
This buyer’s guide is a collection of the advice previously given on SaabScene for buying a used Classic SAAB 900. Special thanks should go to Adrian for doing so much of the work here. Thanks is also due to the many SaabScene members who have contributed their thoughts on this subject.

I have separated the guide into three parts. The first section is a quick check list to tell if the car is worth a closer inspection. The second part covers what to look for on closer inspection. Third is a short price guide giving a current range for cars being sold in the UK if in very good condition. I have tried to keep this buyer’s guide SAAB 900 specific: there are many other ‘common sense’ checks, such as looking at the condition of tires, exhaust and windscreen which I am assuming will be made as a matter of course.

These are old, often hard driven, cars. High mileage is not a problem as such with SAABs, as long as the car has been properly maintained. A full SAAB service history (FSSH), or one from a known and reputable specialist, is desirable and it is not unusual to find cars with FSSH well past 140,000 miles. At worst there should be a stack of receipts showing what work was done and when.

A lot of the points mentioned in the guide are minor. They are usually within the capabilities of the average amateur mechanic to fix and should not put you off purchase. Do bear in mind, however, that a large number of small problems point to a poorly maintained vehicle and can add up to a lot of time spent putting them right. A good model-specific manual such as those produced by Bentley or Haynes should be bought. If possible buy both but if just buying just one manual then the Bentley is the more comprehensive guide. Internet forums such as SaabScene are also extremely good resources for practical advice.

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First Impressions

**Body** - Rust is not usually a problem but the older cars need looking at carefully especially doorsills, wheel arches and the sides of bonnet (hood).

**Engine** - Listen for any tappet sounds and also for slapping timing chain noise. The car should start first time whether cold or warmed up. Turbos should be smoke free: floor the throttle on a run and check for blue/black smoke behind.

**Gearbox** - Gearboxes are a known weak spot particularly on early cars. Check all gears are available and that it doesn't jump out of any, particularly on the overrun. On automatics check kickdown does not come in at low speed.

**Suspension** - The rear can sag on its arches. Check front tires - is the tracking OK? Check ball joints for knocking on the test drive.

**Power Assisted Steering (PAS)** - Get a feel for the car on the test drive: is steering OK? Is the PAS working immediately and without noise?
**Brakes** – There should be firm bite on braking. Warped disks will show up as judder through the steering wheel on braking. On ABS equipped cars check the warning light comes on with ignition (sometimes removed to hide faults!) and that it goes out after a minute or so. Early models with front wheel handbrake can have problems with it binding.

**Electrical** – The main earth (ground) point on the right hand side by the radiator should be clean. Likewise the rear light cluster earth under the false floor in the boot (trunk).

**Interior** - Sagging headlining is a common problem. Look for cracks on the plastic dash. Check electric windows, electric mirrors and heated seats and for the smooth operation of the sunroof if fitted. Check that the central locking works (including boot).

**Detailed checks**

**Body rust** - Look at the rear shock top mountings (prod with screwdriver), wheel arch lips, front wheel arch splash panels and behind the mud flaps where they fasten to the body. Door sills should be checked as well as in the boot and the underside behind the radiator. Check all four jacking points. Look for rust under the battery tray and under radiator. Rust can also form inside the petrol filler cap. Also bubbling on the double skinned part of the bonnet under the ‘SAAB’/ ‘turbo’ badges.

**Engine** - 8 valve engines have tappet shims and are a big job to reset. 16 valve engines have hydraulic lifters which should be noise free after 20 - 30 seconds. It is an easy job to identify and replace a noisy one (for the average DIY person). Timing chains last on average about 110-120,000 miles on turbos before showing signs of wear. The chains will last much longer on normally aspirated models which were built to the same tolerances as their more powerful turbo-charged brethren. Depending on wear and tear on the chain guides and sprockets, 16 valve cars can have the new chain inexpensively fed through by a dealer or specialist with the correct tool. 8 valve engines will always need to come out for a timing chain replacement.

Look for radiator leaks and at the condition of hoses for visible residue or ozone damage. Check the coolant colour and condition. Examine the water pump for signs of leaks and, when running, noise. Check degree of alternator bush movement by hand (engine stopped!) then look to see if there is any vibration of alternator when engine running. There should be no undue play but these bushes do wear out. Inspect all vacuum hoses for damage (usually age and heat related) and security on barbs.

If the engine mounts are hydraulic, they will have a relatively limited lifespan; the solid rubber ones usually last longer. The left hand one usually goes first followed by the transmission mount. Visually check for cracks in the rubber. Also undue movement from the engine on start up (bucking). A poor transmission mount can cause gear change sloppiness on the test drive.

