RANGE ROVER AT 50

BACK HOME IN THE RANGIE

In celebration of the Range Rover's half-century, **Richard Webber** takes the current model on a road trip to meet an ancestor with a very special history

PHOTOGRAPHY STUART COLLINS

RANGE ROVER
YVB 166H

RANGIE MOMENT

MATT SAUNDERS

The Range Rover is inextricably linked to one my happiest memories of driving, primarily because it was the first car I actually drove. I was on holiday with my folks and we were staying in the kind of French rural idyll where you can drive a 10-mile round trip to the nearest village for your daily croissants and pain de campagne and not see another car. You can even have your idiot-grinning, yet-to-turn-15 lad drive you, if you're daft enough – every morning, for about a fortnight, in your H-registered, beige cloth-upholstered, 2.5-litre Range Rover 'Turbo D'. Rarely had that lad felt greater freedom than when spinning that oversized, deliciously raked, chubby-rimmed beige leather steering wheel through turn after turn of lock and gently feeding the heavy clutch in so as not to make the old man uncomfortable. Or regretful. Or both. Our top speed probably wasn't even 40mph – and even now I feel guilty acknowledging that we even made it that quick. And yet I dare say it wouldn't have been nearly as special an experience in a lesser motor.

RANGE ROVER TIMELINE

1965
Concept of 'lifestyle' Land Rover explored

1967
'100-inch Station Wagon' project initiated

1970
RANGE ROVER CLASSIC
■ 100in wheelbase ■ Two-door body ■ Coil-spring suspension, live axles ■ Separate ladder chassis ■ 3.5-litre carburettor-fed petrol V8 ■ Four-speed manual gearbox ■ Permanent four-wheel drive ■ Locking centre differential ■ All-round disc brakes

1973
Hydraulic power steering introduced

1981
Four-door body introduced; 'In Vogue' edition launched

1982
Automatic gearbox introduced

> “Rover had agreed to buy GM’s tooling for the 3.5-litre Buick V8. That would do nicely”

By the 1970s, Range Rover production (above) was in full swing

Jaguar Land Rover’s new advanced product creation centre in Gaydon employs about 13,000 engineers and designers. But back in 1966 it was just three souls – working out of hours, no less – that drew up the initial design of what would become an all-new model for the Rover Company. Then three engineers took the vehicle to production-ready status in only two years. It was a remarkable achievement.

In turn, the project was variously known as ‘Alternative Station Wagon’, ‘100-inch Station Wagon’ and ‘Concept Oyster’ before being launched in 1970 wearing a much more familiar name: Range Rover.

Today, we mark 50 years of the pioneering 4x4 by driving one of the remaining pre-production Range Rovers – engineering vehicle number 23 – which turned from test hack to unlikely rally car in the hands of one of the three aforementioned engineers, Roger Crathorne, who later became its owner (and whom we interview overleaf). And to see what four generations of evolution looks like, we’ve brought along a current Range Rover SDV8 Vogue.

But first to join the dots between 1966 and 1970. Spencer ‘Spen’ King’s job in Rover’s creative New Vehicle Projects Department was to go metaphorically off piste. But it was a literal manifestation of his role that sparked the idea for the Range Rover when he took a Rover P6 2000 saloon clambering over fields near the company’s factory in Solihull. The car’s soft, long-travel coil springs, he theorised, could do a far better job than the Land Rover’s leaf springs at smoothing out rough terrain while also improving on-road handling.

Emerging international demand for American-style four-wheel-drive ‘leisure’ vehicles such as the International Harvester Scout, Jeep Wagoneer and Ford Bronco warranted further investigation of the concept but called for a more potent heart than Land Rover’s relatively tame 2.25- and 2.6-litre engines. As it happens, with its saloon cars in mind, Rover had already agreed to buy General Motors’ tooling for the all-alloy 3.5-litre Buick V8. That would do nicely.

