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NEW SERIES! 'Golden Oldies'; Kim's Retrospective Road Test No. 1 – 1996 Vauxhall Astra 1.7 LS turbodiesel (Isuzu engine).

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Astronomical!

In the first of a new series on Wheels-Alive, Kim Henson assesses Vauxhall's family hatchback of the 1990s, in the form of a 1996 Vauxhall Astra F ('Mark 3'), powered by Isuzu's fuel-sipping 1.7 litre turbodiesel engine.

(All words and photographs by Kim).

"Astra from Vauxhall. It's every car you'll ever need - or want." So proclaimed Vauxhall when promoting their 1996 Astra line-up.

The context... In the mid-1990s competition was intense between manufacturers in the mid-



range family hatchback market. Major players included the Ford Escort, Vauxhall Astra, Rover 200 series, Peugeot 306 and Volkswagen Golf, among others.

While it was the sporting versions of these models that attracted the most attention in their heyday (and that are now regarded as highly 'desirable' modern classics), it was the less potent but more affordable 'family' versions that were the best-sellers - and interest in these too is growing as their remaining numbers inevitably decline with the passing of time.

Taking 1995 as a mid-decade example year, undisputed king in overall sales terms for all sizes of vehicle was the Ford Escort, with 137,760 examples finding buyers in the UK. This was after 12 years in which various different style Fords bearing the Escort model name had held the top spot.

For the record, the smaller Fiesta was second best seller, and the larger Mondeo came in at Number 3.

However, Vauxhall's British-built Astra was the next mid-range hatchback to feature in the top seller list, at position No. 4 and clocking up 100,709 sales. (It is interesting also to note that by the end of 1995 the Astra was catching up with the Escort in terms of sales numbers).

The larger Cavalier and the smaller Corsa respectively held the next two positions.

Next, at No. 7, came the Rover 200 hatchback series, with 68,141 sales (the smaller, Metro-derived Rover 100 was 10th in sales numbers, at 52,392).

Moving down to the eighth and ninth positions respectively were the mid-range Peugeot 306 (56,112 sales) and the smaller Renault Clio (52,576).

Interestingly, VW's Golf did not appear in the 1995 top 10...

At the time diesel power was growing in popularity as such engines became more powerful



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and gained refinement, as well as delivering far better fuel consumption figures by comparison with contemporary petrol-driven motors providing similar performance.



VAUXHALL ASTRA 1.7 LS TURBODIESEL (ISUZU ENGINE)

Enter the subject of our road test, a Vauxhall Astra five door hatchback, in second-tier LS trim level form and powered by the acclaimed 1.7 litre (1686cc) turbocharged Isuzu engine, renowned for its long-term reliability and frugality. Our car was registered very early in January 1996 (so it was built in 1995).

To put the model in perspective, it is worth looking briefly at the history of the Astra...

The first Vauxhall bearing that name, and the firm's first front wheel drive model, was a hatchback which arrived as the Astra for 1980, effectively a right-hand drive version of the new Opel Kadett 'D' (that in fact I first test-drove at the model's launch at Castle Donington in September 1979!).



These first generation Astras ('Mark 1' or 'D' versions) were produced until 1984, when the more rounded second generation ('Mark 2' or Astra 'E') cars were introduced.

In 1991 the third generation models ('Mark 3' or Astra 'F' – like our test car) represented a further evolution and ousted their predecessors. These continued in production until 1998.

As I write, in 2017, Astras have continued to be popular among buyers and are now in their much-acclaimed seventh generation.



ASTRA CHOICES

Back to our test vehicle... At the outset let's look at the choice within the Astra range for



potential buyers, in 1995/6.

At that time, Astra customers could choose between three or five door hatchback, four door saloon, five door estate or convertible variants.

Five trim levels started with Merit, rising through LS, GLS and Sport to the range-topping and very comprehensively-equipped CDX.

Petrol engine options included two 1.4 litre fuel-injected four cylinder units, developing 60 PS (1389cc overhead camshaft 'Hi-Torq') or 90 PS (1389cc twin overhead camshaft 'ECOTEC-4'. Incidentally, 'ECOTEC' stands for, "Economy, Ecology and Technology").

