

Solihull stretch

An unexpected email leads to an interesting and unique piece of Land Rover and Solihull history joining the Dunsfold Collection

THERE really is nothing quite like a good Land Rover mystery! This 120 inch wheelbase Range Rover first came to the attention of Philip Bashall of the Dunsfold Collection earlier this year when owner Jeffrey Lee got in touch offering it for sale. Many months later, Jeffrey contacted us again with a specific value in mind. In the meantime, Philip and I had done some research and discovered how little seemed to be known about the Mayor of Solihull's stretched Range Rover limousine. Nevertheless, we concluded that this fascinating Range Rover potentially deserved a place in the Collection... as long as it was built by the company rather than one of the many Range Rover conversion specialists that were active in the 1980s.

But let's start with what we initially discovered about the vehicle. It was registered on August 24, 1983, with the number SOL 1 and the first owner was the Metropolitan Borough of Solihull. It was registered to the Mayor's Parlour at the Council House in Solihull, and it was destined to be the mayoral limousine. The general consensus was that it was built to commemorate Land Rover's 35th anniversary and some believed it was gifted to the council.

Roger Crathorne believes that the idea originally came from Paul Lloyd. "At the time, Paul was



STORY: GARY PUSEY PHOTOS: PATRICK CRUYWAGEN, DUNSFOLD COLLECTION



Sofa-like rear seat
in blue velour and
walnut veneer trim



ARCHIVE, JAMES TAYLOR COLLECTION/JD STOCKWELL



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The Mayor's chauffeur was invited to Lode Lane to have a fitting to ensure total comfort

employed in the workshops at Lode Lane although he later joined me in the demonstration team. Paul had asked why the mayor of the town where we built the Range Rover was being driven around in a Volvo. Quite how this then turned into a firm order for a Range Rover limousine I don't really know. I do remember seeing the vehicle in the workshop, although I have no recollection of the company celebrating the 35th anniversary in any significant way. I'm also doubtful that it was gifted to the council."

It has a wheelbase of 120 inches, meaning that it is 20 inches longer than a standard first-generation Range Rover, is 196 inches long and weighs 2.5 tons. It has a soundproofed, bespoke interior swathed in walnut veneer and shimmering blue velour featuring a sofa-like rear seat, two fold-down rear-facing seats, and a cramped driving compartment separated from the sumptuous accommodation in the back by a sliding glass privacy screen.

There are two independently-controlled air conditioning systems and two radios; one for the chauffeur and one for the VIPs. It has the Chrysler Torqueflite three-speed automatic transmission that had been introduced the year before with the four-door Range Rover In Vogue. There is a standard carb-fed 3.5 V8, and the latter is fitted with a

At the height of its use (and prime) it retained its original plate SOL 1

demountable pennant that carries the embroidered Solihull coat of arms with the legend 'Urbs in Rure' which, for the benefit of the non-Latin speakers among us, means 'town in the countryside'. The coat of arms was granted way back in the depths of history. Well, in 1975, to be precise.

In October 1983, Land Rover went to the trouble of creating and sending to the Council a unique loose-leaf 'Supplement to the Driver's Handbook' specific to the 'Range Rover Four Door Auto 120 inch' which refers to some of the fascinating features on the mayoral limousine. The side steps, for example, were full-length units that could be pre-set to extend automatically when the rear doors were opened and retract when they were closed.

Dual batteries were installed under the bonnet and the spare wheel was secured flat in the loadspace underneath a hinged, fully trimmed panel. It is particularly interesting to discover the 20 inch exhaust pipe extension, the extended prop shaft and 20 inch extensions for the main and return fuel lines and the brake pipes are all listed with their own Genuine Parts numbers, while the entries for the interior folding grab handles above the rear doors reveal that they are Jaguar components.

