



After HENRY

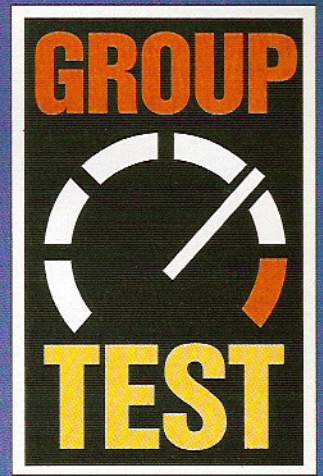
*The age of the
Sierra Cosworth*

*— the affordable four-door supercar — is at an end,
and there's no Mondeo successor on the horizon.*

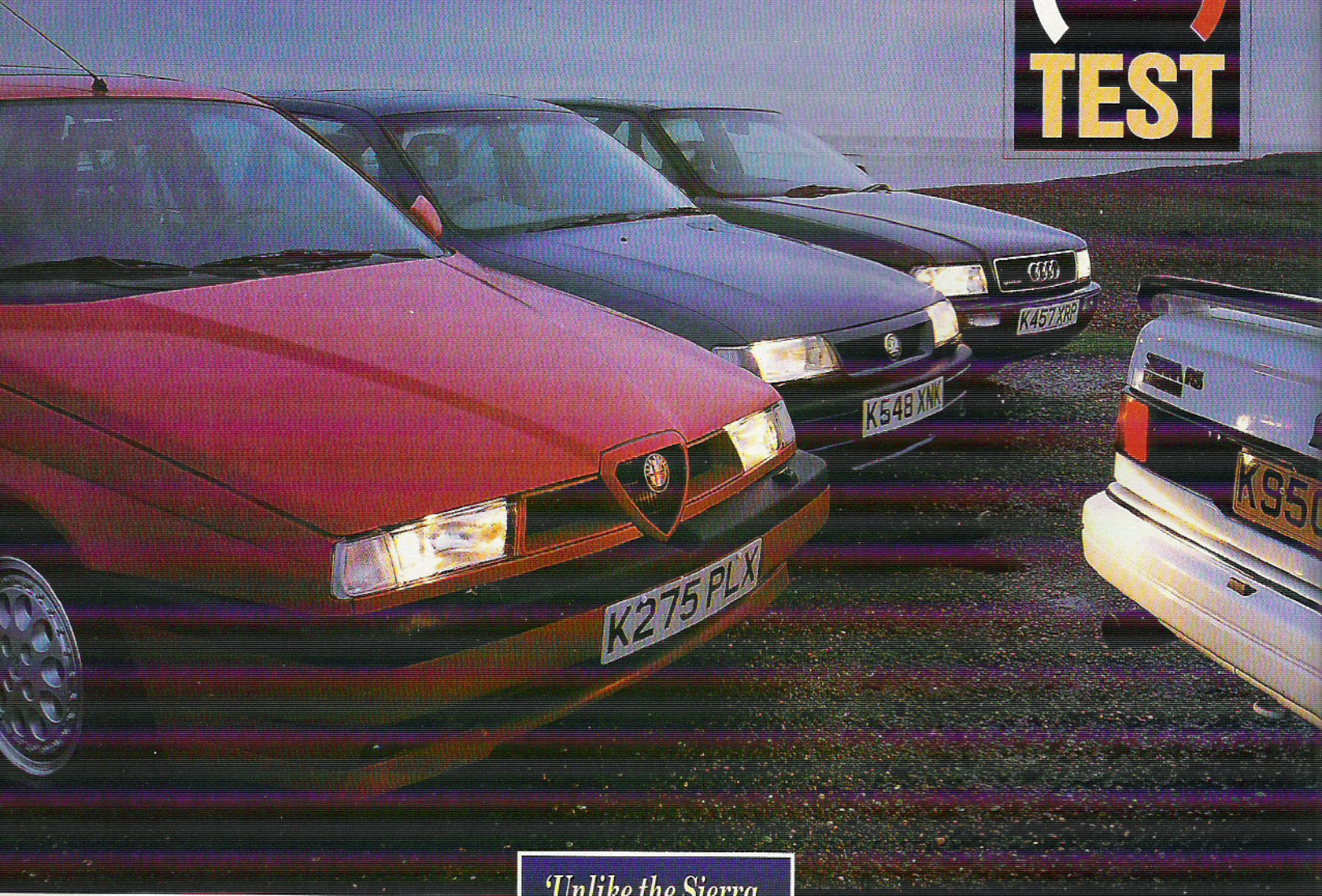
Kevin Blick wonders who, if anybody, will wear the crown

