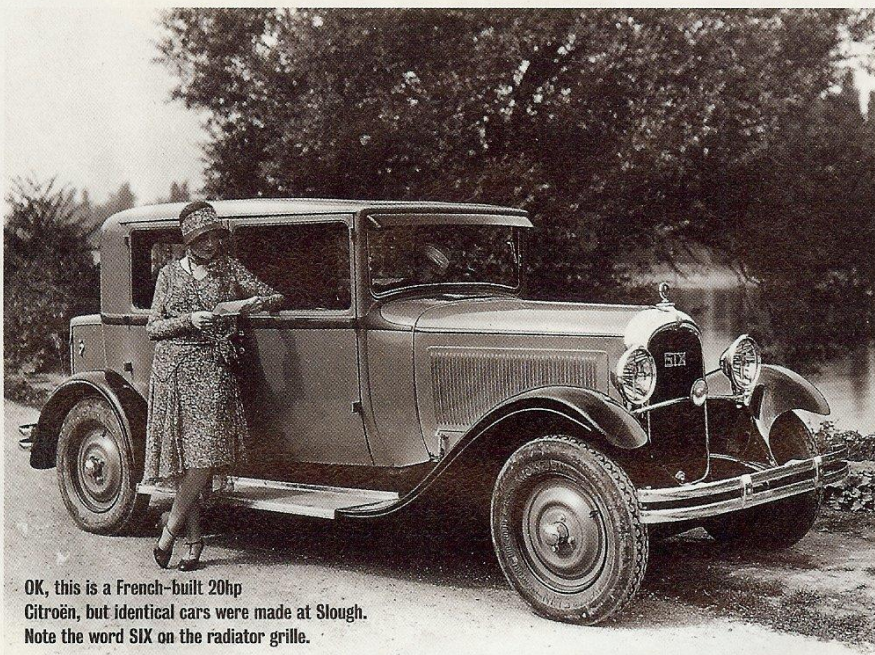


Even though Citroëns are more French than croissants and café-au-lait, they've always sold well in Britain. Mark Dixon charts the progress of the big British Citroën



OK, this is a French-built 20hp Citroën, but identical cars were made at Slough. Note the word SIX on the radiator grille.



Big in Britain

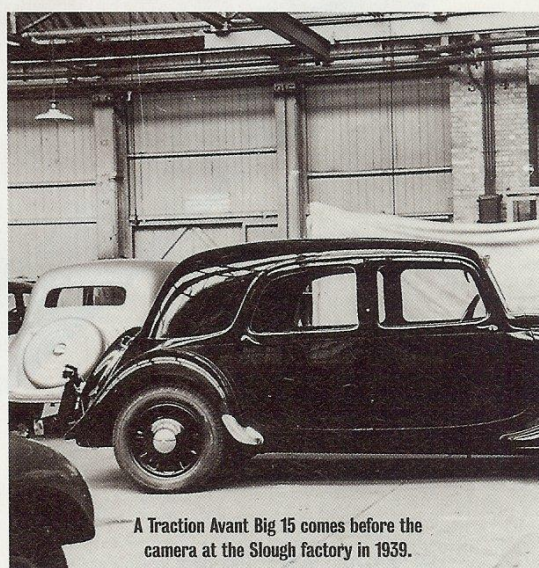
YOU'D THINK, in these days when heritage of any kind is milked for all it's worth, that a car maker like Citroën would take full advantage of its fascinating past. Citroën has never made a truly bad car and it's never gone through a Leyland-esque phase which turned its name to mud. Along the way it's also created a few legends: cars such as the Traction Avant and the DS. Surely Citroën should be having a field day reminding people about them.

You might think so, but you'd be wrong. Instead Citroën prefers to use an obscure Australian comedian or Claudia Schiffer getting her kit off to plug its current range. The only

explanation seems to be that the company is afraid today's Citroëns would appear unimaginative in comparison with what they used to be like.

There's some logic in that, for modern Citroëns are certainly becoming more and more like all the other cars on our roads. Ironically, it's happening about 40 years too late as far as the British are concerned. Only now is the great British car buying public waking up to the fact that family cars don't have to be dull — just when Citroën decides to go the other way.