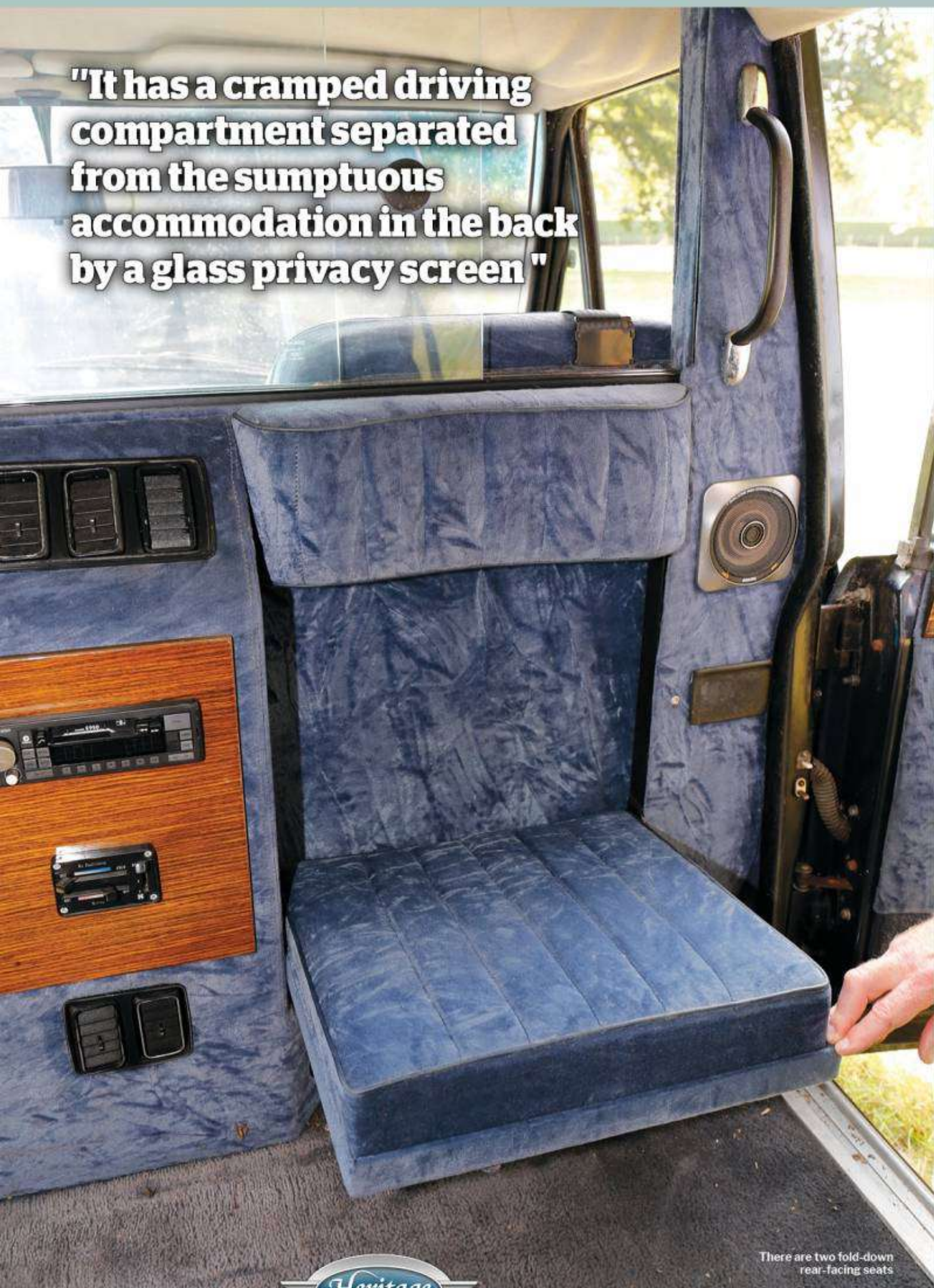
Within five years the vehicle had covered 61,000 miles, which seems to me to be quite a lot for a mayoral limousine that presumably rarely ventured further than Birmingham or Coventry, although it is known to have wafted the Mayor down to London at least once, to attend a ceremony at Westminster Abbey to commemorate the 900th anniversary of the Domesday Book, in 1986.