Photography by Michael Bailie

Alfa Romeo 155 Q4
Audi 80 2.8E quattro
Ford Sierra Sapphire RS Cosworth
Vauxhall Cavalier Turbo 4x4



GROUP TEST



Good old Henry. He makes his mistakes but, even so, over the years no-one has been better at bringing power to the people.

Take four-wheel drive. After Audi had virtually re-invented the system with its original Quattro, along came our Henry — Henry Ford that is — and introduced it to people who thought that Audi was something John Wayne said to his partner in Westerns.

First there was the Sierra XR4x4 and then came the stunning Sierra Sapphire RS Cosworth 4x4, the car that wrapped up everything the blue oval stood for in giving high performance motoring to the man in the street.

The poor man's supercar was a stunning piece of kit. Sadly, the owners weren't the only people who thought so and it soon became Britain's most stolen supercar, too. But before it became the villain of the piece, the fast Ford's success obviously stirred the seeds of envy

among the opposition and a whole clutch of instant racers went onto the drawing boards in double quick time.

Unfortunately, the economy went from flat-out in fifth to reverse even quicker, and these banzai machines now stick out worse than a plate of sausage rolls at a barmitzvah party.

No matter that the only people who can afford to run them are company liquidators married to insurance brokers, they are still damned exciting cars. But how exciting? And now that the coming of the Cosworth-less Mondeo means the super-Sierra has faded away, which one should take its crown?

To find out — and to say farewell in

'Unlike the Sierra, whose deep spoilers and rear wing give it a butch, street-racer appeal, the Cavalier looks, well, just like a Cavalier'

style to the great Cossie — we put one of the last of the Sierras (final list price £20,063) against a trio of pretenders. The Escort RS Cosworth was not one of them: its dressed-to-kill, rally-inspired style doesn't fit the Sierra's fast-family-four-door profile. (It also costs nearly five grand more!)

Closest in spirit to the Ford has to be the £19,705 Vauxhall Cavalier Turbo 4x4. Like the Sierra, it's a rep's car on Ecstasy. The dynamics of the two are uncannily similar: each has a 2-litre, 16-valve engine boosted to 200-plus horsepower (220 in the case of the Ford; a mere 204 for the Cavalier).

Unlike the Sierra, whose deep

spoilers and rear wing give it a rather butch street-racer appeal, the Cavalier looks, well, just like a Cavalier. You're more likely to spot the 'turbo' badge than the very subtle spoilers and skirts.

If the Lancia Integrale is soul-mate to the Escort Cosworth, then the new Alfa 155 Cloverleaf 4 must be the Latin rival to the Sierra and Cavalier 4x4s. Effectively, it's an Integrale mechanical package — 190bhp, 16-valve turbo motor and 4wd — mated with the four-door 155's body. As with the Cavalier, there's not much on the outside to distinguish a Q4 from any other 155, but what there is is tasty (purposeful, drilled alloy wheels and the usual skirts job) and, anyway, the wedgy 155 looked good already.

Like the Integrale, the Q4 will only be available as a left-hooker. That, and the £21,024 price tag, should do wonders for its sales appeal (NOT!).