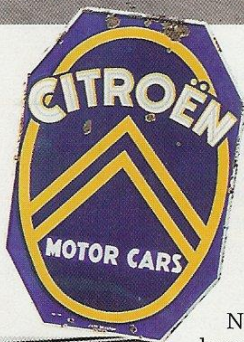
In one way the wheel has come full circle. Early Citroëns were well built but conventionally engineered, and while they sometimes incorporated novel features it wasn't until the debut



A Traction Avant Big 15 comes before the camera at the Slough factory in 1939.



MAIN PICTURE: finished chassis await their bodies at the Slough works, some time in the late Twenties. This photo gives some idea of the factory's size — it covered 60 acres. INSET LEFT: our own Mark Dixon picked up this enamel sign at the Beaulieu Autojumble a couple of years ago. A rare survivor, it was made in France for a British Citroën agency.



of the Traction Avant in 1934 that Citroën's reputation for innovation was really made.

BEFORE THE TRACTION

NOW THAT we're so used to companies such as Nissan or Honda setting up huge factories in Britain, it comes as something of a shock to discover that Citroën built an enormous plant at Slough as far back as 1925. Spread over 60 acres, the Citroën factory was largely responsible for the regeneration of Slough after WW1. Working at full capacity, it could turn out 200 cars a day.

The models on offer were basically the same as those sold in France, although many of the smaller components — lights, instruments and so on — were sourced in Britain. André Citroën has been quoted as saying that a car needs four doors, four seats and four cylinders, and it's true that the vast majority of Citroëns had four-cylinder engines; even quite large saloons and tourers.

It wasn't until 1929 that Citroën offered a six-cylinder car, the 20hp. It wasn't popular in Britain, and most buyers seem to have opted for a four-pot motor in the same bodysell. Westinghouse servo-assisted brakes were a useful feature, but the cars were still much the same as everyone else's.

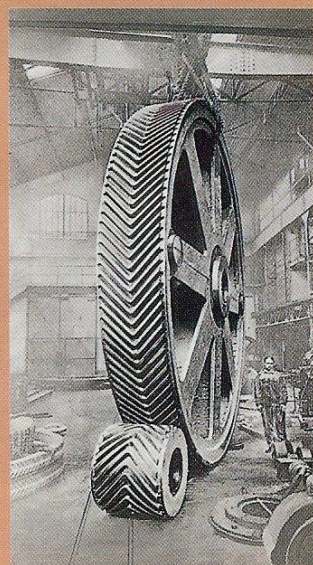
Citroën wasn't slow to make improvements over the next few years — low-pressure tyres and flexible drivetrain mounts were two of the most important — but the cars themselves looked conventional enough. Bearing in mind the typical Briton's distrust of anything foreign, it was a sound policy. But everything would be turned upside-down in 1934, for that's when Citroën unveiled the Traction Avant.

PULLING POWER

AT A TIME when modernism and streamlining was all the rage, the Traction Avant (literally meaning front-wheel drive) was bang up-to-the-minute. In fact, it was way ahead of its time. Citroën engineers had introduced front-wheel drive to

CITROËN CURIOSITIES

- ❖ While travelling through Poland, the young André Citroën saw a wooden pattern for gears with chevron-shaped teeth in a village workshop. He bought the patent and based his company logo on the design. It's still used today.
- ❖ André Citroën liked dramatic gestures, and his most notorious was to light up the Eiffel Tower with a quarter-of-a-million bulbs to advertise Citroën. On another occasion a light aircraft was used to skywrite the name Citroën above the streets of Paris.
- ❖ Citroën was one of the first mass-producers to get into the London taxi market, before even Austin or Morris. By 1931, over half of London General's 550-strong fleet of taxis were Citroëns.
- ❖ Restaurant owner François Lecot spent all day, every day for a year driving his Citroën Traction alternately to Paris and Monte Carlo from his home in Lyon. He covered a staggering 250,000 miles in 12 months.
- ❖ A handful of prototype V8-powered Tractions were built for the 1934 Paris Show. The so-called 22CV could have been a supercar, but was killed off by Citroën's financial problems. The prototypes were scrapped, but every so often there are rumours of a survivor.
- ❖ The height-adjustable suspension of the DS theoretically made it possible to drive with one rear wheel removed in the event of a puncture, the car remaining balanced on the other three wheels. The suspension also allowed a wheel to be changed without using a separate jack.



