

Crossing the great divide

Ford and Citroën took very different approaches to their glam '60s convertibles.

Strange, then, muses Iain Robertson, that the DS and the Thunderbird display so many similarities

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONY BAKER





“Mechanically they could hardly be more different, but both achieve the same top speed”

Like zebras and horses from the same basic gene-pool, their evolutionary routes are oceans apart. And yet, through common objectives of manufacture, purpose and style - the automotive equivalent of nature's environmental determinism - the mid-'60s Ford Thunderbird Convertible and Citroën DS Cabriolet, raised on opposite Atlantic shores, could be sisters.

Sure, they're not exactly twins - the Thunderbird is too sassy and the DS too demure. But their laid-back driving style, boulevard ride, low-tailed tapering coachwork, exquisite chrome-plated ornaments, column-mounted gearlevers and upswept catfish-like snouts bear distinct similarities.

Mechanically, they could hardly be more different. The 3910lbs Thunderbird is muscled along, through a leaf-sprung rigid back axle, by a 6.4-litre 300bhp Detroit V8. Contrast that with the comparatively lithe, hydraulically suspended, DS which has to make do with half as many cylinders, front-wheel drive and only one third of the T-bird's displacement and power. Nevertheless, both cars achieve the same 110mph top speed and, compared to local rivals of the period, score identically for technological eccentricity.

Flaminio Bertoni, the creative mastermind behind the radical Citroën DS, had design proposals for a four-seat, two-door, convertible version on his drawing board as early as January 1954 - a year and a half before the launch of his futuristic saloon. But the first production version did not appear until 1960 and the motivation came not from Citroën or



DS restored from wreck found in '94. Most fittings are new; engine is fuel-injected 2.3

designer Bertoni, but fading French coach-builder Henri Chapron.

Chapron made its name in the 1930s building exotic, specially-commissioned alloy bodies for the Delahayes, Delages and Talbot Lagos of France's most wealthy. In 1958, anxious to supplement flagging demand for extravagant one-offs and limited-run specials, Chapron turned its attention to cheaper, mass-market running gear and unveiled a drophead prototype based on the newly introduced ID19 - essentially a cheaper and technically simpler entry-level DS. Chapron hoped to stimulate enough demand for a small batch of hand-built examples for private buyers and pursued the project through a series of ever-

improving exhibition prototypes. In order to cut costs and allow rear wheel changing, for example, the early versions retained the saloon's removable rear wings, with rather clumsy fixed panels in place of the rear doors.

By the 1959 Geneva motor show, the Chapron 'La Croisette' acquired elegant one-piece rear wings - cut away around the wheels and a neat flush-stowing soft-top. Within a year Chapron was approached by Citroën to build the car, in small numbers, as part of its standard ID and DS model range.

Citroën raised the hood and tapered the rear wings and boot lid slightly, and at the Paris motor show in October 1960 the first 'factory' Cabriolet was unveiled to the public.

Production started early in 1961 with 32 ID Cabriolets and 130 DS Cabriolets completed in the first year. Output peaked in 1963 with 34 IDs and 207 DSs before declining steadily to just 13 DS Cabriolets in the final year of production, 1971. In all, Chapron built 1325 'factory' Cabriolets for Citroën.

Chapron continued to pursue its own range of DS-derived designs - building 116 special convertibles, 121 coupés and 44 limousines between 1958 and 1974. The original heavily ornamented four-seat 'La Croisette' convertible was considered too similar to the 'factory' Cabriolet so Chapron added the two-plus-two 'Le Caddy' as an alternative in 1960 and then replaced it altogether

with the tail-finned 'Palm Beach' in 1963. But none were as beautiful or successful as the cheaper 'factory' Cabriolet.

Across the pond, five years before the first open-topped Citroën DS, Ford had launched the Thunderbird.

