18 Buying a Griffith or Chimaera

So you want to buy a Griffith or a Chimaera... How can you tell the good ones from the bad ones? Which model should you go for? How do you make sure that the car you buy is a joy rather than an annoyance? The answers to these questions are provided in this chapter.

What do you want?

The first things to decide are model and specification. If you have read the rest of this book, you probably understand that there is no such thing as a 'standard' TVR! There is such an immense choice of cars, engines and options that choosing a particular model can be difficult.

The first choice is really based on body shape and, to some degree, the type of driving that you want to enjoy. It is also quite easy to get carried away and perhaps dismiss the 4 litre cars as being 'underpowered' or 'for wimps'. Remember that even a 4 litre Chimaera or Griffith can show a clean pair of heels to most cars on the road — so they should not be dismissed as being the 'poor relative' of the TVR world. They provide an entry level car which is still exhilarating to drive. Their performance is way beyond anything else you could buy at a similar price.

In general, the Griffith is the more sports orientated, no compromise car with a harder suspension and a generally more aggressive feel. The Chimaera is more of a 'grand tourer' car, with slightly softer suspension and a bigger boot. The styles are different and, in some cases, this will be enough to push the decision one way or the other.

The next selection point is typically the engine size. This is not a problem with new Griffiths as only the 5 litre engine was available after the introduction of the Griffith 500. Prospective Chimaera owners can choose from an entry level 4.0 litre engine, an intermediary 4.0 HC, 4.3 or 4.5 engine, or the same 5 litre engine that powers the Griffith 500.

After that the choices get harder. If you look at the specifications, especially those of the late 1995 and later cars, the brake, chassis and gearbox specifications were standardised, which means that the same brakes, chassis and gearbox were used, irrespective of the engine. These cars are undoubtedly the ones to go for because of the higher performance brakes and better gearbox and generally attract higher prices. Before late 1995, the 5 litre cars had higher specifications than the other models.

If you are new to high performance cars, it may be wise to go for the smaller engined and less performant cars, first time round, as they are not as demanding to drive and control as the larger engined cars. On the other hand, the bigger engined cars are more sought after as and many owners get used to the 4 litre power and crave more — but then have to change the car, which is a level of hassle that many do not want to go through. It is a difficult choice especially as there is a level of machismo involved in going straight to a 5 litre version. There is no right or wrong answer here — it is something that you have to decide. I 'advanced' to the 5 litre Griffith via smaller engined TVRs and a 4 litre V8S — and am glad I did so.

"I want a loud one"

The sound of the exhaust note is a very emotive subject amongst many TVR owners and, for any prospective owner that values the sound of the exhaust note above most other features, the only car to go for is an original Griffith 4.x, as these were not fitted with a catalytic converter. As a result, they do have a sound of their own which is louder than the Chimaera or Griffith 500 — and generates a considerable interest. This does not mean that the Chimaera and Griffith 500 do not have a blood-curdling roar — they most certainly do, but it is not the same as the non-catalytic converter early Griffiths.

Many cars have sports exhausts fitted to increase the car's noise and characteristics but, as with most modifications, this can put buyers off as well as encourage them. They can be retrofitted and removed, so this may not be such an issue — but it does seem that the more modified the car the harder it may be to sell it in the future.

A trio of new cars waiting for their new owners. All TVRs are built to order and therefore there can be a considerable waiting list for new cars.

Service history

Service history is *essential* with these cars. They need regular servicing and, unless this is done, there is a high risk that the car has been neglected and has some hidden faults that could prove costly.

Most extended warranties insist on the regular servicing being carried out by a TVR approved centre so, if the service book is up to date with such stamps, this is a good sign. Many older cars are serviced by independent specialists, especially when the extended warranty is no longer applicable. Some dealers used to charge excessive amounts for servicing but most now recognise that this was not really acceptable and, with the current level of competition, servicing costs do appear to have come down over the years. It is fair to say that as the main dealers have moved to the modern AJP-engined cars, the good independents have picked up the servicing of the Rover V8 engined cars. There is the argument that they see more of the older cars than the dealers do and this helps keep the knowledge and expertise up to date. Many have even started to make replacement parts for those parts that TVR can no longer supply. As a result, a set of well known reputable independent specialist stamps should be interpreted as a positive sign for any prospective buyer.

