September 1991 AA Car Test R9146A
Supplements R8943

Proton 1.3GL

WHAT'S REALLY DIFFERENT ABOUT Proton in 1991, is that this new brand has continued to increase sales, whereas nearly every other company has seen its market shrink. But why should a 'secondhand' Japanese design be so successful? The answer must be price, combined with shrewd marketing.

Mitsubishi power units are to be found in Hyundai as well as this Proton and, of course, the Colt 1300/1500/Lancer range. Yet they're not as close in specification as you might think at first glance, so study the figures closely.

The latest Protons use three-valves-per-cylinder engines, which have boosted output on both 1.3 and 1.5 litre versions. So much so, that this latest lower priced, lower spec 1.3 saloon now shows a 3bhp advantage over last year's 1.5GLS (see report R8943); the latest 1.5 has power output increased by 11bhp. How does all this translate into practice?

AT THE WHEEL
– driver appeal?

Starting our car from cold caused some hesitant running for the first few seconds, even in mid-summer, but once the carburettor had cleared its throat, the engine settled down nicely. It could jerk a bit in the first mile or so, but this snag may be swept away by the catalysed version that must inevitably arrive later.

No complaints thereafter, however; this 1.3 felt smooth, flexible and well-mannered in slow progress, pulling cleanly even from 30mph in top. Full-bore acceleration still has a hint of breathlessness about throttle response, but through-the-gears acceleration turned out to be an improvement over last time – and that was with a 1.5 litre version! This isn't the case in fifth or fourth – they are slightly slower – but top speed was the same.

The gearchange and clutch action continue to be ultra-light and undemanding. There's also an enhanced feeling of mechanical refinement about this latest 1.3. It cruises unobtrusively at 70mph and even when revved, it doesn't become too loud or objectionable. To be able to say this about a less well-equipped, cheaper version is quite significant. However, it's a pity that the mechanical changes have eroded this Proton's fuel consumption even more.

Perhaps because it uses simple 80-Series radials, the 1.3 Proton's ride feels compliant, as well – even later rivals aren't conspicuously superior in this respect, in this size and type of saloon.

The handling and steering are less illustrious – stolid and trustworthy, rather than agile and exciting, sums them up. In this 1.3 version, the moderately geared steering remains a manual set-up, whereas the 1.5s have become power-assisted with the wheel turns between locks reduced from 4.5 to 2.8. Cornering on the limit is reassuringly safe, and there's useful feel through the steering.

SPACE AND COMFORT
– popular with passengers?

Some tidying up of the trim, steering wheel and front seats has been largely successful in 'Europeanising' the Proton's interior aspect. The new front seats are comfortable and generous in width, even though the GE/GL versions offer no height or lumbar adjustment. The wheel can seem rather prominent for shorter drivers (it's not adjustable either), but the low window sills are welcome. The radio/cassette player performs no more than adequately and the switches for the heated rear screen and hazard flashers remain badly sited, masked from view by the steering wheel.

This wheel still has brand stickers on it that are garish and crinkled; the centre padding over the boss just peels off, too, exposing the metalwork lurking ominously beneath. The rear doors have courtesy switches activating the bright sensible roof lamp and there's a 'door-ajar' tell-tale wired in, too. However, the buzzer that wails when you open the driver's door with the key still in the ignition, proved very unpopular with us – we would disconnect it.

At the back of this GL saloon, the seat provides ample hiproom, but only because there are no proper armrests; the seat is fixed and there's no centre armrest either. Its comfort is fair, although headroom restrictions mean that you sit rather low and leaned-back. Dimensionally, it's no better for legroom than many smaller hatchbacks.

The boot lacks height and is cheaply trimmed, but at least it has a regular shape and a flat floor; you have to heave cargo over the prominent sill, though.

LIVING WITH THE PROTON
– how reassuring?

Like Hyundai, the Protons offer an amalgam of Japanese-style reliability and almost East European prices. It's a way of cutting risk yet still saving money. In practice, as we emphasised before, Protons are not especially cut-price. However, this saloon, with the smaller engine and GL trim, does represent keen value, being £1000-£1500 cheaper than West European (or Japanese) counterparts.

