

For some, the best part of an old car is its interior. **Martin Buckley** guides you around five of the most evocative post-war interiors from the Fifties, Sixties, Seventies and Eighties

WORLD OF

NOTHING GIVES YOU THE flavour of a classic, a sense of its period, and its place in the scheme of things, like its interior. It is the cabin of an old car that sets it apart, and sometimes lifts it above, its modern counterparts. Be it humble run-about or high-class Hmousine, after you've looked at the shape you want to know about

the seats, dash, switches and the little bits and pieces that bring it to life: how many of us have spent hours sitting behind the wheel of some old derelict, fiddling and caressing, soaking up the atmosphere as if, somehow, to fire the engine might break the spell?

No matter how fast and refined contemporary machinery becomes, recreating the ambience of a period cabin would be impos-

sible for today's designers. Crash safety and ergonomics have outlawed much of the detail that gives, say, a Sixties Jaguar saloon its special and unmistakable feel: solid, skull-threatening walnut on dashboards and door cappings without crash padding would not be allowed, never mind that distracting chrome, a row of indecipherable toggle switchgear or those shiny, solid black ⇨

plastic steering wheels that are so soothing to the touch but so unyielding in a shunt. Moderns have bigger glass areas, so you lose the seclusion that thick C-posts give. Also, in many older cars you sit higher, in the sort of dominant driving position only off-roaders afford you these days, with a view along a bonnet that is inevitably more shapely and distinctive.

Then there are the aromas – not just of the leathers but the plastics, glues and carpets that manufacturers used in the Fifties and Sixties – that are no longer with us today. One whiff of an interior (and it's amazing how strongly some cars retain their original odour) can send you reeling back through the years, recalling events long forgotten.

This isn't just about wood and leather, either. As we approach the end of the century, the cabins of later classics of the Seventies and afterwards begin to look separate and unusual too: name a modern car that uses plastics with the same bold, colourful relish as the first examples of the Rover SD1 for instance.

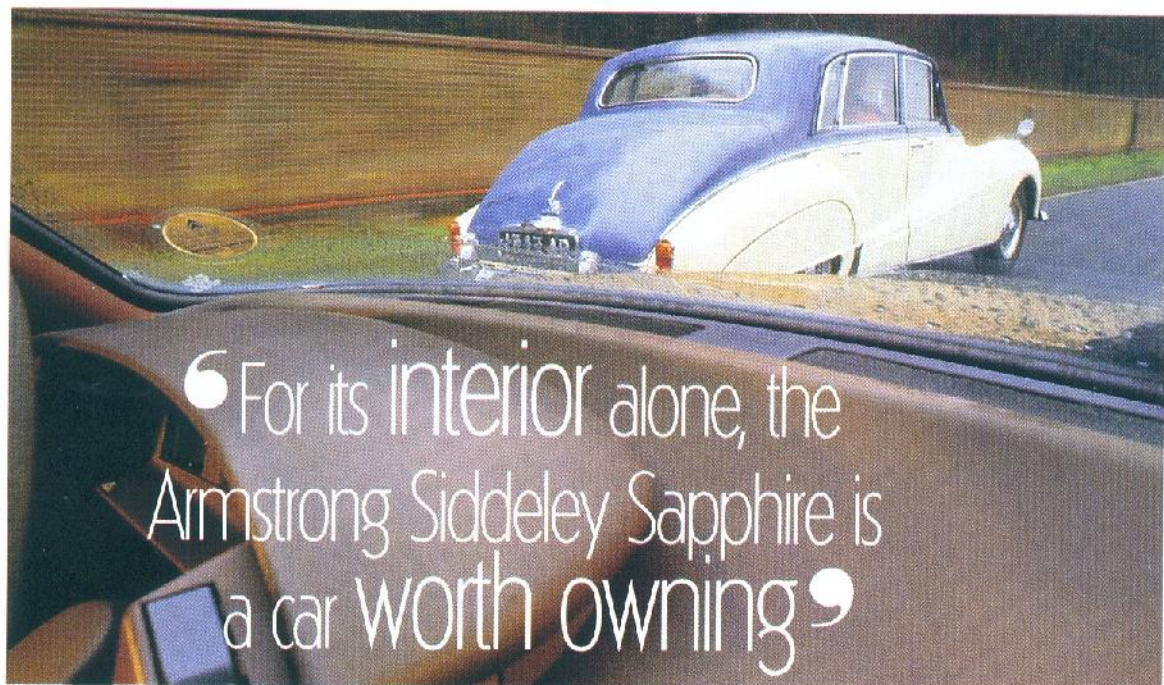
Here we celebrate five of the most evocative post-war interiors from the Fifties, Sixties, Seventies and Eighties. From the clubland atmosphere of an Armstrong Siddeley Star Sapphire, to the futurism of an early Citroën CX; the lavish penthouse-appeal of a Maserati Quattroporte, to the suburban pretensions of a Vanden Plas 1100, or the caddish flash of a Mk2 Jaguar. Step inside... ➔





