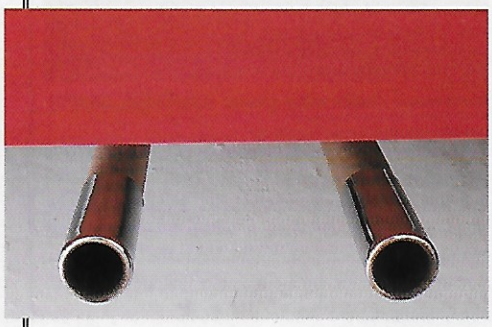
TVR M series

TVR's modern-day success story as a True Brit maker of fantastically powerful, charismatic – and stylish – sports cars makes the company's classic models more appealing than ever before. That's why we focus here on the M-series TVRs of 1972-'80. They have such an array of virtues that the logic of buying one is irresistible to anyone who loves powerful sports cars.



They're affordable: £6000 will buy a decent 3000M and £12,000 an excellent convertible. They're fast: a 3000M does 120mph and handles, while a Turbo delivers neck-snapping performance. They're cheap to maintain: rugged chassis, glassfibre body and off-the-shelf running gear a brilliant recipe. Tempted?

PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMES MANN

Blend of power and practicality proves irresistible for lovers of rorty sports cars

Owners' views

Gloucestershire-based Stuart Doyle owns the 1980 TVR 3000S Convertible in our pictures. He became interested three years ago almost by chance, but now he's hooked: "I went to buy a kitchen and found myself passing David Gerald's, the TVR specialist. I took a car out and had to have one. I loved the performance and handling, but mainly it was the looks that appealed. I bought a 3000M but what I really wanted was a convertible."

Stuart eventually found the right car in the London area, complete with a good numberplate. It had been stored for six years, but was basically in good condition. The chassis was sound and the windscreen frame (a vulnerable point on the convertible) wasn't rusty. The V6 engine, however, had seized and the paint had faded. He worked with Roger Warren and Martin Andrews on a programme of refurbishment, rebuilding the engine jointly and doing all pre-paint preparation himself. Although the interior just needed to be cleaned up, new sidescreens had to be specially made. His original 3000M moved on to make way for the convertible, but Stuart now owns a rare 1964 Grantura 1800S MkIV as well.

Charlie and Viv Blow divide their everyday driving between a 1973 TVR 3000M (see p128) and a 1974 Alfa 2000 GTV – and there's a part-restored MGA waiting in the wings. They rate the TVR highly for fun on a low budget. Valued at £6000, it's a terrific specimen mechanically but cosmetically quite good too, having been looked after well by the previous owner, a woman who had owned it for many years but virtually stopped using it because of growing children. She kept a pub where Charlie had stopped for a business lunch, and negotiations opened when he asked if the TVR in the car park could be added to his bill!

Adrian Venn of Coventry-based Exactly TVR did body-off refurbishment, which involved minor chassis repairs followed by powder-coating for long-term protection, as well as a thorough going-over of suspension, brakes and steering. Charlie speaks highly of Adrian's work and thought the cost 'extremely reasonable'. The interior could be better, but Charlie is more interested in handling and performance – which he has explored at track days at Cadwell Park and Curborough.

WHICH IS WHICH?

1600M (1972-'73 & 1975-'77) 1599cc/86bhp (Ford 'Kent' engine), 0-60mph 10.4 secs, max speed 105mph. Production: 149.
2500M (1972-'77) 2498cc/106bhp (Triumph TR6 engine), 0-60mph 9.3 secs, max speed 109mph. Production: 947.
3000M (1972-'79) 2994cc/138bhp (Ford 'Essex' V6 engine), 0-60mph 7.7 secs, max speed 121mph. Production: 634.
Taimar (1976-'79) Hatchback version of 3000M; name is a shortening of 'Tai-lgate' and 'Mar-tin' (as in Lilley). Production: 365.
Convertible (1978-'79) Not just a chop-top 3000M: proper boot, sidescreens, revised facia, many panels differ. Production: 245.
Turbo (1976-'79) 2994cc/230bhp (Broadspeed-developed Ford V6), 0-60mph 5.8 secs, max speed 139mph (convertible). Production: 20 (3000M), 30 (Taimar), 13 (Convertible).

