



Dunsfold Diaries

By Philip Bashall



TYRE TROUBLES

Finding the right tyres for classic Land Rovers isn't easy – and it could get a lot more difficult, warns Philip Bashall

IT'S THAT time of year when, with plenty of standing water and maybe ice on the road, that you soon become aware of any deficiencies in the tyres that are fitted to your Land Rover. As you can imagine, with 130 vehicles in the Dunsfold Collection, tyres are a subject never far from our minds – and I do wonder what the future is going to hold for those of us with classic Land Rovers, who like to keep them looking original.

Vintage Tyre Supplies, down at the National Motor Museum in Beaulieu, has done a superb job in keeping the classic movement on the road with correct-period rubber, and has even had some old tyre patterns remanufactured. But the fact is, when it comes to Land Rovers – which are not nearly so well provided for as classic cars – you can pretty much count the number of period-correct tyre types on the fingers of one hand. And that worries me about what might happen, should the current MoT legislation change to outlaw tyres that are more than a few years old.

Here in the UK, we're lucky. At the moment, the MoT test only requires tyres to pass a visual inspection as to their condition and tread depth. There's no legislation about how old they are. In Germany, however, the TÜV inspectors are much stricter about the age of tyres, and they can refuse to pass anything older than ten years. One of my German customers, who has a nice Series I, keeps a spare set of

rims with period-correct tyres mounted on it for when he's on holiday in the UK, and then changes them for modern tyres when he goes back home!

As far as Dunsfold's concerned, any change to the law would have a major impact on what we could do with our vehicles. It wouldn't affect them being on display at events like our Open Weekend, which is held every two years on the nearby Springbok Estate, and it might not even prevent them from being driven at places like that, since it's private ground and the speeds involved are relatively low. But it would certainly have an impact on, say, events that Land Rover organises where the media and other VIPs get to drive classic Land Rovers on the road.

There's no doubt that rubber does deteriorate as tyres age – but it very much depends on how they have been used or stored, because UV light is what really kills them. That, and under-inflation, which lets the carcass go soggy and causes heat build-up, which then leads to a blow-out. You see so many trailers and caravans sitting forlornly at the side of motorways because people never bother to check the pressures. Keep tyres away from light and properly inflated and they will last a very long time.

I'm also convinced that some modern tyres aren't as well made as they used to be, having experienced severe cracking on the sidewalls of some five-year-old tyres made by a very well-known manufacturer. Whether it's because



There's a bewildering choice of rubber available but it's never easy to find the right tyre for an historic Land Rover

production has been outsourced, I don't know, but it's a worrying development. In contrast, I personally – and I stress that this is only my own opinion, and not Dunsfold's policy – would be happy to drive on certain tyres that are decades old, because they were so well made.

The fact is, certain Land Rovers only look right on certain tyres: they make a huge difference to overall appearance. My favourite Land Rover tyre of all time has to be the Dunlop T29A, which was used in the 1950s and 60s. It's a very pretty tyre, but it wears out quickly on the road. Before that, Land Rover used its predecessor the T28, and that looks absolutely right on a Series I 80 – but not on an 86, even though the T28 was fitted right through to early Series II production. And then there was the Dunlop RK3, which was also fitted to Series Is. This tyre business is a minefield.

I'm about to meet an enthusiast who imports Malaysian-made tyres that are a close copy of the Avon Traction, an offroad-biased tyre used on early production Land Rovers (as distinct from the Traction Mileage, which was more road-biased). If they're any good, they will improve the choice available to Series I owners – but I'm not sure whether they can legally be sold in the UK, if they're not E-marked. Since 1997, any tyre sold for road use in the EC has to have an E-mark, and that applies to 4x4 tyres too.

Military Land Rovers are a special kind of headache when it comes to finding the right tyre. A military 110 just has to have the Michelin XCL, with its chunky block-pattern tread, yet those tyres have been out of production for at least 15 years and you won't pick them up in military surplus sales any longer, because the Army is quite strict about not keeping old tyres on the shelf. On the other hand, a Wolf needs to be on Goodyear G90s, because that's what they came out with and anything else simply looks wrong – even though the Army now fits them with Michelins, because that's all that's available. They just don't look the same.

Usually I'm not a fan of aggressive-pattern Goodyears on anything non-military, but the exception has to be the North American Spec 90 or the 50th Anniversary V8 90, where they look spot-on. A number of owners swapped them for slightly smaller-radius tyres to make them go better – the tall Goodyears made the gearing a bit high – but the

smaller tyres just look wrong. It has to be a set of knobbly BFGs. Yet put those on a standard Defender hardtop in Bronze Green and they will then look wrong, too. Go figure!

Range Rovers are another case in point. To my eyes, an early three-door just has to be on Michelin 205/16 XM+S tyres, which was a brilliant tyre and was used on Defenders right into the 1990s. One of my fellow trustees at the Dunsfold Collection, who owns some extremely nice early Range Rovers including chassis number one, won't fit them, however, because of the age problem. He fits modern rubber but in fairness he does like to use his cars and has been known to drive a pre-pro Range Rover on rallies in Europe, and if you are taking on journeys like that then you want to be safe. Chassis number one doesn't get used very much, so I've persuaded him to keep that on the Michelins for the moment, but I suspect I'm fighting a losing battle...

Series Land Rover owners are very lucky that Avon still produces occasional batches of the classic Traction Mileage design, which was still being fitted on early Land Rover Ninetyts, having been a mainstay since the days of the Series II. It lasts forever and it looks just right, and we should be extremely grateful that Avon is still prepared to make it. Unfortunately, a single tyre costs about £200, so a set of five will set you back a grand, and many owners aren't prepared to make that kind of investment.

I run up against this kind of blinkered thinking all the time when I'm quoting owners for restoration work. They accept that a good paint job is going to cost several thousand pounds, and a proper engine rebuild a few thousand more – but when I point out they need to budget another thousand for some decent tyres, I can see their faces blanch. Thing is, having the right tyres on a restored vehicle can only add to its value. It's a sign that the owner cares and that the vehicle has been done right.

Dunsfold Collection

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