



# Dunsfold Diaries

By Philip Bashall

## HAND MADE BY ROBERTS

*Philip Bashall explains how the Dunsfold Collection played a key role in creating the replica of a Series 1 production line at Solihull*

Photographs: The Dunsfold Collection and Land Rover

**I**T WAS ONE OF the more surreal conversations I've had. Roger Crathorne and I were sitting in a G-WAC Discovery on Lake Geneva, discussing Roger's long-held ambition to mark the imminent end of Defender production by recreating the original Series 1 production line at Solihull. And when I say 'on Lake Geneva', I mean just that. We were floating in the amphibious G-WAC that had been built for the press launch in 1989, and which had been shipped out for the 2014 Geneva Motor Show to give visiting journalists and industry figures a bit of excitement on the lake in the Discovery's 25th anniversary year.

But I digress. You may already have read about the Series 1 display, which officially opened slap-bang in the middle of the Defender assembly hall this February. It will remain there until the end of Defender production later this year, and you can see it as part of a three-hour tour that costs £45. I think it's well worth it; I've been visiting the plant on-and-off since the 1970s and I never get bored of seeing how Land Rovers are put together in a manner that hasn't changed much since the first ones were built in 1948.

My unconventional meeting with Roger took place last March, but plans to recreate the production line were afoot well before that. The original idea came from Roger but the old bugger decided to retire – finally! – halfway through the project, at which point Michael Bishop from the Land Rover Driving Experience at Solihull took control. Michael is a huge Series enthusiast – he wrote the book *They Found Our Engineer* about tracking down Series 1 development engineer Arthur Goddard, who is still very much alive in Australia – and he deserves credit for doing a fantastic job.

My role, as representative of Dunsfold, was to assemble a selection of 'new' Series 1s as they might have appeared going down the line. They would represent three stages of the build progress: chassis with axles attached; rolling chassis with engine and gearbox installed; and an almost complete vehicle with most of its bodywork fitted. One of the restored Series 1s from the Land Rover press fleet – 438 DEL – would depict a finished vehicle, while the Series One Club agreed to lend their sectioned example.

While this tableau of Series 1s nominally represents the start of production in 1948, it's actually more accurately dated to January 1949. Why not '48? Because spare parts for that period are incredibly difficult to find! Land Rover only built 3000 vehicles in '48. But accepting that compromise, I tried to use as many genuine 1949 components as I could lay my hands on. A Series 1 consists of about 8000 parts, and most of the smaller ones were



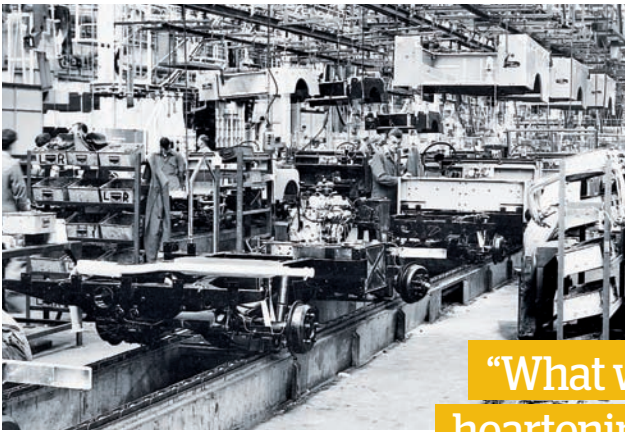
**Clockwise from top:**  
Loading a 'new build' Series 1 for transport to Solihull; 1949-spec chassis from the Series One Club; fully refurbished engines

new-old-stock from the Dunsfold stores. We only resorted to reconditioned secondhand parts for the bigger items, like engine blocks or gearbox cases, which can no longer be found brand new.

We had a real ding-dong over the choice of tyres to use. I was adamant that we weren't going to use some modern casings made in the Czech Republic or wherever; problem was, you can no longer obtain Trakgrips – the moulds in Malaysia have now been destroyed – and it wouldn't be possible to get hold of enough Avon Traction Mileages in time. So we decided to go for modern reproductions of the old Bargrips, which were fitted to Australian-market vehicles. They're the same as used on WW2 Jeeps.

As with any large organisation, getting the paperwork signed off takes quite a while and so I made a leap of faith and commissioned some rear bodytubs from hot rod fabricator Geoff Cousins off my own bat in December 2013, which was the only time he could make them. Likewise, I ordered four new chassis – though only three were used in

**Immediately below and bottom right:**  
Land Rover production in the mid- and early-50s respectively. Note the high proportion of left-hand-drive vehicles being built for export



**“What was really heartening was how the Defender line workers rallied round”**



the end – from the Series One Club well before the project had been officially given the green light. I was pretty sure it was going to happen, so I was willing to take the gamble and lay out my own money up front.

What was really heartening was how the workers on the Defender production line rallied round and contributed to the project. There’s a real sense of camaraderie among these guys and they went the extra mile to help out. Not many people realise that my reproduction Series 1 bodies were painted on the Defender production line, thanks to the blokes in the Paint Shop. Steve Moray in the Tool Room also deserves a special mention for welding up the ‘skids’ on which the vehicles are moved along the line, plus the work benches, racking and anything else that was needed.

There were many, many more individual acts of generosity. Someone might say, “Old Fred has still got a 1950s coat locker in his garage”, and in this way many authentic pieces were gathered together from former employees. Even a batch of factory asset plates – the metal tags attached to every item of equipment – was discovered and used to add a touch of authenticity. I was able to provide some of the old galvanised parts bins that I’d acquired when Land Rover switched to using plastic tubs; a real case of coals to Newcastle.

As for what will happen to the display when Defender production finishes later this year – well, I can’t imagine that it won’t be kept intact and moved to a museum. There’s certainly no intention to sell off the vehicles as ‘new’ Series 1s, even if that were possible. But it would be worth visiting Solihull this year, just in case.

I’m sometimes asked what I think about the Defender coming to an end. This may surprise you, but my opinion is – bring it on! The Defender is a vehicle designed for another age. I have every confidence that whatever replaces it will be just as impressive. And for a well-upholstered person like myself, it will certainly be a lot more comfortable to drive.



**Above centre, left and right:**  
A complete rolling chassis, correctly painted green, ready to leave Dunsfold for the recreated Series 1 production line at Solihull

## 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 this year. You can become a Friend of the Collection for an annual subscription of £35. Visit [www.dunsfoldcollection.co.uk](http://www.dunsfoldcollection.co.uk) to find out more.

THE DEFENDER CELEBRATION TOUR costs £45 per person and must be booked in advance. Visit <https://shop.landrover.co.uk/driving-experiences/find-a-centre/solihull> or call +44 (0)121 700 4619.

