

Citroën DS Décapotable

Unmatched in its verve, grace and capacity to do things differently, the Décapotable is a car for the virtuoso. Lloyd McNeill pays homage

WHEN CONVERSATION TURNS TO THE MOST beautiful cars in the world, Citroëns are not often among the first to present themselves. Radical? Yes. Inventive? Certainly. Quirky? For sure. But beautiful? Well, let's just leave that to the Italians.

If we do, we risk ignoring the seraphal being that glows on the following pages. The Citroën DS Décapotable – literally 'beheadable' – was created on a DS chassis in the late Fifties by revered coachbuilder Henri Chapron. And a fine creation it was too. The Décapotable invoked all the ground-breaking benefits of Citroën's idiosyncratic DS saloon, and encased them in the effortless élan of its sleek, comely body.

With only a development of the ancient Traction Avant engine for motive power, the Décapotable was never going to whiten your knuckles with its blistering performance. But that wasn't the idea. It had flair in abundance, from its clean aerodynamic shape and tailor-made interior, to its decorous dash, single-spoke collapsible steering wheel and solitary central nut securing each road wheel. A car this chic was intended to cut an avant-garde dash as it wafted elegantly through the bourgeois masses on the way to some fashionable society function. And it wafted remarkably well, thanks to the ingenuity of young braking systems specialist, Paul Magès.

In pondering the conundrum of achieving a quality ride over France's heinous roads, Magès hit upon a revolutionary solution. Using his hydraulics expertise, he discovered he could build a suspension system whose characteristics could be adjusted to suit the car's immediate attitude on the road, and allow it to maintain a consistent ride height regardless of payload. The system worked by pumping liquid to the areas that needed it at a given time and became fully self-compensating by using rising-rate gas springs which stiffen progressively under load (unlike conventional steel springs).

The high pressure hydraulic servo system had the added boon of providing a means to power the steering, brakes, clutch and gearshift. Such was the suspension's competence it could hold the car stable in the event of a high-speed blowout and then be used as a jacking device; it even allowed the car to be driven on three wheels. This ultimate party trick (don't try it at home) typified the flamboyant brio so easily evoked by Citroën's and Chapron's finest achievement. ➔➔







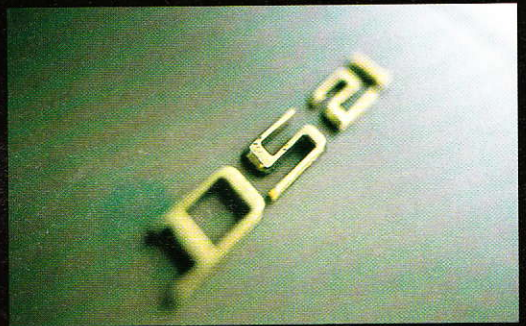
The Décapotable is... a goddess

Study the DS Décapotable's delectable lines. So graceful, so fussless, so French. In a few easy swoops Chapron translated the quirky spirit of the iconoclastic DS saloon into its ultimate rendition – a heavenly embodiment of Parisian chic and flair.

Heavenly is an apt description for the DS, and one which didn't escape Citroën's marketers. Initially the DS design project was known as VGD (*voiture de grande diffusion*, or 'car for the mass market'). Prototypes were coded with a D for *diffusion*, but as the project approached conclusion an S for *speciale* joined the D to represent the new crossflow cylinder head or *culasse speciale*.

As an acronym DS became *déesse*, the French for goddess or deity. It was fitting for a car that, in 1955, appeared to belong to another world and floated celestially across savage French cobbles.

Naturally Citroën retained this convenient codename for production, and even continued the D-series configuration and acronymic theme when the cheaper, non-pneumatic ID (*dée*, meaning idea or innovation) was introduced.

