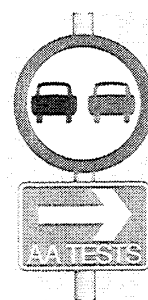


Four of a kind



In this issue, we put the Toyota Carina, Ford Mondeo, Rover 620i and Citroën Xantia under the microscope

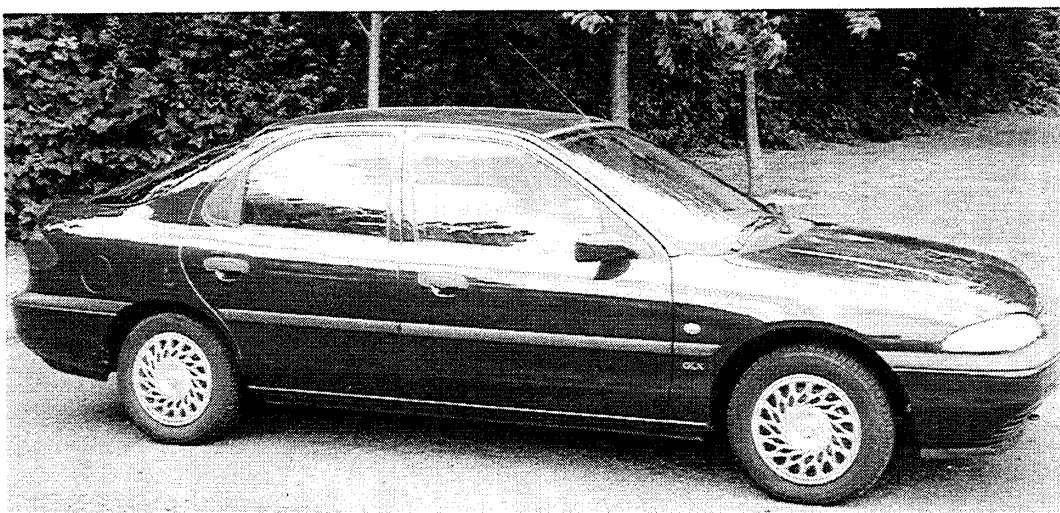
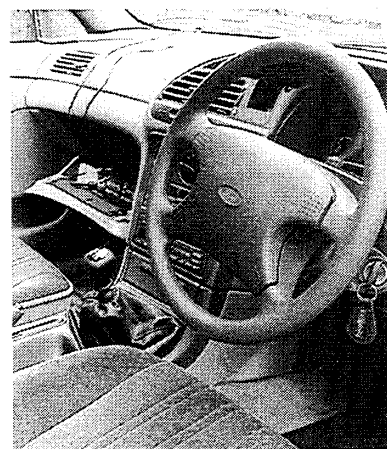
Remember when it used to be a straight choice between the Ford Cortina and the Morris Marina? In those days, front-wheel drive, five-door cars were too adventurous for most people.

In the last decade or so, ordinary, mainstream, full-sized family cars have improved immeasurably. You can now choose between four or five-door models and front-wheel drive has become universally accepted. Middle-of-the-range offerings are typically 1.8 litre/110 bhp engines pulling bodies just under 15ft long. Current asking prices are an average £13,000, depending on the trim and equipment level specified by the buyer.

Our quartet – the Toyota Carina, Ford Mondeo, Rover 620i and the Citroën Xantia – fits naturally into this upper-medium sector, although the Rover has aspirations to greater grandeur. Our less-than-lavish base 620i version costs more than the rest, but then it is the longest and it has the biggest engine. The 620i is really a clever cosmetic re-work of the latest Honda Accord, so it possesses the credentials of a high quality product. With the Mondeo, Ford has finally converted to front-wheel drive for this Sierra replacement, whereas Toyota did it with the Carina before this one. Finally, there's Citroën's compact yet elegant Xantia. Already on to a winning streak with its smaller sister ZX, the five-door Xantia uses the same power units as the Peugeot 405, although the novel gas and oil suspension and cabin refinements make it something quite distinct, both to view and to drive.

At the wheel

The Mondeo has a right-first-time driving position, with admirable seat support and range of adjustments, while the dearer Rover lacks lumbar and seat height resetting. All four cars prove comfortable on long runs, although the Carina's lumbar support, even when set to firm, is only just sufficient. Each of the cars has rake-adjustable steering wheels, except the cheaper XLi versions of the Carina. The pedals are rather prominent on the Xantia – the accelerator pad is higher than the



brake – which means there's less legroom for the tall driver than in the others.

As for parking, all four suffer from bad rear blind-spots. It even proves difficult to reverse in a straight line in the Xantia, the blame for which almost certainly lies with its confusingly curvaceous window lines.

The Mondeo's 1.8-litre engine installation is a vast improvement on the one fitted in its baby brother Ford Escort, which means it pulls much more smoothly and cruises much more quietly.

