

The Last GATWICK DEFENDER

British Airways, and its predecessors BOAC and BEA, had a long and illustrious involvement with Land Rover, but that is now drawing to a close as its last Defenders are retired

In June 2013, British Airways took delivery of a small batch of Defenders to augment its existing fleet. Only one, the 90 you see here, entered service at London's Gatwick Airport, and it would become the last British Airways Defender to serve there, finally being retired in 2024.

Paul New has worked at Gatwick for 30 years, joining British Airways in November 1995 as a baggage handler, although he really wanted to work in the Aircraft Handling Unit. This required an HGV2 licence and with that under his belt, in 1997 he started as an aircraft towing and pushback tug operator.

Paul is a huge Land Rover enthusiast and a keen amateur photographer, things he has in common with his late father, Michael, who worked in sales at Land Rover dealer Southern Counties in Crawley, and later at Crawley Down Garage at Copthorne. Michael's pride and joy was his 1956 Series I station wagon. It was used as

daily transport, and also took the family and their caravan on extended holidays as far afield as Switzerland and the old Yugoslavia. Michael was a member of the original Land Rover Owners' Club too, and participated in off-road trials events and safaris in the 1950s and '60s.

Searching online for references to his dad's Series I, which was registered VAC 265, Paul was astonished to discover it had not only survived but was in the care of the Dunsfold Collection. You can read the story of Paul and his mother Maria's reunion with the family Land Rover in LRM March 2018, which is illustrated with some of Michael's spectacular period photographs.

"It was really very emotional to sit in the Series I again, and I was very touched when Philip Bashall presented me with one of the reflective number plates that Dad fitted to it in 1968, as well as the original gearknob. I've since become a volunteer at Dunsfold, where I'm responsible for organising teams of volunteers to staff the Collection Open Days and the bigger private tours."





All part of the day job – Dunsfold volunteer Paul New and the Defender before its retirement

"Spending time at Dunsfold, as well as discovering how close my Dad's Series I was to being lost forever before Philip stepped in to save it, made me appreciate how important it is that interesting and important Land Rovers with a story to tell are preserved for future generations to enjoy.

"The Gatwick Defender has been a constant in my working life for the past ten years, day and night and in all weathers, and I've photographed it dozens of times in its working environment, and I well remember the first day I saw it. It was allocated to the Engineering fleet and basically spent almost all of its time airside, carrying the engineers and servicing teams as they attended to the aircraft on the ramp. It would usually be towing a trailer of one kind or another, and quite often these were the large Engineering Kit trailers for the BA Airbus and Boeing aircraft operating out of Gatwick.

"These Engineering Kits contain jacks, wheel changing equipment, and spare wheels, as well as special stands to allow access to aircraft wheel bays, brakes and engines. These stands can weigh up to 750kg each, so the trailers weigh around 2175kg when fully loaded, but because the Defender is a standard vehicle it requires no special training to operate it, other than observing a strict speed limit of 15mph when towing the unbraked Engineering Kit trailers.

"The Defender would also make regular trips around the M25 to Heathrow to collect parts and so on, and these runs were a necessity in terms of keeping the 90 in good shape, because the maximum speed limit on the ramp at Gatwick is 20mph, and this is not ideal for the 90's diesel particulate filter. BA had some very expensive bills when the DPF had to be replaced on two occasions.

