USED CAR SURVEY

Rover 200/400

Featuring 1989-1997 models

If you're thinking of buying a used 200/400, 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.

THE HONDA CONCERTO-BASED ROVER 200 hatchback and the 400 saloon that followed it five months later, were a real turn up for the book when they were launched in 1989/90. After the trilby hat and St Bruno image of the Maestro and Montego, they were a breath of fresh air, with their elegant looks, a set of up-to-date engines and quality that was more than skin (or walnut veneer) deep.

Initially the cars were powered by the 16-valve 95bhp Rover K-Series 1.4 and 116bhp Honda 1.6 engines, with Si, SLi, GSi and GTi trim levels. An eight-valve, carburettored S version with 75bhp followed (before being replaced by a 74bhp injected version in April 1993), at the same time as the sporty 216GTi Twin Cam.

In March 1991, 218 and 418 turbo-diesel models were launched, powered by 66 and 87bhp Peugeot engines, giving about 45mpg. These were followed eight months later by the muscular 220 and 420 with Rover's own two-litre 136 and 198bhp power units.

October 1992 saw all the models in the range given a facelift with an attractive new grille (available as a retro-fit kit), the K-Series went multi-point injection, to give 103bhp, 214 and 216 Cabriolets were letting the sunshine in, and the sleek 216 (111bhp) and 220 (134 and turbo 198bhp) Coupé had arrived, leaving scorch marks on the tarmac.

With such variants, a wide range of engines, two- and four-door models and even a pretty if none-too-practical estate car (Tourer), buyers are spoilt for choice.

The main points to look for…

Engine and cooling system

There's nothing major to cause underbonnet alarm, but take a good look for oil seepages from around the cylinder head gasket, the front crankshaft seal, as well as the camshaft cover and sump areas. A touch of piston noise from cold is acceptable – it should disappear when the engine's warm – but make sure the engine starts

instantly and runs at a steady idle; any misfire could be due to a faulty rotor arm. On turbo-diesel models, check that the air hose isn't split, and if the tailpipe blows out a cloud of blue smoke when the engine is revved after ticking over for a few minutes, it could mean worn turbocharger seals. Be prepared for surface corrosion on the exhaust system, but beware of one that's "blowing". Listen for a loose, rattly manifold heat shield, too. On higher-mileage models, try to find out if the cambelt has been renewed. This should be done every 60,000 miles (72,000 on diesels) – a breakage will cost you dear. Coolant problems aren't unknown, so make sure there are no seepages from the hoses, the thermostat housing and the (concealed) water pump. Any temperature control problems point to a dodgy thermostat.

Transmission

Our survey revealed that the 200/400's clutches prove to be no more than *fairly* reliable. Cables can fail, but are more likely to become stiff and creaky. Check that the unit engages without squeal or judder (if it doesn't it's had a hard life and is on the way out), and that the gearchange operates freely and with unbeatable synchromesh. There should be no grumbles from the gearbox, either. Dismiss any model emitting clonks from the driveshafts when turning on full locks and take a look underneath to see that the gaiters aren't split and oozing lubricant.

Suspension, steering and brakes

Power steering on this model is a must if you want a light, responsive feel at the wheel. Make sure there's no play or knock from the steering and check around the power steering reservoir and pump area for fluid leaks. Pulling to one side, unevenly worn front tyres and a steering wheel that's on cock-eyed indicate that the steering geometry needs resetting – there's a lot of it about. Suspension knocks on bumpy roads suggest worn anti-roll bar drop links and/or rear trailing arm bushes. The dampers could be worn, too, and seeping oil. While underneath, check that the steering rack and ball-joint gaiters are sound. Uneven or juddery brakes points to worn discs and pads. Check metal brake pipes for corrosion and make sure that the handbrake is correctly adjusted and works properly.

Electrics and instruments

These items are generally well behaved, but we've come across quite a few battery snags (does it sound healthy when cranking the engine?), including corrosion in the mounting tray. The alternator and, to a lesser extent, the starter motor can give trouble, as well. The same applies to the windscreen wipers – none of these has a clean bill of health. Horns can play up, too, and we're surprised at the number of inoperative radios that needed their codes keyed in. Don't overlook courtesy light switches and powered windows when carrying out your general electrical checks, and try to establish that the back window demister elements are sound.

Bodywork

Scuffed wheel trims featured prominently in our survey, but that's no big deal. What you must look for is wetness in the spare wheel well (caused by water ingress), faulty central locking, sluggish window operation and a stiff-to-open sunroof. These are the main weak spots. Heater controls occasionally give problems – make sure all's well here, and listen for behind-the-facia rattles. The car's rust resistance is impressive, but do check particularly the rear wheelarch area for signs of corrosion.

Costs and servicing

With such a wide variety of models and ages, there's a 200/400 to suit most people and their pockets, but beware of forecourt gloss that hides a well-worn repmobile. General reliability of the mechanicals is of a high order, fuel economy is respectable (expect mid-30s mpg with petrol models, about 10mpg better with diesels) and servicing schedules are undemanding. Remember, though, that diesels require more frequent oil changes. Insurance shouldn't break the bank, either (group 8 for a 16-valve 214Si, for example), and contrary to what you might expect, parts prices are below average for both bodywork and mechanical components.

So to sum up…

The 200/400 range is an excellent proposition for the private buyer, thanks to its largely bulletproof build quality. What's more, we've seen a lot of well cared for examples at keen prices. But try before you buy, because the smaller-engined models are somewhat frenetic when cruising the motorway and don't exactly exude quiet dignity and unruffled composure on the road, as did Rovers of old. What they do provide is peppy performance when revved and light controls (go for 16-valves, multi-point injection and power steering, though). Also to the model's credit is a comfortable driving environment, adequate seating for four and a soundly built (almost coachwork quality) body, as evidenced by the "thunk" of a closing door. This is one soundly engineered car with an added touch of class. Recommended.