



Dunsfold Diaries

By Philip Bashall

THE ORIGINAL AND BEST?

As Series I prices continue to rise, Philip Bashall explains why everyone suddenly wants one



I grew up with Series Is. My old man had a Series I in 1951, rolled it and mended it, and has had Land Rovers ever since. My first car was a 1950 80in which was given to me in a collection of packing cases and cardboard boxes, with the suggestion that if I wanted a car of my own then I'd ruddy well better get on and build it. I learned to drive in that 80 and used it every day, before upgrading to a 1955 86in Station Wagon, into which I slotted a straight-six because I wanted more power. Typical boy.

These days, everyone wants a Series I, which was not the case 20 or even ten years ago. It's a generational thing: people start getting nostalgic about the vehicles they grew up with, and as they get older they tend to have a bit more disposable income and are able to indulge their whims. Some people want a vehicle that was made not just in the year but the month of the year they were born – one of my friends has just found a Series I with a chassis that we've worked out was laid down on the actual day of his birth. I'm just as bad: I've always wanted a Series II that was made in June 1959. I found one that was made in May, but I'm holding out for June!

The crazy thing is that it's the earliest vehicles that are the most sought after whereas, as far as Series Is are concerned, it's the later, the better. If you want a short-wheelbase, then the 88in is the one to have. Those extra two inches over an 86 make it just a bit more comfortable and has a better steering box, a dipswitch on the floor – all little

refinements that were added as the Series I evolved.

Rarity doesn't always equate with desirability, either, from an ownership point of view. Dunsfold's 1949 80in that was experimentally fitted with a Rolls-Royce engine goes like a rocketship but it's not a nice vehicle. They had to stiffen the front end up massively to cope with the weight of the engine, and while it will shoot right up to 80mph it's still on early brakes, so coming back down again isn't as easy. Everyone would like a 1948 pre-pro and yet they are the least pleasant to own, with their 1600cc engine, uncomfortable seats, ring-pull gearboxes and headlights obscured by the grille.

One of my favourite vehicles is my 1954 107in pick-up. It's my going-away car, the one I'll jump into if I need to drive to Birmingham or Belgium for a Series One Club jolly. Because I'm associated with Dunsfold, everyone expects me to turn up in something a little oddball – and the 107in is not green and it's not a short-wheelbase. The longer wheelbase also means it rides better and is more comfortable. I've fitted a Fairey overdrive, but with a hidden lever under the centre seat cushion so that I didn't have to cut a hole in the transmission tunnel. It's a very original vehicle, and featured in James Taylor's book *Original Land-Rover Series I*, although I've ended up rebuilding everything mechanical, and replacing the bulkhead.

A friend of mine, the collector Richard Hughes, recently bought a 107 pick-up that was a Swiss fire engine, and it's in fantastic condition. It has the fully trimmed Deluxe cab and it has only done about 8000 miles from new. A few

Facing page and below:
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really nice Series I fire engines have come to light recently in northern European countries and Scandinavia – I know of another superb example that has been imported from Norway. Series Is can still be found in places such as South Africa and Australia, but they are often very beaten-up because they've lived hard lives out in the Bush.

Dunsfold is known for its large stock of original Series I spares, and we have the MoD to thank for that. If they hadn't ordered spares in large quantities back in the '50s, I doubt there would be nearly so many Series Is still in existence. About 70 per cent of the Series I spares we sell are ex-MoD. We made our first large purchase of ex-MoD stock back in 1997-98, when we bought a huge amount from Paddocks; enough to fill a large building. I regret to say that we ended up scrapping quantities of steering idlers, because they were heavy items that took up space and were worth more in scrap than they were as new parts. Now, you can't find them. But that's how it goes: circumstances change and you do what seems right at the time.

While we are still a major supplier of original Series I parts, our stocks have started to dwindle: our last major stock acquisition was ten years ago. Even once-common items such as certain bearings for gearboxes or rear axles are becoming hard to find. More accurately, quality bearings are hard to find. I'll only buy branded stock made by manufacturers such as Skefco or Timken. Some people moan at paying £80 for a bearing but I point out that, while you can buy cheaper bearings, you'll end up changing them again after a year.

The quality of modern parts has become a real problem in recent years. I have a wheel cylinder on my desk right now: it's supposedly made by the OE supplier and yet it's a piece of crap. The body is steel, rather than aluminium, and the internal spring is too strong, so it holds the brakes on.

Really, you can only trust Lucas parts from the 1950s and 60s in their original orange boxes. We recommend doing away with the distributor internals altogether in favour of a Pertronix electronic ignition system. It costs £120 for the dizzy module plus £60 for the coil and it's a 20-minute job to install. I've fitted it in my 107 pick-up and it's a godsend.

Reproduction parts for Series Is vary in quality but, thankfully, there are now some properly researched and developed products making it to market. Companies such as Undercover Covers are offering really accurate hoods now, having consulted a number of experts on the correct specification and colours of the originals. It winds me up when remanufactured parts aren't accurate. If you're going to invest in the tooling to remake something, why on earth wouldn't you bother to get it right?

At least the increasing value of Series Is means that there'll be more incentive for companies to remake parts, and of a higher quality. But if someone tells me they want to buy a classic Land Rover, I'll always encourage them to buy a Series IIA instead. It's a better vehicle in every way and it'll be half the price of a Series I. Good original examples are now making £10-15k – but a proper Series I is now north of £20k. That makes the IIA look like a bargain.

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.

