

The steel greyhound

That's what they called the Traction Avant Citroën, and it's never truer than with the elegantly slimline roadster. **Jon Pressnell** tells its story, and drives two early examples

PHOTOGRAPHY GARRY STUART





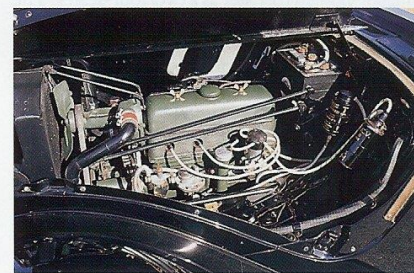
They are the most beautiful, the rarest and – inevitably – the most sought-after of Traction Avant Citroëns. And we're spoilt because we're here with two of the best roadsters you're likely to encounter. Not only that, but the cars are both early examples, from the days before Citroën fitted rack-and-pinion steering to its revolutionary front-wheel-drive model. One of our two cars is an ultra-scarce 7B model from 1934 – the year in which André Citroën rushed the Traction into production, before it had been fully developed, in a desperate but ultimately doomed bid to put money back into the company's depleted coffers.

So fraught with teething problems were the early Tractions that the base '7' went through three evolutions before the end of 1934, and it was well into 1935 before the car was fully debugged. Thus the 1529cc 7B was merely a blip on the screen, being introduced in July 1934 to replace the original 1303cc 7A of April 1934 and deleted in September when the 1628cc 7C arrived.

The roadster, with its fold-flat screen and wind-up side windows, was part of the '7' range from the start, as was a closed two-seat coupé, both cars having a dicky in their sweeping rear deck. When the 1911cc 7S (soon renamed the 11 *Légère*) joined the range in July 1934, this was also offered in roadster and coupé forms – as was the longer and wider '11' when it arrived later in the year.

These larger variants (latterly known as the 11 *Normale*) are difficult to distinguish from their more compact siblings, because the same doors are used. There is, however, more length between the backs of the doors and the rear wings, while on the coupé the roof turret is more bulbous. Comparing like with like is something you won't have much occasion to do, because the *Normales* accounted for only about a quarter of total roadster and coupé production, and so there are fewer survivors than with the smaller models.

With their lithe good looks, the two special Tractions made rival offerings from other manufacturers seem distinctly porky. On the other hand, Citroën did not make available the variety of specialist coachwork proposed by principal competitors Renault and Peugeot. The reason for the lack of full four-seater or five-seater *coach* (two-door coupé) or *coach décapotable* (cabriolet) variants



'Floating Power' mounting: rigid hoses rad to engine



Hood panel unzips so all passengers can communicate



Was there ever a more elegant open version of a cooking saloon? 7B has deeper front wings than 7A

was simple: structural rigidity. 'At first we envisaged a four-seater cabriolet, but faced with the difficulties presented by the lengthening and reinforcement of the shell, we gave up,' body engineer Jean Daninos (see opposite) told authors Borgé and Viasnoff. With their long rear deck, the coupé and roadster were inherently stronger – especially the tight-turreted coupé. Yet early cars suffered structural problems, so wider sills and strengthening for the side panels and deck had to be introduced. That the monocoque was still marginal in rigidity is evident from stories of the cars suffering in old age from fatigue cracking behind the doors and on the rear deck.

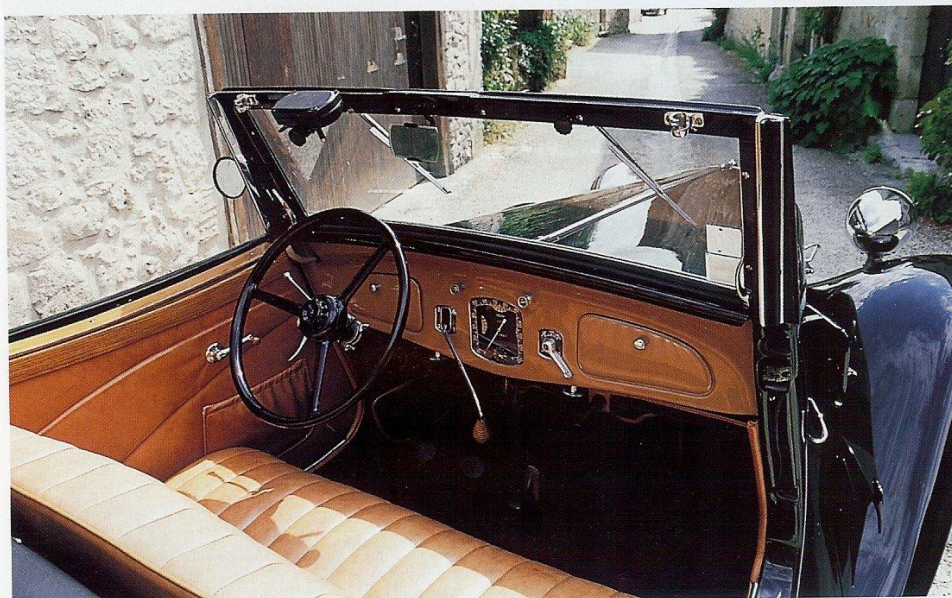
As a result of their configuration, the seating arrangements in the two cars were inevitably constrained. The roadsters always had a bench seat, so in theory could accommodate three people within the cockpit – plus two in the dickey, to which access was aided by a step on the right-hand side of the bumper and another on top of the wing. It was possible to order a car without seating in the dickey, in which case the compartment was closed off from the cockpit with a bulkhead panel.