Citroën's double-chevron logo was based on this gear pattern, which André Citroën patented when he first set up in business.



Big in Britain

continued

Maybe the artist has exaggerated slightly, but this contemporary brochure gives a good impression of the then-new Citroën depot.



MADE IN BRITAIN

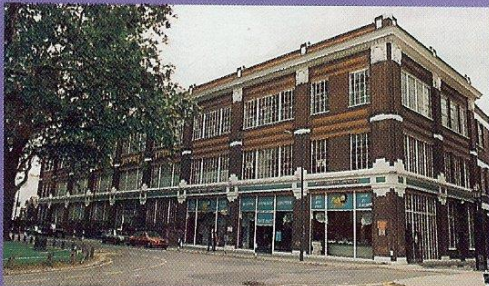
TODAY it's an anonymous-looking storage centre in West London. But in 1923, this large, three-storey building was claimed to be the largest service station in the world. With the opening of its new premises at Brook Green, Hammersmith, Citroën established itself as the most important foreign marque in Britain.

Before 1923, sales of Citroën in the UK had been handled by the concessionaires, Gaston Ltd. They had done a fine job but André Citroën had big ideas for his cars in Britain and decided to bring the sales and servicing in-house as the first step in his expansion plans.

Although the building at Brook Green was converted for Citroën rather than specially built, it was fully in keeping with the founder's flamboyant style. Its three floors housed a showroom, parts department, service area and fully equipped machine shop; the flat roof was even used for testing cars! State-of-the-art fittings included an internal sprinkler system, electric car lifts and a vacuum plant connected to all floors so that cars (and offices) could be cleaned.

Within only three years this impressive centre was overshadowed by the opening of the enormous Citroën factory at Slough, and an opulent new showroom at New Devonshire House, Piccadilly. Both the Piccadilly showroom and Brook Green were closed in the mid-Thirties as part of Citroën's cost-cutting exercises.

Sixty years after Citroën moved out, the Brook Green building is remarkably unchanged — although the artist who sketched it in 1923 seems to have conveniently ignored the huge tree immediately opposite!



Seventy years on, the Brook Green depot is now used for storage but is remarkably unchanged from how it looked in Citroën's time.

'Even the British could not fail to see the Traction's advantages'



the mass-produced car, and made it work. They also gave it hydraulic brakes, monocoque construction and independent front suspension: features that made the Traction handle like nothing else on the market.

Brilliant as the Traction was, it came too late to save Citroën from financial disaster. The Patron had finally overstretched himself, and his creditors called in the debts; Michelin was owed the most, so they were allowed to take over the company. André Citroën died soon afterwards in July 1935. Was it the stomach tumour or the shame of bankruptcy that killed him? Both, probably.

His company lived on, of course. Across the Channel, assembly lines in Slough were readied to start producing the new Traction, although the existing rear-wheel-drive cars were also kept on stream until 1939. Even the conservative British could not fail to see the advantages that the Traction

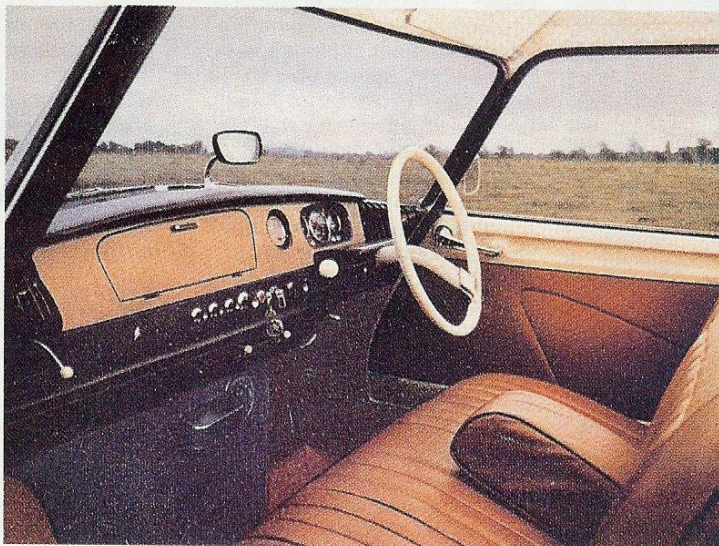
offered, however, and it would become the mainstay of the Citroën range well into the Fifties, when an equally revolutionary car would replace it — the Citroën DS.

