

God,

In Britain you can now

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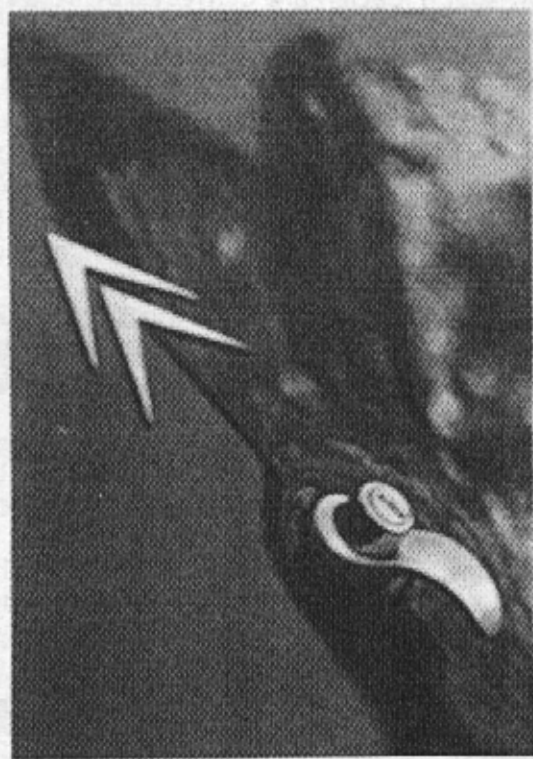
buy a 'new' DS 21 for around ten thousand pounds.

Beautiful Car!

Here's the pitch; for around ten thousand pounds you can have a Ford Sierra-class company car that's utterly different from the average rep-mobile, and guaranteed to stand out in the company car park. A car that made motoring history when it was launched, and which has already become a classic. For a private buyer it's just as attractive.

No surprise that it's a Citroën, more of a surprise that it's a DS - a model first launched in 1955 - completely revamped to look and drive like new. The idea has been dreamed up by one Mark Housden, who has begun importing DS's from France into England, having first completely restored them inside and out.

Housden was fed up with the sameness of modern cars, and reckoned he could find 50-odd like-minded buyers a year who would go for the distinctive DS design, as long as the car was fully rebuilt to new (or better) condition. The more he thought about the idea, the better he liked it: a company car more than four years old attracts a smaller tax liability, a classic car should depreciate more slowly (if at all) which would please company accountants, but best of all, the DS is simply a beautiful design.



From his base in the Dordogne, Housden set about looking for old DS's in good condition, and people to restore them. More accurately, he hired Nick Setford, a bilingual colleague from Housden's former despatch company in London, to do his searching for him, while Housden

set up a company in England - under the resounding title of the Morton Stockwell Group - to import and market the new old cars.

Southern France is the happiest hunting ground for old cars because the weather is generally good, and winter roads remain free from salt, so rust is hardly a problem.

Of the 1.4 million DS's built in the model's 20-year life from 1955 to 1975, all but 124,000 were sold in France, so there are still plenty about.

Finding cars good enough for restoration, but cheap enough to make the operation profitable, is another matter. Setford checks newspaper ads, and the French telephone-based advertising service in 'Minitel' to run down suitable

leads, then covers up to 1200 miles a week on his BMW K100 motorbike checking them out. Having found a few cars, Setford looked for high-quality restoration experts.

'There are bodywork people in every town', he explains, 'but most of them aren't good enough for what we

wanted. I went around towns in the area, talking about DS's, and finally found an expert upholsterer, Phillipe Vergeau, and he put me in touch with Jean-Marc Boulesteix'.

Boulesteix has a small 11-man coachwork company on the outskirts of Angouleme (60 miles north-east of Bordeaux). His modern workshops - equipped with new spray booths and a paint-baking room - specialise in classic car restoration, though they also carry out conventional crash repairs.

Among projects in progress during our visit are a '54 Mercedes 300 SL roadster, a 402 Peugeot and an old Cadillac. Boulesteix is particularly proud of the Le Mans Allard (brought to him from England) and a Type 49 Bugatti that he has restored. One of his more dramatic projects was a fifties Rolls-Royce damaged during filming in Miami, which was flown over for Boulesteix to repair against the clock during a two-week break in the film's shooting schedule.

