



Friends REUNITED

This Series I was the New family's car for almost three decades. Thirty years on, the son is astonished to find his father's pride and joy not only exists but has been beautifully preserved

Story: Gary Pusey Pictures: Michael and Paul New, and the Dunsfold Collection

I can't quite believe that I'm sitting in the same seat I sat in as a kid, my younger brother Steven sitting opposite, Mum in the front with Dad driving, and our big caravan bobbing along behind. This car was Dad's pride and joy," exclaimed Paul New.

A time-served panel beater and painter, and currently an aircraft tug driver at Gatwick Airport, Paul has just been reunited with the Series I that was his family's car for over 32 years, from 1957 until 1989.

"One evening I was thinking about my Dad, who sadly died in 1995, and I decided to Google the registration number of his old Land Rover, not really expecting to find anything. I was astonished to discover the car on the Dunsfold Collection website, beautifully restored and looking magnificent. I'll admit that it was



a very emotional moment for me, and the memories came flooding back.

"Dad was a Land Rover salesman at Southern Counties Garage in Crawley, and later at Crawley Down Garage in Copthorne. He was a huge Land Rover fan, and he always said that it started when he did his National Service. He was in the Royal Engineers and served in North Africa, and that's where he first drove a Land Rover, and he was obsessed with them from that point on."

Paul's association with VAC 265 began at a very tender age, as as he reminisces about a photo he fondly remembers of him as a toddler, nestled in the spare wheel on the bonnet. The snap was, of course, taken by his father, Michael, and dates from September 1972.

"He was a very keen photographer," says Paul, "and left us a huge collection of carefully-annotated and dated colour slides that includes many wonderful photographs of the car."

"We went on many family holidays in the Land Rover, including drives to Zagreb in Croatia, which was then part of the old Yugoslavia, to visit Mum's family. Dad had first driven the station wagon there in June 1969 with his best friend Ian Johnson, when he went to see Mum's father to ask if he could marry her." The answer was yes, and Maria and Michael were married later that year.

"Dad had family in Switzerland and he drove there many times in the Land Rover before he and Mum got married, and he was also a member of the original Land Rover Owners' Club and participated in off-road trials events in the 1950s and 60s."

Michael's first competitive event, as far as we know, was the LROC Point-to-Point in November 1957, which was held at the Solihull works. On December 28, 1958, he came fourth in the LROC South Downs Treasure Hunt, and in March 1959 he was a prize winner in the Warlingham Trial. In late December 1959 he took third place in the club trial held in central London, which seems to have involved some off-roading around wartime bomb sites, and he also participated in the Welsh Safari in September 1964 and the Malham Safari and Trial in 1965.

A rich and colourful history

The station wagon is undoubtedly an extremely interesting vehicle. A RHD export model, it was unusually completed in grey with blue wheels and chassis, and traces of the original chassis paint were found under the handbrake mounting and on the chassis rails during the Dunsfold Collection restoration. Rover Company records show that chassis number 1766-01126 was built on January 24, 1956. However, it was not registered until over eight months later, when the company gave it the factory registration number VAC 265.

Those same company records show that from new it had a standard 2.0-litre petrol engine, but the earliest DVLA records dating from the early 1970s show that this had been replaced with a prototype 2.25 Rover overhead valve four-cylinder petrol engine. One of the great mysteries is how the car came to be fitted with this prototype engine.

Philip Bashall at Dunsfold wonders whether this was an



VAC 265 competing in an off-road event half a century ago

early attempt to fit a 2.25 into a Land Rover vehicle for mileage testing. Records show that prototype 2.25 engines were installed in road Rovers as early as February 1956, so it is possible that VAC 265 was similarly fitted around the same time. However, those same records show that prototype 2.25s were still being installed in development vehicles as late as mid-1961, and the engine in VAC 265 is one of the later engines in the prototype series. But if the factory didn't fit the 2.25, then who did?

The theory that the vehicle was retained by Rover for testing is reinforced by the delay in registering it, because for assessment purposes Philip suggests that it would probably have carried trade plates. Furthermore, the car was in the middle of a batch of 40 cars that were all shipped to overseas destinations including Bahrain, British Honduras, Ethiopia, Gold Coast, Libya, Nigeria, Northern Rhodesia, New Guinea and the Persian Gulf. Why this particular export market vehicle was delivered to Rover Company Home Sales isn't actually clear.

Whatever the details of its early history with the company, VAC 265 was sold by Rover to dealer Evans of Wimbledon in



Evidence of Michael's personalisation to the 86in still intact

“He was a huge Land Rover fan, and it started when he first drove one in the Royal Engineers in North Africa”

to replace the original 2.0-litre? Michael certainly had close connections with people at the Solihull factory, perhaps through his involvement in the trials scene or through his day job in Land Rover sales, so perhaps he was able to obtain the 2.25 via his contacts?

When the Dunsfold Collection acquired the vehicle in 2011, evidence of the black customisation was still visible on the panels and the 2.25 prototype engine was present and correct. Philip also found some major cut-and-shut work in the cab to create more legroom and to fit a Bostrom seat. Like Paul, Michael was six feet six inches tall so the modifications were a necessity. There was also clear evidence of a collision or other accident to the offside rear body. “Yes,” concurs Paul. “Dad lost the car once on some ice, and trashed the bodywork in exactly that place!” Another historical mystery solved.

Saved from the scrapper's jaws

Michael sold the car locally in 1989, and the new owner kept it for six years before selling it to a buyer in Epsom. Two years later it was with a new owner in Weymouth. Ten years later it appeared for sale on eBay and was bought on behalf of Norwegian enthusiast Ketil Oftedahl, whose collection of over 130 Land Rovers was housed near Stavanger. The station wagon moved north to Blyth in Northumberland, where it joined a dozen or so other Land Rovers that were being stored until they could be shipped to Norway to join the collection.

