



You're the boss of Citroën's UK assembly plant, and you have a problem. Nobody much wants to buy the 2CVs you've been bolting together since 1953, and your large stock of 2CV components shows little sign of diminishing. At the time – mid-1959 – the solution is obvious: you build a glassfibre saloon on the 2CV platform.

The rationale behind what became the Bijou seemed logical, as *Automobile Engineer* painstakingly explained in its analysis of the car: 'Rather than compete with well-established, mass-produced family cars, it was decided to produce a vehicle to appeal to a narrower but more discriminating market. In particular, there was thought to be a market for a small, high-quality, long lasting vehicle as a second car in families already owning a larger one. Used for shopping and local motoring, such a vehicle would not need full family accommodation or high power. It should require only a minimum of maintenance and attention and be capable of resisting deterioration without the protection of a second garage. In both these aspects the air-cooled engine and the simple chassis design are advantages. The problem of outdoor storage could be met by the use of a non-rusting, non-corrodible body'.

No amount of finely-argued logic, however, could save the Bijou – launched at the 1959 Motor Show – from becoming an Anglo-French turkey of the highest order: barely 200 cars were made over the July 1960 to August 1964 period, against a potential capacity of approximately 1500 units a year. Faced with a somewhat odd-looking two-door saloon powered by 12bhp of 425cc flat-twin, and priced at a wallet-lushing £695 (in 1961), would-be buyers stuck to their Morris Minors (£619 in de luxe trim), Ford Anglias (£610) or BMC Minis (£495 and upwards). That, however, was only half the story: the Bijou – dubbed 'The Plastic Monster' by Slough personnel – was a swine to make.

Drawn up by Peter Kirwan Taylor, the accountant and amateur car stylist responsible for the lines of the Lotus Elite, the Bijou was built around 11 separate mouldings, bonded

Flawed gem

Named after the French word for 'jewel', the British-built Bijou was a 2CV derivative which sadly failed to sparkle. Jon Pressnell tells the story



First prototype debuted at '59 Motor Show, featuring undisguised 2CV hammock seats

together where appropriate and with localised metal reinforcement. It was claimed that panels from the six sets of moulds laid down were interchangeable. The completed shell, quoted as weighing 116cwt, was mounted on a standard 2CV chassis via four bolt-on outriggers.

The body manufacturing contract, initially for 1000 shells at a rate of up to 30 per week, went to James Whitson & Co of Yiewsley, Middlesex, a coachbuilding firm with some years of experience in making grp lorry cabs – and which already fabricated the bodies for the TR based Peerless, made, like the Bijou, in Slough. Whitson's involvement with the Bijou didn't last long: after 100 shells, the contract moved to CF Taylor Plastics of Crowthorne, which introduced thicker body lay-up and tubular reinforcement of the bonnet and boot to eliminate stress-cracking. But if the body was stronger, its assembly at the Citroën works was no easier. 'They were terrible things to build. The shells had to be chopped about, relaminated and trimmed down to make things fit,' recalls one old hand. 'The number of hours that went into them meant they could never have been profitable.'

Ken Smith, then production manager at Slough, confirms this tale of woe: 'Laylors did more than its best to overcome the problems, some of which were not overcomeable, as the moulds were the wrong shape. In principle, any component from any mould should have matched that from any other mould. But it never did. To get a set of matching components you had to take the body from one mould, a bonnet and wing from a second mould, a left-hand door from a third mould, and a right-hand door from a fourth mould. It became selective assembly, with a lot of grinding and sanding to make panels fit. Not only that, but the first shells were heavier than we had been told to expect and, in production, they continued to increase in weight. You felt there was an extra passenger in the car.'

Better aerodynamics than the 2CV were always going to offset the Bijou's extra 1cwt and MIRA tests revealed an impressive drag coefficient of 0.37, against a 2CV's Nissen hut 0.53 Cd, with both cars having the same frontal area. All the same, there were limits to what the



Bigger grille on production car improved cooling; fibre mouldings were good quality



Bijou looks like a mini DS coupé from rear; headlamps stay put when the bonnet's lifted

little air-cooled 'twin' could deliver, especially as weight crept up. The Bijou felt 'embarrassingly low powered', reported *The Motor*, going on to comment that it was 'difficult to avoid obstructing the normal brisk flow of rush-hour suburban traffic'. Maximum speed was clocked at a wretched 44.7mph, with 0-40mph coming up in a watching-paint-dry 41.7 secs. Not even 59.5mpg fuel consumption could efface such sludginess, and the magazine, baring its stiff British upper lip, phlegmatically dubbed the Bijou 'an interesting venture', but one 'unlikely ever to kindle the enthusiasm bordering on fanaticism with which other Citroën models inspire many owners'. Rival *The Autocar* was kinder, summarising the car as offering 'an altogether different, leisurely style of motoring which some find very appealing'. Maybe this assessment was prompted by the more sprightly 50.3mph maximum and 31.3 secs to 40mph the magazine extracted from the car.

