

# THE ECCENTRIC GODDESS

To most Australians Citroens are weird. But isn't that what you'd expect of a car from 20 years in the future?

John Wright put five to the Time Test

**F**OR THE first WHEELS Time Test we chose Peugeot, a marque celebrated for its distinctiveness, consistency and the length of its model runs. The test proved clearly what most of us had felt all along: that a 10 or 15 year-old Peugeot feels more modern in its design than most of its peers. But there is one other manufacturer whose products make an even greater mockery of the passing calendars and changing automotive fashions than do Peugeots.

It is, of course, Citroen. The Traction Avant (the car later developed into the Light 15) appeared to some derision in 1934 but confounded both its detractors and its admirers by surviving until 1957. The D Series left the wind tunnel and entered Citroen showrooms in 1955, where it stayed for a full two decades. And in 1974 Citroen introduced the CX. After almost a decade of extremely rapid automotive development, the CX still looks like a new design.

Citroen has always had its work cut out in Australia. In the land of six cylinders and simplicity, these elaborate French cars have always been regarded with some distrust; while the Citroen cognoscenti swear by them, the great majority of Australian buyers either swear at Citroens or

simply fail to register their presence.

It is probably true to say that the Light 15 never attracted as much attention to itself in Australia as did its successor. Although the Traction Avant looked rakish in 1934, its styling was never as controversial or singular as that of the D. Remember 1955? The FJ Holden was Australia's most beloved car. The ohv Customline had just arrived in Australia with all the chrome and masculine charisma that upwardly mobile buyers seemed to expect in the '50s. Further downmarket, the eccentric VW was winning many supporters.

But we had never seen anything like the Citroen Goddess. A design that appealed to many European tastes seemed to bewilder Australian buyers, so the D Series Citroen quickly established itself as a badge of differentness. If you bought one of these funny French cars, you were making a statement about yourself; it was a kind of minor rebellion against the overwhelming conformity of that Menzies era. In fact, the early DS19 Citroen was probably the world's most notable ever non-conformist car. Practically every aspect of its design challenged orthodoxy. It took up the theme begun by the Traction Avant and turned it into a concerto.

How different had the 1934 Traction been? Well, for a start, it was the world's first popular priced front-drive sedan. It was also the first car to combine such radical features as a monocoque body, torsion bar independent front suspension, hydraulic brakes all round and the absence of items commonly taken for granted — running boards and front quarter vent windows. The passenger floor was flat and one stepped down into it. The relatively low seating

the car nevertheless had huge popular appeal. It was sold all around the world and about 25,000 were built in Slough, England — some of which found their way to Australia. Citroen seemed to be able to combine technical advancement with mass appeal and complexity with simplicity. Take the 2CV, for example, which first appeared in 1948. It quickly became the archetypal French peasant's car, but it offered a degree of ride comfort previously undreamt of in small cars.

was no coincidence that Citroen selected them.

This Goddess stole the show. Citroen had made one of motoring's most modest ever boasts back in 1934 in claiming the Traction Avant to be two years ahead of its time, but the Goddess was plainly at least 10 years ahead of its time. And its charms, of course, went far deeper than its

## 1954 CITROEN LIGHT



*The last Light 15 to be registered in Queensland is owned by Jim Reddix and is a perfect example. It has impressive ride and handling and the interior is simple and neat*

position accentuated the excellence of the roadholding and cornering.

The performance of the early Traction was unspectacular. They were advanced in terms of engine design, with overhead valves and wet cylinder liners, but the car itself was quite heavy for the size of its engine, 1303 cm<sup>3</sup>. That first model was called the 7A and it tipped the scales at 900 kg. But within a year or so, the sporty 7S model was on stream with a capacity of 1911 cm<sup>3</sup>, the same as the first of the D Series cars. In 1936 the Traction's heavy and insensitive recirculating ball steering was replaced by a rack and pinion unit, which greatly improved the Citroen's already impressive driveability.