The Xantia's low gearing ensures a sweet nature at low speed and, like the

The Ford Mondeo (above). Ford's Don Hume, felt our review was "very fair" and had no further comment to make

Carina, becomes only marginally more intrusive as you approach 70mph. The cable-operated gearchange on the Carina is light but clunky, and the Mondeo's baulks if you rush it. It's the Rover that comes out on top for both engine and gearchange smoothness, though. It's sublime when driving slowly, yet it emits a lovely, muted, sporty snarl when given its head as you

The Toyota Carina (right). Toyota had no comments to make in response to this article



accelerate up through the gears. The Carina does well, too, though it's slower in top gear pick-up and there's a hint of raggedness in its throttle response.

The eight-valve, lowest power 1.8 Xantia is slowest through the gears and it looks as if the two litre/123bhp version is really needed to maintain parity with the others. Its low gearing makes it a touch noisy on a motorway, but aids high gear acceleration wonderfully. All the cars corner safely and predictably. But it's the Mondeo which surprises with its agility and responsiveness, while the Carina does flounder a bit by comparison.

Fuel costs

The Carina fully justifies its special lean-burn engine management by outstripping the others, with mpg figures to match a 1.4 litre Metro. The 620i proves worst, while the other two are no more than respectable. All have a generous tank range, even though the Mondeo lacks a low level lamp and the Carina's warning is alarmist.

Space and comfort

Although the 620i corners well, it can get a little bumpy at times. Like the Carina, the Mondeo is a much smoother ride altogether. The Citroën's hydropneumatic suspension is no longer out on its own – as the competition is catching up. But when it comes to absorbing the bumps, it means the Xantia's still got that extra something, though it can still get caught out by the odd hump-backed bridge. The Xantia also has a tendency to rock and float from side to side at times. The Xantia's back seat is pretty roomy, but it's pipped at the post by the Carina for space and for cosiness. The Mondeo's centre console and tunnel get in the way and its seat cushion curves round at the edges and is too flat for proper support. The 620i's back seat is a bit of a disappointment. The front passenger's footwell is more intrusive than on the driver's side, which means you have to move the seat back, so the legroom becomes a touch cramped for those who have to sit in the back.

The Carina is way ahead in heating and ventilating – it's the only one of the four that gives out fresh air at face level while the heater's on. However, the heater controls are rather stiff and the temperature in the footwells tends to be different.

For lovers of fresh air, the 620i would be something of a disappointment, since it doesn't come fitted with a sunroof.

The Xantia scores well in terms of how much you can cram in it. Thanks to split/folding cushions and backrests, load-lashing eyes and rear seatbelts, it can carry quite a hefty load, though it's no match for the Mondeo and the Carina. The 620i comes off pretty poorly – it doesn't even have rear folding seats. You can get them on the Si model, but you'll pay a hefty £1,000 more.

HOW THE CARS MEASURE UP

GETTING IN

Front legroom (in)
Typical rear legroom/kneeroom (in) A
Overall length x width – with mirrors folded if possible (in)
Turning circles – on full lock (ft)
– for one complete turn of wheel (ft) B
Load length – seat in use/folded (in)
Load height – to cover/tailgate top (in)

GETTING ON

Engine cc/bhp
Acceleration: 30–70mph through gears (sec)
30–70mph in 5th/4th gear (sec)
Engine speed at 70mph (rpm)
Brakes best stop from 50mph (ft/lb)

PAYING OUT

Fuel economy (mpg)
Short trips in the suburbs
On a motorway
Gentle touring
AA-rated mpg overall
Realistic tank range (litre/miles) C

OTHER COSTS

Parts prices – AA's basket of spares (£) D
Insurance group (from 1 to 20)
Servicing – number of visits/hours charged over 3 years or 38,000 miles
Depreciation over 3 years or 38,000 miles (£) E

	Toyota Carina E 1.6 (5dr)	Ford Mondeo 1.8 (5dr)	Rover 620i 2.0 (4dr)	Citroën Xantia 1.8 (5dr)
Front legroom (in)	43%	43	44½	42%
Typical rear legroom/kneeroom (in) A	41¾/31	40/28	38¾/27	40¾/29
Overall length x width – with mirrors folded if possible (in)	178¼ x 66¾	176½ x 75¼	183 x 74¼	174¼ x 69¼
Turning circles – on full lock (ft)	35½ (P)	34 (P)	38½ (P)	34¾ (P)
– for one complete turn of wheel (ft) B	56%	50%	59%	54
Load length – seat in use/folded (in)	39/66	35½/61	39/-	33/54½
Load height – to cover/tailgate top (in)	19/31½	19/32	17-19½	19/29¾
Engine cc/bhp	1587/106	1796/115	1997/115	1761/103
Acceleration: 30–70mph through gears (sec)	11.0	10.7	10.7	12.5
30–70mph in 5th/4th gear (sec)	30.4/22.0	26.3/17.2	25.5/18.7	24.3/16.3
Engine speed at 70mph (rpm)	3200	3230	3140	3430
Brakes best stop from 50mph (ft/lb)	91	89	94	94
Fuel economy (mpg)	33	28	27	27½
Short trips in the suburbs	38	40	33	37
On a motorway	48½	42½	38	41
Gentle touring	40	36%	32%	35%
AA-rated mpg overall	50/440	55/440	54/385	59/460
Realistic tank range (litre/miles) C				
Parts prices – AA's basket of spares (£) D	2158	1252	2075	1560
Insurance group (from 1 to 20)	10	9	10	9
Servicing – number of visits/hours charged over 3 years or 38,000 miles	7/8.9	4/5.5	6/7.8	5/6.1
Depreciation over 3 years or 38,000 miles (£) E	7115	7935	8700	8380