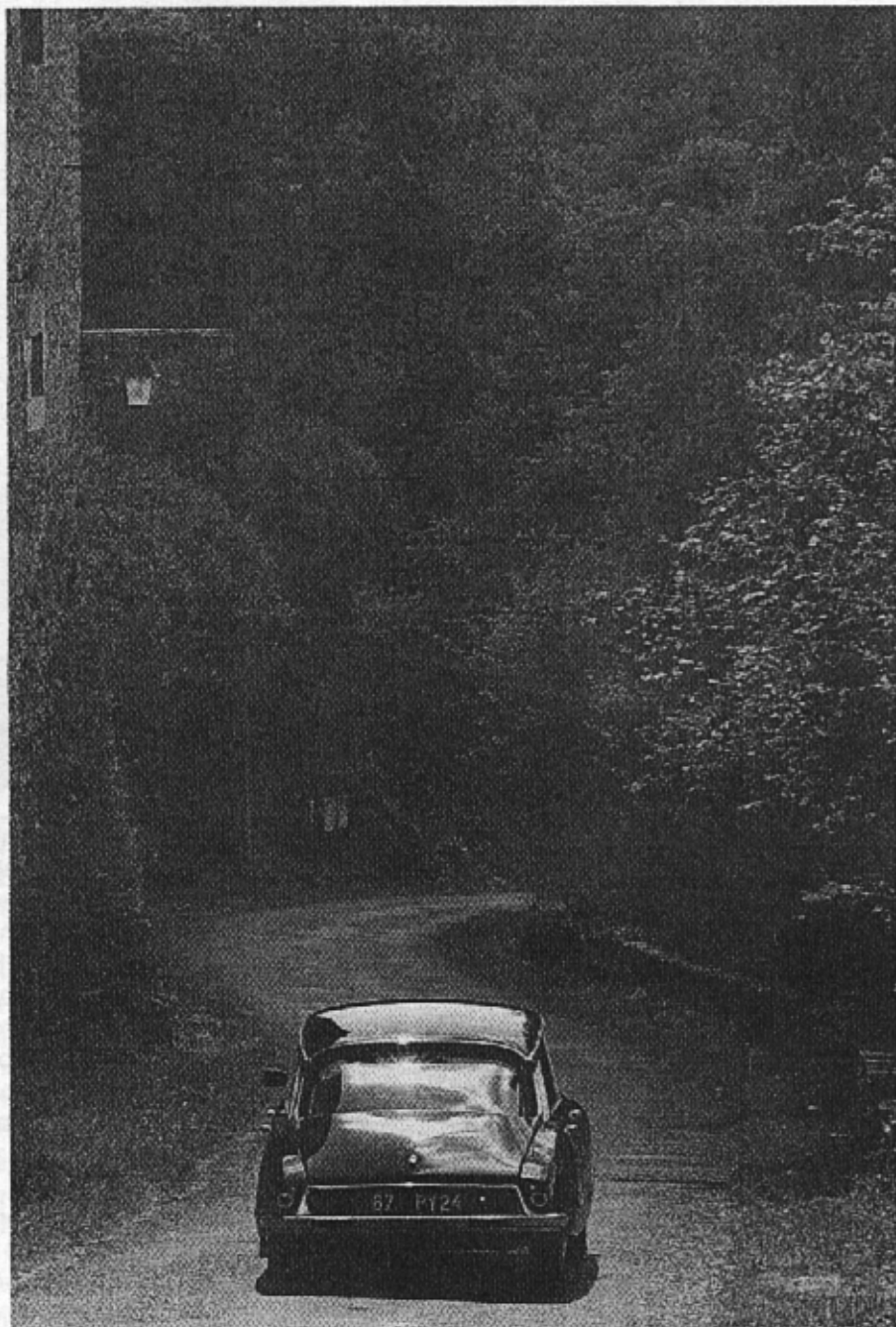
The DS's are stripped down to the metal, and the body panels unbolted. Boulesteix reckons the final paint job is better than the original - it's thicker, and the modern paint itself is of better quality. And the inner sills and other potential rust traps are wax-injected. Boulesteix offers a three-year paintwork guarantee.

Meanwhile the engine, gearbox and major mechanical components are stripped and checked. The engine gets new pistons and liners, new valves and bearings. The work is done by Michel Petit, for 20 years the owner of a Citroën agency in Angouleme, but now running a small workshop, having tired of the bureaucracy involved in a big garage.

'I've been a Citroën man since the early 2CV, through to the XM', says Petit, 'but the DS has always been my favourite, particularly the later models, which had fuel injection and a five-speed gearbox'.

Petit dismisses the idea that the DS fuel injection was troublesome, suggesting that the English didn't know how to deal with it, but Housden has done his homework. The fuel injection was a nightmare of unreliability in UK DS's, at least, and he will only be importing carburettor cars.

In fact, his model choice is limited to a single version, the DS21, which has a





2175cc four-cylinder engine, and the five-speed box fitted to later models: 'If we could find enough DS23s in good condition we would do them', says Housden, 'but it's easier to find 21's'.

