

May 2011 £4.50

CLASSIC

& SPORTS CAR

The world's best-selling classic car magazine

DBS TO VANTAGE
FROM AS LITTLE AS £15k!

ASTON V8s

Four decades of muscle and glamour, with up to 550bhp and 186mph



Monte rally centenary
Meet our historic heroes



Fabulous Brewster Rolls
Prohibition-era Phantom



A Benz born for the US
Touring LA in a 280SE



Can a Lion gatecrash the Stag's party?

The Triumph Stag is the obvious choice for open-top family fun, but not the only one. **Martin Buckley** makes a case for the glamorous Peugeot 504 V6 Cabriolet

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**



At the bleak and tatty end of the '70s, the soon-to-die Triumph Stag had become a car that people sneered about thanks to its widely publicised engine maladies. Even as an 11-year old in 1977, I sensed that its breezy Michelotti looks and upbeat colours seemed to sit uneasily in a world of spittle-covered punks, international terrorism and the aftermath of a world fuel crisis. It's odd to think that, when the model was discontinued, we were only a year or two away from Thatcher's Britain, *Love Will Tear Us Apart* and the first Mini Metros.

Just seven years earlier, the Stag had an exciting future ahead of it – those glinting fake Ro-Styles and that curved-hip styling somehow perfectly attuned to the lurid polyester-textured

zeitgeist of a still-optimistic decade. The Stag was a lifestyle car pitched at the Sunday supplement set with their colour television sets and love of exotic holidays. Here, in a country obsessing over the morality of hot pants and arguing about decimalisation and North Sea gas, was a great British hope, created to deflect the advances of all those flashy foreign jobs with their suave looks and fancy price-tags. It was a throaty Grand Tourer that doubled as a four-seater drophead and could therefore trump the Germans and the Italians at their own game.

This was a cleverly conceived 'image' car from one of the less creaky bits of the British Leyland empire. A car that, alongside the Range Rover and the Jaguar XJ6, seemed to spearhead a resurgence in the fortunes of British motor-car building after the industry's complacency

and arrogance during the 1950s and '60s.

Triumph seized the moment. It made sure that James Bond drove one (a pre-production prototype) in *Diamonds are Forever*, as well as Gerald Harper in the best-forgotten TV series *Hadleigh*. For me, though, a Stag never looked better than when Stephanie Beacham took the wheel of an orange example in *Dracula AD 1972*. It was only later, with the various 'improvements' of the Mk2, post-'73 car (stick-on coachlines, alloy wheels, et cetera) that this flagship Triumph acquired a slightly suburban 'ladies' car' image.

But at the dawn of the 1970s the Stag was a desirable and trendsetting car for successful, aspirant people of either sex. It had an affluent, upmarket feel and a specification that put it nose-to-nose with anything that the competition had to offer; V8 power and all-independent



suspension were, after all, still not everyday fodder even in the GT class of 1970. Such was the optimism around the Stag when it emerged that you could be forgiven for believing it didn't have a competitor in sight. The only vaguely comparable Mercedes SL was a strict two-seater at double the Stag's list price. Everything else had a fixed roof and could not match the versatility of the Stag, with its neatly designed roll-hoop and hefty but not unattractive hard-top that transformed it into an instant coupé.

It's true that the Merc makes a neat counterpoint to the Stag, but for me the Peugeot 504 has always been the closer and more cogent comparison – one of those tasty continental morsels rarely seen in the UK. Its very scarcity has always given it an added frisson of desirability. Back in 1977, like most people who thought they knew about cars, I was only vaguely aware of the Pininfarina-bodied Peugeots.

