

PILOT PRODUCTION FREELANDERS

VX56 registrations
identify these Freelanders
as pre-production and
press launch vehicles



STORY: GARY PUSEY PICTURES: CRAIG PUSEY AND CHARLIE MAGEE

Full Circle

Two pilot production Freelander 2s are reunited for the first time since they were part of the launch fleet in 2006 - both are now stars of the Dunsfold Collection



DEFENDER engineer Greg King was on holiday with his family in Portugal in April 2018 when he spotted a distinctive Freelander 2 as he was driving into the seaside town of Vilamoura on the Algarve. Having joined Land Rover as an apprentice at the age of 17, Greg certainly knows his Land Rovers, and he recognised the significance of the UK registration number immediately.

"I knew that VX56 DBV was one of the numbers allocated to the pilot production Freelander 2 fleet," says Greg. "The ultra-rare Tambora Flame paint job was a dead giveaway as well, because this metallic orange colour was applied only to a small number of very early vehicles to make them stand out and attract attention. The colour was quietly shelved a few months after production started.

"As we drove by, I could see that it was also left-hand drive and I guessed that it was probably owned by an ex-pat from the UK. A left-hooker would make a lot of sense if you owned a holiday home in the area. Later that day I saw it again parked at the side of the harbour, and I took a few photographs as well as having a sneaky peek at the VIN plate at the bottom of the windscreen. It was number 228 which was incredibly early.



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"That evening I sent a WhatsApp message to Dunsfold's Philip Bashall, who was as excited with the find as I was. At Philip's request, I penned a note and left it under the wiper saying that if ever the owner was considering selling, could they please give Philip a ring. I joked with Philip that the note would probably be screwed-up and in the bin in no time, and that would be the last we'd hear of it, so I was staggered when Philip called me six months later to say the owner had been in touch and he had agreed a deal."

Everyone knows that Philip Bashall has developed what some might consider to be an extreme interest in the Freelander over the past few years. In fact, his respect and admiration for the vehicle extends to using one as his daily driver, and it cannot be denied that the Dunsfold Collection has been responsible for saving some very early and interesting examples. Perhaps his opinions were formed several years ago, when he attended the press launch of the Freelander 2.

"Despite being actively involved in preserving Land Rover vehicles, history and heritage for many years, I've only ever been invited to attend two Land Rover new vehicle global media drives," Philip tells me. "These are not the vehicle launches that take place at public motor shows but the highly important events that allow the ladies and gentlemen of the world's automotive press to get behind the wheel for the first time. Car manufacturers put a huge amount of money and effort into these media drives, and the journalists are flown to an exotic location and lavishly entertained."

"In 2006 I was pleasantly surprised to be invited to the press launch of the Freelander 2, which took place at Essaouira in Morocco. I was given only three days' notice and while I was delighted to accept I've often wondered whether it was because somebody much more important than me had cancelled at the last minute. I was instructed to get myself to the airport where I joined the other members of this particular group, or rotation as they are known in the trade, which I recall was made up of mainly government people. This was just one of probably dozens of rotations that would have attended the launch over several weeks."

"When Greg sent me the photos of the Tambora Flame Freelander on the quayside in Portugal, the thought crossed my mind that it might well have been one of the vehicles on the Moroccan press launch. This made me particularly keen to acquire it for the Collection because having a press launch car would sort of bring things full circle for me personally,



HSE i6 indicated 3.0-litre petrol option, which was rare in the UK



Second generation Freelander adopted all the McGovern-era styling cues



Tambora Flame launch colour
did what it set out to do: get the
new Freelander noticed



Car-like interior indicative
of where the company
saw the market for the
new Freelander



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having been on the launch, as well as adding an interesting vehicle to the Collection. I was delighted when the owner called me and offered the car for sale, and once we'd agreed a price I arranged for a specialist transport company to pick it up and bring it back to the UK.

"VX56 DBV is powered by the Volvo Si6 3.0-litre six-cylinder inline engine, which was chosen by Land Rover as the petrol option for the Freelander 2 because it was the most compact of all the available Ford engines. Both Land Rover and Volvo were at that time part of Ford's Premier Automotive Group, so using the Si6 was a logical family decision. The 3.0-litre petrol Freelander was targeted primarily at the North American market and it was never a big seller in the UK, which made it doubly interesting to me.

"By an amazing coincidence, not long after we'd got it back to the UK some intriguing photographs of it appeared on social media showing the car airborne off the top of a sand dune and then crashing nose-first into the sand! The supporting commentary mentioned that the shots had been taken in Morocco in 2006 and seemed to confirm that VX56 DBV was indeed a press launch vehicle. I was delighted to add the photos to the history file.

"The vehicle was built in August 2006 to Italian market spec and registered to Land Rover Company Vehicles, Gaydon on September 1, 2006, where it was formally allocated to the Freelander 2 launch fleet. When Land Rover had finished with it, they sold it at auction and registered to its first private owner in Essex in November 2008. He sold it with 21,500 miles on the clock to its second private owner in Inverness-shire in January 2011, and that's when it moved to sunnier climes."

Fast-forward to December 2021 and Philip was approached by Friend of the Collection, Peter Galilee, who as many of you will know is a highly-respected and lifelong Land Rover enthusiast, historian and writer. Peter was the proud owner of pre-pro Freelander 2 VX56 DCE, which is chassis number 293. He'd acquired it in 2013 after a long search but had decided it was time to pass it on to a good home. Naturally, he thought of Philip.

