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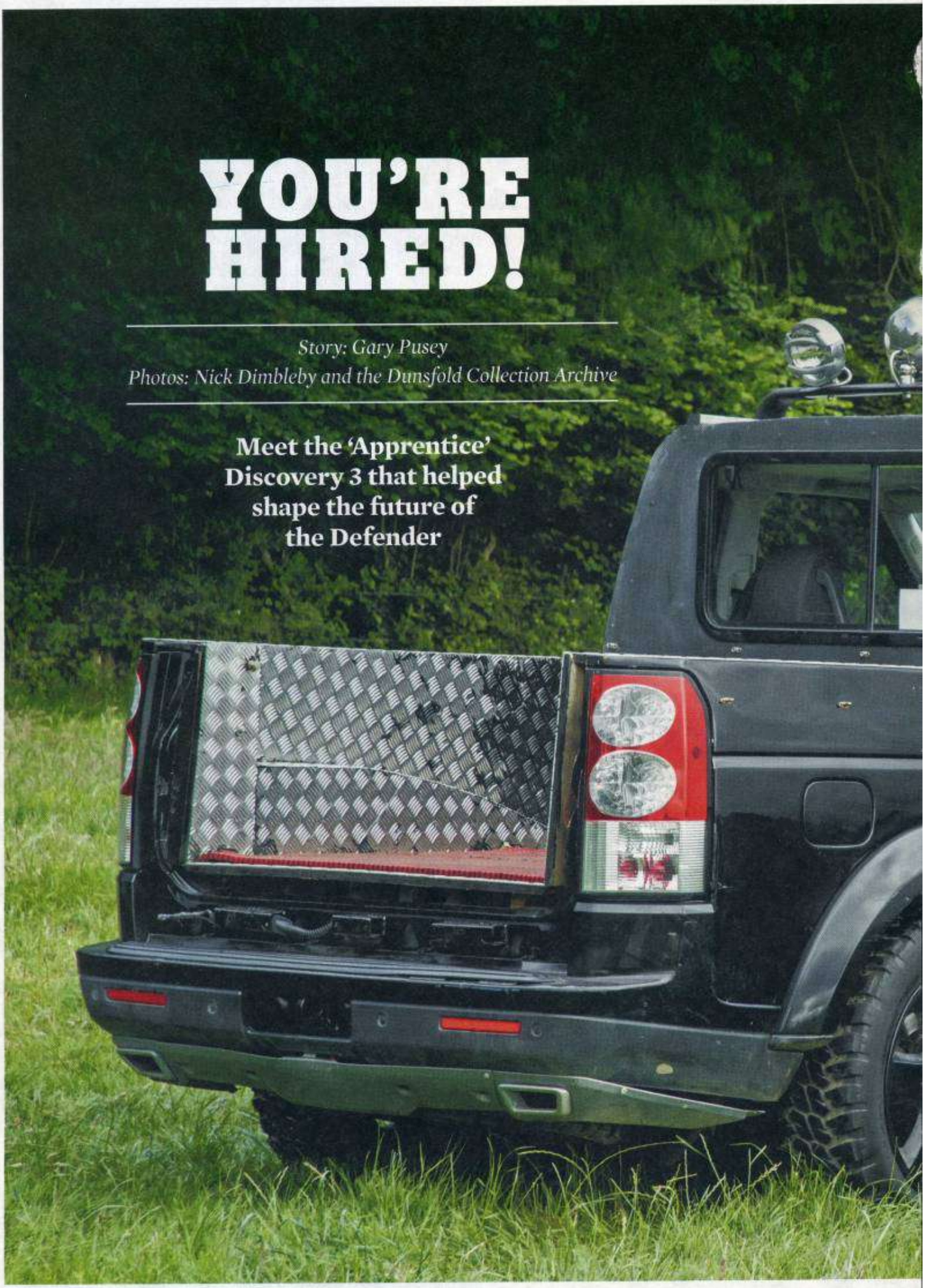
Story: Gary Pusey
Photos: Nick Dimbleby and the Dunsfold Collection Archive

Meet the 'Apprentice' Discovery 3 that helped shape the future of the Defender



It's had a number of names over the years. It was initially given the name 'Rogue' by the team that created it, but interestingly it carries factory labels on the windscreen and rear window that identify it as 'ICON 1', and we'll come back to this in a moment. In later years it was known by many simply as 'The Apprentice Discovery'.