Armstrong Siddeley, an Edwardian drawing room on wheels. The finest woods and leathers can give any car charisma and presence, as well as smelling and feeling wonderful, but more modern materials in '60s and '70s cars have their charms too

CLUBLAND



“For its interior alone, the Armstrong Siddeley Sapphire is a car worth owning.”

DON'T DISMISS THE ARMSTRONG Siddeley Sapphire, especially this last-of-the-line Star Sapphire, as just another matronly British saloon of the Fifties: packing 4 litres and 165bhp in a well-honed separate chassis, it had, and still has, surprising driver appeal.

Launched in 1958, this was a swift and restrained 100mph A-road express that hoped to tackle the Jaguar MkIX head-on but was not produced in sufficient numbers – at a sufficiently low price – to be really in with a hope.

Shame that, because whereas the 'bargain'

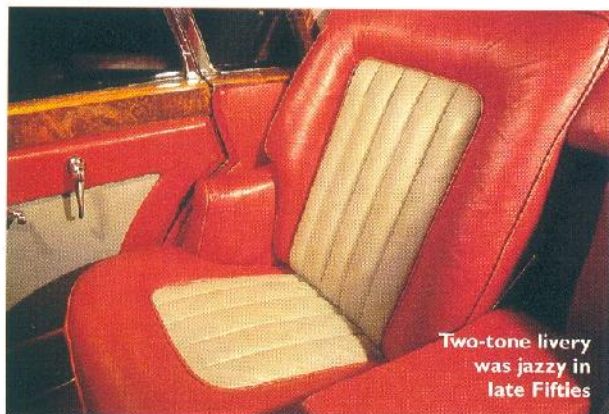
Jaguar aspired to quality, the Armstrong's appeal went more than skin-deep: here, in fact, was a beautifully built, traditional luxury car in the carriage-trade mould, exquisitely furnished in Edwardian drawing-room taste.

You climb up into the Sapphire using a step that forms part of the sill. You need the step because the floor is built on top of the car's substantial boxed cruciform chassis, which makes for a distinctly imperious view along the noble bonnet, with an illuminated 'sight' atop the brow of each wing. The steering wheel is a huge two-spoker with reach adjustment. The plump leather door armrests can be moved up and down too, so it's easy to get comfortable. Unless you are really tall, that is: the seat has no rake adjustment and very little movement for legroom, in order to liberate room for tycoons lounging in the back.