Number four in our line-up was to have been the new Peugeot 405 T16, another family saloon with a steroid-overdose, but since this turboed, 16-

valve, 4wd sprinter isn't around yet, and since you can't really compare 4wd saloons without including a quattro, we settled for the more subtle charms of the £22,560 Audi 80 quattro. With no turbo and only two valves per cylinder, it's the odd man out, generating its 174bhp via a 2.8-litre V6 instead. The 4wd system is unique, too, using a Torsen centre diff which both splits the drive front and rear, and varies the torque split, rather than the epicyclic plus viscous coupling format of the others.

Despite the seeming similarity of all bar the Audi, there are important differences between them. The Sierra started life with rear-drive; the Alfa and Vauxhall base cars have transverse engines and front-drive. The Vauxhall, uniquely here, has a six-speed 'box, with five close-stacked ratios and an overdrive-style top.

They resolve the conflicting demands of 4wd and ABS differently, too. ABS won't work properly if there's any residual drive left between the different wheels when braking. The Sierra's first generation 4wd system gets over that with 'soft' viscous coupling settings; Vauxhall disconnects the 4wd with an automatic clutch; Alfa uses the latest, very sensitive Bosch ABS so it can fine-tune its viscous coupling accurately and Audi's Torsen diff automatically unlocks itself when the throttle is lifted.

With its handsome power advantage, the Cossie ought to leave the others looking at its tyre tracks. Yes, it is the quickest off the line but, as you'll see, not by the sort of margin you might expect.

The engine has all the aural appeal of a Flymo. It's coarse, noisy and vibrates like an old twin-tub washing machine, but all that pales beside its thundering acceleration: 0-60mph takes only 5.6 seconds, 0-100 14.9, but it is the wallop of mid-range thrust that provides the real excitement. This is where the turbo motor is so devastatingly effective; its 210lb ft of torque is a match for a 911 Carrera, and it shows in terrific overtaking performance. Just look at the fourth gear figures above 40mph: each 20mph increment dispatched in barely five seconds.

For all its gruffness, the Cossie's is a well-sorted engine. There's not a lot of lag and the torque spread is good: it will pull usefully from under 3000 revs but only from there on does the power really build up. The driveline is less satisfactory. The long-travel clutch and baulky, slow gearshift prevent fast, fluid shifting.

The Cavalier gives the Ford a damned good run for its money. Indeed, on the road, there are times when its smoother-running, quicker-spinning motor and light, slick gearchange make it feel faster than the Cosworth. The six-speed 'box contributes as well, though only at

● Vauxhall responds too lazily to be great fun in the twisty stuff. Steering is the least impressive here



● Ford's chassis is the most communicative and chuckable — it wants you to have fun



● Front-end washout and unwanted tailslides make Alfa an unappetising handful



● Audi's body roll is too pronounced, but it shows no nerves at all when cornering



GROUP TEST

higher speeds, for the first three gears of each are pretty similar.

Against the watch, the Cavalier is the slower. Needing an extra gearchange before 60mph, it tails the Cossie in the 0-60 sprint by a full second, and by 100mph the gap has widened to two seconds.

But don't think this makes the Cavalier a slouch. It is a terrific sprinter, and its better aerodynamics enable it to outrun the Sierra on top speed, the Ford topping out at 143mph, the Cavalier touching 147mph on Millbrook's bowl.

The Cavalier's extra cog makes direct gear-for-gear comparisons difficult, but it hasn't quite the same sort of mid-range thump as the Ford; instead there's a jet-like build-up of thrust from an engine that's been tuned to deliver the goods with a certain subtlety. It's a fine turbo installation, though the engine itself can be irritatingly boomy at higher revs. The sixth speed is worth having for motorway peace alone.

The Alfa gets its priorities the other way around — a peachy smooth engine (the twin-cam has balancer shafts for extra refinement) with an old-fashioned all-or-nothing turbo installation.

Alfa claims an impressive 215lb ft of peak torque to come at 2500revs. You could have fooled us. The car's only cantering until the tacho needle has clipped past 3500rpm and then it takes off. The result is a blistering turn of mid-range acceleration that's a match for both the Vauxhall and the Ford, even though it is bettered by both in the 0-60mph and 0-100mph sprints (6.9 and 18.6secs respectively). In Alfa (eg catalysed) form, the twin-cam has lost 20bhp compared with the Integrale, so it doesn't have the same, horizon-swallowing acceleration, but it is still plenty quick enough to be a lot of fun.