"If it had come with the 602cc engine, it would have been much more saleable," concedes Bijou owner Roger Griffiths. All the same, Roger says the maximum speed of his car is an indicated 55mph, and that he can average 40mph. "If you lived somewhere flat, with no major hills, the performance would be fine," he points out.

Sceptics first have to decide whether they like the looks of the Bijou. The car appears surprisingly fresh and modern, at least from the rear, thanks to the generously sized curved back window and the raised edges of the roof, and with its pillarless sides it's pleasantly glassy. Inside, first impressions are pleasing. The doors are wide, the floor flat, and the curved windscreen far away from the front seats, with the domed roof further adding to the airy feel. You sit in comfort on disguised, fully-upholstered versions of the 2CV's famous hammock-type seats, facing a DS single-spoke wheel. Despite being criticised at the time, the driving position isn't too bad. Just don't expect much headroom or legroom in the back, although you do get a good parcel shelf and deep side pockets, along with a decent boot which can be expanded by folding forward the rear seatback.

Tidily presented though it is, the overall feeling is a strange mix of the well-executed and the home-made. The sparse flat tin instrument panel, screwed into position with its edges showing, could be from an Isotta, the clumsy umbrella handbrake looks as if it's a relic from a perpendicular Ford Popular, and the wire-

COMPACT AND BIJOU TRIVIA

Some sources give total production as 213 units (203 UK cars, 10 to Australia); Glass's Guide suggests 212. Ken Smith's records show that, after some 2CV component sets had been returned to France, there remained, at the end of 1959, a total of 211 sets. The '59 Show car and display chassis may constitute the two 'missing'.

The Bijou was cooked up by Slough's MD, sales manager and chief engineer – with no support or encouragement from Citroën in France.

The press launch at Slough was so last-minute that, as journalists arrived, the prototype was still without its rear window. As the first scribes approached, the installer slammed the door – and the glass dropped out at their feet.

There were probably no more than five workers on the Bijou line, against 35 for the DS. Production was intended to be 4-5 cars a day but generally no more than one day a week was devoted to the Bijou.

When tested on the prove at MIRA, Automobile Engineer said that, at 30mph, the Bijou's passenger could read a newspaper, so good was the ride.



framed sunvisors are pretty flimsy. On a 2CV such details might have been excusable, but not in a costly niche product such as the Bijou.

Driving proves less of a chore than you might imagine – although in fairness the terrain for my run was largely flat. The 2CV push-pull twist gearchange puts second and third opposite each other and the overdriven fourth is a pronounced twist-and-push up and away from third. It's a convenient arrangement, as you row the car along in the middle two ratios – third in particular being a very usable gear – before slotting the lever into top once a sustainable 35mph has been reached.

Seemingly flat out at an indicated 40mph, the Citroën continues to gather speed – up to 45mph, or even 50mph with a favourable slope. "There's not a lot of throttle response," Roger concedes, telling the story of in-car disputes about whether or not the apparently immobile speedo is actually working.

Still, you know you can – and should – thrash that all-of-a-piece unburstable 2CV engine to within an inch of its life. You also know that 2CVs aren't afraid of corners, so you just keep the momentum up, piling into roundabouts without worrying whether the Bijou will get around. It will, of course, with that characteristic heave-ho roll, part of a seductive chassis set-up: the relaxed, underdamped bounciness of the interconnected suspension cannot fail to put a smile on your face. The steering is adequately quick, and not excessively heavy, the clutch sweet, and the brakes short-travel and firm, so there are no perils in exploiting the tenacity of the chassis. You also have the fun of a centrifugal clutch, enabling clutchless engagement of first or reverse from rest, and allowing you to trickle along in traffic without the need to touch the clutch pedal.

"The Bijou was an example of a good way not to do things," says Ken Smith. "Up to a point it was interesting, but it was costly in time and money and did not achieve its aim of popularising the 2CV in Britain. It was not a happy episode." Such an assessment is indisputable, but remove the Bijou from its manufacturing and commercial contexts and it certainly has charm. Just don't live near any hills. ♦

Disguised hammocks lift out and relocate to alter driving position; 425cc flat-twin.