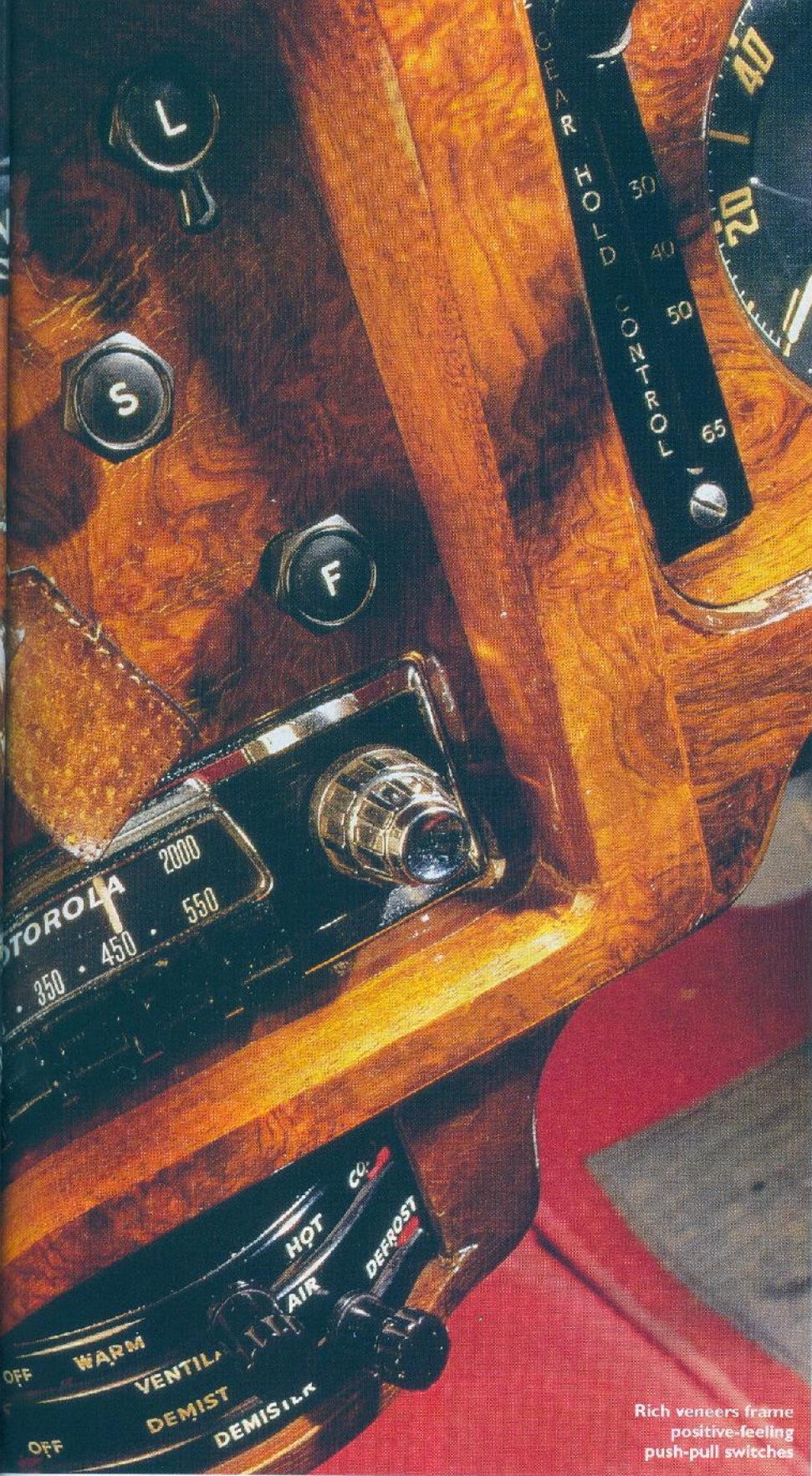
The firmly-sprung front seats form a split bench; the passenger's slightly wider to accommodate a third person, unless the centre armrest is folded down for the club-armchair effect: anyone for cigars and brandy?

The livery for the seats and door panels is a rich red on this car – a concours winner, owned by Kerry Schroeder – contrasting with light grey centre panels and highly-figured dark walnut on the dash, door cappings and on the A, B and C pillars.

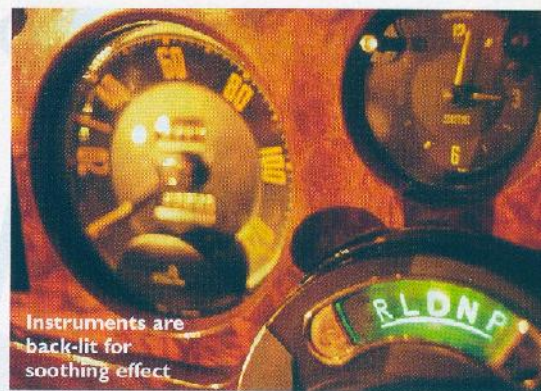
This is an interior full of wonderful detail. Rear passengers have their own independent heater – controlled by a big adjuster and a fan switch on the driver's-side B-post – which blows air through ducts on the rear shelf to clear the glass. The gop-shaped Bakelite switches clustered in the centre part of the dash have a wonderfully crisp, heavy-but-smooth engineered feel to their action: the light switches, in particular, have complex twist-and-pull dual functions that are especially satisfying. The same goes for the window winders which are both high-g geared and smooth, and for the



Two-tone livery was jazzy in late Fifties



Rich veneers frame positive-feeling push-pull switches



Instruments are back-lit for soothing effect



Rear passengers have separate heater controls

way the doors shut with an easy, heavy clunk. Wouldn't such soothing, satisfying mechanical actions – like stroking a car – make you live longer if performed daily?

All Star Sapphires were automatics and the Borg-Warner 'box is controlled by a ball-ended column shift with a chunky, positive movement. Flip open the glove box and there's a shock: the other side of the lid is finished in Formica, just

like an old kitchen table, inviting occupants to use it for putting cups on.