THE CLUB

The 4500-member TVR Car Club is very active, its social events including track days, trips to Le Mans and even – in the case of one regional group – a Christmas shopping expedition to New York. The two big gatherings of the year are 'Back Home' (a Blackpool-based event in May that includes factory visits) and 'Mania' (a track weekend, held this year over August Bank Holiday at Pembrey, South Wales). Besides insurance and technical advice, the club also offers a monthly colour magazine (*Sprint*) and a website (www.tvrcc.com). You can join the club (£27 a year, plus £8 joining fee) at the website, by telephone on 01952 770635, or by writing to PO Box 36, Telford TF6 6WF.

SPECIALISTS

Henley Heritage TVR Henley, Oxon, 01491 411177; **David Gerald TVR Sportscars Ltd** Inkberrow, Worcs, 01386 793237; **Exactly TVR** Coventry, 01203 596883; **TVR Centre**, Barnet, Herts, 0181 440 6666; **Ian Bannister** Bingley, Yorkshire, 01274 565222.

Body, style and interior

TVR styling has tended to be evolutionary, so the start of the M-series in 1972 was marked not by any significant visual change – only the nose and tail styling were revised – but by a big difference under the skin. A new chassis provided the strength necessary to meet imminent crash legislation and was also more economic to build. The 'M' label comes from the first initial of Martin Lilley, who owned TVR in this period.

This chassis was still a multi-tubular design with four longitudinal members forming its backbone, but some of the tubes were thicker than before (14 gauge instead of 16 gauge) and others were now of square section. Compared with previous TVRs, the revised chassis freed interior space by allowing the spare wheel to be moved from the rear of the cabin to under the bonnet.

Parts such as Cortina MkIV handles available

Now, a generation later, the combination of this excellent chassis and a stout glassfibre body makes an M-series TVR extremely robust. These cars suffer relatively few structural problems and refurbishment, when necessary, is nowhere near as complicated or expensive as comparable work on a steel-bodied car.

Where chassis rust has occurred, the best solution is replacement of the whole chassis as localised welding is inadvisable. This isn't as alarming as it sounds: a new chassis, complete with rust-inhibiting measures that the original lacked, costs £1750 (a reasonable price in view of its complexity) and isn't difficult to fit. The body has to be unbolted at 10 points before it can be lifted clear, a morning's work for an experienced specialist with the right equipment or a day for an amateur with a couple of helpers.

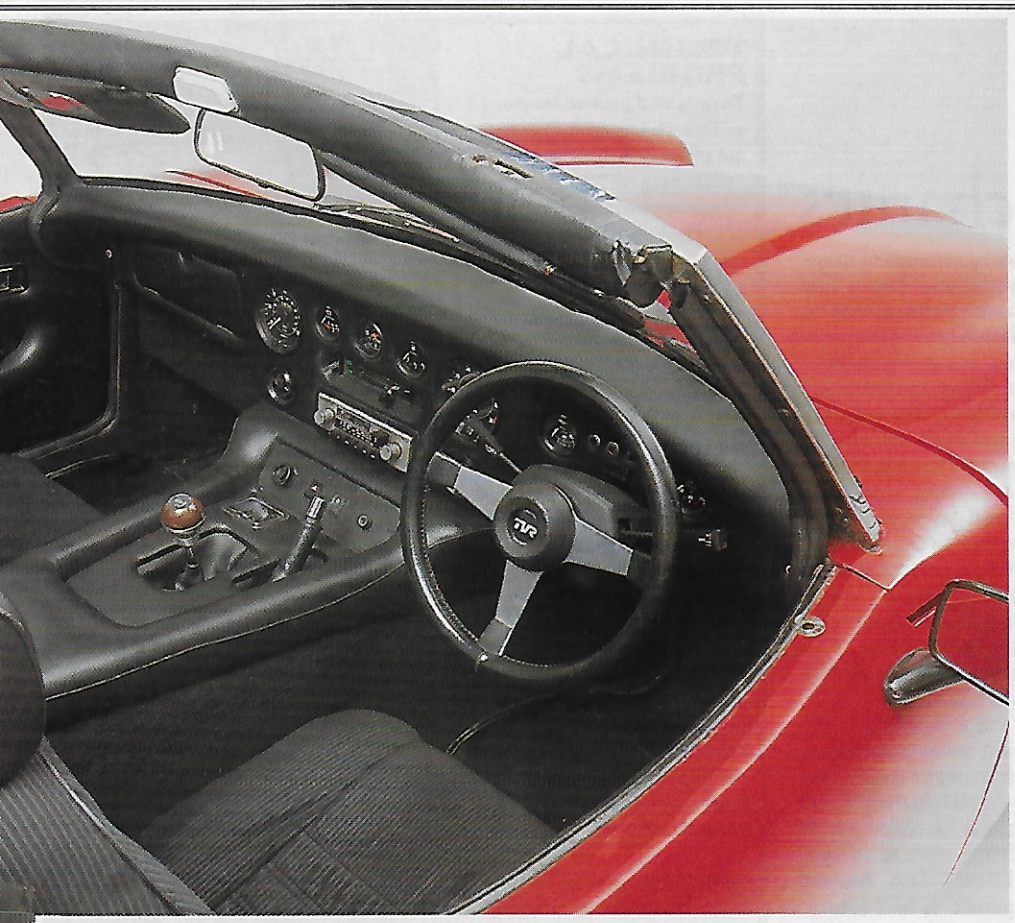
You can find plenty of M-series cars that have already received a new chassis, but it can be cheaper to buy a car with a suspect chassis and replace it. Like most unique parts, a new chassis to correct specification can be supplied by David Gerald TVR Sportscars Ltd, which owns manufacturing rights, jigs and tools for all M-series and 'pre-M' TVRs.

