

30 YEARS IN THE MAKING...

AA GARY PUSEY 📷 NICK DIMBLEBY, ROGER CRATHORNE AND JLR



Roger Crathorne had set his heart on owning a Defender that celebrated its 1948 ancestor. On the last day of utility Defender production in 2016, his long-held dream became a reality

CHASSIS number SALLDWLP7GA490318 was assembled at Solihull on 29 January 2016 in the full glare of the world's media. Its proud new owner, Roger Crathorne, had hoped to watch it every step of the way, but he found himself in great demand for press and TV interviews. Only ten more Defenders followed it down the line before production of the utility Land Rover ended forever. But Roger had managed at last to secure a Land Rover that he had spent over 30 years trying to persuade the company to build.

What's so special about it, I hear you ask? After all, there are plenty of soft top Defenders out there, but the vast majority of them are either ex-military or aftermarket conversions. The last UK civilian market soft top Land Rover was built in 1983, before the Defender brand was even conceived. Roger takes up the story.

"I was heavily involved in the planning and preparation for the Land Rover 40th anniversary celebrations in 1988 and carried out the recce with the company's PR manager on the Isle of Islay, which is where the Wilks family had a holiday house and where early Land Rovers and Range Rovers were occasionally tested.

"The press would be flown to the tiny airfield at Machrihanish near Campbeltown, travel in a 1948 bus up the Mull of Kintyre and then by ferry to Islay. I came up with the idea of building 40 soft top Ninetys for the media to use during the event, which would then be sold off to the public via the dealer network. I was convinced that a limited edition anniversary model that was as close as possible to the very first 80in vehicles built in 1948 would be very popular.

"Of course, it would be based on the current model and would have a few concessions to convenience and modernity, such as an external swing-away spare wheel on the rear body to maximise internal load space, and a radio. I even researched the purchase of 40 registration plates with the number 40 in them, but only two vehicles were built before the idea was scuppered. One of these, E40 KDU, is now part of the





British Motor Museum collection at Gaydon, and the other, F40 NWK, was converted into an amphibious vehicle for use at Cowes Week in 1988.

"As an aside, the amphibious Ninety was all about getting Land Rover noticed at Cowes that year, in preparation for the amphibious G-WAC Discovery the company would float at Cowes the following year as part of the launch of the new Discovery. Boat owners were one segment of the target market for the new 'leisure lifestyle Land Rover' vehicle.

"Over the years, the myth has taken root that the 40th anniversary Ninetys were not built because there was a strike at the factory, but the true story is that Land Rover's then managing director, Tony Gilroy, had got wind of it and didn't approve. Gilroy had taken the job at a time when the company was struggling. Utility Land Rover sales were declining dramatically, particularly in the traditional overseas markets in Africa, South America and Australia, and the brand-new Discovery was being rushed through a rapid development programme but would not be launched until 1989.

"As well as my day job, I was actively involved in trying to save what I thought were important vehicles in Land Rover's history, but Tony Gilroy only had eyes on the future of the company and did not want to waste time on the past. As he said of my idea for the 40th anniversary limited edition, 'either they go, or you go!' They went...

"I realised I'd lost the battle, so I dropped the idea. But I was still convinced that Land Rover enthusiasts would be keen to buy a basic soft top vehicle. Over the following years, the company created a number of limited-edition soft tops such as the SV90, the NAS 90 for the North American market and the SVX, but these were very different from the true-to-its-roots model that I had in mind, but I could never convince anyone to go forward with it.

It might have taken 30 years, but Roger is clearly pleased with the final result

"The idea never really left me, though, and as it became clear that Defender production was definitely going to come to an end, I once again started to think about trying to interest the company in building a vehicle with a strong connection to the very first Land Rovers. I'd also decided that I would try to order an end-of-production Defender for myself, so even if there was no corporate interest in a basic soft top vehicle, I might at least be able to fulfil my ambition to have one!

"I decided to approach JLR's head of PR, Fiona Pargeter, to see what the company's thoughts were around commemorating the end of Defender production. I was astonished when she told me that she didn't believe the company would be making a big thing out of it, and that she didn't envisage any kind of media event. It seemed incredible to me that the company was even thinking that Defender could go quietly and without any kind of fanfare, after being in production for nearly 70 years. I certainly didn't think the many hundreds of thousands of loyal Land Rover enthusiasts around the world would be happy if the Defender simply faded away.

"I always got on well with JLR's CEO, Dr Ralf Speth, and would often spend time with him at media events, sometimes driving him around in a heritage Land Rover. I took the opportunity to mention to him that I was keen to order a basic soft top for my own use, but he told me this wouldn't be possible because the company had 'other plans' for the end of production.

"I was due to drive the DC100 concept vehicle onto the stage at the forthcoming Frankfurt Motor Show and John Edwards, who was then head of Special Vehicles, was there. I asked him if he thought it would be possible to build what I had in mind, and he was very positive that SVO could build it for me. However, when I started to look into the details with people in SVO the general reaction was that it would be too difficult to do and would also be



“The 40th anniversary Ninetys were not built because Tony Gilroy had got wind of it and didn't approve”

Could this be the best of the final Defender models? A glorious blend of the first and the last of the utility Land Rovers



Neat interior light was added by the production line team...