The first prototype was built in July 1967 and had the silhouette of a Range Rover but not the details (see the Ford Transit bumpers). And all-important coil springs aside, it →

1985 Fuel injection introduced; ‘Vogue’ becomes top specification

1986 Diesel engine introduced

1987 North American market launch

1989 3.9-litre V8 and anti-lock brakes introduced

1992 108in long-wheelbase ‘LSE’ launched; electronically controlled air suspension and traction control introduced

1993 4.2-litre V8 and ‘Autobiography’ customisation introduced

1994 **P38A RANGE ROVER**
- 108.1in wheelbase
- Revised ladder chassis
- Electronic range selection
- 4.6-litre V8 introduced
- BMW assumes ownership

←traded heavily on Land Rover hardware, using axles, selectable four-wheel drive and drum brakes from the utilitarian workhorse.

That all changed with the second iteration, which set the formula for production. There was prototype full-time four-wheel drive, a Boge Hydromat self-levelling strut to maintain ride height at the back – allowing both suppleness and stability, regardless of payload – and all-round disc brakes.

A third prototype emerged in July 1969 and replaced the original exterior design with a more refined aesthetic that was instantly recognisable as the production model, which nowadays is known as the Range Rover Classic.

In all, seven prototypes were built, undergoing testing not only at home but also across Europe and North Africa. Then came 28 pre-production chassis, exploring engineering possibilities from long-wheelbase and six-wheeler configurations to ambulance specification and even roof-mounted air conditioning. So as not to arouse suspicion, these cars were branded 'Velar' (referencing the Italian velare – to veil) and registered miles away in Croydon.

It's one of these cars we've come to drive on the estate surrounding Land Rover Experience London at Luton Hoo. Best known by its reg, YVB 166H (or just '166'), it is now owned by Richard Beddall, co-founder and trustee of the 143-strong Dunsfold Collection of Land Rovers that was founded in 1968 to preserve the marque's history.

Crathorne bought 166 from Rover for a trifling £400 in 1972, and thereafter used it as his family car, including holidaymaking trips to Spain and Greece. The car was sold on in 1979, but Beddall rescued it from a shipping container in a Welsh forest eight years ago. In a sorry state, it had been stripped of its engine, which he replaced as part of an immediate restoration. Its body and chassis are original, as is the gearbox – a production-spec manual with integrated dual range (co-developed for a military Land Rover project) and offering eight forward ratios and two reverses.

And you can bet all of them were used by Crathorne during the two-day Hill Rally of May 1971. Inspired by the Rallye des Cimes in the Pyrenees, it was sponsored by Senior Service cigarettes and became the first speed-based off-road event of its kind in the UK, scaling mountains, galloping along tracks, grappling →

ROGER CRATHORNE: GODFATHER OF THE RANGE ROVER

Roger Crathorne started at Land Rover in 1963, and in 1967 he joined the team working on what would become the Range Rover. He remained with the company until retiring in 2014.

How did you become involved in Range Rover development?
"One of my last apprentice postings was in the engineering department, just as the project was being talked about. After qualifying, I was selected to join and couldn't believe my luck. I worked on the very first prototype. There were only three of us in the team that took the car to production."

What were your first impressions of driving the car?
"Phenomenal. You had twice the suspension movement of a leaf-sprung vehicle. It transformed the characteristics of a four-wheel-drive vehicle."

What were the trickiest parts of the development process?
"We put a lot into ride and handling and tyre development was also important – we needed it to run gross vehicle weight at 90mph-plus. Off-road durability was mega-important. Prototype 13 drove 1500 miles on pavé and cross-country with hardly any damage. We put it back for another 1500 and it still didn't break. We then did 5000 miles at a military proving ground and the only issue was rear brake pad wear. Incredible."