VX56 DCE is also a Volvo-engined HSE i6 although this time in the rather more subtle shade of Stornoway Grey. It was despatched from the Halewood plant on August 3, 2006, and like VX56 DCV it was registered on September 1, 2006, to Land Rover Company Vehicles. It was disposed of in June 2007 and acquired by its first private owner in Bromley, Kent, in August 2007. Its second owner lived in the same area and registered it in his name in October 2011, and Peter acquired it in March 2013. He had been searching for some time before he found his dream combination of 3.0-litre



Volvo's transverse-mounted straight-six is a snug fit



Classy Stornoway Grey is more restrained than Tambora Flame





VX56 DCE was a UK press fleet car and the April 2007 *LRE* cover star



Interior design has aged well



straight-six, right-hand drive and pre-production.

Needless to say another deal was done, and Peter's pride and joy was transported to Surrey, complete with its meticulous history file which included every magazine article ever published about the Freelander 2, one of which appeared in the April 2007 issue of the now-defunct *Land Rover Enthusiast* magazine. This particular article involved the *LRE* editorial team off-roading at Eastnor Castle in VX56 DCE, which was allocated to the UK press fleet at the time.

Other than the social media pictures of the flying Freelander and the shots of the grey car at Eastnor, Philip hadn't found any shots of the vehicles in action at the press launch in Morocco, so the obvious thing to do was call Nick Dimbleby, who was more than likely to have been Land Rover's official snapper on the launch. Nick confirmed that he was there and agreed to dig into his archives for us.

"I was in Morocco for the full five weeks of the global media drive," Nick informs me. "I photographed each rotation of

Freelander fanboy Philip Bashall reckons the 3.0-litre petrol Freelander 2 is a desirable Landy

journalists from around the world as they drove the demonstration fleet on- and off-road. I remember Philip coming out and made sure I took a few photos of him driving his allotted vehicles. I was fascinated to think that Dunsfold might have acquired two of the Morocco launch models and I scoured my files for photographs of them. Sadly, I couldn't find either of them. And more to the point, it was clear that the entire Freelander 2 press launch fleet in Morocco were registered with the VX56 E-series numberplates."

This was depressing news, but at *LRM* we don't like to give up. More research unearthed a copy of *Autocar* magazine's 2006 special supplement on the new Freelander, entitled *The Falklands by Freelander*. Astonishingly, the *Autocar* team managed to ship two early-build Td4 Freelanders all the way to Port Stanley via Montevideo, a sea voyage that took six weeks, and then flew down to join them for what proved to be a fascinating adventure. Written by Steve Cropley, it's a great article and well worth seeking out.

But there's more, because in the same publication can be





The Autocar article was an exciting discovery

found another story, described as a trip to Morocco 'to see how the new Freelander would deal with the blistering heat of the African desert'. The article is entitled 'Happy as a sand boy' and was written by Andrew Frankel. The photographs by Charlie Magee that accompany the article include the ones that appeared on social media, showing the Tambora Flame Freelander airborne.

The trip involved just the Freelander, a support Discovery and one of Land Rover's impressive Big Foot Defender 110s. Frankel described it as 'the final sign-off of the route that would be used to launch the Freelander to the world's motoring press, a programme that would ultimately bring 800 hacks from 140 countries to Morocco'.

And those airborne shots? Inevitably, the drive ended up in the extensive sand dunes that are a prominent feature of this part of Morocco's Atlantic coast, and Frankel quickly discovered that the Freelander's tyres 'were completely unsuited to sand' and this, combined with 'a limited supply of low-down torque' meant that he was needing a lot of help from the Big Foot Defender.

David Sneath, at that time head of Land Rover Experience and responsible for the planning and execution of the press launch, offered words of encouragement, perhaps best summarised as 'more welly needed', which is how Frankel 'became the first person to go flying in the new Freelander'. The article concludes with the Freelander and its Big Foot Defender guardian battling their way through the incoming tide and eventually returning safely to Essaouira.

Frankel's social media post some 12 years later is rather more entertaining, and I quote: "We'd been up into the mountains and down to the desert but what we wanted was a really good jump shot of the car launching into the air. Hence the dunes. But I wasn't brave enough. I'd go roaring up the dune, but just as the car was about to take off I'd lift the throttle and because the slope was so steep and the sand so sticky, I'd lose all momentum and merely ease over the top. Time was running out because not only was the light starting to go, the tide was coming in too. And our only means of escape was up the beach. So someone quite senior from Land Rover told me not to lift for anything. This time the Freelander flew beautifully. And was still flying when the



Don't do this at home... Charlie Magee's epic photographs of the airborne Freelander

nose finally heeded the call of gravity and headed earthward, with the result you can see. The damage to the bonnet, wings, bumper and grille mattered little, the smashed radiator rather more. We abandoned it and just escaped in the Big Foot Defender, the tide now so far in we had literally to wade through the ocean, a three-day headache brewing in my head. I was actually quite scared."

I also have it on good authority that the Freelander was dragged back to base at the end of a tow rope by the Big Foot, but whatever... The important thing is that what Dunsfold has acquired is one Freelander that wasn't actually a press launch car but was the star of an exclusive *Autocar* feature – one of the world's first in-depth stories on the new Freelander. And, of course, it was the vehicle that was famously airborne in the hands of Andrew Frankel that (thankfully) does not appear to have spent several hours in the Atlantic Ocean, while the second Freelander was a UK press fleet vehicle for those members of the media who were deemed not quite important enough to get the VIP treatment in Morocco.

They are both very interesting and desirable vehicles and well worth saving. But as to our opening question, I guess the answer is, 'Almost full circle, but not quite...' And what is it they say about journalists? Never let the truth get in the way of a good story, and never forget who's paying your bills.