Interior is simple and purposeful, always finished as standard in black, dark blue or oatmeal. Personalising is common, but originality preferable. Seats (in cloth or vinyl/cloth combination according to period) are unique to the car, but can be hand-trimmed in correct materials if tatty. Carpets and Smiths instrumentation are all available. Check for interior dampness on all cars, but particularly convertibles.

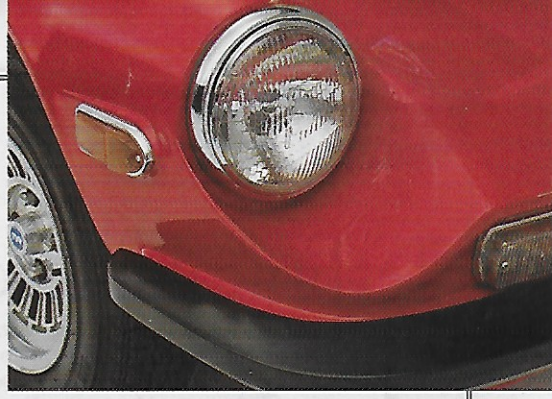
Chassis corrosion is rarely extensive, but there's one troublesome area. Between the bodyshell and the 'cage' structure around the differential is a 1in layer of felt, TVR's crude attempt at sound-deadening. Because this absorbs water and salt, rust develops in adjacent tubes, attacking differential and upper wishbone mountings – check this on a ramp.

Coupé rear window leaks at bottom corners, where water collects. And water dripping on to the luggage platform carpet can generate rust in the top of the steel fuel tank: the smell of petrol might be obvious. Aluminium replacement tank is best fitted from above, by removing window glass.

Check for chassis rot trouble spot – between 'cage' and chassis – on a ramp



Seats are unique to TVR, but can be retrimmed. Check all areas of interior for dampness



BEST BOOKS

The best historical coverage of the M-series cars is found in two books: Graham Robson's ***TVRs Volume 1: Grantura to Taimar*** (MRP 'Collector's Guide', £14.95) is a landscape-format title with lots of good archive photos, while John Tipler's ***TVR: The Complete Story*** (Crowood, £19.95) contains more colour but costs more. ***TVR Gold Portfolio 1959-'86*** (Brooklands Books, £12.95) is an excellent collection of road-test reprints.

The M-series story also straddles two other worthwhile books: Peter Filby's ***TVR: Success Against The Odds*** (Gentry) has been out of print for years, but this is such a lively account of the company's chequered history up to 1975 that it's worth searching for a second-hand copy. Finally, Iain Ayre's ***Muscle and Curves*** (Mitchell Filby, £14.95) is promoted as a 'successor volume' that completes the history post-1975.

