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Dark Horses

John Payne introduces two thoroughbreds from the Peugeot stable that are rare in Britain and much fancied

THOUGH they evidently have virtues in plenty, Peugeots have never been cars that one could really enthuse about. Like Volvos and Rovers, they impress as being thoroughly decent, dependable sort of chaps but just a bit on the dull side. It came as no surprise to me to learn that early in its long history — for Peugeot has been a family business since around the time of the French Revolution — the company made the little strips of steel that Victorian ladies used to slip into their corsets to keep their backs poker-straight.

The cars have always seemed to be a logical progression from such upright and unfrivolous beginnings. Straitlaced is just the word that comes to mind when you're looking for a brand-image to fit Peugeot: not prim-and-proper cars, not puritanical, but certainly staid and sensible.

Not even Peugeot's many wins in the East African Safari Rally do anything to alter that image. My memory's eye sees pictures of elephantine 404s splurging their remorseless way through buffalo wallows, but somehow it has never occurred to me that these cars were anything but absolutely standard specimens taken straight off the front of the taxi-rank outside Nairobi station. It is not for *le sport* but to demonstrate *le dure* that Peugeots go rallying.

Durability has always been the Peugeot hallmark, and this aim and intention are suitably expressed in the choice of the lion as their representative symbol. Had they gone for a horse, one feels, it could never be a rampant stallion as favoured by Ferrari, but a plodding kind of horse, a gee-up-dobbin kind of work horse.

At any rate, that's how my own thinking about Peugeot has always run. It was only by chance that I was disabused of my ignorance that they stabled the odd thoroughbred or two among their draught-horses. One evening last winter someone from our local garage came to pick up our Alfa to take back to the workshop for some small job. He left the car he'd come in on our drive meanwhile, and in the dark I couldn't see what it

was, apart from noting that it looked Italianate. I guessed it might be one of the Farina Lancias.

Then five minutes later the phone rang and it was my daughter saying she was coming home for the weekend and could we pick her up from the station. A phone call to the garage cleared us to drive the mystery car, and only then did I shine a torch to see what it was. And I was intrigued to discover that it said Peugeot on the bootlid and 504 on the bonnet. I had got myself on a blind date with the elegant Italian outcross that graces the Peugeot stable: the coupe by Pininfarina out of the 504 saloon.

On the way to the station my wife said, "I like this car". And on the way back she said, "I wonder if it's for sale". It was, and a deal was done, and since then I have been seeking information about the coupe and its even more alluring sister the cabriolet, both of them very much dark horses on the English scene, since only some 150 were imported between April 1972 and February 1974 and once here converted to right-hand drive mostly by Hodec Ltd, of Byfleet, Surrey.

In fact, as their styling suggests, the coupe and cabriolet are cars of the Sixties, having been launched at the Paris Show in 1969. It is typical of the longevity of Peugeot model-runs that they are still in production in much the same form today, though only available in countries that drive on the wrong side of the road. In 1974 the coupe was given the option of the Peugeot-Renault-Volvo all-aluminium V6 engine of 2664cc and 144bhp. The cabriolet, possibly deemed to be a *voiture aux dames* was never offered this hairy alternative and has continued with the 4-cylinder 1971cc unit, which puts out 104bhp and with the

help of Kugelfischer fuel injection is capable of a far-from-effeminate claimed maximum speed of 112mph.

This is the form in which the car was imported into Britain and will be the one preferred by purists who like all things automobilic to be true to the original concept. And of course most of us here naturally prefer to have the steering wheel in the gentlemanly place on the right, and you will find no V6s in that form.

The earlier cars to come here were soon discovered to have a problem. It seems there can be no pleasure without pain, no beauty without a beast. And the beast in this instance is every car-buff's most booted and hissed villain: rust.

The explanation is that the coupe and cabriolet were not simply a drawing-board exercise for Pininfarina, as in other associations with Peugeot: these bodies were actually built in the Pininfarina works at Turin; and as everyone knows, there is an English disease that infects all Italian-made cars and brings them out in nasty red spots. By 1973 Peugeot were doing what they could to stop the rot by having all cars brought into England rust-proofed before delivery, thus helping considerably.

On my own coupe this prophylactic measure took the form of a thick tectyl coating in the obvious places where rust gets a hold: the underbody, wheel arches, inside doors, etc; and it does seem to have been of benefit.