Based on a chassis 19cm shorter than that of the 504 saloon, and with a slightly wider rear track, the Cabriolet approximated the Stag for passenger space even if it could not match its adaptability. That said, 504 fans may argue that you could always buy the Coupé if you wanted a hard-top – and it would have made a formidable rival for the Triumph if Peugeot had ever bothered to import it in any quantity. In France, the Coupé and convertible were 40% dearer than the saloon, yet somehow the sums never added up when the idea of a UK-spec factory 504 Cabriolet was mooted. A few found their way

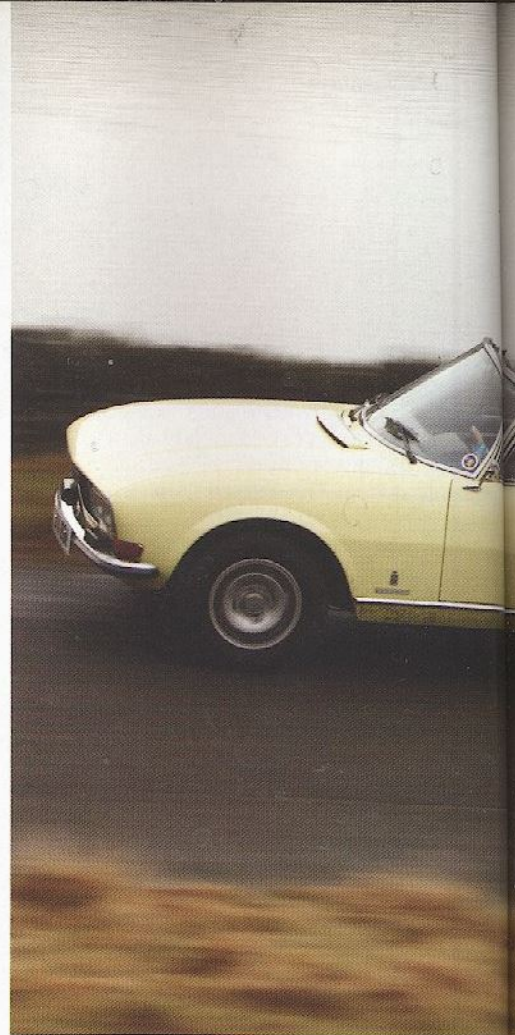
over on special order and c150 were converted to right-hand drive by Hodec in the UK.

Pininfarina not only styled but also produced the two-door 504s. The bodywork was built alongside various Ferraris, Lancias and Fiats at its factory in a Turin suburb. Launched in 1969 – six months after the saloon, its introduction delayed by the student riots of 1968 – these pleasingly couture trinkets ran through to the mid-'80s, by which time they had acquired colour-coded bumpers and other dubious visual upgrades that tended to highlight the age of the design rather than hide it. Even at the end, though, these were outstandingly beautiful cars with an aura of effortless chic that you also find in a Pagoda Mercedes or a Chapron DS.

What the Peugeot lacked, at least at first, was a 'performance' engine. In fairness, these 504s went deceptively well on 2 litres and 108bhp (only the early cars were 1.8s), with standard-fit Kugelfischer mechanical fuel injection adding flexibility, refinement and surprising economy.

But the Peugeot-Renault-Volvo 'Douvrin' V6 gave the car the muscle it needed in 1974. This 136bhp 90° V6, with its unusual single-choke and twin-choke carburettor arrangement, made its debut in the Pininfarina 504s, temporarily ousting the 2-litre engine. The V6s featured a redesigned grille, new alloys and one-piece tail-lamps replacing the distinctive three-piece type.

When the 160bhp injection models were launched in 1977, however, only the Coupé got the V6. By then Cabriolet buyers had to make



PEUGEOT 504 V6 CABRIOLET

Sold/no built 1974-'77/8185 (all engines)

Construction steel monocoque

Engine all-alloy, sohc-per-bank 2664cc V6, single/twin-choke carburettors; 136bhp @ 5750rpm; 153lb ft @ 3500rpm **Transmission** four-speed manual, driving rear wheels

Suspension: front MacPherson struts rear semi-trailing arms, coils; telescopics, a-r bar f/r **Steering** power-assisted rack and pinion

Brakes discs, with servo **Length** 14ft 4 1/4in (4375mm) **Width** 5ft 5 1/4in (1670mm)