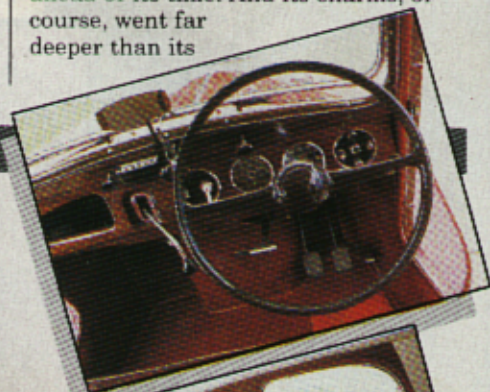
Sadly, Andre Citroen died in 1934. Not only was that the year of the Traction Avant's release, but it was also the year that Michelin took over a bankrupt Citroen. And Mr Citroen — whose name had previously been associated with essentially mundane cars — didn't survive to witness the success of his final design.

The Traction Avant marks the start of the paradox that has remained at the core of Citroen's philosophy ever since. Radical as its design clearly was,

By 1953, Citroen was ready to introduce its revolutionary hydro-pneumatic suspension system. In that year the Big Six (similar in styling to the Light 15 but somewhat larger and powered by a 2886 cm<sup>3</sup> six-cylinder engine) was given the new suspension at the rear. The Big Six had been introduced in 1939 and hadn't aroused the same kind of interest as the Light 15 from which it was derived. But fitting air suspension — as a kind of trial run for the forthcoming DS19 — gave it a new character. So astoundingly good was the resultant ride/handling compromise that other aspects of the car seemed dated.

Probably the most old-fashioned aspect of both the Light 15 and the Big Six by the mid '50s was the styling. We were growing accustomed by that time to the three-box school of styling, so that separate mudguards and headlamps that weren't faired into the bodywork began to look as if they belonged to the pre-war era.

So although the name of Citroen was still associated in the public mind with technical advancement, nobody was prepared for the reality of the DS19. Those initials, spoken in French, come to "Diesse" or Goddess and it



alluring appearance: not only did it

have hydraulic suspension, but there was no clutch pedal and the gearchange was hydraulically controlled in response to movements of the gearlever (effectively a kind of clutchless manual system); the steering was power-assisted and extremely direct; the DS19 was the first production car in the world to have disc brakes (inboard at the front and power-assisted).

Partly because of the relatively streamlined shape of the car, but more because of its smooth underbody, there was far less wind and road noise than on virtually any other 1955 sedan; the body panels were bolted on to the strong underframe; the roof was made of plastic as was the instrument panel, while the cooling fan was nylon; and

the steering wheel attracted laughter because it had only one spoke — a feature that has recently begun appearing in other vehicles (but it took more than 25 years).

Few individual cars have ever inspired intellectuals to write essays about them, but the Citroen DS19 prompted the famous semiologist, Roland Barthes, to do exactly this. Semiology is — to put it perhaps too simplistically — the study of cultural symbols, the exploration of the signs and motifs that affect life and values.

In his celebrated volume, *Mythologies*, Barthes has a chapter called "The New Citroen", where he writes of the Goddess as a car that changed people's perceptions of motoring. It had, he says, a magical lightness to its styling.

"There is a return to a certain degree of streamlining, new, however, since it is less bulky, less incisive, more relaxed than that which one found in the first period of this fashion. Speed here is expressed by less aggressive, less athletic signs, as if it were evolving from a primitive to a classical form ... it is possible that the *Deesse* marks a change in the mythology of cars. The dashboard looks more like the working surface of a modern kitchen than the control-room of a factory: the slim panes of matt fluted metal, the small levers topped by a white ball, the very simple dials, the very discreteness of the nickel-work, all this signifies a kind of control exercised over motion, which is henceforth conceived as comfort rather than performance. One is obviously turning from an alchemy of speed to a relish in driving."

It is certainly true that a new level of comfort — indeed, a new emphasis on comfort — distinguished the Goddess. There was that unique hydro-pneumatic suspension for a start. It swallowed huge potholes in a way that was simply unknown in ordinary vehicles and even 1984's best cannot surpass the 1955 Citroen in this.

