LODE LANE LOFTY

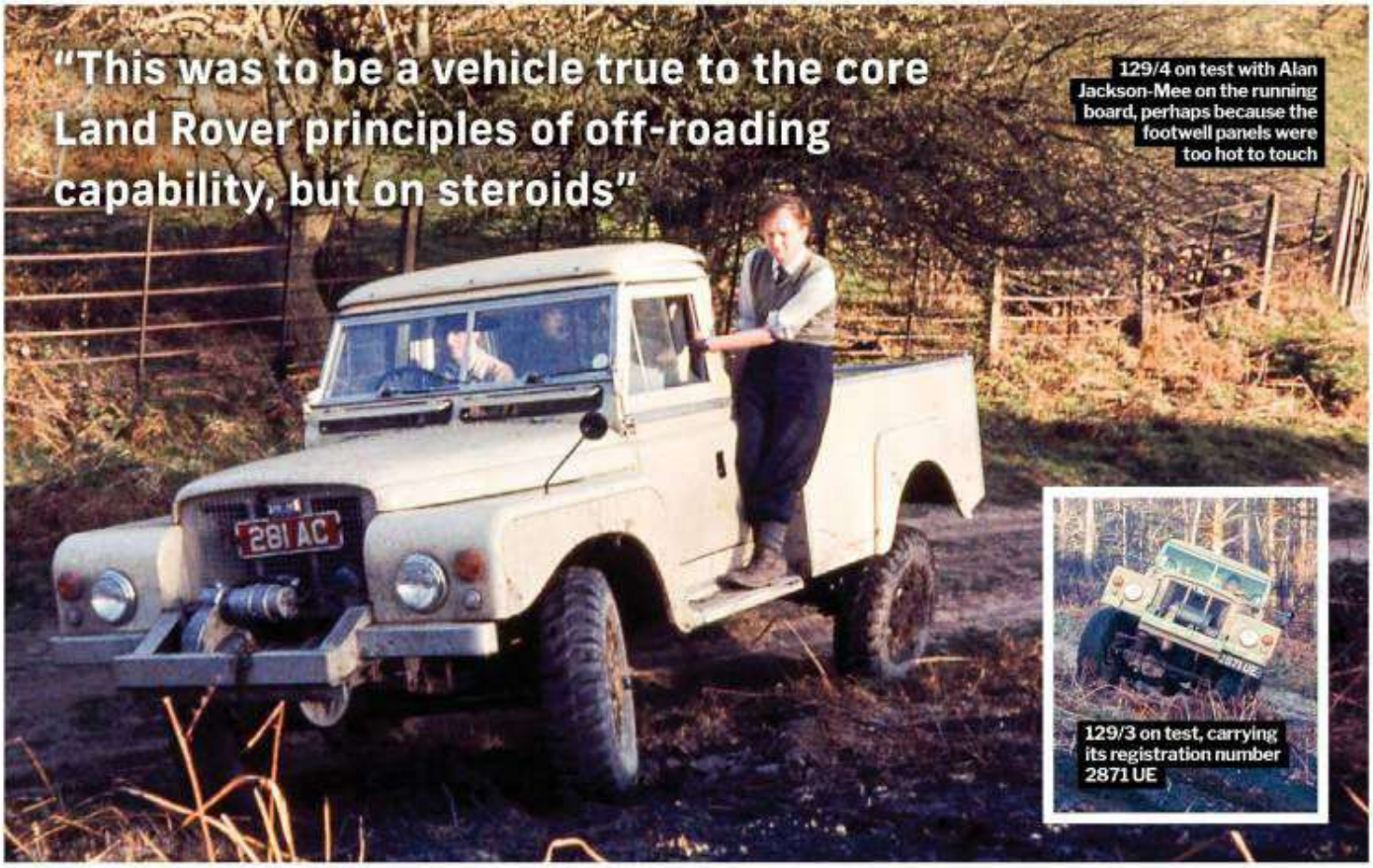
In the late 1950s, Land Rover decided to develop a vehicle to compete with the Dodge Power Wagon, the medium truck of choice in developing countries and the oil fields of the Middle East...