The time to start worrying is if there are no service stamps or receipts or if the work has been done by a non-TVR specialist. This is usually symptomatic of a 'it's a Land Rover, I'll service it like a Land Rover and save money' approach to servicing. In some cases, such servicing can be fine — but the risk of missing an important check or work is far higher. It is this risk that can be very difficult to assess. Talking to the previous owner can often shed some light on this.

I must stress that a complete service history should not be considered a replacement for a mechanical inspection or that a set of approved TVR dealer stamps will mean that the car is in perfect condition. Although such a set of stamps is often a good sign, this has to be evaluated with the other information to form an opinion about a car.

When calculating the cost of the car, car tax, insurance, servicing, repair and depreciation costs must also be taken into consideration. There is no point buying one of these cars and not maintaining it. If they are driven hard and with little or no maintenance, they quickly degrade — and it costs more to rectify the faults in the long term. One of the biggest mistakes that prospective owners can make is to assume that because it has a Rover engine, maintenance requirements will be similar to a Land Rover.

Another point to remember is that only a few thousand cars were made. The Chimaera has been TVR's most successful model, with about 7-8,000 cars produced in total. Only 602 Griffith 4.x cars were made and the Griffith 500 production since 1993 has totalled about 2,000 to 3,000 cars. If your 'ideal' specification is too closely defined, the car may not even exist and you could be in danger of spending a lot of time chasing an impossible dream. It may be easier to find a good car and bring it up to your specification, rather than reject a car that does not have absolutely everything you want. Also bear in mind that good cars are often in demand. If the start of the summer is hot, the supply of cars can dry up as

A dealer's showroom of TVRs. Be careful! Simply taking any one of these cars out for a test drive is enough to get you totally hooked... and make you ready to sign anything just to take the car home with you!

demand exceeds supply. More cars come onto the market in the winter, so choice is generally higher and prices about 10% lower.

Low or high mileage

Low mileage cars seem to fetch far higher prices than high mileage cars. A typical TVR will do about 3,000 to 5,000 miles per year — so it is classed as a low mileage vehicle. Higher mileage than this results in lower prices. But beware: a low mileage car that has been stored and not serviced regularly may not be in good condition. A car's condition and history are very important factors and probably more crucial than the actual mileage.

This is often a contentious issue as many high mileage cars can be in a better condition that a low mileage car. It is true that higher mileage cars will be cheaper than a lower mileage version and this seems to be down to market forces rather than any real logic.

New versus second-hand

This question used to arise but with the Griffith production finished and the Chimaera production in its last stages, the possibility of buying a new car can be very limited. The advantage of a new car is that you can specify exactly how you want it, right down to the colour of the piping around the carpet and the stitching in the leather! The downside is that you might have to wait some time before you can get the car. Currently, the waiting list is about 6 to 9 months, with a peak usually in October or November caused by the need for spring deliveries.

The alternative is to buy a second-hand car. The advantages are that you don't have to wait for the car, it has already been run in and you can simply get in and enjoy it. A second-hand car will generally be cheaper but, as depreciation is low, the price of relatively new cars can be close to list price. The disadvantages of a second-hand car are that you may well have to accept a compromise concerning the specification, especially if the colour scheme is not one of the more common ones, e.g. dark green or blue.

Private versus dealer

This is another perennial question as prices for private sales are generally lower than buying the car from a dealer. The big difference is that a private sale provides no warranty or comeback on the seller. The buyer buys the car as is and it is entirely the buyer's responsibility to ensure that it is what it is supposed to be. In the UK, the rule of 'buyer beware' is a key phrase. If the car engine blows up after the car is purchased, the seller has no responsibility whatsoever.

Buying from a dealer is different in that the Sale of Goods Act starts to come into force and there is a defined legal responsibility. In addition, most dealers provide a 3 month warranty with the option of a warranty insurance policy. This provides the buyer with some comeback if the car breaks down during the warranty period. Advocates of buying privately will argue that these warranties may often not be honoured and that you can save some money buying privately. Advocates of the dealer approach say that the warranties are good and that they have saved some hefty bills and provided piece of mind. However, it is important to consider some other factors before deciding what to do.

