

CELEBRATING

We conclude our two-part celebration of the 50th anniversary of the completion of the British Trans-Americas Expedition in 1972



Slightly surreal – the pre-dawn crossing of Westminster Bridge

IN STYLE

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NE of the most popular vehicles in the Dunsfold Collection is the 1971-72 British Trans-Americas Expedition vehicle VXC 765K, better known as the Darién Gap Range Rover. It is one of two that were provided and prepared by Rover for what would turn out to be one of the most exciting and challenging chapters in the company's history, as described in the last issue of *LRM* by Thom Westcott in her interview with expedition leader, Colonel John Blashford-Snell.

It is interesting to note that even today, the British Trans-Americas Expedition is still sometimes referred to as the first vehicular crossing of the Darién Gap. It is a claim that was made by Russell Braddon in what was the first and supposedly 'official' book on the expedition, published in 1974. It seems that Rover was more than happy at the time to allow this misinformation to prevail and never sought to correct it, because the Trans-Americas was most definitely not the first vehicular crossing of the Darién Gap. It was, however, the first to drive the entire length of the Pan-American Highway, traversing the Gap on the way.

According to Guinness World Records, the first overland crossing of the Darién was The Trans-Darién Expedition of 1960 that was sponsored by the Pan-American Highway Congress and the National Geographic Society. The crew included Richard Bevir from the UK as





In the depths of the Darién, VXC 765K easily recognised by the missing centre section on the top of the bull bar

well as Terence Whitfield, Otis Imboden, Kip Ross, and Arnado and Reina Arauz. Originally tasked with finding a route for the completion of the Pan-American Highway, the expedition took place between February and June 1960 at an average speed of 201mph, although in this case that stands for metres per hour. At least they used a Land Rover, an 88in station wagon they named 'La Cucaracha Cariñosa' or 'The Affectionate Cockroach', but they also had a Jeep pick-up.

Two years later there was another attempt, this time sponsored by Chevrolet and using three of its newly launched Corvair cars and a few Chevy four-wheel drive trucks. One (possibly two) of the three Corvairs seemingly made it through to Colombia but no further; the others (or other) being abandoned to the jungle. In fact, Blashford-Snell's team came across the remains of

Rusting relic – the team discovered the remains of a Chevy Corsair abandoned by a previous expedition



one of the Corvairs during their crossing of the Gap.

Other sources claim that the first vehicular crossing was made over 30 years earlier, by three Brazilians in two Ford Model T cars who left Rio de Janeiro in 1928 and finally arrived in Detroit in 1938, where they were welcomed by Franklin Roosevelt and Henry Ford. The participants were Brazilian Army Lieutenant Leonidas Borges de Oliveira, Brazilian Air Force officer Francisco Lopez da Cruz, and a mechanic named Mário Fava. Their story is available with photos in the book *O Brasil através das três Américas* (Brazil Across the Three Americas).

Not long after leaving Anchorage, Alaska, where the British Trans-Americas Expedition started, VXC 765K crashed into an 18-wheeler that was recovering a stuck car. The Range Rover had been unable to stop on the icy road surface and found itself stuck under the truck's trailer. Letting down the tyres allowed the team to get the Range Rover out, but it had suffered severe damage to the front wings, bonnet and radiator, and lost its windscreen. The latter was a particular problem for the occupants during the 1200-mile tow back to Vancouver in sub-zero temperatures.

At the end of the expedition, the Range Rovers were shipped home by sea, and once back at Solihull they were completely stripped for examination. This included cutting both the chassis into three sections so they could be assessed for corrosion and cracks. Sadly, this meant that when the Range Rovers were reassembled by the apprentices in Land Rover's Training Department, they were given new chassis. Most of the other components were apparently reused in the rebuilds, and the vehicles embarked on a round of publicity events and shows up and down the country. Eventually, both were presented by Land Rover to the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust (now the British Motor Museum) and VXC 765K ended up being used as a hack at the BMIHT's storage facilities at Studley Castle.



There was plenty of training and testing before departure



VXC 765K poses for the official portrait before departure; beautiful model Range Rovers were presented to the team by Rover after the expedition

In the late 1980s it was loaned to the Dunsfold Collection and was found to be in very bad shape. David Cooper offered to rebuild it on behalf of the Collection, and this was completed in 1994. David arranged for replica ladders to be made out of wood by the props department of a theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, copying the original aluminium ladders that were still on the other expedition Range Rover that had remained with BMIHT.

