

BBC
Top Gear
M A G A Z I N E
GROUP TEST



All the exhibits in this collection may be well and truly ancient, but you don't need to go to a museum to see them – they're still on sale. We peer at five old relics

THE HISTORIC DOCKYARD When you drive one of these cars, you soon get used to these two comments: 'I didn't know they still made those,' and 'what's that, then?'

These are the great lost cars. They're still on sale but, as far as most people are concerned, they could have vanished along with the woolly mammoth.

Take the Audi Cabriolet. Introduced way back in '92, it was based on the old Audi 100. It's still squarishly handsome and classy, but people are astounded that it's still on sale.

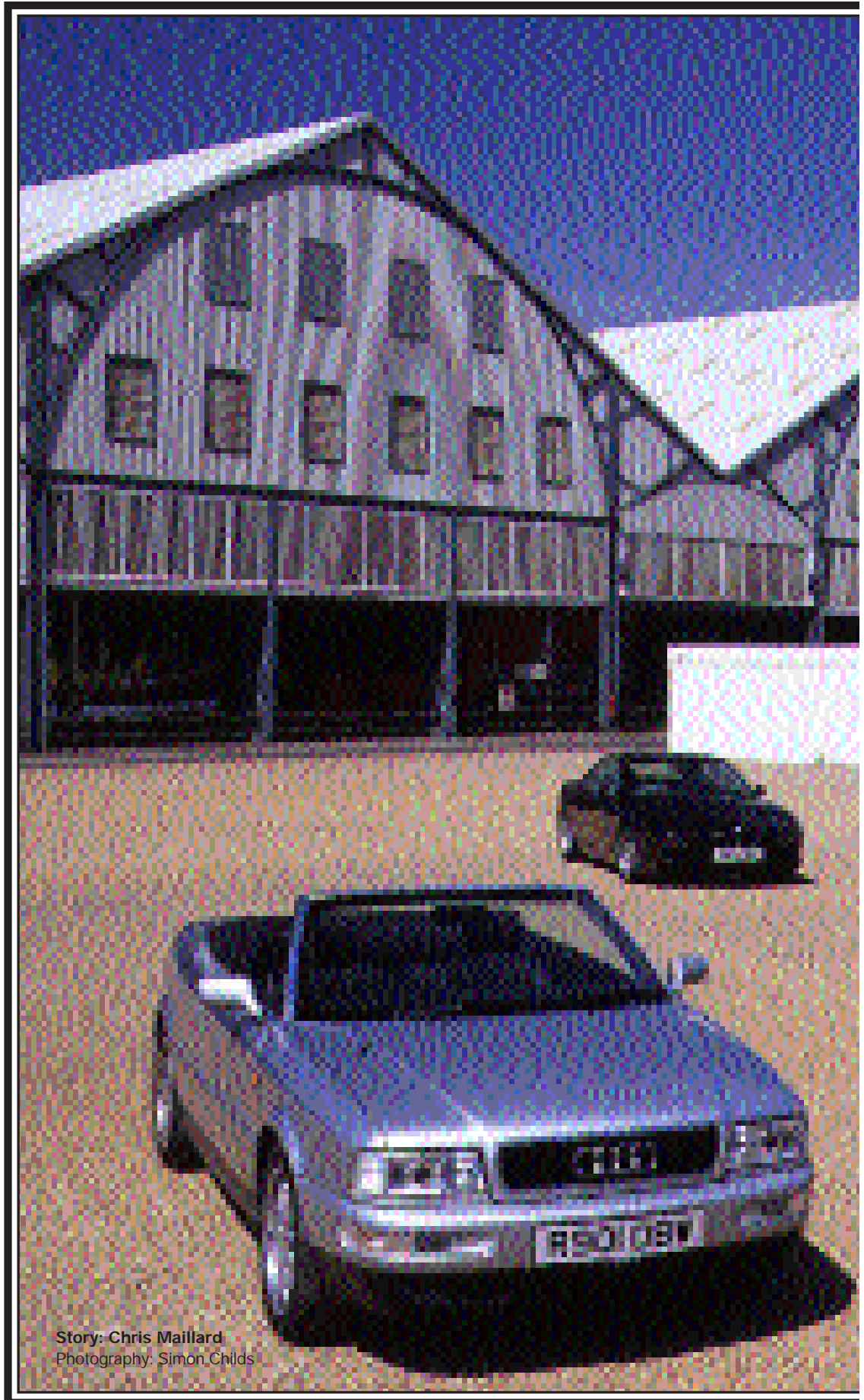
The BMW 840Ci is definitely a product of the padded-shouldered, designer-suited power-dressed '80s. Gordon Gekko would have driven one. But you can still buy one today.

