

DISCOVERY PIONEERS

Only three prototype three-door Discoverys were thought to have survived, but now there are four...



IN the summer of 1988, someone managed to take photographs of a vehicle inside Land Rover's Design Studio and promptly either leaked or sold them to the media, who immediately reported the story of what they described as a 'baby Range Rover' known as 'Project J'.

In one fell swoop, the vehicle that would be formally announced a year later as the Discovery was front page news and the story wouldn't go away, no matter how much the company tried to suppress it.

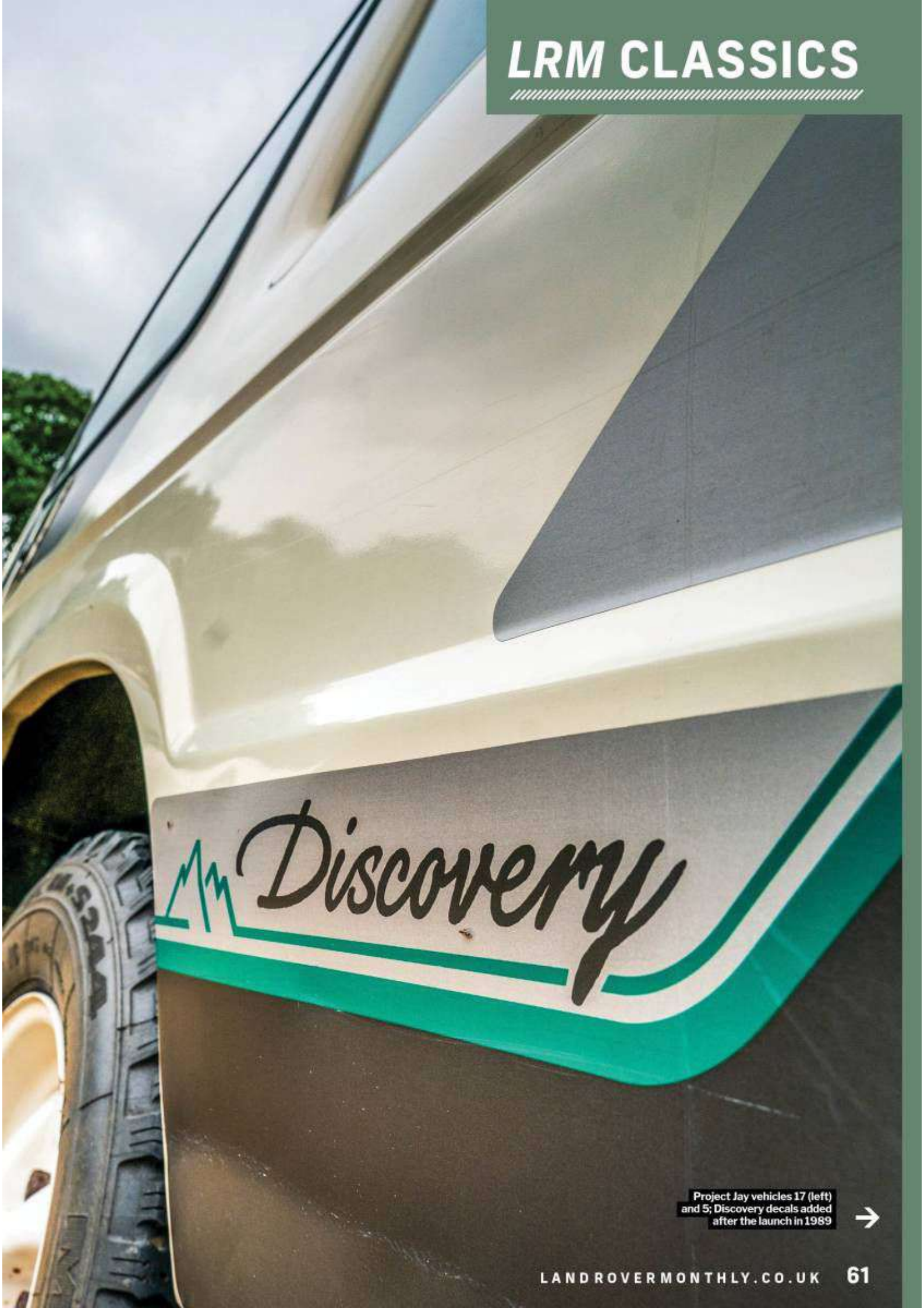
Even the UK's local newspapers picked up on the story, an example being the *Burton Mail*, which on 5 August concluded its feature on the forthcoming launch of Daihatsu's 'new small four-wheel drive Jeep-style vehicle' with the comment 'Land Rover Ltd is refusing to comment on speculation that it is developing a baby Range Rover to compete in the growing market

for small off-road vehicles'.