Convertible's windscreen frame is unique to this model – and a trouble spot. Beneath the chrome-plated trim is a steel frame that rusts out of sight. This frame can flex anyway, but excessive movement indicates corrosion. A new frame costs more than £500 and takes a day to fit. Windscreen on coupés is from the Consul MkI.

Chrome quarter bumpers (used before September 1974) rust quickly, so later rubber units are often fitted to earlier cars. Rechroming can be done, but polished stainless steel replacements have recently become available.

Paint is durable for a glassfibre car, resisting the tendency to turn matt. But resprays need thorough surface preparation (rubbing back, priming) to last well. Make sure you check the whole body carefully for microblistering, paint cracks, ripples and signs of accident repairs.

Accident damage can distort the chassis, if a car is thumped heavily enough. The most common clue to a front-end smack is a kink around the lower wishbone mountings, but other tubes can be out of line. As with chassis rust, a distorted chassis should be replaced, not straightened. Apart from the safety aspect, a new chassis (which is liberally protected against corrosion) will last much longer.

Glassfibre body gives little trouble. It's so robustly made that structural problems only occur as a result of accident damage. Stress cracks can occur at corners (bonnet, doors, headlamp cut-outs), but they're not a great concern – and cracks at these points may only be in the paint.

Bonnet doesn't open far, and its front scrapes on ground when opened – best to protect it here with a footwell mat. When a front tyre punctures, engine bay access is even worse because the car is lower, so spare wheel (above the radiator) is difficult to remove. Bonnet can be made removable by fitting a quick-release conversion.

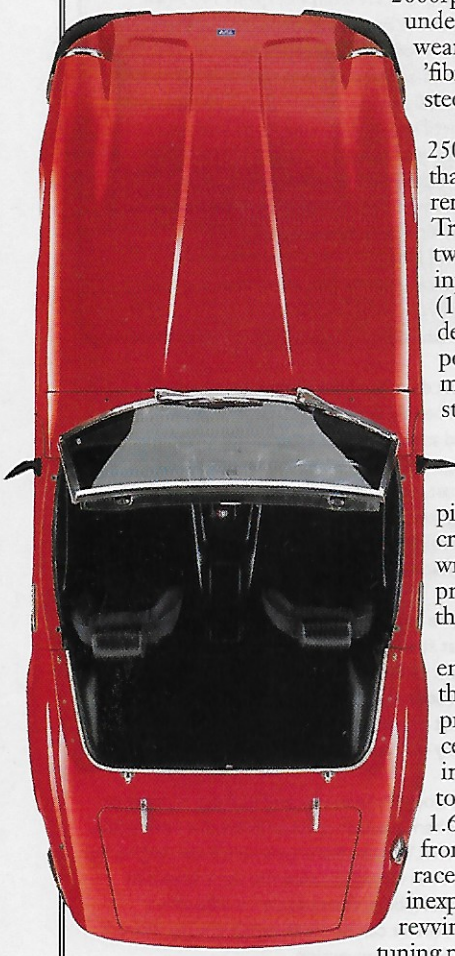
External trim often has mass-produced origins, so scrapyards can yield parts. Front wing vents (on cars before January 1975) are from Zephyr/Zodiac MkIV rear pillars, tail lamps (Cortina MkII pre-'73, TR6 '73-78', Scimitar post-'78). All badges are available new.

Doors suffer two problems. Hinges are weak (they're a poor design) and doors can drop; new hinges aren't available so all you can do is refurbish. Extruded aluminium frames for door glasses are fastened within the bottom of each door to a steel channel, where electrolytic reaction can cause the frame to break away. If the frame doesn't feel solidly anchored it will need replacement one day – and that's costly.

Technical & mechanics

Turbo excepted, these TVRs use standard versions of mass-produced engines, so parts are plentiful and cheap. The in-line four and V6 Ford units also have a great reputation for reliability and longevity. Even if you encounter a car with a tired engine, it can be better to treat this as a bargaining point rather than a reason to walk away as rebuilding one shouldn't cost more than £1000 and buying second-hand would be cheaper still.