Meanwhile, Mr Oftedahl had found himself in some difficulty with the local authorities in Stavanger, and was forced to dispose of the entire collection at short notice. The affair was the subject of huge interest at the time, both in the national press and among Land Rover enthusiasts across the world. Some of the rarer and more interesting vehicles were brought back to the UK and sold at auction, and others were disposed of locally in Norway and to buyers in other

November 1956, and it is quite likely that Michael bought the car directly from them – we know he owned it by November 1957, when he entered the LROC event at Solihull.

During Michael's years of ownership, the 86in was lovingly cared for and the subject of a considerable degree of personalisation. “Dad painted various panels black to contrast with the grey,” recalls Paul. “This included a black bonnet and lower front and rear wings, a black roof underneath the white safari roof, and a black waistline stripe. This was all set off with a red coachline at the waist level, and another one around the roof guttering. We always thought it looked very smart.”

In April 1962, Michael took a photograph of the engine bay, showing a 2.0-litre motor that he had also personalised, carrying the external black and red paint theme under the bonnet. So from this we know that the car was fitted with a 2.0-litre in the early 1960s, but was this a temporary replacement for the original 2.25, or was the 2.0-litre in the car when he bought it?

The early logbook shows the prototype 2.25 in place by the early 1970s. Was this engine acquired by Michael, and fitted

Philip presents son Paul and mother Maria with the plate that Michael put on the car in around 1968



“We were pulled over by the police once and they told Dad either to speed-up or get off the motorway!”

DURING THE Dunsfold restoration, which was completed in 2017, Philip returned the cab metalwork to standard and installed factory-specification seats, which means that unfortunately Paul is, like his father, just too tall to drive the car in standard configuration, but Philip offers a quick tour of the village with Paul in the passenger seat. Paul decides not to take his old seat in the back, and remembers that even as a lad there were times when his head hit the roof, but Paul is grinning from ear-to-ear when they drive back into the yard.

“The smell, the sound of the engine, the distinctive tyre noise... it could only be a Land Rover and it all brings back so many memories,” he says, and the childhood recollections come thick and fast.

“Our holidays were slow and leisurely affairs,” Paul remembers. “Especially when we were towing the caravan. We were pulled over by the police once, in Holland, and they told Dad either to speed-up or get off the motorway! Typical of Dad, he asked them which of these options they would recommend, given that he was driving as fast as he could!”

“On one of our trips to Switzerland to visit some

Son Paul is too tall to drive it in the standard spec but even as a passenger the memories come flooding back

of Dad's family, the car kept overheating on the mountain passes. We'd stop for a while, and then set off again until the temperature rose once more. Eventually, we were driving with the bonnet propped open.

“Our caravan used to fishtail a bit, and I remember after one long trip we found that the sidewalls on the new Avon tyres on the rear of the station wagon had split, as a result of the continuous lateral flexing.

“We were late trying to reach our chosen camping site in France one year, and as it was getting dark Dad just decided to pull over and park in a small town. We awoke in the caravan the following morning to find that we were surrounded by stalls selling fruit, vegetables, cheese... we had parked in the middle of the site of the weekly market.

“Dad was also a big fan of steam locomotives, and we would regularly visit preserved steam railways like the Bluebell and the Severn Valley in the station wagon. We also visited steam sheds and museums when we were on holiday on the continent. Dad also built an amazing model railway at home, which was featured in various magazines at the time.”



countries. The vehicles in store in Blyth therefore never made it to Norway, and the owner of the storage unit wanted them gone. Quickly.

He had already made plans to have them weighed-in at the local scrapyards when Philip and others mounted a last-minute rescue effort, and it was this that resulted in VAC 265 being acquired for the Dunsfold Collection in 2011. Indeed, if it hadn't been for the fact that the prototype engine and the factory registration number piqued Philip's interest, the station wagon might well have been lost, because by then it was in very poor shape indeed.

The fully-restored vehicle's first long drive was to the Yorkshire Dales to meet up with friends on a Series I event, and this was followed by the 2017 Land Rover Series One Club rally in Ireland, where the station wagon was awarded the John Taylor Cup for the best 86in.

Reunited at last

Besides Michael's wonderful and evocative legacy of photographs, the only memento Paul has of the station

The station wagon was awarded the best 86in at the Irish SI club rally

The Dunsfold Collection was responsible for restoring VAC 265



wagon that was such an important part of his early life is the metal Land Rover badge that was attached to his father's key ring on a leather fob, which has long since disintegrated. Or at least, that was the only item he had until his visit to Dunsfold to be reunited with the car, when Philip generously gives him the original gear knob. Paul is absolutely delighted.

Several weeks after Paul was reunited with his father's station wagon, he returns to Dunsfold with his mother, Maria. She is very emotional as she climbs into the front passenger seat. "This Land Rover was such an important part of our family," she says, "and to see it here is unbelievable. I feel like Michael is sitting here beside me again." Philip has found one of the reflective number plates that Michael put on the car around 1968, and presents it to Maria and Paul.

And then Michael's old friend Ian Johnson and his wife Jackie and son Andrew arrive. It is the first time Maria has seen them in over 23 years. "This really is a trip down memory lane for me," Ian says. "Mike and I had some real adventures in this car and it's wonderful to discover that it has survived. This Land Rover brought families together in the 1960s, and it has brought those same families back together again today."

And the mystery regarding the installation of the prototype 2.25 engine? Well, it remains just that... a mystery.