166 leads the way. It was salvaged from a shipping container

TIMELINE CONT'D

1999
£100,000 ultra-luxurious 'Linley' edition with sat-nav, TV and VCR

2000
Ford assumes ownership

2002
L322 RANGE ROVER
■ 113.4in wheelbase ■ Unibody construction, independent air suspension ■ 4.4-litre petrol V8 and 2.9-litre inline-six diesel engines from BMW

2002
500,000th Range Rover produced

2005
4.2-litre supercharged V8 introduced

2006
TDV8 diesel engine and Terrain Response introduced

Crathorne and 166 won the Senior Service Hill Rally; trophy and 'toolkit' survive to this day

> "Crathorne bought 166 from Rover for £400 in 1972 and used it as his family car"

RANGIE MOMENT
STEVE CROPLEY
Bought a Range Rover once. It was an early original two-door, chassis number 300-ish, made before they even had power steering so it needed six turns lock to lock. It was a 1970 model on a J-plate, bought long before early RRs acquired the value they have now. Came to me in a swap deal for a £750 Daimler Sovereign and eventually died of rust. Always think of that machine – so small and crude – when I'm in a contemporary one because its essential spirit was so similar. Same 'command' driving position, same respect wherever you went, same sense of well-being when driving, with a bit less body roll. Fascinates me that Gerry McGovern & Co have so faithfully preserved these intangibles in cars that are entirely different and 50 years younger. Major achievement.

2008
Jaguar Land Rover formed under Tata ownership

2009
5.0-litre V8 introduced

2012
L405 RANGE ROVER
- 115.0in wheelbase
- All-aluminium bonded chassis
- 5.0-litre V8, TDV6 and SDV8 engines
- Terrain Response 2
- Electrically assisted power steering
- Active roll control, adaptive damping

2013
122.8in extended wheelbase introduced

2014
First hybrid Range Rover

2017
First plug-in hybrid Range Rover

2019
1.19 million Range Rovers built to date

Original Rangie offers a much better view out than today's

←through bogs and fording rivers across central Wales.

Having completed its core engineering duties, 166 was chosen for the task, although a fear of failure in some company quarters led to it being entered for the event by the Rover Owners' Association. It was fitted with a roll-cage and other kit such as map-reading lights, a raised differential lock indicator and a passenger-side horn. Despite the misgivings, the seriousness of the entry was not to be doubted, as technical director Peter Wilks gave the green light to use non-OEM Dunlop tyres for the event. "We're out to win," he told Crathorne.

There was also hesitance from Crathorne himself, who prefers to treat the natural environment more carefully: "The most important thing is to get from A to B as safely as possible without breaking the eggs," he tells me. But countless miles of off-road durability experience made him the ideal pilot, and he soon found the bit between his teeth.

"There were thousands of people watching and they were all standing on the track, trying to force you into a bog," he recalls. "I told [navigator] 'Taff' Evans to keep his foot on the horn, because we're going through them. We were going 60-70mph off road, which is a bit stupid, really. At one stage I overtook the pace car."

There was a varied field of 45 vehicles. Most were Land Rovers, but there were also several US Army surplus Jeeps, Toyota Land Cruisers and Austin Champs. Intrigue was→

Earlier two-door Range Rover Classics have twin interior handles on each door to allow easier operation from the rear bench.

No Terrain Response tech here – gearlever, range selector and diff lock are absolutely of their time

RANGIE MOMENT
MATT PRIOR

It's the launch of the Range Rover Sport, summer 2005, and Land Rover has found a stretch of off-road with a seriously steep flat rock face to ascend. The Range Rover is tethered to the top in case it slips, but you can see slack in the wire. It's so steep I struggle to clamber up on all fours to get a picture, but sure enough, the car crawls up, using just four tiny patches of rubber on rock. Remarkable.

added by the Austrian 643cc flat twin-engined Halflinger agricultural vehicle. Its locking front and rear differentials helped with the slippery stuff but it couldn't keep up in the open. Meanwhile, the leaf-sprung Land Rovers bucked and dived across the terrain, their occupants – and sometimes their panels – regularly escaping their moorings.

