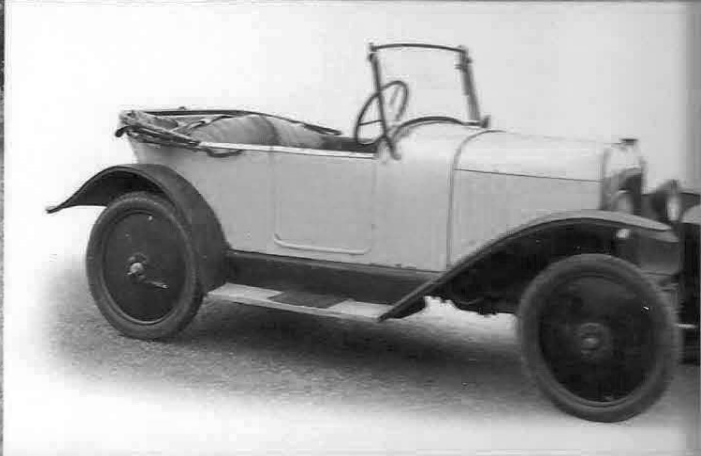


Eighty Years of

Citroën

in the United Kingdom



1923 to 2003

Including the history of the Citroën Works
at Slough from 1926 to 1966

John Reynolds

common-sense factor ... not spoiled by any desire to remind its occupants of a gin palace," and, conceding that it was a car for the enthusiast, markedly different in character from the average family saloon. "Perhaps the most impressive thing is the way that the Citroën can be cornered at speed with a feeling of complete security," *The Autocar* continued. "It has a very solid and stable feel and corners as if on rails."

In point of fact, an important change was just around the corner for the Citroën Cars Traction Avant range. In order to offer customers the space of the Six with the economy of the four cylinder model, in September 1952 production of the Big Fifteen was resumed. However, in contrast to France where it was known as the *Onze Normale* (11B), this version was built in very small numbers at Slough compared with the Light Fifteen—only 1,026 examples were to be made over the following four years, somewhat less than the total of 1,225 Sixes. Now offering the extra luggage capacity provided by the new "big-boot" arrangement recently

introduced in France and subsequently made standard on the other two British Traction models, the Big Fifteen cost £1,152 including tax, £85 more than the Light Fifteen. Like the Six Cylinder saloon, whose 10ft. 1ins. wheelbase body it shared, the 1911cc engined Big Fifteen was fitted with a single bench-type front seat rather than the twin bucket seats of the 9ft. 6ins. wheelbase Light Fifteen, but in all other details of trim and specification it was the same as the smaller car, except for its dashboard. This featured a row of four circular, clock-style instruments, dials and switch-plates—a modification to the normal Slough pattern which was incorporated on the Six the following year. Reviewing the Big Fifteen, *The Motor* commented that "when the front-wheel-drive Citroën was first introduced it was a boldly unconventional design. That, however, was eighteen years ago and although owners of other cars still tend to look on the design as unorthodox it must now be regarded as one of the most thoroughly proven layouts existing anywhere in the world."



Above: In 1955, Citroën Cars built a special batch of 24 RHD examples of the long wheelbase 7-seater familiale version of the Traction Avant, for export to Australia as the Family Seven. (Peter Dulson)

Opposite Top: Before the war, the long wheelbase, six-light Family, Limousine and Commercial versions of the Traction Avant were all assembled in RHD form at Slough and available as standard models in the Citroën Cars catalogue. However, none of these models was produced for the UK market after the war. (Peter Dulson)

Right: The Australian Family Seven boasts the final version of the Slough dashboard, with round-dialed instruments, plus a non-standard Bluemels sprung steering wheel. (Peter Dulson)

Opposite: The Family Seven had two occasional folding seats, so that four passengers could ride in the rear compartment plus two more along with the driver on the front bench seat. The red or brown leather and leather-cloth upholstery was standard for all cars. (Peter Dulson)



With one singular exception, no changes to the Slough-built Traction Avant range were announced by Citroën Cars throughout 1953 and 1954 except for the usual increases in prices, which crept steadily upwards. By October 1955, the three-car range (each model available with a sliding roof as an optional extra) varied in cost from £1,028 including Purchase Tax for the cheapest right up to £1,486 including tax for the most expensive car. This lack of improvement was certainly not the result of a dearth of invention at the Slough factory. Believing that the Traction's frontal aspect was now looking decidedly dated, the Slough engineers produced a prototype six cylinder with the headlamps flared into the wings. Unfortunately, this sacrilegious attempt to modernise the Traction's venerable appearance was not well received by the head office in France and the idea was quickly abandoned.

