

The Dandy Griffith

If not treated with respect, the car's 85-inch wheelbase and 289 Ford V8 will have you spinning like a dog chasing a laser pointer



1965 Griffith 200 coupe in optional "shagadelic paint"

Unlike the environmentally conscious, fuel-sipping, ultra-low emissions, and utterly boring "hybrid" cars of today, a whole different group deserved that name in the 1960s.

They consisted of European sports cars that fell into the hands of cottage industry "manufacturers," which took Italian and British sports car sophistication (or lack thereof) and shoehorned in American V8 lumps.

The period is the 1960s, so we are skipping cars built by men like Cunningham and Allard, though all these creations used American V8s. Most popular was the lightweight Ford 260/289 V8, although many cars also used Chevrolet small-blocks and Chrysler V8s.

Thanks in great part to Carroll Shelby, British cars with the Ford 260/289 were by far the most successful. In this segment, the players included Shelby's Cobra, the Ford GT40, the Sunbeam Tiger, and the little-known and often misunderstood Griffith 200 and 400 Series. These little bastards were the scrappy kid from down the street who could beat up anybody, if he could stay out of jail long enough.

Andrew Jackson Griffith—"Jack"—was a high-performance Ford dealer from Long Island, New York, who also sold Jaguars and Shelby Cobras. In fact, Shelby hired Griffith to collect the rolling AC Cobra bodies from the shipping docks and store them at his facility until Shelby had enough cars in New York to fill a transport truck for delivery to California.

Griffith even purchased an early competition Cobra, which he campaigned with Bob Brown, Jr., Bob Johnson, and Mark Donohue as drivers. About this time, Griffith was shown a TVR Grantura Mk III by friend Gary Sagerman.

Intrigued by the Grantura, and surrounded by a garage full of AC bodies waiting for Ford V8s, the entrepreneurial light bulb in Griffith's head likely got

powered up. An idea was born, and soon one of Donohue's spare Cobra engines was being test fitted into Sagerman's car.

Convinced it would work, Griffith cut a deal with TVR to supply modified Granturas, minus engines and transmissions, and then contracted with Ford to supply 289-ci engines and 4-speed "Toploader" transmissions. The final ingredient was for Griffith to lease a "factory" in Syosset, NY—all you needed in 1964 to be considered a manufacturer.

Fairly well-developed, albeit crude

The TVR Grantura that Griffith used was a fairly well-developed sports car, if a bit crude. With a fiberglass body, a full tubular frame, four-wheel independent suspension, and disc brakes all around, it was an extremely light (1,500 lb), well-handling car, perfectly suited for the 4-cylinder MG B motor that TVR used.

In order to shoehorn the Ford V8 into it, TVR supplied Griffith with modified cars; the main chassis tubes were nine inches farther apart, the front suspension pickup points were strengthened, and the lower tube frame crossmember was moved six inches forward to clear the Ford oil pan.

Back in Syosset, the frame tubes that wouldn't clear the Ford starter were beaten into submission with a 16-lb sledgehammer (concours Griffith restorers, take note). In March 1964, Jack Griffith announced the end result—the Griffith 200—named for the 200-hp the Ford engine produced.

On paper, this made for a fantastic performer. The Ford engine added only 75 lb, and retaining the MG B rear axle, with its 4.11:1 ratio, promised stunning performance, a fact not lost on Griffith's ad copywriters at the time.

Original advertisements quoted sub-4-second 0–60 mph times, with a top speed "in excess of 150 mph." Curb weight was reported as 1,485 lb, although 1,700 lb is closer to the truth. Base price for a Griffith 200 was \$3,995, with the 271-hp Ford "Hi-Po" 289 engine available for an extra \$495. Styling was debatable, with its Virgil Exner-esque tail and squashed frog front. But somehow it fit the quirkiness of the car.

Griffith learned as he went along

However, unlike other "hybrid" manufacturers such as Shelby, Griffith wasted little time on any actual engineering. He learned as he went along. Early cars had frightening torque steer... if everything behind the transmission survived your first full-throttle application.

The TVR half-shaft bolts literally turned into dust, and the MG B diffs often followed suit. Plus, there was no room to fit a proper alternator, so a 30-amp generator was fitted. Unfortunately, the dual electric cooling fans and electric fuel pump alone consumed about 31 amps, so the first time you activated a lamp or the windshield wipers, your car died.