ENTER THE GODDESS

IF ANYTHING, the DS (pronounced Dé-ess, or 'goddess' in French) created even more of an uproar than the Traction had done 21 years earlier.

Like the Traction, it was front-wheel drive, and mechanically it was very similar under the skin. The big news was that suspension, brakes, transmission and steering were all hydraulically controlled. The DS also happened to look like one of the rocket ships that Dan Dare piloted in *The Eagle* comic.

To soften the culture-shock for British buyers, a less expensive and less complicated model was soon offered alongside the DS. The ID19 kept the hydraulic suspension but had conventional



FORTY YEARS OF OWNING A PRE-WAR CITROËN

FORTY-SIX, to be precise. Aberdeen solicitor Frank Connon was a newly qualified lawyer when he bought this 20hp Citroën in 1952. Like all the best vintage cars, the Citroën has a good story behind it.

'It was supposedly bought by one of the twins who were heirs to a Scottish estate,' explains Frank. 'On their 21st birthdays, they had a fight on the front lawn to decide who would inherit the estate. The loser went abroad to become a big game hunter, and he bought the Citroën new in January 1930.'

Frank paid £40 for the car and used it as regular transport for several years until he accidentally stripped a gear some time in the late Fifties. The Citroën was taken off the road and didn't see the light of day again until the Seventies. It's now owned by his son Roger, and keeps company with the family's other classics, a 1929 Rolls-Royce 20 and a 1926 Swift.

During the Fifties, the car was used without a hood because the frame was missing. Many years later, someone asked Frank whether he wanted a hood frame that had been discovered in a garage — and of course, it was the actual assembly that had gone missing all those years ago!

Apart from being possibly the only survivor of its type in the UK, 'Fifi', as the Citroën has been known since the days before Frank bought her, has one other claim to fame. She's the only car to have appeared in the very first Kildrummy classic rally, held in 1958, and the latest — in 1998.



Frank (left) and Roger Connon pose with the Citroën 20hp bought by Frank back in 1952...



...when it looked like this. The original hood frame didn't turn up until years later!

steering, gearchange and brakes. It also had a traditional wood facia, which sat a little oddly with the single-spoke steering wheel that would become a Citroën hallmark right into the Nineties.

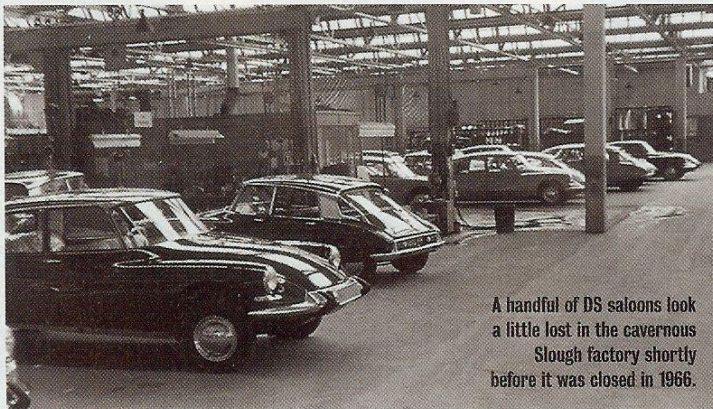
The D-series initially sold quite well in Britain, although these things are relative — 2000 were built at Slough in 1960, compared with 83,000 in its native country. You can see the writing on the wall in those figures: it was fast becoming uneconomic for Slough to make Citroëns, especially when new assembly plants were opened in Australia and South Africa;

markets traditionally supplied from Slough.

