



ATTACK OF THE TIDDLERS!

These featherweights from Peugeot and Citroën defined the Gallic way of doing things, '80s style. **Paul Hardiman** sings the praises of lightness – and passive rear steer

PHOTOGRAPH BY MALCOLM BRIDGEMAN



Fast: fleet-footed; flimsy... dangerous? Great fun! You can see how the thought process evolved and has now come full circle over the three decades since these tiny tear-aways first punched above their weight in the mid-1980s. First, the press praised them for their nimbleness, before came the realisation that the very lightness that conferred their sparkling performance meant that you wouldn't want to be wrapped into a ball in one. When the penny dropped that their joyous handling meant that it was entirely feasible for a press-on type to have a comprehensive accident while so mounted, then corporate opinions shifted. No more ragged edge fun, the public must have safe understeer (gazes meaningfully towards Wolfsburg). Now, there are so few of these little gems left it hardly matters. The rare survivors are revered rather than relics.

They are related but not the same, the last independent designs from the PSA group before small Peugeots and Citroëns began sharing platforms – the 306, basically an enlarged 205, which it replaced, was reskinned into the Xsara. The smaller Saxo and 106 are virtual clones.

In each case, lightness is what it's all about. The AX was a 640kg flyweight at launch and, even with heavier-duty running gear forced by more power, both of these rear hatches are on the right side of 800kg apiece. For comparison, a 1275cc Mk1 Mini Cooper is about 650kg, while a current 'MINI' Cooper is 1305kg...

The 205 had been the first to appear, in 1983. With power from a single-overhead-camshaft 'four', MacPherson struts front and Peugeot's ingenious torsion bar/trailing arm rear end with

space-saving horizontal dampers, originally seen on the 305 estate, it set the template for small PSA platforms. Though it was pipped by the Fiat Uno in the European Car of the Year Award, it was voted Car of the Decade by *Car* in 1990.

The 1.6 GTi version appeared in 1984 – and Citroën was in on the hot hatch game, too, its Visa GTi, shown at the '84 Paris Salon for launch in '85, using the same 1580cc injected engine.

The hot Visa was a stopgap: the AX, introduced in '86, was transformed from a minimalist

economobile into a modern Mini Cooper late in 1987 by the fitting of an all-alloy version of the new 1360cc TU engine, in this case with a twin-choke carburettor. Its output of 85bhp might not sound much but it's 10 more than a Cooper 'S' and the AX already had minimal weight on its side, thanks to careful attention to steel thickness, features such as plastic tailgate and every component being just... tiny.

The first performance version had been the limited-run AX Sport, with a 1.3-litre motor and twin carbs, same as the 205 Rallye's, except that it needed a shorter inlet manifold and even tinier air filters to fit in the smaller engine bay, and lost a few bhp in the process. From '91, by which time the Peugeot was ending production, the GTi – like the rest of the range – changed to injection to comply with tougher 1992 EU emission regs that introduced catalytic converters. An AX GTi makes 100bhp. There was also the Pistes Rouges 1400, based on the standard three-door GT but with a four-wheel-drive system developed and produced by Dangel from 1992 to '94. Later, the AX was developed into the Peugeot 106, which



Clockwise: fat stools on 205; Peugeot-Talbot Sport graphics on tailgate and grille; clear Jaeger dials, with large rev counter



Sharp 205 just has the edge in tighter corners, and will eventually cock its inside rear wheel in the air. This Dutch-market Rallye could have escaped a stage career because of its dealer-fit sunroof



Agile Citroën corners almost as keenly as the 205. It leans much more on its supple suspension, but doesn't feel quite as skittish as the Peugeot. There's no clock in the dash, but it's overhead



replaced (along with the 306) the 205 and in '96 106 was cloned into Saxo to replace the AX.

The 205 Rallye came a year later than the AX Sport and GT. English-market Rallyes had the 1360 TU motor, similar to the AX GT's but with an iron block and missing 10bhp – basically XT's with bigger rims and flash stripes – while German cars packed a detuned 1.9. But the rest of Europe got the real thing: a spartan homologation special with an all-aluminium 1294cc on twin double-choke carbs, Solex to start with and later Weber DCOM 40s. This is the TU24, an 1100 bored out but still slightly oversquare at 75x73.2mm, good for 100bhp plus at 6800rpm. Its suspension and brakes were lifted from the 1.6 GTI.