Lighting is moody and well-considered: the elegantly figured main instruments and the quadrant on the steering column for the automatic gearbox are back-lit and glow a restful green at night. When you open the doors, the soft, yellowy glow makes this a beautifully cosy and inviting interior.

As the Star Sapphire burbles through the night, it's a bit like sitting in front of an old radio set. It must have been restful and reassuring to have been a businessman – perhaps a Hatton Garden jeweller – enjoying the rear seat, seeing the streetlamps reflect off the woodwork and enjoying the swift and assured way that the big £2500 motorcar swept effortlessly past lesser vehicles. The Star Sapphire had a unique adjustment, via a sliding lever on the dashboard, that allowed the driver to hold second gear at any speed up to 65mph, so it didn't hang about.

The owner would have liked the way the big straight-six was just a distant murmur, and the impressive bite of those new-fangled front disc brakes. Only his driver would have known about the slightly ponderous power steering which, while not too light, needed constant small corrections to keep the car in a straight line.

Which doesn't mean to say that the Armstrong handles like a pig: such apparently dignified cars might not lend themselves to undignified cornering – if only because smooth, shapeless leather seats have little purchase on the posteriors of their dignified occupants – but in fact the suspension is quite stiff, the car's behaviour gentlemanly, in a way that many later big saloons of the Sixties just weren't.

It's a shame that the success of Jaguar in the Fifties killed off marques like this. It's an even bigger shame that of the 950 Star Sapphires built, the survival rate is only in double figures. For its interior alone it's a car worth owning. ●

MINIMAL CHIC

THE SLIM PROFILE OF THE CITROËN CX has worn the years well (the last ones were built in 1989, the first in 1974) and, if anything, the interior, and especially the dashboard, is more radical than that of late DS models, which became progressively more 'normal'. Perhaps its day is coming as a fashionable classic like the trendy 'D'.

This left-hand-drive, base-model 2-litre was a pre-production car – one of a pair that came into this country in 1974, nine months ahead of their UK launch, for show and evaluation purposes. It was bought off the Earls Court show stand by its

first owner (who also bought the first SM in the country) but eventually found its way into a scrapyard – like most other early CXs – by the early Nineties. Luckily it was recognised by local specialists and was fully restored by Roger Bradford of the CX Centre in Cambridgeshire.

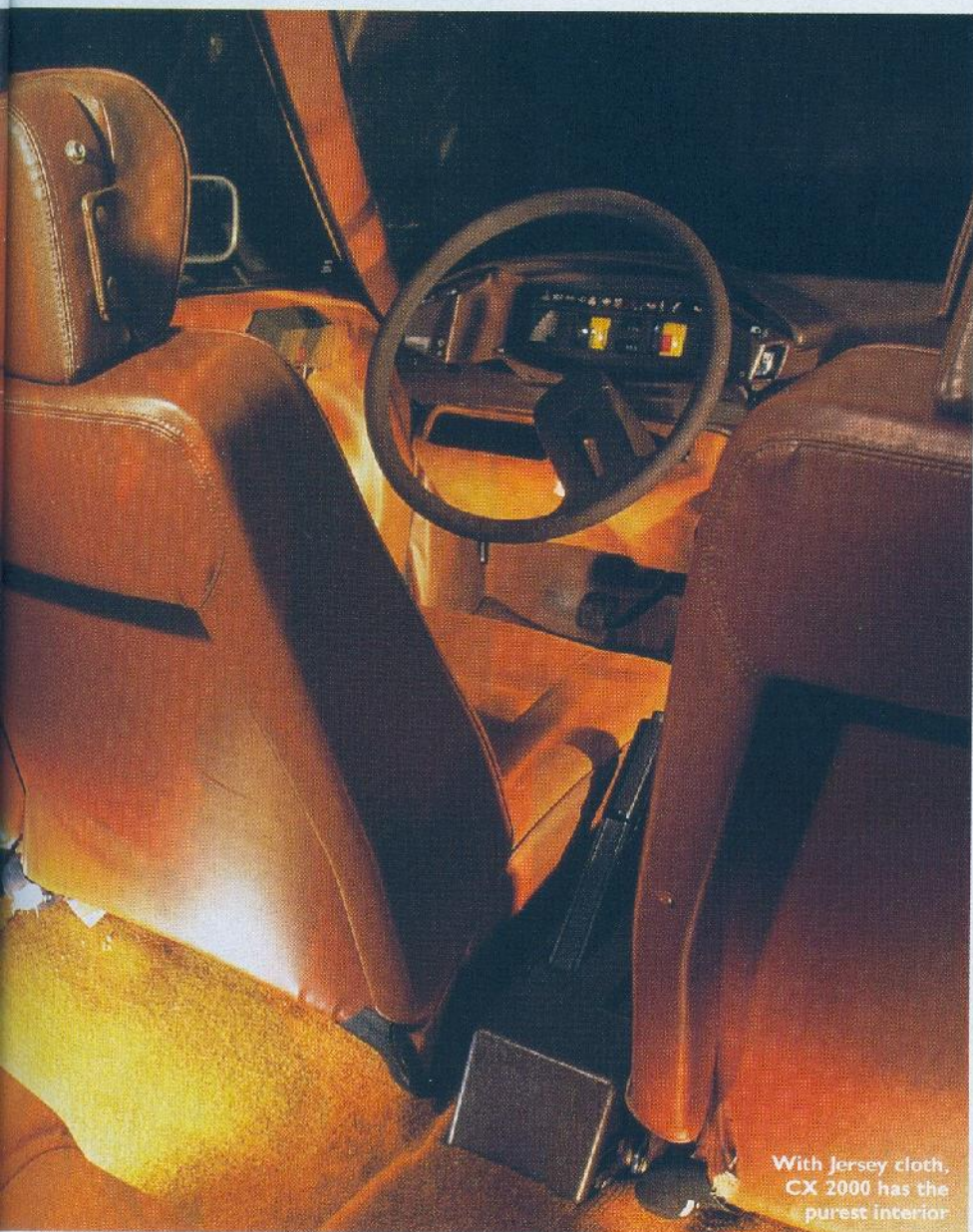
If only today's cars could dare to be as brave and futuristic inside as this. The fascia is a great sweep of brown, non-reflective, slightly mottled plastic, with everything the driver needs concentrated around an instrument pod shaped like a half-closed eye. The door panels are similarly bold, with door pulls in yielding foam that