Even so, I have the same apprehensiveness whenever I look the car over as I've always had with the succession of Alfas I've owned over the last 10 years or so. You'd think it would be like banging your head against a brick wall — that after a while you'd get used to it; but you don't, and every time a new blister appears it smarts as if it has popped up on your own finger.

The commonplace rust areas in the coupe/cabriolet are the front wings and the sills immediately behind the front wheel arches. And the irony is that this is the only car I've ever come across that has drain-holes in the sills — good-sized slots spaced about a foot apart all along the lower edge of the sills. The trouble is, owners neglect to keep the drain-holes clear at the front end, which comes in for all the flak thrown up by



the front wheels. So, little by little, the mud clogging up the hole works its way up into the sills and wetly festers away at the metal. And so a good idea comes to nothing for want of a little care and attention in keeping the drain-holes clear to let air get up into the sills and dry them out.

There is only one way to love and cherish an Italian car, and that is not merely to smarm it with Turtlewax but to keep its underside so clean you could eat off it and never ever take it out in snow without *soon* afterwards giving it a thorough hosing down in all the parts the salty slush might have reached. In the kind of temperature that goes with snow, this demands better than average dedication — and still you don't get to outwit the corrosion altogether, only ensure as best you can that you have a car which doesn't think its true destiny was to be a colander.

Having stated these hurtful truths, let's move on to the many positive merits of these cars which the Peugeot sales brochure promises will open up *un nouveau monde automobile* — which somehow sounds less hackneyed when it's said in French. Chief among the plus factors must be that these Peugeots offer distinguished packaging to what is essentially the trusty hack of the Peugeot stable: the standard 504. There are very few significant departures from the saloon's mechanical specification, and none of these special items is frighteningly expensive, and so you have the charisma of an exotic car on much the same budget as for a *sedan ordinaire*. You have a car that is still in production in its country of origin, and so there is no difficulty about getting body panels or other parts unique to the model — which is the sort of good news that owners of, say, Zagato-bodied Alfa Romeos would dearly like to hear.

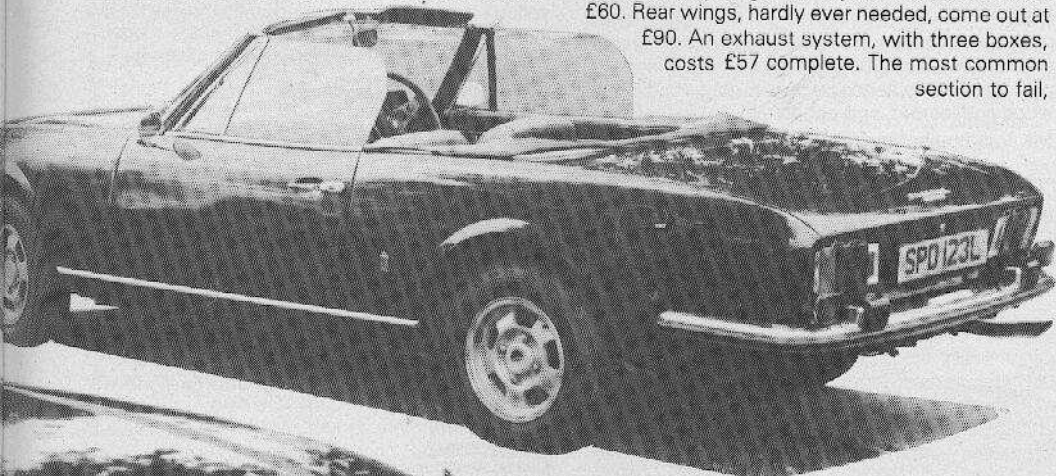
Above all you have a car that is exciting to drive in either coupe or cabriolet form. My wife's first impression of the coupe has not only been sustained but has been built upon, and the more she drives the car the more she likes it. Her enthusiasm has even led her to utter the heresy

that she prefers the Peugeot to the Alfa, and though I would not agree because I personally feel the Alfa to be a little more 'glove-like' to drive, the Peugeot with its bit more space, bit more refinement of ride, is more truly a grand tourer, whereas the Alfa is what the Italians describe in a complimentary way as 'nervous' — a true sports car that you're supposed to drive with the neck-hair up.