In practice, the narrowness of the '7' and *Onze Légère* shell militated against three-abreast seating and Citroën always described the smaller-bodied roadster as a two/four-seater. The wider *Normale* could seat three across, however, and so in coupé form also came with a bench seat as standard, with individual seats as an option – whereas the short-wheelbase coupé was normally equipped with two individual seats.

Not only that, but the extra length of the body meant that in coupé form the *Normale* had a cockpit spacious enough for Citroën to offer two sideways-facing jump-seats as an option. If these were specified, the dickey was not trimmed and was closed off from the cockpit – because the jump-seats occupied the place where passengers in the dickey would have put their feet.

The upholstery of the coupé and roadster broadly followed the styles used in the saloons, but with roadsters being trimmed as standard in leathercloth. Leather was available as an option on both the coupé (normally cloth-upholstered) and the roadster. The dashboard matched the upholstery colour until April 1935, after which it was the same tone as the coachwork. Colour schemes, meanwhile, stood apart, with more frequent use of single-tone coachwork and a greater choice of shades than on the saloons.

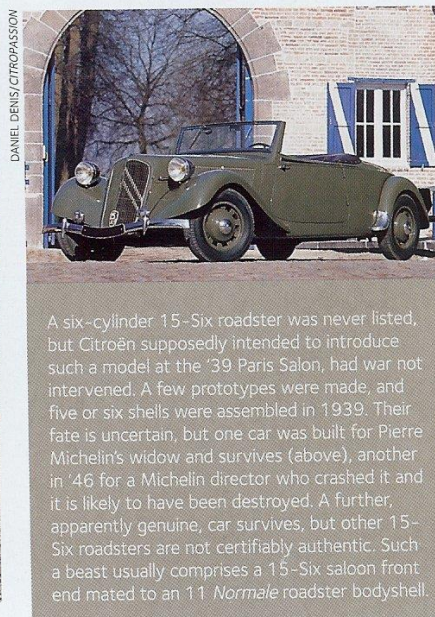
Evolution followed that of the saloons, whose mechanical specification the premium-priced coupé and roadster always shared. Where they



Delightfully symmetrical dash had central Jaeger dial to June '36. Wheel on early cars from previous rwd Rosalie



Dickey could be untrimmed or have two jump-seats



A six-cylinder 15-Six roadster was never listed, but Citroën supposedly intended to introduce such a model at the '39 Paris Salon, had war not intervened. A few prototypes were made, and five or six shells were assembled in 1939. Their fate is uncertain, but one car was built for Pierre Michelin's widow and survives (above), another in '46 for a Michelin director who crashed it and it is likely to have been destroyed. A further, apparently genuine, car survives, but other 15-Six roadsters are not certifiably authentic. Such a beast usually comprises a 15-Six saloon front end mated to an 11 *Normale* roadster bodyshell.

WHO STYLED IT?

Ever since the 1975 publication of *La Traction – un roman d'amour* by Jacques Borgé and Nicolas Viasnoff, it has been common belief that the roadster and coupé were styled by Jean Daninos, future creator of the Facel-Véga. Daninos allowed himself to be photographed, for the book, sketching a roadster on a drawing board (below). For *Mes prototypes*, published by Daninos in 2000, he insisted that this photo be used on the cover – continuing to propagate the idea that the cars were his work.