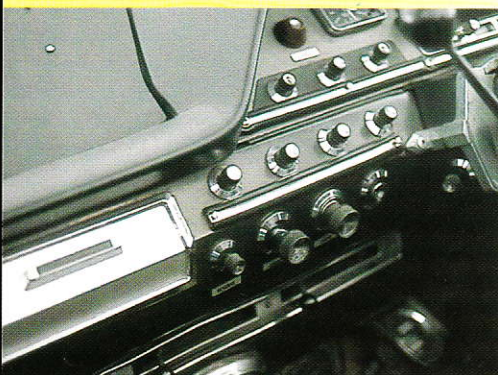
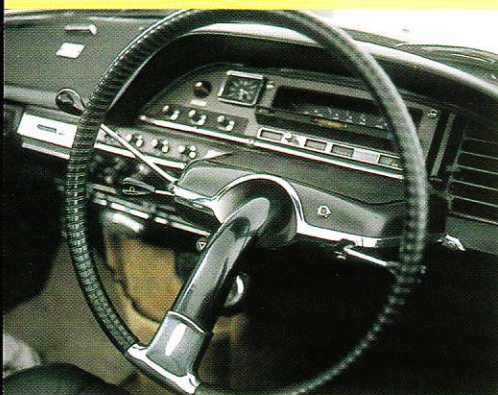


The Décapotable is... a car that suits you

There are two types of Décapotable – 306 cars commissioned by Chapron's private customers, and 1365 factory (or *usine*) models. All were tailor-made in Chapron's carrosserie, so despite clear model derivations few cars are identical. The nature of Chapron's art and his bohemian customers meant that a car's final specification was influenced more by modish Parisian taste than anything the brochure said.

Chapron's own designs were the fussier, with chrome rubbing strips, Art Deco interiors and plush upholstery. He called the first cars Croisette cabriolets, although Caddy and Palm Beach models with subtle styling differences appeared later. All these cars brandished their model name proudly on the front wing in grandiose chrome lettering.

In contrast to the private commissions, *usine* cars were purer and cleaner of design. The pride of the Citroën sales brochure, even these were only ever built to order. Think of the droptop DS and it's the chic simplicity of the factory car, as seen in our pictures, that presents itself most readily to the mind's eye.