TVRs are a low volume production car, so the numbers that are available privately can be low and involve a lot of travelling across the country to see and test them. This can quickly eat into any potential savings. A dealer will often have a selection of cars, making it is easier to make a comparison between engine sizes, the Griffith versus the Chimaera, and so on. If you already have a TVR, the dealer will also often give as good a price for a trade-in as you would get privately — removing the problems of transport to pick up the new car and also the hassle of having to sell the old one.

In my opinion, the real problem with buying privately is that despite the precautions you take, in the form of professional vehicle inspections and outstanding credit and insurance claim checks, the end responsibility for assessing the car's condition and likelihood of any problems is yours. Get this right and you can save some money. Get it wrong and it may cost several thousands of pounds to put right. With a purchase from a dealer, the dealer takes that responsibility legally, making it a less risky route. It might be a little more expensive but at least you have some legal comeback if things go wrong. Essentially, the decision is all about risk assessment and these risks can change dramatically, depending on the car and the circumstances.

Do not dismiss the dealer route if you are selling a TVR either. I have traded in three TVRs and, in each case, was given trade-in values higher than the then going private sale value. In some cases, this difference can make buying from a dealer no more expensive than buying privately. The reason for 'premium' trade-in prices is that dealers will often buy privately to ensure a good selection of cars. Don't assume that a dealer will automatically give you a bad deal as it all depends on the circumstances. Remember, if you don't ask, you won't know!

From a personal point of view, trading in also means that you don't have to worry about placing adverts, time wasters who simply want an opportunity to ride in a TVR and all the other hassle that a private sale can cause. In addition, there is the knowledge that the new owner will have some protection which a private seller is not legally obliged to provide. It is a clean process with no risk of recrimination. Whichever route you take, you can make good or bad purchases, so be careful!

Getting the knowledge

A buyer who is knowledgeable about a car is unlikely to buy a bad one. So how do you get this knowledge? I suggest joining the TVR Car Club (TVRCC), going to local meetings and talking to current owners. This is how much of the information in this book was sourced: either from the Club magazine 'Sprint' (which is also a good source of 'for sale' advertisements) and from members' personal experiences.

Most owners are more than willing to discuss their cars and show you exactly what they are talking about. The more you discuss and look at the cars, the better you will be at judging when you have found the right one.

Be prepared to make a decision quickly. This is difficult in some cases — but if you find a car that meets your specification and in the right condition, chances are that other potential owners are on its trail. However, be careful not to fall into the 'rose tinted glasses syndrome', where your judgement is clouded by the desire to get a car. In the end, you have to make a decision. This is why it is important to go and look at several cars before you even think of parting with your cash. By the way, there is nothing to stop you making an offer subject to a later inspection. All sellers have been buyers and understand the dilemma.

Running costs

The recommended service interval is 6,000 miles or 12 months, whichever comes first. As most cars do less than 6,000 miles, in practice this means once a year. A 6,000 mile service costs about £300 to £500, but there is some variation in the costs due to different labour rates and the service interval.

The cost of insurance is high but not as high as you might think. The cars are classed as group 20 or 20+ but the premiums can be reduced if it is a second car, garaged and alarmed, and subject to a limited mileage clause e.g. you agree to do less than 3,000 miles in a year. The best deals are often available from specialist brokers, several of whom advertise in Sprint, the TVRCC's monthly magazine.

Fuel economy is *very* dependent on driving style. I kept records of my Griffith 500's fuel consumption and worked out that on long motorway cruises, it returned about 22-24 mpg, with the best run at 25 mpg. Around town, in light traffic, this dropped to about 18-20 mpg. With heavier traffic, expect about 15 to 18 mpg! My Griffith 500 averaged 21 mpg over about 4,500 miles, including six track days which reduced the fuel consumption down to 10 mpg or even lower... The smaller engined cars are slightly better, in terms of fuel economy, but the figures given here are reasonably representative.

New tyres cost about £120 to £200 each, depending on the make and a reasonable amount of shopping around. Local TVRCC members often

know where the best deals are. (Another reason for joining the TVRCC and attending local meetings!) Tyre wear is difficult to predict and dependent on the make of tyre, driving style and how many track days the car participates in.... My 4,500 miles required a replacement set of tyres mainly because of the fun I was having on track days.