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but for many the 129 is one cool Land Rover

AA GARY PUSEY CRAIG PUSEY, DUNSFOLD COLLECTION ARCHIVE, GEOF MILLER, MECUM

IT was apparently one of the Colonel's ideas, but it would not go into production. In 1956, Rover had split its engineering department in two, with one team focused on the car side of the business, and the other dedicated to Land Rover. Each had its own Assistant Chief Engineer who reported to Robert Boyle, Rover's Chief Engineer. Tom Barton was in charge on the Land Rover side, and he had been responsible for the design of the first Land Rover, while Arthur Goddard was Development Engineer responsible for the build, and for the first public airing of the new vehicle in Amsterdam. When Arthur Goddard moved to Girling Ltd, Tom quietly slid into Arthur's chair.

In 1958, the company hired a senior ex-REME officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Jack Pogmore, and appointed him to the Land Rover engineering team. James Taylor has suggested that: "It is difficult now to define Pogmore's role precisely, but it seems clear that he had been drafted in partly because Rover hoped his contacts with the War Department would help relations with that vitally important customer to run more smoothly. Although Pogmore was senior to Tom Barton, →



129/4 on test with Alan Jackson-Mee on the running board, perhaps because the footwell panels were too hot to touch

129/3 on test, carrying its registration number 2871 UE

the latter remained in charge of both existing Land Rover products and projects for the military. Pogmore's job was to look at ways of expanding the highly profitable Land Rover product range."

Others, among them Geof Miller, have suggested that Barton was shunted sideways when Pogmore was brought in and appointed Assistant Chief Engineer in charge of Land Rover engineering, with Barton only resuming the role when Pogmore left the company in 1962. Barton surely can't have been very happy with the situation and who could blame him? After all, Pogmore was a career army officer who had lately held senior roles in War Department procurement, and was not an experienced vehicle design and development engineer.

Either way, in his brief tenure at Solihull, Pogmore was certainly the driving force for several Land Rover projects that eventually came to nothing. One of these was the 129-inch medium truck, of which six prototypes were built between 1959 and 1963.

Pogmore saw what he thought was a way to extend the Land Rover product range upwards by designing a vehicle that was significantly bigger than the existing long-wheelbase models and would have a 30cwt (1.5-ton) load capacity. He believed there was potential for a military medium truck of this type, and he also hoped to tap into the civilian market that was dominated at the time by the Dodge Power Wagon, which was largely unchallenged in the valuable oil fields market in the Middle East.

Beautifully restored example of the highly successful Dodge Power Wagon

The Power Wagon had its roots in US military Second World War designs and was launched in March 1946. Powered by a 230 cubic inch (3.8-litre) six-cylinder side-valve petrol engine, with a four-speed gearbox and a two-speed transfer 'box, it was reliable, rugged, and had a huge load capacity that just happened to be perfect for carrying standard steel oil drums. It was exactly what the oil companies needed.

Interestingly, and perhaps offering some insight into what he thought of Land Rover's engineers, Pogmore appointed Bill Harper to run the project. Harper had recently joined Rover from Esso and, like Pogmore, he was not a vehicle design and development engineer. According to James Taylor: "With the aid of the Drawing Office he developed a specification for the new vehicle and got the prototype built."

What is also interesting is that no one seems to have thought it might have been a good idea to have a Dodge Power Wagon to hand for evaluation and comparison, so the team relied on photographs and documents. Equally bizarre, there are no records of any attempt to contact the oil companies, who were the core target market for the new vehicle, to see what they required both now and in future, and to try to interest them in the vehicle. Ignoring your customers is generally never a good idea.

Around this time Geof Miller became involved in the 129 project. "I was a junior technical assistant and in 1959 I spent six months on a vehicle research training course at MIRA," he tells me. "On my return I was appointed Assistant Project Engineer on the newly created Land Rover New Projects team, and one of the projects already underway was the 129.

"This was to be a vehicle true to the core Land Rover principles of off-road capability, but it was going to be around 50 per cent longer, wider, and taller – a Land Rover on steroids. As with all Land Rover projects in the 1950s and 1960s, resources were limited, so there was

The 129 is an imposing vehicle from every angle, but particularly from the front

no chance that we could design an engine specifically to suit the requirements of the 129. We had to make use of what was available, which is how we settled on the 3.0-litre straight-six from the Rover P5 saloon, plus existing Land Rover gearboxes and the standard cab.