The gearshift is quick but has an unnervingly dead feel — you're never quite sure the gear's gone in until you lift the clutch. Its five speeds are almost identical to the lower five of the Vauxhall, so it buzzes quite noisily on the motorway.

With 'only' 174bhp, the Audi loses out in the horsepower hunt. What you get is an engine that is the smoothest here by some margin, and which delivers the goods in a lazy, torquey fashion ideally suited to making

effortless and, by most standards, fast progress.

It's not in the same speed league as the other three, though, especially since Audi has gone for long gearing: 0-60 takes 7.7secs and 100mph 23.4. Top speed is 130mph.

The Audi's chassis takes the same relaxed approach to life as its engine. Its abilities creep up on you and, after a day's driving on secondary roads, you find yourself reflecting on just how competently it has performed.

What it doesn't do is inspire, and the chief culprit must be the steering, which is too light and which has an entirely artificial feel. There's no proper feedback from the front wheels.

That's a shame, for the chassis has a rare poise. It doesn't radiate the nervous tension of a sports car when cornering — turn-in is a bit lazy and there's too much body lean — but cornering balance is excellent with a consistent but gentle bias towards understeer. Not that it's short of grip: on our wet back-to-back test day, its relatively modest 195/60 Dunlops clung on strongly.

Which is more than could be said for the 205/50 Bridgestones of the Cosworth, which slid all too easily. A wet surface soon exposes the crudity of the Ford's first generation 4wd system: it understeers, you lift off, it oversteers. Self evidently, it can't vary the torque distribution around the wheels with the same smoothness as the Audi achieves.

But that crudity actually makes it all the more fun. It's driver-dependent in a way that none of the others here are and, for something of its size and power, very user-friendly as well. It oozes with the 'feel-good' factor. You can drift it and slide it almost at will — certainly in the wet — then rely on its 4wd traction to pull you through.

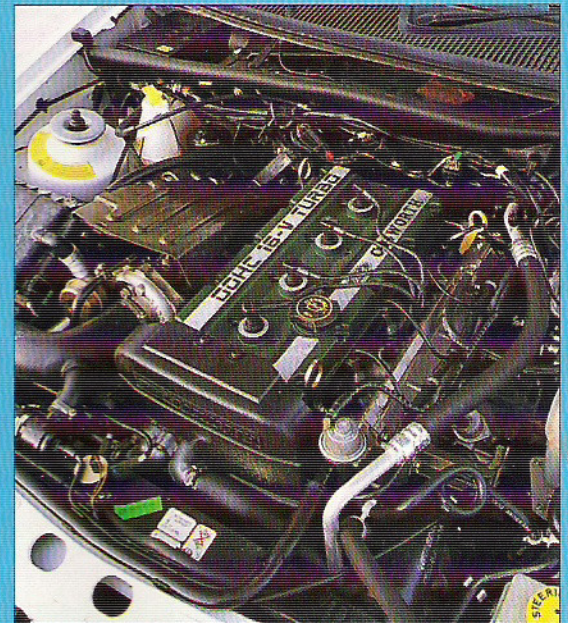
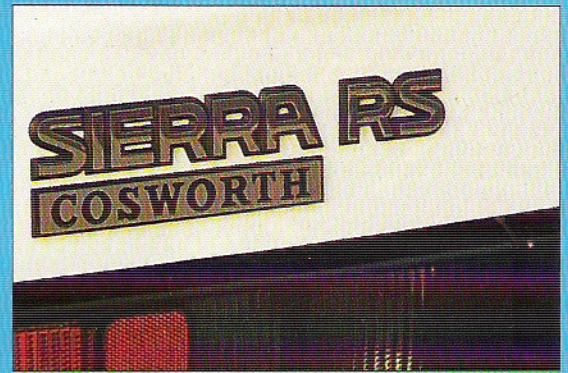
Steering is superb — that helps a lot. It's firmly weighted, quick and feeds back a stream of messages from the road.