The media might have been wrong in comparing Land Rover's new vehicle with a Daihatsu Fourtrak, but this did nothing to calm the fury at Solihull, and Land Rover's bosses immediately set up an internal investigation headed by none other than John Stalker, the ex-deputy chief constable of Greater Manchester Police. Despite Stalker's best endeavours, the person responsible for the leak was never identified.

From that point on, the new vehicle remained a hot story until it was officially confirmed by the company on 7 July 1989, when a photograph was issued to the press and the Discovery name was announced for the first time. It was unveiled to the public at the Frankfurt Motor Show in September, and the dealer and media launch took place in Plymouth in October, when the famous G-WACs made their debut. Whichever of these events in 1989 that you consider to be the official launch of the Discovery, 2024 is its 35th birthday. ➔

LRM CLASSICS



Project Jay vehicles 17 (left)
and 5; Discovery decals added
after the launch in 1989



DISCO THREE-DOOR PROTOTYPES

I've never come across a definitive listing of the Project Jay prototype and pre-production Discoverys, despite over the years asking several people who were members of the Project Jay team, so it's time to spend a couple of days in the Reading Room at the British Motor Museum to see what I can find.

In the late '80s there was only one chassis numbering system for everything Land Rover built, meaning the early Jays are submerged in an ocean of Range Rover and utility Land Rover chassis records. Blink at the wrong moment, and you might miss a prototype Discovery. More than eight hours looking through almost 100,000 vehicle production records eventually proves well-spent, and a picture starts to emerge.

Some researchers have suggested that the first two prototypes were assembled in late 1987, but I found no evidence of these. What I did find is an initial batch of vehicles built between January and August 1988, followed in early 1989 by a further group of what I assume were Methods Build vehicles. Both batches were a mixture of RHD and LHD, and petrol and diesel models.

At some point 'prototype' morphed into 'pilot-production' and the company records show that a large batch of around a hundred was built in May and early June 1989, all of which were labelled by the Engineering Department as Specially Designated Vehicles. Some 86 of these were used for the press launch at Plymouth, with registration numbers from G451 WAC to G537 WAC (omitting G500 WAC).

The three white vehicles you see on these pages were believed to be the only survivors from the prototype and Methods Build batches, although around 22 of the press launch G-WACs have also survived. B62 COH was registered on 29 March 1988 and carries the chassis number SALLJGBV8EA 329069. It was known as Jay 5 by the project team, and the number 5 remains on the



Charles Whitaker's C742 HUH is believed to be Jay 53



B62 COH is Jay 5 and the oldest surviving Discovery; C60 JKG is Jay 17. Both went to Canada



Sonar Blue interior trim was bold and innovative for the time

vehicle to this day, scrawled in black marker pen on the inside of the B-pillars. It was powered by a normally aspirated 3.5-litre V8 with the number J003, but this was replaced by a later 3.5 Efi before the vehicle came to Dunsfold. It is the oldest Discovery in existence today and has been in Dunsfold's care since 2003.

The first thing you notice is that it carries the 'B' prefix registration number dating from 1984, which was part of an elaborate attempt to conceal the truth regarding what the new vehicle really was. There were other elements to this subterfuge, including telling the DVLA that its make was 'Austin' and that it was a 'Montego L Estate', all of which remains on its V5C to this day.

Its first registered keeper was not Land Rover Ltd as you would expect, but Mr Thomas of High Cross, a suburb of Newport in South Wales, and this was another thing intended to ensure the world did not associate the vehicles with Solihull. I asked Roger Crathorne about this,



Jay 5 in Canada showing the cold climate test team fitting the body camouflage unit



Jay 5 has a prototype five-door window switch panel (above) and white paint added in period to transfer 'box knob



Jay 5 and Jay 17 have similar numbers on the B-pillar posts

"Jay 5 is the oldest Discovery in existence today"



and he confirmed that Mr Thomas was in fact the brother of Howard Thomas, who was Land Rover's security chief at that time. It's interesting to contemplate exactly how many Jays might have been registered to Howard's brother in High Cross.

Many years ago, James Taylor managed to save some material that the Land Rover press office was throwing away, which included photographs of a Discovery carrying the Canadian registration number 968 FPP, taken during cold weather trials there.

Amazingly, these photographs showed the vehicle wearing its glassfibre rear body camouflage, which was a bolt-on unit intended to hide the distinctive Discovery roof profile and rear windows, and make it look more like a van or truck.

The vehicle was also painted black around the headlamps, bonnet, and front end in an attempt to hide the design details, and also fitted with Range Rover-style wheels. The photographs show what was probably the most effective part of the disguise, which was sending a white vehicle to Canada in the depths of winter!