Next up the ladder were 1.6 litre fuel-injected four cylinder motors, in 75 PS (1598cc overhead camshaft) and 100 PS (1598cc twin overhead camshaft 'ECOTEC-4') forms, then a 2.0 litre fuel-injected unit (1998cc twin overhead camshaft 'ECOTEC-4').

Perhaps confusingly, the Astra could also be bought with one of two very different 1.7 litre overhead camshaft four cylinder diesel engines.

Vauxhall's own 1700cc 'TD' unit, with a low pressure turbocharger and an intercooler, developed 68 PS, plus a maximum of 97.3 lb.ft (132 Nm) of torque at 2,400 rpm.

By contrast the Isuzu-sourced turbocharged and intercooled 1686cc 'TDS' unit produced 82 PS, with a maximum torque output of 123.9 lb.ft (168 Nm) at 2,400 rpm. This is the unit in our test car.



Both the diesel motors conformed with contemporary EU96 emission standards.

The LS specification of our test vehicle denotes a step up from the entry-level 'Merit' trim level, but even for Merit buyers (and across the line-up) their Astra came with an impressive amount of standard equipment.

This included a facia-integrated 'Multi Function Display' (MFD) panel, providing an instant read-out for the car's audio settings, also the time and date and outside temperature (with an ice warning function to alert the driver too). In addition, the heating and ventilation system was fitted as standard with a cabin pollen filter and an air recirculation facility (and top-line CDX versions came with a full air conditioning system that included the glovebox).

In the mid-1990s most car stereo systems still included a cassette player, but the Astra CDX



model provided a CD player instead, and this was optionally available at extra cost on lower specification versions. All Astras of the time featured radios incorporating microprocessor-controlled quartz tuning. Most also came with audio systems that included RDS/EON ('Radio Data System' - embedding digital information in FM broadcasts/'Enhanced Other Networks' - for delivering traffic information to devices able to pick this up) and 'Traffic Programme' - enabling the user to use radio stations regularly broadcasting traffic information.

Safety was taken very seriously by Vauxhall, and in this era of Astra starting with a computer-optimised body shell incorporating a central survival cell, plus front and rear deformation or 'crumple' zones.

Earlier Astras had been the first Vauxhalls to have built-in side impact protection beams, and the model under review featured additional padding within the doors, plus reinforced front seat frames and strengthened rear seat backs (to minimise the effects of luggage moving in the load compartment).

In addition, a full size airbag was fitted to protect the driver (and, in CDX versions, an airbag was also standard-fit on the passenger side of the vehicle; this was an option on all other Astras too).

The front seat belts incorporated a 'body lock' pre-tensioner system to minimise head and chest injuries in frontal impacts.

Anti-lock braking ('ABS') was not yet standard fare, but optionally available on all Astra models.

It should be mentioned that the Astras of the time were regarded as safer vehicles than many of their contemporaries, performing well in independent crash assessments.

Security also featured strongly on Astras of this era, and the model gained many awards for progress in this area. Standard equipment on all Astras included strengthened door lock surrounds, plus, on all except the entry-level Merit, deadlock type central locking (but it



could be specified as an extra), a transponder-activated engine deadlock (working via a receiver in the ignition lock), also a remote display and 'burnt-in' security code for the audio system, making it virtually useless once removed from the car to which it was originally fitted.

In addition, on the Sport and CDX versions, an alarm system came as standard.



'RUN-IN'

At the start of our road test, our test car (registered early in January 1996 and built in 1995) was already 21 years old and came with 118,000 miles on the clock, so was nicely run-in. We added another 3,500 miles or so to this tally during our full year of testing.



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Interestingly, in the



contemporary Vauxhall Astra brochure, and on the first page of text, there is a paragraph headed 'Built to Last', and which reads, "Astra is built better to last longer. That way, you can be confident of knowing that your particular model will continue looking good for many years to come". So, with our test car now 22 years old, I reckon it's a case of 'so far, so good' then!

