

**NEW
SERIES**



Dunsfold Diaries

By Philip Bashall

FLOATING IDEAS...

Continuing his new series, Philip Bashall of the Dunsfold Collection explains how he became hooked on Land Rovers – thanks to a very unusual amphibious one-off

Photographs: The Dunsfold Collection

LAST MONTH I mentioned how the Dunsfold Collection got underway in 1970 when my father, Brian, started to get to know the key guys in Land Rover’s engineering and experimental departments. One of those people was Roger Crathorne – the legendary development engineer who became known as ‘Mr Land Rover’ – and both he and Brian were very much into Land Rover trialling during the mid-to-late 1960s.

As a young boy, I used to go with Brian to watch him compete in trials, and it was a trip to Solihull early in 1970 for a trial and a factory tour that really got me bitten by the Land Rover bug. That’s when I had my first glimpse of the vehicle that would change my life. I wanted it so badly, but it would take nearly 40 years to realise my dream.

It’s embarrassing now to admit it, but somehow on that Sunday in March 1970, when snow was still on the ground, we got into the shed where the pre-production Range Rovers were being built. Brian had his Pentax Spotmatic with him and took some pictures – something you’d never even consider doing today, when you would risk being prosecuted for industrial espionage – and they’re now believed to be the only shots that exist of the ‘Velars’ under construction. Brian didn’t show them to Roger Crathorne until 1998, and even then we were rather worried that he might have a fit – he certainly didn’t know what we’d got up to nearly 30 years earlier – but he was delighted to see them. In fact, he asked

if he could have them professionally scanned on behalf of Land Rover.

On the last frame of that same roll of film, Brian took a snap of a rather unusual Land Rover that was parked outside in the snow. In those days, Land Rover had a separate department for inventing specialist vehicles that might be saleable to armies here and abroad. In 1965 the department built what was known as the One Ton Amphibious Land Rover, or OTAL, to demonstrate to the Australian Army for possible use in the Vietnam War. When we saw it in 1970, it had finished its trials and was about to be disposed of. I was 11 years old then and I said to Brian: “One day I would love to own that.”

“The wings had been slowly filling with water – about 40 gallons gushed out”

The OTAL was a one-off, powered by a single-carb, 2.6-litre straight-six, and with a unique alloy body. The rear tub and front wings were all separate, sealed units filled with expanding foam to help it float, and which were claimed to be unaffected by small-arms fire. A hydraulic winch was fitted at the front, so the OTAL could self-recover, and its wheels were 900 x 16 deep rims like the ones used on Forward Controls. It was officially described as “a vehicle which has all the characteristics of a Land Rover, but which in addition is able to cross inland water without special preparation and without using appliqué flotation kits.”

It was quite clever in some ways – for example, the front wings quickly detached to give access to the engine – but on water it was pretty hopeless because there wasn’t a separate





propulsion system and it had to rely on its four wheels for forward movement and steering. The engine compartment wasn't sealed either, so the water level came up to the level of the head gasket, although that would probably have been changed for production. I thought it looked fantastic, like one of those big toys sold as accessories for Action Man.

The Australian Army wasn't so impressed, however. The OTAL was tested on the lake at Packington Park in Warwickshire and then shipped to Australia to be demonstrated, but ended up back at Solihull by 1970 – where I saw it – before it was sent off to Eastnor Castle for use on the estate. It was repainted Ferguson grey and registered TVJ 237J, and then converted to carry a snow plough – and it also came in useful, equipped with a set of Firestone SAT tyres, for recovering stranded cars and caravans after events had been held there.

There's a good story about how the OTAL's steering seemed to have become unusually heavy during its time at Eastnor. It turned out that the foam-filled front wings had been slowly filling up with water over the years, and when a couple of holes were drilled in the bottom of each wing, about 40 gallons gushed out! So much for the claim about being "unaffected by small arms fire"...

In the mid 1980s, Eastnor donated the OTAL to the British Motor Industry Heritage Collection and it sat there until 2006, when I persuaded them to do a swap for one of my vehicles (a 'Pink Panther' ex-SAS Landy, if I remember right). I restored it to running condition in 2008 and its first outing was at the press launch of Roger Crathorne's book *Born in Lode Lane*, held, appropriately enough, at Eastnor Castle. My ambition is to make it watertight again and take it back to Packington Park lake, but I've been warned by an engineer who used to work in Land Rover's military department not to back it into the water, because the tailgate top will become submerged before the vehicle starts to float!

You can't quite see it in the photo taken at Solihull in 1970, but there was a sign on the brick wall behind the OTAL for the Military Engineering and Special Projects department, where it was built half-a-century ago. That sign now hangs above the staircase in my workshop. I rescued it when Land Rover was clearing out old lock-ups.



Above:
The OTAL outside the Military Engineering and Special Projects workshops in 1970;
Left:
Going "down under" might have had a completely different meaning for an amphibious Landy intended for Australia;
Below:
Philip with the OTAL today at Dunsfold – clearly it's no sitting DUKW



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, 2015. 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 such as Land Rover trials and gymkhanas. Visit www.dunsfoldcollection.co.uk to find out more.