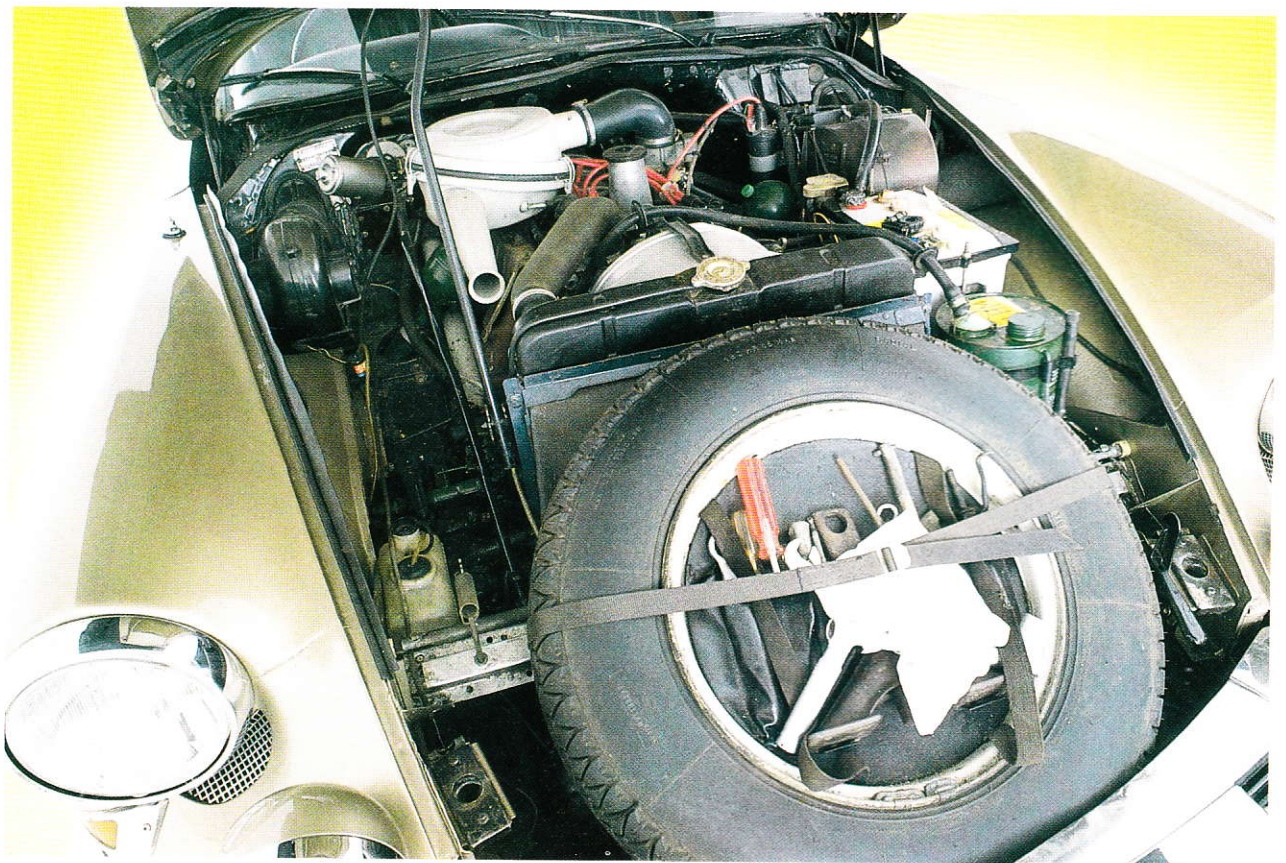
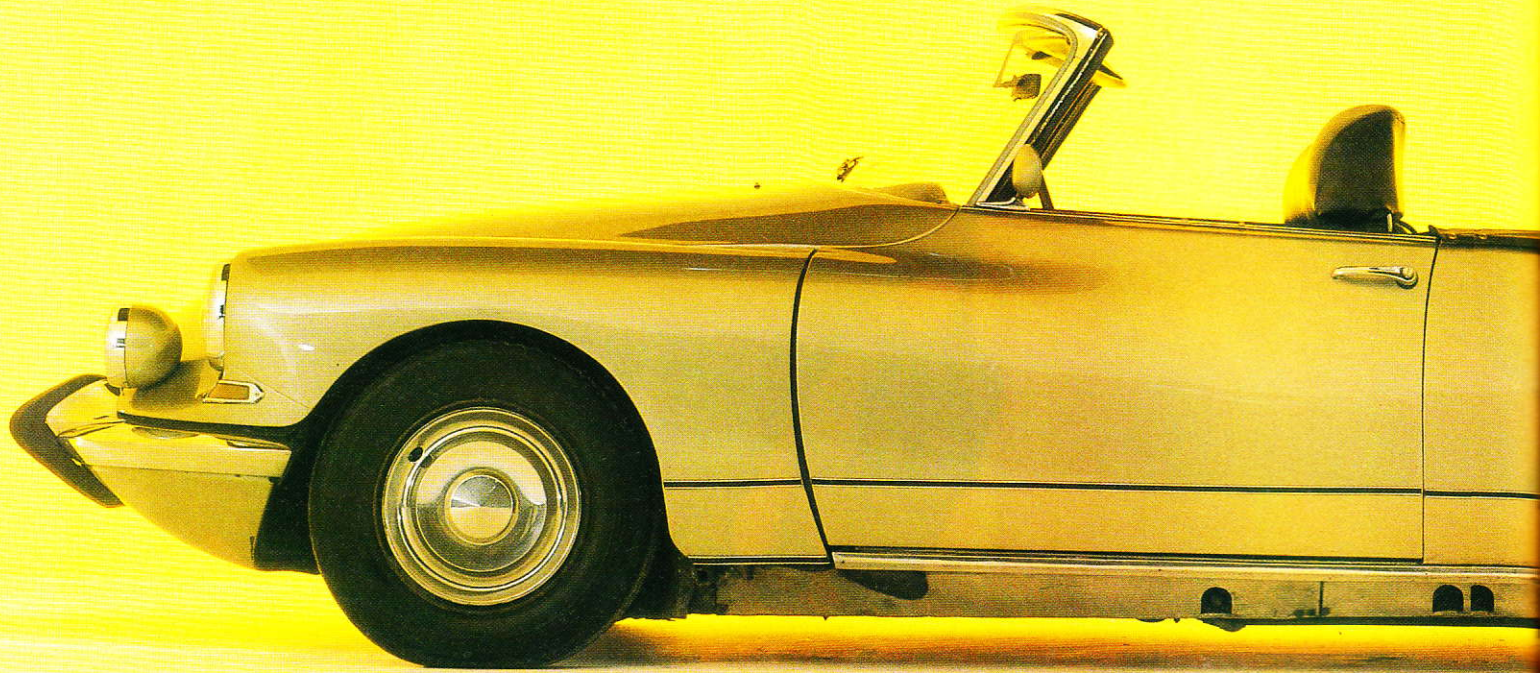
The Décapotable was... **conceived by geniuses**

