

**GROUP TEST**



# Battle<sup>of</sup> the big guns

It's 1955 and Teddy Boys rule. But Britain faces another threat – the Citroën DS. Can the Jaguar Mk1 2.4, Mercedes 190D or Lancia Aurelia fight it off?

**T**HE 1955 London Motor Show – held at a time when rationing was a fading memory and ITV was the talk of the country – ushered in a new era of post-war motoring. Here were the cars that would become mainstays for their respective manufactures, from the Fiat 600 and the Peugeot 403 to Britain's own Sunbeam Rapier, Jaguar 2.4 Mk1, MGA and the Rolls-Royce Silver

Cloud. It also saw the debut of the utilitarian Standard Vanguard Phase III that one national motoring correspondent described as 'the Queen of the Show' – a telling comment on car styling in 1955 Britain if ever there was one.

Above all, it saw the debut of a car that a low-key ad in *The Motor* magazine described as 'something really out of the ordinary'. There was no picture of the car but the discreet chevron logo was enough to direct readers to the Citroën stand, where they would find the Citroën DS.

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of Citroën's masterpiece, *Practical Classics* is recreating the spirit of the 1955 show by comparing the oldest French-built DS in the UK with three foreign rivals. Each rival represents one aspect of the Citroën's appeal: as a sporting saloon to rival the Jaguar 2.4 Mk1, as a European family car competing with the Mercedes-Benz 190 'Ponton', and as a cruiser challenging the Lancia Aurelia.

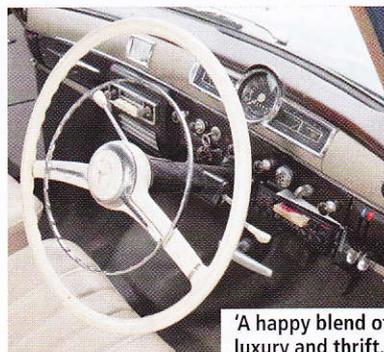


# GROUP TEST: CITROËN DS V RIVALS

**MERCEDES-BENZ 190D** CURRENT VALUE: £5000



One of the chunkiest radiator grills you're likely to see.



'A happy blend of luxury and thrift.'



**C**ONSTANT PUBLIC emphasis on the Citroën DS23 Pallas EFI has disguised the fact that the DS was originally designed to succeed the Onze Legre and the Onze Normale Traction Avants as a large European family car, especially for the lucrative taxi market.

But 1955 had already seen the introduction of a French rival in the form of the near-indestructible Peugeot 403. In the mid-Fifties, however, the European taxi of choice was the 'Ponton'-series Mercedes-Benz. Introduced in 1953 as the first new post-war Mercedes-Benz aimed at the middle-class motorist, the 180 Ponton (German for 'pontoon' – a nickname the car earned because of its pontoon-bridge-like front suspension) was the car that established the marque in the mass-market.

The original 180 model was joined by the higher-powered 190 in 1956 and the 190D a year later. But the Ponton's British identity was always rather different to its persona in Germany. There it was designed as a world car for Daimler-Benz, one that would be manufactured in India, South Africa and Argentina. But import duties raised the price of the 1958 190D tested here from £1000 to £1694 – comparable with a Jaguar Mk VII. This meant that few British taxi companies would consider a Ponton, especially in the pre-minicab era. According to its brochure, the 190D offered a 'happy blend of luxury and



### OWNER PROFILE

Brian Wincorp regards his 190D as ideal transport for a 72-year-old retired Suffolk joiner. He has fitted reclining seats from a 220S Fintail but every other aspect of his Ponton is original. Over the past decade his 190D has won several concours awards.



Diesel engine is a workhorse but makes a bit of a racket.

thrift' and so it appealed to a select group of motorists for whom owning a car bearing the tri-star was more important than a walnut-veneered dashboard.

Today, Brian Wincorp's 1958 190D is an amazingly original example of a truly practical classic. The cabin combines numerous features (cigarette lighter, full instrumentation, side window demisters) with plastic upholstery and rubber floor-matting. The only anachronistic touches are the front indicators mounted on the front wings, where they badly reflect in the

mirrors. The Ponton was carefully designed by Mercedes-Benz to offer business drivers a firm but comfortable ride with a four-speed column change light years away from sloppy and imprecise American changes.

As a refined cruiser, the clatter of the Ponton's diesel engine compares unfavourably with the Citroën's quiet two-litre petrol unit. And as the most compact member of the group, the Merc is a slightly cramped six-seater. But to a fleet operator who had nightmares about the Citroën's suspension failing in the middle of the Kenyan Highlands, the Ponton was an ideal choice.