I have said that Peugeot's ride is refined, and this is something often said about French cars, meaning they they have fairly soft, roll-begetting suspension-layouts designed for vertebral French road-surfaces. But these particular Peugeots are not like that at all; one of the departures from the standard saloon is uprated springing and stiffer front shock absorbers, which somehow has the effect of giving the best of both worlds in that one has much of the tremorless quality of the characteristic French ride with one of its attendant cornering lurch. Another modification that must contribute to the handling is that the wheelbase is 19cm. shorter and the rear track 5cm wider than on the 504 saloon. And the overall length is shorter by 13cm.

My initiation into the likely cost of running and if need be restoring my own coupe was given me by Geoff Sizzey, of Geoffrey Sizzey (Automobiles) Ltd, Wisborough Green, near Billingshurst, W. Sussex. The firm specialises in selling and servicing Peugeots, and Geoff Sizzey himself owns an immaculate pair of the Pininfarina cars: a V6 coupe which he brought over from France as a personal import in 1978 (the year a works-entered coupe won the Safari Rally) and a 1973 cabriolet.

Geoff Sizzey, who has been selling Peugeots since the late sixties, was able to reassure me that spares for the coupe and cabriolet are readily available either here in England or to order from France (through any Peugeot agent). And the prices he quoted for typical replacement parts did not cause me to wince. The new front wing I'm going to have to get for my own car should cost £60. Rear wings, hardly ever needed, come out at £90. An exhaust system, with three boxes, costs £57 complete. The most common section to fail,



Two views of the very attractive and desirable cabriolet version of the Peugeot 504 by Pininfarina.

the rear silencer and tail pipe, costs £24. Headlights are £20 for inners and £22 for outers. (These prices are rounded off and do not include VAT.)

One item that did strike me as expensive was the hood for the cabriolet, which is around £250. As the hood is a dead ringer for the one on Pininfarina's other classic open-air car, the Alfa Spyder, and as I know that E. B. Spares of Westbury, Wilts, can supply the Alfa hood for only £80 or so, the difference in price can hardly be put down to the slightly larger cockpit of the Peugeot. But perhaps it's unfair to compare anyone's prices with those offered by E. B. Spares, who really do come up with some astonishing bargains for Alfa owners.

In Geoff Sizzey's experience a Peugeot clutch is usually good for at least 70,000 miles, and when it goes the new parts cost £46 and fitting around £60. As for the engine, mine standing at 65,000 miles is reckoned to be only about a third of the way through its life. I had initially been nervous of fuel injection, having heard horrendous stories about repair bills; but since learning that Peugeot have been using the Kugelfischer system since 1962 and that it's very reliable my mind has been put at ease.

As with most all-disc brake layouts, there is the usual shortcoming in the handbrake department. Mine works sporadically at the moment and this may need to be remedied as a last resort by fitting new handbrake calipers. The cost for parts should be about £50.

You would think that the cabriolet should be exactly the same to drive as the coupe, since they are identical in all respects save that one is open. In fact the cabriolet comes to hand quite differently: there is a certain amount of body-flexing as an inevitable consequence of being less rigidly structured than the coupe, and this brings a different sort of feel to the car; not markedly so, but enough to make one question which car handles the better. I'd come down on the side of the coupe because of its tautness, but possibly it's only a matter of custom. Certainly the cabriolet is the more glamorous of the two and as the Peugeot brochure says, "*Avec le cabriolet 504 vous ferez le plein de ciel et le soleil*". What a pity we're so far from the Riviera.

Still, it is at least comforting to know that the hood not only looks crisp and clean-cut but also works with the ease and simplicity of an up-and-over door. Down comes the rain, pitter-patter; up goes the hood, clunk-click. Interestingly, Geoff Sizzey told me that Reliant hired his cabriolet for a couple of weeks when they were designing their own new convertible. Whether the Farina/Peugeot hood gave them any inspiration he hasn't been told; but it would be good to know that there's at least one British open car that doesn't make you feel as if you're in *Carry On Camping*.

