

Wilderness Wagon

By: Bob Weir

Very few commercials are destined to reach the giddy heights of immortality, but the Citroen Kegresse is a rare exception. Bob Weir travelled to Strathmiglo in Fife to meet Alan Stewart who owns one of the last survivors.

“My first memory of the Kegresse was my father using it during the war years as a replacement tractor,” said Mr Stewart. Nowadays the Citroen has a more leisurely lifestyle, entertaining the crowds on the Scottish vintage vehicle circuit. Alan’s family originally hail from St Andrews, the headquarters of the Royal & Ancient, the spiritual home of golf. After World War One his father owned a construction company that was responsible for building part of the famous university. During the 1930s the family moved to their country retreat in nearby Strathmiglo.

Alan has been collecting vintage vehicles for years. These include a pair of old Land Rovers and a coach-built Bentley Type R that was custom-built for his father. He also admits to being a dab hand with a shotgun, and has been involved in clay pigeon shooting since his teens, when his father used to run regular events in the fields surrounding the estate. Alan took to the sport like the proverbial duck to water, and in his prime won a gold medal in the Commonwealth games. He was also the first Scot to win the English Open Championship.

Citroen also has a flair for the limelight, and has a long tradition of unusual and daring designs. The 2CV and Traction Avant are classic examples, along with more recent models that favoured oleo-pneumatic suspension. But even though it was designed and produced over 80 years ago, the Kegresse went one better - it ran on half-tracks.

The idea was the brainchild of Adolphe Kegresse, a Frenchman who had already gained some experience of all-terrain vehicles by converting Czar Nicholas II’s small fleet of luxury



cars to cope with the harsh Russian winters. On his return to France he collaborated with fellow countryman Jacques Hinstin to design a new type of bogey.

The Kegresse was quickly put into production at Andre Citroen’s factory in Paris, and during the 1920s the revolutionary half-track was at the cutting edge of motorised exploration. Under the skilful guidance of adventurers like Georges Marie Haardt, the Citroen became the first vehicle to cross the barren wastes of the Sahara.

On 17 December 1922 Haardt set out with 11 colleagues from Touggourt, Algeria. The party arrived in Timbuktu, Mali three weeks later. The following year, several Citroen half-tracks followed up this spectacular feat, by traversing the length and breadth of Africa, a trip known as the La Croisiere Noir. The unique Citroen/Kegresse/Hinstin transmission, was also used on the first complete crossing of the Sahara by motor car.

Commercially the Kegresse was used for a variety of tasks, including pulling canal barges and hauling parties of skiers up mountainsides. Skis could be fitted to the wheels in wintry conditions, and a snow plough was also a popular option. The Australians in particular took a liking to the vehicle, as the Citroen proved ideal for handling the rigours of the outback.

Mechanics

The original Mk A and B2 versions were equipped with 1500cc four-cylinder inline four-stroke water-cooled engines. This petrol-powered unit was mounted at the front, driving the rear tracks. The power was eventually upgraded on the military types. The French and Danish armed forces ordered several examples, and the Polish army found it particularly suitable given the state of some of their roads. On some military versions the superstructure was cut back, or even discarded in favour of a canvas roof. This made the vehicle useful for a variety of tasks, including a gun carriage, mobile radio truck and officer's staff car.

Of particular interest was the high and low ratio gearbox. This was a pioneering development, and a forerunner of the type that would eventually be used in the first

Land Rovers after World War Two. The Kegresse was also renowned for its flexibility, as the drive was capable of being fitted to existing vehicles as an alternative power train. This option would prove its worth during an expedition to the Himalayas, when one Kegresse had to be dismantled and then re-assembled to avoid the aftermath of an unexpected landslide. The harsh terrain was not the only hazard faced by the intrepid explorers, who had to run the gauntlet of bandits and a mountain of red tape.

Alan's Kegresse has been in the family now for over 60 years. He said: "The vehicle was originally new in 1929 to Arthur Bell distillers in Pitlochry. It was apparently used to ferry guests out to the local grouse moor. When they eventually decided to replace the Citroen, my father picked it up for a £100." Alan estimates the top speed to be in the region of 25mph (40kph). The vehicle has a maximum payload of 0.7 ton, and ground clearance is just under 12 inches. The brakes on his model B2 are on the drive sprockets. This is situated to the rear of the track mechanism, with the idler up front bracketing four double road wheels on a sprung bogey. The front wheels were fitted on a conventional leaf-sprung axle, and fitted with 750x90mm tyres.

The Kegresse's tracks were made with a mixture of rubber and steel, with a width on all variants of 10.8 inches (275mm). Alan's vehicle is also fitted with an extra lever that can be used to lift the front wheels in the event of having to tackle serious obstructions.

He said: "Like all new designs it has its little foibles. When you are driving the vehicle it has a tendency to sink by the nose in very soft ground, which makes it difficult to steer. Desert explorers solved this problem by fixing a barrel in front of the wheels to act as a bolster."

Despite the fact the Kegresse dates back to the inter-war years, the mechanics are still in their original condition - a testament if one was needed, to the Citroen's ruggedness and reliability. Body wise there have been a few modifications.

"When my father first acquired the vehicle, he decided to add a makeshift roof to protect people from the elements," says Alan. "Then about 25 years ago I was driving back from a rally, and the old structure suddenly collapsed."

Alan decided to take off the sides, and ran it as an open top for several years. But having suffered a number of recent soakings, he eventually decided enough was enough. He said: "Last year I decided to grab the bull by the horns, and fit a new roof. The woodwork was put together by an employee who looks after my forestry interests, and the vinyl was provided by a friend in the Bentley owners club." The Kegresse now looks as good as new, and Alan reckons the Citroen has many more miles left in the tank.

Words & Photography: Bob Weir