Barthes wrote at one point: "It is obvious that the new Citroen has fallen from the sky." And to watch the Citroen, when the driver started the engine, was to understand that it truly was a flying saucer type of a motor car — there it would be one moment, idle at the kerb, merely centimetres from the road and then, once the engine started and the hydraulics went into operation, it would rise higher off the ground with a slight wheezing noise.

It was as if the Citroen's reason for existence was to meet the driver's every need. (Originally, the magic fluid that performed this work was a red

synthetic vegetable oil (LHS2), but in 1966 Citroen changed to green liquid hydraulic mineral oil (LHM) — a story of hidden colour!)

The power steering and that funny little mushroom brake pedal were so light to operate that the driver quickly developed a sense of total control over the car. Even the seats were ultra-soft and welcoming. By 1955 standards outright performance was quite good, but the Citroen — more than most of its peers — proved that it's not *what* she'll do that counts but *how* she does it. You could never fully convey the nature of the Citroen's performance merely by quoting performance figures. Here was not so much a car that one drove in so much as an *experience* in which one participated.

French cars always seem to have been better at consuming long stretches of road than other cars of similar engine size. The D Series marked a considerable improvement in this regard over the Light 15 — which was geared rather on the low side to aid its acceleration, while still being higher geared than most English cars of its long era. The DS19's effortless cruising gait surpassed even that of the Peugeot 403, which admittedly had an engine 443 cm<sup>3</sup> smaller.

Road testers had commented on the Light 15's and Big Six's capacity to cover long distances without fuss, but with the introduction of the D Series, this came to be seen as Citroen's forte.

But Australians, traditionally suspicious of "too much too soon" or of anything that seemed "too different", saw the DS as epitomising the oddball Continental car. Like the Peugeot, it was somewhat hampered by having just four cylinders, which was okay for a little car like a VW but was seen as a problem for a family car.

The people who bought Citroens were, of course, oblivious to these popular misgivings. For them the car conveyed an appropriate degree of individual style while going very effectively about the business of carrying them and their families from one geographical point to another.

Citroen owners, it has frequently been said, are a law unto themselves. There was in Australia always an air of counter-culturalism, of the avant-garde, about Citroen ownership. It is tempting to suggest, in fact, that the car played a similar role to an old Beetle, but upmarket. When Beetles had a few years of age on them and the lustre of their paintwork had dulled, they were very popular with people who wouldn't have been happy to be seen in a Holden or Falcon. The status of Citroen ownership was incidental;

the car was more a proof of discernment than of material success.

It would be interesting to be able to locate statistics on this point, but I'd guess that the percentage of Citroen owners whose marque loyalty never falters is high — as high as, or even higher than, that among Pugophiles.

But back to the cars themselves. Australia saw its first DS19s in 1956. Three years later the cheaper ID19 arrived, lacking the standard power steering, the hydraulic gearchange and various luxury features of the DS. Although the ID still used the 1911 cm<sup>3</sup> engine, it produced less power than the DS. Local assembly of the ID19 began in 1961 at Continental and General's West Heidelberg factory near Melbourne and ceased in 1966.

In 1966 the 2175 cm<sup>3</sup> DS21 replaced the DS19, but the ID range continued in production. Where relatively few DS19s were imported once local assembly of the cheaper ID (known here as the Parisienne) had begun, the emphasis switched back to the DS21 when it was released and local assembly of the Parisienne stopped.

By 1969, the Citroen importers had once again seen the need for a cheaper model and the D Special appeared on the local market. It was something of a hybrid, combining some features of the French D Special with others from the D Super (which came here only as a private import). The "Australian" D Special is best understood as a cross between the old ID19 and the DS21. Its displacement was 1985 cm<sup>3</sup>, enabling it to reach a top speed of 163 km/h. It sold from 1969 to 1975 and later models had a dual-throat carburettor.

But by 1971 the DS21 had acquired fuel injection and a five-speed gearbox, greatly increasing its capacity to consume bewilderingly long distances at high speed, while keeping driver and passengers relaxed. Furthermore, the car was now beyond reproach as far as performance against the stopwatch was concerned. It made plenty of noise in the process, but the DS21 could knock off the standing 400 in just 17.6 seconds and continue to almost 190 km/h. To beat it in Australia, you needed a local V8 (most of which didn't have as high a top speed).