Even Japan, the nation of fads and fast product turnover, has its dinosaurs. The Mitsubishi 3000GT still roams the earth, with four-wheel drive, four-wheel steer, adjustable suspension and so on. But it's so obscure that even now, six years after its introduction, hardly anybody knows what it is.

Citroen's tame fossil is the bizarre XM. The wedgy weirdo is one of the last examples of the French firm's trademark quirkiness, and its Darth Vader styling is complemented by an '80s hi-fi interior and super-complex hydraulic suspension. It never sold well, but if you still want a new one...

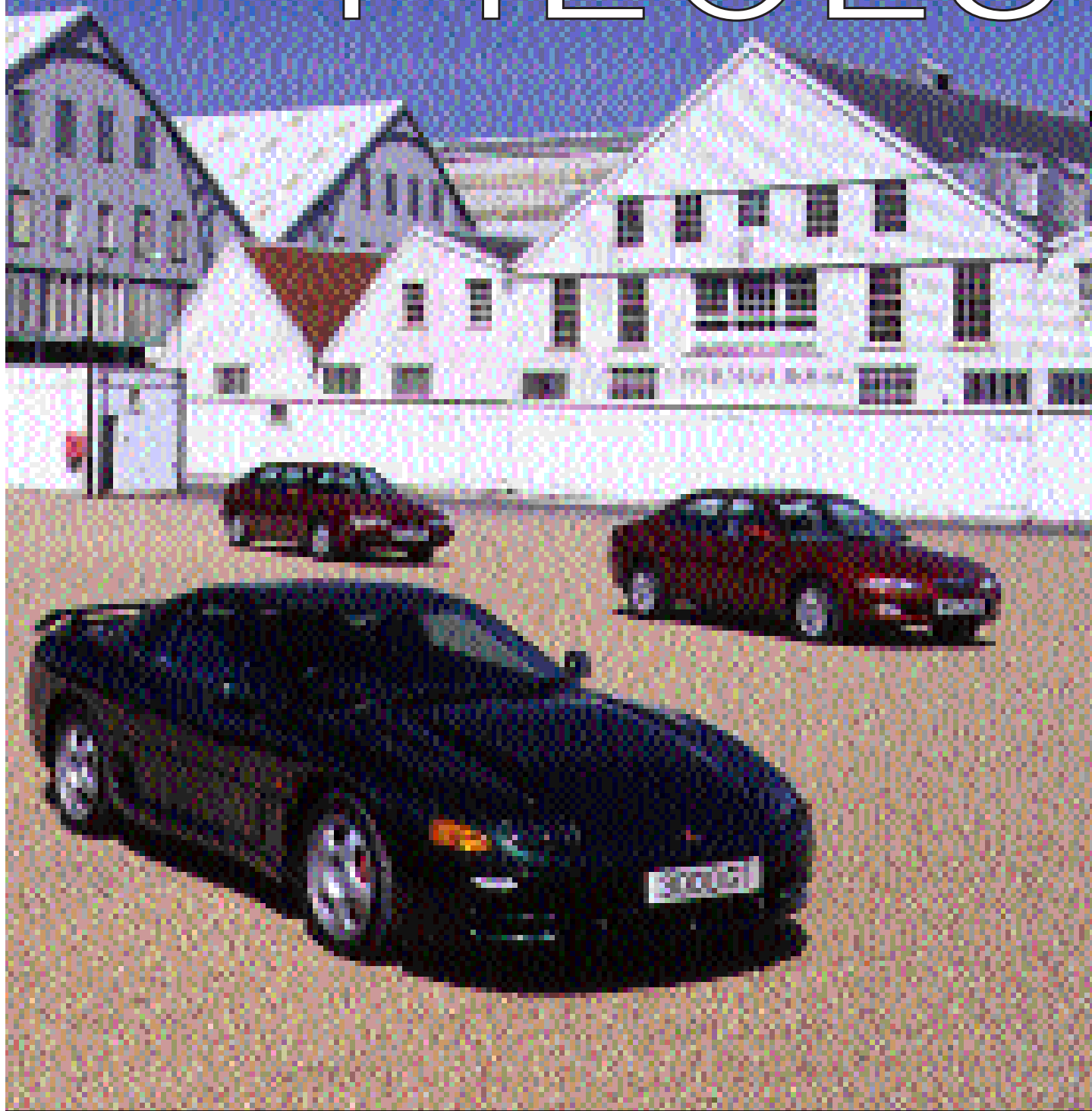
And then there's the Mazda Xedos, the organic, flowing lines of which were state-of-the-art for about five minutes when it first appeared in 1992. It now looks desperately dated, but it's still in the showrooms.