Height 4ft 4 1/2in (1334mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft 4 1/4in (2550mm) **Weight** 3010lb (1365kg)

0-60mph 9.3 secs **Top speed** 117mph **Mpg** 24 **Price new** special order in UK **Price now** £12k



Clockwise, from above: 504 feels roomier, wheel is later addition; Douvrin V6; Peugeot rides better and corners confidently; lion motif on alloy rims



'THE PEUGEOT IS VISUALLY THE MORE SUBTLE, THE STAG IS FUSSIER, FLASHIER, BUT STILL HANDSOME'



do with an injected 2-litre motor again because there were concerns that the open-topped shell wasn't stiff enough to take the extra urge that the bigger engine could generate. The Cabriolets continued to the end in 1983, but the short-lived V6 version must be one of the rarest and most desirable Peugeots of all.

In the metal, putting theory to one side, the Stag and 504 are closely matched in some respects, poles apart in others. The Peugeot is visually the more subtle of the two, its gentle curves and elegantly resolved volumes conferring a cool beauty on the shape from any vantage point, although I have to say I'd prefer an early car with hubcaps and quad lights, preferably in yellow. The Stag is fussier, flashier, but still a handsome car with that Triumph corporate 'face' that linked it to the 2000/2500 saloons that its underpinnings were adapted from.

Both look crisp enough with their hoods erected (the Peugeot's is the easier of the two to operate) and conjure vivid 1970s imagery with their respective tops off. Remember the early Stag brochure? Triumph promoted it as a car for those white polo-neck types who would think nothing of hoofing down to Monaco for a long weekend. In the glossy spreads of that snazzy document, the Stag somehow managed to look at home in sophisticated Euro-chic scenarios – be it parked casually outside a pavement café or beside a yacht on the French Riviera – in a way that few other British cars could carry off.

Its catalogue was so awash with the clichés of GT imagery, in fact, that you could hardly imagine that this sleek, two-door, four-seater had emerged from a factory in the Midlands. If you believed what you read in the *Daily Mail*, it was the product of a bolshevik workforce, half of whom were card-carrying Communist Party members.

The Peugeot's sense of its own stylishness is

more effortlessly carried off. Look at it and you can almost smell a warm evening on the Côte d'Azur. It could be Cannes promenade, a cocky, skinny Frenchman at the wheel. He's under 30, slightly effete, wearing a white shirt with one too many buttons open, has sunglasses on his head, maybe *en route* to picking up a girlfriend then meeting some friends at an expensive, trendy beach bar. His dad probably bought him the car, of course, and he leaves it unlocked everywhere, with the top down. It takes a charismatic vehicle to transport you on a flight of fancy such as this on a wintry afternoon just outside Buxton, but both the 504 V6 Cabriolet and the Stag are undeniably alluring if, in the end, unsensational to drive. Perhaps that doesn't matter.

No aspect of the Peugeot is anything other than totally competent yet it leaves you with an impression of a superbly supple, tremor-free and quiet ride. It's complemented by equally smooth performance from a V6 that feels fractionally rough (it was designed as a V8, hence the 90° angle) and winds out with a curiously pedestrian



TRIUMPH STAG

Sold/number built 1970-77/25,939

Construction steel monocoque **Engine** iron-block, alloy-heads, sohc-per-bank 2997cc 90° V8; 146bhp @ 4700rpm; 167lb ft @ 3500rpm

Transmission four-speed manual, optional o/d or three-speed auto, driving rear wheels

Suspension: front MacPherson struts, a-r bar **rear** semi-trailing arms, coils; telescopics f/r

Steering power-assisted rack and pinion

Brakes discs f, drums r, servo **Length** 14ft 6¾in (4439mm) **Width** 5ft 3½in (1613mm)

Height 4ft 4¼in (1327mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft 4in (2540mm) **Weight** 2807lb (1273kg)

0-60mph 10.4 secs (auto) **Top speed** 112mph

Mpg 21 **Price new** £2685 **Price now** £10,000

From top: two Strombergs feed V8; cabin is sportier; auto suits laid-back Stag, but it still feels quick

exhaust note. From memory, it feels more effort- less than the smaller four-cylinders – there's more torque, obviously – without being notice- ably more potent. Still, the four gears pace the performance nicely, the lever flopping from slot to slot in a way that reminds you that this is an unrepentantly saloon-derived convertible.

