

CITROËN Traction Avant owner John Savelli was determined that he and his car would take part in the Paris celebrations in France to mark the 50th anniversary of the model. He worked on his 1935 fixed-head coupé until 2.30 in the morning most nights for a month before the spectacular rally in Paris.

John and his beloved car did get there. But only after the journey from his home in Falkirk, Scotland, involved driving on the handbrake for more than 150 miles after the main brakes failed, travelling the 100 miles from Rouen to Paris at night without lights because the battery packed up, keeping stopping because the car was overheating, and last but not least sleeping in the car because he arrived at his hotel in the French capital too late to disturb the owners!

But the remarkable thing about John Savelli's story was that among the couple of thousand Traction Avant enthusiasts who came to Paris, the story was not remarkable at all! They drove their Maitret-style cars manufactured in the Thirties, Forties and Fifties from all over Europe. They flew in from the United States, New Zealand, South Africa and other countries from around the world. They all had a story to tell of how they tracked down a particular Traction Avant and/or spent countless hours restoring it to its original shining splendour.

John Savelli was part of a British contingent which crossed the channel in 30 Traction Avants. Perhaps it was significant that of the first 15 cars to arrive that bright sunny morning at the end of April at the Place de la Concorde, a dozen were British. Certainly their enthusiasm matched that of any who drove in a spectacular cavalcade of well over 1000 Traction Avants.

The historic procession brought Paris to a standstill as it motored non-stop across the city with horns blaring and passengers waving as the gendarme outriders escorted the beaming drivers across red traffic lights.

Many of the cars owned by the British Traction Owners Club were built at Slough. The Traction Avant Light 15 driven to Paris by Stephen Fothergill was the tenth to last Traction off the British production line. Stephen, aged 30, of Highclere, near Newbury, Berkshire, bought the car 10 years ago for £50. "It was rotting in a car park near Newbury," said Stephen, standing next to the pristine automobile looking resplendent in the line up at the Place de la Concorde.

It took Stephen, head of insurance administration for the Automobile Association, four years to restore the car. "Now it's part of the family," he said. Stephen and other members of the British Traction Owners' Club began the anniversary weekend with a dinner and rally at a hotel in Bracknell. They drove in convoy to Newhaven, crossed on a Sealink ferry, and motored from Dieppe to Paris. Some, like John Savelli, had a long drive just getting to Bracknell let alone going on to Paris.

Peter Stenner, of Rowlands Gill, Tyne and Wear,



Above, members of the Traction Owners Club gather with their cars before the start of their pilgrimage to Paris among thousands of similar Tractions to celebrate the car's 50th anniversary this year. Below, a femme fatale among this line-up of Traction Avant cars joined in the spirit of the occasion

had a trouble-free drive in his 1955 Onze Normale. Just a couple of years ago Peter, managing director of a Durham print company, had to evict sheep and chickens from the Vintage Citroën when he found it in a French barn. Over six months he stripped down the car so it was nothing more than four wheels and a body shell.

His fascination with Traction Avants goes back to his teens. "I have owned Tractions since I was 18 — that's 15 years," he said. "I find them tremendously well designed." Peter said he felt he just had to go to the celebrations. And driving his restored car back to France was particularly poignant. "This sized gathering of Tractions will never happen again in my lifetime and I couldn't miss it," he said.

Norman Moore made a 1700 mile round journey in his 1938 Traction Avant Light 12 to be at the Paris anniversary. Norman, aged 58, set off from



his home in Limavady, Co Londonderry, Northern Ireland, on Tuesday to arrive in Paris on the Sunday. After crossing on the ferry from Larne he got as far as Dumfries only to find a petrol leak had made the car run dry. He had to sleep in the car from 3am outside a petrol station until it opened!

But for Norman, who owns a jeweller's shop, it was all worth it. "I love Tractions, and to see so many is a chance in a lifetime," he said. Norman bought his Traction Avant four years ago for £1200. "I wanted something with character, but also something with comfort that I could drive easily in traffic," he said.

He also owns a Jaguar Xj6. "If I am not in a hurry going somewhere, I'd rather drive the Traction."

Twins Malcolm and David Boyd both helped mark the motoring milestone with drives that culminated years of dedication. Malcolm, a director of Barclay's Bank in Redditch, Worcestershire, both bought Tractions three years ago... 28 years after they jointly owned their first Traction Avant.

Malcolm's current Traction was bought for £450. It was a wreck left in a barn in Oxford with chickens roosting in it, he says. Two years of work brought it up to the gleaming condition good enough to hold its own in the heart of Paris. The car made the journey from Walsall with nothing more serious going wrong than an overheated brake which needed adjusting.

Malcolm tried to describe what it was about the car that inspired their owners. "It's difficult to put your finger on what it is that makes them so special," he said. "They have a certain character that modern cars don't have any more."

Brother David bought his 1939 Roadster Traction Avant Light 15 for £3500. He completely stripped it down and rebuilt it. The car is now worth maybe as much as £12,000, he says. He said of Tractions: "It is now beginning to be recognised more and more as being one of the classics of its day."

