



# Dunsfold Diaries

By Philip Bashall

## MYTHS AND LEGENDS

*Philip Bashall explains why the Centre Steer is one of his least favourite subjects for discussion...*



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HE DUNSFOLD Collection doesn't usually get involved with replicas. We have enough on our plate keeping on top of our 130 prototype and historic Land Rovers without taking on fakes! And yet, when we were offered a replica of the infamous Centre

Steer a few years ago, we couldn't turn it down – because the chance of ever acquiring the real thing is, in my opinion, absolutely zero.

The Centre Steer divides opinion like no other Rover product ever made. There are several key players in the Land Rover world who have firm views on the Centre Steer, and they're all different. Feelings on the subject run very high and after all these years we'll probably never know the truth with absolute certainty. However, thanks to research done by enthusiasts such as Michael Bishop – a senior instructor with Land Rover Experience – we can make a fair guess at what really happened.

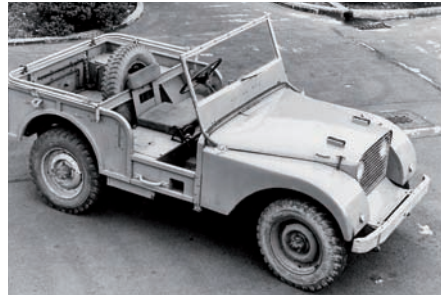
People have speculated for years that there were two Centre Steers, and photographs do show two different gearlever arrangements: one between the driver's legs, and one offset to the side. However, only one Centre Steer was fully built and drivable. A mock-up chassis was also built and photographed in 1947 for an early brochure; the steering arrangements aren't shown, but the general layout does seem to allow for a central steering position.

Hard on the heels of this mock-up came "Huey" – HUE 166 – which is the first proper Land Rover as we know it. All this happened in the space of months rather than years, which is one reason that the truth is so hard to unravel. As Arthur Goddard, the only member of the original design team who is still alive – he turns 94 on 31 January – told me recently, "It was all a very long time ago."

It's generally agreed that the drivable Centre Steer was built on a 1942 Canadian-spec Jeep chassis (we can tell that from the lashing rings front and rear) with a new body. The gearbox was from a Rover saloon, mated to the Jeep transfer box, but no one knows what type of engine was fitted because not a single photograph exists of the vehicle with its bonnet up. It could have been a Rover 16 overhead-valve unit, the original Jeep engine or maybe the new Rover/Land Rover inlet-over-exhaust design. All we have to go on is the position of the exhaust downpipe, which suggests it was the IOE engine.

Personally, I suspect that parts from an amphibious Jeep, the GPA, were used. I've owned one and the shape of the windscreen, and the type of windscreen mounts, look like a GPA's. The fact that the Centre Steer also had a PTO might support this, because the GPA used a PTO to power the bilge pumps and the rear propeller. I'm not suggesting that Rover bought a GPA, but the parts could easily have been sourced from a war-surplus dealer. Mind you, we

Real or fake? The colour pics are of Dunsfold's Centre Steer replica; the 1940s black-and-white shots are of the original – note the muddy tyres, top right, after testing



know that the capstan winch shown in some pictures was just a wooden mock-up, so it's quite likely that the rear pulley driving a saw belt in photos was also a fake!

The Dunsfold replica has been finished as in Rover's period publicity photos of the Centre Steer, with grey body, silver chassis and fittings, and Bargrip tyres. Although I'm referring to the Centre Steer as 'ours', and I have done quite a lot of work to it, the fact is that it was constructed in 2004-05 by a brilliant chap called Bill Hayfield. Bill is well known on the Land Rover show circuit as 'Bill the Paint Man' and he's one of those talented blokes who can turn his hand to anything. He built the Centre Steer from just six photographs, basing the dimensions on a Jeep grab handle! It's a shame he didn't tell anyone he was doing it, because he might have found people willing to lend him a lot more pictures. As it was, he built it from scratch in a lean-to at the side of his house, and I think he had a total budget of about two-and-a-half grand.

Bill did a fantastic job, in view of what he had to work with, but inevitably a few inaccuracies crept in. The chassis, for example, is from a Ford-built Jeep and not a Willys, which meant it had the wrong front crossmember – I've since changed that. And he had to guess the dashboard, because he didn't have a photo of it; again, I've remade that. Bill had stocked the dash with a collection of instruments he'd found at autojumbles, some of which weren't right for the period, but I've re-equipped it with the right gauges and Lucas switches. I've also added the correct steering wheel, wiper motor and hoodsticks.

Bill's Centre Steer made an enormous impact when it first appeared, and you could see people thinking "Is this the real thing? Has it finally surfaced?" All credit to the guy; it was absolutely brilliant. He made all his own panels, just like they would have done in the Rover workshop, although he used Metric bolts and pop rivets, so I've had to change all the bolts to BSF and as many of the rivets as I could for the dome-headed type. But the paint is the same grey paint that Bill brushed on, and I've just tidied it up here and there. No-one knows whether the real Centre Steer was painted a Ferguson tractor grey or a Rover car grey because, of course, the only photographs are in black and white.

The best example of Bill's ingenuity is the steering. We don't know how Rover would have done it, but Bill used a pair of Series I camshaft sprockets and a timing chain to link the central steering column to the Jeep steering box on the chassis member. There's even a timing chain tensioner to take up any slack. It works perfectly, and everyone who drives the vehicle comments on how light and manoeuvrable it is. In fact, it drives like an absolute dream. It flies along and the steering is simply gorgeous. The gear ratios are spot on, too, using the original Jeep diffs. Quite how the gearbox mainshaft is mated to the transfer box gears, I've yet to find out, because I've never had it apart, but I'm guessing he welded two Rover mainshafts together to extend them, and welded a Rover gear into the back of one of the Jeep gears. One day it'll break and I'll find out for certain.

The replica Centre Steer isn't registered for the road, because it's a built-up "bitsa": half Rover, half Jeep. The Jeep used for the original Centre Steer was registered, however, as FWD 536 – and that number was still in use as late as the 1970s. I suspect that this Centre Steer was rebuilt as a Jeep, but it's equally possible that someone kept hold of the logbook and transferred it to another Jeep. Hence the rumours that the Centre Steer had somehow magically survived.

The chances of the original Centre Steer turning up now are non-existent, I think, but at least a couple of other replicas have been built. Some American enthusiasts are making one – they've been over to take pictures of ours and measure it up – and there was another one in the UK, which had a Jeep engine. It hasn't been seen for years and was last heard of in the Northampton area. So maybe there is still a Centre Steer, of sorts, just waiting to be discovered in someone's shed...

## 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](http://www.dunsfoldcollection.co.uk) to find out more.

