

Time



About seven years ago, I remember a Land Rover friend telling me a joke: 'What do you call an old Discovery?' Answer: An organ donor! At the time, I appreciated the humour because, like many in the classic Land Rover community, I'd recently fitted an ex-Discovery 200Tdi engine to my Series III. It was the must-have engine conversion giving almost twice the economy and power of a 2,286cc petrol. Now time has moved on, Series vehicles are increasingly being retro fitted with rebuilt

original engines and I'm fast becoming convinced that good early Discoverys shouldn't be laid out for the vultures to pick over.

The achilles heel of the original Discovery was the bodywork which was prone to serious rot, especially on the sills, inner wings and boot floor. Repairing is time-consuming and often financially unviable for the average owner so eventually, it was off to the local scrap yard.

For a while, an ageing 'Disco' was the

weapon of choice among the off-road fraternity, usually sporting the obligatory two-inch lift, whippy CB aerial and a sea of stickers and chequerplate. The vehicles were cheap and cheerful, easy to accessorise and far more comfortable than a Defender. This was the budget way into Land Rovers and it lasted until there was no more sound metal to weld to and the second generation Discovery became affordable.

First generation Discovery chassis' tended to last well though and mechanically they

Served

WORDS: EMRYS KIRBY
PICTURES: NICK DIMBLEBY/JLR

Emrys Kirby drives an immaculate unrestored early Discovery and reckons the time has come to call it a true classic



Discovery was designed to appeal to active families

were nigh on bombproof, especially as they were often used as everyday cars, not trashed as work vehicles. For this reason, just like the Range Rover 'classic' before it, it became the vehicle of choice to build budget racers, trials vehicles and of course retro-fit engine conversions.

Nowadays, good first-generation Range Rovers are fetching serious money and you only need to look at JLR's own Range Rover Reborn programme to see that people are willing to invest. And here I think we'll

'In 1986, Project Jay was launched with a plan to build a new family 4x4 based on the Range Rover chassis'

see history is repeating itself - there's a natural cycle: new car, old car, scrap car, classic car. The last stage is always the most complicated but I reckon few would argue that the beautiful early and totally original, unrestored Discovery is now a true classic.

This vehicle was registered in June 1990 and bought by a doctor who traded in his 1972 Range Rover to buy it - very appropriate given my musings on the journey a vehicle takes to attain classic status. Furthermore, the Discovery design



A sea of Sonar Blue plastic!

Headlights aren't that good and reflectors usually rust

Land Rover logo but dash came from Austin cars



is based on the same chassis, it's pretty much just the body that's different and this was an expedient but very canny business move on the part of Land Rover in the mid to late 1980s. This particular vehicle was used carefully and sparingly throughout its life with the doctor and has only covered 51,000 miles. It was sold on in 2014 and since then it has been used in recent JLR publicity events and is in the care of the Dunsfold Collection.

It is hard to overstate just how important

the Discovery is in company history – put simply, the Discovery model saved Land Rover and set the standard for the family 4x4, a market that JLR still leads today.

In the early to mid-1980s, Land Rover was struggling, sales were still on the slide despite the launch of the 110 and 90 models. The company only had two products, the utilitarian Land Rover and the increasingly luxurious Range Rover.

Traditional Land Rover markets were lost to Japanese manufactures in the 1970s

and the big growth area in 4x4 sales in the early 1980s was with family sports utility vehicles. Land Rover simply didn't have a vehicle that fell into this category, neither did it have sufficient money to invest in developing a totally new one.

Therefore in 1986, Project Jay was launched with a plan to build a new family 4x4 based on the Range Rover chassis but sufficiently different, less premium and appealing to a younger, less affluent customer. In turn, the Range Rover could then be sent further up

Massive door card pockets



market, especially to appeal to American buyers and given the commonality of components, could reduce production cost on economies of scale. The name Discovery was chosen in autumn 1989 and the vehicle was launched at a ride and drive event in Plymouth in October that year.

The styling which came from the Conran Studio was deliberately very different to the Range Rover and the multitude of

'You know it's a diesel but there's no rattle, no vibration, no harshness inside the cab'

Distinctive rising roofline allowed for rear dicky seats



lifestyle accessories aimed it firmly into the practical, everyday camp.

It was designed to seat five in comfort with the addition of two side-facing 'dicky' seats. The interior of this particular vehicle is simply superb – the Sonar Blue plastic was definitely of its time but because of the low mileage, there's none of the usual wear and tear on places like the dimpled plastic steering wheel and the gear knob is only lightly polished.