In contrast, 166 loped along, its languid springs absorbing the landscape's ire, leaving the crew in superior control and relative comfort while the sturdy V8 roared away. With a stage remaining, a Series I Land Rover was leading, but Crathorne drove the upstart Range Rover to victory on the Sunday evening and claimed the £50 prize.

The event was reprised that September, when 166 was explicitly factory backed. Bad weather made for tougher conditions: half the field didn't finish and a works Ford Bronco 4.7 shed its rear axle. Nonetheless, if not for a poorly marked route, Crathorne would have won again but had to settle for a class win, collecting the 'Trail Blazers' Trophy'

Today, 49 years later, that trophy is sitting proudly in 166's load bay alongside the hammer that Crathorne used to bash the steel Rostyles back into shape after any unfortunate clatterings.

While thankfully not over-restored, the car looks unexpectedly handsome – lithe, even – next to its modern heir, the absence of bulky skirts and bumpers lending an almost athletic stance. And that's not just down to dimensions: the new car is bigger, but this is no comical, BMC Mini-vs-BMW Mini mismatch.

Making a mockery of its entry-level status, our Vogue-spec interior is a mosaic of luxury finishes with aspirational names straight from Prince Harry's travel schedule: Windsor leather, Kalahari wood, Morzine headlining. But one glance at 166's cabin confirms that Range Rover was not originally a watchword of opulence: it's a festival of faded black plastic and fractured beige vinyl, while the lashed-on rev counter signals the paucity of standard-fit niceties. Autocar's 1972 description starkly illustrates how much the nameplate's attitude to swank has shifted since, as these words from the time attest: "It is a car for the man who has no time to attend to carpets, walnut facings and luxurious hide upholstery."

But 166's skinny pillars and expansive glazing offer a lovely feeling of light and unfettered visibility the current model can't touch, while the high seating position lets you plot the course of that square-set clamshell bonnet with ease. Well, once you're rolling at least. At manoeuvring speeds, the unassisted recirculating-ball steering takes some work; power steering didn't make production until 1973.

The wand-like gearshift has a throw that's absurdly long by modern standards, especially laterally, but

