

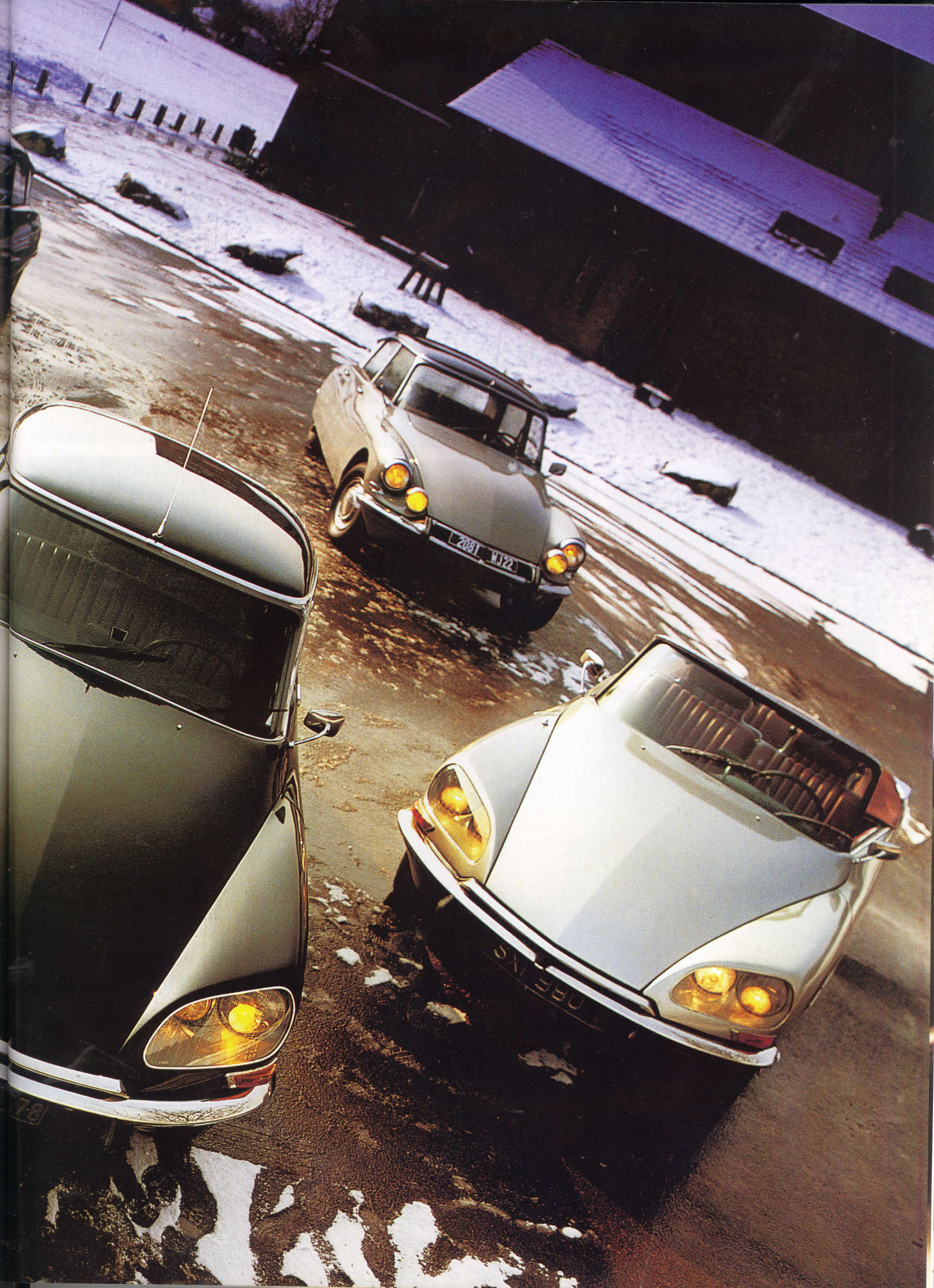


50 YEARS  
of **DS**

Citroën's sensational DS shocked even the blasé French when it was launched. And **Martin Buckley** still can't believe that the style Goddess is 50