The DS23 was released at the Paris Salon in the European autumn of 1972, arriving here a few months later. As well as the five-speed manual, there was a fully automatic version — the first such Citroen. The automatic had been intended mainly for the US market, but Citroen also encouraged its Australian distributors to take this model. It proved to be remarkably unreliable and there's a rumour among

Citroen buffs that dealers used to ascertain whether the cars to be collected from the docks were manuals or autos. For manual DS23s, runs the story, drivers were sent to drive them to the showroom. But for automatics, the dealers sent a tow truck!

It's probably a tall tale, but many long-time Citroen owners were greatly disillusioned with their automatic DS23s and Citroen didn't persevere with the transmission (produced by Borg-Warner). Instead, the company

between Citroen and Rover. In designing the P6, Rover had cast more than a casual glance at Citroen. That's where the idea of bolt-on panels came from, as well as at least some of the inspiration for the styling.

The D Series was always an expensive car to produce and Citroen apparently lost money on the last of the DS23s. The CX is a much cheaper car to build. No longer does every body panel have to be separately fitted. There is now no hand assembling of

fell off very sharply in the early to mid '70s and there is some evidence to suggest that Citroen rushed its successor onto the market before it was properly developed. Not that the first CX2200 was a bad car, but more that it lacked some of the final touches it should have had from the start. The most obvious of these is the power steering. It simply wasn't ready when

## 1964 CITROEN ID19



*Alderman Ted Mack's 20-year-old ID19 is brilliant apart from heavy steering at parking speed. Interior is odd, brake button is awkward initially, gearchange is a delight*

reverted to a system somewhat like that used in the first DS19 — a clutch pedal-less semi-automatic, known as the C-Matic.

It wasn't until 1982 that fully automatic Citroens were produced again. These cars weren't, however, sold in Australia and it is only now — with the arrival of the CX2500 — that Australian Citroen buyers can once again opt for automatic transmission.

For many Citroen enthusiasts, the DS23 Pallas injected five-speeder remains the ultimate Citroen. The early CX2200s were disappointing and the August 1976 WHEELS road test was headed, "The Makings of a Great Car". To some extent it was a case of sky-high expectations being brought down to earth. After all, a new Citroen is news indeed after 20 years of anticipation, but it was also clear that the CX had lost much of the long-legged feel of the D Series cars as well as surrendering some of the magic carpet ride quality in exchange for flatter handling.

By the mid '70s car production costs were soaring and manufacturers were looking for cheaper ways of building vehicles. There are some interesting parallels to be drawn at this point

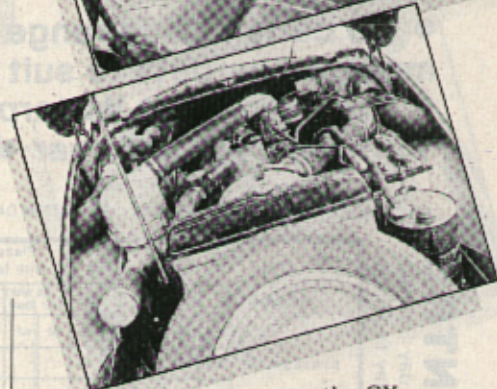
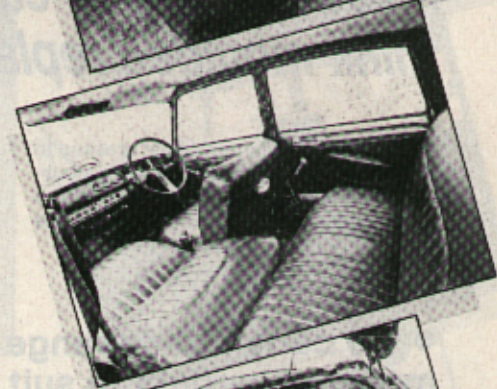
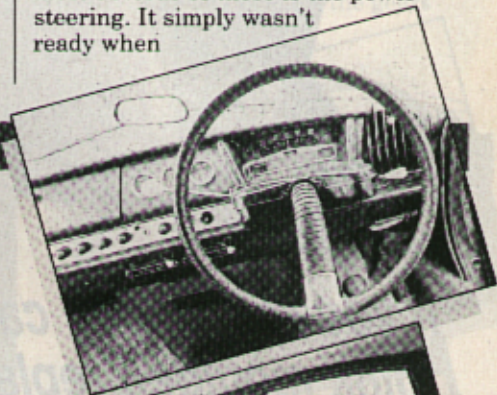
the bodyshell and the entire design of the CX was aimed for automation on the production line.