The Cavalier is utterly different. The average rep might sit behind the wheel for a week and never guess it had four-wheel drive, such is the smooth operation of its more sophisticated 4wd system. It steers, handles and rides pretty much like any other Cavalier. So what's the point? Only that four-wheel drive lets it put those 200 horses down on the road in a cool, calm and collected fashion which would be impossible in a front-drive Cav.

Like the Audi, the Vauxhall takes time to appreciate. They are both at their best on roads with fast, sweeping bends where balance and composure are at a premium. Like the Audi, the Vauxhall is too lazy in its responses to be anything like as much fun as the Ford on the tight, twisty stuff. It also has dire steering — worse even than the Audi's, which is merely light and artificial. The Cavalier's is light, artificial and woolly, too.

And so to the Integrale-inspired Alfa. Unbelievably, Alfa's engineers have taken what was arguably the greatest four-wheel-drive chassis and turned it into what must be one of the worst. The steering remains

Alfa Romeo 155 Q4 • Audi 80 2.8E quattro • Ford Sierra Sapphire RS Cosworth • Vauxhall Cavalier Turbo 4x4



● Ford's 220bhp, 2-litre in-line four is a coarse, noisy engine that really starts to pull from 3000rpm



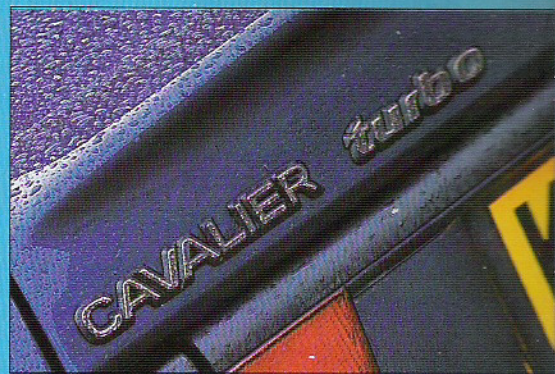
● Cosworth cabin shows its age, with poor switchgear and muddled dials, but leather Recaros are fine



● Alfa's 190bhp, 2-litre unit with all-or-nothing turbo, has terrific power delivery mid-range



● Audi's 174bhp, 2.8-litre V6 the smoothest here, delivering its power without drama



● Vauxhall's 204bhp, 2-litre four prone to high-rev booming, but a fine turbo and a star sprinter



● Q4 interior mixes luxury with cheapness, and reverts to that age-old driving position problem



● Quattro interior the class act of the four — not appetising to look at, but brilliant to live with



● Cavalier fit and finish superb. Leather trim is standard — cloth (pictured) is a less-cost option

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In 'Auto' mode, a hapless mix of stiff springs and soggy damper settings allows the nose to bob up and down like a small boat, while at the same time the front wheels are pattering over every crack in the road. Stick to 'Sport' and you have to endure a juddering ride that sends shudders up the A-pillars.

Nor is the Alfa's cornering prowess anything special. The front end washes out wide too easily and, if you lift off, the tail slides unwillingly out to compensate. All the flick-flick agility of the Integrale through the this-way-and-that turns and cambers of a typical B-road has gone.

Compared with the Alfa, all the others have limousine rides, though all are actually pretty firm. The Cavalier's is the best, the Ford sounds coarse but is taut and well controlled, while the Audi would benefit from decent electronic damping — it feels too soft at speed; too joggly around town.

The Ford disguises its lumpy ride well, with excellent Recaro seats. Cloaked in soft, black leather, they do a lot to take your eyes away from the dated cabin, with its clumsy switchgear and muddled dials.