So what's the secret of their survival? How have they outlasted their peers? Who the hell buys them? And why?



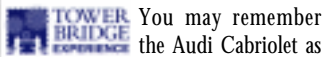
Story: Chris Maillard
Photography: Simon Childs

museum PIECES





A great work of engineering, worked by hidden motors and hinged cunningly to fold out of the way... and Tower Bridge isn't bad either



You may remember the Audi Cabriolet as the car that Princess Di drove; hundreds of paparazzi snaps of her feature one in the background.

But apart from that one, it's one of the most discreet cars ever built. As a result of its squarishly handsome yet entirely unremarkable looks, it is the epitome of classy, understated transport. Though it's a convertible, which should mean extrovert fun, wind-in-the-hair posing and carefree cruising, this car gives exactly the opposite message. It is the Stealth Soft-Top.

Its blocky looks are due to the fact that it predates the current, curvy, Audi A4 range; it's based on the previous models, which, despite the odd tweak round the headlamps and a modernising of the interior to semi-A4 standard, gives it a dated appearance.

A U D I C A B R I O L E T

After all, it was launched in 1992, so it should by rights be showing its age.

Strangely, though, it doesn't feel like an old car to drive; Audi have kept up with the times when it comes to the Cabriolet's engines, and these days it comes with a 1.8-litre four-cylinder or 2.6- and 2.8-litre six-cylinder engines. The 2.8, particularly, is a fine motor and pushes the car along at a fair pace. It's not the lightest thing in the world, after all, what with the hood mechanism and all the extra bracing and reinforcements needed to

keep it stiff, but it'll trundle along effortlessly and smoothly.

That extra bracing works, too. Compared to many newer soft-tops (the blancmange-like Saab, say), the Audi is very solid. And with the triple-layered roof up, noise is kept well down, even on motorways. It's not unbearably breezy with the hood down, and there's a wind deflector too.

But the folding mechanism is just as impressive. Put the handbrake on and set the ignition to 'on', then undo a single handle and press a but-



ton. Whirr, clonk, trundle, thunk, click... a few seconds later it's gone, leaving nothing but a smooth rear deck. Neat and smart – and it raises one question. Why, if Audi could do that at the start of this decade, do Jaguar and BMW, to name but two, still make soft tops that resemble something off a pram?

There's one button to raise and lower all the windows, too, which is a good idea not seen often enough elsewhere.

This isn't a cheap car – the 2.8 version costs £30,941. But it does feel like a luxury car, and it has now attained the sort of classic status and desirability that keeps resale values up and neighbours envious.

The secret of this Audi's survival is simple. It may be old, but it still says the right things about you. And it says them very quietly indeed.



The BMW goes very well with the Victoria & Albert museum – both are examples of grandeur and elegance with an interior that contains much from recent decades. Like those headrests



V&A The BMW 840Ci is a real museum exhibit – preserved as if in a glass case, it's the perfect example of an aggressive, thrusting executive's car from that most aggressive, thrusting of decades, the 1980s.