Elsewhere, he is more circumspect. In the earlier *Conceptions automobiles Jean Daninos*, he attributes the roadster to 'Cuinet – Daninos', while in *Mes prototypes* he says: 'I was more particularly charged with the conception of the bodywork for the coupé and cabriolet versions.' This delicately ambiguous phrasing could mean anything from creating the original style to designing the production-ready bodyskells. In May 2000, Daninos – still very alert and with excellent recall, despite his 93 years – spelt out his version of the story, in his typically clipped fashion: '[Raoul] Cuinet was my boss. I was working on styling. Cuinet was keen on styling. The *berline* was entirely designed by Cuinet. He asked me what I thought. I said it was good – it couldn't be better. 'You,' he said, pointing to me, 'are going to do the convertible and the coupé.' When the first coupé was finished, it was presented to André Citroën and his wife. Mme Citroën turned to me and said 'That's for me, the first one of those'."

When the question was raised of Bertoni's supposed part in the shaping of the Traction Avant and, more particularly, the roadster and coupé, Daninos responded with a mixture of irritation and condescension: "Who? It's a completely idiotic story. You know who Bertoni was? He was an *ouvrier* ['one of the workers'], an Italian mechanic, a *maçon*. He was a nice lad. He was one of two who worked under my direction and that of Cuinet to make plaster models. Later he became more important."

Speaking in '84, however, Daninos was less categorical about his role. "I participated to a large extent in the study and realisation of that model and most particularly the coupé and cabriolet," he told Michel Renou of *le Fanauto*.

Picking a path through all this is not straightforward, in particular because Citroën enthusiasts resent any attempt to diminish the significance of Bertoni. As a junior member of the design office at the time of the Traction Avant, Bertoni would not have undertaken overall body engineering for the production-ready coupé/roadster monocoques; nor has this ever been suggested. That he always claimed the style as his own is not incompatible with much of what Daninos has said. The most plausible rendering is that the basic shape was created by Bertoni, and refined by Daninos and Cuinet, who then drew up and engineered a monocoque shell ready for manufacture. But an eyebrow can legitimately be raised at Daninos' attempt to pull the bedclothes over to his side of the bed, as the French expression has it.



differed was in their commercial life: the coupé was deleted in autumn 1938 and the roadster with the coming of war in 1939 – although one *Onze Normale* roadster was assembled in 1941. Post-WW2, neither car was reintroduced.

It is not difficult to understand why the coupé was discontinued. Both it and the roadster were built in small numbers and featured relatively extensive – and costly – lead-loading of their coachwork. With an output of 1200 cars in 1937 and nearly 1000 in 1938, the roadster was probably a viable exercise. But with barely 200 examples made in 1937, and a mere 139 in its admittedly curtailed final year, the coupé must have seemed an unnecessary distraction. Total production is not known, but between 1936 and 1938 a slender 478 coupés were made, against the 3524 roadsters made in the 1936-'39 period.

So Jean-Michel Boisserie's 7B roadster is a rarity among rarities, especially because it has been self-restored to a high level: the only point where an expert would quibble is over the hood that should be in buff rather than black cloth. The car was found in a scrapyard, engine-less, buried up to its doors, and with wrecks piled on top of it: the wind-screen was being used as a sewing table by the scrapper's wife and so, fortunately, survived.

Keeping the Boisserie car company is Jean-Claude Bonnelie's striking early 1936 7C roadster – and here the purist might be a little more quizzical. But if the Bugatti-style two-toning is not original, it was often encountered in period – and Bonnelie remembers just such a two-tone roadster from his childhood. The car also sports smart RAF-brand alloy wheels and Robri aluminium stoneguards – again perfectly period.

So what are they like to drive? Conventional wisdom says that the May 1936 introduction of rack-and-pinion steering transformed the Citroën. The Bonnelie car suggests this is true: the steering is woolly and endowed with sufficient play to deprive the car of its traditional handling precision. The mind boggles when you consider that up to a quarter-turn of radial movement at the wheel was apparently considered within limits when the car was current.

Boisserie, however, has lovingly rebuilt the steering box on his earlier car, and the difference is stunning. The worm-and-roller set-up lacks the sharpness of the rack, but here it is adequately responsive and well weighted, allowing the car to be hustled along without worry. The point, though, is that the steering box develops play alarmingly quickly – especially on early cars such as this, where the roller shaft is inadequately supported within its casing.