Parts, surprisingly, are not a problem: 'At first glance they're not available', says chief ferret Nick Setford, 'but now I know where to look, there's nothing I can't get. Every day I find new sources. In Germany and Holland there are people making good parts for DS's'.

Housden and Setford reckon they can manage four cars a month - any more would make their cars less exclusive, and strain their very personal organisation: 'We have done eight cars so far, without doing up the engines, and we've sold them on at cost', Housden explains. 'We used them to learn; the car's got to be perfect

before I'm interested in selling it'. The first fully finished car certainly fits that description. It's lacquered to a deep lustrous black, and the interior has been completely retrimmed. Black leather upholstery, complete new carpet and headlining; upholsterer Phillippe Vergeau has done as a fine job inside as the Boulesteix team has done on the paintwork. The car smells new.

This is to be Housden's demonstrator, and we're going to drive it back to England. Justifiably proud, Boulesteix, Vergeau and Petit toast their handiwork before we leave. Beside it in the workshop, DS number two is already half dismantled, other cars are stored nearby, ready for work to start as orders come in. Two hundred and fifty man-hours go into the bodywork alone, and Housden plans to supply each car

eight weeks after receiving an order.

Formalities out of the way, we start up the engine. Here it's hard to maintain the feeling that we're in a new car (albiet one that was actually built in 1970). Citroën engines were never very advanced, and 20 years hasn't helped. But at least we know that this one has been completely renewed. In fact, we will be running it in on the trip to London, so it had better be right. Housden intends to do a couple of hundred test miles on 'production' cars before they're transported to Britain. The column gearchange too, is not quite as slick as a modern floor shift, though you can slip the lever neatly between ratios once you're used to it. But it does have one huge side benefit - the floor in front of the seats is completely uncluttered

apart from the curve of the engine bulkhead.

The dash is original, even down to the speedo, which has a quirky stopping distance indicator on the speed needle. Housden would have preferred to sixties dash, but they are hard to get, particularly in right-hand drive form, so he's settled for the seventies look. This car is a left-hand drive, but for an extra £500 buyers can order an rhd spec.

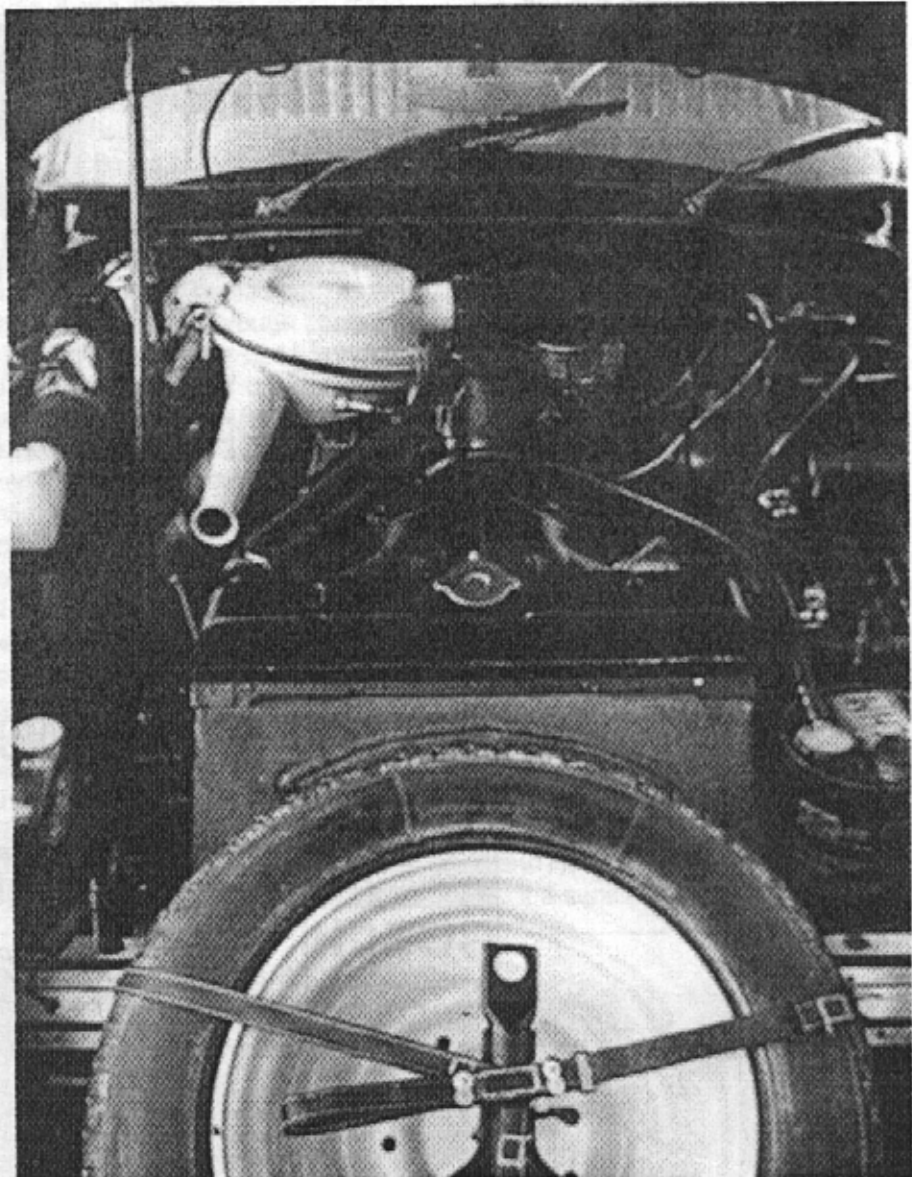
This is a car to enjoy, and after two days of driving and photography en route to Dover the four of us like it as much as we did at the outset. There are all sorts of pleasing and practical design details. Even the jack is carefully thought out, as we later discover.