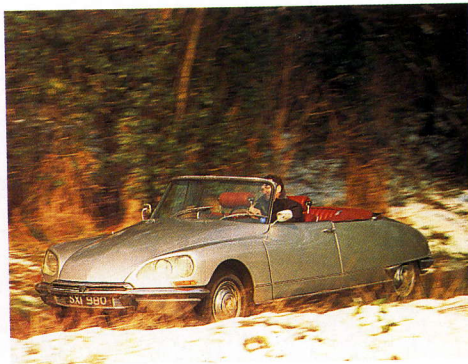
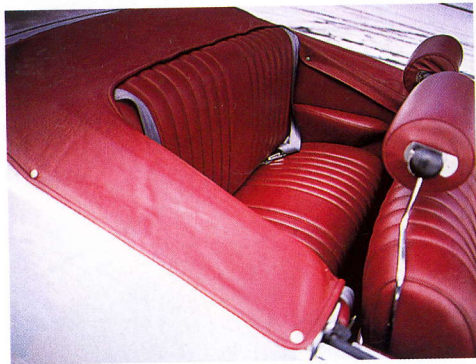
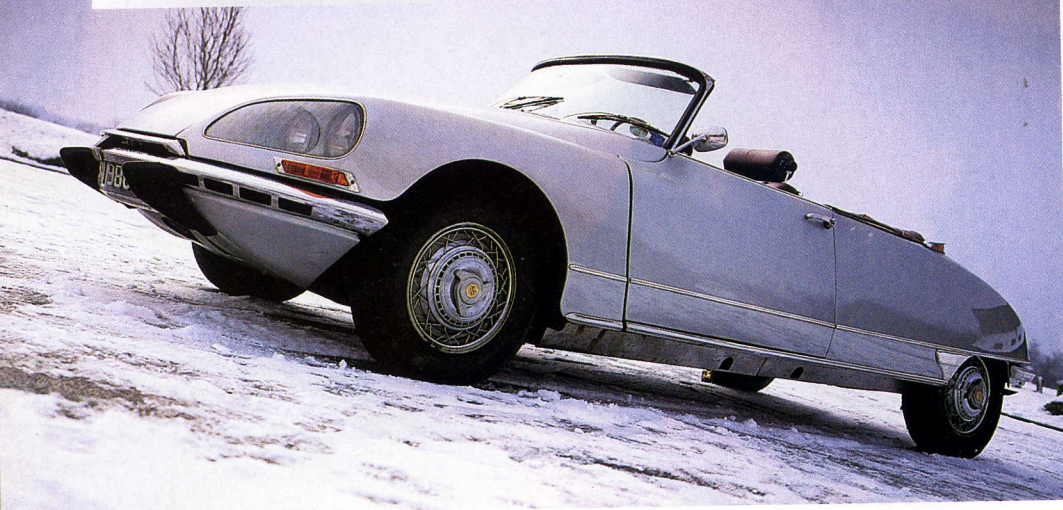
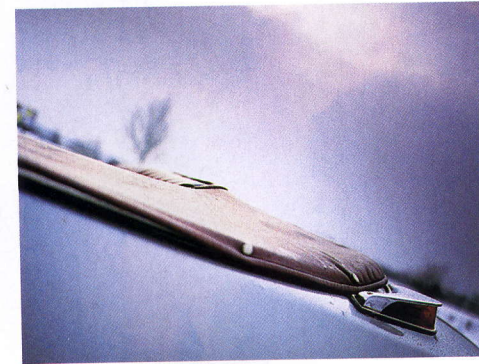
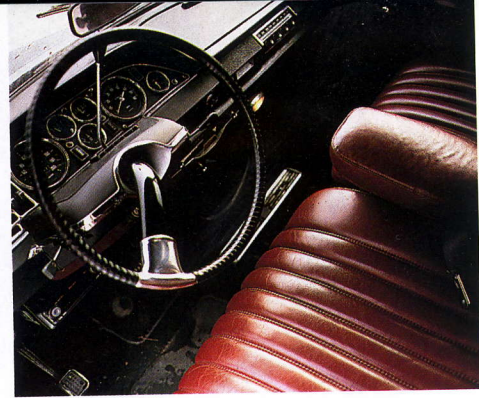
PHOTOGRAPHY ALEX P.

# Les enfants du paradis



# 50 YEARS of DS

Prices of ultra-desirable Décap have lately gone wild: £40k for restos. It started as a Chapron and became a factory model. Dash envy rife among DS owners, such as this Jaeger sport. Even snow melts in style off a DS



## Topless of Tunbridge Wells DS21 DECAPOTABLE

Marcus Carlton (left), DS secretary of the Citroën Car Club, has owned about 20 DSs in his time: "I imported a few from South Africa and made a bit of money but was always working my way to owning a Décapotable." These rare, elegant cars – of which only 50 were sold new in the UK, Peter Cook being one famous owner – are big money. Cars at recent auctions fetched from £45,000 to £52,000, but they still needed full restorations...

"In Germany and Holland, they are fetching between 80 and 85,000 Euros," says Carlton, who finds his DS21 Décapotable a lot noisier than a saloon or a modern convertible. But he has made it more usable with a special five-speed semi-automatic 'box and air conditioning using an original unit from a '69 saloon: "We use it for holidays and it's got a huge boot. I put about 5000 miles a year on it – we are going to Spain and France in it this summer. It is completely reliable and there is not really anything to be worried about. It's tried and tested technology."

This car was sold new to a newspaper editor in Provence who ordered it from his local dealer with a Jaeger sport dash – which has lots of extra dials and is quite sought-after – and a radio. Like most soft tops, it came loaded with extras such as Robergel wheel trims and Chapron headrests. Interestingly, the last Chapron DS were built long after the demise of the saloon: Jane Clark, wife of celebrated

political diarist Alan, had the last one in 1978. Convertibles were usually based on stronger estate 'chassis', but poorly built: "Much of the chassis was not even painted let alone rust proofed. Every Chapron that you buy needs complete restoration unless it's been done already. They all rust under the rear seats."