While retaining most of the D's mechanical advancement, the CX is a simpler and cheaper car to build and is thus more profitable. The front suspension, for example, while similar in principle, is less complex.

Rover went a similar way with its SD1 model, released a year after the CX. It's often said that Rover styled the SD1 along the lines of the CX, but both cars in fact were inspired by a Pininfarina show car of the late '60s. The British company, however, didn't succeed so well as the French one in achieving greater simplicity without sacrificing subtlety.

Where the new Rover had given away inboard rear disc brakes in dubious favour of drums, the CX Citroen became the first Citroen to use discs at the rear. And when Rover dropped the de Dion rear-end, it lost out on ride comfort without gaining anything in handling. About the only obvious loss in specification in the CX as compared with its predecessor, was the turning headlights — extremely costly to produce.

Demand for the D Series Citroens



the CX was released and the manual system with 4.6 turns from lock to lock and great heaviness at parking speeds made what should have been an agile car feel ponderous and somewhat clumsy. The manual steering accentuated the CX's understeer.

It wasn't until the power steering arrived — similar in design to that used on the '55 DS19 — that the CX began to realise its potential; with a nice degree of weight and a mere 2.5 turns between locks, the steering did wonders for the driveability of the new generation Citroen.

In December 1977 the CX2400 superseded the CX2200 in local showrooms. The Pallas now came with leather trim as standard (it had been a \$745 option on the previous Pallas). But, perhaps sadly for enthusiasts, the

standard transmission was now the C-Matic, which had its virtues when you grew accustomed to it, but was neither one thing nor the other. It wasn't good for drivers who *enjoy* changing gears and it forced those who don't into going through some of the motions.

The C-Matic transmission probably symbolises the place of Citroen in the Australian market. Traditionally, Citroens have appealed to a small but frantically loyal band of one-marque enthusiasts. But the rising price of

version, but simply, there now seems to be no other way that the specialist European manufacturers can sell its cars in this country.

### 1954 Citroen Light 15

Jim Reddiex is Australia's Mr Citroen, the man responsible for importing the cars since 1967 and for restoring the marque to the local scene with the brand new CX2500. So keen is he, that he had his own maroon Light 15 —

The gearchange itself has nothing except eccentricity to recommend it. First is closest to your left knee with an unprotected reverse directly above it. Second is across the gate and upwards, so an overhand grip and slight pressure leftwards is the easiest way of finding second. Third is simply below second. That's all the gears there are and, I must say, I'm rather

## 1975 CITROEN DS23 PALLAS



*The ultimate D Series Citroen, this immaculate specimen owned by David Halls-Rogers. Everything good about the ID19 is taken and improved; car is superbly comfortable*

imported cars has moved Citroen continually upmarket. Back in 1964 the ID19 sold for \$3476, compared with some \$2800 for a Holden Premier. By 1974 the DS23 Pallas was pulling \$9990, compared with some \$5000 for a heavily optioned Premier. Two years later, when the CX2200 came on stream the prices had soared again, taking the new model into a different market category: the Super started at \$13,990, the Pallas two grand more.

Citroen that to recognise that many longtime supporters will no longer be able to afford to buy a new model. The CX2500 comes loaded to the hilt with goodies of the kind that carry plenty of weight in the executive market. Fortunately, the car is now equipped with fully automatic transmission. There is central locking, the mirrors are electrically adjustable; in other words, the CX2500 can justify its \$32,950 pricetag. Leather, however, has become optional again and adds \$1000 to the price.