Researcher Robin Craig in Canada requested further information under his country's freedom of information laws and discovered that 968 FPP was Jay 5, which had been registered by Jaguar Canada Inc on 17 November 1988 as a 'Rover two-door sedan or coupé'. The Canadian plates were finally cancelled on 13 December 1989, although testing must have ended months before that date.

The Land Rover build records state that on 20 July 1988 it was sent to Mr D Champion in Arizona. It's a name I remember from somewhere, and a quick call to Roger confirms that Dave Champion ran the company's testing facility in Arizona, so Jay 5 must have spent some time there on hot weather testing, before going to Canada for the winter snows.



Roll cage and black steering wheel in Jay 17

The second vehicle is Jay 17 and it is also one of the initial batch of prototypes. Land Rover's records state that chassis number SALLJGBF8FA 337614 was registered as C60 JKG on 26 May 1988. It is listed on the VSC as a 'Rover estate', and its first registered keeper was also Mr Thomas of High Cross.

DVLA records state that it was fitted with 200Tdi engine number J114 but this was replaced with an early 200Tdi production engine, number 12L00141A, before it came to Dunsfold in 1992. And just to reinforce how components were swapped or replaced on these vehicles, it has a bonnet marked inside 'Removed Jay 3' and when it came to Dunsfold it had a bellhousing marked 'Jay 8' which is now on display in the museum.

A comment alongside the entry for the vehicle in Land Rover's records states that it was also sent to Canada for cold weather testing. A tattered paper





Charles Whitaker's Methods Build vehicle still has its original black camouflage paint

docket in the vehicle's history file reveals that C60 JKG was signed out from the factory for a visit to the RARDE (Royal Armament Research and Development Establishment) Proving Ground at Bagshot in Surrey, although when this happened and what the vehicle did there is not clear.

After Land Rover had finished using it for mileage testing, it was repurposed as a training hack for the Camel Trophy, hence the full roll cage and winch. The body is extensively damaged and shows the scars of many hours of off-road driver training at Eastnor Castle. At one time the vehicle was apparently left submerged for three days in a muddy hole with water up to the waistline to test for water ingress into mechanical components. More than a little must have got in because the ashtrays are still filled with silt!

The years of abuse have taken their toll and corrosion is severe on the chassis and body frame. Short of a complete restoration, which would mean an original vehicle being turned into a replica, it is unlikely that Jay 17 will ever be registered again for use on the road.

The third of the surviving Jay prototypes is owned by ex-Land Rover engineer Charles Whitaker, who bought it from Land Rover's retired Engineering boss Bill Morris in July 2006. It is SALLJGBF7GA 380301 and was despatched out on 26 April 1989, considerably later than

BMM's vehicle is thought to be a Methods Build prototype rather than the first production vehicle

the other two survivors, and it is one of the Methods Build vehicles. It was also given a C-prefix registration, in this case C742 HUH, and the DVLA confirms that it was first registered on 26 April 1989. It was recorded as a 'Rover estate' and there was one keeper prior to Bill Morris, but whether it was our friend Mr Thomas of High Cross, or Land Rover, is not known.

"I have only relatively recently discovered the Jay number for mine," Charles tells me when we are comparing notes on the history of the Jays. "I'd already searched all over the vehicle, having failed to find the number written on one of the door posts, where I expected it to be. I was trying to get the radio back into the console and pulled the Range Rover radio out completely, only to find 'Property of Land Rover J53' scratched into the casing.

"This number does seem to fit with it being a considerably later vehicle than the other two survivors, and although radios could have been swapped between vehicles, I think this identity number is likely to be the correct one.

"Bill bought it from Land Rover mainly to compete in Midland Rover Owners Club trials, and I have a few pictures of it trialling. Bill then passed it to his son Peter in October 1994 to use as transport while he was at university. The last tax due date was 1 October 1995, so it was only on the road for just over six years.

"I have quite a few photographs of the vehicle on test back in the day, as it featured in the launch video towing a trailer on road mileage accumulation. I also managed to get a photo from Paul O'Connor who was the Land Rover photographer at the time Project Jay was running."

As I was wrapping up my research in the Reading Room, I decided on a whim to check out the BMM's Discovery, which was registered in 2012 with the age-related number F981 ENV. I've seen it many times at shows and other events, and it is always described as 'the first production Discovery'.

I wanted to look at its background because I expected it to reveal the chassis number of the first Discovery to leave the production line, which according to Glass' Guide is 393361. I was rather shocked to discover that the BMM vehicle is chassis number 377733, making it earlier than Charles Whitaker's Jay 53, and therefore also one of the Methods Build vehicles and not the first production Discovery. But the good news is there are now four known very early three-door Jay prototypes.