Because the convertible-owner may not always keep his weather-eye open and leave the car to get caught hood-down in a shower, Peugeot have opted for the practicality of plastic-covered seats in the cabriolet — more slippery and colder than the plush cloth seats in the coupe, but nonetheless comfortable and well-shaped. The plastic is a fair facsimile of leather in both appearance and feel, but it does have the usual tendency to stiffen up and crack. However, replacement facings are available from France, and when Geoff Sizzey got some for his car two years ago, the cost was £100 each and delivery took six weeks. The seats of both models are cunningly recessed at the back to give more rear leg-room so that four adults can travel in comfort.

The interior of the cars is fitted out in a tastefully de-luxe sort of way, one of the luxuries being the dubious labour-saving device of electrically-operated windows, which I personally do not care for. Peugeot have thoughtfully provided a little cranking handle that can be plugged into a stuck mechanism to wind the windows down by hand.

Thoughtful and practical touches like this are the keynote of the interior. There are lots of lights in evidence — not idiot lights but really useful ones — red warning lights in the door edges, discreet interior lights in the footwells that come on when either door is opened, a glow-worm that illuminates the glove-locker, a light for the heater controls, and another for the console-mounted ashtray, which comes on when the ash-tray's lid is flipped over. The coupe has three-way interior lights up on top of the doorposts; both cars have boot lights but no engine-compartment light — tacitly implying that nothing should ever need viewing under the bonnet on a dark night.

GRACE, SPACE, PACE

continued from page 78

this has been (old figures in brackets): Urban cycle, 15mpg (12.5); 56mph, 26.8mpg (21.2); 75mph, 21.5mpg (18.2).

So much for the histories of these three significant cars and their engines. What are they like on the road? Early SS1 saloons are pretty rare but BL Heritage had a 1935 example in their collection at Syon Park. This is the one with the continuous swept wing line and it looked handsome indeed in its black livery setting off the glistening chrome body details — even the wheel rims are chromed, a SS feature. But in 1935 you could have had it in Apple Green, Carnation Red, Birch Grey, Lavender Grey, Dark Blue, Ivory, Cream, Nile Blue, Crimson Lake, Beige, Olive Green, or Silver at £5 extra. And the upholstery, wheels, wings, head and trunk (these were leathercloth covered, remember) could all be had in a variety of combinations. Lyons obviously believed in giving people what they wanted.

The car's low build is astonishing even now — it's 4ft 7in from ground to roof. I'm sure that if you owned such a car, even if it never turned a wheel, you could sit in a deckchair and ponder it for hours. I resisted that temptation and climbed into the snug, almost womb-like interior. Through that letter box strip of windscreen — it's actually not that bad because you sit so close to it — the view out is equally impressive. Acres of long, black polished bonnet, like some great metal runway at the end of which the glistening headlamp backs and arched wing tops lurk. Thrust into one's chest is the large four-leafspring-spoked steering wheel. There's a polished wood fascia with a satin-chrome instrument dashboard set into the centre. The hexagonal instrument bezels are bright chrome plated — the hexagon was the an SS feature. But in 1935 you could have had it in diamond — and include speedometer, large clock, ampmeter and paired revolving drums for oil pressure and water temperature. A large starter button was separate from the ignition key. I noted the neat Pytchley sliding roof panel, the opening windscreen (an essential aid in City smog) and, unusually, the opening (and again neatly chrome-framed) rear window. Door windows had louvres for 'draughtless ventilation' and

the leather trim on the inner door panels carried a delightful Art Deco sunray pattern pleating, with a polished wood setting sun peering over a bottom few inches of scuff carpeting. The front seats had deep cushions, set rather low, upholstered in Connolly's best quality 'Vaumol' hide. The rear seats had a raised centre divide armrest but legroom is distinctly limited and adults would need to sit askew.

I switched on the ignition but alas this car had not run for some time and needed coaxing into life with a gentle push. Once fired up, the SS ran with a purposeful exhaust note. The four-speed floor-mounted gearchange was delightfully smooth and satisfying, synchromesh aiding noiseless changes given deliberate and not over-rushed movement. The steering, while moderately heavy at parking speeds, was nicely weighted and positive at speed.

The suspension was described as firm but resilient when new and even allowing for the passing years this is undoubtedly true, though the body has become rather rattly. But I was pleasantly surprised by the performance, steady and smooth with that feeling of unburstability over high mileages that is immensely reassuring in any car I would want to own. No, definitely not a high performance car, but a satisfying performer that was above all reliable. How right Lyons was to resist the temptation of a highly stressed and temperamental engine in the quest for more performance — how damaging it would have been to his new marque. Now I really regret not finding the means to buy the SSI coupé I could have bought for just £95 in my final school years.