You would have been perfectly happy driving one of these from your warehouse apartment in Wapping to your City trading floor, listening to news of the miners' strike on the radio while taking the occasional call on your shoe-box-sized cellphone and adjusting the red braces beneath your pinstriped suit.

However, car development taking as long as it does, this businessman's behemoth didn't actually arrive until 1990. When it did, it turned up as the 850i, with BMW's then-new 5.6-litre V12 engine. The V8, 4.4-litre 840 turned up a little later, and the V12

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version was phased out in the UK thanks to cost, emissions regulations, and the fact that it was selling in such tiny numbers that it wasn't worthwhile making right-hand drive ones. The 840Ci is the only model now available, in Sport or Auto versions.

Sitting in it is like being transported back in time; the big, oblong buttons, the horizontal dials, the all-black curving dash and the orangey-red displays all seem very old hat now, though they were on the cutting edge in '90.

But it drives well; though a little unwieldy for town trundling, once on the move it feels

extraordinarily long-legged. More than any other car, this feels as though it was conceived entirely with the autobahn-blasting plutocrat in mind. This car would make more sense for a blat from Dresden to Dusseldorf or Bremen to Bern than anything else.

It is, of course, full of executive toys. Its computer will tell you how far you have gone, what time you are due to arrive, how economical, how fast, how warm it is and what time it is. Its climate control will chill you with icy efficiency or its heated seats will warm your wallet. It also has ASC+T (traction control),

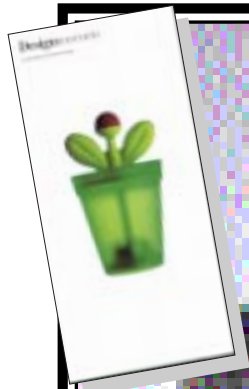


ARAK (active rear axle), EDC (damper control), FIRST (safety package), AAR (air recirculation), AGS (adaptive gearbox) DME (digital motor electronics) and TMA (too many acronyms). Still, it looks very impressive in the Filofax.

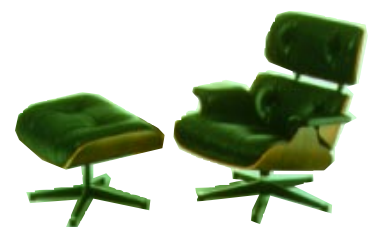
The wacky headrests, with seatbelts built into them, look impressive in a pointless kind of way too, and the leather seats are very supportive.

And, though the V12 was hugely irrelevant at a stonking £82,000, this 840Ci is a real Jaguar XK8 rival at just under £60,000. It still sells a steady 500 or so a year, as it has done since it was launched, and BMW say they haven't any plans for a replacement.

All of which means that, though in many ways it's a real period piece, the big BMW's time may finally have come. Next thing, we'll all start liking Frankie Goes To Hollywood records.



This is proper design; no doubt about it, the Design Museum will be after an XM to put in their 20th Century Pointy department



Designmuseum Two words could be, cruelly, said to sum up the Citroën XM: Pointy... and pointless.

Its *Battlestar Galactica* design is startling in the extreme, even now, a full decade after its 1989 launch, but under that spaceship-shaped body things get even weirder.

This is what enthusiasts would call a 'true' Citroën - in other words, it uses the company's fearsomely complicated computer-controlled self-leveling Hydraulic suspension



sion system - a technical tour de force more akin to robotic plumbing than anything you'd recognise as car springs.

This is the XM's unique advantage, but also its Achilles' heel. It gives a super-smooth, floaty ride, with adjustable Sport or Normal modes and ride height that can be instantly altered from floor-scraping to off-roader. On the road, the system constantly monitors driver input and vehicle movement and adjusts the suspension settings to suit. Fiendishly clever.

But also enormously offputting to the rather conservative buyers in the top end of the car market. 'But what if it goes wrong?' they wailed worriedly and, it has to be said, a patchy record of reliability, particularly electrically, has lent force to their quibbles. Hence

secondhand XMs are astoundingly cheap - once the warranty expires, so does most people's interest in buying one, and the depreciation curve looks like an Alpine ski-run.