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

For a design that is more than two decades old, the Astra still looks sleek and attractive, according to our view and to comments received during our time with the vehicle. It's pretty good aerodynamically-speaking too, with a drag coefficient for the hatchback, as tested, of Cd 0.32 (the saloon version beats it, at Cd 0.31, while the more boxy-shaped but highly practical estate is a little less 'smooth', with a Cd of 0.32).



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The 'LS' specification



of our test car means that from new it featured a variety of equipment over and above that found on the entry-level Merit model. The additional features included electrically-operated front windows, a tilt/slide glass sun roof, green tinted glass, height-adjustment for the driver's seat, a tachometer and a high specification stereo radio/cassette player (although at some time in our car's life this set-up been changed for a stereo radio/CD system). Standard too were a deadlock type central locking system, plus an engine deadlock immobiliser.

As with all Astras of the time, on our test car the suspension is by coil springs at the front and rear, with gas-filled shock absorbers (dampers). The running gear also incorporates a front disc/rear drum braking system and power-assisted steering.

First impressions on entering the car are that the interior is spacious and pleasantly-trimmed (with attractive 'Rhine' cloth upholstery). The fact that the seats, carpets and headlining are still intact and in most respects looking very good in a car over 20 years old bears testament to the long-term durability of the materials employed and, no doubt, to the care of previous owners.



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The accommodating front seats proved to be comfortable and supportive, even over long distances, and although I haven't been able to travel in the rear (as I am usually driving!), rear seat passengers have told me that the rear seats too are comfortable. They also provide generous head and leg room, plus plenty of width for three adults.

The ride quality is impressive whether the car is lightly-loaded or if it has a full complement of passengers and luggage. On a recent weekend break to Devon, covering about 300 miles in total, the Astra proved to be comfortable.

It is also an easy and pleasant car to drive in terms of handling and roadholding; it grips the tarmac well through twisty sections, with comparatively little body roll, and it seems not to



be shaken nor stirred when encountering potholes midway through bends.

The heating and ventilation system works well, and the tilt/slide glass sun roof is a real boon too (there is no air conditioning on this version).

PERFORMANCE?

Engine-wise, by comparison with recent diesel-powered cars, it is certainly evident at start-up and tickover that the Isuzu unit is an older type motor, for it idles with a fair amount of noise and vibration. This is hardly surprising in view of the age of the design, and to be honest I have not found it to be intrusive.

The start-up procedure is to allow the glowplug warning lamp to fully extinguish before attempting to crank the engine. This only takes a few seconds (while your seatbelt is fastened, say), and then the engine always, but always, starts instantly. When we took delivery of the car we were warned that it would definitely refuse to start if the lamp was still glowing when the key was turned to the 'start' position. It just takes a little while to remember this!

The motor soon settles down to its normal willing sound, and pulls well through the well-chosen gearbox ratios.

The gearchange on our test car was somewhat stiff when it arrived, but was soon vastly improved in slickness, speed and precision by sparing lubrication of the various gearchange mechanism pivot points (I suspect that these had seldom or never been lubricated in all of the car's 21 years!).

My wife has found the gearchange position less than ideal for her; she needs to have the driver's seat set fairly far forward, so then the gear lever is a little too far back for her comfort, although the gear lever position is fine for me.

At low engine speeds acceleration is best described as 'leisurely', and in order to make



faster progress, especially when overtaking, etc, you need to change down a ratio or two to get the engine spinning above about 2,500 to 3,000 rpm, and the turbocharger 'on song'. Similar characteristics were features of most early turbocharged diesels, but I found that once I got used to the manner in which the Astra performed, it was not difficult to live with.

Once the tacho needle climbs above 2,500 rpm and heads towards 3,000 rpm and higher engine speeds, the car pulls solidly and energetically until cruising speeds are reached.

Talking of which, the Astra is happy to sit all day long at 70 mph on a motorway, with the rev counter indicating approximately 2,600 rpm in fifth gear (2,200 or so rpm at 60 mph). At these higher speeds the car is happy purring along for mile after mile and feels smooth, quiet and refined.

With the car fully laden, on long climbs such as motorway inclines, it is necessary to change down to fourth gear to maintain engine and road speed, but I didn't find this to be a chore, and anyway it's what a gearbox is for!

