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# DS DÉCAPOTABLE



# FROG PRINCESS

AFTER A FOUR-YEAR HUNT, THIS **GROUND-BREAKING CITROËN DS CONVERTIBLE** WAS FOUND UNDER A SHEET ON A NSW FARM

**R**umours are tiny mind-worms that burrow into the innermost layers of the sub-conscious to lay eggs of previously unconsidered ideas or actions.

How else can stories of mythical winged horses, Harold Holt being kidnapped by a Chinese submarine, or the existence of a right-hand drive Citroën convertible in a

tiny NSW farming town be given any rational credence, if not from the force of a rumour?

Proving that rumours also have a power disproportionate to their size is the fact that Citroën collector, Peter Huth, devoted four years of his life after hearing one word at a national Citroën club gathering.

French for convertible, 'décapotable', was the catalyst that started Huth on his quest for a model that is deemed by some enthusiasts to be the zenith of this French marque.

## The Goddess

Designed by  
Flaminio Bertoni  
and Andre  
Lefebvre, the  
DS (or *Déesse*,

meaning 'goddess') was a revelation on debut at the 1955 Paris Motor Show, with 12,000 orders taken in one day.

While it could have traded on looks alone for the 20 years it was on sale, the DS was a technical marvel as well, with self-levelling, hydro-pneumatic suspension and, later, headlights that turned with the steering, marking it a triumph of French engineering.

French coachbuilder Henri Chapron also took to the charms of the DS and immediately set about putting his personal stamp on the design with a convertible version.

Citroën eventually approved it for production after initial reluctance, probably caused by seeing their fresh new design decapitated.

Chapron was a legendary 'carrossier' who, unlike many of his

WORDS BEN DILLON PICS NATHAN DUFF

**BELOW** Lucky Les Hay is the only man entrusted with the keys to this rare beauty



contemporaries, continued to produce and remodel car bodies after the introduction of monocoque construction consigned many coachbuilders – who relied on traditional body-on-chassis designs – to the history books.

Arguably, it was Chapron's relationship with Citroën that allowed his business to continue until his death in 1978. His wife then ran the business until 1985, producing bespoke presidential Citroën specials and cars for the French elite.

## Paris Match

Chapron ID and DS convertibles are becoming the GT-HO Falcons of the European classic market, with examples like Huth and his Citroën collector mate Les Hay's car commanding up to \$500,000.

Style plays a large part in the escalation of ID/DS prices but so does the story the car can tell and this DS definitely has a yarn worth spinning.

Australian graziers Tom and Julie Holt were on a European holiday when, strolling down the Champs Elysees in Paris, a DS Décapotable in the Chapron Carrossier showroom caught Julie's eye.

"Can you see what I see?" was all Julie said as they went inside for a closer look at what, in the late '60s, must have appeared like an alien to eyes more used to boxy XR Falcons and HD Holdens.

After talking to the salesperson, the pair met Henri Chapron at his body shop in

Levallois-Perret, and placed an order for a right-hand drive DS21 Décapotable in green with a beige leather interior.

Upon delivery, the cabriolet was pressed into service as Julie's daily driver, even playing the role of feed transporter for animals at their farm at Urana in country New South Wales.

The story goes that Julie used to drive to town to buy bales of hay, which were

The latter gave photographer Nathan a nasty rash after he sat on the back seat, possibly an allergic reaction to hay!

The only non-original item seems to be the cross-flow radiator, which was included to allow air-conditioning when Julie owned the car.

One of 1219 DS Décapotables manufactured with Citroën consent, this vehicle was the only DS cabriolet sold

## THE HORSES WOULD EAT HAY DIRECTLY FROM THE BOOT OF THE CITROËN

carried back to the farm in the capacious boot of the cabriolet. Upon arrival she would open the boot and horses would feed directly from the back of the Citroën.

The history of this car with the Hols is vague but after the passing of her husband, Ms Holt retired the Citroën to a garage where it stayed covered by a sheet for nearly a decade.

The car remains much as it was when new, with very little work done to it besides a respray in the original colour. This uncovered stampings on the end of the doors and chassis, which mark it as a matching-numbers car.

The odometer reads 34,000 miles, which Huth attests to being accurate as the drivetrain is in excellent condition, as is the completely original interior.

through the Citroën dealer network in Australia and is believed to be one of only two late-model cabriolets the factory made in right-hand drive

## The Thrill of the Chase

While that magic word 'décapotable' had a profound effect on Huth, the four years he devoted searching for the DS21 consisted mostly of waiting for the owner to finally agree to sell the car.

Finding the car took two years but convincing Ms Holt that he was the best caretaker for it took yet another two years.

"I first heard a rumour about the existence of a DS21 cabriolet at a national Citroën rally in South Australia and that another party was trying to acquire it," Huth says.

