

Did Citroën make a DS21 Bianchi Special?

Prologue.

When Citroën revealed the DS at the Paris Motor Show in 1955 it shook the motoring world as arguably the greatest advance in motoring history: in design, suspension and braking in road-going cars. It wasn't long before D Models proved themselves competitive in rally, road and track racing, despite their four cylinder 'agricultural' engines. They were incredibly adaptable for each form of racing, requiring minimal modification to compete with much more souped-up, powerful cars. They were lined up at Bathurst, for example, amongst V8 'supercars' of their generation and gave them serious competition, because they out-braked them all, with their mighty inboard disc brakes against the drum brakes of the opposition, and superior handling, thanks to their hydro-pneumatic suspension.

To the majority of Australian motorists, the D Models were strangely shaped, queer, 'flash' cars. Mechanics would refuse to touch them, because they appeared too complicated, never mind their 'agricultural' engines. In the meantime, however, they were quietly making a name for themselves, so it was no surprise to observant motor-racing officienados that they did so well in world-wide rallies and endurance events.

At this point I should introduce the hero of this story, Lucien Bianchi, Italian-borne Belgian racing driver of the 1950s and 1960s. 1968 was a great year for this versatile driver, who raced track and rally events on both sides of the Atlantic. This year was one of his most successful, including third in the 1968 Monaco Grand Prix in a Cooper T86B, a win with Pedro Martinez at the Le Mans 24 Hour endurance race, in a Ford GT40 in September 1968, competitor in many forms of motor racing and flag-bearer for Citroën in numerous rallies. For me, one of his greatest achievements was the win denied him and his co-driver, Jean-Claude Ogier, in the 1968 Daily Express London to Sydney Marathon, more of which later.



Lucien Bianchi, 1934 -1969.

My favourite D Model: my most cherished car and main reason for originally joining the CCCT .

Shortly after its inception in the 1980s, I joined the Citroën Car Club of Tasmania and was a member until the late nineties, by which time I had parted with my last Citroën, a 1970 DS21ie Five Speed Manual, which I bought in Perth in 1975. It was much against my inclination and better judgement to sell it in 1995, but I was voted out of it by wife and daughter, after owning it for twenty years. It went to Jonathan Clabburn, a Sydney professional photographer. He got it for \$6,000, knowing full well it was worth \$20,000 in Sydney.

From 1970 to 1995 I owned six D models in WA; the last, with two CXs and one GS, in Tasmania. In discussion with Mike Barrett, I learned the GS had been owned by his father. Small world! If you want more details about them, you can ask me.

When my daughter arrived in London in 1998, she discovered the DS was a very cool car. Until then, she thought like her school mates that it was 'different'.



My lovely DS, accompanied by the photographer's wife and our families, in convey with the GS, on Gormanston Hill in the mid-eighties. Perhaps this photo was one of the reasons I was voted out of the car, for it was originally titled, 'Two loves'.

Re-joining the CCCT.

Because of a windfall in my finances that made me wonder what I would most like to spend it on, I bought a 2009 C5 Exclusive HDi in Adelaide, having discovered my chances of getting back into a D Model was going to be too expensive: much more so than the C5. So, I was qualified to re-join the CCCT, thereby getting in touch with Mike Barrett and Charles Murdock.



My 2009 C5 Exclusive HDi Turbo, wearing its SA plates.

When Mike Barrett and I first met in Ulverstone on Wednesday, 22nd November, we naturally fell to discussing our histories of owning Citroëns. Mike and I naturally recalled our favourite cars. Mine, I said, was a 1970 DS21ie Five Speed Manual, which I was told by Larry Stevens of Dependable Motors in Perth, with whom I traded in a beautiful silver 1970 DS21 Pallas for it in 1975, was a rare model called the 'Bianchi Special'. With the 1968 Daily Express London to Sydney Marathon fresh in my mind, I was fully prepared to accept that. Mike, however was sceptical about it, so I agreed to see if I could follow up the veracity of Larry Stevens' comment.

The 1968 Daily Express London to Sydney Marathon Rally.

If you're age my vintage, or close to it, and a motoring enthusiast, you would recall the 1968 Daily Express London to Sydney Marathon. The rally was supposed to show-case the British Motor Industry, which was flagging and needed a publicity boost. It was an open event, so it attracted international entries, including Australian manufacturers. Naturally, it drew much attention in the countries it passed through, especially Australia, 24th November to 17th December 1968.