By 1965 Slough was turning out fewer than 500 cars a year and in 1966 the factory closed.

THE GODDESS'S DAUGHTERS

CITROËN didn't stop selling cars in Britain, of course. In fact, sales actually started to go up as the company began to market itself more aggressively over here. The DS, which had been given a nose-job in 1967 with new faired-in headlights, had become an accepted sight on British roads.



A handful of DS saloons look a little lost in the cavernous Slough factory shortly before it was closed in 1966.

FACING PAGE TOP: the pre-war Citroën Traction Avant Commerciale was one of the world's first hatchbacks, aimed at business users — or the Frenchman who was a really serious wine drinker.

LEFT: reactionary British tastes led to a slightly bizarre DS model, the iD19, with wooden facia...

FIND IN A MILLION

AN OFF-THE-CUFF remark to a lorry driver led Peter Knowles to a hugely important find — the earliest UK-built Citroën DS.

'Back in the Eighties I was running a 1965 ID19 and was having problems finding spares, so I thought I'd try to find a donor car,' explains Peter. 'I happened to mention this to one of the TNT delivery drivers at the place I worked at, and half-jokingly asked him to keep an eye out for me. Two weeks later he told me he'd found one. He'd got lost in the wilds of Oxfordshire and had spotted this DS on someone's drive!'

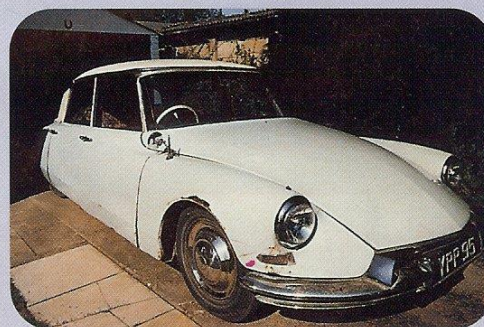
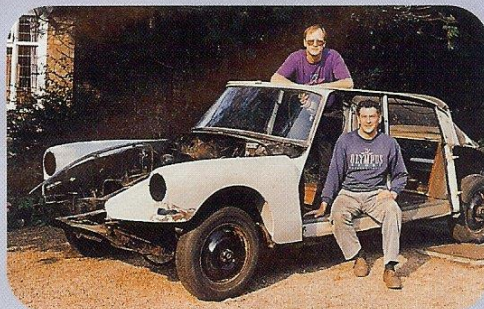
'I went up to see it and timed things just right: the owner was getting divorced and needed to sell. He'd bought some land and had found the DS in a barn with some other cars.'

'At the time I had no idea that it was anything special, and it was only once I'd started to take panels off that I noticed various odd features I hadn't seen before. I called up a friend of mine, Nick Woodhouse, who is a DS nut, and as I was describing it I could tell he was getting more and more excited! He realised it was a very early example, and the chassis plate confirmed that it was in fact the 30th car off the line in September 1956.'

'Once we realised the car's significance, any ideas about breaking it were quickly forgotten. Instead we planned a full restoration, which is nearly finished. Fortunately the DS was almost totally complete — even the tool roll was still there. The leather interior was in good order and the body was incredibly sound, thanks to a thick layer of underseal.'

Peter has since discovered that YPP 95 had a distinguished early history. 'It was used for a year or so by M Louis Garbe, the managing director of Citroën UK, and then sold to a Mr Franklin Engelmann, who used to present *Down Your Way* on the BBC.'

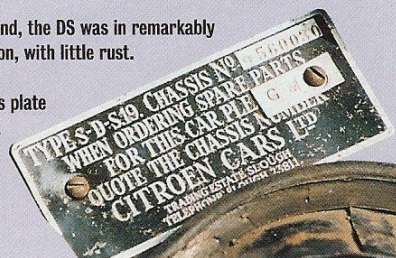
Nick Woodhouse is tackling the restoration, which will be as authentic as possible. We hope to bring you the full story of this fascinating car in a future issue.



TOP: a slightly younger Peter Knowles rests his elbows on the stripped DS which Nick Woodhouse, in front, would restore.