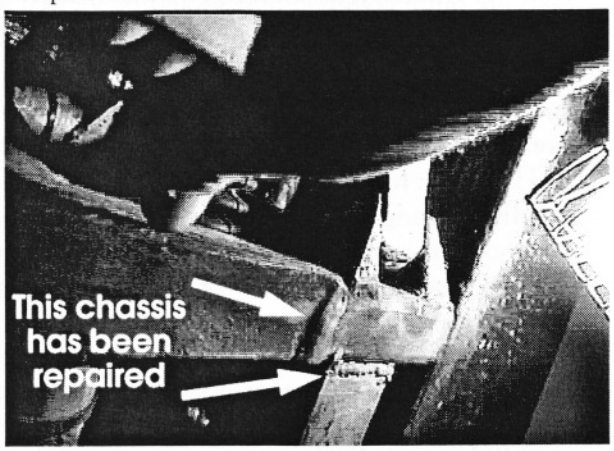
It is not all bad news. With the Griffith and Chimaera no longer in production, prices are now beginning to harden and stabilise. While the days of these cars being one of the best makes of car for holding their value have gone, the steep decline in prices has eased off. It is fair to say that the Griffith and the Chimaera 500 are the best cars to have in this respect and depreciation can be less than 10% per annum, once the car has gone through the steeper drop in its first 2-3 years. The Griffith in particular is becoming a cult car and there are signs that the cars may even increase slightly in value. However, they should not be considered an investment from a purely financial perspective — this is just a bonus. Other cars may have cheaper direct running costs but when their depreciation is taken into account, their total or actual cost per year will often be far higher than that of a TVR.

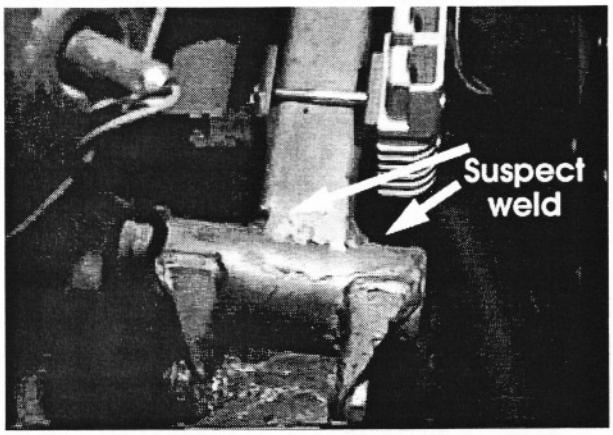
What to look for...

The Griffith and Chimaera are pretty well built but the later the car, the better the build quality. Provided they have been looked after (i.e. regularly serviced and cared for), they are reliable cars. The list in this section describes the points to look out for. Whether a single point is enough to put you off buying the car depends on other factors: how much will it cost to repair? Can you repair it yourself? Unfortunately, many of these more logical approaches can go out the window when it is exactly the colour that you were looking for!

Chassis

The chassis can rot on the outriggers, behind the front wheels and in the bracing tubes in the rear trailing arms — but this is quite rare. However, in the earlier cars, the plastic coating may have come off in these key areas, revealing bare metal. If not treated, the potential for chassis problems to start occurring may well increase over the next few years. Of course, the chassis should have been treated with Hammerite or Waxoyl to prevent rot but if it has not, make sure that the only rust is on the surface. If you find a car where the chassis has been painted and Waxoyled, this can be a good omen. The chassis tends to be low down the maintenance list and if it has been maintained well, the probability is that the rest of the car has been well looked after. However, do not rely on this — still carry out the checks. The chassis can be replaced if necessary but it is very expensive to do so, which is why some cars get bodged. Look at the welding quality see if there have been any additional welding repairs done. Again, if done correctly this may not be a problem but it could indicate that the car has been in an accident. Use the pictures in this book as a reference.





An accident repaired chassis. This car had been in an frontal impact and the chassis repaired. The welding finish is different from the rest of the chassis. In this case, the welding looks substantial but such differences should always be treated as suspicious.

Check the straightness of the chassis at the front and rear — it is easy to fit new bodywork and hide impact damage. This often requires putting the car on a ramp to get a good look. Straight edges of laser alignment equipment can be very useful in checking that what you think is a bend actually is. The chassis tubing can fool an inexperienced eye.