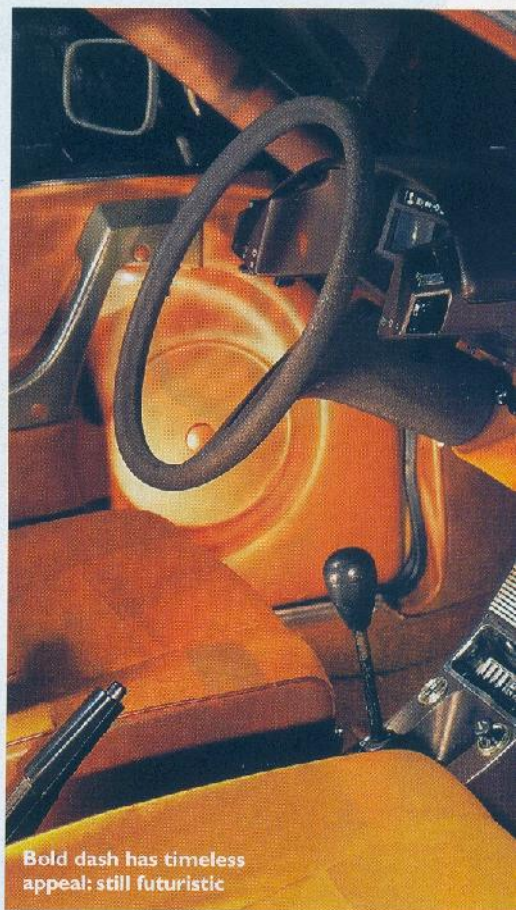
sweep into armrests and feature sketchy rear-drop-shaped lock catches. There is a small cubby hole for the driver, a big, lit shin-bin for the passenger and a curiously pod-shaped ashtray plonked atop the centre console like a mutant clam shell. Speedometer and rev counter take the form of revolving yellow drums behind convex magnified glass and look like refugees from a one-armed bandit. Other than a petrol gauge and clock, all other information comes via 16 warning lights, like Blackpool's illuminations, built into the top of the pod. The centre lights are the ones to keep an eye on – hydraulic pressure, water temperature, oil pressure – as they bring on the 'stop' light urging you to halt and switch off. The other gauge is a conventional water temperature instrument, just below the steering column.