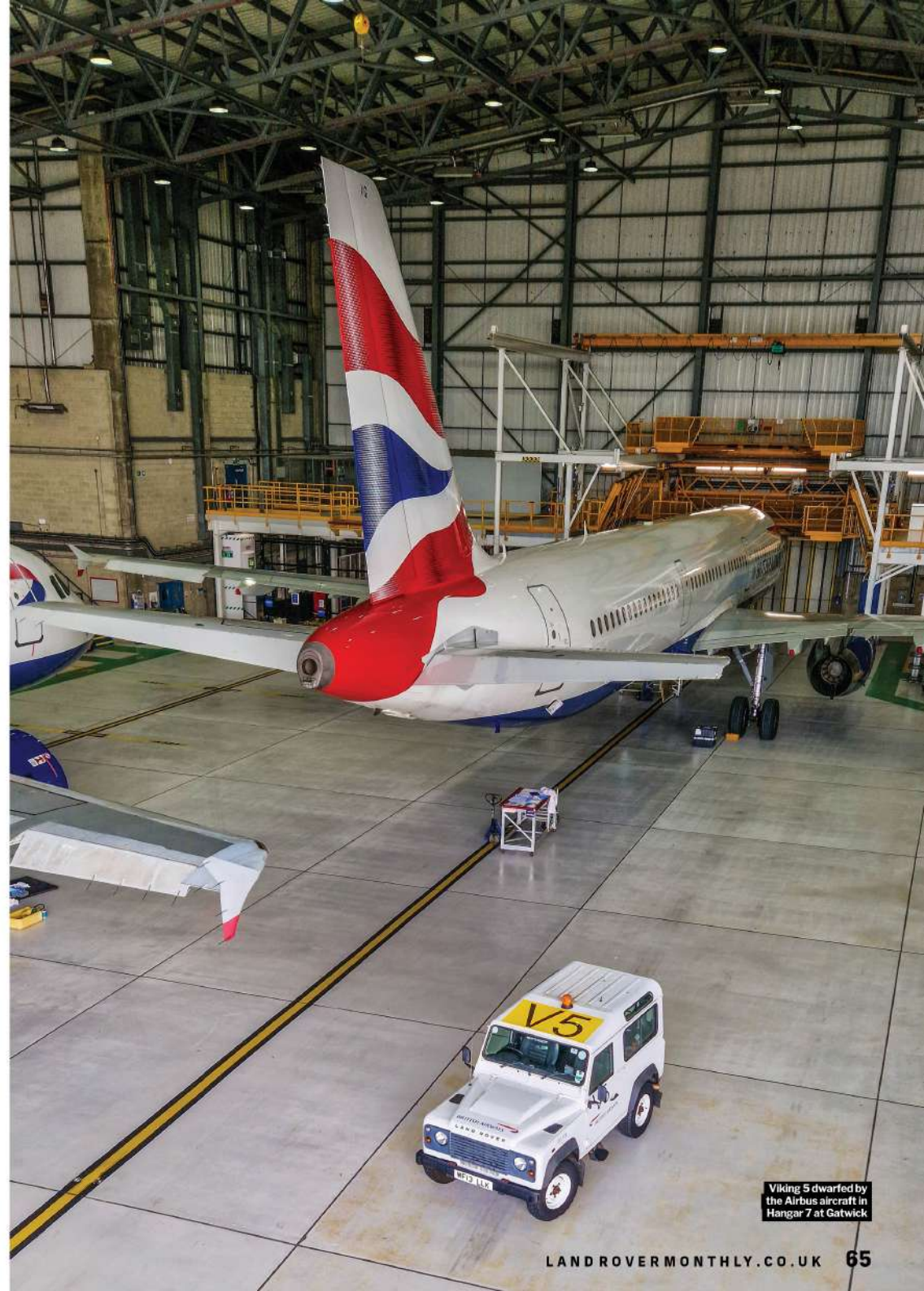
"The V5 markings on the doors and the yellow roof

panel were allocated to BA and this particular vehicle by Gatwick Airport Limited, and they mean that 'Viking 5' was permitted under the specific instructions of air traffic control to access restricted areas such as the airport's taxiways. The Defender was the only Land Rover to get this clearance – none of its siblings at Heathrow Airport had it – which makes this particular vehicle even more special."

Back in 2018, soon after he started working as a volunteer at Dunsfold, Paul shared with me some stunning photographs he'd taken of the Defender in action at Gatwick, and I sent these to *LRM*'s then editor, Patrick. The result was a brief article that appeared in the January 2019 issue, beautifully illustrated by some of Paul's photographs.

The photos were all the more remarkable because the BA Defenders are so reclusive. If you want to know what I mean by that, go online and search for British Airways Defenders. You'll find very few images of them, and most will have been taken through the plate glass windows of the terminal building by a Land Rover enthusiast who glimpsed one parked on the ramp or attending to an aircraft while queuing to board his or her flight. These are working Land Rovers that most of us will always struggle to get close to, because of the very nature of what they do for a living.

Fast forward to 2023, and during a coffee and cake break at a museum working party of Dunsfold volunteers, Paul told Philip and I that the Gatwick Defender was reaching its tenth birthday and that would mean it would be taken out of service and sold. Paul thought it would be an excellent addition to the Collection, because this particular Defender is very much a local vehicle, the last one in use at Gatwick, and Dunsfold is under the



Viking 5 dwarfed by the Airbus aircraft in Hangar 7 at Gatwick



On duty night and day, Viking 5 with BA Engineering's Airbus Kit 2 at Gatwick



Paul and his daily driver, the Schop F300, which weighs 45.4 tonnes with a draw bar pull of 300kN



Handover in Hangar 7 – Simon Booth, Philip Bashall, Steve Parkinson, Tom Owen, and Paul New



A very special day – Viking 5 arrives at its new home at Dunsfold, thanks to Paul and his colleagues at BA

airport's take-off and landing flightpaths.