A small - by '50s American standards - open, two seater, its sole objective was to win sales from arch-rival Chevrolet's Corvette and establish Ford as the US sports car king. It failed. Its pretty Frank Hershey-designed steel shell was too heavy to challenge the nimble Corvette with its lightweight glassfibre body, and customers complained about its cramped cockpit, poor performance and modest luggage space. For 1956, Ford softened the

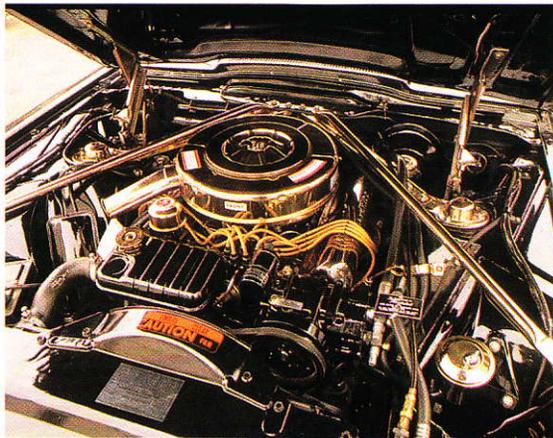
ride, reduced the steering ratio and put the spare wheel on the rear bumper to increase boot space. The following year a super-charger was fitted to the larger 5.2-litre version, boosting power to more than 300bhp. But it was too late. Ford sold a disappointing 21,380 T-birds in 1957 and newly-appointed divisional general manager Robert McNamara pulled the plug on Ford's only two-seater. For 1958, under McNamara's guidance the Thunderbird reappeared with bigger, more luxurious body and - crucially - four seats. Sales took off.

By 1964, Ford had a sporty new Corvette challenger in the pipeline - the Mustang - so the Thunderbird was finally free to shed its uneasy sports car pretensions and adapt to a more appropriate high specification, upmarket, cruiser role. Ford's designers started from scratch, drawing inspiration for its all-new, low-slung, exterior styling from the latest rockets and jet fighters, while inside the space-age theme continued with a catalogue of new electric luxury gizmos and a glitzy 'flight-deck instrument panel.'

Though not compulsory at the time, the '64 T-bird even turned unfashionable safety-belts into must-have aerospace-authenticated accessories. Buckling up not only extinguished the annoying blinking warning light, it formed a crucial step in the T-bird driver's pre-launch flight-deck checklist.