ABOVE: as found, the DS was in remarkably sound condition, with little rust.

RIGHT: chassis plate confirms that this is the 30th DS built at Slough.



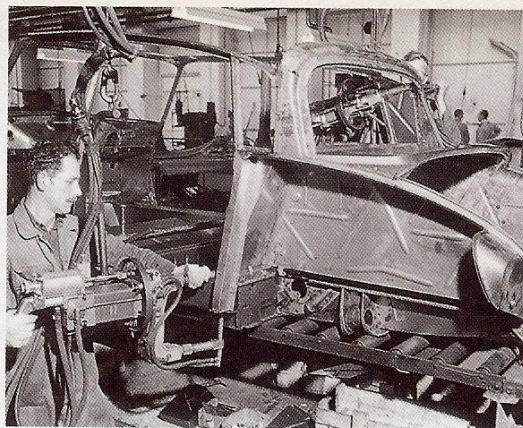
Big in Britain

continued

That's more than can be said of a DS spin-off, the Citroën SM. A truly beautiful car, the SM used Maserati V6 power to haul it up to 140mph or so. Citroën had never built anything like it since the ill-fated Traction V8 prototypes of the 1930s.

Sadly, it was just too high-tech for us Brits, and the 1973 fuel crisis finished off the job that apathy – and a high price of £5342 when a Jaguar XJ12 was £3726 – had started. Only 300 or so of the 13,000 built were imported, and most of those seem to be up for grabs in today's classified ads. Buyers are still frightened of the cars' complexity.

The DS's successor, the CX, was also somewhat overshadowed by its illustrious parent. Hardly surprising, perhaps, given that Citroën had sold nearly one-and-a-half million of the DS over 21



LEFT: spot-welding a DS base unit at Slough. The way the DS was put together influenced Rover's Sixties P6 saloon.



RIGHT: the DS made a successful rally car, but the CX...? Paddy Hopkirk tried one on the 1977 London to Sydney.

years. The CX appeared in 1974, and while it had its own character, it was nowhere near as radically different as the DS and Traction had been in their own times. There were still typically bizarre Citroën touches – a single, huge windscreen wiper; revolving-drum instruments – but the car was still recognisably DS-shaped, and still powered by DS-type engines.

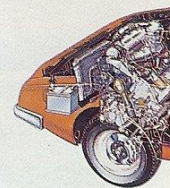
Curiously, despite its swept-down tail, the CX was not a hatchback. In a world that was just entering the hatchback age, this was unfortunate. Even more so were the corrosion problems that afflicted early examples.

LAST OF THE LINE?

NATURALLY, Citroën continued to develop the CX and it remained the company's flagship for a very respectable 15 years or so. Every taste was catered for, with diesel and economy 2-litre petrol models, a 168bhp GTi Turbo and the aircraft carrier-sized Safari estate. By the time it went out of production the CX was a million seller, which is good going for a big car.

The second generation of DS-influenced big Citroëns took over in 1989, and is still on sale. The XM is recognisably inspired by the DS, but uses straight lines and flat planes where the DS was all curves and rounded surfaces. Computers made their inevitable entrance in the XM, controlling ride and engine management and providing – on earlier cars – a *Star Wars*-style LED display when the ignition was switched on.

Many Citroën aficionados argue that the XM was too clever for its own good, and the used car market seems to feel the same way: elderly XMs have suffered Jaguar-like levels



ABOVE: presumably this CX cutaway was meant to intrigue punters, not put them off. Note the lack of a hatchback, despite the shape.

DOING IT BY THE BOOK

AS THE author of the definitive hardback, *The British Citroën*, Malcolm Bobbitt knows a thing or two about the marque's history. He can speak from experience, too: he's owned two Traction Avants over the last 25 years.

'I bought my first Traction – a very early Slough-built car – in 1974,' remembers Malcolm. 'I kept it about six years until I had to sell it with my Citroën DS to pay for a trip to Australia! My next Traction came along in 1990. This was another Slough-built example: a 11BL model of 1955.'

'There's a lot of debate in Citroën circles about whether the British cars are preferable to the French ones. Continental enthusiasts like our leather trim and wooden dashboards, but on the other hand the French-built cars, with their painted radiator shells and chevrons on the front grille, have a definitely Gallic character.'