Although the panelwork is quite well painted, it's of thin gauge construction and the metal 'bumpers' don't really represent any protection in minor nudges.

The brakes don't resist fade very well in repeated use, but servo assistance and best-stop performance are quite respectable. Some interior safety padding is absent, under the facia and in the backs of front seats, for example, where the wire frames can be felt lurking beneath the upholstery.

VERDICT

Partly because the revisions constitute a useful set of improvements and partly because this latest test car was cheaper, we felt more enthusiastic about it by the end of the test. It's a dated design and some of the higher-priced rivals we've listed offer more room, better economy and that less-easy-to-define sense of driver enjoyment. It has a nondescript personality that makes it neither especially cosy nor especially fun to drive or be driven in.

Nevertheless, the Proton 1.3GL saloon (or the GE version) offers a reasonably well-made family saloon at a keen price. It's the sort of car that the old Ford Cortina used to represent – 'a lot of motor for you money'. It's easy to drive, easy on the eye and easy on your cheque book. For many hard-pressed private motorists, that's a mighty persuasive combination.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Same as for 1.5GLS (see R8943) except for:

ENGINE

Type and size 71mm bore x 82mm stroke = 1298cc.

Compression ratio 9.5:1

Valve gear three valves per cylinder

Maximum power (DIN-net) 78bhp at 6000rpm

Maximum torque (DIN-net) 76 lb ft at 4000rpm

TRANSMISSION

Final drive 4.32:1, to front wheels

Mph per 1000rpm 19.5 in top, 16.2 in 4th

Rpm at 70mph 3600 in top gear

CHASSIS

Wheels 5J steel with 155R13 78S tyres (Dunlop D7 on test car)

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds

STANDING START	0-30mph	0-60mph	¼ mile
	4.1	13.2	19.4

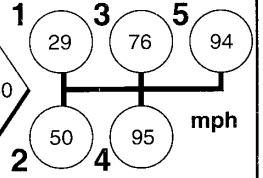
mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS	2.2	5.1	9.1		14.2
IN 5TH GEAR	7.4	15.1	23.4		33.5
IN 4TH GEAR	5.6	11.3	17.2		23.7

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES	14.8/11.3		16.0/11.6		
		15.1/11.3			18.4/12.4

Maximum speeds

REVS PER MINUTE	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
		6500 *		5900	4850

*for best acceleration



FUEL CONSUMPTION

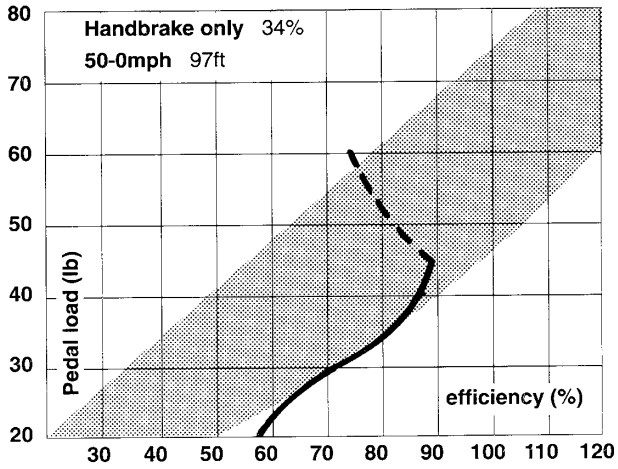
Fuel grade for tests: unleaded Premium/95 octane

Normal range	mpg
Hard driving, heavy traffic	29
Short journeys in the suburbs	27½
Motorway – 70mph cruising	37½
Brisk driving, mixed roads	35½
Gentle driving – rural roads	40½
Typical mpg overall	**35½**
Realistic tank range*	38 litres/300 miles

*based on gauge/warning lamp and filling station experience

SAFETY

Brakes How pedal loads affect braking



Braking efficiency shown as a percentage of gravity (ie 100% = 1.0g)

Ideally the braking curve should fall within the shaded zone of this graph. If it's above, the brakes are too heavy; if it's below, they are too light – particularly on cars without ABS. When the curve becomes broken, the wheels are skidding.