Henri Chapron considered his cars to be *couture*, says Carlton: "His attitude was you buy it and use it for a couple of years and then discard it. It was sold to a really wealthy clientele – industrialists and titled people."

The Citroën DS, cult object, is 50 years old. How can it be? Here is a car that still seems to represent an idealised tomorrow that has yet to arrive. A car so immune to fashion it refuses to get old. A car that seems to capture everything that is eccentric and rational about the French. A car that came to be part of the fabric of French national life and an ambassador for her reputation as a world technological powerhouse in an era when technology was seen as a cure for the world's problems rather than one of the main causes.

Writing a 50th anniversary tribute to such a machine is almost intimidating. How to do justice to such an all-time great without getting bogged down in tired cliché?

The DS was eulogised by philosophers and presidents. Roland Barthes compared it to 'an object from another planet' while de Gaulle would not be driven in anything else.

So there is a romance about this big Citroën that goes way beyond the bald facts of its front-wheel drive, clever hydropneumatic suspension and power assists that so dazzled visitors to the Paris Salon in 1955. Goddess is the literal translation of *Déesse* – a fitting name for a car that has come to be surrounded by so much mythology.

It was a slice of egalitarian luxury for presidents and Paris cabbies – and almost everyone in between. While the DS could never be mundane and work-a-day, it is worth recalling that this big Citroën became as ubiquitous in France – from 1955 to 1975 almost 1.5 million were made – as a Cortina in the UK.

A much-anticipated replacement for the Trac-tion, work on the DS began, amazingly, in the '30s but the first prototypes were not produced until the late '40s. Basic principles were borrowed from

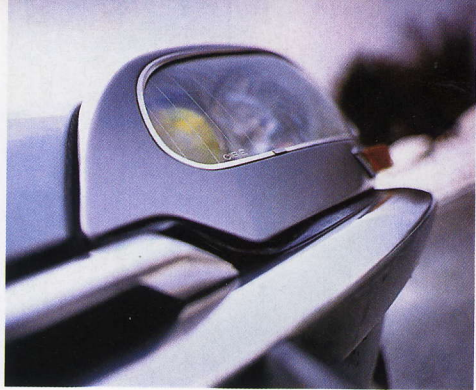
the earlier car, such as front drive, rack-and-pinion steering and unitary construction – with the gearbox mounted ahead of the engine on two large, forward-facing longerons. Tractions with hydropneumatics were running in 1948 and Citroën even offered the production 15H – with self-levelling rear suspension – to test the water and divert intense French editorial interest away from development of the unborn DS.

It's hard to grasp how advanced this car appeared only a decade after the end of WW2. A few other vehicles looked spacecraft-inspired, but the DS had the technology to back it up. Its ring-main of clicking and wheezing hydropneumatics worked the self-levelling gas-and-oil suspension, brakes (inboard discs at the front), power steering and even gearchanging. The column shift controlled a conventional manual gearbox via hydraulics, operating the clutch as soon as the lever was touched. Moving the lever to 'D' even operated the starter.

The suspension of the Goddess, pressure spheres that provided springing and damping for the twin leading front arms and single trailing rears, gave the Citroën a supple ride. Nothing came close for years: it moved differently from other cars, seeming to glide just above the road in