Sensibly, the lights, horn, windscreen wipers and the famous non-self-cancelling indicator controls are clustered within fingertip reach of the steering wheel on satellites either side of the main pod, an idea used on later GS models. As plasticky Seventies switchgear goes, it isn't especially satisfying to manipulate but the switches

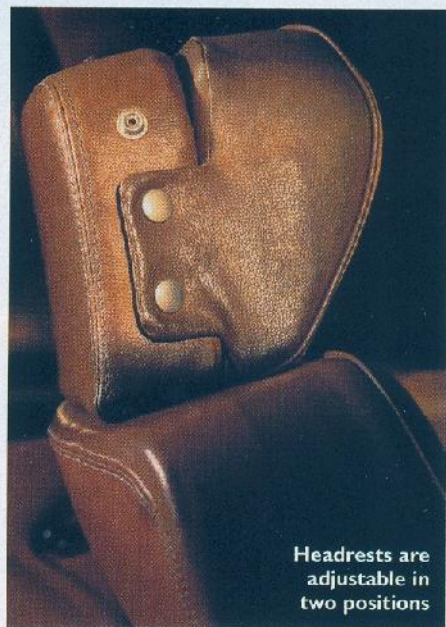
“Only now are the CX's advances over the DS being fully recognised”



With Jersey cloth, CX 2000 has the purest interior



Bold dash has timeless appeal: still futuristic



Headrests are adjustable in two positions

do the job admirably – the driver shouldn't have to take his or her hands off the wheel.

The vertically mounted radio wasn't to be found on later cars, which placed it between the seats, alongside the suspension height adjustment levers. The seats are highly stylised but deeply comfortable. Trimmed in a practical orange cloth called Jersey velour, the front seats feature headrests adjustable by the use of press-studs. The big Prestige offered the ultimate in CX legroom but the standard Citroën, with its almost-flat floor, wasn't exactly lacking either.

Certain details separate this very special CX from the rapidly thinning early CX herd. Outwardly, all you can see are the unique hub caps that were not used on the production cars and an unusual filler flap. On the inside, you'll find slow, noisy electric windows (again, not used on basic production CXs, which have manual winders set in the circular door trim cut-outs), non-production height adjustment for the front seat and a DS switch for the heated rear window.

Less desirable novelties of those early cars included the lack of power steering – almost all



Spinning-drum speedo not universally liked in the mid-Seventies

the UK cars had Vari-power steering – which makes driving the car around town something of a chore, although the diameter of the single-spoke wheel was increased to compensate.

A thrashy 2-litre transverse four-cylinder engine deploys just 106bhp through a mere four agricultural speeds for a top speed of just over 100mph and a 0-60mph time in the 12-second bracket. Torque is there though, and it will return 25mpg.

On a positive note, this early car rides better than its later siblings, almost as smoothly and softly as a good DS, as it sweeps majestically over pot-holes and cracked asphalt, yet manages aston-

ishing grip on its modest Michelin MXV rubber.

With fine aerodynamics of 0.34Cd (long before Audi began talking of such things), the CX generates little wind or road noise and is magnificently stable in side winds. As a motorway express, the CX was always difficult to beat.

However, as a piece of ground-breaking technology, the CX, in the giant shadow of the earlier DS, could not help but look slightly tame. Only now, almost a decade after its demise, are its qualities as a proper big Citroën – and its solid advances over the DS – being fully recognised. Buy now while stocks last. ●

PENTHOUSE SUITE

WHAT DO YOU CALL A Maserati Quattroporte parked in a taxi rank? A Hyundai Stellar, of course! Who could deny that this opulent four-door supercar doesn't bear more than a passing resemblance to the Korean Cortina, the angular and uncompromising three-box styling of both cars coming from the pen of Giugiaro.