It's a continuing pleasure to see the curves of wing and bonnet in the foreground as you drive; the swivelling headlights look good but are no mere gimmick. As we twist and turn through the lanes around Housden's house at night, the headlights (linked to the steering arm by primitive but effective levers) light up the curves to right and left as clearly as a spotlight. The only snag is that flies get into the headlight cowling through the gap around the moving lights, but, of course Citroën has thought of that. There's a little flap reached from under the bonnet so can scoop them out.

The long wheelbase and hydropneumatic suspension confer a wonderfully smooth ride. It's hard to believe this suspension first appeared in 1955 - it's still about the best ride you can buy; better even than the XM, whose computer-controlled springing seems hyperactive compared with the calm DS.

In two days of travelling we appreciate the ride more and more. And we notice other benefits. The tall cabin has better headroom than almost any modern big car, particularly at the back, in spite of the more upright seating position. The seats themselves are higher off the floor, which effectively increases the legroom.

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The DS is a very companionable car for a long drive. So often in a large modern car the front and rear occupants are separated by distance and headrests. Here there are none, but we don't miss them, indeed all but the driver regularly fell comfortably to sleep.

When they are awake, the rear passengers have an unrivalled view forwards. So does the driver, thanks to the slim A-pillar and sharply curved windscreen.

The five-speed DS is a long-legged tourer. At our maximum running-in engine speed of 3000rpm we're doing 70mph. There's little wind noise, since all the door-seal rubbers are new, and the engine sounds a lot smoother.

Back in England, after the DS's first service, we are able to open out the engine to 4000rpm. Full power comes at 5500 revs, but the Citroën dealer has recommended a further intermediate running-in stage. How cars have changed. In a modern car running-in is much more perfunctory.

Now the DS cruises comfortably at UK motorway speeds, but pushing it harder shows that the handling is not up to XM standards, even if the ride is equal or better. But the DS isn't the car you'd buy if you want to drive a GTi.

You'll buy it to be different, and be-

cause it will make you smile more often than would any modern rival. Even in France, where DS's are still not rare, passers-by appreciate the fine condition of our machine. Near Chateauroux we stop in a farmyard to take pictures. The old farmer appears, and enthuses over the DS: 'Yes', he murmurs approvingly, 'this was President De Gaulle's car'. As we trundle unhindered through customs at Dover, through the open window we hear one customs officer say to another, 'Great cars for their time weren't they?'

Even a puncture on the M2 makes us smile. Now we can try the jack, which requires no effort. First the hydropneumatic suspension is raised to full height, then the jack is inserted into its socket and the suspension is dropped to the bottom of its travel. The nearside wheels rise off the ground, and we replace the dead tyre. We're sorry to part from the DS, and contemplate joining the queue to buy one. Housden's plan is that he will offer demonstrations and take orders. The basic spec, using cloth uphol-

stery, will cost around £10,000. Connolly leather will add £700, and buyers can order a range of extras, and choose any colour.

Housden's demonstrator has no side strips - part of the Pallas spec - because he doesn't like them, but they will be fitted if buyers want them: 'The reason for aiming at company buyers is so that people can have one who couldn't afford one privately', he says. 'Some enthusiasts are going to be upset, because we may push up the price of DS's, but my argument is that this is the only way to preserve it'. As a measure of his confidence, he's offering a one-year guarantee on mechanical components to match the paintwork warranty. Servicing can be carried out by any UK Citroën dealer, Housden says, and he's telling dealers he can supply DS spares in 48 hours.

Stand one of his rebuilt DS's beside a mid-range Sierra and you won't need much convincing. This is a highly desirable alternative to the company car, and Housden is doing his best to make it a sensible choice.