By the end of first day at '55 Paris Salon, Citroën had taken 12,000 orders



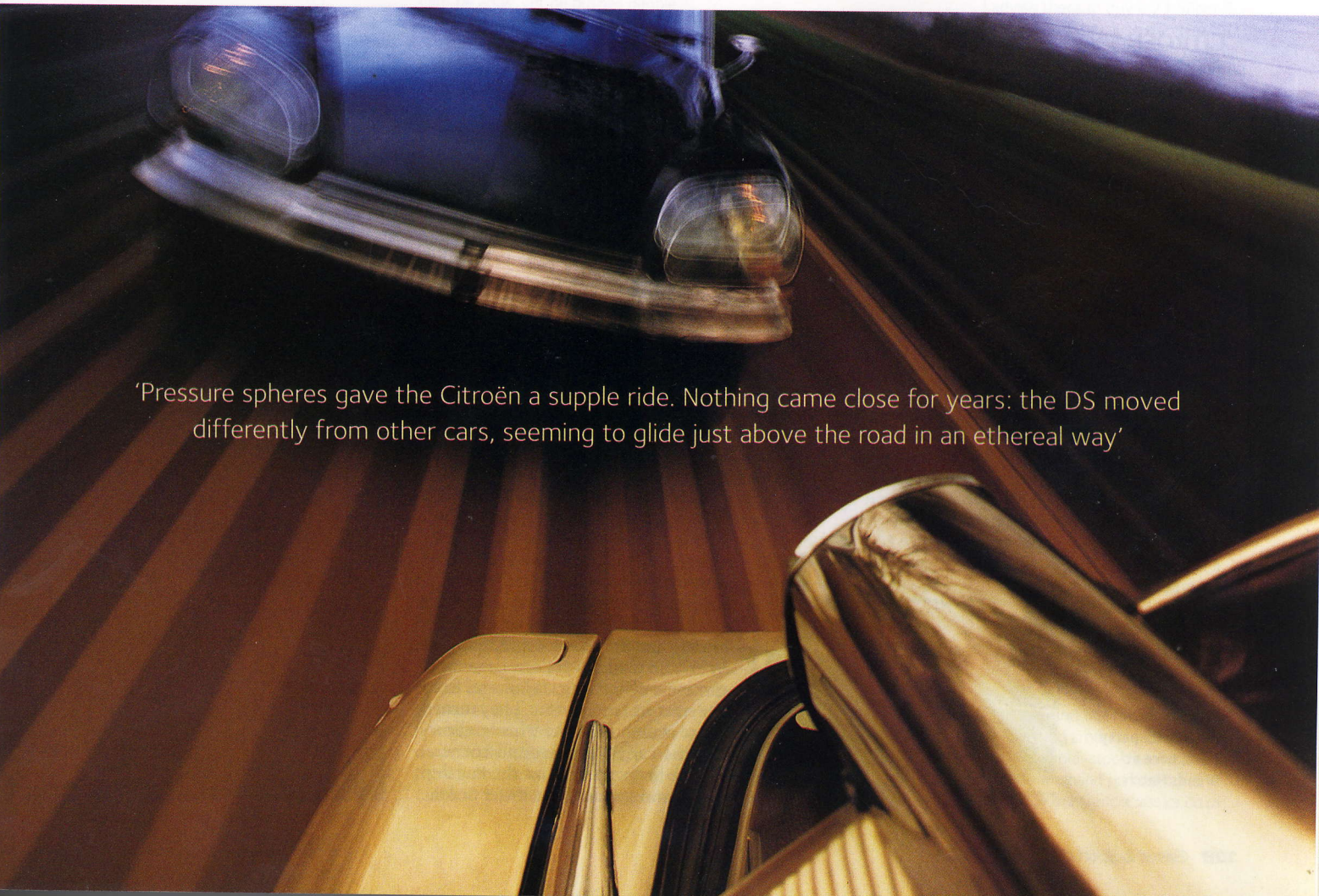
Left: facelift in '67 included 'cat's eye' nose with turning headlamps. Remarkable late-model rhd DS23Efi 46k-miler recently recommissioned after 25-year lay-up. Only lacks leather from the ultimate spec



## DE GAULLE AND THE DS

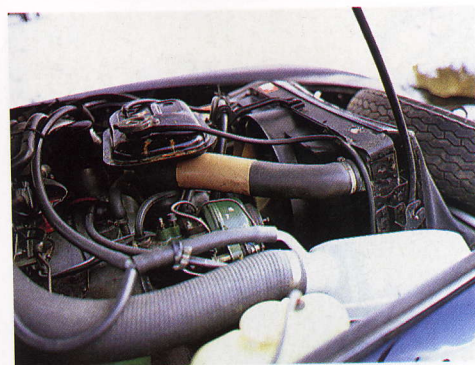
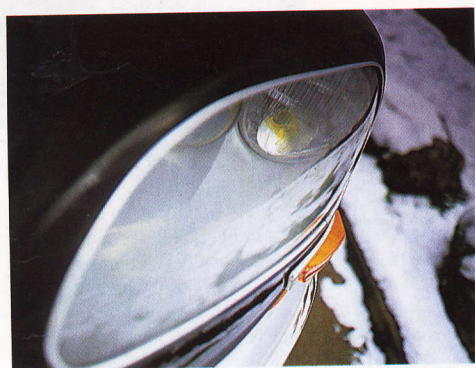
The general was such a Citroën devotee that he expected to see a DS in his motorcade; on one visit to Pau, when de Gaulle surveyed the DS-free presidential fleet, he ominously asked: "Who's in charge of the cars?" The DS had to be driven down overnight from Paris. For de Gaulle, a big Citroën was indispensable after a close shave in August 1962. His black DS was speeding down the Avenue de la Libération at 70mph when 12 OAS men opened fire. Most of the bullets hit the car from behind, bursting its tyres and causing a front-wheel skid. Some shattered the rear window as chauffeur Maroux wrestled with the wheel. De Gaulle and his wife emerged unscathed and, thanks to its hydropneumatic suspension, the DS limped safely to Villacoublay where a helicopter was waiting to take the de Gaulles to their country retreat. This scenario was famously recreated in the 1973 thriller *The Day of The Jackal*, the Fred Zinnemann film of Frederick Forsyth's book.