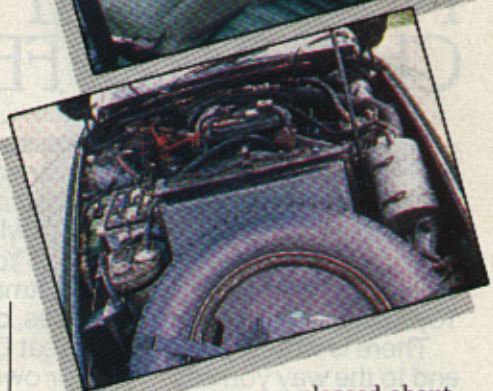
It may seem odd to Citroen lovers that the only model now available in Australia — and remember that there were some 16 months when the marque was no longer imported — is a fully equipped, fully automatic Pallas

believed to be the last of its kind to be registered new in Queensland by the distributor, Maxim Motors — trucked down south to Sydney so that WHEELS could sample its charms.

It is a far cry, this 1954 example, from the last Light 15 I drove. That would have been about 15 years back when even an immaculate old Citroen was worth scarcely more than a new bumper and the asking price for the basically sound car I tried was \$125. Needless to say, no amount of money would buy Jim's Light 15.

Once I can muster up sufficient courage to step down into the Light 15, the first thing that impresses me is the beautiful walnut dashboard — not beautiful in the burred Rolls-Royce style, but simple and very neat. And not a veneer, but solid wood. An odd looking lever protrudes from it somewhere to the left of and above my left knee and this is the gearlever.

Before moving away, the view over that vintage-style bonnet, separate mudguards and bug-eye headlights, is imposing. This is a car you could just sit in and look through the windscreen without ever needing to push the starter button and coax your way into the oblivious traffic.



pleased about that! Every gearchange must be unhurried.

Which is just about the opposite of every corner. As legend insists, the Light 15 is indeed the perfect vintage vehicle in which to play out one's cops and robbers fantasies. You can even open the windscreen for extra impressions of speed. The cornering is flatter than any car of this period that I have driven. The understeer is muted to the point of not being noticed. The steering is magnificently direct, with just 2.3 turns lock to lock on what is, admittedly, an appalling lock. There's not much feel in the steering, but neither is there a skerrick of slack.

Just as impressive as the handling is the ride. Some 1984 tinboxes would be battling to surpass the old Citroen here. There's no pitch or wallow and

even bad bumps don't shake things about too much.

By today's standards, acceleration is weak, but the engine feels willing. The gearing is low so that an indicated 55 mph (88 km/h) on a highly optimistic speedo feels about the maximum effective speed in second, while top starts to get fussy at an indicated 75 mph (120 km/h). Better to keep your quick stuff for the corners.

The car, I decide, corners as if it's on radials. Then — blush, horror,

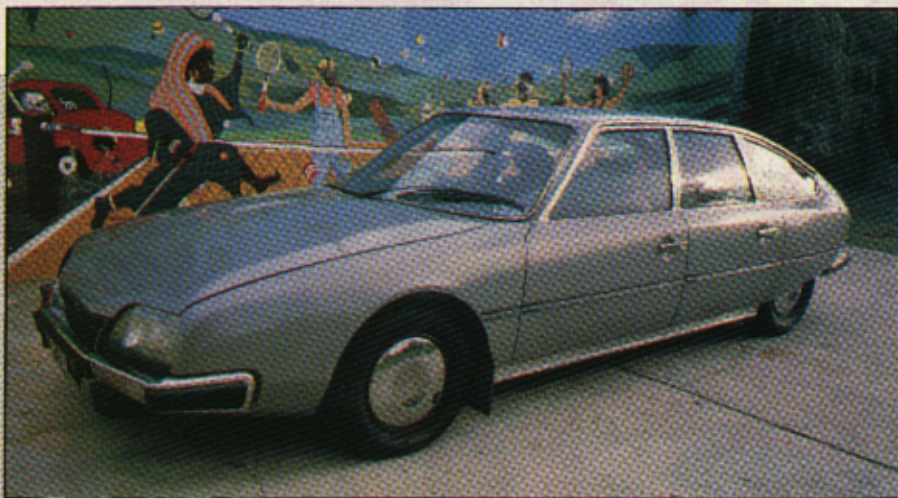
an eerie fashion. And when you encounter the first patches of uneven road, you realise that the ride is simply brilliant, because it soaks up holes that would jar even an S Class Mercedes. You float, but not in the seemingly arbitrary manner of a big American of the '60s; despite its excesses, this is a highly controlled and highly controllable motor car.