Have the car started from cold, allow it to run and check for erratic idle. The idle control valve (16 Valve engines) or auxiliary air valve (8 Valve engines) should be seen to keep the revs steady. Revs at idle should be +/-850rpm (roughly bottom of numeral ‘1’ on rev counter).
**Gearbox**

Manual - Gearbox should be OK if its not a turbo but check all gears for selection. Don’t worry too much about crunching when getting reverse this is a ‘feature’ as SAAB did not fit a synchro for reverse. It can be fixed by choosing first or third gear (depending on model) and then selecting reverse. The drivetrain was strengthened in ’89 and again in ’92. Gearbox oil should be clean and filled to correct level.

Automatic – Typically shorter lived than manual. SAAB 900 auto boxes had only 3 gears putting greater strain on the box than manual ones. Check kickdown does not come in at low speed.

**Suspension** - The typical stance is a little higher at the front than back (snow clearance?). But this does not mean the rear should be seen to sag. Check the leading and trailing arm bushes and rear springs. Inspect the exhaust around the back box for signs of grounding as this points to poor rear springs. The rear arches should be about 1.5” -2” above the top of the tires (depending on model, e.g. less for T16S). Front bump stops crack and rear ones drop off. At the front check the lower shock bushes (and anti-roll bar bushes if fitted).

**Power Assisted Steering** - In general racks are good for about 150-160,000 miles. Check this works immediately and without stiffness when cold. Also listen for squeaking or grinding noises at the extremes. Visually inspect the rubber boots for splits or twists. Inspect dipstick level (bottom mark if cold, top mark if hot). With the car stationary, turn the wheel from one extreme to the other and check for a uniform ‘feel’ - stiff spots could point to a new PAS rack being needed in the near future.

**Brakes** – Check the disks and pads don’t need replacing. ’88 year models onwards had larger brakes borrowed from the early 9000s. The handbrake was also rear mounted on these models. Pre-’88 models, with front wheel handbrake, can have problems with it binding (or alternatively it has been wound off too much to compensate for this). The hand brake should engage fully at 4-5 clicks. Early model calipers may now require a rebuild. If the ABS warning light fails to respond correctly on cars equipped with ABS the problem could be a simple connection or a very expensive pump/transducer replacement.

**Electrical** – Check condition of the headlight reflectors: these are often dull but can be re-silvered. Check headlight wipers both have blades, operate and park correctly. The earth point by radiator (on RHS) should be clean. Ditto rear light cluster earth.

**Interior** - It is likely that a 900 from the ‘80s will now have a sagging headlining. This can be fixed by a good upholstery shop. The DIY cost of repair is about £95 - £150 and takes around 8 hours. The C pillars are covered in the same fabric material and it tends to split here. The plastic dash can suffer UV damage: look for cracks around speaker grills. Also check dash illumination. Operate electric windows (window regulator gear teeth rust/ wear out) and electric mirrors. Turn radio on and off to check the electric mast rises and contracts correctly.

The heater matrix valve is a known weak spot. Check both cold and hot air is available via heater control and there are no leaks into the passenger footwell (on RHD cars). These are a tricky job to replace. Check the automatic heated seats work (a good reason to test drive on a cold day). Seats should operate when the temperature falls below 12°C. You can test by spraying a freezing agent (plumbers shops) onto the seat base thermostat but this might upset the seller! The driver’s seat base can sag which will also imply damaged heater elements.
Look in the spare wheel compartment: check the tool kit is all there (in a box under the compartment lid). Check the jack works. Ensure that the spare wheel is present and in good condition. Water can find its way into this compartment so check for rust.

**Price guide**

These cars are not yet seen as collectable and prices now are fairly low. As a rule, advertisers from owners’ clubs and on SAAB specific classifieds expect a higher return from their car than the average seller. This is based on the amount of time, money and effort the individual has typically spent keeping the car in good condition. These cars can sometimes represent good value for money, which is not to say that the vendor’s expectation is often unrealistically high. On the other hand, some owners are just happy to see their car “go to a good home”.

SAABs do have a reputation as high mileage cars. Mileage, even as high as 200,000+, does not seem to have much effect on the asking price of the cars. In general terms, late model classics have improved brakes and drivetrain and shouldn't suffer from headlining problems. Full turbo models, and special editions such as Carlssons or the 1993 'Ruby' models, always command the highest prices.

This is a rough guide and prices will go up or down depending on the type of seller and condition of the car.

**Early models - mid 80s**
Normally aspirated models are now in the 'banger' category and running examples in fair condition can be found for £200. Double this price for turbo models of the same vintage. Carburettet models usually fall into the “free to a good home” category but often prove to be good runners.

**Late '80s**
Asking price in the region of £600-£800 for very good condition models.

**Early '90s**
£1,250- £1,500 for a very good ’90-91 model: £1,750- £2,250 for ’92-93. Expect to be asked considerably more (up to £4,500) for a ’93 T16S.

**Convertibles**
As a very rough rule of thumb, prices for convertible 900s are priced approximately £3,000 higher than their saloon/ hatchback equivalents.