In 1989 it was presumably downgraded for the use of officials rather less important than the mayor, because it was re-registered with the number SOL 2, and SOL 1 was reallocated to a Daimler. In early 1995, by which time it had covered around 85,000 miles, it was downgraded again and given the age-related registration A451 YOX. Over the following three years it drove a mere 3000 miles and in May 1998 the council offered it for sale and invited interested parties to submit their offers.

The lucky bidder at £4200 was Jeffrey Lee, a director of Doherty & Lee Ltd, who had a long association with the council as civil engineering contractors. Jeffrey is a serious



"It has a cramped driving compartment separated from the sumptuous accommodation in the back by a glass privacy screen"



There are two fold-down rear-facing seats

Cllr Mrs Miriam Harris was Mayor of Solihull when the Limousine was delivered in 1983



petrolhead who owns a classic Porsche 911 and an Armstrong Siddeley saloon as well as the Range Rover limo, and together they make an eclectic collection.

"I used the Range Rover a lot in the first few years," Jeffrey recalls. "We went to France in it regularly, and it was very comfortable and a good ride. It certainly attracted a lot of attention and interest. I always understood that it was given to Solihull Council to mark Land Rover's 35th anniversary in 1983, and I've heard there was a big presentation event when the Range Rover was handed over to the council. The paint isn't a standard Range Rover colour and I was told that it is actually a Jaguar colour known as Westminster Blue."

When Philip and I began to make enquiries about the vehicle there were some who suggested the chassis extension and body modifications had been carried out by Glover Webb or FLM Panelcraft, supposedly because Land Rover didn't have the requisite skills in-house at that time. This seemed unlikely, and indeed Philip came across a rather grainy photograph of a similar vehicle in the scrap compound at the factory that was taken by his father, Brian, in 1981 or 1982. Philip wonders whether this was a prototype or development vehicle for the mayoral limousine, a theory reinforced by James Taylor who thinks it highly likely that the company would have wanted to satisfy itself that the chassis was safe before it was handed over to the council.

James first heard about the mayoral limo in the mid-1990s: "Tony Poole told me about it and gave me a copy of the drawing showing the 120 inch wheelbase and the side steps, and said that it was a vehicle Land Rover had built for Solihull Council. I don't know exactly why he had the drawing, although as head of 4x4 styling at the time he would presumably have had to give his approval at the very least."

James thinks it is also intriguing that the chassis stretch on

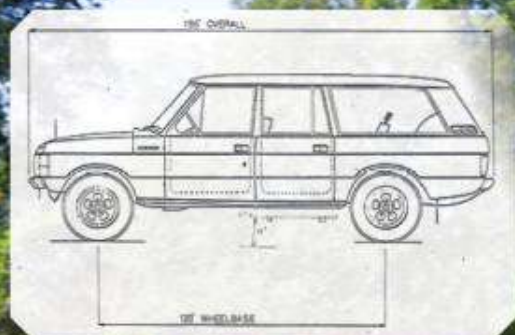
Unique touches include a 20 inch exhaust pipe extension and a mayoral pennant on the bonnet

both vehicles is 20 inches. "This creates a lot more work because two standard front doors need to be cut down and remade to create the rear doors," he says. "Had the stretch been extended to 24 inches, the company's engineers could have fitted unmodified front doors on the rear and also avoided having to make modifications to the rear wings and the Danish market rear windows." James knows of at least three more stretched Range Rovers built by the company subsequently, and all had 124 inch chassis.

Jeffrey Lee used the Range Rover until 2008 when it was placed on a SORN and put into storage with 95,000 miles on the clock, and on a warm September afternoon Philip Bashall and I are looking at it on Jeffrey's driveway in Stourbridge. It would be an understatement to suggest this rather dilapidated and down at heel Range Rover requires work! Serious body rot is present in all the usual places, but Philip is convinced that the chassis is sound, and the all-important bespoke interior is present and correct. It even has its slightly faded mayoral pennant on the bonnet!

