (081-995 0022) it was time for some refreshing honesty about the marque. Bill Shannahan didn't want me to get involved with his 400SE unless I was absolutely certain I knew what I was letting myself in for. This was one of the last of the old-shape Tasmin-related relics with the Oz alloys, 'walnut-style

MAKE/MODEL: TVR 350i **YEAR:** 1989 **PRICE:** £9995 **SOLD BY:** Oxfordshire Sports Cars **COMMENT:** Bargain introduction to the marque, ideal for the TVR virgin. White and dead right

dash', magnolia hide and timber gearknob frippery that makes this such a medallion chariot. It was reduced from £16,295 to £15,995, but I inferred that £15,000 was within reach without any haggling at all. I had a soft spot for this 17,000-miler, and I liked the way Chequered Flag sold me the sizzle of a TVR while pointing out that they can behave on occasions like old



sausages (bangers). They also had a 5000-mile Chimaera tucked away somewhere at £24,495, which sounded very good value.

MAKE/MODEL: TVR 400SE **YEAR:** 1991 **PRICE:** £15,995 **SOLD BY:** Chequered Flag **COMMENT:** Very flash, very fast, very mean ... and painted seductive Cooper green

BITS AND PIECES

PARTS:

TVR componentry is sourced from very disparate suppliers, and therefore it's difficult to provide an accurate price guide for spare parts. Variations can be quite startling, so it definitely pays to shop around

INSURANCE:

Quotes (fully comprehensive) supplied by Norwich Union for a 35-year-old man living in west London. 1989 TVR 350i: £1112; 1990 TVR S3: £1112; 1991 TVR 400SE: £1191; 1992 TVR Griffith 4.3: £1191

I found more realists at Oxfordshire Sports Cars (0865 874412), who took the time to explain and emphasise that no two TVRs are the same. Even quite recent examples can look ragged and be brilliant, or look factory-fresh and be very troublesome. Their impressive line-up included an early Tasmin, a rare fixed-head coupé, a 1982 convertible at a trifling £4995, and a 1987 420SEAC for £11,000 more. In between were a bunch of S2s at around £11,000 and some 350is at about £1000 less. They pointed me in the direction of a neat, tidy and sensibly priced 350i in white. A 1989 model with black hide and power steering, it performed brilliantly on the all-important test run – no baulky gearbox, rattly engine nor whining diff: just a nice, clean, straight, comfortable and frighteningly exciting car.

If I learned anything on this Kerbcrawl, it was that every TVR is different. Getting a good one requires a modicum of luck. You have to be aware of the cars' shortcomings, and not only lump them but love them, too. Buy on condition and not price, and you won't be disappointed.