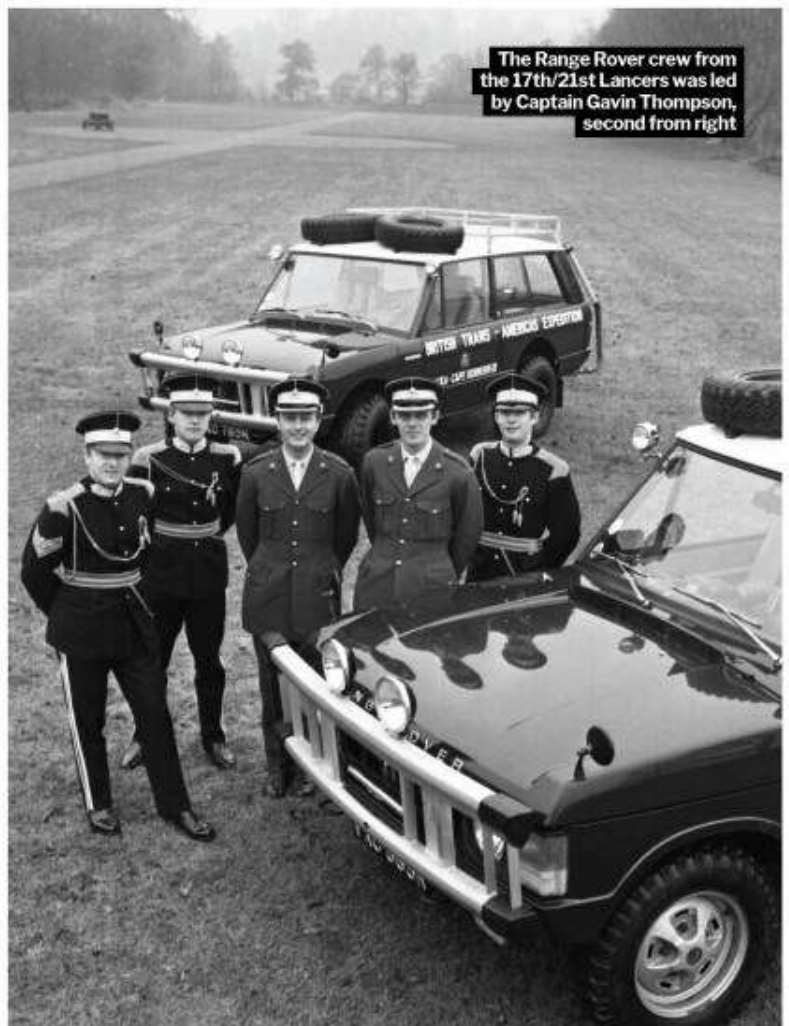
In 2003 the BMIHT decided to auction around 100 items from its collection that were considered surplus to requirements, and these included VXC 765K. The Bashall family did not want to see the vehicle sold and possibly leave the UK, so an offer was made and accepted. The Darién Range Rover has been in the Dunsfold Collection ever since.

Despite its popularity, it would be fair to say that Dunsfold's VXC 765K doesn't get out much and, when it does, it is invariably on static display. Last year it enjoyed yet another journey on a trailer, this time to rural Lincolnshire, where it spent a weekend sitting in a barn at the Classic Land Rover Gathering. It proved to be a very appropriate backdrop to an interview with Colonel Blashford-Snell, conducted by Dunsfold's Richard Beddall on behalf of the visitors to the event.

In September this year it was centre stage at an altogether grander location - the Royal Automobile Club on London's Pall Mall. It was a fine way for the Darién Gap Range Rover to celebrate the golden anniversary of the British Trans-Americas Expedition.

"We were delighted to receive a call from the Royal Automobile Club," says Philip Bashall. "The RAC told us they would be hosting an evening with Colonel Blashford-Snell and asked if they could have the vehicle for a week to display in the Rotunda at the Club, and they were more than happy to pay our modest hire fee."

"If you haven't seen the Rotunda, it is a large and rather grand oval hallway and atrium at the top of a



The Range Rover crew from the 17th/21st Lancers was led by Captain Gavin Thompson, second from right

THE DARIÉN GAP: PART 2

flight of stairs that are the main entrance route for members and their guests coming into the Club from Pall Mall. Presumably, someone at the RAC came up with the brilliant idea that, as a club whose roots go back to the dawn of motoring, it would be a good idea to display an interesting vehicle every week in the Rotunda.