But, luckily for the Gallic iconoclasts, there are enough brave or bonkers people around to have bought 22,000 of the things since the XM was launched and, though last year's total sold was a tiny 386, it still sells in a steady trickle, in a difficult market which BMW, Mercedes and Volvo have made their own. It's still being made, while Ford's Scorpio, among others, isn't.

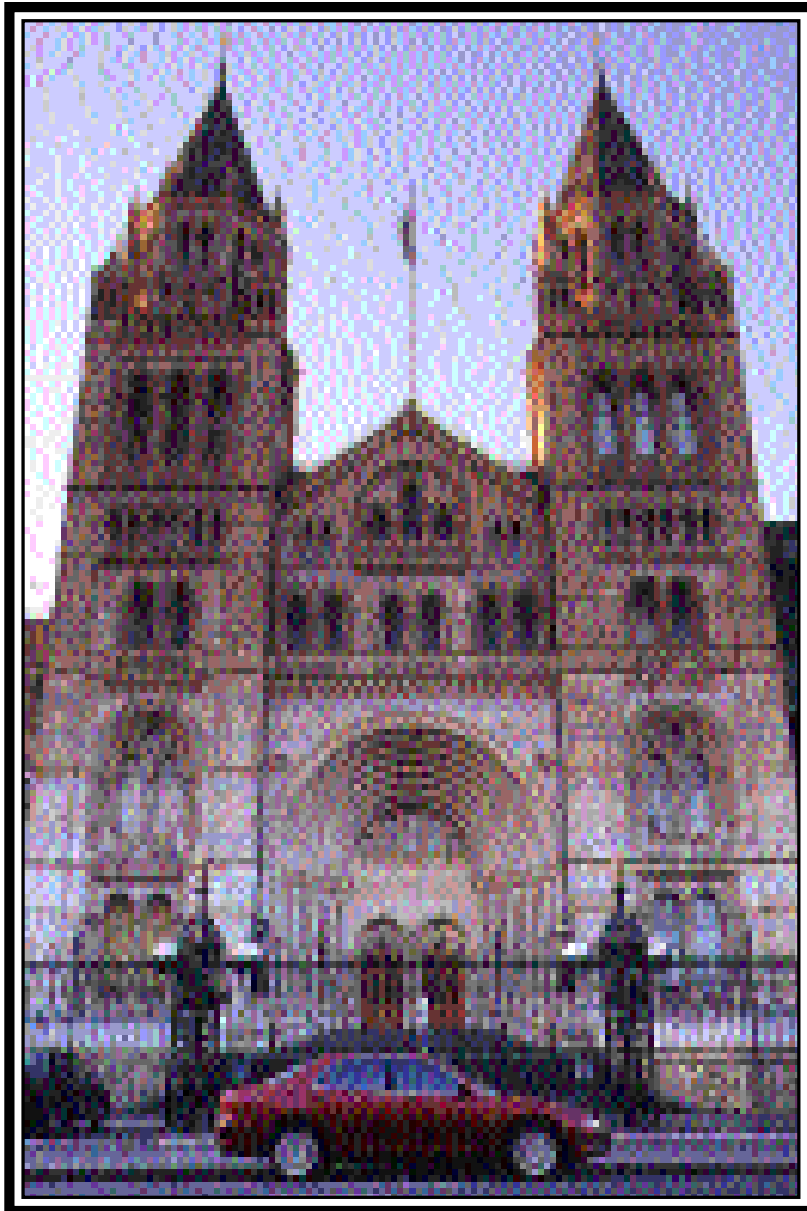
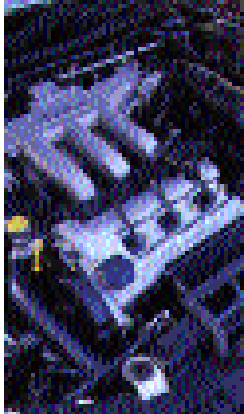
So what's it like to drive? Well, odd. You have to forget most of what you expect from a car and just settle down to be wafted from place to place. It looks like a spaceship, and it handles

like you'd expect one to as well. The bigger-engined ones are smooth as whipped hollandaise sauce, and the three-litre V6 which we drove here, while a little thirsty, is quite adequately quick - and it has air conditioning, cruise control, dinky wheel-mounted stereo buttons and an interior from the same school of sci-fi set design as the outside. Mind you, it costs £28,980.