Fade test

How hard use or water affects braking. (Ideal brakes show no change.)

Pedal load needed for 75% stop (lb)

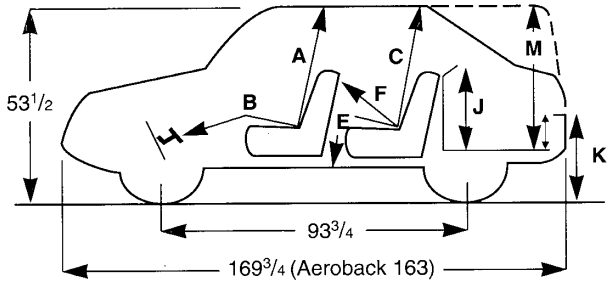
31	At start of test
40	After constant use
65	After severe use
90	After watersplash
5	Number of stops to recover

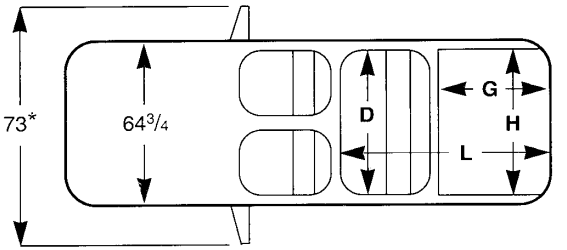
Safety check list

Steering true 'feel' of the road?	✔
Brakes powerful?	✔
sensible effort?	✔
fade resistant?	✘
Seatbelts front – effective?	✔
convenient?	✘
rears – effective?	✔
convenient?	✘
Head restraints front– effective?	✔
rear – effective?	✘
Interior thoroughly padded?	✘
Fuel shielded filler?	✔
protected tank?	✔

MEASUREMENTS

Dimensions (inches)





