

# High mileage, several careless owners...

**Andrew Don** on how to avoid being taken for a ride when buying a used car

THE VALUE of the used car market was an estimated £30bn in 2004, the second-highest on record, according to the most up-to-date figures from British Car Auctions' Used Car Market Report. But buyers frequently fail to check the history of a vehicle before buying it, according to a recent report from AA Car Data Check, leaving them vulnerable to fraud or being left out of pocket. So how do you buy without being taken for a ride?

Used cars can be bought from many sources: an internet site, such as eBay Motors; adverts in publications, such as *Auto Trader*, *Loot*, or local newspapers; shop windows; and auctions. A more

radical option is to look overseas, though Peter Stratton, lead officer on cars at the Trading Standards Institute, says this is probably not worth the hassle: 'What do you do if it goes wrong? Do you want another ferry crossing?' And Mike Brown, used vehicle director at Network Q, advises against the inexperienced trying their luck at auctions. 'It's hard to check a car's history and you rarely have enough time to have a proper look under the bonnet.'

The most obvious way is to buy from a dealer, though the stereotypical image of the used-car dealer as 'dodgy' could be off-putting, as could the margin they cost

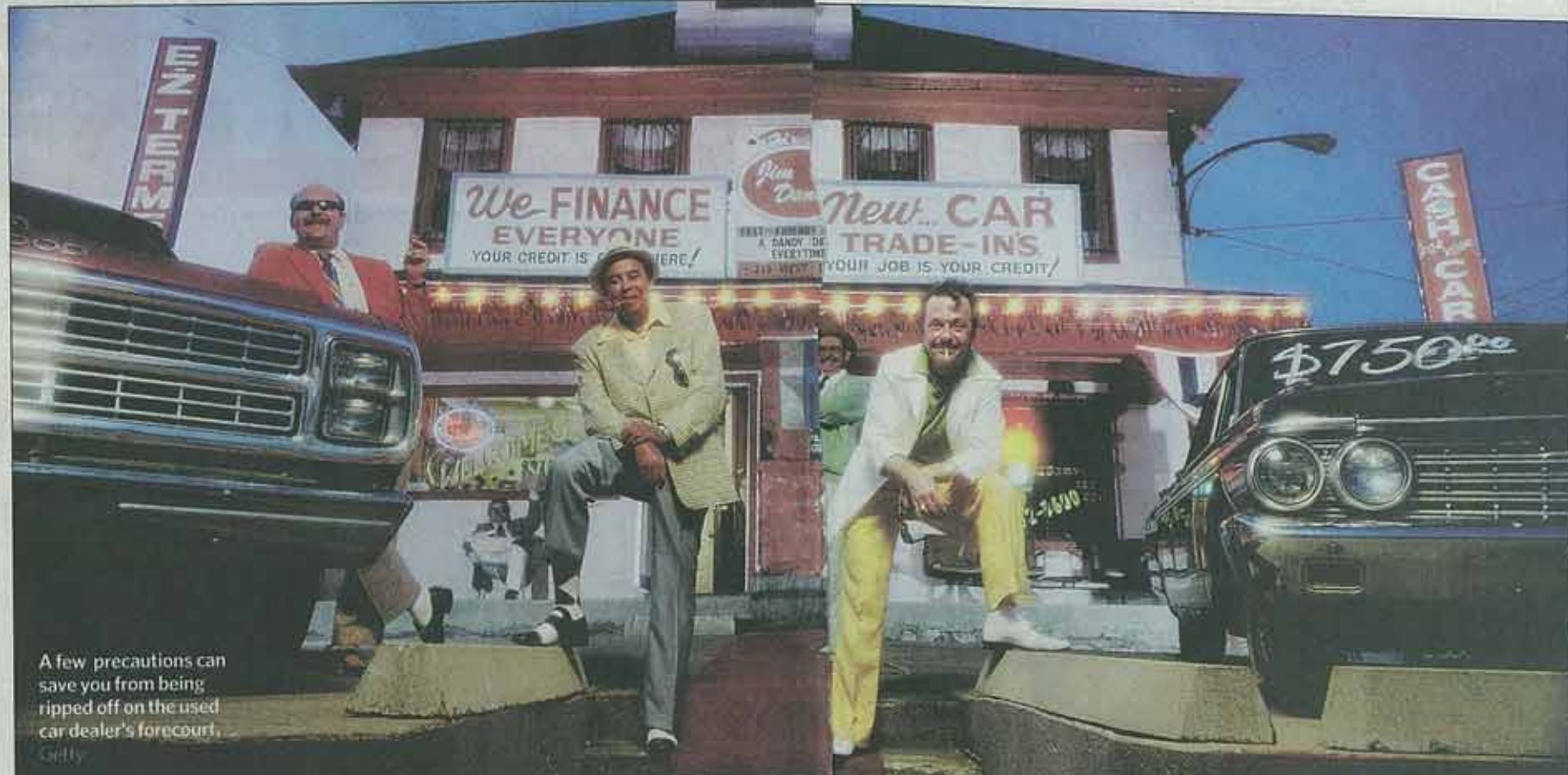
in. Dave Edmonston, managing director of motoring e-zine *PistonHeads.com*, says that while dodgy dealers are in the minority, 'at the lower end of the market, where margins are tighter, rogues can be more easily found. Traders are keen to squeeze more cash out of deals by cutting corners or fraudulently meddling with a vehicle.'