The Discovery 3 in question was an M1 Build Prototype for the 2010 Model Year. It was built in 2008 with left-hand drive to Arabian Gulf market specification, with a 4.0-litre Ford V6 Cologne SOHC Efi engine and six-speed automatic Steptronic transmission. The vehicle was apparently utilised for transmission calibration tests as part of the 2010 MY programme.

And that might well have been it, because such a vehicle would almost certainly have ended its days in the recycling crusher. In fact, by early 2009 it was already sitting forlornly in the disposal compound at Solihull. But it wasn't scrapped. Instead, it was diverted to the Prototype Operations team in Building 117 at Gaydon, and given to the apprentices that were assigned to that team. And that's really where our story begins.

JLR's commitment to developing its own long-term

"The apprentices made a tidy job of the conversion within the financial restraints"

talent pool is well-known, and the company's award-winning apprenticeship schemes are much-admired. Did you know that JLR is actually the biggest provider of automotive apprenticeships in the UK, and hires more apprentices than all the other UK automotive manufacturers put together? Today, it has 807 apprentices working across nine UK sites.

The annual intake of apprentices has increased dramatically over recent years, and since 2011 JLR has hired over 1000 people into its apprenticeship schemes, at either Advanced or Degree levels, depending on where the candidate is with their education, and interests. These apprentice programmes represent a serious commitment on the part of the company, but also require an equally serious commitment from the men and women who join them. The Advanced Scheme runs for four years and is designed for young people who are about to sit their GCSEs, or have just taken them. The Degree Scheme runs for six years, and is for those who are in their final year of A Levels, or have completed the appropriate A Levels or required vocational qualifications. The JLR schemes are also vastly over-subscribed: in 2016, for example, there were some 8000 hopeful applicants for 180 apprentice positions.

Exactly when the apprentices that were working in Prototype Operations back in 2009 were hired remains unclear, but what is known is that they were given the Java Black Discovery as the basis for a project that was intended to teach them new skills outside the normal day-to-day pressures that characterise Prototype Operations, where everything has to be done to tight time scales.

Maybe there wasn't much going on in Prototype Operations at the time, though, because the pick-up that the team created from their donor vehicle was clearly not an overnight job or a fill-in for an hour at the end of the working day.

Extremely interesting in its own right, of course, and we will review it in some detail shortly, but it is the 'ICON 1' label that potentially connects this vehicle with something else that was happening at JLR at the same time. Because in 2009, 'Project Icon' was the code name for a programme to assess whether a successor to the Defender could be developed around the steel T5 chassis that underpinned the Discovery 3 and the Range Rover Sport.

At the time, it was said that Land Rover's thinking was that the relatively simple, sturdy, twin-rail T5, which had the option of both coil and air springs, would be an ideal base for the successor to the Defender, because it would allow the company to continue to offer the wide range of body styles

that characterised the then-current Defender model. There were a number of raised eyebrows among commentators, who suggested that the T5 would require a serious weight-loss programme before it would be even remotely suitable, but the media nevertheless speculated that a T5-based Defender might be in production by 2012.

Was that the Rogue part of that programme, or is it purely coincidence that the creation of the Apprentice Discovery and the assessment of a potential Defender replacement shared both the same name and the same chassis? Those involved with the Rogue insist that it is exactly that – a coincidence – but once word got out about what was being created in Building 117, there was significant interest within the company, and the team was asked to present the completed vehicle to none other than Bob Joyce, who was Group Engineering Director at the time. Maybe that was when the 'ICON 1' title was associated with the car?