Most UK cars use Ford's 'Essex' 3-litre V6, found in all Taimar and Convertible models as well as the 3000M. Servicing and usage dictates how this engine lasts, but 200,000 miles without major work isn't unknown. If there's a weakness, it's a tendency for head gasket problems, so check water and oil condition. Other indications that an engine is past it are intrusive tappet or bearing noise, low oil pressure (below 50psi at 2000rpm when warm), exhaust smoke under acceleration (indicating bore wear) and weak performance. The 'fibre cam drive gear can fail, but the steel alternative lasts well.



Due to the US market, the 2500M was built in bigger numbers than any other M-series model, but remains little-known in the UK. Its Triumph six was 'detoxed', with twin Strombergs instead of fuel injection. There's less muscle (106bhp against 150/125bhp, depending on year), but smoother power delivery and no injection maladies. The timing chain can stretch, so listen for the metallic sound of it hitting its casing. Crankshaft end float can be caused by thrust washers dropping out from the back of the crank. Too much movement can wreck the block, so get someone to press the clutch while you watch the nose of the crank.

Powered by the Ford 'Kent' engine in 86bhp Capri GT spec, the 1600M wasn't popular: buyers preferred to pay an extra 10 per cent for the 3000M's performance increase. Values are much lower today, but at least this ubiquitous 1.6-litre unit – used in everything from Escorts to Formula Ford racers – is economical, durable and inexpensive to maintain. It has a free-revving nature and there is massive tuning potential.

Talking of tuning, these TVRs are frequently modified, often for light competition use, although the desire for originality is growing. You can assess the merits of a 'developed' car from how it feels and what its history indicates, but it's all down to taste and how well a tuning job has been executed: seductive top-end performance might come with a tiresome lack of tractability.

Marginal cooling due to poor airflow is a trait of all these cars, particularly if tuned. Fitting twin electric fans ahead of the radiator is recommended, and the radiator itself can be upgraded to an aluminium double crossflow unit; efficiency of water pump and pressure cap (pressure runs at a high 13psi) is also important. The standard system improved when the factory introduced an 'upright' radiator in 1978.

The biggest tweak of all was TVR's Turbo, launched when forced induction was in its infancy on road cars. It can be reliable, but engine life suffers. It's an advantage if a car has already been converted to run on unleaded petrol. With the V6, this involves fitting machined exchange heads fitted with replacement valves, springs and hardened seats.

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

Four-speed gearboxes (Ford or Triumph according to engine) are generally dependable, and 1600M has a really slick change. Synchromesh on Ford 'box in 3000M weakens with age, lever can jump out of gear through worn mainshaft bearings, first-gear bearing noise can develop; TVR-designed overdrive (optional from 1976) for 3000M isn't desirable as gearchange is less pleasant. Triumph unit (always available with optional overdrive) can become noisy with worn layshaft bearings, lever may baulk into second. Some cars have been converted to five-speed, using a special bellhousing.

Differential changed from Triumph to Salisbury 4HU in 1977. Both can cope with the power, but the Salisbury is heavier-duty, quieter and sometimes fitted with optional Powr-Lok. Repairs, however, are cheaper with the Triumph diff.

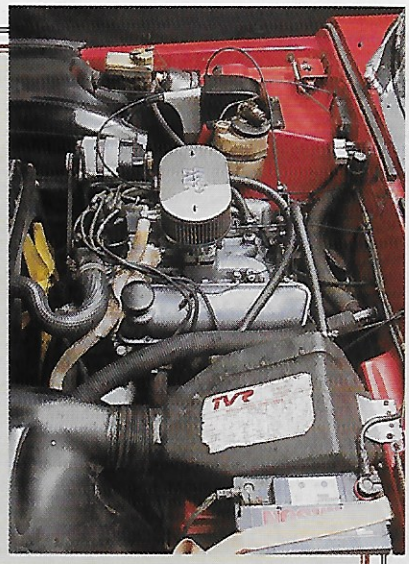
Suspension is partly TR6-sourced, but wishbones, springs and dampers are unique to TVR. Main weakness, as with the Triumph, is wear or seizure in front trunnions, which need regular oiling with EP90. Rubber bushes have a hard life, so many owners fit polypropylene replacements for durability and slightly more stiffness.

Brakes (discs front, drums rear) are straightforward and adequate in standard form, but commonly upgraded: four-pot calipers, vented discs, Aeroquip lines.