'Pressure spheres gave the Citroën a supple ride. Nothing came close for years: the DS moved differently from other cars, seeming to glide just above the road in an ethereal way'



50 YEARS  
of DS

Chapron-made Prestige 21ie limo is built on same wheelbase as the normal saloon, but with bias to huge rear cabin, in which there's massive legroom and aircon just for the back. Most cars came in black or dark grey



## CITROËN DS

**Produced/built** 1955-1975/1,455,746

**Engine** iron-block, alloy hemi head inclined pushrod 1911-2347cc 'four', with Weber twin-choke carburettor or Bosch electronic injection; 75bhp @ 4500rpm-130bhp @ 5250rpm; 101lb ft @ 3000rpm-144lb ft @ 2500rpm

**Transmission** four-speed hydraulic semi-automatic, four- or five-speed manual or optional three-speed Borg-Warner fully auto

**Suspension** independent, at front by twin leading arms rear trailing arms, hydropneumatic units and anti-roll bar front and rear

**Steering** power-assisted rack and pinion

**Brakes** power-assisted inboard discs front, outboard drums rear

**Tyres** Michelin X/XA2/XAS; 165x400 front, 155x400 rear-185x380 all round (EFI)

**Length** 4797-4860mm **Width** 1802mm

**Height** 1472mm **Wheelbase** 3122mm

**Track: front** 1497mm **rear** 1294mm

**Weight** 1232-1361kg **0-60mph** 23.3-10.4 secs **Top speed** 87-119mph

**Price new**

£1726 ('58)

**Now** £6500

(ave)-£15,000 (mint rhd Pallas); c£55k (Décap)

Three wheels on your wagon: a famous DS party trick, here at Brands Hatch



an ethereal way. Only humpback bridges had to be approached with caution if the driver was to avoid crashing the DS on to its bump stops.

It was adjustable through three height positions of 9, 16 and 28cm. In the highest setting it was possible to drive the D on three wheels or, more usefully, jack it using a central prop. Yet changing a rear wheel still meant removing the wing, which was held on by a single bolt.

Citroën constantly updated the D, sometimes taking away idiosyncratic features in a bid to keep the design contemporary and give it broader appeal. Fascia styling became more conventional over the years. Purists love the space-age austerity of the early designs - very cool, with the white steering wheel and the first car to have a plastic dashboard - while the circular instruments and unrelenting black that feature on the post-1969 models look almost boringly mainstream. Neither, in truth, was ergonomically impressive.

The DS family could luxuriate in leather or perspire on plastic Targa trim, but the velour of the Pallas seemed most appropriate to the car's image as a modern, high-speed European express.

The main changes worth remembering are the introduction of a new short-stroke engine in 1965 (an evolution of the Traction-derived unit) and, visually, slightly lengthened rear wings in 1959 and four cowl-in headlights in '67, on posher versions the inners turning with steering via linkages from the steering mechanism. They turned more acutely than the wheels, allowing the car to 'see' around corners. These first appeared on the flagship Pallas and spread to the lower orders.

Another important change was the suspension fluid: pre-1965 models have the troublesome red fluid that absorbs moisture, corroding valves and cylinders and ruining hydraulic seals. There was an interim type from 1964 to '66, LHS-2, before the familiar green LHM mineral fluid took over.

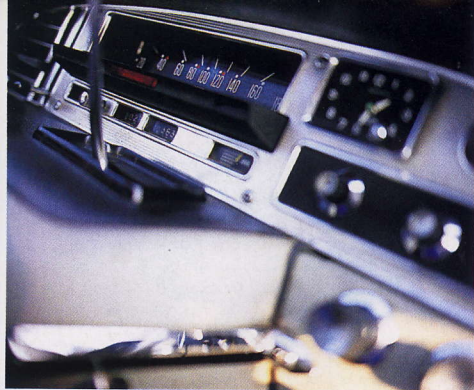
The unitary punt of welded and pressed sheet steel features easily removable unstressed panels (the car can be stripped to its tub in two hours), a glassfibre roof (unpainted and translucent under street lighting on prototypes) an aluminium bonnet and mostly stainless-steel brightwork.

Now, as then, it's that shape that grabs you first. So bold, so confident, Flaminio Bertoni's shark-like profile seems to be spearing forwards even when at rest. Bertoni settled on the basic outline early in the car's development, refining aerodynamic teardrop shapes but losing the bulbous beetleback just months before the car's debut in favour of the wrapped and slightly recessed rear screen. The trademark roof-mounted 'trumpet' indicators were also a late addition.

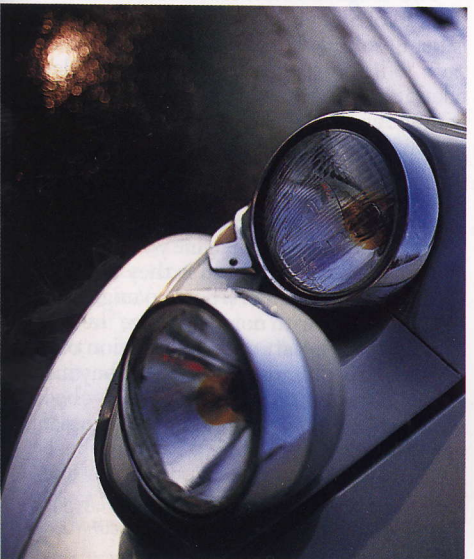
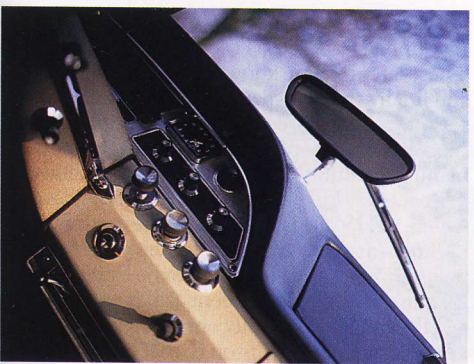
In an era of gloomy, claustrophobic cabins, the frameless door glasses added to the light, airy feel and even tightened themselves against the door rubbers for a weatherproof seal by flicking inwards over their last half inch of movement.