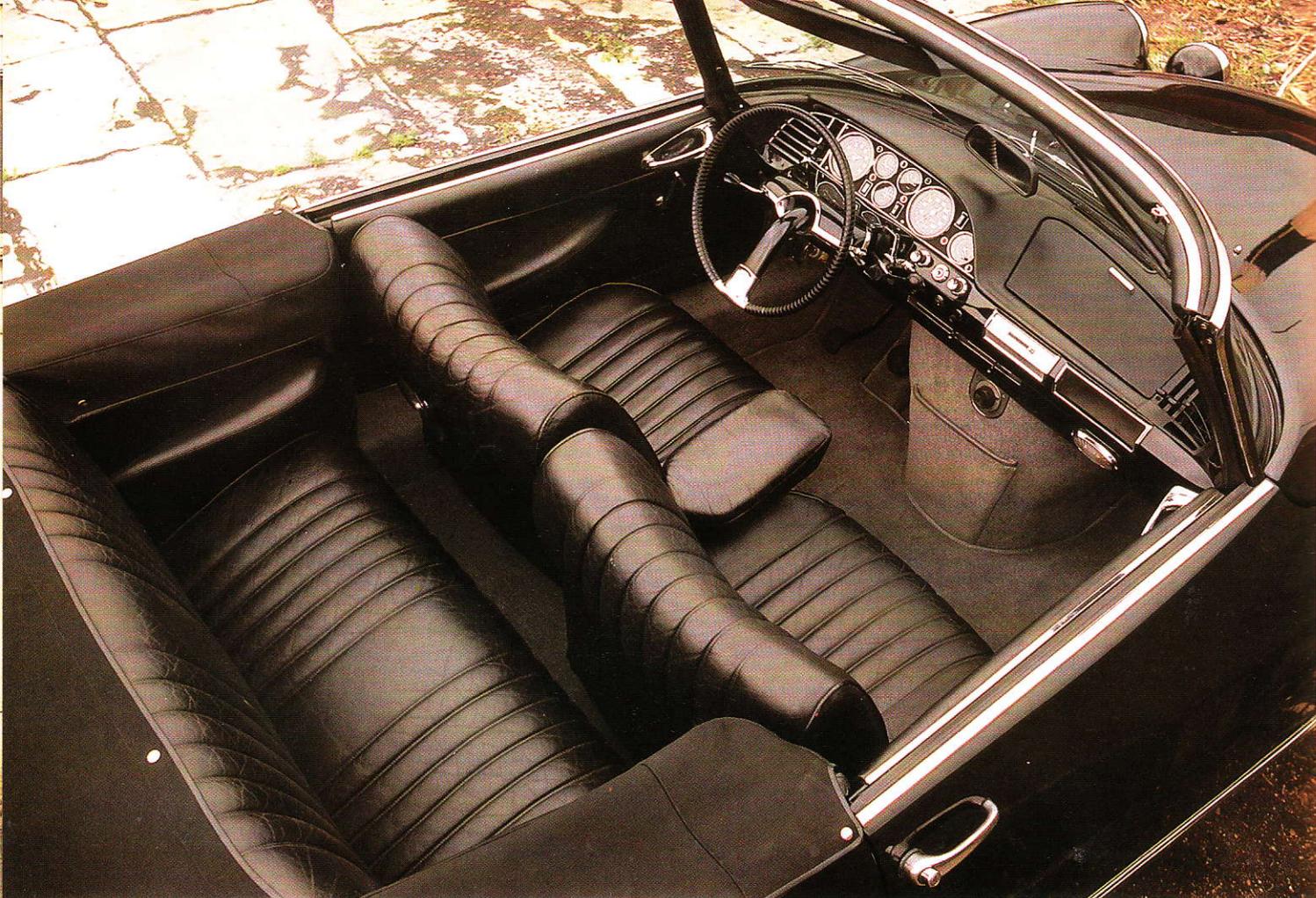
The convertible extended the high-tech theme still further with a fully automatic power hood which folded and stowed like the retractable fixed-head of the

T-'bird rumbles along courtesy of 6.4-litre V8. Power hood takes up all luggage space



"Ford's designers drew inspiration for its low-slung styling from the latest jet fighters"





“Viewed from the side both share the same high-nose, long low-tailed proportion”

earlier Skyliner - robbing the Thunderbird of all luggage space. Ford's customers didn't seem to mind, and annual sales immediately soared by 45 per cent to 92,465. The Thunderbird America wanted had arrived.

Three decades on, surprisingly few 1964 Thunderbird Convertibles survive in original condition and only 10 at most reside in the UK. Peter Taylor's gleaming black example is probably the finest. Restored and meticulously detailed to virtually original condition, including engine bay stickers and factory chalk-marks, it has a unique history.

Registered in Britain from new, it was originally supplied 'fully-loaded' by Wembley American car dealer Simpson Motors to Associated Newspapers vice-chairman Robert A Redhead, and remained in his possession until July 1990.

Taylor's T-bird has virtually every factory option available, including wire wheels and a glassfibre rear tonneau cover which fairs in the front seat headrests giving a two-seater appearance. Only 45 '64 Thunderbirds were built with this wheel and tonneau combination. When new this car cost £4600; today its value is closer to £25,000.

Built in considerably smaller numbers, 'factory' Citroën DS Cabriolets are an even rarer sight on British roads. Discovered in a Somerset barn in 1994 and restored by London-based DS specialist Retromobile, this pretty 1967 example is the most desirable of all. From 1968 all IDs and DSs lost their distinctive toad-eye headlights in favour of an ugly glazed-in arrangement. Models built in 1966



Distinctive headlights and long, low boot give the Citroën a shark-like aggression

and earlier had the good-looking lights, but required more maintenance and suffered regular hydraulic failure. These early cars used red, vegetable-based, hydraulic fluid which was highly corrosive and had to be replaced every six months. Catastrophic haemorrhaging was the inevitable result of poor maintenance, leaving many DSS stranded without steering, brakes or suspension in a pool of red fluid. Later cars used the same green mineral-based fluid as modern Citroëns and were virtually immune to such failure.

