Farewell, old friend

They have taken us to school and on shoots, across stubble and through snowdrifts. Is this really the end of the road for the Land Rover Defender? Daniel Pembrey tells the tale

RETIRING at the age of 68 doesn't sound exceptional but when the personality retiring is the original Land Rover, the end of the road was always going to be emotional. So it proved when the last Defender came off its Solihull production line in January this year and tears were shed at Jaguar Land Rover and beyond.

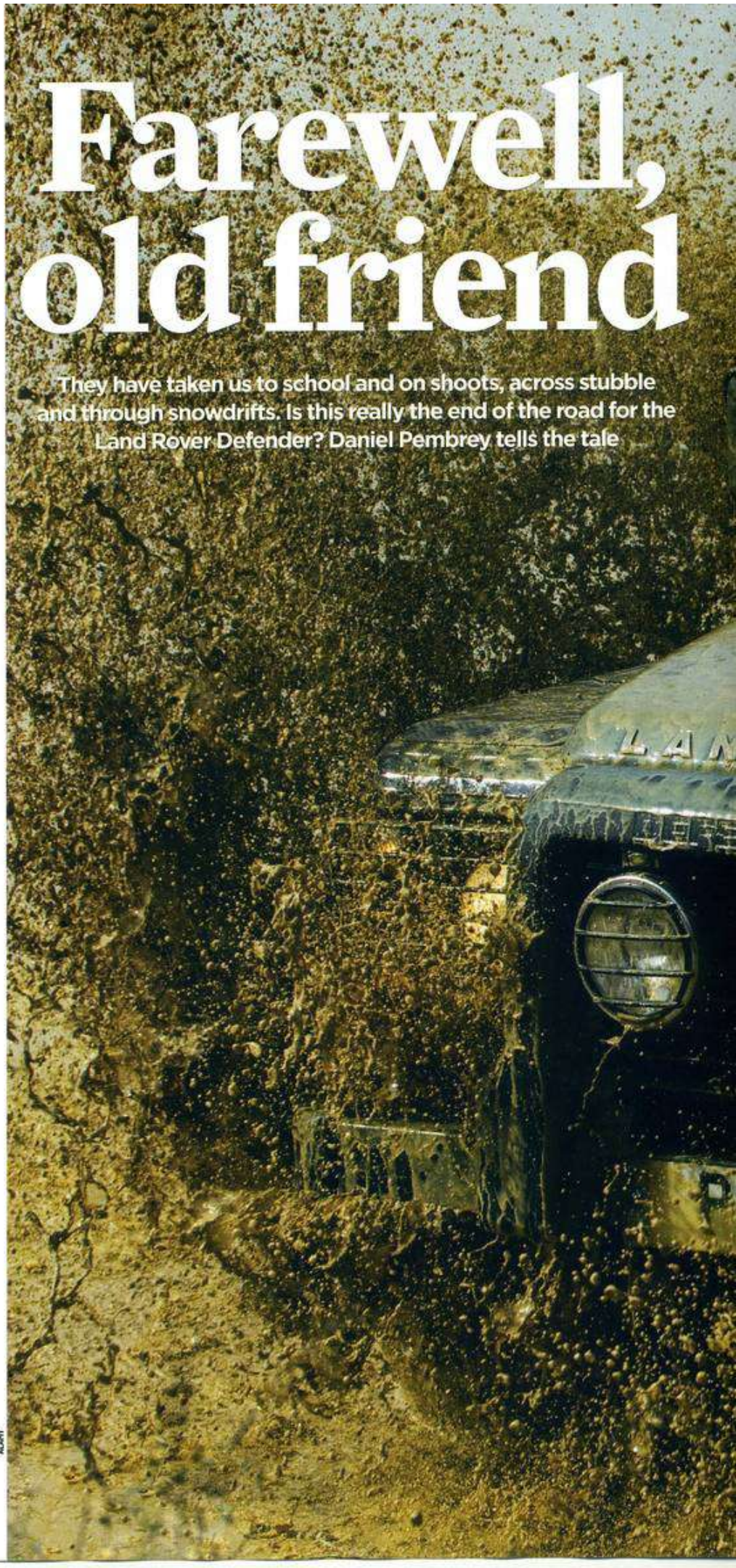
"It was enormously emotional. A loud cheer rang out in the factory building as each of the last cars came off the line," recalls Kim Palmer, a spokesperson for the company. "When the assemblers and other production staff completed their tasks on the final Defender, they walked behind it to the end." It was a spontaneous gesture of respect that few, if any, other vehicles could garner.