It was a shape that promised speed, luxury and refinement - a stable and high-g geared saloon for the tree-lined *routes nationales* of the imagination. The fabulous scientific suspension allowed the DS driver to maintain his speed on the pot-holed surfaces commonplace in pre-*autoroute* France, confident behind the futuristic single-spoke steering wheel that was collapsible on impact and immune to kick-back.

From the start, the DS was about covering the



Confort spec DS only sold from September 1966-Aug '67. Fabulous mustard cloth interior. Above: indicator trumpet – the most famous detail on any car? Gradulux rear blinds are *de rigueur* for that period look



## Dealers worship the Goddess

### SIMON LYNES: DS WORLD

"The problem I'm finding," says DS World boss Simon Lynes, "is sourcing good English-specification cars. The ones I've sold people over the years tend to get hung on to or they have just vanished."

In the past couple of years, Lynes has noticed values for right-hand-drive cars rising: "They can be worth 50 per cent more than a comparable left-hand drive, although I like lhd; it's easier in London with judging the narrow gaps and width restrictors."

"They don't rust any more than any other classic car," he adds, yet he pushes people into a wax injection if they have bought a lovely rust-free car from the south of France because the rusting is such a quick process once it takes hold underneath.

At one time Lynes sold almost exclusively to London media types but now it's across the board: "We sell to people with young families who want something quirky. They like them because they are safe and solid; you can put seatbelts in the back on factory mounts. I also deal with lots of legal people."

"You can still buy tatty Ds with patchwork welding, but for a sorted Pallas you are looking at £8000 upwards. What's nice is that you can sometimes find a car that's tatty on the body but has a really good chassis."

So are they reliable? "I hear less and less of the reliability problems. If you burst a pipe you are going to be incapacitated but it's rare. Most will have had a lot of the pipes changed. The only cars you have problems with are red-fluid cars but one that's had a proper restoration can be reliable."

As the longest-running UK specialist, Lynes says he has survived because the DS tends to be immune to market dips: "We do a lot more servicing and restoration work now. Parts sales have increased dramatically; there's now 70 per cent availability so there is no excuse for not keeping one on the road." Call 020 7498 7111; see [www.dsworldltd.com](http://www.dsworldltd.com)

### OLIVIER HOULLER: FRENCH CLASSICS

Olivier Houiller of Kent-based French Classics bought his first DS, a red-fluid car, in 1993: "It was a disaster because I didn't know about them – but I learned the hard way. Then I went to a fuel-injection car that had been messed around with – one extreme to the other!" Eventually it became a business for the French former ski instructor.

Any best buys? "People like the higher-spec Pallas cars because they are quieter and more comfortable, but if somebody is running one in London every day

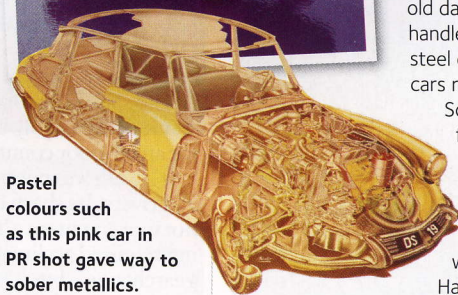
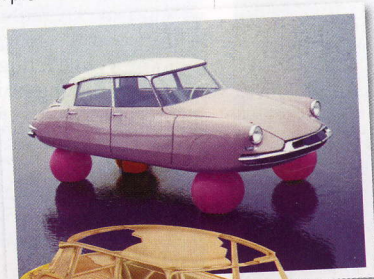
I advise them to buy a 21 Super 5 or a D Super because they are more basic. They have the best power-to-weight ratio and the simple carburettor; with the fuel injection you have to get a specialist to fix them; '68/'69 cars are the best years because you get the new lights but the old dash. When they went to lift handles rather than push-button, steel quality went down and the cars rusted a lot quicker."

So who buys them? "Quite a few are wives buying presents for their husbands and I even sold one to Brian Johnson of AC/DC who wanted one with aircon to use in Miami."

Hardcore DS buyers still want a semi-auto: "In France they call it 'the real DS' and, when they are set up properly, they are lovely."

Houiller has spread his net wider when tracking cars down: "I went to South Africa and bought three rhd DS with beige trim and black carpets which you never get in Europe." Yet the south of France is still favourite: "You don't see them on the road but they are kept in barns; you see more driving around in London. In France in the '80s it was quite naff. Even now there is a perception that it's a bit of an old fart's car, but you can't buy them cheaply any more."