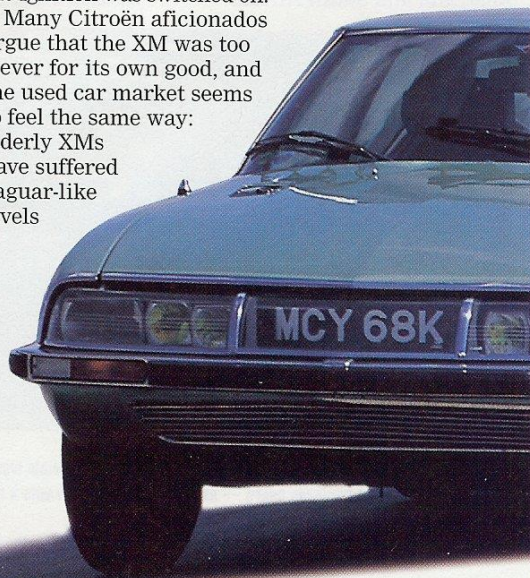
Malcolm's Tractions were regarded as hobby cars but he says there's no reason why a Traction shouldn't be used every day provided it's in good condition and is frequently maintained. 'For example, the driveshafts need to be greased every 600-700 miles,' he says. 'On the plus side, the spares situation is quite good thanks to specialists such as Classic Restorations, based at Waterloo in London.'

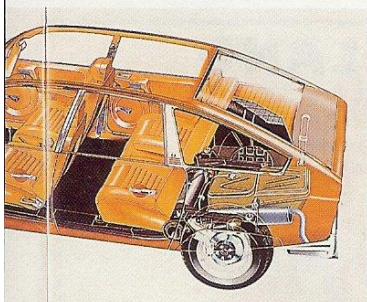
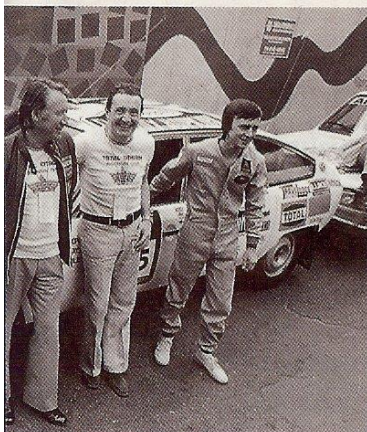
'The one weak point is the gearbox. Citroën originally intended to use a semi-automatic 'box but they couldn't make it work properly in time, so fitted a conventional three-speed manual gearbox instead. It doesn't take kindly to abuse – crunch the gears a lot and you can soon wreck it. Having said that, I've never had any trouble in 30,000 miles of Traction motoring.'



Malcolm Bobbitt has owned two Slough-built Traction Avants and covered 30,000 miles in them without problems. Look after one and you could use it every day, he reckons.

BELOW: the SM was a fantastic car, but the marriage of V6 Maserati engine and Citroën hydraulics was too off-putting for British buyers.





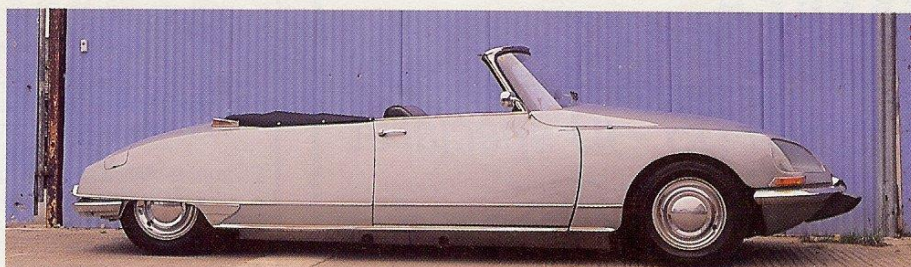
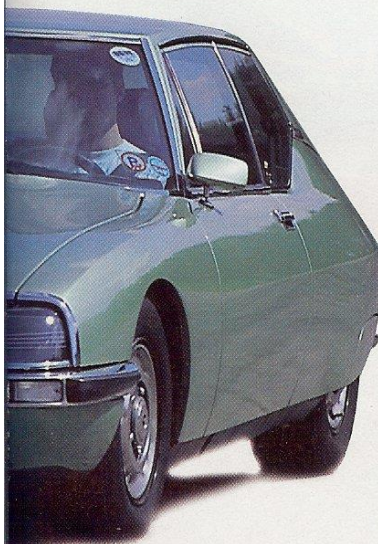
of depreciation. But it's an individual car and much better built than its reputation suggests.