If you were a Citroën enthusiast, you would have rejoiced in the performance of Lucian Bianchi and Jean-Claude Ogier in their DS21 #87, which as soon as it set off from Perth, placed third, left the rest of the field steadily in its dust.



Entry 87, Bianchi and Ogier, in the 1968 London to Sydney Marathon on an Australian dirt road stage.

On the final, cruising stage of the Marathon, on 17th December 1968, with 158 kilometres to the finish in Sydney, on a supposedly closed road to Nowra, with Ogier driving and Bianchi sleeping in the passenger seat, they encountered a BMC Mini, fully kitted out with rally restraints, driven against the traffic by a couple of inebriated off-duty policemen. The result was a head-on that destroyed the right front of the Citroën, seriously injuring Bianchi (both were hospitalised), and leaving the Mini on its left side. Paddy Hopkirk, several minutes behind in his BMC 1800, was first on the scene. Before the next car was in the area, Hopkirk returned to a recently passed check-point to call for help for Bianchi and Ogier. Hopkirk thereby gave up a certain win, which Andrew Cowan took with no scruple, in his Hillman Hunter. I reluctantly agreed that he deserved it, because he was one of the ten finishers of a gruelling event.

Because the marauding Mini was so well kitted out, there were suggestions of sabotage. It is not difficult to imagine a BMC executive in Sydney exclaiming, "That Citroën must be stopped!", with Hopkirk in his BMC 1800 in second place. It was to his complete credit, that Paddy did not take advantage of Bianchi's and Ogier's catastrophe, being more concerned with their safety than the certainty of his win.



Entry 87 destroyed in a head-on crash by the Mini that had no business being on the road, on its side, left foreground.



Entry 87, the moral winner of the 1968 London to Sydney Marathon deposited, presumably, at Nowra.

This narrative did not end there, for later, Bianchi, not fully recovered from the crash, died in practice for the 1969 Le Mans, in an ill-prepared Alpha Romeo T33/3 on 30th March, 1969.

I would surmise that at that point, the Citroën executive called the DS model closest to Bianchi's Marathon car, at the time the fastest of D Models, the 1968 to 1972 DS21ie Five Speed Manual, the 'Bianchi Special', as Larry Stevens claimed. I confess, however, that I have found nothing in my consequent research on the topic that substantiates Larry's claim. I am still happy to think of my car as a 'Bianchi Special', to commemorate Lucien Bianchi, a great driver,

As it happens, in the subsequent London to Sydney Marathon in 1977, Paddy Hopkirk, Michael Taylor and Bob Riley, were third in a CX2400, Claude Laurent and Jean-Claude Ogier fourth in their CX2400, and Jean Paul Luc and Patrick Vanson 7th in their CX2400. Andrew Cowan won the event again, fairly, in a Mercedes 280E, with Makin and Mike Broad. Tony Fowkes and Peter O'Gorman were second in their Mercedes 280E. Queensland Citroën dealer, Jim Reddiex, with Barry Ferguson and Doug Stewart, all Australian team, in 10th in their CX2400.

Jim Reddiex had already made his mark, with Ken Tubman and Andre Welinski, in the 1974 UTD London - Sahara - Munich World Cup Rally of 19,000 km, driving their Total Citroën Australia DS23ie, winning in a record margin, 28 hours ahead of the factory supported, Peugeot 504 Ti cars, that were second, third and fourth.

Postscript.

A few months ago, a couple in Sydney phoned to tell me they had found that very car, my 'Bianchi Special', near Ballarat. It had been standing in a paddock for the last fifteen years. They had bought it for \$9,000 and carried it to their home on a trailer, complete with the log-book that I kept scrupulously all the time I had owned and loved the car. Included in that was that I had the engine block reamed out by Merv Grey's Workshop in Launceston, and fitted a set of DS23 liners and pistons, made, funnily enough, in England, in 1989. Meantime, I polished the air distributor, inlet manifold and exhaust ports of the cross-flow head. Asking Merv Grey if he could improve the head, he said he could not. The result was a gratifying improvement of performance and economy, using its original Bosch Fuel Injection computer.

The wife of the couple earned her spurs as a detective, for she tracked me at home in Tullah and found my phone number. They called me to tell me their news. I was stunned and emotional to know my old friend had been so long neglected, but had finally been rescued. They said they would restore it, if it wasn't beyond their means to do so.

I wait with baited breath, hoping they do restore it, wishing I had known it was there, looking for another owner over fifteen years ago, before it was cast aside so ignominiously. Having parted with the wife and daughter in 2002, I would have moved heaven and earth to make it mine once more, without argument.