Cooling

The temperature should stay rock steady at 70-90°C during normal running. The fan should cut in at 90 to 92°C. Make sure that the car's cooling system is working correctly. If not, you could spend a lot of time and money getting this sorted out. If you cannot take the car for a run, start it and leave it

idling while watching the temperature gauge and note the temperature when the electric fan cuts in. Also make sure that this reduces the temperature.

Check for any coolant leaks, especially in the corners of the radiators and around the hoses and water pump.

Bodywork

Stone chips on the bonnet and on the mirror pods are quite common and should be viewed as a normal consequence of driving. If the front of the car is perfect, it may have been resprayed either to cover the stone chips or as a consequence of some front end damage. If these chips are only cosmetic and have not resulted in any chassis damage, this is usually nothing to worry about. Again, use some common sense when judging whether the damage is cosmetic and liveable with — or a symptom of something more sinister and potentially expensive.

Small cracks on the Chimaera bonnet splits are common as the bonnet does flex and this is a particular weak point. Cracks in the engine bay, especially around the front chassis mounting points and where the insulation is located do indicate a frontal impact and should raise some suspicions. If accident damage is repaired well, there should be no visible indication of the repair. There may be a reinforcing layer of matting behind the repair but that should be it.

Body panel fit

After looking at a lot of cars, you can tell whether the panel fit is right. The styling makes the door fit less critical, compared to the lines on a Wedge or an S series car. The doors may start to sag with time but this can be corrected — a job best left to a specialist.

Wheels and tyres

Check that you have four good tyres, ideally Bridgestones, as they are the best tyre for these cars. If the car has been fitted with another make, it might be a good bartering point as is a set of tyres with low or no tread at all. They should be ZR rated but VR rated tyres have been known to appear on these cars. These are not suitable for the car and should be replaced immediately.

Make sure the wheels themselves are in good condition as they are getting increasingly hard to find and replace.

Windscreen

There should be no milkiness around the edges. This is a sign of water ingress and de-lamination and particularly affects early cars or ones that have had their windscreen replaced without ensuring the windscreen edge was bedded in with sealant. This problem can be hidden by black plastic or paint on the surface of the screen but it is not necessarily a major problem as the screen can be replaced relatively cheaply.

Springs and shock absorbers

The car should be level. The shock absorbers should be functional and not leaking. The springs should not be compacted. A simple test is to push down on each corner. If the car is pushed down and then released, it should simply move back into place in a single movement.

Front suspension

This takes a hammering. Check the steering rack, wheel bearings, and so on. (The car will need to be jacked up to do this.) Upper ball joint wear can be best detected by rocking the wheel with the car's weight on it.

Look at the wear patterns on the front tyres to see if there is any uneven wear. If there is, this can be caused by a front suspension or steering problem. It can also be caused by the wrong tyre pressures or too many track days (or living in Milton Keynes, where the temptation of over 300 roundabouts can cause premature wear on the nearside front tyre! Apparently, Milton Keynes tyre companies replace more nearside tyres than offside tyres due to the roundabouts). This type of tyre wear can be difficult to assess.

Exhaust system

These do not get knocked around as much as those on the S series. They do tend to rust through, although the stainless steel ones have a very long life. Check the exhaust manifolds and gaskets. Make sure that the rubber suspension mounts are still attached. If these are loose, the exhaust can cause knocking noises which can be confused with transmission problems.

The Griffith 4.x cars are known for cracking exhaust manifolds. These can either be welded up or replaced with stainless steel versions.

Engine

This should start and rev freely when warm. The exhaust should be smoke free, with no sign of burning oil. It should idle smoothly and not hunt.

In terms of other features, check the engine does not overheat. 70-80°C while moving and 90°C only when stationary is a good sign.

Check that the engine starts when hot. Stop at the dealer after the test drive and try restarting it — you don't want to get stranded. This fault is often due to a poor earth connection and is easy to fix.

Check that the oil pressure is a good 25-30lbs. Check that the engine idles smoothly at 1,000 revs and is free revving when accelerating — you'll enjoy that bit of the road test. Make sure that the car is straight before accelerating, otherwise the tendency to spin is high, even with just a 4 litre car and especially if the road is wet.

