

# OLD GOLD?

## FORD SIERRA

**AGEING SIERRAS ARE CHEAP BUT SPECIAL CARE IS NEEDED WHEN BUYING, says Kim Henson.**

**L**ove it or hate it, the original 'jelly mould' Sierra was one of the most popular Fords ever built. However, many have been thrashed in hard daily use, and vast numbers have suffered from rampant corrosion. Bear this in mind when viewing; there are lots around so you can afford to be fussy.

### HISTORY

Many believed that Ford had got it wrong with the radically styled Sierra when presented to a shocked British public in 1982. However the Sierra soon became a common sight on our roads, and private buyers eventually became accustomed to its styling. To be fair, the five-door hatchback bodywork was more practical than that of the Cortina saloon it replaced. Five-door estates were available too.

Despite ultra-modern styling, the mechanics are 100% traditional - rear wheel drive, with in-line engine and gearbox.

Transmissions and suspensions were

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**CORROSION IN DOORS CAN BE RAMPANT**

improved though. Five speed manual or three speed automatic gearboxes were available, and independent rear suspension replaced the Cortina's leaf springs. Power steering was standard with 2.0-litre and bigger engines.

There was plenty of choice of power units and trim levels too. From launch, in October 1982, buyers could opt for overhead cam 1.3, 1.6 or 2.0 (Pinto) engines, or a 2.3-litre V6 petrol unit, or Peugeot's proven 2.3-litre diesel motor. Trim levels consisted of 'base', L, GL and Ghia, which featured such goodies as electric windows, central

locking, a sunroof and front fog lights.

The rapid, three-door XR3i, powered by a 2.8-litre V6 engine, with close ratio gearbox and sporty suspension, arrived in May 1983, and 'mainstream' three door hatchbacks followed in the autumn. New 1.8-litre Sierras made their debut in October 1984. A four wheel drive XR4x4i replaced the rear drive model in 1985.

During 1986, 2.0-litre, fuel-injected Ghia EFI versions joined the line-up, as did LX variants (GL-based, but with uprated suspension and other refinements), and the 1.3-litre option was



Front crossmember and surrounding structure are usually hidden by engine. However, closely inspect the vitally important steelwork here. If corrosion is widespread look for another car.



From within each rear wheelarch, look forwards and establish condition of 'splash' panel, sill rear end and structure supporting rear suspension arm. Serious rust here is very bad news.



Sills are often weak, and the lower edges are especially vulnerable. If you are looking at a mixture of holes, rusty steel and various patches, bargain on extensive repairs further in!

CHECK FOR ROT IN  
SCREEN PILLARS, DOOR PILLARS  
AND BULKHEADS



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discontinued. The 'instant classic' RS Cosworth Sierra, with 16 valve 2.0-litre engine producing over 200bhp, and performance (plus insurance premiums!) to match, came on the scene in the summer of the same year.

In early 1987, the styling was revised with four door saloon variants of the Sierra, designated 'Sapphire', added to the range.

In June 1988 the 1.8-litre 'Pinto' engine was replaced with a 1.8-litre CVH 'lean burn' unit capable of running on unleaded fuel.

Towards the end of 1988, across-the-

range improvements were carried out, including a new fuel-injected 2.9-litre V6 engine and five speed (MT75) gearbox on the XR4x4i and the 2.9i Ghia 4x4 estate car.

Twin-cam 2.0-litre engines replaced the single-cam Pinto units in mid-1989, and in 1990 a new, 1.8-litre turbo-diesel ousted the naturally aspirated 2.3-litre Peugeot unit. Suspension, steering and refinement improvements were made in October 1991. GTs were added to the range in February 1992, before the entire range was replaced in March 1993 by the new Mondeo.



Lower rear valance panel is rust-prone on all models (this estate was in a very poor condition). Such damage is not usually confined to one area of the vehicle; check thoroughly - everywhere!



Front and rear wheelarch lips, and the wing sections normally masked by the upper edges of the bumpers, are often holed/wafer-thin. Check by eye and feel. Examine inner wheelarches too.

## LIVING WITH A SIERRA

Sierras are roomy family cars, generally comfortable, and ride well. Luggage space is good, but the rear load sill is high on hatchback and saloon versions.

Fuel consumption is reasonable; as examples, expect 30 plus mpg overall, from 1.6-litre versions, around 20 mpg from V6 versions, and 40 mpg from the turbo diesels.

Insurance costs can be prohibitively high on XR and Cosworth models, which are also notorious for being stolen. Check that the vendor really is the owner!

Sierras are not difficult to maintain at home. There's plenty of room to operate under the bonnet, and clutch changes, cylinder head overhauls and even full engine rebuilds are all realistic possibilities. Spares are readily available and generally inexpensive.