Everywhere you look, inside or out, there are flashy little touches, like the hidden warning lights inside, the odd double rear windscreen (unusually for a big car these days, the XM has a proper hatchback), the keypad immobiliser and the passenger side mirror which dips automatically so you can see the kerb when you're reversing.

The Citroën XM isn't old at all - it's been beamed into our century from some far distant future. Beam me up!

CITROËN XM



The Natural History Museum houses examples of many rare and wonderful creatures, like the well-camouflaged Xedos 6. It can usually be spotted in the wild by its distinctive grin



The middle of the market is the fiercest evolutionary battleground of them all. Darwin's laws seem to apply much more harshly to Mondeos, Vectras, 406s and Primeras and their rivals than to other automotive species. Hence product lines are short-lived, ranges are revised almost by the week, and models like the Carina and Xantia scabble for survival in a vicious tooth-and-claw fight.

The Mazda Xedos 6, however, was launched in 1992 and has trundled along quite happily ever since. It doesn't sell in huge numbers - 6,538 up until last year, and 625 so far this year - but it has remained remarkably unchanged while all around it has been caught up in a frenzy of development.

This is quite possibly because when it first appeared its design was innovative

MAZDA XEDOS 6

and striking. Sure, it doesn't look too startling these days, but eight years ago its curvy, muscular flanks and its little chromed grille with a hint of MkII Jag were right up there with today's adventurous Ford 'edge design' in the good-grief-look-at-that stakes.

Under that organic bodywork, though, lurks a pretty conventional midrange saloon. The two-litre version we drove, in SE trim, costs £22,000 which is not cheap; but this car, though the size of Mondeos and so on, sits at the top end of that market along with Audi A4s, Honda

Accords and Alfa Romeo 156s. Which is part of the reason for its long-term survival; it has found a small but worthwhile ecological niche and a faithful, if not exactly numerous, herd of buyers to feed upon.

And you can see why they like it. It's pleasant, though not exactly thunderingly exciting, to drive; the steering is light yet positive, the gearchange slick and the engine willing enough to tug you along at a quite adequate rate of knots.

It's well-equipped, too, with ABS, air conditioning, leather upholstery, a sunroof,

electric seat adjustment, a posh stereo... in short, all the accoutrements a motorist could wish for.

The only trouble is that it's a bit dull. Not as dull as its big brother the Xedos 9, which is longer and has less interesting lines, but still a tad boring. The interior is standard Japanese car, sleek but characterless, and the driving experience is worthy... but no fun.

Mazda have a history of quirky, adventurous stuff like the rotary-engined RX-7 and the stonking little MX-5, which was a real leap of faith when it was first designed. But, like Citroen before them, they haven't been overly financially successful and in fact Ford stepped in with a pile of cash.

Maybe the reason for the Xedos' survival is that they just can't afford to design a successor for its niche market. It's not a car - it's a pleasant dodo.





Children of all ages love the 3000GT; it's an enormous Dinky car with loads of bits that go 'ping!', though they won't, hopefully, disappear under Mum's settee



If ever there was a big boy's toy, this car is it. The

Mitsubishi 3000GT has everything that the never-grown-out-of-it bloke could possibly want – bulges, scoops, spoilers (the rear one wags up and down! Cool!), sporty leather seats, a loud stereo, and, more important, more gadgets, buttons, gimmicks and pointlessly flashy electronic widgets than you could shake a copy of the *Innovations* catalogue at.

It has four-wheel drive, four-wheel steering, four-wheel computer-controlled ABS braking, a six-speed gearbox, two intercooled turbochargers, electronically controlled and adjustable suspension, and active aerodynamics.