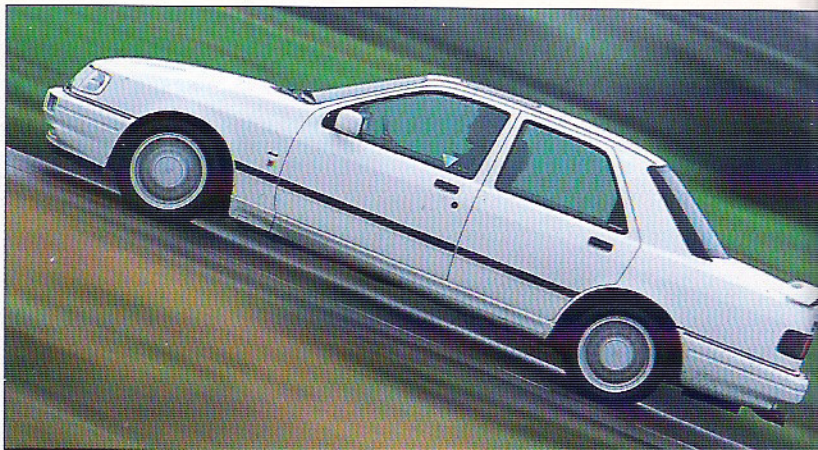
For all its graphic shortcomings, you still feel good behind the Ford's

snappy and firm, but beyond that almost all has been lost.

The electronic damping is perhaps the culprit. It has settings for Auto — which self-selects firm damping when the circumstances dictate — and Sport — which keeps the damping permanently firm. In either, the ride is poor, and we're not just talking lack of comfort. The car skitters about on the road in a way that destroys your confidence and enthusiasm for going fast.

PERFORMANCE

	Ford	Alfa Romeo	Audi	Vauxhall
THROUGH THE GEARS (SECS)				
0-30mph	1.9	2.6	2.6	2.3
0-40mph	3.1	3.9	4.2	3.5
0-50mph	4.3	5.2	5.9	4.6
0-60mph	5.6	6.9	7.7	6.6
0-70mph	8.0	9.1	10.6	8.5
0-80mph	9.9	11.5	13.5	10.7
0-90mph	11.9	14.8	17.4	13.6
0-100mph	14.9	18.6	23.4	17.0
0-110mph	—	24.2	30.4	21.9
0-120mph	—	31.8	—	27.8
Standing 1/4mile (sec/mph)	14.3/96	15.4/92	16.0/87	14.9/95
Averaged top speed (mph)	143	137	130	147
4th GEAR ACCELERATION				
30-50mph	7.2	5.5	7.5	5.5
40-60mph	5.1	4.5	7.0	4.9
50-70mph	4.9	4.7	7.2	5.0
60-80mph	5.1	5.3	7.7	5.3
70-90mph	5.2	6.0	8.7	5.5
80-100mph	5.6	7.1	10.2	6.3
90-110mph	—	9.1	12.3	8.1
5th GEAR ACCELERATION				
30-50mph	10.6	9.7	9.7	8.7
40-60mph	7.7	6.7	9.1	6.9
50-70mph	6.3	6.3	9.1	6.3
60-80mph	6.7	6.9	9.1	6.7
70-90mph	6.8	7.5	10.6	7.4
80-100mph	7.6	8.5	13.1	8.2
90-110mph	—	10.4	—	8.9
Overall fuel cons (mpg)	21.9	23.6	22.1	24.0
Touring mpg. (from Govt figs)	27.9	28.0	26.7	30.9
Track conditions	Dry	Dry	Dry	Dry
Temperature (C)	6	3	7	2
Wind speed (mph)	10	8	7-8	0
Atmospheric pressure (mbar)	1016	1017	1008	1020



● The shape of the original affordable four-door supercar



● An impressive wedge that needs few sporting extras



● A fast, yet understated saloon cuts its dash quietly



● The ultimate bushel under which to hide a sporting light

wheel. The authoritative driving position looking down over the bonnet, well-placed pedals, thick-rimmed wheel and grippy, rally-style seat exude that 'drive-me' confidence.