NOTES: A) 'Typical' represents the mean measurement behind the driver's seat set at 39 inch legroom and the other front seat set at 41 inches. B) The smaller this circle's diameter, the less the driver needs to turn the wheel on corners. (P) = power-assistance standard. C) Based on actual experience with the car – not the tank capacity stated in the handbook. D) Represents a selection of 20 body, electrical and mechanical parts commonly required on a car in service. Less reliable cars will need more of them than others. E) Covers loss of value and capital interest on the list price of a model purchased for cash in mid-1990.

Safe and sound

When it comes to reliability, the Carina has an enviable reputation. Toyota is so confident, the company offers a three year/60,000-mile warranty on everything, including paintwork. The 620i buyer, on the other hand, has to make do with a one-year mechanical warranty, as does the Mondeo or Xantia buyer. Under the bonnet, it's the Mondeo which looks the most inaccessible, but its parts prices remain cheaper than those of its rivals. Parts for the 620i and the Carina are considerably more expensive but, then again, you may not need them so often.

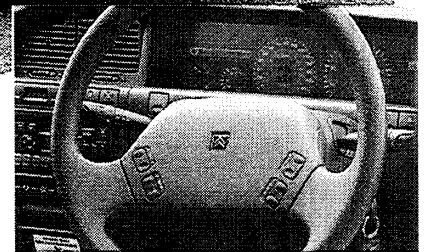
None of the cars is seriously deficient in safety or security matters. The Mondeo stands out as its standard-fit driver's airbag, seatbelt grabbers and pretensioners all combine to give it the edge in terms of safety features. The Xantia has the most thorough list of defences against car crime, including deadlocks and a keypad that demands an identification number before the engine will respond to the key. Of more everyday use is the Xantia's boot, which unlocks with or without central locking – really convenient when you're out shopping. Why, though, can you get to the rear seat tilt buttons from inside the car?

Operating costs and depreciation over the first few years have looked most favourable with the Carina, particularly with the umbrella of that extended warranty. Limited supply has

The Rover 620i (below). In reply to our criticism of the car, Rover said the acid test was "who buys which car" and the answer from the public was – Rover



The Citroën Xantia (above and right). Citroën had no comment to make when we gave them the opportunity to respond to our review



undoubtedly boosted used-car values in the recent past. With these restrictions removed, this advantage could well be eroded, although it must be said its fuel economy advantage is beyond question.

Verdict

There are no bad players in this quartet, but they do strike different chords. If you're looking for good space and comfort, low costs and ultimate reliability, the Toyota Carina is the best commonsense buy.

The Mondeo, although a practical family car, still has a certain amount of fun and drivers should enjoy it. It scores highly for safety and security and is a thoroughly likeable, good value all-rounder.

The Xantia is a more spicy, individual beast, with impressive interior comfort within its compact exterior. It's got practical appeal, yet is just that bit distinctive.

The Rover 620i clearly has the finest power unit and the sweetest gearchange. Its Honda lineage means that its reliability record will probably prove to be excellent. Its unique aura and good looks will appeal to those who buy with their hearts, not their heads. Yet Rover's aspirations to grandeur can't disguise the facts. The 620i costs more to buy and run. It is under-equipped and takes up a lot of space outside, without offering any of the benefit of its less pretentious rivals inside.

SCORE CARD

	Toyota Carina E	Ford Mondeo	Rover 620i	Citroën Xantia
All-round vision (includes headlamps, mirrors, wipers)	5	4	4	3
Accident avoidance	5	5	4	5
Fuel economy	9	6	3	5
Other costs – buying & selling	8	7	5	7
– running	4	9	5	7
Security	6	8	5	8
Ease of getting in & out (inc luggage)	6	5	5	5
Driving position/controls/displays	5	8	7	6
Injury prevention	6	8	6	6
Cornering & overtaking abilities	5	7	7	5
Interior and luggage space	9	6	4	5
Ride comfort/mechanical refinement	7	6	6	8

TOTAL (out of 120) **75 79 61 70**
The categories are based on a survey of what AA members look for when buying a new car