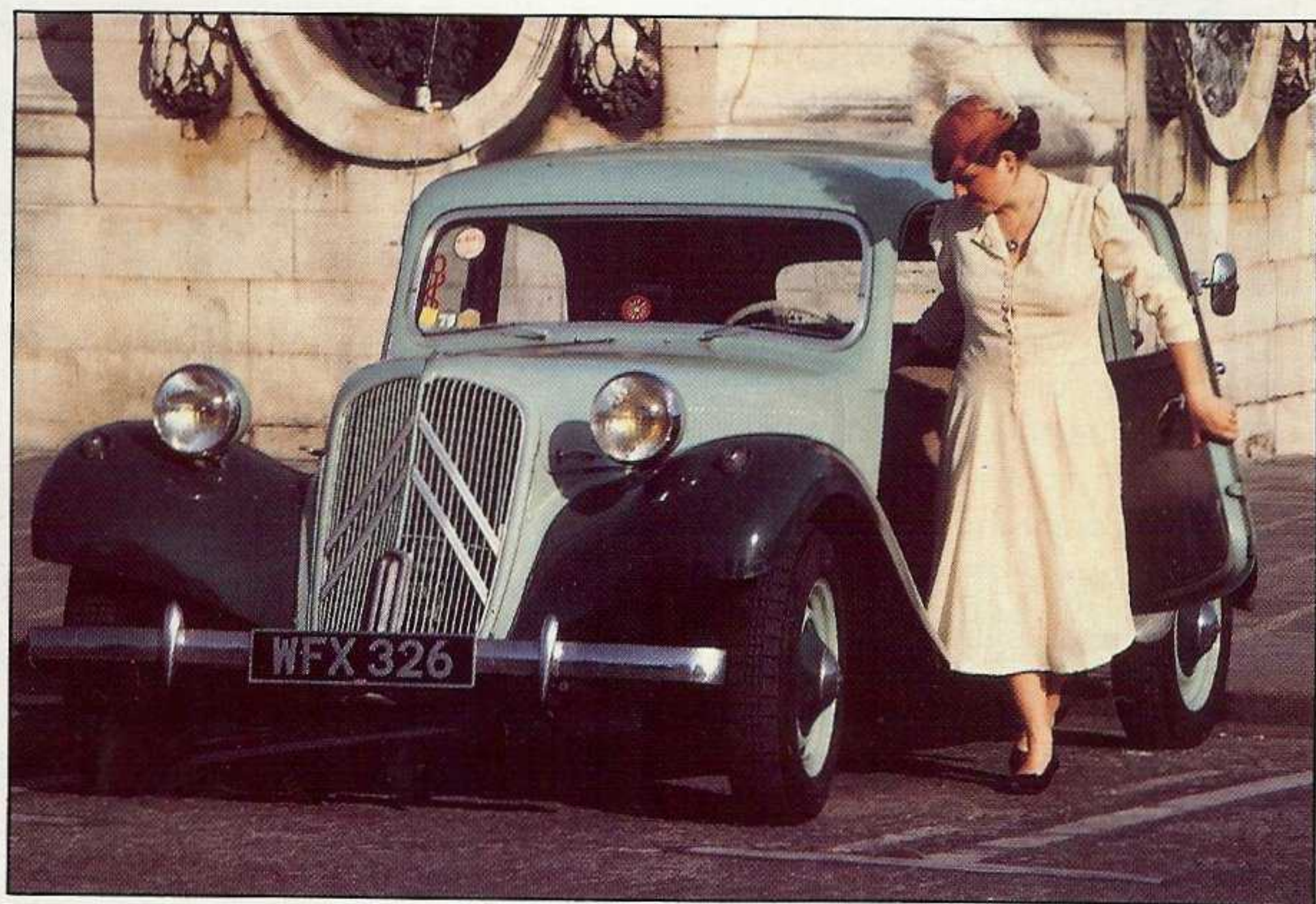
The British contingent's organiser was Traction Owners Club member Laurie Turnbull. Laurie was only able to go along as a passenger because he is still restoring the Slough-built Big 15 he bought three years ago. Laurie, of Fulham, remembers being so impressed when he saw a Traction Avant when he was just 12 years old that he there and then made his mind up to own one some day.

The UK Traction Owners Club was formed in 1976 by a group of these like-minded fanatics and it has thrived ever since. This year, as their chairman Bernie Shaw says, "is a bit special for all of us".

As well as the international celebrations in Paris, in August, the largest gathering of Citroën cars ever in Britain came together at a three-day rally at Knebworth Park in Hertfordshire. However, many enthusiasts saw as the highlight of this anniversary year the marathon drive from Paris to Moscow in July by a convoy of no fewer than 150 Traction Avants to commemorate an identical run undertaken by a Traction Avant in the year of its launch. But that, as they say, is another story... 

Traction Action

1984 was the Golden Anniversary of Andre Citroën's remarkable Traction Avant. As one of the events celebrating this notable occasion, more than 1000 enthusiasts from around the world made a pilgrimage to Paris in their beloved cars. Report and pictures by Doug Wills



Above, Traction toured through Paris following a gathering in the Place de la Concorde. Below left, Allan Sibley is ready to cut the cake! Below right and bottom centre, many dressed specially for the occasion. Bottom, just a small number of the 1000 cars which came from all over Europe