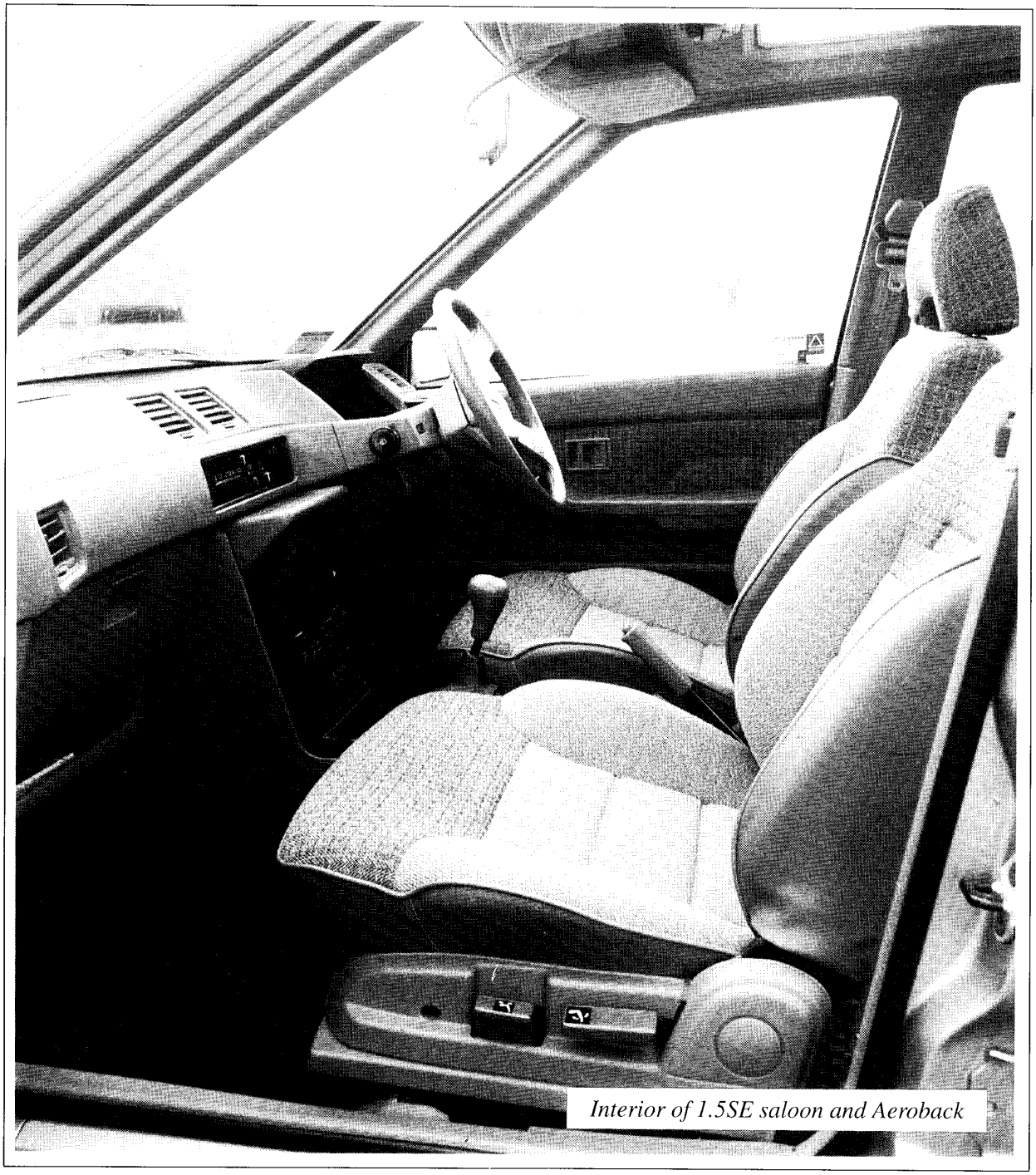
*mirrors don't fold

Kerb weight in lb (full of fuel) 2060

Inside (inches)

A Front headroom	37¼	**G** Load length	39½
B Front legroom (min - max)	35-41	**H** Load floor width (min - max)	40-60
C Rear headroom	34¼	**J** Load height	16-18
D Back seat width (between armrests)	52	**K** Sill height (inner/outer)	13/34
E Typical rear * legroom	36¾	**L** Load length	NA
F Typical rear * kneeroom	25	**M** Load height (to tailgate hinge)	NA

*'Typical' represents the mean measurement behind the driver's seat set at 39in legroom and the passenger's seat set at 41in



Interior of 1.5SE saloon and Aeroback

HOW IT COMPARES	Engine cap/power (cc/bhp)	Maximum speed (mph)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	Fuel overall (mpg)	Brakes best stop (%g/lb)	Maximum legroom – front (in)	Typical leg/ kneeroom – rear (in)	Steering turns/ circle (ft)	Overall length (in)
Proton 1.3GL	**1298/78**	**95**	**14.2**	**33.5/23.7**	**35 1/2**	**89/45**	**41**	**36 3/4/25**	**4.5/32 1/2**	**169 3/4**
Seat Ibiza 1.2CLX	1193/63	99	14.4	37.0/24.3	39 1/2	94/37	39 1/2	37 3/4/26 1/2	4.1/35	143 1/4
Hyundai Pony X2 (with catalyser)*	1468/82	100	13.9	29.7/21.6	37 1/2	96/33	42	37 1/2/26 3/4	2.9/33 1/4 (p)	161 1/2
Fiat Tipo 1.4 Formula	1372/78	103	12.6	28.0/20.3	39	98/35	42 1/4	40/29	3.6/34 3/4	156
Skoda Favorit 1.3	1289/63	90	15.6	40.0/24.3	38 1/2	97/45	42	39 3/4/27 1/2	3.7/33 1/2	150 1/4
* 1.3LS (not tested) price-comparable									(p) = power assisted	