You sit rather lower in the Triumph, on a seat that seems to lack padding and whose relation- ship with the floor forces you to splay your legs around the steering column. The dash – with its multifunctional warning gauge and dull-finish, pseudo-Habitat wood – is much more ambitious than the 504's, whose layout is neat enough but the overall look is drab for a car with such glamorous pretensions.

But then I can't think of a Peugeot with a really good-looking dash. Being a later car, it would have been burdened with the uninspiring, saloon-type steering wheel with the fat centre boss had it not been swapped for a wood-rimmed job. Generally, though, the French car is more cossetting and roomier than the Stag. Its seats are comfortable enough for my tenure, and covered in a kind of imitation leather that is probably as close to the real thing as has ever been devised.


The Triumph sounds emphatically better and more interesting than the Peugeot, its twin pipes emitting a tuneful gurgle that sounds far more sophisticated – and potent – than the car really is. Manual-overdrive Stags are pleasingly high geared yet the auto nicely suits the lazy character of the Triumph and the responsive mid-range kickdown gives it a lively feel. The Stag's smooth, short-stroke 3-litre V8 has an instant authority the French car lacks, with 100mph cruising if

you need it – and can live with the wind noise.

Not that either car invites aggressive driving. The Stag is quite tidy and well mannered; there's modest understeer until you show it an undulating surface, when it gets slightly lurchy and pitchy. It does not even attempt to match the Peugeot's lovely ride, with wheel movements that are far less gently controlled; its ability to filter out noise is much less accomplished, too.

If anything, the Peugeot corners better. The 504 takes fast or slow curves in a flat and undramatic way, showing a stabilising degree of understeer transmitted through assisted rack-and-pinion steering that, like the Stag's, is a little too light and fractionally low-geared.

Yet, such trifles aside, these are desirable cars that really do put you somewhere warmer and sunnier in your head when you're driving them. Undo a few buttons, hold your gut in and you could be that Riviera rich kid, or a playboy borrowing his girlfriend's car because his Lamborghini is in the workshop again. Or even the chisel-jawed polo-neck man from that Stag brochure, who appears to be taking his new secretary on an expense-account 'business trip'.

As to which I'd have, the choice isn't difficult. I like the Stag, but it's not quite special enough or rare enough to get my elitist vote. No: with reservation, I'd take the Peugeot, a car that I've already owned three times in four-cylinder form. The 504 is best enjoyed at leisure because it was very much an accessory for the idle classes when it was new. Treat it as a relaxing car – one that will still arouse a soft mutter of approval when it arrives in any situation – then you'll enjoy every second behind the wheel. 

Meet the owners

IAN KIRKWOOD

Club Peugeot UK president Kirkwood worked for Peugeot for 26 years. As well the V6 Cabriolet, which he bought from another club member a year ago, he owns a 504 Coupé, a 205 T16 and a 304 Cabriolet. "The only real problems with these cars are rust and finding body panels," he explains. "As for the mechanical side, it's surprising how many parts the Peugeot dealers still stock. I've just bought a brake master cylinder from one in Scotland."



LINDA BOOTH

Jeff and Linda Booth from Denton, Manchester have owned their Stag for 20 years. "It really is like a part of the family," says Linda. "On the odd occasions that Jeff has talked about selling it, the kids look as if we are having a dog put down!" Apart from it needing an engine rebuild early in the Booths' ownership, the Stag, one of a batch built for the US market but never sold there (running lights are a clue) has been reliable. "It gets taken on holidays abroad and I used it to drive to work for quite a while when our modern car broke down."



'THE STAG'S SHORT-STROKE V8 GIVES IT AN INSTANT AUTHORITY THE FRENCH CAR LACKS'