Despite a plethora of electric seat adjusters and a movable steering column, the Alfa's knees-splayed, arms-stretched driving position reverts to a problem which has bugged Italian cars for 30 years. You'll never discover if the seat was designed to give support, for you end up hardly sitting on it. Worse, to pull the high-set steering wheel down to a sensible angle means obscuring both the main instrument faces.

The cabin is a curious mix of luxury — air conditioning, a (poorly located) CD player and loads of electric gizmos — and cheap materials. The seats are trimmed in a tacky vinyl that simply has no place in a £21,000 car.

To step from the Alfa into the Vauxhall is to be given an instant insight into all that's wrong with Italian car making. It may be just a Cavalier, but the Vauxhall has a fit, finish and solidity that would not embarrass a BMW.

What it lacks is the final ten per cent of inspiration. It is impossible to fault the driving position, or the supportive sports seats — which will be leather rather than cloth trimmed

as standard — but, save for the 'turbo' badge on the wheel centre, it could still just be any high-series Cavalier rep-mobile. It is equipped like one as well, which means comprehensively, though not with the Alfa's goodies.

The Audi, as you might expect, is the class act of the four. Everything about the interior looks elegant and all the controls work with a real finesse.

For all that, it isn't an immediately appetising interior. You sit down low in a rather gloomy cabin on a seat that is flat and unsupportive compared with the others' sporty buckets. The wheel is rather large and a bit too high for comfort.

The Audi is also very scantily equipped. An electric sunroof is the only nod towards luxury: rear electric windows, cassette player and even alloy wheels are missing from the standard spec.

The Audi offers more than a nod

'To step from the Alfa into the Vauxhall is to be given an insight into all that is wrong with Italian car making'

towards safety, with its Procon-Ten system and side door beams. Vauxhall has door beams, too, as well as an optional driver's airbag which will probably become standard soon. Surprisingly for a new design, the Alfa has neither beams nor bag and nor does the old-timer Ford, which comes from a pre-safety conscious era.

Only the Vauxhall offers a comprehensive security package of deadlocks, immobiliser and an alarm.

CONCLUSION

Disappointment, anger, frustration. Those are the sorry sentiments that the Alfa Q4 inspires. How could anyone allow a car out with such ill-sorted suspension, such an awful driving position? Other 155s we've driven have been far better built, so we'll give the dismal fit and finish of this one the benefit of the doubt —

the crooked boot lid, the doors that don't line up with the body, the mismatching of paint between spoilers and body and so on. Alfa ought to be crawling over the Cavalier to see how GM does it — but one suspects they have never bothered.

The Audi is the sort of car that a lot of would-be Alfa owners find themselves buying. It lacks that edge of fun and sparkle but it's well screwed together and exudes middle-class appeal. There's not a lot to complain about — merely the poor steering and gloomy cabin — but surely motoring ought to be more fun.

The Cavalier inspires the same sort of sentiments. It's shatteringly fast, a very composed handler, decently equipped and very, very well made. Yet somehow there's no real sparkle — even about the way it looks.

You can guess what we are leading up to saying. This test was conceived to wave bye bye to the Cossie and say hello to its successor but, when it comes down to the wire, the Cossie is still king.

It's rough and raucous; a big, clumsy machine in many ways, and it is almost pre-historic inside. Yet it provides something that all the others lack — fun. It's liberating and exciting; a car that'll bring a big grin to your face. Just remember to keep it locked up. ■

