



Dunsfold Diaries

By Philip Bashall



THE WORLD'S BEST BIRTHDAY PARTY

The Dunsfold Collection's Open Weekend is held at about the time of Philip Bashall's birthday – and everyone's invited

Photographs: Nick Dimbleby / The Dunsfold Collection

About 250 gallons of fuel. Up to 60 batteries. Four pints of brake fluid, ten gallons of oil and Lord knows how many gallons of water. Not to mention reams of paper, several printer cartridges and three weeks of my time. Those are the raw ingredients needed for a Dunsfold Open Weekend – so it's just as well that we only hold them every two years.

Before we staged the first Open Weekend, back in 1993, it was almost impossible for enthusiasts to see any vehicles in the Collection. They were stashed away door-handle-to-door-handle in dark barns. Occasionally, we'd empty the shed out and run a broom round it for a special visitor – we had a wealthy businessman come along once, who we were hoping might put some money in – but that was very rare. And the businessman didn't cough up, either.

For that first event in '93 we lined up perhaps 30 vehicles and had around 1000 visitors. Now you can treble both of those figures; in fact, there are several hundred Land Rovers on display if you take into account all the club vehicles and the ones belonging to private collectors. That's not counting all the Landies in the car park. If you turn up in a Land Rover, you're automatically part of the show. But heaven help you if you arrive in a car!

For the first few years, we put the show on annually, but

we soon switched to a biennial date to keep things fresh, and to take some of the stress off the organising team. It seems to get bigger every year and we've had to move the location twice: from the paddock at Dunsfold to a big field behind the workshops, and from there to our current home at The Springbok Estate, which is a rest home for retired seamen. As you can imagine, sailors don't spend much time in houses, so they often don't have anywhere to go when they retire. The people at Springbok are fantastic and we couldn't wish for a better location. We rent the land from them, make use of their bar and always leave the site even tidier than it was when we arrived.

It takes a lot of people to put on a show like the Open Weekend, and it wouldn't happen without the Friends of the Collection's Social Section. A core of about 10 Friends take care of everything from printing the programmes to setting the fields out, and over the weekend that core expands to some 30 volunteers. We feed them in our own mess tent, and there's always a pot of tea on the go.

Even so, the task of sorting out all the vehicles and extracting them from the Collection falls to me, and I'll start checking them over in April/May. I know that 80% will fire up as soon as a battery is put on them. Equally, I know that some of them won't. The prototype L322 Range Rover, for example, will have its fuel pump gummied up with old

Facing page and below:
The Dunsfold Collection numbers more than 100 rare and one-off Land Rovers, which are augmented for the Open Weekend by dozens more from clubs and private owners



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petrol, which can never be fully drained. And the amphibious Discovery will have a stuck starter and a rusted-on clutch, because it was used on Lake Geneva in March 2013. So I’ll be pulling the engine out to fix those.

For security and safety reasons, most vehicles have their batteries removed while they’re stored, and in the months leading up to the show I’ll have up to 100 batteries being trickle-charged in small batches. I tend to bulk-buy batteries in a useful size just before the show and then re-sell them straight afterwards. Unfortunately, even though the Springbok Estate is only a couple of miles away, all the vehicles have to be trailered there. We don’t tax or MoT them while they’re in storage, for reasons of cost, and some of the prototypes were never passed for road use anyway.

So, a week before the show, I’ll start loading up vehicles and delivering them to the site. Last time, my old Discovery clocked up 80 miles just doing these two-mile runs – and it’s only one of the tow vehicles. Happily, there’s a valet company on the Springbok Estate and I can drop each display vehicle off there for a quick wash-and-brush-up before it’s moved to the show site. I’m obsessive about having them lined up with military precision, and it rather annoys me that individual vehicles have to be taken out of the line for a parade or demonstration!

Running the vehicles is good for them, however, and it’s good for the Collection too, because we hold a raffle of rides in our one-offs. On the Saturday night, Richard Beddall holds a ‘money can’t buy’-type auction and it will often raise £3000-4000. In 2013 one man bid £110 for a ride in the Forest Rover, so I took him out in that around the site and then, when it was safe, I let him have a drive as well. It’s all very laid-back and informal.

I try to have some sort of theme at each Open Weekend, and this year will see the biggest-ever gathering of pre-production Series Is. We have 17 of the 20 surviving pre-pros coming from all over the UK, France, Holland and Germany. Even when they were brand new, there wouldn’t

have been 17 gathered all together at the factory, so it truly will be a unique event. At the other end of the timescale, this year will be your last chance to have a ride in a new Defender, courtesy of Land Rover Experience London, who will be offering trips around our off-road course.

Yes, the weather can be unpredictable – I’ll never forget the year a guy had his roof tent struck by lightning while he was sleeping in it – but everyone takes it in their stride. People come from all over the world; they even plan their weddings around our Open Weekend. I love it because it’s always around the time of my birthday and it’s like having a massive party with all your mates.

Nevertheless, getting ready for the Open Weekend takes a huge amount of effort, and I can only fantasise about having all the vehicles stored in a spacious and well-lit museum, where they stay clean and I can tinker with any of them without having to move half-a-dozen others beforehand – at present it’s like trying to solve a Rubik’s Cube.

But that’s exactly why we hold the Open Weekend: to raise funds for that dream building, and to inspire others to get involved with saving our Land Rover heritage.

Dunsfold Collection

THIS YEAR’S Dunsfold Collection Open Weekend is on June 13-14 at the Springbok Estate, GU6 8EX. Adult entry costs £12 per day or £20 for the weekend, with concessions for children and OAPs, and camping is available if you book before 29 May – visit www.dunsfoldcollection.co.uk.

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. Details are on the website.