...as were one or two other little improvements, such as the door pulls

very expensive, because my employee discount would not apply.

"I had similar conversations with various people around the company, but everyone said it was not possible to build a soft top vehicle to UK market spec, although I did hear that it would be possible to build one for certain overseas markets. That was when the seeds of a plan were sown in my mind. I went off to do some research, and finally found a way forward that should result in me getting the vehicle I wanted.

"I spoke to the dealer principal at Land Rover retailer Westover and ordered a Defender 90 Truck Cab in Keswick Green with all the extras except alloy wheels and front mudflaps. Then, once I knew the order had been processed and was in the system, I went to see the UK sales team at JLR and asked if my order with Westover could be changed to a Cyprus market Truck Cab. Yes, they said, that could be done, so I then asked if the order could be further changed to a Cyprus-spec Soft Top, and this was done as well.

"There were still a few other things that needed to be sorted out, not least the hood. The standard company design was made of plastic and I wanted one made of canvas. Greg King came to the rescue when he offered to organise one to the correct design in canvas from Undercover Covers. Everything was falling neatly into place, or so I thought.

"Things almost derailed when the guys at Westover called with what they thought was good news, telling me that my 90 was going to be built earlier than expected and I would get it in November 2015. They were surprised when I told them I wanted it to be completed as late as possible, but thank goodness they called me, because otherwise I might not have known until it was too late.

"I knew many of the people on the Defender production line and told them I'd like my vehicle to be as close to the end of production as possible, and it was very



“It seemed incredible that the company was even thinking that the Defender could go quietly, without any sort of fanfare”



Not many utility Land Rovers are so sparkingly clean inside



exciting to hear that they thought they might be able to make it the penultimate vehicle off the line.

"Meanwhile, the debate as to the exact nature of the last day event had continued at senior management level, and good sense seemed to be prevailing as it became clear that there would be a significant media event at Solihull on the last day, with journalists, photographers, TV crews and invited guests coming in from all over the world.

"A selection of Land Rovers was gathered together to form a parade within the factory, led by pre-pro R01, better known as HUE 166, and ending with the last-off-line, appropriately registered H166 HUE. Commentary would be provided by Vicki Butler-Henderson and Quentin Willson, in front of an audience of media, invited VIP guests and JLR senior management, which would be followed by the vehicles driving around the factory complex. It was an excellent way to say goodbye to the utility Land Rover, and a far cry from the initial idea to issue a press release and a few photographs.

"There was a lot of last-minute discussion about the final Defenders that would roll down the line of the last day, with different views as to the various models and specifications, but JLR Classic's Tim Hannig made the decision that the last vehicle off the line would be a 90 Soft Top just like mine, which would go to the JLR Classic heritage fleet. Once I'd found out how to go about getting one built, Tim was only too pleased to be able to repeat the process for the last-off-line.

"I was told that mine would therefore not be the penultimate vehicle off the line but would definitely be built on the final day. I also discovered that the body panel set allocated to my 90 was the very last set to be built into a complete vehicle.

"There were hundreds of media and guests around the Defender production line on the last day, 29 January, and I spotted my vehicle as soon as it started down the line.

Roger on the production line on the last day, between media interviews

I'd hoped to follow it but the excitement and the demands of various TV crews and journalists for interviews meant that I was soon distracted.

"I didn't even see it drive off the line because I was doing an interview for a German TV company, and when Tiff Needell said to me, 'where's your vehicle, Roger, let's go and stand by it and do an interview', we couldn't even find it!

"Luckily the men and woman on the line knew which vehicle was mine, and as a result a few extras appeared, which I was only aware of when the vehicle had been completed. Carpets, rubber mats and over-mats were fitted, and the pedals, door pulls and knobs were swapped for items usually reserved for the special editions like the Autobiography.

"Hands-free and Bluetooth were also added, as were alloy wheels, although that was a bit of a problem because I'd specially ordered steels to fit in with the basic spec that I had envisaged.

"I'd mentioned to the team that I wanted a wire installed up the side of the windscreen so that I could fit an interior light at some point, once I got the vehicle home. I was absolutely delighted to find that when I eventually had the time to go and see my newly completed vehicle, it had an interior light, courtesy of the production line team.

"My final retirement from Land Rover was imminent, and I was very touched to have been presented with the registration number R90 HUE, which was one of the batch of numbers I'd bought for the company to use some years previously, and I put it straight onto the Soft Top.

"I've enjoyed driving it and it now has 24,000 miles on the clock, but I decided that it was time to move it on and dedicate my time to my 80in, and I'm very pleased that R90 HUE has found a safe home for posterity with the Dunsfold Collection."





End of the line – the final utility Defender rolls through the factory



Parade included this 1956 Series I fire tender...



...stunning 1994 Defender 90 NAS...



...and the 1967 Buick V8-engined Series IIA 88in



JLR Executive Director Nigel Blenkinsop enjoyed driving the last-off-line in the parade