



Renault Clio



If you're thinking of buying a used Clio, we can help. We've delved into our breakdown, warranty and vehicle inspection service statistics covering the last few years and have come up with what you need to know if you're planning to become the second owner.

FOLLOWING ON AFTER THE LONG-RUNNING Renault 5, the Clio has been a big hit since its 1991 launch. This cute, stylish hatchback has proved popular in Nicole's famous TV adverts, and has put in consistent "top ten" appearances in the sales charts, too.

Unlike the K-Series Metro, which looked a lot like its predecessor yet was totally transformed to drive, the Clio's chic style has, until recently, struggled to mask its comparatively dated mechanical origins. When launched, its *haute couture* looks and inviting interior gave hatchbacks like the Fiesta, Metro and Nova plenty to worry about. For us, though, the Clio's compromised driving position, mediocre seats and indifferent mechanical refinement meant that it performed better in the showroom than on the road. The improved version, introduced in 1996, is much nicer to drive, however, although, so

far, the new and more refined engine is fitted only to the 1.2-litre model.

The three- and five-door hatchbacks come with a choice of 1.2-, 1.4- and 1.8-litre petrol engines or a 1.9-litre diesel, and there are three main trim levels: RL, RN and RT. (Think of these as L for Low, N for Normal and T for Top, if you like.) There's automatic transmission for those who want the gearchanging done for them, while sporty types are catered for by a 1.8 16-valve version or the slightly-cheaper-to-insure RSi model, introduced in 1993. Look out for the convenient remote-control radio operating stalk on higher specification versions, while collectors will no doubt make straight for the racy-but-rare two-litre 16-valve Williams edition, named after the Formula One racing team.

The main points to look for...

Engine

A blown head gasket is one of the more common problems we've come across under the bonnet, so checking for any signs of this should be one of your first jobs. The crankshaft rear oil seal has been known to spring a leak, too, but apart from a few oil and water seepages, Clio power units don't suffer too many problems. Listen for any unwarranted noises, though.

Engine ancillaries and cooling system

There aren't too many problems in this area, either, but the water pump, radiator and thermostat can give trouble and (as applies to many engines, nowadays) try to find out if the camshaft drive belt has been changed at the appropriate interval on high-mileage cars. Don't forget to check the exhaust system for leaks or corrosion when you're grovelling underneath, although the original system should last several years or 30-40,000 miles before any replacements are needed.

Transmission

The Clio's gearshift isn't the best you'll come across; it feels a little vague around the slots and, like the clutch, is quite weighty, too. Overall, Clio clutches tend to give fewer than average problems, but check the cable as a new one is quite often needed. Don't forget to inspect the driveshaft gaiters when you're down under, as these are prone to perishing or splitting. Provided any damage is caught in time, you should be able to dodge a sizeable bill for new driveshafts or constant velocity joints.

Suspension, steering and brakes

Check all the usual joints, suspension attachment points and bushes for wear or play, and examine the front tyres for any uneven wear – this points to wheel alignment woes. Rear dampers give a few problems, so examine these for any leaks or damage. Faulty wheel bearings are one of the Clio's most common weaknesses (the front ones especially); pay close attention to these and check thoroughly for any hint of wear or play. Brakes are satisfactory in normal use, but we've never been very impressed with their performance in more extreme use. Squealing or juddery brakes and rusted or scored discs are quite common, and the rear wheel cylinders give a few problems, so don't forget to check these for leaks.

Electrics and instruments

Faulty starter motors are one of the most frequent electrical problems we've found on the Clio. With around half the average failure rate, the alternator is more reliable, but it's worth checking the charging and listening for noisy bearings, all the same. Other gremlins to be on the look-out for include the front and rear wiper motors and failed ignition amplifier units, while flickering speedometer needles and drive cable problems are also quite common. Make sure that the heater fan is working, too, as it's not unheard of for one or more of the fan speeds to give up the ghost, while the low-mounted front fog lamps are susceptible to stone-damaged lenses and water ingress.

Bodywork

The plastic front and rear bumpers don't rust, of course, but have a good look at vulnerable areas like

the sills, the wheelarches, around the fuel-filler and door locks and along the bonnet's exposed leading edge for stone chips, blisters and general cosmetic deterioration. Like a lot of small hatchbacks, Clio wheel trims often display signs of kerb-scuffing, but this is easily, if not particularly cheaply, rectified. Make sure that electric windows and central locking, if fitted, all work properly, as both can prove quite expensive to fix. Check that both door mirrors are intact as they stick out quite prominently, and also that the remote adjusters work satisfactorily.

Costs and servicing

Smaller-engined versions deliver over 40mpg, so with cheap insurance, too, running a Clio shouldn't dent your bank balance too severely. Servicing requirements are a bit more onerous, but although 20-30 per cent dearer than a Fiesta's, parts prices are roughly on par with those of other French superminis. The front-hinged bonnet restricts access to the engine bay, though routine maintenance items are all reasonably easy to get at.

So to sum up...

The Clio isn't the roomiest or the most rewarding-to-drive small hatchback, but apart from a busy-sounding nature and mediocre driving position, it has plenty of Gallic charm to offer. What's more, there are plenty of them to choose from.

Look out for the revised grille, reshaped door mirrors and dark-tinted rear lamps on post-'94 models, which benefited from improved safety and equipment levels. Power steering is well worth having, too; it significantly eases otherwise tedious parking and cornering.

Pick the more refined 1.4 over a harder-worked 1.2 unless out-of-town trips are a rarity, don't expect too much Peugeot-like refinement from the diesel, and tread wearily with the sporty 16-valve or RSi models – unless they're immaculately presented and come with a full service history.

We can't tell you which model to choose, but once you've found a car you like, we can provide reassurance by arranging a comprehensive check anywhere in the country by one of our Vehicle Inspection Engineers. Call 0345 500 610 for details of fees or to arrange an inspection. For longer term peace of mind we can also offer mechanical breakdown insurance. For further information, call AA Warranty Services on 0800 269 798.