"The secret to reliability with all of them is use, especially the red-fluid cars and the fuel-injection models which don't like sitting around. The main parts problem is finding new old-stock body panels but there are plenty of secondhand parts around." Call 01474 703125; see [www.frenchclassics.co.uk](http://www.frenchclassics.co.uk)



Pastel colours such as this pink car in PR shot gave way to sober metallics. Black is still the favourite though

# 50 YEARS of DS



## Snapper focuses on driving DS20 DAILY-DRIVER

Hans Staartjes, a Dutch photographer now living in Ealing, uses his DS20 as everyday transport, running on LPG to keep costs down. It also has to live out on the street. He fell in love with the car back home in Holland where, today, the DS probably has its largest and most enthusiastic following: "In Holland they have always had an appreciation for good design and engineering, although in the '80s the DS in Holland was just a cheap student car."

"I love driving it," says Staartjes, "and I like to work on it too: the engine has been out a couple of times. I like to figure out how everything works. It's intriguing. This morning I started the car and the hydraulic gearchange was hard because the LHM has got thick in the cold weather. To me that's all part of the character of the thing."

When Staartjes started looking for a DS he was convinced he wanted to find one in France: "I started looking on the internet. I'm not a French

speaker so I was having it translated but soon I started getting this strange feeling I was going to get screwed." He didn't do any better in the UK: "They were all awful rust buckets. In Holland there were so many more driving around so I decided if I'm going to get screwed I want to get screwed by one of my own."

Staartjes suspects he paid a little over the top for his car but points out that it has never been welded: "I'm having it Dinitrol treated because they seem to rust just while you look at them although a CX is even worse."

Like many who get struck by the DS 'disease' – "It's kind of an obsession, a religion or like drugs" – Staartjes has started with a relatively late car but feels drawn to the mystique of an early red-fluid DS: "You can't put your finger on what it is. The dashboard is so futuristic and the interiors are wild, and the colours on the outside.

"In France you still find a lot of red-fluid IDs, but the DS is getting thin on the ground. You have to be quite dedicated to own an early car."

ground quickly rather than ultimate performance – in its earliest guise it couldn't even manage 90mph. While it might be true to say that the car never got the engine it deserved (Walter Becchia's prototype flat-six was deemed too slow and costly), the rugged character of the big fours that powered the D now form part of its appeal.

They range from 1985 to 2347cc in post-'67 five-bearing form, but some purists like the easy-going sweetness of the original three-bearing 1911cc unit. They all featured alloy cylinder heads, pushrod-operated overhead valves, wet liners in iron cylinder blocks and, later, fuel injection. All are hugely durable and relatively thrifty for an oil-poor country where fuel was expensive.

The DS was never going to be a car that suited all drivers. Its sharp brakes (operated by pressure not movement via a 'mushroom' pedal) and steering required acclimatisation – as did its clutchless gearchange – but it rewarded those who took the trouble to learn to drive it smoothly, with a flowing balance and agility that made it deceptively quick through a curve. With the front end providing most of the traction and braking, Citroën was happy to fit 10mm slimmer 155 tyres on the rear of earlier cars – aft track was narrower – but rhd models had the same size rubber all round.

The nuts and bolts of a production history that spanned two decades is almost as complex as the car: from poverty models to coachbuilt limousines, it is hard to think of another single design that spawned such a huge number of variants.

In simple terms, D-series saloons began with the fully hydraulic DS19 of 1955 via DS20, 21 and 23, the latter two offered with injection and up to 130bhp for a top speed nudging 120mph.

There was a parallel range of despecified ID

models, with less hydraulics and more basic trim, that only ever came as carburetted 2-litre cars. These later became known as D Spécial, D Super and finally the five-speed manual D Super 5.

There were three transmission options, the semi-auto four-speed, the straight four-speed manual column shift and the five-speed. Late on there was a normal three-speed Borg Warner auto which, in DS terms, seemed a little earthbound.

Interwoven with all this, there's your Slough-built cars up to 1966 (detailed in the English style), various estates, the decadent Pallas and Prestige and the exotic coachbuilt convertibles, coupés and saloons by Henri Chapron (*C&SC*, Sept '96).

The 'frogeye' estate featured here is one of a handful of Slough-built Safaris on the road, and is being sold by DS World. Boss Simon Lynes says: "The current owner uses it every day and takes it on grouse shooting trips. It was full up with shotgun cartridges when he dropped it off."

Olivier Houiller, his counterpart at French Classics, found 'our' mint Prestige, one of 500 or so finished by Chapron. Sat in the rear on plush brown leather, with the division up, you can have Cold War fantasies or imagine you're in *The Day of the Jackal* – yet the truth is they were mostly used by local councillors. So who might buy one today? "People with noisy children," he quips.

This range is part of the fascination of the D series and why almost anybody can buy into the magic of the car on almost any level – be it the scruffy chic of a two-grand runner or the glamour of a £50,000 Décapotable. ■

Thanks to the Citroën Car Club (07000 248258, [www.citroencarclub.org.uk](http://www.citroencarclub.org.uk)) and West Kingsdown Library

Rare '64 Safari, one of a handful of Slough-built survivors. Who needs an ugly modern MPV when the elegant Citroën seats seven? Familiale had third row. Early car has three-bearing 1911cc motor. Lucas lights on UK car



## The early car that's run late

There are people who were promised drives in Richard Bremner's 1957 DS19 – battleship grey and one of the first 30,000 off the line – over a decade ago. It is probably the UK's best-documented rebuild saga that has consumed 14 years of the *Autocar* executive editor's life and no small amount of his cash. If ever there was a restoration experience that could put you off a DS for ever, this is it.