Drooling over the Décapotable's dreamy lines, it's easy to forget that this drophead is based on an astonishingly bold design. Long before Henri Chapron's artistry sprinkled grace into the body, the landmark DS saloon had been fashioned by the finest, most original automotive thinkers.

Foremost in its creation was Pierre-Jules Boulanger, an architect turned industrialist whose vision not only rethought the flagship Traction Avant into that epitome of functional futurism, the DS, but also laid down plans for Citroën's 2CV and H-van, creating probably the most original fleet of any post-war manufacturer.

The hydro-pneumatic self-levelling suspension – inspired by France's notoriously rough roads – was the brainchild of Paul 'The Professor' Magès, a radical thinker with none of the engineering qualifications his nickname implied. He famously claimed that a formal training would have vetoed his ideas, because only a fool would have set about such an ambitious scheme.

The third protagonist was chassis engineer André Lefebvre, who already had 20 years' experience of front-wheel drive innovation with the Traction Avant. Beginning his career in the Twenties, Lefebvre was one of the first to identify the chassis and aerodynamics as a way to enhance performance while others were simply fitting ever bigger engines. It was his experience that ensured the DS drove with unheard-of comfort and efficiency – a standard of ride still appreciated and admired today.





The Décapotable is an idea that nearly didn't happen

With the fashion for cars with separate chassis starting to wane in the late Fifties, Henri Chapron was finding subjects on which to practise his art increasingly difficult to come by. The DS, with its rugged separate chassis and space-age technology, must have been a dream come true.

Chapron asked Citroën to supply him with a series of DS chassis fitted with only the frontal panels for conversion. But Citroën refused – it had considered its own convertible DS project in 1954 but the idea hadn't made it past the drawing board, and it wasn't keen to be associated with a freelance venture.

At first Chapron was obliged to buy complete DS saloons to cut up and rebody, which made the conversions wickedly expensive. But his first cars, unveiled at the 1958 Paris Salon, proved so popular that Citroën was forced to reconsider its decision. By 1960 Chapron had sealed a commission to build factory conversions alongside his own exclusive cars.



The Décapotable is... French as a legless lily hopper



ALTHOUGH synonymous with the DS Décapotable, Gallic style guru Henri Chapron (above) was no one-hit wonder. The esteemed coachbuilder began bodying mass-produced chassis in 1919, and his CV boasted most of the French manufacturers, including Panhard, Delage and Talbot. As well as Décapotables, Chapron's DS theme included a range of two-door coupés and even the glamorous Lorraine and Majesty limousines.



WHEN YOU are responsible for a car as urbane as the DS Décapotable, it's inevitable your concept should be a focus for publicity material. Citroën was not slow to realise the svelte convertible's marketing potential, and the car featured heavily in the company's promotions. Somehow the car captured everything positive about cosmopolitan French culture, and for its avant-garde chic Citroën forever owes Chapron a debt of gratitude.



NOT CONTENT with building a car of perfect elegance, Chapron incorporated each evolution that the standard DS saloons underwent – larger engines, a facelifted front end (above) with cowled-in swivelling headlamps from 1967, and artificial fluid in the hydraulics to replace the rust-inducing hygroscopic castor-based oil in earlier systems. Each change improved the Décapotable immeasurably without dissolving its effortless finesse.

Lloyd McNeil thinks the new S-type is: 'a poor man's Mercedes.'
NEXT MONTH: JAGUAR XJ220