There's no denying that the 205 looks the tick 'ard business while the AX appears a tad unsexed up. Wide white steels filling squared-off wheelarches provide a perfect stance and shout 'no nonsense', backed up by the stripped-out spartan interior. There are GTI seats but with lightweight coverings, plus functional easy-to-read Jaeger instruments, a manual choke



Clockwise: factory option alloy wheels have been on from new; double chevrons; compact Veglia instrument set, with tiny rev counter



control, wind-up windows and not even a radio.

Now, bear in mind that the 205 GTI 1.6 is considered the finest hot hatch ever (as voted for at the Performance Car Show in 2016), developing 115bhp and weighing 900kg for a power-to-weight ratio of 128bhp per tonne. The Rallye just shades that, but remember the golden rule: add power and it's faster in a straight line; lose weight and it's quicker everywhere. It's the way they deliver that's different, the Rallye is a much more

frenetic device that changes direction almost instantly, with plenty of bite from the front unless you're clumsy with the throttle on the way in.

That PSA rear axle has its rubber bushings cleverly arranged to allow an element of passive rear steer – basically, heel it hard into a corner, or lift off, and you can feel it actively helping you, in that delicious way of changing attitude without needing so much input at the wheel. Lifting the throttle tips the chassis into neutrality, or if you're trying harder can even induce oversteer.

It's quite Mini like, but more so, and better than an M100 Elan, which operates in much the same way but feels crude in comparison – when the tail slides, it goes in 'steps' rather than degrees. You do need to be in front of them, though, and quickly back on some power to keep it contained, because lifting suddenly on, say, a wet roundabout can result in the tail wagging the dog. In faster corners, small Pugs and Citroëns of this era can *in extremis* lift an inside rear wheel.

Both boast nicely communicative steering, light years from the low-geared, heavily castored feel of the previous generation of front-drivers, from Beta to Montego. The weight allows a small footprint, but this 205 wears 185/60s rather than 175/70s due to the availability of 13in rubber.

Nick Bailey bought it after a fruitless 18-month search for a two-door Mk2 Escort Sport: "The cars just kept increasing in value and were still selling as soon as they were advertised. This is much rarer and, with the purchase price and a little tidying-up I've got about £12,000 in it." It may have been saved from being rallied to death, as most of them were, by its dealer-fitted sunroof. Today, a real 205 Rallye is such a rare

Both are in their element around the Curborough Sprint Course, but the Citroën is more forgiving. If you lift off in tight corners, it also looks more subtle than its overtly sporting PSA sibling.



'THE RALLYE IS A MUCH MORE FRENETIC DEVICE, CHANGING DIRECTION ALMOST INSTANTLY'

sight that it's hard to believe Peugeot made more than 30,000 of them. Intriguingly, Bailey's first "proper" car after an MG Midget was an AX GT.

The AX, not far off the Rallye at 115bhp per tonne, is at its best on no more than 165/65s. It is surprisingly soft and compliant, the Citroën philosophy of soft spring rates and long wheel travel holding good. Which means that however hard you bang it, the inside rear stays planted, and lifting the throttle means that it tends to drift all four wheels rather than overtly oversteering. Only the slightly 'Toy-town' feel of the controls – the rev counter is about the size of a 50p – distracts from just how good, communicative and adjustable that chassis is, but the brakes are softer than the Peugeot's, and the gearchange less precise.

The AX feels as quick as the 205, and both are happy around 6000rpm, with redlines at 7000, so you don't have to be sly about giving them a seeing to. Matthew Hocking admits he was "very lucky" three years ago to find one in such good condition, only having to correct such details as smoked rear lights: "My main motivation was preservation, but I have taken to its charms."