"And that's why there is a faintly surreal ceremony every Monday morning that has to be completed by 05:00am, during which the RAC's team disassemble and remove the huge, glazed and very heavy revolving wooden doors, while a second team arrives with a vast covered trailer full of sets of ramps and tailor-made gear to put over the staircase and the carpet.

"Once that's done, last week's display vehicle can be driven out and the following week's vehicle driven in. It is as peculiarly and eccentrically British as the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace. The entrance is accessible only by driving a vehicle off the tarmac in Pall Mall at an angle of 90 degrees, across the pavement and through the doorway, where clearance is a matter of a few inches either side, before the revolving doors are reinstated. Given the disruption this causes, it's easy to see why it all has to be done and dusted before London wakes up.

"Richard Beddall oversaw the delivery of the vehicle to the RAC by trailer, and Philip and I were on duty to collect it a week later. We departed Dunsfold at very early O'clock in Philip's Freelander II for the drive into central London, arriving at the Club at 04:45am. The RAC team had already removed the doors and were assembling the ramps down which Philip would drive the Range Rover.

"Always up for a bit of a Land Rover adventure, we had decided not to bother to bring the trailer and instead drive the Range Rover back to Dunsfold. After all, when would we get the chance again to get some once-in-a-lifetime photographs of the Darién driving across Westminster Bridge, even though it would still be pretty dark. It would also be its longest journey since, well, probably since the Darién Gap.

"Our photographer, Craig, wanted us to drive across the bridge a few times while he stood on the pavement and tried to get some shots of us with Big Ben and so on," says Philip. "Not being a regular driver in London, I suggested that Gary should lead in the Freelander and work out where the suitable spots were to turn around, and I would follow. We did three back-and-forth crossings of the River Thames before Craig signalled that he had what he wanted, and we stopped to pick him up.

"That was when we realised that we had attracted the interest of the significant Police presence and the video cameras around the Palace of Westminster and Whitehall, and as we headed south across the bridge for the last time and turned to drive past St Thomas' Hospital towards the A3, blue flashing lights appeared in my mirror and were approaching fast, before tucking in behind me as we cruised at the legal limit of 20mph. They probably don't see many stickered and beaten-up old Range Rovers with ladders and spare wheels on the roof in Westminster, let alone one driving suspiciously backwards and forwards across Westminster Bridge and around Parliament Square, in the dark.

"Whatever they were checking must have satisfied them, because after a few moments of being tailed and expecting to be given a tug, as they used to say in *The Sweeney*, the blue lights were turned off and the patrol car made a sharp U-turn and returned to matters of greater consequence.

"It had certainly been a fun morning, and the photos of VXC crossing the bridge in the pre-dawn light are wonderful, but what we needed right now was coffee and a bacon sandwich."



Dunsfold's Philip Bashall would rather look up for the photographer than check the snazzy carpet for oil stains...



One out, one in. With the Darién safely out onto the road, the Ferrari replacing it was driven straight in

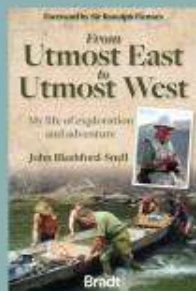


WANT TO LEARN MORE?

The first book on the British Trans-America Expedition is *The Hundred Days of Darién* by Russell Braddon, which was published in 1974. Somewhat breathless in style, among its many dubious aspects is its claim that the expedition was the first crossing of the Darién Gap by wheeled vehicles. No one involved at the time seems to have felt motivated to point out the fundamental falsehood of this remarkable claim. It is not highly regarded but is nevertheless worth a read and includes a nice selection of photographs.

And then there are John Blashford-Snell's own autobiographies, *Something Lost Behind the Ranges*, first published in 1994 and revised in 2014, and *From Utmost East to Utmost West*, due out in late 2022, which cover the Darién expedition together with his many other exploratory adventures around the world.

The best book on the expedition by some margin is *Making the Range Rover Legend: The 1971-72 British Trans-Americas Expedition* by John Carroll, ex-editor of *Classic Land Rover* magazine, whose admirable research and attention to detail is impressive. Carroll draws heavily on the reminiscences of a number of expedition members, and also provides useful summaries of the expeditions that preceded the Trans-Americas.



The RAC's huge wooden doors are removed and the Range Rover slowly emerges into the pre-dawn darkness