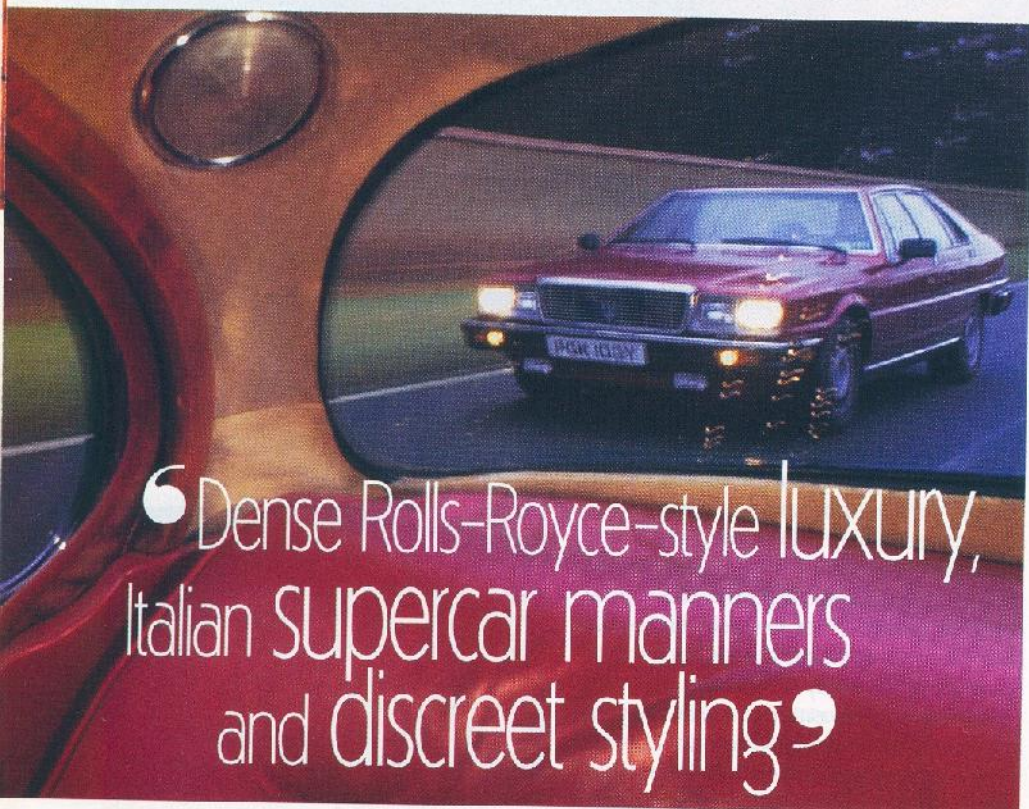
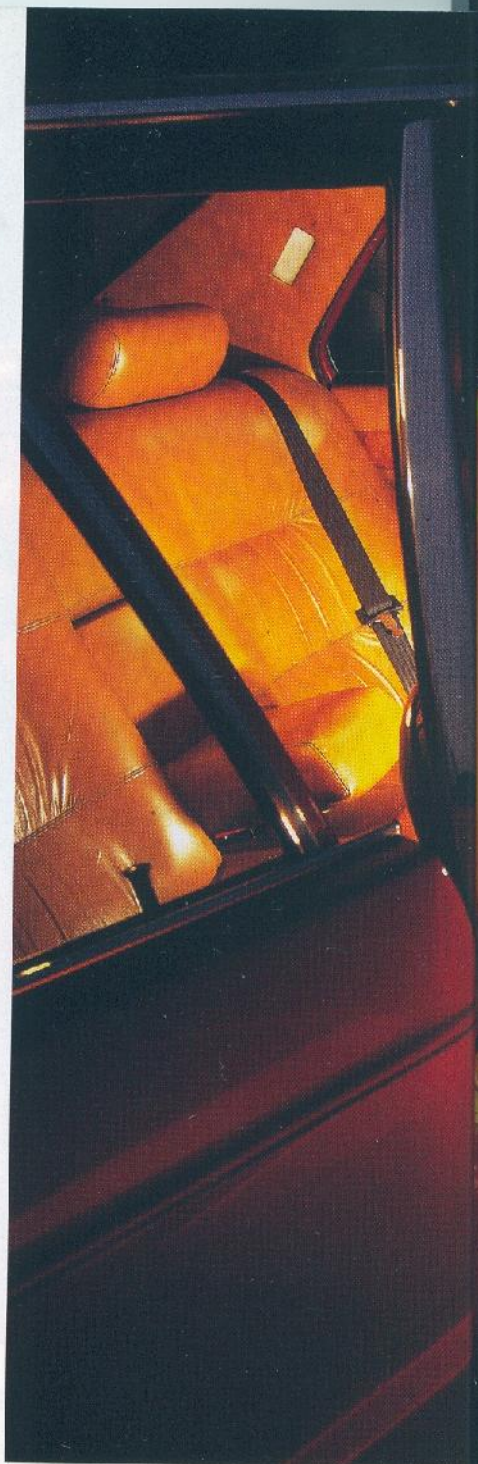
The 4.9-litre V8 Maser got there first though – 1979 to be exact – and whether you like it or not, this is a car with gravitas and presence, six feet across and a little shorter than an SEL Mercedes.

As, in its day, one of the most expensive and fast big saloons in the world (it will exceed 140mph), beloved of both the Mafia and politicians in its native Italy, the Quattroporte has a truly striking interior of rare opulence. Never was leather used so lavishly, in a loosely pleated, sumptuous style, somehow suggestive of the

arrogance of serious wealth. The fat, fleshy rolls of undulating hide – repeated on the centre armrest that hides an oddments box – take me back to the early Eighties and the furniture found in the houses of the well-to-do, glimpsed through open curtains. The colour, a striking light tan, almost completely merges with the smooth, highly-figured walnut sweeping across the middle and the top of the dashboard, along the doors and onto the centre console.