Retromobile boss Rupert Preston puts his '67 Cabriolet's value at "around £38,000", although he admits that it has been restored using all new parts to 'ultimate' rather than

original condition. The post-'71 manual gearbox has five forward ratios instead of four and the engine is not the original 109bhp 2.1-litre, but a 1973 vintage 2.3-litre developing 141bhp - despite its gold 'DS21' boot badge. The paint colour isn't original either. Citroën never offered the Cabriolet in black, which is a shame because it looks sensational.

Original or not, these modifications only serve to enhance the wonderful Cabriolet driving experience, which is surprisingly modern thanks to its excellent round-dialled Jaeger instruments, light, positive, controls and sharp dynamic responses. At motorway speeds wind noise from the hood is intrusive but, like all DSS, it rides superbly and mechan-

ical refinement is first rate. Non-cancelling indicators and snatchy over-sensitive brakes, operated by Citroën's unique floor button, are the only real idiosyncrasies.

The T-bird is a different animal altogether. From its deep throbbing V8 to its ergonomically disastrous chrome dashboard, wonderful 'Swing-Away' steering wheel and street-theatre power hood the Thunderbird is as extrovert as the DS is stylish - pure Americana. On the move it fails to live up to the high-tech promise. The potent-sounding gold-plated V8 (Taylor's own indulgence, originals had gold paint) and three-speed self-shifting 'Cruise-O-Matic' gearbox struggle to move the T-bird's vast bulk with any real urge, the steer-

ing is as vague as an arcade game and the wallowy ride is no match for the smooth composure of the DS. It is great fun, though, and totally effortless.

Parked up together - perhaps for the first time - the Thunderbird Convertible and DS Cabriolet are worlds apart, each an icon of its national culture. But study the dimensions, the proportions and the chrome details and you'll find uncanny similarities. At 4840mm the DS is longer than you might expect, just 380mm short of the Thunderbird. The DS's wheelbase at 3125mm is 249mm longer.

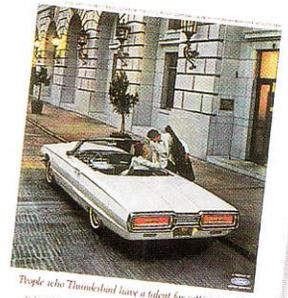
Viewed from the side both share the same high-nose, long low-tailed proportion - looking more like big-booted two-seaters than the

roomy four-seaters they are. The optional rear wheel arch covers fitted to steel-wheeled T-birds make the similarity even more striking

With respect to their overall lengths, the position of their upright chrome-framed windscreens is virtually identical. But the most uncanny relationship can be found in the design of their chrome-plated bumpers and quad-lamped up-swept noses.

It's a long-shot, but according to popular legend, the original Thunderbird look was born in 1951 when Ford general manager Lewis D Crusoe and stylist George Walker visited the Paris motor show to gather inspiration for their secret new roadster. Bertoni and Chapron would have been there as well.

Who knows... But it's certainly true what they say about great minds.



People who Thunderbird have a talent for setting trends
And the Citroën DS Cabriolet... In 1951, Ford general manager Lewis D. Crusoe and stylist George Walker visited the Paris motor show to gather inspiration for their secret new roadster. Bertoni and Chapron would have been there as well. Who knows... But it's certainly true what they say about great minds.

Pure *Thelma and Louise*. Glassfibre fairing makes the car into a convincing two-seater



Thanks to the Historic Dockyards, Chatham, Kent, for use of the location, to Thunderbird owner Peter Taylor and to Citroën DS specialist Retromobile whose 1967 DS Cabriolet is for sale on 0171 498 7111

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