The 7B has a less assured chassis, however. With the torsion-bar suspension controlled by friction dampers at the front and lever-arms at the rear (in this case proprietary rotary-action Houdailles), the ride is notably pitchy, especially at the front, and the car is quite restless on undulating roads. Telescopic dampers were fitted from April/May 1935 and transformed the car: the proof is that the Bonnelie 7C has the firm, slightly rubbery responses that you traditionally associate with the Traction Avant.

Performance? While the original 1.3-litre engine in the 7A is low-geared and busy, the later 7B and 7C engines are much more up to the task. The 1628cc 7C develops a modest 36bhp, against 46bhp for an early 11CV, but feels surprisingly little disadvantaged. That's because the smaller



Wing-mounted square rear numberplate from Oct '35



Elegant RAF alloy wheels are a period accessory...



...as are the effective Robri aluminium stoneguards



This Traction has external rather than concealed horns

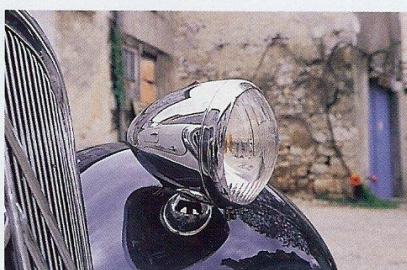
'The secure roadholding is as legend has it, the hydraulic brakes are fully up to the job and the three-speed 'mustard-spoon' dash gearchange is a delight to slice deliberately from gear to gear'



Smaller engine in 7C gives sweet performance, but steering vague. Traction gained rack and pinion from May '36



From 7B-on, front-most bonnet vent opened forwards

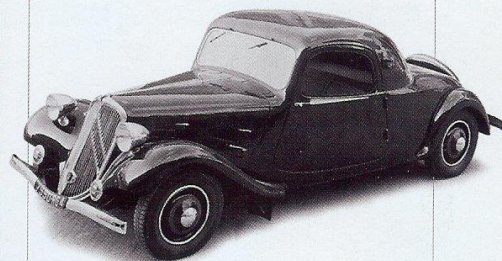


Domed glass came in for '36; chrome pre-WW2 only

THE NAME GAME

What should the two featured cars be called? The open model has a long rear deck with a dickey seat (*spider* in French), and has a fold-flat screen. Normal coachbuilding convention suggests that it is a roadster rather than a cabriolet. Citroën agreed, and called the car this at its launch; later catalogues referred to it as a cabriolet or – somewhat tautologically, but to distinguish it from the closed version – gave it the *cabriolet décapotable* (convertible cabriolet) appellation. The hard-top variant spent most of its life being called a *faux-cabriolet* (false cabriolet), but for its final year it took the coupé name. Given this ambiguity, we have used the words 'roadster' and 'coupé', with a lower-case 'r' and 'c', using them as generic coachwork terms rather than as specific model names.

The pre-production 11 *Normale coupé* (below) is to a short-lived concours d'élégance spec, including rim embellishers and coachlined hubcaps. The production radiator shell was more bowed. Note that the coupé's door handles are set higher than on the roadster.



engine really is a sweet-spinning unit in the same way as a 1600cc Fiat twin-cam is smoother and zingier than the more torquey 2-litre version. Given that the 7B engine is only marginally smaller, and is quoted as delivering only 1bhp less, you'd expect there to be little difference between the two units – and that is the case. Helped by Boissier having balanced the engine, and further assisted by the higher-ratio final drive he has fitted, his roadster is both responsive and relaxed, cruising happily at an indicated 50mph. It's tempting to think that the '7' is a more agreeable drive than the '11', whatever the added performance of the latter's 1911cc engine.

The rest is identikit Traction. The secure roadholding is as legend has it, the hydraulic brakes are fully up to the job and the three-speed 'mustard spoon' dashboard gearchange, with its firm but accurate action, is a delight to slice deliberately from gear to gear.

Yes, the early Traction Avant has its failings, relative to the more evolved cars of the late '30s and post-war years. But the germs of greatness were there from the start – and wrapped in a slender and more elegantly detailed package than the progressively more austere later cars. Dial in that svelte roadster coachwork, and you can see what that French journalist meant when he famously described the Citroën, at its launch, as a 'steel greyhound'. Our two cars here are proof of how soon this seductive and most advanced of motor cars found its feet. ■

Jon Pressnell's book *Citroën Traction Avant* is to be published by Crowood Press in 2005