As a Mk1A, it lacks the later rear spoiler, and he values a good GT at £6000, tops. The former rock car racer and aficionado of 1960s-'90s French cars points out that Citroën achieved



Clockwise: funky script; Bailey also owned an AX GT; cabin more basic than UK-spec Rallyes; feisty motor thrives on revs

further weight savings by the classically Gallic philosophy of omitting as much as it could: three wheel bolts instead of four, a single wiper instead of two and only a pair of speakers, placed between front and rear passengers. The AX also does without conventional doorhandles, having simple catches accessed via scoops in the body sides, and came as standard with steels, although this one has had the optional alloys since new.

Both, being early-fed, have hot-starting issues,



PEUGEOT 205 RALLYE

Sold/number built 1987-'92/30,111

Construction steel monocoque

Engine all-alloy, sohc 1294cc 'four', with two twin-throat carburettors

Max power 102bhp @ 6800rpm

Max torque 89lb ft @ 5000rpm

Transmission five-speed manual driving front wheels

Suspension: front MacPherson struts rear trailing arms, torsion bars, telescopic dampers

Steering rack and pinion

Brakes ventilated discs front, drums rear, with servo

Length 12ft 2in (3708mm)

Width 5ft 7in (1577mm)

Height 4ft 3in (1295mm)

Weight 1742lb (790kg)

0-60mph 9.6 secs

Top speed 118mph

Mpg 30

Price new £7810 **Price now** c£12,000

Shared DNA is obvious in sharp lines, though the AX is about 200mm shorter – most of which is in the nose and engine bay. Both are now rare, too: just 39 GTs are known of in the UK and only 11 Clio Rallies.



'HOWEVER HARD YOU BUNG IT, THE INSIDE REAR STAYS PLANTED. IF YOU LIFT, IT DRIFTS'

but that just reminds you that these are analogue cars built before the age of full engine management and for me that adds to their appeal. Both are roomy – the Citroën, notably, can take four in comfort – but carrying a passenger just about kills their driving appeal. As with a Caterham, adding another body increases all-up weight by around 10%, and you feel it dull the performance.

These platforms represented a golden era in making humdrum cars entertaining, basically by not treating the driver as an idiot, but it's interesting that their behaviour is retrospectively branded 'dangerous' by the same titles that raved about them when they were new. Yet that very behaviour generates their appeal, and dates them at the same time. Do we condemn Frazer Nashes because they corner sideways as a design feature?

You could argue that an AX Sport might have been a closer comparison to the Rallye, but try finding one. The last one advertised was asking £12,650 – about the value of 'our' 205 Rallye.

There's no 'which is better?' here. They are fascinating examples of what thoughtful French philosophy and engineering produced to delight keen drivers when all Ford could manage was pushrods and beam axles in the XR2, and they are related if not actually descended. That said, the 205 is the 'best', of course – in keeping with



Clockwise: tailgate bottom half is plastic; GT reminds Hocking of one his brother bought new; cublat dash; lively yet frugal motor

its slightly naughty looks, it's rawer, stiffer, rarer and rapidly becoming more collectable than an RS 2.7 Lightweight. We reckon that there are just 11 'proper' T U24 205 Rallyes in the UK and some of those are competition cars.

But the AX is a surprise: as swift in practical terms, super comfortable and probably even harder to find in standard condition. So what I really want is a GT with the Rallye's 'proper' twin-carbed 1.3. An AX Sport, in fact.



CITROËN AX GT

Sold/number built 1988 '92/c 2,400,000 (all)

Construction steel monocoque, with plastic tailgate

Engine all alloy, sohc 1360cc 'four', with twin-choke carburettor

Max power 85bhp @ 6400rpm

Max torque 86lb ft @ 4000rpm

Transmission five speed manual, FWD

Suspension front MacPherson struts rear trailing arms, torsion bars, telescopic dampers

Steering rack and pinion

Brakes discs front, drums rear, with servo

Length 11ft 7in (3531mm)

Width 5ft 3in (1600mm)

Height 4ft 4½in (1340mm)

Weight 1592lb (722kg)

0-60mph 9.2 secs

Top speed 112mph

Mpg 32.5

Price new £7199

Price now £6000