SPECIFICATION	Ford Sierra Cosworth	Alfa Romeo 155 Q4	Audi 80 2.8E quattro	Vauxhall Cavalier 4x4
ENGINE	Four-cylinder, in-line, longitudinal	Four-cylinder, in-line, transverse	Six cylinders in vee, longitudinal	Four-cylinder, in-line, transverse
DISPLACEMENT	1993cc	1995cc	2771cc	1998cc
BORE x STROKE	90.8mm x 77.0mm	84.0mm x 90.0mm	82.5mm x 86.4mm	86.0mm x 86.0mm
COMPRESSION RATIO	8.0 to 1	8.5 to 1	10.0 to 1	9.0 to 1
FUEL AND IGNITION	Weber-Marelli multipoint fuel injection and ignition, turbocharger and intercooler	Weber-Marelli P8 multipoint fuel injection and ignition, turbocharger and intercooler	Bosch MH Motronic multi-point fuel injection and electronic ignition	Bosch Motronic multi-point fuel injection and ignition, turbocharger and intercooler
CYLINDER BLOCK	Cast iron	Cast iron	Cast iron	Cast iron
CYLINDER HEAD	Aluminium alloy, dohc, four valves per cylinder	Aluminium alloy, dohc, four valves per cylinder	Aluminium alloy, dohc, two valves per cylinder	Aluminium alloy, dohc, four valves per cylinder
MAX POWER (DIN)	220bhp @ 6250rpm	190bhp @ 6000rpm	174bhp @ 5500rpm	204bhp @ 5600rpm
MAX TORQUE (DIN)	214lb ft @ 3500rpm	215lb ft @ 2500rpm	184lb ft @ 3000rpm	207lb ft @ 2400rpm
TRANSMISSION	Five-speed manual, 4wd	Five-speed manual, 4wd	Five-speed manual, 4wd	Six-speed manual, 4wd
GEAR RATIOS	1st 3.61 4th 1.00 2nd 2.08 5th 0.83 3rd 1.36	1st 3.50 4th 1.16 2nd 2.18 5th 0.92 3rd 1.52	1st 3.50 4th 0.94 2nd 1.84 5th 0.82 3rd 1.23	1st 3.57 4th 1.10 2nd 2.16 5th 0.89 3rd 1.45 6th 0.74
FINAL DRIVE RATIO	3.62 to 1	3.35 to 1	3.89 to 1	Front 3.72: to 1, rear 3.70 to 1
SPEED PER 1000rpm, TOP	22.2mph	21.7mph	24.1mph	25.3mph
FRONT SUSPENSION	Independent by MacPherson struts, lower wishbones, coil springs and anti-roll bar	Independent by MacPherson struts, lower wishbones, coil springs and anti-roll bar	Independent by MacPherson struts, lower wishbones, coil springs and anti-roll bar	Independent by MacPherson struts, lower wishbones, coil springs and anti-roll bar
REAR SUSPENSION	Independent by semi-trailing arms coil springs and anti-roll bar	Trailing arms, coil springs and anti-roll bar. Electronic damping	Double wishbones, track control arms, coil springs and anti-roll bar	Semi-trailing arms, cross link, coil springs and anti-roll bar
STEERING	Rack and pinion, power assisted	Rack and pinion, power assisted	Rack and pinion, power assisted	Rack and pinion, power assisted
BRAKES	Vented discs all round. Anti-lock standard	Front vented discs, rear discs. Anti-lock standard	Front vented discs, rear discs. Anti-lock standard	Front vented discs, rear discs. Anti-lock standard
WHEELS	7 x 15in alloy	6 x 15in alloy	6 x 15in alloy	6 x 16in alloy
TYRES	205/50 ZR Bridgestone	205/50 ZR Pirelli	195/65 VR Dunlop	205/50 ZR Firestone Firehawk
WHEELBASE	102.7in	100.0in	102.9in	102.4in
TURNING CIRCLE	32.8ft	35.2ft	36.8ft	34.8ft
FUEL TANK CAPACITY	13.2 gal/60 litres	13.2gal/60litres	14gal/64litres	14gal/63litres
UNLADEN WEIGHT	2870lb	3263lb	3197lb	3086lb
TEST WEIGHT	3068lb	3594lb	3527lb	3417lb
POWER TO WEIGHT RATIO (TEST WEIGHT)	157bhp/ton	118bhp/ton	109bhp/ton	134bhp/ton
BASIC PRICE	£20,063	£21,024	£22,560	£19,705
PRICE AS TESTED	£20,063	£21,024	£22,795	£19,259
OPTIONAL EXTRAS FITTED TO TEST CAR	None	None	Sony XR5451 radio unit (£235)	Cloth trim (-£446)