"The first prototype, 129/1, had its road springs under the axles, as with conventional Land Rovers. This had distinct limitations because it did not allow fitment of the largest of the anticipated tyre sizes – 16.00 x 16 – so the subsequent vehicles were built to a phase two design with the springs over the axles, which resulted in a much more impressive looking vehicle. A Land Rover on steroids and on stilts."

In early 1960 Bill Harper, the ex-Esso man in charge of the 129 project, left Land Rover. He was replaced by Alan Jackson-Mee from Land Rover's Solihull research department, who recruited a third person to the 129 project team. This was Bill Morris, at that time a very junior technical assistant, but a man who before joining Rover had already worked as a development engineer on aircraft engines at de Havilland, and as an engineer on board an Ellerman Line ship, completing two voyages to Japan via Port Sudan, Calcutta, Singapore, Hong Kong and the Philippines.

In 1984, Bill would become Land Rover's Director of Engineering (see *LRM* May 2018 for our exclusive →

Phase Two design with springs over the axles

conversation with Bill about his life with Land Rovers).

Two further 129-inch prototypes were completed in early 1960, both to the phase two design with headlights on the wings rather than in the grille, springs over the axles, and removable rear wheelarch panels to allow the largest tyres to be fitted if required. The different propshaft angles resulting from the revised locations of the springs meant the transfer 'box now had to be mounted remotely from the gearbox and driven by an additional short propshaft.

"Various problems arose during testing at Solihull and MIRA," Geof explains to me. "The main issue was the inability of the gearboxes to cope with the power and torque of the 3.0-litre engine. The engine was superb in the Rover car but it wasn't suited to the 129, where it was required to run for long periods at maximum torque or maximum power.

"On some full power tests, the passenger footwell got so hot that we had to design felt-based heat shields, but these caught fire! You could see the exhaust manifold glowing red. Plans had been made to run a hot climate test trip to North Africa in 1961, and several of us had our new passports ready, but the tests were cancelled.

"The gearbox and transfer 'box overheated badly as well, so we redesigned their casings to increase oil capacity and added cooling fins, and even painted the casings black, but it still cooked the oil. There were also problems with the steering, which had a mind of its own. If you went round a bend too quickly, the steering would wind itself onto full lock.

"Prototype number four was built in early 1963 but all of the problems remained. A fifth vehicle was finished later that year, and this was given a basic body with military use in mind. It was also fitted with a prototype

129/5 body design is arguably the most resolved and purposeful of all the prototypes


Sturdy sidestep is a must. It's a long way up


129/5 was apparently known as Three Tanks because it was the only 129 to have three fuel tanks

2.5-litre diesel developed jointly with CAV and fitted with one of their turbochargers, which was pretty advanced thinking at the time."

Number five is believed to have been delivered to the Fighting Vehicles Research and Development Establishment (FVRDE) at Chobham for evaluation, probably because the military was interested in the turbodiesel rather than the vehicle itself, because the War Department's thinking was already directed at a potential forward control layout.

No one seems to remember exactly when the 129 project ended, but it seems to have fizzled out around the end of 1963. Bill Morris has suggested that it was the realisation that the vehicle would require its own dedicated production line, the costs of which were prohibitive, that put an end to it, although it is also possible that the powers that be finally acknowledged that the vehicle wasn't viable.

A sixth prototype was partially completed when the plug was pulled, but it was finished and became a test hack for the forward control Land Rovers that were being developed for the British military.

Prototype 129/1 was retained by the factory and allocated to the Experimental Department. It was used as a support vehicle on the APGP (Air Portable General Purpose) project, fitted with a large lifting gantry. It was finally registered for the road in 1973 as GOA 606L, and photographs of it have come to light being used as a recovery vehicle by Islington Motors. It is believed to have been scrapped in the 1980s.

