



Dunsfold Diaries

By Philip Bashall

TRIALS BASIS

Philip Bashall of the Dunsfold Collection remembers trialling in the 1960s and 70s – when gentlemen wore shirts and ties, and the ladies put on their Sunday best

Photographs: The Dunsfold Collection

BACK IN THE olden days, if you bought a Land Rover from a main dealer, chances are the salesman would suggest you join the local off-road club to get the most out of it. The dealers seemed to actively promote the club scene back then, and there are stories of Land Rovers being taken off the forecourt and entered in a trial at the weekend, before going back on sale on the Monday... “Never raced or rallied”, of course!

My father, Brian, certainly used to take customers’ vehicles out trialling. I’m sure he asked them beforehand – probably – and they would have been only too pleased if Brian had suggested that he was taking their Land Rover for a drive around a bit of heathland “to bed the suspension in” or similar. “Oh, what a marvellous idea, Mr Bashall – how much do I owe you?”

Brian did a lot of trialling in the early days of Dunsfold. He co-founded the All Wheel Drive Club in 1968 because he liked military off-roaders such as Jeeps, Austin Champs or Dodge weapons carriers as well as Land Rovers; most often, though, it would be a Land Rover that he took trialling, and usually it would be whatever vehicle was in daily use at the time.

Preparation was minimal. You’d drive to the trials venue, let down the tyres to 10psi or thereabouts – so as to give maximum traction on slippery surfaces – do the event, and then reinflate the tyres at the end of the day before driving home. That was if you could be bothered to pump them back up; otherwise it was a case of driving slowly on soggy carcasses. There were no fancy nitrogen bottles in those days, just old-fashioned foot pumps.

If you were taking things a bit more seriously, you might wind the front wheel lock stops right back, so as to reduce the turning circle, and stick a Marigold rubber glove over the distributor to help keep it dry. And once the vertically cranked handbrake lever was introduced on the Series IIA, everyone started retro-fitting them because they were easier to reach when belted in – they were known as the “old man’s handbrake” for that reason. If you were really serious, you might extend the spring shackles to give some extra ground clearance, but that was about it.

Everyone, though, swore by Regent Newcraft tyres. They were basically a remould of the well-proven Dunlop Trakgrip but with extra cuts in the tread to help prevent them from sliding sideways on a slope. I’ve only just got rid of a whole stack of Brian’s old trialling Newcrafts from behind the

workshop; they were 40 years old, full of rust and water and absolutely knackered, so not worth keeping any more.

My mother did a fair bit of trialling, too, and she was far from being the only woman who did. As you can see from the picture [opposite], some ladies used to dress up for the occasion – in fact, the men would usually put on a shirt and tie, rather like those old promotional films you see for the Series I, where someone is using a mobile welding set in their Sunday best... Mother would enter her 88in Series I for a trial at the weekend, and then take me to school in it on the Monday. That seemed perfectly normal back then.

When I started this column in the January issue of *LRM*, I included a photo of Brian trialling mother’s Series I. Blow me if a reader called Mark Wilson didn’t then get in touch

to say that he now owns it. Mark kindly sent me a photo of RGC 112 as it is now; I have to say that the old girl looks in rather better shape today!

“Mother would enter her Series I for a trial, and take me to school in it on the Monday”



Above from top:

Engineers from Land Rover’s military department trialling a prototype Lightweight at Eastnor Castle; Philip’s mum’s Series I, then and now.



I was nine or ten years old when Brian started taking me along with him to trials, although I was more interested in finding spent ammunition and other treasures on the Ministry of Defence land that often hosted the events, than in watching other people drive their Land Rovers. However, I was driving my own Land Rover on a trial when I was 13, which I think was the minimum age at which you were allowed to compete. I had put it together from a pile of parts, after Brian told me, "If you want a car to play with, you have to build it yourself!"

My favourite site was Weaver's Down, on the military site at Longmoor, just off the A3. It's a lovely bit of sandy heathland, with lots of big hills, and it could be dusty or treacherously slippery – you just didn't know. Another great place was Bordon, at Slab Common, where there were old tank hulks that were used for training aids, and you drove around them. The World War Two stuff has been sold off to collectors now, but there's still the odd Chieftain or Centurian at Slab Common – and I remember poking around inside a Comet, which would have dated to the end of WW2 or the early 1950s. I still have the seat from a Dingo scout car, which had been dumped in the demolitions pit at Weaver's Down; a wheel had been blown off it but it was otherwise complete. Such a shame.

Talking of military vehicles, I can't remember actually trialling it, but I certainly went offroading once or twice in my 101 with powered trailer [pictured top]. And Brian took 'Lofty', the 1963 prototype 35cwt turbodiesel truck [top right] on the traditional Boxing Day run along the Ridgeway, soon after we acquired it in 1968-69. We all piled into this huge Land Rover, drove it all the way to Reading, along the Ridgeway and then back home from Marlborough in the evening. Quite a long way in something like that.

Brian carried on trialling until the mid-1980s, using a prototype 90, chassis number 2. He's told me that when he finally pops his clogs, I have to sprinkle his ashes on the infamous Halfshaft Hill at Weaver's Down. "It nearly killed me once, so it can have me then!" he says.

Clockwise from top: Philip used this 101 and powered trailer both on- and off-road for years; turbodiesel 'Lofty' heads a Boxing Day run along the Ridgeway; Brian attacks a hill in LUE 599, an 80in Series I fitted with a Rover 2000 engine; another view (below) of the prototype Lightweight, taken at Eastnor during the 1970 Land Rover Clubs' National Rally; we don't know who this couple are, but we admire the lady's style!



Dunsfold Collection

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