It is quite probably the flashiest car, pound for pound, on the planet. Does this disgust you? Do you find it crass

MITSUBISHI 3000GT

and unnecessary? Well bog off and read about a diesel hatchback, then. Because the Mitsubishi 3000GT is pure, infantile fun. It looks great, for a start, in an overblown, flashy way. People may look at you and wonder which second division football club you play for, but they certainly do look. In a bright red or black (sadly, the one we had was an unflattering sludge green) it has all the presence of a Ferrari – plus, unlike any Italian supercar, you know it'll start in the morning and

its servicing costs won't bankrupt you.

It goes well; its three-litre twin-turbo V6 engine punts it along at a good lick, right up to a decent 149mph, though some keen drivers complain that its handling is non-communicative and feel-less. On the other hand, it makes a fine long-legged grand tourer, and if you're blasting off to the Costa Brava the last thing you want is twitchy, over-sensitive steering.

The five-way electrically-adjustable seats can be adjusted

to give you a decent driving position, but the suspension, even in the softer 'Tour' mode, is a mite crashy. There's very little headroom, too, and the all-black interior is a bit gloomy, but it does show up the LED displays and all the illuminated buttons and knobs.

Which is half the point. If you're going to drive about in something with most of Dixon's built into the dashboard, you want to be able to see it all.

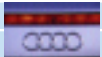

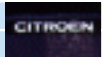

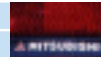
This is a very impressive car, in the true meaning of the word. It will impress grannies, children, your mates, and girls for whom an ankle bracelet is an essential accessory. It might even impress your bank manager briefly – you do get a lot for your £45,800. And it's exclusive, too, with just 580 sold here since it appeared in 1992.

True enthusiasts may sneer. But wave your spoiler at them and zoom off.





IN A GLASS CASE

	Audi Cabriolet	BMW	Citroen XM 3.0i	Mazda Xedos 6	Mitsubishi
	2.8	840Ci	V6 Exclusive	2.0i SE	3000GT
					
Performance					
0-60mph (secs)	9.8	7.5	8.6	9.4	5.7
Maximum speed	136	154	143	133	149
Braking 70-0mph	n/a	159ft	187ft	193ft	158ft
Costs					
On the road price	£30,941	£57,495	£28,980	£21,950	£45,800
Euromix mpg	25.9	22.1	22.4	31.4	22.8
Insurance group	17	19	14	16	20
Equipment					
Airbag driver/passenger	yes/no	yes/yes	yes/yes	yes/no	yes/yes
Remote/central locking	yes/yes	yes/yes	yes/yes	yes/yes	yes/yes
Stereo/CD	yes/opt	yes/yes	yes/opt	yes/no	yes/yes
Anti-lock brakes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Air conditioning	opt	yes	yes	yes	yes
Technical					
Engine	V6	V8	V6	V6	V6
Capacity (cc)	2,771	4,398	2,946	1,995	2,972
Max power (bhp @ rpm)	174/5,500	286/5,700	194/5,500	141/6,000	281.5/6,000
Max torque (lb ft @ rpm)	185/3,000	310/3,900	197/4,000	128/5,000	300/3,000
Transmission	5spd man, fwd	4spd auto, rwd	4spd auto, fwd	5spd man, fwd	6spd man, 4wd
Dimensions L/W (mm)	4,366/1,716	4,780/1,855	4,705/1,798	4,560/1,700	4,570/1,840

EXHIBITS

The five cars we picked out for this test aren't by any means the only examples of antediluvian automobiles trundling round on our roads. Many of the oldest



ones (including living fossils like the Mini, Land Rover or Morgan)



are in niche markets. There are 4x4s like the **Suzuki Vitara**, and **Daihatsu Sportrak**, both below, luxury cars like the **Mercedes SL**, above, and people-carriers like the **Nissan Serena**.



The reason they've survived is that the pace of change in these odd bits of the motoring market is slower than in the hurly-burly of the middle.



One surprise exception is the **Fiat Punto** (below) which has been around since '93. It is due to be replaced soon, however. But it costs an enormous amount to design and tool up for a new model – money some won't spend



Where, what, how? See Leftovers for our massive museum guide