Two of the prototypes have survived, numbers 129/3 and 129/5, and for a while they were both owned by the Dunsfold Collection. 129/5 had returned to Solihull on completion of the FVRDE trials and was later given to CAV of Acton in West London, for use as a works hack. There it was registered it as FYF 928C on 17 June 1965, and it was bought from CAV by Brian Bashall in 1968. For obvious reasons it was immediately named 'Lofty',

129/1 in use as a recovery vehicle, seen here with gantry in the stowed position

Official factory photograph of 129/2

129/3 photographed at Solihull

129/4 believed to have been taken at a Rover Owners' Club event

"It was the 129 that kicked off Land Rover's long association with Eastnor Castle"

129/5 is unique in having the military styling with hugely practical dropside rear body

Lofty is one of Philip Bashall's favourite vehicles, perhaps because he remembers greenlaning in it aged ten with his father

THE 129in PROTOTYPES

129/3 and 129/5 at Dunsfold

129/1	RHD. Built late 1959. Phase 1 design: headlamps beside the grille, springs under the axles. 3.0-litre engine. To Project Department early 1961 for tests with 2.25-litre turbo diesel, then to Experimental Department painted dark green and fitted with gantry crane under tall canvas tilt. APGP project support vehicle. Later registered GOA 606L owned by Islington Motors as a recovery vehicle. *Presumed scrapped.*
129/2	RHD. Built early 1960. Phase 2 design: Headlamps in the wings, springs over the axles. One-piece doors. Left-hand rear wing stowage locker. Bumperettes. 3.0-litre engine. Removable rear wheelarch panels to allow for 16.00 x 16 tyres. *Presumed scrapped.*
129/3	LHD. Built early 1960. Phase 2 design. Two-piece doors. Left-hand rear wing stowage locker. Front winch. 3.0-litre engine. Registered 2871 UE on 1 Sep 1960. Later to Research Department painted yellow. Acquired by Dunsfold Collection mid-1970s. Now owned by BMM Gaydon, restored and repainted to original sand colour. *Extant.*
129/4	RHD. Built early 1963. Phase 2 design. Safari roof. Two-piece doors. No left-hand rear wing stowage locker. Front winch. 3.0-litre engine. *Presumed scrapped.*
129/5	RHD. Built mid-1963. Phase 2 design with dropside body and canvas tilt. 2.5-litre turbo diesel. To FVRDE Chobham for trials. Later returned to Solihull, then given to CAV at Acton, London as works hack. Registered FYF 928C on 17 Jun 1965. To Dunsfold Collection in 1968. *Extant.*
129/6	RHD. Built late 1963. Phase 2 design. Became endurance mileage vehicle for the 112in and 120in Forward Control programme and fitted with a Perkins 6.354 multi-fuel engine. *Presumed scrapped.*

and that's what everyone knows it as to this day.

"Brian repainted it green and dressed it up as he thought it might have looked had it been in British army service," Philip Bashall tells me. "He was very keen on it and used it on his regular greenlaning days. There's a photo in the family album of my brother and I aged about 10 or 12, sitting in the car on the Ridgeway in Berkshire during one of those greenlane outings. Later, we acquired 129/3 from Solihull which meant we had two, but in the mid-1970s Brian did a deal with the BMIHT and 129/3 joined their collection.

"We've since repainted 129/5 back to the correct grey, and it remains a very popular vehicle. A couple of years ago the injector pump packed up and I contacted CAV on the off-chance that they might be able to help. To my surprise and delight, they still had the vehicle on file and were able to rebuild the pump.

"The vehicle is also fitted with an intercooler, but no one can remember whether this was fitted during the initial engine development phase carried out jointly by Rover and CAV, or installed later once the vehicle had become the CAV works hack.

"It's also interesting that it was the 129 that kicked off Land Rover's long association with Eastnor Castle, which continues to this day. In 1961, Geof and Bill were looking for somewhere to test the prototype in challenging off-road conditions, and with Major Ben Hervey-Bathurst's support they were able to use his estate at Eastnor. In 2011 JLR organised an event at Eastnor to mark the 50th anniversary of its relationship with the estate, and Geof and Bill were on hand to share their memories."

And we'll leave the last word on the 129 to Geof: "The most interesting use I ever found for these vehicles was using 129/1 when it was Experimental Department chargehand Bill Morby's recovery truck to help put a 3.0-litre Rover six-cylinder into my 88-inch, and then lifting the Jensen 4.0-litre engine out of, and back into, my Interceptor when it needed a rebore."