Contemporary Range Rover is dimensionally bigger but not to excess

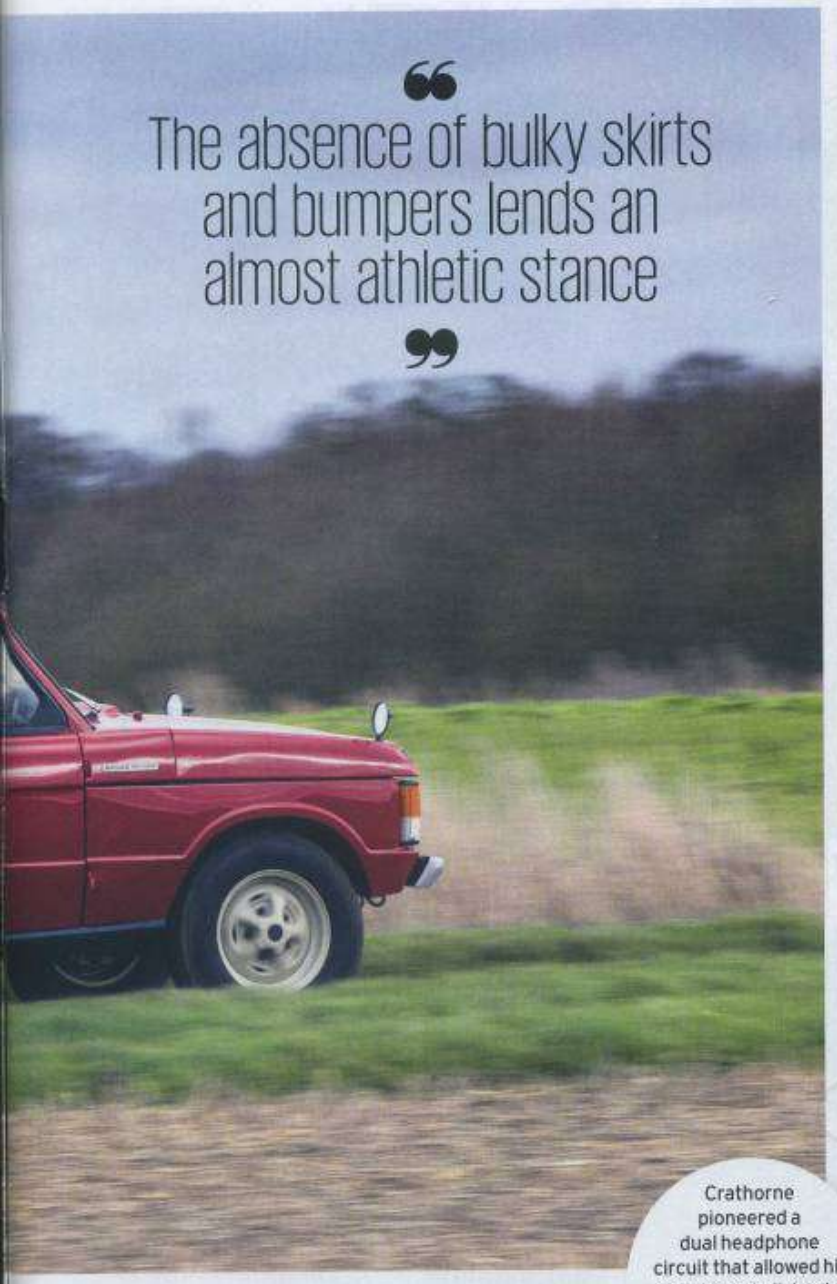
RANGIE MOMENT

ANDREW FRANKEL

It was late 1992. The first of my gang of mates was getting married and his stag night was in Scotland. By lucky hap there just happened to be a Range Rover LSE complete with air springs and a 4.2-litre V8 hanging around the Autocar & Motor offices. And as road test editor, I had the keys. So I piled it high with chums, raced up to Scotland, behaved appallingly for a couple of days, sobered up and raced back. Huge fun from start to finish – until the editor rejected my fuel expenses claim. The car had done 15mpg over 1000 miles. Damn near broke me, that. But it was worth every penny.

166 has had sympathetic refurbishment rather than concours restoration, and is all the better for it

> The absence of bulky skirts and bumpers lends an almost athletic stance



Crathorne pioneered a dual headphone circuit that allowed his daughters to listen to eight-tracks in the back while the adults got Radio 4.

MEET THE ANCESTORS

The '100-inch Station Wagon' wasn't Rover's first attempt to civilise the utilitarian Land Rover. Here are three earlier efforts...

Land Rover Station Wagon (left) first appeared in 1948

1 LAND ROVER STATION WAGON (1948-1951)
Borrowing the American 'station wagon' label, this multi-purpose 4x4 people carrier was outsourced to Tickford, which applied a mahogany-framed aluminium-alloy body atop a reinforced 80in Series I. It featured four folding, inward-facing rear seats and the split tailgate later assumed by all Range Rovers. The absence of commercial vehicle status contributed to a high price that limited its appeal. Just 641 were built.

2 ROAD ROVER SERIES I PROTOTYPE (1952-1955)
Nicknamed 'Greenhouse', 12 of these two-door prototypes were built, combining Land Rover's simple styling, aluminium body construction and 2.0-litre petrol engine with a modified chassis from the P4 saloon. They featured coil springs up front but a leaf-sprung rear, and most were rear-drive. This final, 1955 example has three front seats and two in the back, with a side-hinged tailgate and plush carpeting.

3 ROAD ROVER SERIES II PROTOTYPE (1956-1958)
Lower, longer and with Americanised styling, nine more Road Rovers were built using components from the P5. Two front chairs and a three-person rear bench offered car-like seating, while the split tailgate reappeared. Like the initial Range Rover design, the production version was to have used a straight six. This weathered example was tested by Rover chairman Spencer Wilks on Islay – as was the first Range Rover prototype.