For those with the foresight to have ordered a last Defender, there is consolation. According to Philip Bashall of Dunsfold DLR, a Land Rover restorer, the last cars to be produced have already risen in value by as much as £10,000. Collectability of earlier-model Land Rovers has in fact been rising for years, which begs the question: what explains the near-universal appeal of the Land Rover?

The vehicle was introduced at the Amsterdam Motor Show in 1948, at a time when food rationing was still in force in Britain. It was a priority after the war to increase agricultural production and it is hard to overstate the affect this vehicle had on farms around the land, where horses often outnumbered tractors. As the newly established company claimed, "The Land Rover certainly pulls its weight and, when asked to, many times its weight."

It was the versatility of the vehicle that ensured order books were full from the start. "The chassis strength allowed you to add things to it easily," explains Tim Dines, owner of GWD 431 – the third Land Rover ever made and a demonstration model at the 1948 show. "The fire service could put a water tank on the back, utility companies would add a cherry-picker. On farms, it could tow anything from a horse box to a plough, or it could winch logs." Before long, it became the vehicle of choice for forestry, military, mountain rescue and even amphibious work.

The vehicle's design was conceived by Maurice Wilks, a gifted automotive and aeronautical engineer who saw opportunity in converting the US army jeep for British use. Wilks would go on to become chairman of the Rover Company Limited, a post he would hold until his death in 1963. During the 1940s, he worked with whatever was to hand: the ➢



A Land Rover Defender 90 speeds through a flooded road in Slindon, West Sussex

ALAMY


ROVER

aforementioned jeeps, aircraft aluminium surplus to requirements (which didn't rust) and even, allegedly, surplus pale green cockpit paint. It was Wilks who devised the versatile chassis and tractable four-wheel-drive system.

Stuart Hibberd grew up on a 630-acre arable and dairy farm near Cranborne in Dorset; having seen American servicemen zipping round in jeeps, he was determined to own one of the new Land Rovers. His wish came true at the age of 13, in 1951 – the year of the Festival of Britain – when his father rewarded him with a new Series 1 for passing his common entrance exam. It would be another four years before Stuart could drive it on the road but he put it to good use around the farm, even pulling his father's Morris 25 out of the mud on occasions.

This wasn't the only way Hibberd pulled. Ruby, who was to become his wife, was enthralled by the green vehicle with the canvas top. "I remember one time he took me out in it with the top down and I'd just had my hair done. It didn't matter whether we were counting outlying cows, popping out to the shops, turning up at point-to-points or even, indeed, hunt balls – you could do anything without needing to change vehicle."

With the 1960s and advent of the Series 2 models, the styling changed, creating a more eye-catching shape below the body's "waist line". Of course, the '60s weren't swinging for everyone; there were still hardships, including some particularly bad winters. In 1962-63, snow lay on the ground for more than 60 days. The Hibberds recall impassable rural roads, with only the Land Rover able to clear the way for grocery vans and ambulances.

Owners often articulate feelings towards their Land Rover that are only otherwise expressed for a favourite pet. "It was always there for you; it never let you down," remarks Trevor Cooper, a former mining engineer in the North Pennines. "You knew that, no matter how icy a morning, the Land Rover would start."

During another winter, Cooper was driving his Series 1 over Hartside, in open moorland – 1,900 feet up. The wind there formed deep snowdrifts, one of which hid a Triumph Spitfire. The driver's door of the low sports car was broken at the hinge and ajar, with snow entering the cabin. The man inside was almost as white as the snow surrounding him, alive but unresponsive. Cooper attached a short towrope and dragged the Spitfire to the high town of Alston, where the driver was installed in the warm bus café, fortunate to be alive.

