



Dunsfold Diaries

By Philip Bashall

BORN IN LODE LANE

Philip Bashall recalls how Land Rover employees past and present have helped save its heritage



BORN IN LODE LANE is the title of a book about Roger Crathorne, who rightly became known as Mr Land Rover during his lifetime of service to the company. Roger officially retired last year but I don't think he'll ever break his connection with Land Rover, even though he now lives in the New Forest, where he bumbles around in a barn-find Series I.

I'm proud to say that I've known Roger for some 40 years. I've worked on his vehicles and Dunsfold looks after his daughter's Land Rover today. He was instrumental in saving many historic Land Rovers for the Dunsfold Collection, so we owe him a lot. But Roger is just one of the many Land Rover names, past and present, who have helped preserve the company's heritage – and the current employees are just as enthusiastic as their predecessors.

When my father Brian started collecting Land Rovers in the 1960s, it wasn't uncommon to meet people like Roger at national rallies and competing on trials. They would work on Land Rovers during the week, and then they'd go and thrash them at the weekends. Some engineers still do that: Dave Harlow, who is senior manager in charge of prototype vehicle operations, is active in the Defender Challenge. You may have seen him in action this April on Round 1, the Somerset Stages, co-driven by Lynfel Owen – who is Land Rover's vehicle engineering manager.

I was just a kid when Roger Crathorne and his buddies went trialling, so I can't say I remember him from those days. But he was one of the key figures from the factory that

helped Dunsfold get off the ground. At the highest level were the Wilks brothers, Spencer and Maurice, who had been managing director and chief engineer, respectively, of Rover during the 1940s and 50s. Maurice died in 1963, his brother in 1971, and they had family down south, which is how my father got to know them. On a day-to-day level were the great engineers such as Tom Barton, one of the original Series I design team who was still associated with Land Rover as late as 1985, and Norman Busby. If Roger Crathorne was Mr Land Rover, then Norman will always be remembered as Mr 101, having led the design team that produced the 101 Forward Control. Then, of course, there was Geof Miller, development engineer for the Range Rover, and many others.

The way that Dunsfold acquired vehicles from Land Rover in the old days was very informal, but it was always above board. You might meet Tom Barton on a hill rally and say, "Have you any old Land Rovers up for disposal at the moment, Tom?" and he'd go, "Oh no, no," before adding after a pause, "Well, actually, there is one..." And conversations like that would result in us acquiring pre-production 101 number one, which we did in 1974. We would be issued with an invoice for a nominal £1, and that kept the books straight. Our policy was never to say no to anything – the guys in Military Engineering were particularly helpful over the years.

Some vehicles were saved almost by chance. For example, we got a message one day: "There's a Range Rover P38A prototype being dropped off at the Land Rover

Facing page and below:
 Philip once accompanied a customer adventure drive in Morocco, involving two Discovery 1s, two P38As and two 110s. Only one of the cars suffered a puncture



“Passion for preserving the company’s history extends to the top”

Experience centre; liaise with Roger about picking it up.” That became the oldest surviving P38A prototype, because the others were crushed.

The same thing is still happening. Dave Harlow recently arranged for us to receive three of the latest prototypes: a Discovery Sport, Range Rover and Sport, all in photographic camouflage. Over in the factory scrapyard, Tony Monk keeps an eye out for anything that might be worth saving.

I’m very glad to say that this passion for preserving the company’s history extends right to the very top. Nick Rogers, who has just been appointed as director, group engineering, for Jaguar Land Rover, has some classic Land Rovers in his own collection, and he’ll be at our Open Weekend, which happens just after this magazine goes to press. There will be many other Land Rover personnel, past and present, attending too; it often seems that once you join the company you’re there for life! Don Hall, the lorry driver who collects historic vehicles from us for company events (and who has just restored a Series IIA), for example, used to be a vehicle tester during the early 1990s, and would have driven some of the vehicles we now own when they were being developed.

Talking of which, we first started lending vehicles to Land Rover during the late 1970s – I think the first time was for the launch of the Stage One in 1979. And I started getting involved on a personal level during the late 80s, when the British Motor Show was held at the NEC. Land Rover would let customers park at the factory, where they could tour the works and have demonstration rides on the jungle track. We’d have a display of museum vehicles there and I’d spend ten days talking about Land Rover history.

We still do lots of that kind of thing, most recently for the Royal Windsor Horse Show, which was sponsored by Land Rover. We did media drives through the Park, as well as having vehicles on display on Land Rover’s stand.

One of the more glamorous jobs that came my way was in 1994, when Ian Mulingani in the press office – he was the bloke who commissioned the Judge Dredd Land Rovers that I talked about last month – asked me to take part on a Land Rover adventure drive in Morocco. This was a customer event involving two Discovery 1s, two P38A Range Rovers and two 110 Station Wagons, and I was invited along to look after the vehicles and put on a suit and talk with the participants, when necessary. I scrub up quite well and I understand the etiquette, so Land Rover knows that I won’t say anything embarrassing about the product.

At one time I used to get invited on press launches, too, but the last one I went on was the Freelander 2 launch in Morocco: the competition for places has become so intense in recent years that I’ve fallen off the guest list. It’s a shame, because as a Land Rover expert I do get asked my opinion about new vehicles quite a lot – and it’s hugely useful to get first-hand experience of them right at the beginning of their life cycle. One day, they will be historic vehicles too.

Roger Crathorne, aka Mr Land Rover



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.