The apprentices made a pretty tidy job of the conversion, too, within the financial constraints that were presumably imposed on them. The rear body was chopped some way behind the B pillar to create a spacious single cab, and a flat panel was fixed over a frame inside the resulting body aperture, complete with a central rear window neatly fabricated using Defender parts. The all-important horizontal cut was made at a level a couple of inches above the original waistline, its position determined by the top of the rear light clusters and the rear quarter windows. The rear doors were removed, cut, fabricated to suit the new waistline, and welded in place. There are some deft touches, such as the treatment of the panel work where the front door rear shutline and the waistline merge into the rear side panels and the extended upper B pillar.

The load space area was levelled with steel box section and topped with a simple wooden frame covered with sheets of chequer plate for the base, sides, wheel arch covers

Left:
The rear body was chopped behind the B pillar creating a spacious cab

Bottom:
The horizontal cut was made a few inches above the original waistline

"Not everyone at JLR was a fan of the vehicle and it remained a one-off"

and the side rail tops, which is not especially elegant but does the job well enough. The tailgate must have generated a number of problems for the team, and the solution was to use L322 third-generation Range Rover tailgates, suitably remodelled to fit the gap. The tailgate was obviously pretty heavy and with no assisted opening it proved to be unwieldy to use. It is now missing, presumed scrapped, which is a shame, because it was fitted with a rather nice, stylised Rogue logo which looks as it is was laser-cut from aluminium sheet.

Externally, it appears to be mostly standard Discovery 3 although there are a number of additional and bespoke touches here and there including side steps, chrome details, roof-mounted lighting bar, and black G4 wheels. The frontal treatment that doesn't look out of place on the standard Discovery comes across as a bit heavy here, with the missing rear body upsetting the balance, but that could easily have been resolved with a redesigned bumper assembly, which would have created a more useful approach angle as well.

The apprentices must have had a lot of fun building it, though, and were clearly rather proud of what they had created, because they made a plaque and engraved it with the words 'Designed and built by Building 117 Gaydon Prototype Operations 2009', which they neatly mounted for posterity on the base of the left hand door shut.

The modifications appear to have been completed by early August 2009, and a first test drive was made on the 6th of the month. The tester concluded that the vehicle was "a good drive", which I'm sure it was. Not everyone at JLR was a fan of the vehicle, though, and it remained very much a one-off. Project Icon did not lead to a new Defender on the T5 chassis by 2012, and in 2011 the Land Rover DC100 debuted at the Frankfurt Motor Show, designed by Gerry McGovern and billed as "a modern interpretation of the iconic Land Rover Defender". At the same time, JLR announced that the new Defender would be launched in 2015.

In the event, replacing an icon was going to prove rather more challenging. The DC100 was not universally well-received, and the Defender continued in production until January 29, 2016, mainly due to a surge in orders as the world finally realised that the end was nigh. Meanwhile, the launch of its replacement is now touted for 2019, and most commentators expect it to be an all-aluminium vehicle.

In the meantime, Rogue continued to be used by Prototype Operations as a support vehicle. It was eventually discarded and found itself on the scrap list for the second time in its life, supposedly as its usefulness was limited by the fact that it could not be driven on the public highway. Either that, or because its air suspension compressor had failed, leaving the vehicle firmly grounded on its bump stops. What makes me think this? Because this is how it was when it arrived some time ago on loan to the Dunsfold Collection, and getting it off the trailer proved to be an interesting challenge.

Given other priorities, repairing the suspension was a drawn-out affair, but with our show coming up we had an incentive to get it working. A replacement compressor finally did the trick, and allowed us to debut the vehicle at our show in June. Needless to say, it attracted a great deal of attention, perhaps helped by the fact that we decided to make practical use of its open load area by using it as a site service vehicle, which meant that it was regularly trundling around with various bits and pieces that needed moving, emptying, refilling, fixing or whatever.

The Dunsfold Collection is delighted to have been able to help preserve this fascinating vehicle as a testament to the creativity, hard work and ingenuity of JLR's apprentices.