Perhaps the greatest testament to the 190D's status as a reliable workhorse is the fact that Ponton taxis were still in service in Africa as late as the Eighties.

The 190D Ponton established Mercedes in the mass market.



SPECS: 1957 CITROËN DS19	
ENGINE	1911cc/4-cyl/OHV
POWER	75bhp@5400rpm
TORQUE	101lb ft@3000rpm
GEARBOX	4-spd semi automatic
TOP SPEED	87mph
0-60mph	23sec
MPG	27
LENGTH	15ft 9in (4.8m)
WIDTH	5ft 10.5in (1.78m)
WEIGHT	2727lb (1237kg)

### NEED TO KNOW

#### The Mercedes-Benz Owners' Club:

07071 818868, [www.mercedes-benzownersclub.co.uk](http://www.mercedes-benzownersclub.co.uk)

Mercedes Parts: 0113 2813672,

[www.mercedesparts.co.uk](http://www.mercedesparts.co.uk)



Beautiful understated bodywork is a feature of the Jaguar 2.4.



Steering wheel or wagon wheel?



**B**ACK IN 1955 – a time when even front-wheel drive was considered avant-garde – it would have been a radical British motorist who eschewed the likes of the Riley Pathfinder or the Rover P4 90 for the new Citroën DS. In fact, the nearest domestic equivalent that would appeal to the ‘get-ahead’ motorist was the Jaguar 2.4 Mk1, one of a select group of classic cars that is all too often castigated for what it was not (or ever intended to be) rather than appreciated for its very real virtues.

Just as the XJ-S was criticised for not being an E-type two decades later, so the original 2.4 Mk1 was regarded as a prelude to its 3.4-litre stable-mate and the subsequent Mk2 models.

Of course, the 2.4 features some of William Lyons most elegantly understated coachwork and saw off virtually all of its rivals by the end of the decade. Not only was the 2.4 the first Jaguar built at the Browns Lane factory to use unitary construction, it was also the first ever unitary car to top 100mph – a major achievement by any standards and an enormous one for a small company like Jaguar.

Our test car is a 1958 model. Its wider front radiator grille and extra front and rear reflectors reveal that it was assembled in South Africa. Although the 2.4 was always offered in standard form – without heater, windscreen washers and leather trim – none appear to have been sold,

**OWNER PROFILE**

Rick Allen is a Buckinghamshire builder and avid car collector who is putting his Jaguar 2.4 up for sale after five happy years. He is selling so he can fund another project – possibly an Alvis Grey Lady. Rick says: ‘The 2.4 Mk1 is a superb car in its own right and not just the forerunner to the Mk2.

Although the model predates motorways, its cruising performance is still quite lively – as long as you can live with the effects on the fuel economy.’



Six-cylinder engine is much smoother than the Citroën DS’s.

**‘The 2.4’s six-cylinder engine is considerably smoother than the Citroën’s antique two-litre’**

and Rick Allen’s car has the familiar ‘de-luxe’ trim. The interior resembles its larger Mk VII stable-mate, right down to the centrally-mounted instrument dials and the courtesy lamps in the rear three-quarter panels. As for comparisons with the Citroën, it is a case of

six of one, half-a-dozen of the other. The 2.4’s six-cylinder engine is considerably smoother than the DS’s antique two-litre but its ride is firmer. The Jaguar’s interior is more traditional but more claustrophobic than that of the Citroën, with very little space for rear-seat passengers.

The one over-riding similarity is that both cars exude craftsmanship usually only associated with coachbuilt machines. The 2.4 posed potential buyers at the 1955 Motor Show with the age-old Jaguar question – how could Browns Lane provide all of this car for such a reasonable price? 

SPECS: 1958 JAGUAR 2.4 Mk1	
ENGINE	2483cc/6-cyl/DOHC
POWER	112bhp@5750rpm
TORQUE	140lb ft@2000rpm
GEARBOX	4-spd manual
TOP SPEED	101mph
0-60mph	14sec
MPG	19
LENGTH	15ft (4.6m)
WIDTH	5ft 10in (1.78m)
WEIGHT	3029lb (1374kg)

The 2.4 Mk1 was the first unitary car to top 100mph.



# GROUP TEST: CITROËN DS V RIVALS

## LANCIA AURELIA CURRENT VALUE: £10000



Distinguished style is key to the Aurelia's subtle charms.



Unusual green-glowing dials.



**W**ITH A PRICE tag of more than £2000, a customer for a last-of-the-line Lancia Aurelia at the 1955 London Motor Show had to be well heeled to say the least. Above all, though, they had to be discreet. If you wanted flamboyance you could go for a Canadian-built De Soto. The Lancia was about understatement and engineering excellence.