Buying from a trader at least gives you the maximum protection of the law, but when you buy privately there is more risk the car is stolen or may have been used as security for a loan or hire agreement and belong to a finance company.

Some people who pose as private sellers are in fact dealers trying to avoid their legal obligations and offload faulty or overpriced cars. AA Car Data Check warns that many of the 140,000 vehicles stolen last year made it back into circulation and were sold on to innocent buyers.

HPI, another vehicle-checking service, has found that 15 out of every 100 cars it checks have at least one number plate change. Many of these have been made to personalise a vehicle, but there is often a more sinister reason such as to change its identity.

Your only legal right when buying privately is that you can sue if the seller lies about the condition of a car – if you can find them. Much of the time it will be obvious when a car is not as described when viewing, but you can get a motoring organisation such as the AA to give the car the once-over for less obvious faults. Costs for this service vary: the AA charges £35 (£37 for non-members), HPI £39.95 (online only; otherwise £42.95)



A few precautions can save you from being ripped off on the used car dealer's forecourt.  
Getty

## HOW MUCH SHOULD YOU PAY?

VALUE OF POPULAR CARS AT ONE, THREE AND FIVE YEARS. SOURCE: PARKER'S

Registration	Dealer price	Part-exchange value
<b>VAUXHALL CORSA 1.2 SXI 5D</b>		
March 2005	£7,500	£5,610
March 2003	£5,455	£4,200 (previous Corsa 1.2 SXI)
March 2001	£4,025	£3,065
<b>PEUGEOT 206 1.4 S 5D</b>		
March 2005	£8,225	£6,310
March 2003	£5,935	£4,415 (1.4 LX air-con)
March 2001	£4,500	£3,180
<b>FORD FOCUS 1.6 ZETEC 5D</b>		
March 2005	£9,210	£8,290
March 2003	£6,030	£4,955 (previous Focus 1.6 Zetec)
March 2001	£4,190	£3,350
<b>VOLKSWAGEN GOLF 1.6 FSI S 5D</b>		
March 2005	£11,970	£10,185
March 2003	£8,330	£6,555 (previous Golf 1.6 16V SE)
March 2001	£5,880	£4,670

and the RAC £24.99. If you feel more confident and know what to look for, you can carry out checks for roadworthiness and potential tampering yourself. See the box on the right for some guidance.

AA Car Data Check says those who pay more than £10,000 for a used car have a one in three chance of buying a car with a hidden history, whereas nearly two-thirds of those looking to spend between £2,000 and £6,000 are more likely to check this out before they part with their cash.

When it comes to how much to pay, used vehicles are often advertised for a price 'or nearest offer'. The difficulty is knowing where to pitch your nearest offer. Mike Brewer, who has presented programmes on used cars for Channel 4, says: 'Start low and work your way up. The vendor won't be insulted. Remember they want to sell the car as much as

you want to buy it.' He adds that if the car is advertised with a full service history, ask to see it and do not be fobbed off.

Parker's Guide will give an indication of what a specific model is worth but it is essential you keep your wits about you because dodgy dealers and canny private sellers will spot a mug instantly. Brewer says: 'I heard a story of a lady who bought a Nissan Prairie from a dealer. It had a warranty but no reverse gear – they didn't tell her when she bought it. They expected her to turn around and come straight back but she never did. Presumably, she's still going strong. Forwards.'

AA Car Data Check 0800 234 999, [www.aacardatacheck.com](http://www.aacardatacheck.com)  
HPI Check 01722 422422, [www.hpicheck.com](http://www.hpicheck.com)  
Parker's Guides 01733 468000, [www.parkers.co.uk](http://www.parkers.co.uk)

## WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

The Consumer Direct helpline says used cars are a very common area of complaint. It urges the following precautions:

### ■ Check the condition of the car

Look for: rusty sills, wheel arches and door bottoms; damaged or worn tyres; frayed seatbelts; leaking window seals.

### ■ Test drive the car

Make sure you are insured, then look out for noisy brakes, the car pulling to one side, steering wheel shake, and a smell of petrol.

### ■ Let the engine idle with the bonnet up

Listen for any rattling noises from the engine, look for water or oil leaks, check for damaged hoses or fan belts, and beware

excessive smoke from the exhaust.

### ■ Look for evidence of accidents

Beware: repair to body panels and patchy paintwork; welding on the engine or boot; stickers concealing altered etching; evidence that the vehicle identification number (VIN) has been tampered with.

### ■ Query the mileage

Evidence that the car may have been 'clocked' includes: mileometer numbers out of line; heavy wear and tear given the mileage; new pedal rubbers, gear knob or steering wheel; discrepancies between the mileage on the last MoT certificate or on the service history and that shown on the dashboard.