

**NEW
SERIES**



Dunsfold Diaries

By Philip Bashall

HOW IT ALL BEGAN..

The Dunsfold Collection is the world's biggest collection of historic Land Rovers. In our new series Philip Bashall, son of founder Brian, explains how it started

Photographs: The Dunsfold Collection

The Bashall Family has always been mechanically minded. My grandmother's brother, Harry, won the Isle of Man TT in 1912 and my grandmother drove vintage Bentleys – in fact my father, Brian, learned to drive in a Bentley 3-litre. It was Brian who started the Dunsfold Collection of historic Land Rovers and today we have about 130, with another 25 or so that are owned by Trustees and are under the Dunsfold umbrella. It's taken a long time to get to this point, and I'm still collecting – there's a yard full of P38 Range Rovers outside, right now.

My grandmother, Betty, was a very practical sort of woman who founded a business making wooden toys in the 1930s.

To deliver them she bought a vintage 4.5-litre Bentley and rebodied it as a van! Just after WW2, she designed and built her own 65ft motor yacht, which she then sailed through the French waterways to the Mediterranean. She was quite a girl.

Her son – my father, Brian – bought a Series I in 1952 because the father of the girl he was seeing at the time disapproved of his Vincent motorcycle.

He was working for Commerforads, the local motorcycle agency in Thames Ditton (where the family lived), and fixing up vehicles in his spare time, but the council took a dim view of him working in the street in leafy suburbia, so he moved to Surrey. He started repairing Land Rovers for the local horsey types, and in 1968 took over a local garage business that was up for sale. That's how Dunsfold began.

“My grandmother built her own motor yacht and sailed it to the Mediterranean”

Brian was always into military vehicles and he would go along to the Ruddington auctions of ex-military stock, and maybe buy the odd Series I to re-sell. It was at one of these auctions that in 1967 he acquired his first historically significant Land Rover, the APGP (Air Portable General Purpose) Series II, the amphibious one with inflatable 'sausages' along its side. It was only three years old at the time, but he realised it needed preserving for the future.

Dunsfold wasn't called Dunsfold then. The business was named Common House Garage, after the road on which it stood (long changed now), and it occupied the site of a WW2 Canadian searchlight battery. The wartime battery hut was our yard hut, which was appropriate since it would

usually be surrounded by an assortment of old military vehicles such as Jeeps and the garage recovery truck, a Bedford QL 4x4. That hut lasted until 1991, when it was demolished to make way for the much bigger building we still use today, and which itself was extended and doubled in size in 1990.

Brian was secretary of the Southern Land Rover Owners Club but they took

a dim view of him turning up to trials in something like a Jeep, so over a few drinks in a pub one night he co-founded the All Wheel Drive Club – but, of course, he trialed in Land Rovers, too. In fact he won the 1971 Senior Service Hill Rally in a bog standard Series II, only to be disqualified on a technicality. Victory then conveniently went to the official Land Rover entry of a new Range Rover; you can draw your





own conclusions. But he would have driven that Series II, which was bog standard, to Wales to do the rally, and then home again. Quite amazing, really.

As children, the whole lives of me and my elder brother Chris revolved around Land Rovers, and vehicles in general. Dad would tow us around the paddock behind our house in an old three-wheeler bubblecar that he'd got in for scrap, and as we grew a bit older we'd race around this homemade grass track in knackered old saloons, until the neighbours complained and put a stop to that! Chris now runs Surrey Off Road, with my mum, next door to Dunsfold; the family split up in the mid-1970s, quite amicably. Basically, my dad didn't have much time for family life, because he was so tied-up with the business, and that's why he rarely appears in old photos.

The Collection started to get properly underway in 1970 or thereabouts, when Brian built up good relationships with key people at Land Rover such as Roger Crathorne, Geoff Miller, Tom Barton and so on, who began to offer Brian prototypes for which they had no further use.

He did have to pay for them, however: the going rate was usually one pound, or sometimes as much as a tenner! Richard Beddall, who joined the business in the 1970s, has a great story about going up to Solihull to collect the one-ton Lightweight used as a grass mower around the factory; he jumped in and drove it home, grass cuttings flying everywhere.

Myself, I started as an apprentice at Dunsfold after leaving school in 1976. I then became an apprentice and did odd driving jobs until 1981, when I began working for Richard in Buckingham on ex-military vehicles and film work, before returning to the family business in the late 80s. The Collection was still just a family hobby, but by the early 90s Brian had decided to make it a standalone entity, one that's separate from the Land Rover business – which was rebranded DLR after Land Rover's lawyers started sending us letters about 15 years ago. So DLR and the Dunsfold Collection are quite separate, with the Collection supported by Friends' donations.

We're acquiring more vehicles all the time, and in future columns I'll tell the stories of the good, the bad and the ugly – and the ones that got away.

Clockwise from bottom left: Brian and his sister road-testing their mother Betty's wooden toys; the original Dunsfold yard, with Jeep and Bedford 4x4 truck; Brian piloting his young sons in a scrap Messerschmitt three-wheeler; the Bashall family (Philip in the red jacket) with Series I and boat, en route for a Spanish holiday; collecting ex-BEA Landies from Heathrow for re-sale; Brian trialling his wife's daily driver SI; 1958 SII on the 1971 Senior Service Hill Rally.



Dunsfold Collection

THE DUNSFOLD COLLECTION is not open to the public but holds an Open Weekend every two years; the next one is on 13-14 June 2015. You can become a Friend of the Collection for an annual subscription of £35 (plus £10 to cover ALRC and MSA membership) and attend monthly get-togethers and social events such as Land Rover trials and gymkhanas. Visit www.dunsfoldcollection.co.uk to find out more.