The Aurelia debuted at the 1950 Turin Motor Show and featured the world's first production V6 engine fitted to a private car. It also had a mixture of sliding pillar suspension at the front and independent at the rear. The breathtakingly elegant coachwork used aluminum extensively on the opening panels to reduce weight. Even so, the original 1.7-litre engine was hard-pressed to produce Lancia performance and demands from customers led to the introduction of a two-litre engine, and finally a 2.3-litre unit for the last two years of its lifespan.

Production of the Aurelia ceased in 1954/55 and the vast Flaminia Berlina was launched the following year. Surviving examples of the Aurelia are now rare.

Our test car is a 1951 1.7-litre model. As with all Lancias produced until the mid-Fifties, it is a right-hand-drive car. Lancia did not offer a left-hand-drive option until 1956 even though they were produced in Italy.

Despite the age of the design and the narrow track, it immediately strikes you that this is a

### OWNER PROFILE

Mick Mulford is a Sussex-based design consultant. He bought his Lancia on the strength of its doors and instrument lights but now appreciates its many other virtues. Mick says: 'I love using the Lancia for what she was originally designed – as a Grand Tourer across Europe'. Despite its comparatively small engine, it has no difficulties on the Auto Strada. Mick has decided to sell his Aurelia but has one or two other long-term projects in mind.



Original 1.7-litre engine was eventually beefed up to 2.3.

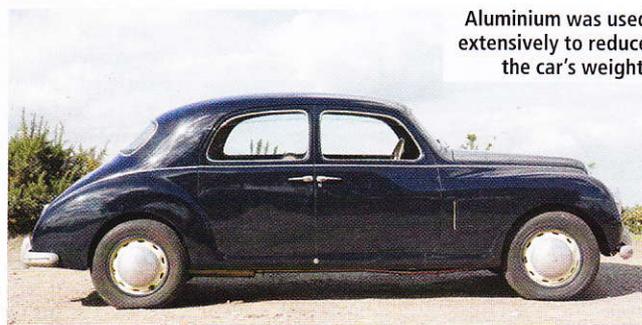
## 'It strikes you that this is a car of real distinction – especially when you open the doors'

car of distinction – especially when you open the doors. The cloth-upholstered bench seats are supremely comfortable and the front-seat backrest can create a double bed by way of a simple bolt mechanism. A rear blind is controlled via a pulley from the dashboard

and 'air conditioning' is provided by two trap doors on the front scuttle.

Best of all, the car's owner Mike Mulford says: 'The instruments glow a shade of green at night – that was my real reason for buying the car!' The other reasons are the smoothness of the ride, the swiftness of the column change, and handling that could easily outpace a sports saloon ten years younger. It is ironic that of our quartet it is the oldest of the group but has most in common with the DS. If the Aurelia owner in 1955 could not face the two-year wait until he took delivery of his new Flaminia Berlina, he might have found the DS a very acceptable alternative.

Aluminium was used extensively to reduce the car's weight.



SPECS: 1951 LANCIA AURELIA	
ENGINE	1754cc/6-cyl/OHV
POWER	56bhp@4000rpm
TORQUE	78lb ft@2500rpm
GEARBOX	4-spd manual
TOP SPEED	95mph
0-60mph	15sec
MPG	22
LENGTH	15ft 7in (4.75m)
WIDTH	5ft 6in (1.65m)
WEIGHT	2646lb (1200kg)

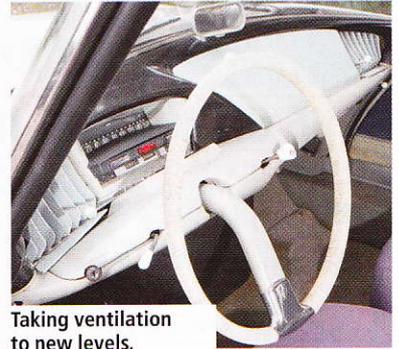
### NEED TO KNOW

Club: Lancia Motor Club - [www.lanciamotorclub.co.uk](http://www.lanciamotorclub.co.uk)  
Spares: 01508-570351, [www.omicron.uk.com](http://www.omicron.uk.com)

# CITROËN DS19 CURRENT VALUE: £10000



In 1955 the DS would have raised more than a few eyebrows.



Taking ventilation to new levels.



**C**AN THERE REALLY be anything new to write about the DS? The short answer is yes – particularly if you consider the car in the context of a 1955-vintage British motorist who had only just accepted the Traction Avant. Coming face to face with a car boasting hydraulic power to the brakes, gears, clutch and steering, clad in a body that seemed to hail from an early *Quatermass* film, must have been a shocking experience.

