

Cars & bikes

You could pick up a bargain at the cheap end of the used-car market. Or you might just buy the banger from hell. **Neil Crossley** finds out how to tell one from the other

Taxed, tested, one careful owner...

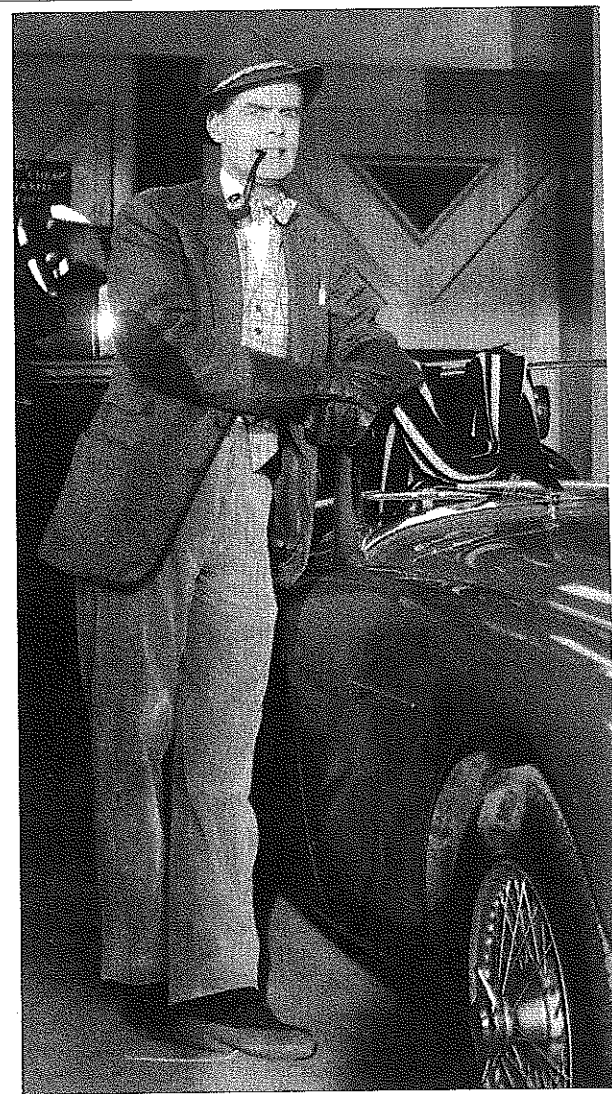
‘What you need is a Vauxhall Nova,” said my mechanic friend chirpily down the phone. “No problem with parts, good on gas and the insurance is a snip.” He was right, of course. It just wasn’t what I wanted to hear. I was still convinced that somewhere out there was a tidy-looking Y-reg BMW 320 with low mileage, full service history and one loving owner — all going for a song. But with barely £1,200 to spend and after two weeks scouring the small ads without much success, I had to agree. In the rock-bottom end of the used-car market, practicality, not aesthetics, is the order of the day. And with increasing numbers of motorists in recession-hit Britain taking the used-car option, buying a half-decent car on a tight budget looks set to get harder.

A recent report from ADT Auctions showed that sales of used cars in the UK in 1994 outnumbered sales of new cars almost four-to-one, taking the used-car market to its highest level since figures began in 1988. The report concludes

that this represents a profound shift from younger used cars to older ones. Of the six to nine million used cars sold last year, more than three million were at least nine years old. Although the average price of sales through dealers showed little change at £4,200, the average for a private sale fell significantly to £1,300.

To most non-mechanically-minded motorists, buying a used car through the small ads can be a worrying experience. With £1,300 or less to spend, the prospect becomes positively daunting. In theory, small hatchbacks such as Metros and Novas will go for less money. But their popularity often means that larger saloons such as Renault 25s could offer better deals because not everybody is willing to pay the higher insurance. Whichever model you choose, the question is: what will £1,300 buy you?

As director of used-vehicle marketing for Fleet Management Services, Alan Brain has more than 30 years’ experience dealing in ex-fleet cars. He believes that anyone trying to buy a reliable, roadworthy car at this price is making false economies. The





Would you buy a used car from these men? Ian Carmichael (left) did just that in the 1960 film comedy, *School For Scoundrels*

RONALD GRANT ARCHIVE

mechanical and structural wear on any car aged nine years or more, he says, means buyers could end up spending at least another £500 on repairs. If you expect such a car to be safe, he says, you're asking for trouble.

"I'm not being snobbish, but quite frankly £1,300 is not enough to buy a decent motor car," he says. "You need to be looking at £2,000 upwards before you can hope to get anything half-decent. You could get a 1986 Metro City with 100,000 miles on the clock for £900. But I wouldn't put my family in a 100,000-mile Metro unless I was very sure of it.

"These cars are being sold with the fag-end of an MoT and they could have chassis corrosion, brake-fluid contamination and God knows what else. They're mobile death traps, some of them."

It's not hard to find a 10-year-old car with a long MoT, but that's no guarantee of safety. Brakes that work efficiently on the day of the test can be badly worn. It's worth putting the car in for a re-test, says Alan Brain, "just to see what comes out the other end". And while a full service history is encouraging, you should give any used car a

full service after you buy it.

However, Adrian Charlish, a senior engineer with the AA, believes it *is* possible to get a good deal for £1,300.

"If you're looking privately, you may get a decent A- or B-registration car for that price," he says. "But you must expect any car of that age and price to have faults, from small dents and cosmetic corrosion right up to worn synchromesh, faulty transmission and worn brakes. So it's imperative that you weigh up what the added cost of repairs might be."

Whether you spend £5,000 or £1,000 on a used car, the advice is the same. If you know nothing about cars, take someone with you who does. Spending one-tenth of the value of a £1,000 car on an AA or RAC inspection may seem like madness, but it could save you from buying a heap.

The alternative is the friend or relative who claims to be a bit of an expert. Opt for the friend, says Adrian Charlish. Even if their expertise does not extend beyond checking the oil, they can be useful as an independent witness. And if you do end up without mechanical back-up, he says, don't panic.

"There are four tips I use. Look, listen, drive or be driven, and ask. Has it got different-coloured paintwork? Is there rust? You don't have to be an engineer to hear if the engine's knocking or to notice it keeps stalling. Ask about it. 'Is the mileage genuine?' is a favourite, although on a 10-year-old car the mileage is almost irrelevant. If you can't drive it for insurance reasons, make sure you are driven. Otherwise you could end up buying it, only to discover your head hits the roof. And remember that the reason most cars of this age and price are for sale is that they're about to cost the owner money."

Having a list of the inevitable faults, says Charlish, gives buyers the upper hand. Make sure the price reflects the estimated cost of repairs, and you have a fair chance of getting a good deal. According to the ADT report, 76 per cent of motorists in Britain will haggle over the price of a used car. Thirty per cent said they would expect to achieve a discount of at least 10 per cent from the advertised price. Given the catalogue of repairs that could await anyone buying a budget used car, this is no bad thing.