

# Our letter to Citroen!

Our Chief Executive Doug Hulme recently wrote a somewhat 'tongue in cheek' letter to the C.E.O of Citroen/Peugeot about our mini bus.

You will have to forgive the pretentious opening 'I write as one C.E.O to another'; the difference in scale has not escaped Doug! We don't expect to get a favourable reaction but we await the reply with baited breath. What do they say about 'nothing ventured... nothing gained'?

We think you will be amused by the letter anyway if nothing else. Someone once quipped to Doug that it must be a Friday afternoon vehicle. If that's true we think it may have been more of an Easter Holiday vehicle!!

We may have to start a new charity for wayward mini buses; we are thinking of calling it "The 300th Chance Charity For Mini Bus's That Need Special help".....

*"Dear Mr Varin*

*I write as one Chief Executive to another about a problem that we have. I apologise for writing in English but my French is not extensive and with your experience in India and at Corus my guess is your English is vastly superior to my French!*

*Back in 2002 we acquired a new Citroen Mini Bus (VF7ZCPMNC17084519 Registration Number LB02EEY). It was the first new vehicle we had acquired. What follows is an interesting account of its history with us.*

*At its last English Test certificate in May it had recorded just 88,000 miles.*

*The first time we used the bus was an expedition to Lake Bala in North Wales and I would guess the vehicle had covered about 600 miles when on its return journey to our head office here in Portsmouth, the clutch burned out and we had to be recovered. This was of course taken care of under warranty. We assumed that this was just one of those things and it was quickly rectified. Little did we realise this was the beginning of a long history of mechanical failures. Since that first clutch we have had no less than 14 new clutches fitted to the vehicle. There appears to be no logical, engineering explanation for this continual failure (and I have an engineering back ground myself). Over the intervening years all mechanical parts that play any relevance to the clutch have been replaced, the plates, the bearing release and its mounting mechanisms, the fly wheel, the gearbox itself. Still the clutch continues to fail. In January whilst on the way to Heathrow Airport with a group of Children, it failed again, it was duly replaced at that time but last week (curiously on a return journey from Heathrow) it failed again. By some simple calculation the*

*average time a clutch lasts on the vehicle is 71/2 months! It has let us down at some crucial times in some very worrying circumstances when you are trying to look after up to 15 vulnerable young people.*

*That said, however, if this was the only problem with the vehicle I wouldn't be writing to you now, we would just 'bite the bullet' and get on with things. If we turn our attentions to the engine, here is another interesting scenario. It's a superb engine, I love driving the vehicle, yet it has its flaws. The vehicle was three years old before it got its first normal service. The reason for that was the engine was replaced more regularly than the service intervals came round. Firstly when it was just a year old we were returning from the summer activities at our cottage in Finland when the oil pump became faulty. It was recovered back to the main dealers in Southampton where (under warranty) the whole engine was replaced. Again we were not complaining it was very inconvenient and also expensive in that we had to hire alternative transport but nonetheless it was fixed. A short while later, maybe the following summer I think, this time on the journey to the cottage in Finland, the timing belt slipped on the engine and it was completely ruined. Your main dealer in Kotka Finland replaced the engine this time. Unfortunately there has been a history of having to fix oil leaks since then but this engine lasted the longest – until last week, when the big end bearings have now 'given up' and the engine needs replacing. I am tempted to adapt the old joke format and say "how many engines does a Citroen Mini Bus take to reach 89,000 miles? Answer = 4!" but I wouldn't go that far!*

*If it was just the engine and the clutch that was the problem we wouldn't be happy but we would be accepting but then there is the tail of the flat batteries. For many years we struggled (along with 3 different main dealers) to keep the battery charged. Extensive research and several abortive attempts to keep the battery charged up were all entered into. In many ways this is actually the most irritating fault of them all and also the most concerning. You need to imagine a dozen youngsters of between 10 and 12 years old trying to bump start a mini bus at Helsinki airport Monday evening after arriving to find the bus we parked on the Friday afternoon completely flat. 3 tons of vehicle doesn't respond very efficiently to their limited muscle power!! It has let us down on dozens and dozens of occasions at very critical times, we even missed air flights once because of it and had to pay for 12 new air tickets in order to get home!*

