DRIVING & RESTORING REAL LAND ROVERS

CLASSIC LAND ROVER

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1948: ORIGINAL AND BEST?

FACTORY HOT ROD

SOLIHULL'S V8 SERIES IIA PROTOTYPE

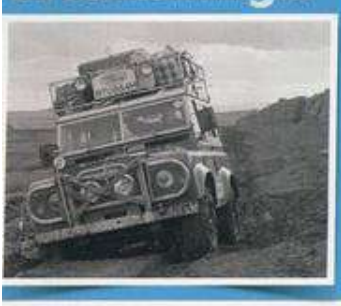
LAND ROVER 80
Two from 1950

The Way We Were

Overlanding...

Working...

Greenlaning...



"There is no doubt that this is a superb vehicle and it begs the question why Rover didn't go with the idea of a V8 powered utility vehicle."

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TECH AND TOOLBOX

- Reupholster Series One seats
- Retrofitted Tdi exhaust fitting
- Repair a Series III bulkhead

VINTAGE TECH

Aeroparts capstan winch history and identification

WORDS **EMRYS KIRNBY**
PICTURES **GARRY STUART**

Prototype version of the Rover V8

Two to the Power of Eight

The V8 petrol is possibly the best loved of all Land Rover engines and this Series IIA played an important role in its development

This experimental Series IIA was built at Solihull in late 1966-67 as a test-bed for the Rover Company's new 3,528cc V8 engine, the design for which it had recently acquired from General Motors.

Becoming a classic in its own time, the engine would go on to be fitted in a multitude of famous British vehicles including TVRs, MGs, the Rover SD1 and of course, the Range Rover. BXC 975G was one of three vehicles built for the task of developing and testing the engine for its suitability in an off-road vehicle and it played a vital role in long distance testing.

However we need to go just a little further back in history to appreciate the full background to the development of this ubiquitous 'British' Land Rover engine. The very first V8 Land Rover predates even this particular vehicle and it started off with an 88in built in California, not Solihull.

In the early 1960s, Rover was keen to expand in the US market, both with cars and Land Rovers. However, the regular complaint to Rover Motor Company of North America (RNA) from its US Land Rover customers was that the 2,286cc engine was just too small, running out of power on hills, and with slow highway speeds.

Meanwhile, General Motors had developed

'McWilliams got approval from Martin-Hurst to experiment with a V8 powered Land Rover'

BXC 975G was built to develop the V8 engine for off-road use

a small (by American standards) aluminium block V8 engine, christened Fireball. Launched in 1960, it was reasonably economical on fuel but with surprising performance.

Fitted to Buick, Oldsmobile and Pontiac vehicles, it proved fairly expensive to produce and was therefore dropped after three years. Bruce McWilliams who was in charge of RNA picked up on this fact and Rover MD William Martin-Hurst agreed that this could be a solution both for the underpowered Land Rover and for future Rover cars.

This would enhance the brand to US customers and transform the vehicles in the UK. Despite opposition to a 'foreign' engine, the timing was right for both Rover and General Motors to do a deal. In 1965, it acquired the design, production rights and tooling with a view to setting up production in the UK.

McWilliams got approval from Martin-Hurst to experiment with a V8- powered Land Rover and so, in April 1966, Project BOP (Buick, Oldsmobile and Pontiac) was launched. The plan, lead by Rover's Western zone product development engineer, Richard Green was to fit the engine to an 88in Series IIA station wagon without altering the general configuration.

'The main visual difference was a cosmetic makeover to enhance its appeal and encourage Solihull to start production'

The conversion works were carried out at Moeller Brothers' Body Shop in San Lorenzo, California. Some mechanical modifications were required such as a new flywheel and bellhousing. The engine fitted well in the chassis without altering the steering and the only bodywork modification required was to the bulkhead.

However, the main visual difference was a cosmetic makeover to enhance its appeal and encourage Solihull to start production of such a vehicle. Notably, 9.40x14 sports wheels were fitted, the vehicle was well trimmed internally and it was sprayed Mustang Yellow, gaining it the name Golden Rod. After a successful drive from California to New York, the vehicle was shipped into Southampton and then taken to Solihull for assessment.

Soon after gaining the design and manufacturing rights to the engine, Rover set up its own production plant at its Acocks

Fitted with radial tyres for high speed testing

Green factory and made a number of alterations to the original GM design.

The capacity was reduced slightly and they fitted SU carburettors instead of the original Rochesters. Notably they replaced pressure casting with sand casting for the block and used a shrink fitting process for the cast piston liners. The engine first appeared in production in 1967 in the Rover P5B, the P6B the following year and mid-mounted in the P6BS sports car.