Soft and yielding, you'll find this strangely odourless hide not just on the seats, but on the door trims and the dash and the places you are never likely to see or touch, always neatly hand-stitched. While there is nothing particularly exceptional about the quality, you sense attention to detail with no penny-pinching. It looks expensive and inviting and makes you feel privileged and pampered.

The deep embrace of the seat supports back,



“Dense Rolls-Royce-style luxury, Italian supercar manners and discreet styling”

thighs and shoulders beautifully and you can tailor your position with a silent, but lethargic, three-way electric adjustment, using switches on the centre console (just forward of the gearshift), elbows resting on elegantly upswept door armrests and that deeply pleated oddments box lid. Only the switchgear shows chinks in the car's facade of Euro-sophistication and glamour: the automatic gear selector quadrant appears cheap, indecisive in operation and suspiciously American in style, as does the memory button for the electric seats. The column stalks are loose and limp, and push-buttons for the extra driving lights and the heated rear screen are unremarkable in appearance and action. The main instrument pod, an inoffensive dark-brown box resting on the dash, is up scaled Biturbo, throwing up information about water coolant levels, parking brake and so on in little red and green illuminated panels, that look like something off a coffee vending



Seats are super-plush in best late-Seventies taste



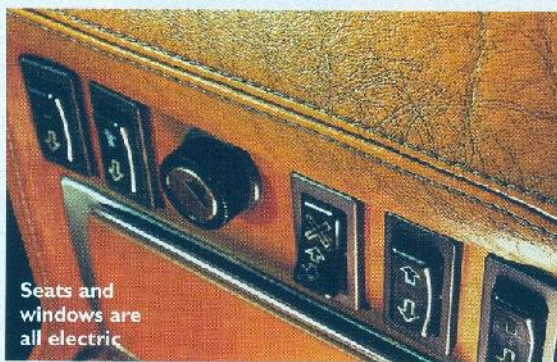
Dash-pack shared with Biturbo



Velour headlining gives relief from leather

machine. Among the six wristwatch-sized minor controls is a vacuum-operated economy gauge, a joke, surely, in this 10mpg dinosaur: in-flight refuelling would be more appropriate than stopping at a petrol station. At least Quattroporte man need not leave the comfort of his armchair when the time comes to fill up, as the petrol flap clicks open electrically, as does the bootlid.

Needless to say, the Quattroporte has the labour-saving toys that befit its status, including electric windows all round, electric door mirrors (as found on a Lancia Gamma Coupé), an upmarket Blaupunkt stereo of its period and, of course, air conditioning. Thick C-pillars give some seclusion to the rear seat which is really a kind of lounge, soft and cosseting with a huge armrest to separate you



Seats and windows are all electric

from your neighbour. Here, passengers are given equal status with those in the front, with separate controls for the air conditioning and radio speakers. The legroom is generous without being as lavish as the car's exterior dimensions suggest, yet the width of the car gives an impression of spaciousness and well-being, a car you could be

driven in for hours on end without feeling tired.

On the road, it is a swift and bullish car, without being stunningly rapid, the combination of sheer weight, a lazy auto 'box and a slightly detuned 280bhp version of the classic four-cam V8 taking its toll on off-the-mark urge. It seems heavy and ponderous at first – the left-hand drive doesn't help – but damping that is a well-tailored compromise between roll-tempering firmness and supple absorbency soon inspires confidence. The car's bulk means bumps are pummelled by the wishbone-and-coil-spring suspension (borrowed from the Kyalami, copied off Jaguar) yet the ride is quiet, with moderate swish from the fat Michelins and just the odd creak from that vast acreage of leather. The steering gave a slight rattle on this car, but also sensible resistance and clean response, if not much feel at the brown, leather-trimmed rim.

The Quattroporte hauls most impressively beyond 80mph, and even when you are well into three figures there is negligible wind noise, making it a restful motorway express for its occupants. The engine growls distantly at all times and even if it never has the silken demeanour of the best German or American V8s, here you sense class and pedigree.

To me, it doesn't matter if the Quattroporte doesn't go, corner or soothe like any number of off-the-peg big saloons of its era. In the Eighties, if you wanted a car that gave you dense Rolls-Royce-style luxury, Italian supercar manners and discreet styling, then, literally, there was nothing else like it. ●