The exception in question, which was introduced on the Slough production line in late 1954, was a development of such technical originality and inventiveness that it ranked with the adoption of front-wheel-drive twenty years earlier as a measure of the uncontested superiority in automobile engineering and manufacturing technology then enjoyed by the Double Chevron firm. In April 1954, Citroën announced the existence of a 15-Six Traction Avant fitted with a revolutionary hydro-pneumatic suspension system in which (on the rear axle only) the conventional metal torsion bar springs were replaced by gas-filled spheres linked to the wheels by hydraulic fluid under pressure. Not only did this system allow for a constant ride height to be maintained whatever the road surface being traversed or the load being carried, it was also possible to adjust the ride height up and down, or jack up the rear to change a tyre. Production of





These right and left-hand views of the engine bay show the large oilbath air cleaner fitted to export versions of the Slough-built Traction Avant, and also the tube that conveyed warm air from the radiator to the passenger compartment. This was the only form of heater and demister provided on these cars, although a fan-assisted internal heater was an optional extra. (Peter Dulson)

this car—named the 15-Six H or Hydraulique—began in France later that year as an alternative to the conventionally sprung version of the 15-Six, but its reception was such that it soon superseded its sister vehicle entirely.

The adoption of this system required the development and implementation of a completely new precision metal-working technology, involving the establishment of a new factory, located at Asnières near Paris, capable of working to tolerances of one tenth of a micron, a standard of precision never before achieved in the automobile industry. Indeed, the ultra-high precision achieved routinely by Citroën in the manufacture of hydro-pneumatic suspension system components was—and remains—a remarkable feat of industrial skill, being then unequalled in mass production practice anywhere in the world.

Assembly of right-hand-drive examples of the 15-Six H began at Slough towards the end of 1954 alongside that of the standard six cylinder model, although only two cars were completed that year. During 1955 a further 75 six

cylinder hydraulic models were made there. Coupled with the newly-developed Michelin X tyres which were by then standard fitting on all the Traction Avant models, this hydro-pneumatic suspension system gave the Six a new lease of life by permitting even higher standards of comfort, security and cornering-power, as both *The Autocar* and *The Motor* duly confirmed in their reviews of the Slough Six H.

Also in 1955, a small series of very unusual right-hand-drive Traction Avant models were assembled at Slough for export to Australia. Distinguished by the chassis numbers 9/557001 - 9/557025, this special order comprised twenty four long wheelbase Big Fifteen Family Seven-Seater cars plus one long wheelbase Big Fifteen Commercial model, equipped with a fully opening hatch-back style rear door for loading goods. All were trimmed with wood and leather in the normal Slough fashion. Six examples of this unique series, including the Commercial, survive in Australia today. No long wheelbase Traction models were built at Slough in the post-war years for sale in the UK, however.



The authentic Slough Works chassis plate, affixed to the engine compartment bulkhead on the left-hand side. (Peter Dulson)

Another interesting aspect of normal Slough practice was the total of 304 left-hand-drive Light Fifteens produced in small batches every year between 1949 and 1954. Trimmed and equipped to the standard British and Commonwealth right-hand-drive specification, these cars were exported to countries such as the U.S.A., Canada and Switzerland normally supplied by the Paris factory, but for the benefit of customers preferring an English style interior and a twelve-volt electrical system. Similarly, the Paris factory continued to produce a small number of right-hand-drive Traction Avant cars to standard French specification in post-war years, either for export, or for use by French Embassies and government agencies in countries where the opposite rule of the road applied. But none of these cars were ever sold on the UK market, as the French-built Popular Traction Avant model had been before the war.

As previously mentioned, any technical improvements that appeared on the Traction Avant in France were very quickly incorporated in British-built versions, as soon as supplies of the components in question could be shipped to England. Thus from March 1955 onwards, the last examples of the Light and Big Fifteen to be built at Slough were fitted with an improved and upgraded version of the long-serving, four cylinder 191 lcc engine, which as a result of a series of modifications, showed an improved power output, raised from 56 bhp to 60 bhp at 4000 rpm. Recognisable by the identification mark 11D, this engine featured numerous improvements; including a revised cast-iron cylinder head with larger inlet passages and a raised compression ratio, strengthened crankshaft and con-rods with shell-type main and big-end bearings, modified pistons and valve gear, a cast alloy sump and various other changes. In reality, the 11D

engine had been specifically developed to provide the motive power for Citroën's revolutionary new DS19 model which was launched later that year—but as installed in the DS19 it was fitted with an aluminium cross-flow cylinder head of an all-new design, which increased the performance of Sainturati's twenty year old war-horse even further, to 75 bhp.

No more than a hundred Traction Avant cars could have left the Slough factory fitted with the 11D engine in its final form, however, for in September 1955 British production ceased entirely. The explanation of this abrupt demise lay in plans to commence production of right-hand-drive versions of the new DS19 model without delay, to replace the Traction Avant completely in Citroën Car's catalogues. This decision necessitated the closure of the Slough assembly line for a whole eight months to allow the installation of a new paint shop and other equipment. As the DS19 was simply too big to pass through the existing paint shop, it proved impossible to continue producing the old and the new cars together for a year or so to complete the order book and cater for the Traction's ever-faithful but conservatively minded customers, as was the case at the Quai de Javel factory in Paris.

So that autumn, the last right-hand-drive example left the Slough production line leaving another 400 cars still on order and uncompleted—almost six month's production at current rates. Sadly, the wonder and excitement aroused by the arrival of the highly-advanced DS19 never overcame the disappointment and regret caused by the demise of the Traction Avant among the traditionalists who then made up the majority of Citroën Cars' British and Commonwealth clientele.....



Unlike French or Belgian versions, all the Slough-built cars had this Citroën badge affixed at the rear. (Peter Dulson)