**RIGHT** DS21 'cab' is believed to be one of only two RHD examples created

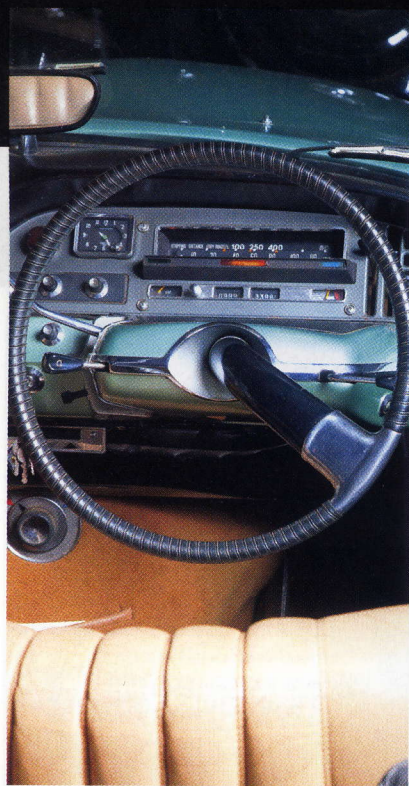
**BELOW** Twin headlights swivel with the steering; body has been resprayed; interior is weird-burger French





**ABOVE** Still a stunner. When Citroën unveiled the DS sedan at the 1955 Paris Motor Show, it took 12,000 orders in one day!

**LEFT** Unique single-spoke steering wheel an example of the advanced free thinking of the DS's interior designers – style was once everything to the French



He was told the general location of where the car was believed to exist, but with the area encompassing Griffith (population around 15,000) and outlying towns, it would prove a large area to cover.

After organising time off work, Huth and wife Pam ventured to Griffith to start the mammoth job of finding his unicorn.

Being the late-1980s meant there was no internet or mobile phones to help his search, so it was down to good old-fashioned, door-to-door canvassing

and following any leads that arose.

“I knocked on every business house in Griffith, talked to the police and placed ads in the local newspaper but drew a complete blank – just nothing at all.”

Huth was deflated but not defeated and continued to follow up leads by staying in touch with contacts through a local payphone and pockets of 20-cent pieces.

“Eighteen months into it I really started to doubt that the car existed. I couldn't

and he had a surname which, with further research, led him to the fact that the Hols were a farming family. Huth began calling around graziers in the area and struck gold almost at once.

“I asked one grazier if he knew Tom Holt who drove Citroëns and he said, ‘Old Tom died a while back’. My heart sank but then the guy said, ‘His wife is still about though’ and gave me the phone number,” Huth reminisces, “I couldn't

## EIGHTEEN MONTHS INTO THE HUNT, I REALLY STARTED TO DOUBT THAT THE CAR EXISTED

find anyone who knew anything about it or if the car even existed,” Huth says.

It was about this time that he went to Brisbane Citroën dealer and winner of the 1974 World Cup Rally (in a DS, of course) Jim Reddiex, who was able to confirm Peter's long-standing hope that the car indeed existed.

Reddiex knew this as the car that had passed through his dealership to be delivered to the Hols in the late 1960s, but Reddiex only had the surname and no other information on his books.

Armed with this new knowledge, Huth called every Holt in the Griffith phone book only to draw another blank.

He now knew the car was out there

believe it.”

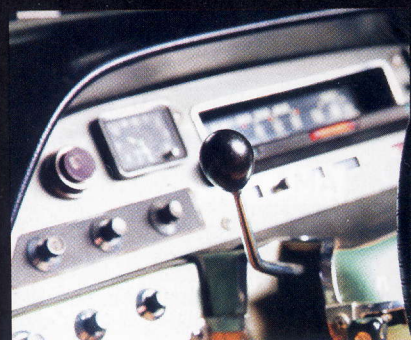
While he had contact details for Julie Holt (which had been listed under a company name), it would be two years of written correspondence and payphone calls, as well as competing with another collector, before the DS would be his.

Huth's persistence finally paid off and four years after hearing the rumour, he and Les travelled to Urana to take possession of the goddess, much to the chagrin of the competing party who had been trying for a much longer time to secure the car.

## St Peter doesn't Drive

Probably the most remarkable part of

# MAISON DE CITROËN



## CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

Unusual horizontal speedo; leather interior survived hay bales and horses; body excellent – note shut lines; five-speed column shift

this Décapotable saga comes as we stand some 20 years later at Huth and Hays' 'La Maison De Citroën' collection in Gayndah, Queensland, watching Hay drive the car up the road for photography.

I ask Peter if Les is in the habit of purloining the keys to his favourite car in the collection.

"I've never driven it, I just love looking at it," is the almost unbelievable reply. "It was never about the money, it was really about the looks of the car. I often wonder how we were so lucky to get a car like this," he muses.

Spending four years tracking down and buying a car reeks of monk-like patience, but the altruism of letting your mate be the only one to drive it proves Huth has either completely lost the plot or is a saint awaiting canonisation.

Having achieved the miracle of putting one of the all-time great Citroëns in his shed, we definitely think it's the latter. ☺

## FAST FACTS

### 1968 CITROËN DS21 DÉCAPOTABLE

**ENGINE** 2175cc 4cyl, OHV, 8v

**POWER** 88kW @ 5500rpm

**TORQUE** 164Nm @ 3000rpm

**GEARBOX** 5-speed manual

**SUSPENSION** Pushrod operated hydro-pneumatic dampers (f); trailing arms, pushrod-operated hydro-pneumatic dampers (r)

**WEIGHT** 1300kg (approx)

**0-100KM/H** 11.2sec

**TOP SPEED** 187km/h