*Being of a mechanical mind I was not content to let this problem rest and worked with the main dealers and others to find the problem, there just had to be a reason but flow meters and connection tests on all electrical outlets produced no answers, in the early stages it had also led to the fitting of 3 new batteries. Then I saw the article in a magazine... Citroen was recalling all Relay vehicles of a certain age because of a wiring fault that resulted in the battery discharging itself. This I thought must be the answer, I awaited my letter of recall... alas it never came. Undeterred we presented the vehicle to the main dealer with the explanation... only to be told that the fault didn't exist on our*

vehicle it was not in the batch of vehicles to be recalled, it couldn't be the fault. I considered this all to be too much of a coincidence and prevailed upon the garage to do the modification to the wiring anyway. They wouldn't do it! I found another main dealer who agreed to do it anyway – the result? No more problem! What a hassle though over many weeks. It turns out that parts of the wiring were touching the chassis/body work and every now and again would short circuit and discharge the battery. Putting a plastic 'sheaf' over the wires at the appropriate point was the answer... what a lot of heartache, expense and inconvenience to get to that point!

Now you can imagine that by a few years of these problems we had become very nervous about using the vehicle at all but the economics of the situation meant we had to. We should really have sold it and cut our losses but we couldn't afford to do that.

What we did was to use our other mini bus for everything we possibly could (If I mentioned it is a very reliable Ford Transit that might be deemed a cheap shot so I won't mention it!) or our 7 seat Land Rover Discovery. I also restricted the drivers to only the most trustworthy and careful, most often myself, in order to treat the Citroen gently and carefully to try and get more than 7 months of clutch use out of it (it didn't work!). By now of course the vehicle was out of warranty and every repair was costing us quite a bit of money, each clutch was several hundred pounds to restore for instance. In fact in the last 12 month period we have spent no less than £3,000 on repairs. A sum that would have bought us an acceptable second hand bus (obviously not a Citroen relay!!) but the recession and the very difficult decision of knowing when you have reached the end of the road has meant we still have the vehicle now.

All this might seem too much but I have not yet mentioned the gearbox!! Last year having replaced all the working parts on the clutch we ventured to take it one last time to the cottage in Finland (it is after all the more pleasant of the mini buses to drive... if it keeps driving!). I should really have known better (it was my decision) but in Northern Germany on a Sunday afternoon and with a Ferry to catch – the clutch went again. We drove it on to the ferry anyway and had it recovered to the main dealers near our cottage in Finland. It was left there and I negotiated a repair from our offices here in England, all residential courses at the cottage cancelled until a repair was complete.

The diagnosis from the garage was that it needed a new gearbox. I was sure it didn't since it was only the 'normal' and 'expected' clutch failure, but they were adamant it was a new gearbox that was needed. What can one do when you are 15000 miles away and speaking another language? The deal was done and a new gearbox fitted at a cost of 1300euros. The activities at the cottage to be curtailed for the rest of the summer, having expended the budget for this on the repair. Looking on the bright side I reasoned that now everything had been replaced around the clutch surely this time it would be a repair for good? Alas not so... the failure of the clutch on the way to the airport in January proved to

*be, upon investigation, a failure of fitting. There was some swarf on the casting of the new gearbox casing and it had prevented the shaft to the bearing release being driven home completely and it had drifted out, cracking the new gear box casing in the process. It would have been a simple job to knock the swarf off if it had been noticed but it wasn't. Now well into the economic recession we were desperate (as we are now) for funds so we welded the gearbox up and made a very good repair but alas – only for the 'normal' clutch failure to occur again just now!*

*This letter has become so long that I possibly wont mention the failure – 4 times of the side door preventing access for the children, the faded paint on the bonnet or the failure of the rear electrical wiring to the lights and therefore it would be also be unfair to say the side door leaks like a sieve along with the roof sunlight (which was probably not factory fitted to be even fairer!!).*

*At last I get to the point of this letter. I seek your advice on what I should do next.*

*At this moment in time the vehicle lays at the garage with no clutch working and the bottom end of the engine shot to pieces. My problem is that due to the recession we have had a fall in our income of about a 1/3, which means there is no spare money at all. We have already spent £5,000 on repairing the vehicle in its recent past.*

*We do need two minibuses. Should we start saving to find the money for a new engine and clutch or maybe a second hand engine and new clutch? This may take some time possibly a whole year before we have the money to spare. I would value your expert advice as to what we should do next?*

*My kindest personal regards*

*Yours sincerely*

*Douglas Hulme (Chief Executive)"*