



LAND ROVER DRIVE ON ISLAY

WHERE THERE'S A WILKS

As MD of Rover, Spencer Wilks oversaw the development of the Land Rover – so where better to drive some classic Landies than on his family estate on the Isle of Islay?

WORDS Mark Dixon





AND THIS is the one that is reminiscent of TCP,' says George Wilks, unveiling one of three types of single malt whisky that he's brought along for us to taste after dinner, halfway through our stay on the Hebridean island of Islay. He's absolutely right: the immediate reaction to sampling this fine spirit is a Proustian memory of another amber-coloured liquid, the one applied to grazed knees when you were nine years old.

Needless to say, the whisky slips down rather more easily than the disinfectant would. In fact, it's distinctly moreish, which doesn't bode well for the Land Rover drive arranged for tomorrow morning. But at least we can say that the tasting is all in the name of research: George Wilks and his family are descendants of Spencer Wilks, managing director of Rover from 1933 to 1957 and the man who – with his brother Maurice, Rover's chief engineer – came up with the original Land Rover.

The Wilks family has a strong association with Islay (pronounced Isla), the island that is the most southerly of the Inner Hebrides, off the west coast of Scotland. Spencer and his wife Kathleen owned the Laggan Estate on Islay and spent much of their lives there. But the tradition didn't end with them: ten years ago their granddaughter Kathy, her husband Anthony and their three sons George, James

and Peter set up the Kilchoman Distillery, the first to be set up on the island in 125 years. Not that they are short of competition, for – as our map shows – the island has a rich tradition of whisky production. What sets Kilchoman apart is that, because it's a farm distillery, everything is done on site: from growing the barley to putting the finished spirit in bottles.

Needless to say, Kilchoman uses a liveried Land Rover Defender for marketing its whisky on Islay and at events around Europe. How could they have chosen anything else? There have been Land Rovers on Islay for longer than anywhere else in the world.

OUR ARRIVAL on Islay was by Britten-Norman Islander aircraft; it has two engines but only one pilot, who sits rather closer to his four passengers than the average bus driver. It's an appropriately old-school way of arriving on an island that seems to belong to a different and more relaxed era. After we've disembarked, we're told that our scheduled 'beach drive' has been postponed because a WW2 mine has just washed up on the very stretch of sand we were about to traverse.

No problem: the lanes of Islay are a perfect place to compare and contrast the handful of Landies old and new that Land Rover has brought here for us to try. Straightaway I make a beeline for my favourite: the beautifully

restored grey Series I 107in pick-up that is on loan from the Dunsfold Collection. Its two-litre inlet-over-side-exhaust engine is hardly audible as it ticks over, and it has that wonderful aroma of old oil, metal and leathercloth that seems unique to a Series I.

Ironically, while these 1950s Landies were never renowned for their creature comforts – you sit bolt upright, rather as if you're on a wooden pew in church, with your feet awkwardly bent back to operate the huge pedals – there's actually more room than in the 2015 Defender that brought us from Glasgow to the edge of the Scottish mainland. The Defender's modern air-conditioning and ventilation system is to blame for eating into the cabin inches; on a Series I you open the bulkhead flaps and the sliding windows.

Performance, however, is definitely from a different age. The 107 will cruise comfortably at 45mph, which is on a par with its handling and steering dynamics. In fact, most Series Is don't steer as sweetly as this restored example, which also rides better than its notoriously choppy short-wheelbase siblings. One of its Land Rover guardians lets slip that it is Dunsfold proprietor Philip Bashall's own vehicle and one of his favourites, which is quite an accolade when you remember that the Collection numbers some 124 vehicles, all of them Land Rovers.



The 107 delivers me safely to our lodgings for the night, the charming Bridgend Hotel. Over drinks in the lobby, I find myself standing next to a couple of more mature years who know Islay very well indeed. Nick Wilks is the son of Spencer, and he's here with his wife Gillian, whom he met on Islay.

'In my youth, I stayed on the family estate pretty much every summer during the 1950s,' says Nick. 'My parents moved to Islay permanently in 1960, which is about the time that I went off to Canada to work in Rover's sales operation over there, after serving my apprenticeship at Solihull.'