Make sure that you get a long road test and drive the car both in traffic and on the motorway to make sure that it handles and behaves itself. With a private car, this may not be possible due to insurance restrictions. In this case, you may have to rely on being a passenger to gauge what the car is like.

Steering column bearings and joints

The steering should feel free without any sticking. If this occurs, it is a sign that one or both of the steering column universal joints are on their way out and will need replacing.

The steering is actually quite difficult to test on the road. The normal test is to let go of the steering wheel and see if the car drifts to one side. If it does, the steering geometry or joints are suspect and need further investigation. Needless to say, this test should be done at low speed with no traffic or other road users on the road. Unfortunately, with the Griffith and Chimaera, this test is of limited use because the steering is sensitive to the road camber and the car may drift to the nearside because of this. On an absolutely flat road, if you can find one, this will not happen. If the test reveals that the car pulls to the offside, be very suspicious. It may then be worth checking the geometry for problems or the chassis to see if there is any misalignment.

Clutch

Make sure it works and that there is no fluid leak. This will involve removing the inspection hatch in the inner wing on the driver's side. The clutch should not slip.

Gearbox

Check that the gear change is smooth and positive. The Rover SD1 gearbox is a bit more notchy than the later Borg-Warner unit. Of the two, the later Borg-Warner gearbox is seen as the preferred choice and these cars tend to go for a higher price. Clunks when changing gear are a bit worrying as they may indicate a worn differential or CV joint. They can equally be caused by loose mountings. These should be checked on a service so see when the last service was done and by whom. Some shock absorbers also clunk, so it is important to understand where any noise is coming from.

Brakes

Make sure that the car brakes in a straight line and that there are no fluid leaks. Any judder when applying the brakes can mean that the discs need replacing.

Electrics

Do they all work? In particular, the instrumentation, the electric windows and the alarm. Do not forget the ventilation system, radio, cigarette lighter and any extras, such as heated seats and electric mirrors.

Leaks

Check for water and rust marks on the upholstery and interior. Check that the carpets are dry underneath as well as on top. Seized or rusty seat belts can be a sign of a leaking roof. The roof can sometimes go out of alignment if one of the rear struts is bent or warped. This is easy to miss but quite annoying. It is easy to fix.

Alarm

You will probably need to have this certified for insurance purposes. It is likely to have a Gemini alarm (which may not be Thatcham 1 approved), although this depends on the age of the car. 1995/96 cars should have a Foxguard, the later cars are fitted with a Meta system. Change the alarm or your insurance company if this a problem. Pearts, for example, just insist on an alarm certificate stating that an alarm and immobiliser are fitted and working.

Warranty

Check for history. The car should have been regularly serviced. If not, be suspicious. Make sure that the service history complies with the servicing small print on the warranty. This usually means an approved dealer and within 21 days of the appropriate time or the warranty is invalid.

Finally... if you haven't driven a *really* powerful rear wheel drive car before, take it easy. If you have, still take it easy! A Griffith or Chimaera, especially the 5 litre versions, deserve some *serious* respect, especially on anything but warm, dry roads. This advice is particularly applicable when you pick the car up for the first time!

Vehicle inspection

Think about getting the car inspected by someone who knows what they are doing. Many of the dealers and specialists will do this for you and will give you an independent view on what you may (or may not) be buying. The AA or the RAC can also provide this service but they may or may not have the same level of knowledge as an independent. This is not cheap (about £180 including VAT) — but the cost is insignificant, compared to the minimum of £10,000+ that a good Griffith or Chimaera will cost! It also gives peace of mind.

The AA will check with HPI for any accidents, HP debt and so on. You will get a five page report on the car done by someone that is not blinkered by dreams of driving in the sunshine! This report will also identify work that needs to be done in the near future.

HPI check

An HPI check gives the accident and ownership history of a car and will also include details of any finance arrangements that the car may be subject to. It will cost about £30 and includes insurance cover (currently up to £10,000) against their records being wrong. This check can be done over the telephone, given the car's chassis and engine numbers, as well as the colour and registration number. Payment can be made by credit card.

Useful telephone numbers

HPI	01722 422 422
AA Vehicle inspections	08706 006 053
RAC	08705 722 722
TVR Car Club	01952 770635