Rumour has it that at the 1955 Motor Show, Humber Hawk owners fled in terror while several Vanguard Phase III owners were said to have fainted. Only Wolseley 6/90 owners, always the most noble of men, stood firm.

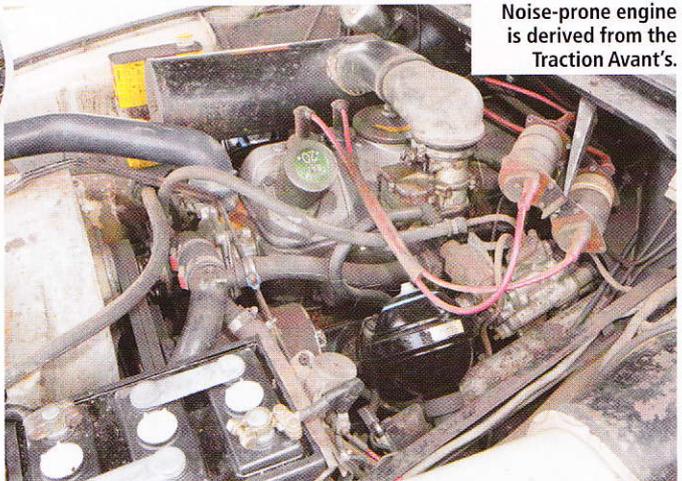
Our 1957 test car, owned by Simon Lynes, is not just the oldest French-built DS in the UK, it is also 100 per cent original. It gives you a unique chance to see a DS19 *au naturel* and imagine what a conventional Fifties British motorist would have thought.

In 1955, buyers of expensive British saloon cars contented themselves with unreliable heater and ventilation/demisting systems. The DS, on the other hand, came with face-level ventilators plus heating ducts to the front and rear. Several British cars circa-1955 still favoured semaphore trafficators, but the DS came with rear flashers directly in the eye-line of the following car. And while the interior of the Jaguar and its ilk was deliberately formal



### OWNER PROFILE

Simon Lynes owns London's famous Citroën garage DS World. He says: 'The trend is now moving towards the early models and many new drivers are surprised to find just how unchallenging the Fifties DS19 is to drive.'



Noise-prone engine is derived from the Traction Avant's.

and dark, with leather trim and thick screen pillars, the DS has incredible all-round vision for a 1955 car. Illuminating courtesy door pillars are mounted on either side and the door windows are frameless. Even the fascia attempts to follow some form of ergonomics rather than scattering Bakelite switches across the dashboard. The DS does contain a couple of unusual touches, but they are utterly practical in their own unique way. Only Citroën's designers would have thought to include not only a starting handle, but a control for a

manual override for the screen wipers, which appeared on their latest model.

The engine is largely inherited from a Traction Avant and is far less noisy than you may have been led to believe. In fact it only adds to the appeal of a car that just doesn't feel 50 years old. Perhaps that's because the DS was so far ahead of its time.

### NEED TO KNOW

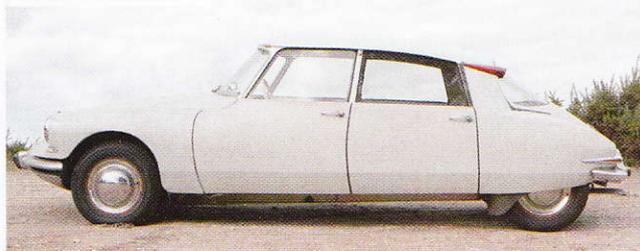
**Citroën Car Club:** 07000 248258, [www.citroencarclub.org.uk](http://www.citroencarclub.org.uk)  
**DS World Ltd, London SW8 (spares):** 020 74987111, email [info@dsworldltd.com](mailto:info@dsworldltd.com)

### VERDICT

For all of the Jaguar's charm, the Lancia's chic and the Mercedes' practicality, there can really only be one winner – the Citroën DS. That's because it's a car that skirts the boundary between excellence and brilliance while being one that actually redefined motoring.



Love it or hate it, the DS's ambitious design still causes a stir.



SPECS: 1958 MERCEDES BENZ 1900D	
ENGINE	1897cc/4-cyl/SOHC
POWER	120bhp@4800rpm
TORQUE	107lb ft@2800rpm
GEARBOX	4-spd manual
TOP SPEED	86mph
0-60mph	25sec
MPG	30
LENGTH	14ft 7in (4.45m)
WIDTH	5ft 8in (1.72m)
WEIGHT	2650lb (1202kg)