Electrical system has a poor reputation on TVRs and much of this is well-founded. Corrosion at earthing points can cause intermittent failures and many problems result from modifications. Check that everything works and all wiring appears sound.

Exhaust is low-slung and takes a pounding, so life of in-line twin resonator boxes can be short. Assess how much they've been scraped and if joints are sound.

Wheels and tyres remain original on most cars, but finding correct replacement wheels is difficult because they were specially made for TVRs. All wheels were alloy and can become pitted: standard wheels were Gemini (pre-1974) or T-slot, but optional Wolfraces common.



Specially made T-slot alloy wheels are hard to come by

PARTS PRICES

New chassis	£1756
Bonnet	£910
Rear corner	£352
Convertible windscreen frame	£528
Aluminium door frame	£705
Perspex rear window	£458
Quarter bumper (stainless steel)	£147
Quarter bumper (rubber)	£75
Front badge	£19
Fuel tank (aluminium)	£205
Footwell carpets (pair)	£38
Water pump	£55
Main bearing set	£37
Big-end bearing set	£32
Head gasket set	£73
Camshaft	£70
Cam drive gear (steel)	£99
Unleaded heads (exchange)	£376
Clutch assembly	£94
Suspension wishbone	£47
Spring/damper assembly	£70
Front trunnion repair kit	£11
Front wheel bearing kit	£23
Front discs (pair)	£41
Exhaust resonator box	£35

Prices (including VAT) are for 3000M, from David Gerald TVR Sportscars Ltd.

Market view

Considering their performance and relative ease of ownership, these TVRs offer terrific value. When you take account of the rarity factor as well, their affordability looks irresistible. Total production of all models was only 2403, of which around half survive world-wide, with perhaps 500 in the UK. The most desirable models – particularly a soft-top or a Turbo, or even the ultimate combination of both – fetch five-figure prices, but in practice you're likely to be looking at a 3000M or a Taimar, with smart examples available for around £6000 or £8000 respectively.

The situation is different in the USA, where the 2500M – rare in the UK – predominates. Any later car (1978-'80) carries a price premium because build quality improved, some mechanical niggles (such as the cooling system) were improved, and TVR – thanks to its improving image – was attracting increasingly discerning customers who tended to look after their cars better.

Taimars reflect this situation, for they are generally found in better overall condition. The Taimar dominated production in the final years because its opening tailgate was such a sensible improvement, and this bonus is just as appealing today. The quality of survivors reflects the desirability of the various models. There aren't many nice 1600Ms and 2500Ms around, but convertibles tend to have been well looked after. A replacement chassis is the biggest single factor in a car's value, and a definite advantage for long-term ownership.

Originality is increasingly preferred by buyers, and factory options add to an individual car's appeal. Most cars have a sunroof and tinted glass, while a heated rear screen, 'model band' (a logo strip along the side of the car) and Wolfrace wheels are common. The most desirable options, but rare, are leather seats and a walnut dashboard.

WHAT TO PAY

Up to £2000
Derelict wrecks with paperwork can be had for less than £1000, but you won't get a decent running car in this price bracket.

£2000-£4000
Tatty, but with MoT and usable in the short term – you can assume the chassis is on borrowed time.

£4000-£7000
Mainstream area for decent coupés, with V6 versions worth extra (1600M is £1000 less, 2500M £500 less). **£6000-£7000** secures great 3000Ms. Taimars in this bracket won't be as smart.

£7000-£9000
Taimar territory: this is where the good cars cluster.

£9000-£12,000
The right price band for decent convertibles, and it's possible you might get a sniff of a Turbo coupé for this money.

Over £12,000
The jewels of the family, which mean the Turbo versions. Top-end prices typically hit around £12,500 (coupé), £13,500 (Taimar) and £18,000 (convertible).

Conclusion

Big-muscle fun, durable build, inexpensive running gear, distinctive looks – an M-series TVR has so many virtues as a classic car buy that it's hard to identify a negative. On top of this is the terrific value of one of the landmark models behind the TVR company's rise to its present status as a manufacturer of truly fabulous sports cars.

Stimulated by the glamour of Chimaeras, Cerberas and Griffiths, interest in classic TVRs is rising and now is the time to buy.

COMING IN SEPTEMBER: Alfa Giulia/ Giulietta