As for the hi-low lever, it's probably hardly ever been used – there's not a speck

Hi/Lo transfer gear information sticker



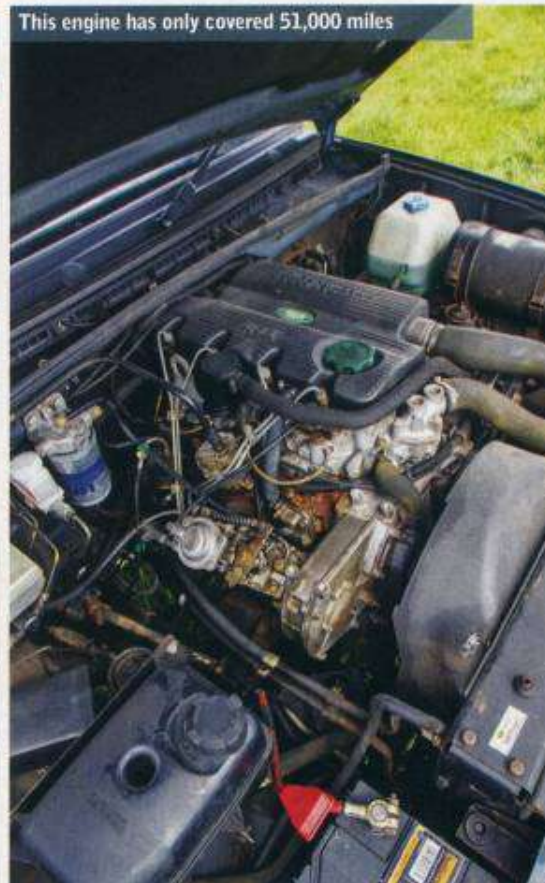
No wear on the gear knobs, low range probably never used



of the usual grubbiness on it. The Discovery opened the Land Rover brand up to a whole new audience, it wasn't just for the farmer or the wealthy land owner, the Discovery was an everyday family motor and very few first owners would have used them off-road.

The Discovery had to look and feel very different to maintain its older brother's premium price. In the early days, the power output of the V8 model was deliberately lower than the Range Rover, there was no automatic transmission and alloy wheels

This engine has only covered 51,000 miles





Dicky seats and optional dog guard

'The Discovery had to look and feel very different to maintain its older brother's premium price'

While we can sing its praises, sitting in the driver's seat you can't help but realise just how far the 4x4 industry has come in 27 years. This vehicle has wind-up front windows, door-card mounted ash trays, crude tilt and slide seats, a simple tilt sunroof controlled by a turn knob, a radio cassette player and a rudimentary factory-fit alarm that really does look like an add on. The current, now fifth generation, Discovery is a starship in comparison, with its touch screen infotainment system, panoramic roof and smartphone adjustable rear seating.

The first generation Discovery has served its time as an old car and those that have escaped the crusher can rightly now be called classic. While values are still generally quite low, expect to pay a premium for something as good as this or anything with factory history like a G-WAC launch vehicle. **CLB**



Distinctive graphics to give sporting appeal



Front grille now looks very crude and dated

instrument binnacle and gauges (from the Montego/Maestro/Metro). Somehow though, this worked well – it was cost-effective, robust, slightly rugged and perfect for a practical everyday vehicle. While it was always designed with a five-door version in mind, the fact that it was launched as a two-door again cemented the difference between it and the Range Rover which was almost exclusively ordered as a five-door by the late 1980s.

What was totally new for the Discovery was the 200Tdi 'Gemini' diesel engine and the Range Rover continued with the 2.5 VM diesel engine. The 200Tdi was still based on existing four-cylinder engine designs but with its two-stage injectors, it was significantly quieter than other direct injection diesels of the time. For those used to the rattle of a Tdi in a Series vehicle, it is truly a revelation to drive a pristine condition Discovery like this. You know it's a diesel but there's no rattle, no vibrations and no harshness inside the cab. Despite the fact that the vehicle and engine were designed and produced in fewer than four years, huge amounts of effort were put into controlling NVH (noise, vibration and harshness). Huge rubber mounts absorb much of the vibration at low revs and a well soundproofed transmission tunnel controls noise.



Amazing range of vivid colours in the seat pattern



Emrys says, "I'm convinced that early Discoverys are a proper classic"

weren't even an option at launch. This example in flat, solid Windjammer Blue has (now) very retro-looking side stripes giving sporting appeal, not oozing sophistication.

To keep manufacturing costs down, the old Austin Rover parts bin was raided for the tail lights (from a Maestro van), the headlights (from a Freight Rover) and