Early gentrification efforts were hardly the lap of luxury. Webber is unimpressed

it docks pleasingly into each nook with a gritty thunk. The stubby range selector lever is quite the opposite, needing the briefest shove to engage, while the centre differential lock is a simple vertical organ stop. Unusually, there's also an overdrive lever, which Crathorne fitted himself. Adding the handbrake by my left leg, the area between the front seats is a mass of black tentacles, all the functions of which have been subsumed into unseen electronics in the new car.

Outside there's a brooding burble from the V8's exhaust, while inside you're treated to an earthy, metallic churn. We won't be calling upon 166's power reserves, but the production Range Rover was launched with 156bhp and 205lb ft – good enough not only for serious off-road duties and towing up to 4064kg, but also 0-60mph in 15.2sec and top clip of 95mph. Respectably quick at the time, but anachronistic against the 6.8sec and 135mph of our muted modern-day SDV8.

Beddall reports that 166 still happily maintains motorway speeds, however, and I can feel the engine's lustiness and keen throttle even on the estate roads. The servo-assisted discs – shielded at the rear to tackle that early pad-wear issue – are also suitably responsive and effective.

I leave Luton Hoo thoroughly smitten by the early Range Rover. The styling is functional but elegant, the powertrain charming and the breadth of ability, from rock-crawling rally-winner to long-distance family cruiser, is made only more remarkable by its age.

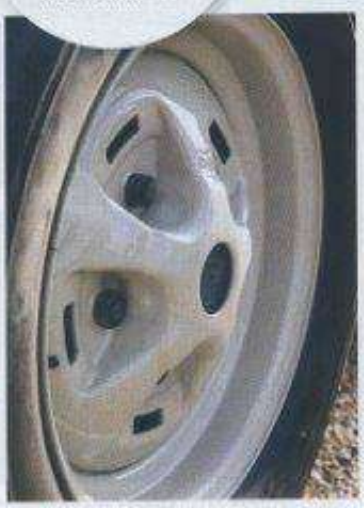
We drive the Vogue 90 minutes to the British Motor Museum at Gaydon to meet some of the Range Rover's forebears (see separate story, p45), giving a chance to ponder its polished dynamics. From dual-carriageway to subsident B-road, there's comfort and composure that are alien to 166 thanks to engineering leaps such as independent suspension, air springs, adaptive damping and hydraulic roll control, not to mention a surfeit of urge and an eight-speed auto 'box whose shifts are as disposable as the original's are physical.

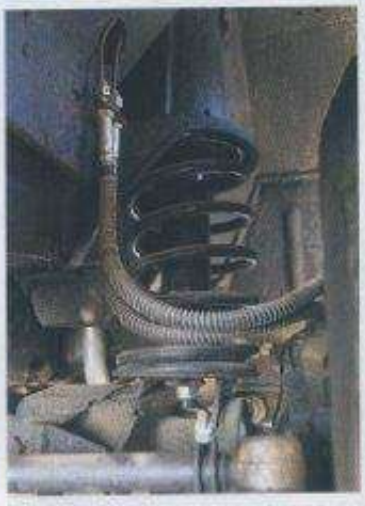
But it's not as if such blacktop sophistication has come at the cost of off-road ability. Truth is, this very car could probably have won the Senior Service Hill Rally without a single modification (save perhaps the tyres). It has the hardware for the job: twin-speed transfer box, locking centre and rear e-diffs and up to half 'again the ground clearance of the Classic. Then there are the electronic traction aids that make heroes even of off-roading novices.