"I wanted an early one because it was the original idea and the purest," says Bremner. "The red-fluid cars are reputedly the best-riding cars ever made, but I can't speak from experience because I've only driven it 10 yards. Even at that stage, with a few parts, I worked out I'd have spent £1.3m per mile.

"A DS restorer pointed me in the direction of the car which I went to see while on holiday in France in 1990. It was amazingly original but wouldn't run."

Bremner embarked on a decade-long struggle in which the car came tantalisingly close to being finished on several occasions, only to fall at the final hurdle as deadline after deadline was broken: "I don't want to rubbish the guys who started restoring the car, but they deserve it. I made the mistake of saying 'fit it in between jobs'. It gradually got to the point where it was thoroughly dismembered and I thought I would just sell it for parts."

Then, five years ago, a guy called James who painted Cobras for AC, persuaded Bremner that he'd like to restore it – from scratch: "James did a brilliant job on the body, but he subcontracted a lot of work to a guy whose indolence is beyond belief. He has had some unfortunate problems, some self-inflicted... but he's brilliant with the cars, especially hydraulics. He is good – I just wish he'd get on with it!"

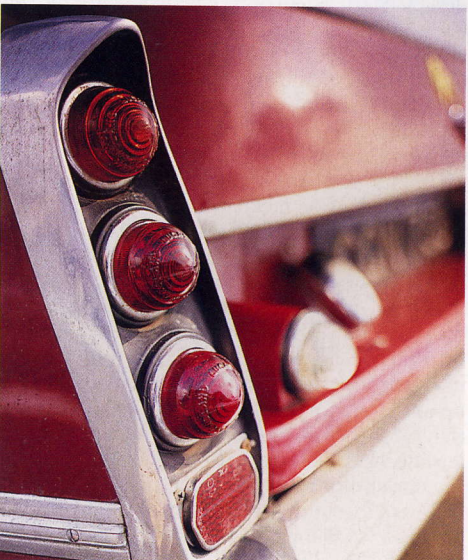
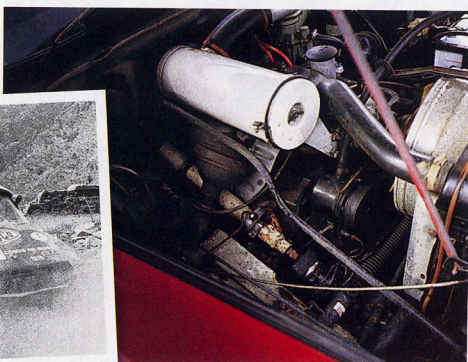
Then the car became hard to start, due to a camshaft problem: "No cams are available for early DSs so we had to use one from an early-'60s car which caused timing problems, so we had to have something machined. When he put it back together one of the original cylinder-head bolts sheared at the block face; to get it out it had to be spark eroded."

The DS was supposed to be ready for his wedding in 2001: "I heard it run in the morning over the phone... but there was no way the car was coming."

"I've got to ring him tomorrow," says Bremner with a note of tired resignation, "he may have put the engine back in yet I doubt if anything has happened. It's nearly finished... but it's always nearly finished."

One of the few glorious moments of ownership was buying mint door trim for £100 at a DS meet at Le Mans and finding an uncorroded fluid reservoir for a '57 car: "I still don't know if I'll like it – and my wife will probably feel sick in it – but for the 50th anniversary I'm determined I'm going on the drive-past down the Champs-Élysées with it in October."

**IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY: TURN OVER FOR A RESTO WITH A HAPPY ENDING**



## ROUGH RIDERS

The DS seems an unlikely competition car but its long-travel suspension made it ideal for use on rough endurance events – it did well in the Spa-Sofia-Liège – or even tighter, more slippery classics such as the Monte Carlo Rally. Some drivers even preferred the hydraulic



gearchange, claiming it was quicker. The DS won the Monte three times: first in 1959 in the hands of Paul Coltelloni (in an ID19), in '66 after the Minis were disqualified (a DS21 driven by Pauli Toivonen, father of Henri) and again in '67. The car's greatest year in Europe was probably 1963 when five DS featured in the top 10 of the Monte and gained wins in the Rallye Lyon, Spa-Sofia-Liège, Routes du Nord, Tour de Corse and Rallye de Mont Blanc. The DS proved its durability in Africa when, out of 16 finishers in an 85-car event, five were Citroëns. In 1969, Neyret and Terramorsi won the Rallye du Maroc in a special two-door DS, a trick they repeated the year after. Photo shows '70 World Cup Rally.

The car's competition involvement – despite the arrival of the apparently more suitable SM – would last until the end of production in 1975. A DS came fourth overall and first in the touring class in the Rallye du Maroc in its swansong year.