## RUST IS THE ENEMY

The most important aspect of checking a Sierra is to ensure that the bodywork is sound and 'straight'. In addition to checking for rust, it is crucially important that the shell is not distorted (even relatively low speed shunts can cause extensive damage - check for evidence from underneath the car, as well as on top).

Rust can strike virtually anywhere, but particularly in the front and rear extremities of the 'chassis' runners, sill assemblies, front and rear valance panels, front cross-member and adjacent structural beams, suspension mounting points, floor pans, screen pillars and bulkhead/door pillar assemblies. If rust is found in the rear 'chassis', the fuel tank will have to come out for repairs. Inspect the rear structure from within the boot and from under the vehicle.

Outer body panels aren't immune either. The doors are especially vulnerable; check under and around the window frames, and along the lower



Doors can be very rusty, even on cars only a few years old. Start by inspecting the sloping 'edges' immediately below the windows. Look for glass fibre and body filler, as well as 'honest' rust!

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edges (view from outside and underneath). Both front and rear wings can disintegrate too – particularly around the arches, also the sections normally hidden by the bumpers.

## ENGINUITY

The Pinto engine is the most commonly encountered type in early Sierras, and can survive for up to 150,000 miles or so between overhauls, if properly maintained. Most importantly, that means regular changing of the engine oil and filter; neglect here results in blocked camshaft oil feed and worn camshaft/followers. Rectification, however, can be carried out at home.

Check for oil leakage too (especially from the cam cover), and for smoke under hard acceleration. The early VV carburettors were notorious for giving trouble – including diaphragm failures.

The CVH engine (1.8-litre, June 1988 on) tends to suffer from smoking following start-up (and after long periods at tickover), due to deterioration of the valve stem oil seals. Replacement is a 'do-it-yourself' operation.

The 2.3 and 2.8-litre V6 'Cologne' engines are pretty reliable, but again infrequent oil/filter changes result in

premature valve gear wear (pushrods and tappets) and 'top end noise'. The timing gears can also wear/rattle.

The later, twin-cam engines and the 2.9-litre V6 units have so far proved to be pretty reliable in service, although on all, regular oil changes are vitally important. On all overhead cam Sierra engines with timing belts, it's essential that the belt is changed regularly. Check the service history, if available.

Note the condition of the under-bonnet electrics – dirty/corroded connections to the engine management systems can cause elusive intermittent faults.

Transmission problems include rumbling/droning gearboxes and final drive units, due to worn bearings. Five-speed cars are more prone to trouble; lubrication of fifth gear is 'marginal', so it's essential that the gearbox oil level is properly maintained at all times.

Ensure that all rubber mounting bushes in the suspension system are in good condition (especially the anti-roll bar to lower suspension arm bushes), or the car will drive 'like a sponge' (you can feel the vehicle 'shunting' on worn bushes) and MoT failure will eventually result. Vital too are the large rubber mountings supporting the rear sub-frame – inspect carefully.

Excessive up/down movement of the steering wheel on the column is some-

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Vauxhall Nova.....	July 1998
BL Metro.....	August 1998
Ford Fiesta.....	September 1998
Fiat Uno.....	October 1998
BL Maestro.....	November 1998
VW Polo.....	December 1998
Ford Escort.....	January 1999
Vauxhall Astra.....	March 1999
Peugeot 205.....	April 1999

times mis-diagnosed as being due to failure of the rubber bush at the lower end of the column (adjacent to the floor). In some cases the movement is due instead to movement up the column of the bush's retaining clip. This can be pressed back down the column and into its correct, locking position by using a large open-ended spanner.

## VERDICT

Elderly Sierras can provide effective transport, but avoid rusty examples and those with obvious major mechanical defects. Rough cars in need of major work can be found for around £50 upwards, while £500 should buy you a tidy example from the mid 1980s. For £1,000 you are looking at a late 1980s car in need of 'cosmetics', while £2,000 should get you a very tidy 1990-ish 1.6/1.8/2.0-litre model.



Lower edges of doors (and tailgate/bootlid) may be virtually non-existent. Usually the most cost-effective solution is to find a secondhand panel in better condition if the rest of the car is sound.



Don't be deceived by a bonnet which looks good from outside. Open it and view the underside of the assembly from below. The leading edge collects moisture and salt, then holes appear.



The luggage compartment can tell you a great deal about the car's use and how well (or otherwise) it has been looked after. This estate appears to have been half-eaten by a hungry dog!



Front suspension and steering require close scrutiny, especially the multitude of rubber bushes, brake discs (they often wear rapidly), and the steering rack (watch for torn gaiters).



At the rear, check out the driveshaft gaiters, mounting bushes for the rear sub-frame/trailing arms, and condition of the steel suspension components. Deficiencies here spell MoT failure.



This is a V6 2.8-litre version (although Pinto powered Sierras predominate). Check for oil leaks, 'top end' noise and timing gear rattle. On Pinto units, watch for oil leaks and smoking, and listen for clattering from worn camshaft/followers.