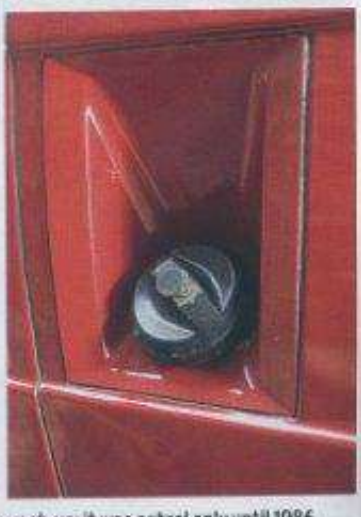
For all the current car's third-millennium extravagance, then, it still honours the original billing from 50 years before: "It's four cars in one. It has the comfort of a luxury saloon, the road-holding of a high-performance car, the capacity of an estate car... and it's go-anywhere, like a Land Rover."

"The breadth of ability is made all the more remarkable by its age"

The modern car's 21in alloys dwarf the original's 16in steel Rostyles. The first prototype initially wore 15-inchers with the US market in mind.



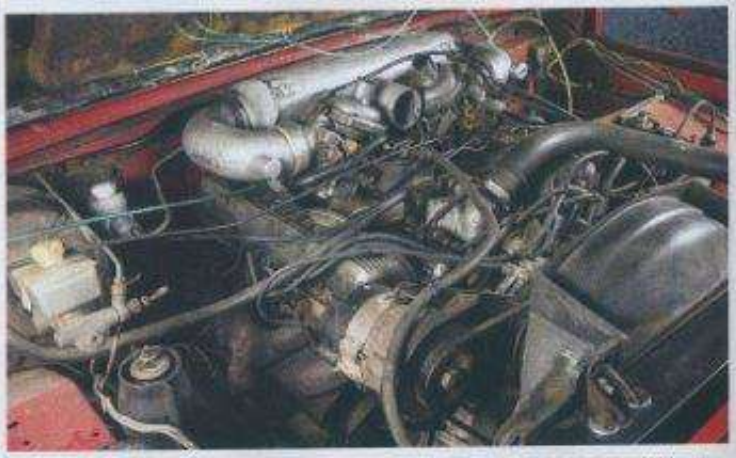




Long-travel coil-sprung suspension was a revelation off road compared with a leaf-sprung set-up; it was petrol only until 1986

RANGIE MOMENT
JAMES RUPPERT

It would be wrong to believe that the Chelsea Tractor is a recent social phenomenon, when in fact there were early adopters in the '80s. Monteverdi made four-door Range Rovers before Solihull got round to it. I got my backside in a left-hand-drive one when it was part of a complicated part-ex against a BMW 635. It was incredibly well finished. You were somewhat higher than an FX4 taxi, not intimidated by them and, being a left-hooker, stepped straight onto the Mayfair pavements. Yes, I was driving the posh SUV future.



Split tailgate has adorned all generations since; Rover bought GM's 3.5-litre V8 tooling

Design and details are svelte by modern comparison but their essence lives on today

WHAT TO PAY

RANGE ROVER CLASSIC 1970-1996
Prices vary wildly with condition and provenance. Dishevelled early cars can be found for four figures, whereas YVB 165H – series predecessor to the car we drove – is currently up for £199,000. Well-restored examples are available from specialist dealers at around £60,000.

P38A 1994-2002
You'll struggle to pay more than £10,000 for a second-generation Range Rover – and that includes the 100 lavish 'Vogue 50' 4.6s of 1998 with their colour-coded blue exterior, 'White Gold' coachline, acres of walnut embellishments and hectares of blue-piped parchment leather. Why look further?

L322 2002-2012
It cost £120,000 new, but a late-model, 503bhp Supercharged Autobiography Ultimate Edition can be yours for under £30k. This generation also introduced the first really high-powered diesel Range Rovers: we spotted a 60,000-mile 2008 3.6 TDV8 Vogue for £10,000.

L405 2012-ON
If you don't mind a mileage towards the six-figure mark, you can pick up an early 254bhp TDV6 or 334bhp SDV8 from less than £25,000 – even in indulgent Autobiography spec. Petrol V8s and diesel hybrids start around £30,000 and long-wheelbase variants from £35,000.