A revelation to me was the car's consistently excellent fuel consumption, especially in view of the 118,000 miles it had already covered at the start of our test, albeit that the car has been well-maintained through the years.

In town running, I was seeing around 43 miles per gallon, this figure improving to 53 mpg on longer trips (the car was used for a variety of long-distance pleasure journeys during the test period). The overall figure worked out at 47 mpg or so; again first class and well up to expectations for this model when it was new, let alone 22 years old!

These excellent mpg figures also mean that one seldom has to stop to refuel, with well over 500 miles available on each tankful, on longer runs. Brilliant.

STORAGE SPACE

The boot is usefully-shaped, long, wide and deep, and greatly extended when required by



folding forwards the rear seats (there's a 60/40 split so that a variety of passenger and load-carrying options are available). During our extended test it swallowed up a variety of luggage cases and bags when required. The only downside is that the rear load sill is quite high for lifting luggage over when loading/unloading.



A normal, full-size spare wheel is available (hooray!); this sits within a well in the boot floor.

Within the car are a variety of storage compartments, including long door bins, a lidded glove box and four 'trays' around the central console area.

VERDICT

This Astra is not a high performance sports model, it's not luxurious and, especially after 22



years and more than 121,000 miles, it's not a perfect car; understandably there are some minor paintwork blemishes etc, but this example has survived remarkably well.

Having driven it for 12 months on a wide variety of pleasure journeys, I have a huge amount of affection for this Astra, and my appreciation of it, and respect for it, have grown during the year.

In addition, trade and private owner sources I have spoken to have all, without exception, been full of praise for this version of the Astra and its Isuzu power unit. The model's reputation for reliability, longevity and frugality on fuel is legendary.

In vehicle terms of course the Vauxhall is getting on in years. Indeed, depending on individual circumstances, type of use and insurance company approach, it can now qualify for classic car insurance as a 'modern classic'.

As already mentioned, its age is evident too in terms of the characteristics of the diesel engine at idle and at low speeds (in particular, preferring to be revved to higher speeds to gain turbo boost for rapid acceleration).

Having said all that, I very soon became used to the manner in which the engine needs to be 'driven' to get the best from it, and have grown to like the car - very much!

I rate this Astra as a willing, roomy, comfortable, exceedingly practical and economical modern classic hatchback that is inexpensive to run and easy to own.

If you fancy one, buy now while you can still find one!



Wheels-Alive Retrospective Tech. Spec. in Brief:

Vauxhall Astra 1.7 LS five door hatchback, January 1996.

Engine/transmission: Isuzu-sourced overhead camshaft 1686cc (Euro 96 emissions-compliant), four cylinder turbocharged and intercooled diesel 82 PS at 4,400 rpm, 123.9 lb.ft (168 Nm) of torque at 2,400 rpm, five speed manual gearbox; front wheel drive.

Performance: 107 mph, 0-60 mph 12.5 seconds.

Fuel consumption:



Official figures: Simulated urban driving, 42.2 mpg; Constant 56 mph, 61.4 mpg; Constant 75 mph, 44.1 mpg.

Our real-life figures on test, over 12 months/3,500 miles: In-town, 43 mpg; long runs, 53 mpg. Overall, 47.2 mpg.

Fuel tank capacity: 11.4 gallons. Approximate range on full tank at our overall mpg figure, over 535 miles.

Dimensions:

Overall length 13ft 3.5in (4,051mm), Width (inc. mirrors) 6ft 0.9in (1,852mm), Height 4ft 7.5ft (1,410mm).

Boot capacity: Rear seats in use, volume beneath rear load cover 12.7 cu. ft (360 litres); rear seats folded forward, total volume 42.4 cu.ft (1,200 litres).

Five doors, five seats.

SOUNDTRACK TO LIFE IN 1995 WHEN OUR ASTRA WAS BUILT:

During 1995, the top three best-selling singles in the UK music charts were Celine Dion's 'Think Twice', in the No. 1 position, with Robson Green and Jerome Flynn coming in at number 2 with 'Unchained Melody/White Cliffs of Dover', and The Outthere Brothers taking the No. 3 spot with 'Boom Boom Boom'.

COMING SOON: More Retrospective Road Tests; watch this space!