The limo is an interesting and unique part of Land Rover history, and we conclude that it meets the Dunsfold Collection's criteria. A deal is done and with some considerable effort, not helped by the fact that it is running on only one bank of cylinders, we load 2.5 tons and 196 inches of stretched Range Rover onto the Collection's six-wheel trailer for the slow haul back to Surrey.

Once safely home and with the limo unloaded, Philip is keen to get underneath to see exactly how the stretch was achieved. Two 20 inch extensions have been neatly welded in place, and a second cross member has been added using a modified gearbox cross member. We can't quite work out how the sills have been fabricated, because they're hidden by the Discovery side steps that have been fitted at some point



Drawing shows 120 inch wheelbase and the side steps



"There were many in the council who felt the standard Range Rover could not make the transformation to sophisticated limousine"

to replace the original, bespoke affairs. It's a shame these have been lost somewhere along the way.

We retreat to the office to look at the history file more closely, which is when we find the typed 'Supplement to the Driver's Handbook' hidden inside one of the two Owner's Handbooks that come with the car. Historians and researchers have probably never had the opportunity to examine the Supplement, and the final page helps to dispel any doubts as to who built the mayoral limousine. . . .

'Assemblies fabricated by Land Rover Ltd,' it reads. 'Chassis 20 inch extension and additional cross member; side frame, rear side windows, roof panel and headlining; rear compartment partition incorporating sliding glass panels, occasional folding tables and centre console; modified front seat frames'. But it's still possible that some or all of the work was done by outside contractors.

Roger Crathorne has been busy connecting with several of his erstwhile Lode Lane colleagues to see if they have any recollections or thoughts, and he's struck gold! Steve Morey and Peter Handley remember the vehicle well and recall the chassis and body shell modifications being carried out in the factory jig shop, before they were delivered to Motor Panels who modified the body panels and did the assembly.

Steve and Peter believe that Motor Panels fitted the dividing screen and privacy glass, which is a modified black cab unit, and the vehicle was then delivered to Callow & Maddox of Exhall for trimming. Final assembly was completed at Solihull and Peter and colleague Bill Badger took it in turns to put mileage on it in the evenings.

"That was when the problem with the driving position became clear," recalls Steve. "it was very cramped because someone had underestimated the legroom in the rear compartment, so the divider

The Mayoral limousine was factory built with only panel work and trim left in the hands of external specialists

had been moved forward to compensate for this, which made the driving position very squashed. When everything was completed the car was handed over to the mayor and the guys involved were invited to the Council House for a reception. I think it was one of those classic Land Rover jobs that would never happen nowadays."

But credit for unearthing the final pieces of the puzzle must go to Elaine Stephens, Civic Officer at Solihull MBC, and her colleague Tracey Williams, who is the Heritage and Local Services Librarian. They came up with a copy of the Municipal Journal dated July 8, 1983, which featured an article entitled 'Solihull will have a unique mayor's car'.

The article describes how the Solihull Town Clerk, John Scampton, and Land Rover's Managing Director, Mike Hodgkinson, came up with the idea and thought it would be 'an ideal way to demonstrate support by the Council for its major commercial employer'.

There were many in the council who apparently felt the standard Range Rover 'could not make the transformation to sophisticated limousine', but Scampton and Hodgkinson persisted, and the council decided to proceed. The price agreed was £18,430. The mayor's chauffeur, Alex England, was even invited to Lode Lane 'to have a fitting, thereby ensuring his total comfort in the driver's seat'.

So now we know. The mayoral limousine was definitely factory-built, although external specialists were responsible for panel work and trimming. It is a worthy addition to the Dunsfold Collection. And since you ask, the current Solihull mayoral limousine is a Range Rover 2.0 litre P400E Petrol PHEV Autobiography.

With grateful thanks to Elaine Stephens, Tracey Williams, Roger Crathorne, Steve Morey, Peter Handley and James Taylor.