Despite McWilliams' and Green's efforts with Golden Rod, attention at Solihull moved away from a more powerful utility vehicle for the US market to a new project, the '100in Station Wagon' which of course, became the Range Rover, launched in 1970.

Meanwhile, no doubt assisted by the engineering in Golden Rod, Land Rover engineers built three of their own V8-powered SWB Land Rovers in 1966-67. However the intention was not prototypes for production but they were used as test beds for prototype versions of the new engine and look at off-road performance.

Like their older American cousin, the Solihull-built vehicles were pretty standard looking but they were also used to test transmission systems. One is reported to have been fitted with an automatic gearbox and testing proved that permanent 4x4 was required to use the power without undue stress to the rear axle.

Range Rover engineer Geof Miller worked on comparison tests at Eastnor, pitting the V8 powered Series IIAs against vehicles from other manufacturers, including the Ford Bronco and the International Harvester Scout. Tests proved that the engine was ideal off-road and the coil springs as featured on the front of the Bronco should be used all-round on the new vehicle.

BXC 975G belongs to the Dunsfold Collection and is the only known survivor of the three engine test vehicles. It is fitted with a standard Series IIA non-synchro gearbox and high-ratio differentials. Because it was used as a mileage test vehicle it was fitted

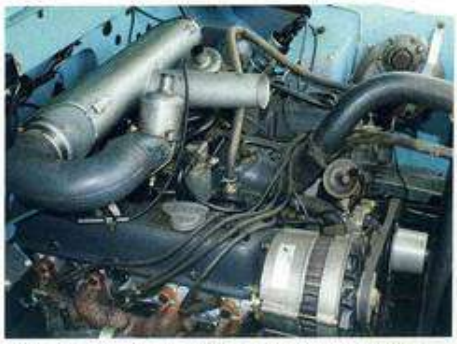
Plastic spoked wheel was a recent update

Sparto rear lamps

Fitted with static seatbelts

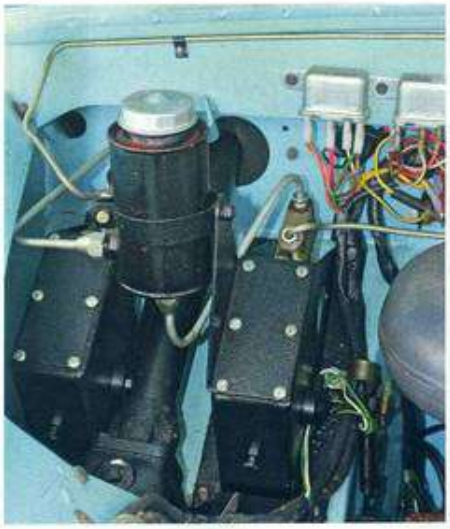
Larger exhaust and rims suggest a powerful engine

Cooling fan just visible behind grille



SU carbs, production Range Rover engine had Zenith-Strombergs

Single line brake system with remote servo



Standard leaf spring chassis

with wider rims, radial tyres and servo-assisted brakes to cope with the extra speed.

All three test vehicles were painted in different experimental colours including this unusual blue. At some point in its life though, it was painted Massai red, a colour used for the County Station Wagon in the early 1980s and fitted with a station wagon hard top and later wings and grille. After it completed its engineering duties it became a tug for a surface friction trailer at the Gaydon test track for many years before Dunsfold acquired it and restored it to original specification and colour.

This vehicle certainly played an important role in further developing the engine to ensure it was suitable for the Range Rover. Changes from the Rover car application included fitting Zenith-Stromberg carburettors and raising the level of the water pump to improve deep wading and access to a crank dog for the starting handle.

There is no doubt though that it is a superb vehicle in its own right and it begs the question why Rover didn't go with the idea of a V8-powered utility vehicle. Land Rover didn't sell a production V8 powered leafer until the arrival of the Stage One 109in in

'This vehicle certainly played an important role in further developing the engine'

1979 and other than a handful of special builds, the company never sold a volume production Short Wheelbase V8.

It may have changed the fortunes of the company, not only in the US but possibly worldwide. It might have created not only an appropriately powered utility but with Golden Rod styling, Land Rover may have led the 4x4 SUV market. It was not until the launch of the NAS 90 in 1993 that the company again had a bold yellow V8-powered lifestyle vehicle in the US.

In the UK, as the Range Rover aged, 88in Series vehicles with V8 conversions became commonplace in the 1980s. The engine was especially popular in the trialling scene and conversion specialists started springing up. Even today, for many classic Land Rover enthusiasts something like BXC 975G would be their dream vehicle. Be it for instant power off-road, blasting round country lanes or simply revving it up off tick-over in a confined space or a tunnel, there is little to beat the psychomotor and auditory experience. CLR