Me? I'm a sucker for a Land Rover in corporate colours, and it doesn't get much better than a British Airways Defender 90. Last of its kind at Gatwick? Check. Local connection to Dunsfold? Check. It got my vote.

"Because I've worked for BA and its affiliates at Gatwick for 30 years I know quite a few people," Paul told us, "Some of them are now managers, and I thought it would be worth having some exploratory conversations to introduce the idea that BA might donate the last Defender at Gatwick to the Dunsfold Collection. Philip agreed with Gary, and so I was able to get the ball rolling.

"Tom Owen, who is part of BA's Engineering Support Team at Gatwick, was very positive about the idea, and he enlisted the help of Dave Holl, who is Operations Project Manager in the Engineering Gatwick Project Line, who has also worked on other BA heritage projects, including Concorde.

"Tom and Dave bought tickets for the Dunsfold Collection Autumn Open Day so they could see for themselves what it is all about and have the opportunity to meet Philip and Gary. I really enjoyed showing them around the Collection and, of course, introducing them to my Dad's station wagon. By the end of the afternoon, everybody had agreed that the museum would be a perfect home for BA's last Gatwick Defender, and the ball was now in BA's court.

"Finally, the relevant paperwork was completed to allow the Defender to be handed over to Dunsfold, and a date was set for Gary, Philip and I to go down to Gatwick for a handover ceremony in the BA Engineering hangar. Tom welcomed us, together with Simon Booth, Satellite Engineer, Ramp 1 Support, and after clearing security we were taken into Hangar 7 and there was the 90, parked in front of a stunning backdrop of two BA Airbus aircraft in for servicing.

"Dave Holl was tied up on business matters at Heathrow and unable to get away, but Steve Parkinson, Operations Manager UK & Ireland Engineering, was able to join us, and said how pleased he was that the vehicle was going to be preserved. Tom talked about how the Gatwick and Heathrow teams had worked closely together to allow the vehicle to be gifted to the Collection, and in particular thanked Engineering Vehicle Fleet Manager Jason McNeaney for his support. Gary said that the donation of the vehicle was a credit to BA and showed that the company recognised the importance of history and heritage, whether it involved saving a 747 or a humble Defender.

"There was plenty of time to take photos and video of the 90 in the hangar for the last time. Philip handed over



Changing a wheel on the ramp at Gatwick is a world away from doing the same job on your Land Rover

to Steve the one-pound payment stipulated by the accountants to keep the books straight, and the Defender was now safely in Dunsfold's care. I was delighted that it had all finally come to fruition and it was a very special day for me."

The Defender was supplied new by main dealer Roger Young of Saltash in Cornwall and registered with the Exeter number WF13 LLK on 28 June 2013. It was allocated BA fleet number LR1108. By the time it passed its first MoT test on 6 July 2016 it had driven 36,888 miles, which seems quite a high mileage given the nature of its airside duties at Gatwick. Over the following year it drove a further 8299 miles but it failed its next MoT due to weak brakes and damaged seat belt webbing.

Annual mileage then seems to have declined quite dramatically, 6192 being recorded at the 2018 MoT, 4084 in 2019, and 4011 in 2020 when it failed its MoT again due to damaged seatbelt webbing. In its final year in service, the Defender covered only 1961 miles and when handed over to Dunsfold the recorded mileage was just over 69,900.

The vehicle itself is unmodified, with the exception of a hand-built wooden loadspace protector with stowage lockers above the rear wheelarches, and an air band radio to allow communication with the ground controllers in the tower, and airport operations staff. Sadly, the radio had to be removed before handover, but Philip is already

on the hunt for a decommissioned example.

In the January 2019 issue of *LRM*, my colleague Louise Woodhams wondered what might eventually replace the last Gatwick Defender. Well, now we know, and I cannot say that I am remotely surprised that it isn't a Land Rover. It is an Isuzu pick-up, and that's because JLR doesn't make a utility 4x4 anymore.

I find it fascinating, having recently researched extensively and written in this magazine about how in the late-1980s Land Rover responded, belatedly but brilliantly, to the threat posed by the Japanese manufacturers by launching the Discovery, while today the company is happy to walk away and leave the utility market to the same companies it wanted to beat back in the day. How times change.

JLR has placed all its bets in the Modern Luxury Reimagined, über-expensive Fashion and Lifestyle Accessory toolbox. Only time will tell whether that strategy proves to be successful. But meanwhile, when you are sitting on your next BA flight at Gatwick, waiting to head off to the sun, it won't be an Engineering team Land Rover you'll be gazing down on; instead it will be an Isuzu D-Max.

The British Airways Gatwick Defender will make its public debut at the Dunsfold Collection Spring Open Day on 26 April. This event is sold out but Dunsfold will be announcing the date for its Autumn Open Day soon.