The British Leyland years brought greater challenges for the vehicle. It had imperfections, some of which prompted affection and humour among enthusiasts. Most owners readily put up with the smell of hot oil and petrol, and even leaking door seals. Other quirks were less easily accepted. "I could always tell a Land Rover owner by a tear in the back of their jacket or coat – V-shaped and oil marked," remarks Richard Beddall, who manages the Land Rover Experience centre in Luton where owners can gain knowledge of all things Land Rover-related. "It was caused by the door catch."

Yet just as the Land Rover attempted to improve its creature comforts, it began to enter a form of mid-life crisis. The Series 3 – the precursor to the Defender – tried harder to appeal to urban drivers and what might be called the "Chelsea Set". Coil springs replaced leaf ones (which improved comfort as well as off-road performance). A fresh-air heater was added and the gearbox became all-synchromesh. But the Chelsea Set was already migrating to the newly launched Range Rover, which offered a more refined ride. The end of the road was coming into view.

During the 1970s, Bashall's father, Brian, started to acquire earlier models for what

A Venture 1983 meeting, captured for a programme by ITV

PHOTO BY ITV/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

SIMON JAUNCEY

Clockwise from far left: the Land Rover stand at the Royal Show, 1959; on a shoot; Land Rover Defender in production at Solihull; in York city centre when the Ouse burst its banks recently; advertisement, 1955; the vehicle for all seasons

would become the Dunsfold Collection, now a registered charity with more than a hundred vehicles. Land Rovers have never been cheap to restore – costs run between £30,000 and £40,000 today for a comprehensive project. What changed was the rise in values, for earlier models in particular. A rare Series 1 can now fetch in excess of £100,000. "There are lots of people with mortgages paid off and kids gone," comments Bashall. "For them, it's play time. What do they want to do with their money? Find that car they coveted in youth and restore it to former glory."

He identifies a particular nostalgia for the way the Land Rover served as the "school bus" in many rural communities. He notes how children respond excitedly to it, partly because they can sit up high and enjoy good visibility, perhaps facing one another in the back, while the blocky shape and colouring may connote Meccano sets and other toys. Certainly, it is hard to deny the call to fun and adventure felt by so many from a young age.

"There's also that smell," Bashall notes. "Yes, there's the tang of petrol and hot oil but you've got that earthy smell of hot mud, too. Every rural Land Rover owner knows that smell, produced by the way the wheels fling up mud onto the exhaust. You don't get that with modern cars."

There are functional – as well as financial – virtues with the earlier models, even today. "They remain remarkably good shooting vehicles," observes Beddall, "owing to their ability to sit quietly in the corner of a field. Birds don't tend to notice them. You can throw dogs, wellies and dead birds in the back. Of course, you can do that with other cars but other cars tend to have chrome or something else intended to draw attention. That's not the case with those earlier models."

The late Defenders remained almost hand-

moved from its original 1948 site. Just as the doors and seals of the vehicle had a reputation for leaking, so the factory's ceiling started to let in water – yet fixing it would mean ceasing production. The vehicle was losing a war with European Union and other regulations (the need for airbags and other safety and emission standards), which would require an expensive redesign. The end, in 2016, was inevitable.

And yet it's not over for the Land Rover – not by a country mile. Rumours persist of a new Defender, on which the company will not comment. More immediately, there is the Land Rover Reborn initiative, enabling customers to commission the company to source a particular model and restore it to original condition. It is a small-scale initiative but it is one way of keeping the heritage alive.

The company also oversees the Land Rover Experience centres, such as the one in Luton run by Beddall. These offer a surprising range of services. For example, anyone who passed their basic driving test after 1997 is no longer permitted to tow a trailer; the Land Rover Experience can train you to sit the separate test now required.

And, of course, there is the breadth and vibrancy of the Land Rover community: the collections, clubs and magazines; the events ("green laneing" and other meets) taking place most weekends; and the rural volunteer rescue clubs, which were so important during recent floods. Certainly, it would be hard to say that the Land Rover had really retired. Indeed, in some peculiarly British way, it has attained its own immortality. ■

Daniel Pembrey's debut novel, The Harbour