The grand-looking MK VII belonging to Geoff Brooks was very different indeed. Not as lithe as the SS perhaps, but handsome enough, and imposing. This one was in its original Sage Green paintwork and you could see how references, however unkindly, to Bentlys arose. This was probably Lyons' last expression of the coachbuilt grand tourer, and the later Mk IX was certainly the last Jaguar built on a chassis. The interior had been designed to be bigger in all respects to the superseded Mk V, particularly in width now that there were no running boards. If you measure opulence by the amount of polished wood and leather, and people did and still do, the MK V is opulent indeed.

You feel very much in command up in the driver's seat — I say up for that is exactly where you are. I could look down on a modern XJ saloon. And once again a huge steering wheel, with four plastic-covered spokes this time, is thrust into one's chest though the 4.7 turns needed to turn lock to lock made the car feel ponderous turning street corners. But the steering was light for the period and the 36ft turning circle good for the car's size.

The XK engine, as impressibly smooth as ever, had lots of torque and it pulled like a train. I did not take the car beyond the legal limit as the owner said that he and its previous owner had never explored such dizzy speeds and the car might succumb from shock if so extended. My guess is that it wouldn't for the car is capable of a wonderful, easy cruising gait. The engine was smooth and quiet but the gearbox, probably the most criticised part of the car when new, whining. The synchromesh was notably weak and the changes needed positive movement, none too rushed either for perfect results. The tiny slender gearlever strikes an odd chord when every thing else about the car is gargantuan — time the changes right however and they are silky smooth.

The skinny 16 x 6.70 tyres appeared to be stretched to the limit by this massive machine and protested vehemently on corners at quite modest speeds. When a light drizzle started the adhesion limits also felt poor, and while I knew that the car was so well balanced that its ultimate handling belied its bulk, I was not keen to experiment too much with somebody else's valuable classic in suburban streets. The Mk VII's ride is far more sophisticated than that of the SS100, its independent torsion bar suspension soaking-up the bumps and allowing smooth, level progress. The equipment, too, is comprehensive. The famous Jaguar tool kit now lives in the door trim, and again there was a metal sliding roof. I was most surprised to find two-speed wipers with autopark on such an early British car — again, no doubt, appealing to US buyers. And those marvellous big clear instruments, lit at night by the indirect 'ultra-violet' light that fascinated me so when I was younger. Yes, the MK VII was a significant saloon.

The XJ12 HE? Quite simply, the best luxury saloon in the world. ▲



Above, the more recent, powerful, V6-engined coupes are only available with left-hand drive.

Dark Horses continued

My only criticism of all this striving to be a mobile Blackpool is that in my own particular car half the lights don't work. Geoff Sizzey assures me that it isn't a common failing, so I accept that it's a peculiarity of my own car. What is both peculiar and common to all the earlier cars is that the reversing lights have amber lenses and are very little use.

In 1972 the list price of the coupe was £2653.86 and of the cabriolet £2583.94, and conversion to right-hand drive cost £450 extra. Geoffrey Sizzey reckons the present-day value of mint specimens to be around £5000 for the cabriolet and less than £4000 for the coupe. He gives due acknowledgment, however, to the fact of life that the present recession has caused the car trade to mark time.

There are probably very few 1972 cars still

around in sufficiently sound condition to tempt even the most intrepid bargain-hunter looking for a restoration project. But 1973 models occasionally crop up at prices from around £1500, and anyone not daunted by the corrosion problem would find himself with a car that is veritably *un hommage à la beauté classique et discrète*.

As it also says in the brochure, *La ligne est douce*. ▲

SPECIFICATION

Engine: 4-cylinder ohv, 1971cc, 104bhp at 5200rpm. Kugelfischer fuel injection.

Gearbox: 4-speed all-synchromesh manual; 3-speed ZF automatic optional on coupe.

Steering: Rack and pinion, no power assistance.

Suspension: All-independent, coil springing; anti-roll bars front and rear.

Brakes: Disc all round with servo assistance. Cable-operated handbrake.

Tyres: 175 x 14 HR.

Electrics: Alternator; battery 12v 55Ah.

Fuel consumption: 28mpg.