We don't yet know what the car that replaces the XM will be like, but if Citroën's new small car, the Xsara, is any guide, then we can prepare to be disappointed.

Is the XM the last 'proper' Citroën? We're afraid it's looking increasingly likely.

THANKS TO:

- John Iudge, chairman of The Citroën Car Club – see page 158 for contact details
- Citroën historians Malcolm Bobbitt and John Reynolds
- Graham Lange at The Oxford French Car Co (01865 316602, fax 240959).



'NEW' CHAPRON CONVERTIBLES

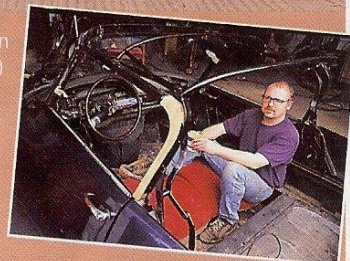
SOME OF the most desirable Citroëns ever made are the DS convertibles, built during the late Sixties and early Seventies by the French coachbuilder Chapron. Only 1365 décapotables were made, and survivors even in average-condition fetch around £20,000-25,000 on the Continent.

However, for a little more you can buy a brand new Chapron — in Oxfordshire. The Oxford French Car Co will build you a Chapron replica that is virtually indistinguishable from the original. Like the original (and unlike some

inferior replicas that were on the market a few years ago) it's all metal. Apart from the bootlid, that is, which is glassfibre — just like the Chapron original.

'We use some genuine Chapron parts, such as the door slam panels,' says partner Graham Lange, 'but the rear wings are specially made for us in Poland. Other parts, like the unique chromed brass rear indicators, are made in France. It's a hugely expensive exercise but we see it more as a promotional vehicle than a profit-making one, and I'll be happy if we sell only half-a-dozen.'

A quick spin around Oxford showed that there's still no better car for dispensing with



Graham Lange relaxes with a cuppa in the shell of a part-converted DS; above is one he made earlier.

speed bumps than a DS, and this convertible felt reassuringly solid. Priced at around £27,000, it's not exactly cheap, but the attention to detail is outstanding and it turns heads like nothing else. Even a certain Inspector's red Mk II Jaguar, in fact...

CONFESSIONS OF AN XM FAN

IT MIGHT SEEM odd to be writing about a modern Citroën in a classic car mag, but the XM deserves a mention. It's the last link to the original DS and it's the last truly quirky Citroën we're likely to see.

I've been running a first-generation XM for 18 months now. I'd always been attracted by the XM's strikingly angular looks but never imagined I could afford one, until I discovered they depreciate faster than a safe dropped off a cliff. I paid £3500 for my five-year-old example, but older ones go for as little as two grand. List price new is about £18,000.

Prices are low because people think XMs are unreliable, but that's only half-true. Yes, early cars did suffer from electrical problems, but in

general the build quality is excellent — you'll never see a rusty XM. The only downside is the astronomical cost of Citroën parts and servicing; I use an independent specialist, Voiture Technique of Warwick (01926 420101).

To date I've added 45,000 miles to the 67,000 on the clock when bought. I've had a few electrical problems (show me an XM owner who hasn't) but, touch wood, the car has never let me down. In fact, it was a life-saver during the flash floods that hit us last Easter. With the height-adjustable suspension on its maximum setting, the XM could wade through floodwater that ordinary cars didn't dare tackle.

Yes, the XM is a classic. Somehow, I don't think we'll be saying that about Citroëns in future. *Mark Dixon*



Yours for a couple of grand? The XM is cheap now, but offers individual motoring.