



Dunsfold Diaries

By Philip Bashall



FINDS AND DISCOVERIES

Rare Land Rovers are still out there waiting to be discovered, says Philip Bashall

AS I write there's a G-registered Discovery three-door for sale on eBay with a BKV factory registration. It's a bit rough but it's being advertised with a Buy It Now price of £1000. At first, I thought it might be a really early example that pre-dated the G-WAC press launch vehicles. Having done some checking, I've discovered that it's not quite as early as that – but it's still a factory-registered three-door, and worth saving.

I'm quite a fan of eBay. A lot of people slag it off, claiming it's full of overpriced tat, but I've made some great discoveries (sorry!) on the site. If you post something on a club forum then you reach maybe a few hundred people. Put something on eBay and the world gets to hear of it, which means a lot of stuff gets saved that would otherwise have been scrapped – like the Bertram Mills 'elephant' Series I that I talked about last month.

Then there's the Lightweight prototype that was described on eBay as 'an early Series IIA Lightweight'. It turned out to be one of six that had been built for evaluation by the Ministry of Defence. The vendor thought it was in good condition but really it was a shed: the chassis and bulkhead had suffered badly due, I think, to it having undergone sea trials early in its career.

We bought it sight unseen but we just had to have it for the Collection, regardless of the cost. Sometimes you just

have to take a deep breath and stump up the cash.

Not that you always have to spend much money to get something interesting. We paid £390 for a Freelander 50th Anniversary limited edition that was for sale on eBay. This one turned up very close to home; I was totally unaware of its existence but if I'd stood on a chair and looked out of my bedroom window I could have seen the place where it spent much of its life. The timing belt had gone and the valves were bent, but we replaced the cylinder head and it turned out to be a lovely car. It's not particularly special but these vehicles are the collectables of the future and are worth squirrelling away.

Some of the most interesting Land Rovers can still be found for sale in local newspapers. We have two rare Series IIs at Dunsfold that were found this way. Short-wheelbase chassis number two, which was despatched new in 1958 to Scotland but sold to Ipswich just two months later, was advertised for sale in the Ipswich local paper. A customer tipped me off and I went up to buy it the next day. We paid well over the odds for it, but hey, it was chassis number two. Unfortunately, we missed out on chassis number one, which surfaced in Stratford-upon-Avon just the other day and was bought by a club member.

Then there's the first production Series II LWB Station Wagon, which my fellow trustee Richard Beddall saw in the classifieds of his local rag when he was living in Wiltshire

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 Some of Dunsfold's finds: Lightweight prototype, as found and after restoration; Freelander 50th Anniversary; Series II LWB Station Wagon no.1; Series I 2.25 test vehicle; Series II SWB no.2.



back in 1996. The owner didn't realise the significance of its 000001 chassis number, but he did make us pay extra for the 8679 AC factory registration. He argued, reasonably enough, that he could sell the plate separately for more than the vehicle was worth, so it was another case where we just had to grin and bear it, and pay the money. It was worth doing, because the Station Wagon was probably a factory demonstrator and is still in very original condition, so it's the perfect reference vehicle.

Sometimes you can even come across something really special at a public auction. Brightwells in Leominster, Herefordshire, is a big auction company that holds regular sales of 4x4s, so it's well attended by all the boys in the trade who know about Land Rovers. And yet a very early Series III Station Wagon with a factory XC registration and a prototype chassis number 109-111-3 went through and was bought by a tractor dealer, who just wanted the Perkins diesel engine out of it. Fortunately, this tractor guy recognised that he'd bought something a bit unusual and got in touch. UXC 624J turned out to be a pre-production Station Wagon that had been fitted with an experimental six-cylinder engine, which had been removed later and the Perkins diesel put in instead. We gave the tractor dealer what he'd paid for the vehicle, he kept the engine, and everyone was happy. It looks as though 624J is the oldest surviving Series III, and yet no one had picked up on it; no one had recognised it for what it was at the auction.

Talking about UXC 624J reminds me of one of our less successful purchases. We needed a replacement bulkhead for this vehicle, and found an ex-council Series III Station Wagon advertised on eBay. It was said to be in good condition with a perfect bulkhead, so we bought it sight unseen – and it turned out to be an absolute pile of crap. That's the danger of buying something without going to look at it first. But I have to say, for every bad purchase we've made, we've probably made eight good ones.

The phone call I had from someone clearing a storage unit in the North-East definitely led to one of our better buys. He said he had a number of old Land Rovers in one of his warehouses that needed shifting immediately, or they would be scrapped. No, he had no idea what they were, and

no, he couldn't take any pictures – but he was prepared to scan the front of the logbooks and email them to me. When I saw that one was a Series I with a factory registration and had been used for testing the 2.25-litre engine that was being developed for the Series II, I suddenly got interested...

It turned out that these were just some of the Land Rovers that had been bought by a prolific Norwegian collector, Ketil Oftedahl, but had not made it out of the country before his collection in Norway was seized by the authorities for, it's believed, unpaid rent and environmental concerns. So we made a deal with John Craddock that he could keep all the other vehicles as long as he secured a couple that we wanted. We ended up with the Series I and a 101 Ambulance that, as I found out later, the Collection had owned several years earlier! It was a prototype that we'd rescued and sold to a customer, who had fully restored it before selling it on to Ketil. So we ended up getting it back, fully restored, at a bargain price. Result! But if the warehouse owner hadn't thought to call me, everything would have gone to the scrapyards.

Finally, let me tell you about the Land Rover I really wanted but didn't get. I've always coveted one of the V8 88s that were factory built for the police in Trinidad. One turned up on eBay, and a colleague here spotted it but didn't think to mention it to me – and I believe it may have been the prototype, too. It sold for something like 1800 quid...

You win some and you lose some. What's for sure is that there are plenty more interesting Land Rovers, particularly 90s and Defenders, that are out there just waiting to be discovered.

Dunsfold Collection

THE DUNSFOLD Collection is not yet open to the public, but is hoping to establish a permanent museum. You can help make that a reality by becoming a Friend of the Collection for an annual subscription of £35. Visit www.dunsfoldcollection.co.uk to find out more.