Because the ID lacks power steering, things are ridiculously heavy at parking speeds but lighten up once

this 1964 Citroen (essentially the same as the original '57 ID19 and — as far as its brakes go — the '55 DS19) has superb stoppers, once you've accustomed yourself to the light pressure required and the minimal travel of that bizarre brake button.

This is a delightfully practical car when it comes to transporting five adults in comfort and style. Even the

## 1976 CITROEN CX2200 PALLAS



*CX2200 manual was in original rather than good condition, but still has aged well. Some things, like instruments appear to be changed for the sake of change — very un-Citroen!*

shock — I realise that it is. Consider that fact alone: a car that started life in 1934 (the Reddix example is two decades into its model life) that is more than happy on Michelin X tyres. Makes you wonder about all those funny round British cars of the postwar years, doesn't it?

### 1964 Citroen ID19

North Sydney alderman Ted Mack's 20 year-old D is a fine example of its kind. Alongside the Light 15, it looks something like three decades more modern. Behind the wheel, I feel like adding another decade.

Unlike the original DS19, the ID has a conventional manual transmission with a column change that is bewilderingly pleasant to use. There are four speeds rather than three and the view from the driver's seat could scarcely be more different from that in the Light 15. Once you're in motion, however, some similarities are apparent and the ID19 doesn't feel quite so far in advance of the old car.

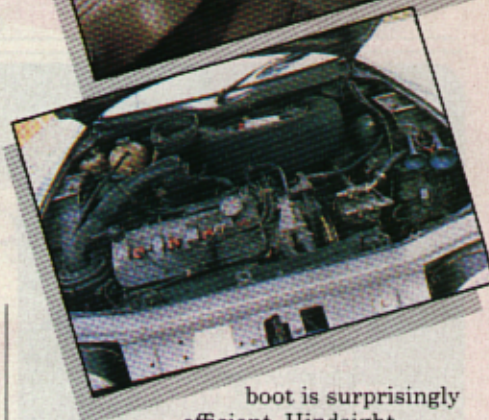
Actually, you don't even need to move before you are aware of this car's most dominant characteristic — its ride. The hydraulics lift you up in quite

you pass about 10 km/h. This car doesn't turn in as well as the Light 15 and there is considerable understeer, accentuated by the steering with its 4.1 turns lock to lock.

But if the steering is geared down compared with the Light 15's, the car itself is geared up. Even in this car — the least powerful of the Ds sold in Australia — third gear feels ideal for highway overtaking manoeuvres and, by the time you're in top (who would believe that the gear positions are conventional for a four-speed column arrangement?) with 70 mph (112 km/h) or so on the speedo, engine noise is mainly a memory and the car lopes along. How nice it would be to just head for the coast!

You can see why salesmen had to battle to sell these cars in Australia, though. Apart from the strangeness of the decor — I'll let the photographs demonstrate what I mean — this machine doesn't really lend itself to the suburban grind. Around tight corners, the body roll is prodigious and, although the acceleration was better than I'd expected, it's certainly not the equal of a Holden EH 179's.

Then you think for a moment about braking. Remember the EH 179? Well,



boot is surprisingly efficient. Hindsight suggests that even in 1964 this Citroen was years in advance of its true place in automotive history. It is also a clear case of a car whose eccentricity blinded many to its essential excellence.

### 1975 Citroen DS23 Pallas

Here it is — the ultimate D Series Citroen, one of the last to be built and equipped with a five-speed manual transmission and electronic fuel injection. This particular specimen belongs to David Halls-Rogers and is in pristine condition, with only 60,000 km to its credit.

It's everything the ID19 is, only much better. Take the interior: the finish is far better and the equipment level is higher; there's a tachometer;