The two-piece fuel tanks had improper soldering on the seam and leaked. Body fit and the strength of its attachment to the tube chassis left a lot to be desired. But as time went on, Griffith identified the issues and the cars were sorted out. In spite of mixed reviews by the automotive press, demand for the 200 was high. Griffith quickly outgrew the Syosset "factory" and moved to larger quarters in Plainview, NY. By late 1964, 191 Griffith 200s had been produced.

Hot on the heels of the 200, for the 1965 model year Griffith introduced the 400 model. It was an improved version of the 200, with the biggest external difference the Kamm tail and wraparound rear window. Standard equipment was the 271-hp "Hi-Po" engine and a new 2.73:1 rear axle ratio.

All of the fixes and tweaks learned during 200 production were incorporated, including my favorite—a chrome strut that connected the dashboard to the roof. Why? It seems that some Griffith 200 owners discovered that at speeds in excess of 130 mph, the fiberglass roof would actually *separate* from the body. So Griffith used a little strut rod to hold the roof on.

In December 1964, a dock strike crippled the East Coast. It would last through April

1965, which meant no TVR bodies for Griffith. Already in a fragile financial position prior to the strike, five months of no cars was the death knell for the little manufacturer. Only 59 Griffith 400s were produced before Ford pulled the plug on supplying engines, due to credit concerns. Although Griffith gave car building one last chance with his Intermeccanica-based, Chrysler 273-ci-powered Griffith 600, only ten were built before Griffith closed the doors.



A mind-boggling performance car

Once sorted, as most remaining examples have been, a good Griffith 200/400 is a mind-boggling performance car. Just imagine a 289 Cobra with better suspension and 500 fewer pounds to drag around. But also keep in mind the much shorter wheelbase of the Griffith, please. Otherwise you will be spinning like a dog chasing a laser pointer.

With just 250 cars produced, Griffiths are too rare—or perhaps just too flawed—to be considered iconic like a Cobra or GT40. Very few trade hands publicly, but from what I understand, they range from \$40,000 eBay bastardized basket cases to the rumor of a fanatically restored 200 trading for north of \$100,000. For those brave enough to not only drive a Griffith but also locate one that has some chassis tubes left

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ENGINE		BODY	
Type	Ford V8	Construction	Reinforced fiberglass in multiple tubes—bracketed for overall strength
Displacement	289 cu. in. (5027 cc)	Doors	Two doors with roll-up windows
Rear Position	Overhead	Seating	Two competition type bucket seats upholstered in high grade leather grain vinyl
Stroke	4.38 in.	Steering wheel	27" dia., 3 spokes, wood rim competition type
Block	2.57 in.	Instrumentation	Speedometer, oil pressure, water temperature, oil level and fuel gauge
Max. R.P.M.	5500 (4800 RPM (200))	Fuel Tank	12 gal. (57L) located in rear with vent valve (10")
Clutch	289 in. dia. hydraulic		
Gearbox	Ford—4 or 5 speed manual, 4 speeds and reverse		
CHASSIS		DIMENSIONS	
Frame	Subframe	Wheelbase	80 1/2 in.
Suspension	Independent all round coil springs with unequal length wishbones	Track	Front 57 1/2 in. Rear 54 in.
Brakes	Front disc, rear drum	Over all length	128 in.
Wipers	Front, 6" long 10" dia. Windshield/Washer wiperage	Over all height	48 in.
Wheels	Steel	Over all width	55 in.
Tires	Blackwall, 12 spoke wire wheels	Ground clearance	5 in.
Steering	Recirc. SP 289/20	curb weight	200 pounds dry
	Ball and pinion		

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The Griffith Series 200 is available in the following range of standard colors: *Black, White, Silver, Blue, Red, Yellow, Green, Orange, Grey, Tan, Bronze, Pink, Purple, Blue, White, Black*

and hasn't been dropped off a cliff, I can't think of a better way to scare yourself for less money.

They are a unique footnote to the whole hybrid movement of the 1960s. Just don't expect the Toyota Prius owner next to you at the light to give you a high-five when you hit the gas. ♦

(TVR founder Trevor Wilkinson died June 6, aged 85.)

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OBSESSED

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