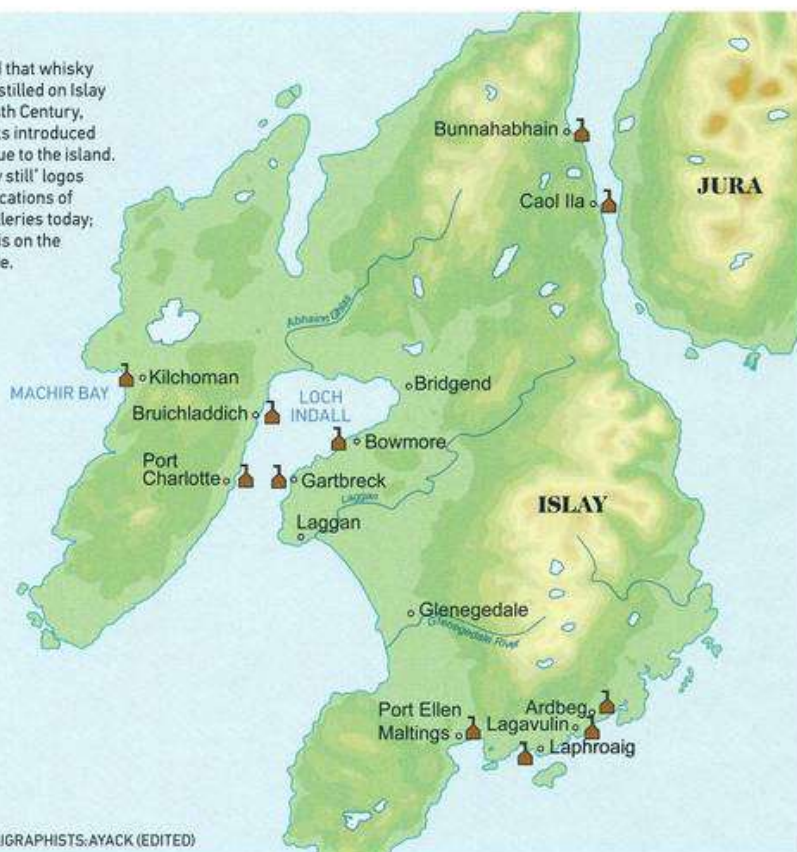
'Nick was best friends with the under keeper, Duncan Fraser,' chips in Gillian. 'They were similar in age and spent a lot of time together. Duncan was born on Islay and worked as a gamekeeper all his life – you may get to meet him tomorrow.'

Somehow, we all manage to resist staying up too late and subjecting the Kilchoman Distillery's wares to an extended taste test. It's just as well, because the proper driving starts tomorrow.

I CUT MY teeth on the Series I yesterday, so it seems appropriate to move onto the grey 1965 Series IIA 88in soft-top that you can see motoring along the beach in the photo at the top of the page opposite. This vehicle has a

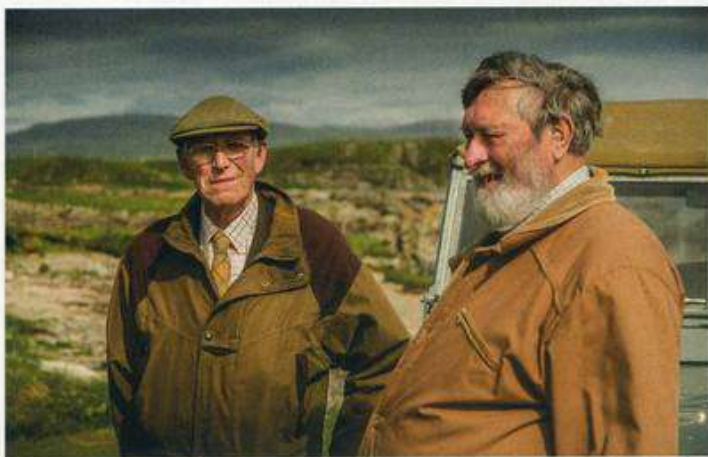
Right

It's believed that whisky has been distilled on Islay since the 14th Century, when monks introduced the technique to the island. The 'whisky still' logos show the locations of Islay's distilleries today; Kilchoman is on the western side.



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very special connection with Islay: it was bought by Spencer Wilks to use on the island, and then passed in due course to his son Nick (pictured with it, over the page). In recent years the IIA has been restored to concours condition and it's now part of Land Rover's heritage fleet.

The IIA looks a lot more modern than the Series I but, aside from a slightly bigger engine and a wider body, it's actually very similar under the skin to the older model. Even the body is only wider from the waist down: the chassis rails are set the same distance apart, so the IIA's body was given small 'skirts' to conceal the fact. Amazingly, although the chassis rails changed in dimensions over the decades, beneath a 2015 Defender they're still set on the same centre lines, according to 'Mr Land Rover' Roger Crathorne, who has come along to explain to the journos what Land Rovers are all about.

Roger has been a key figure at Land Rover since he started work there in the 1960s. He's one of the company's most experienced test drivers and off-road experts, and it's gratifying to see that his passion for the vehicles has not

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diminished over the years. Owner of a Series I himself, he readily shows me pictures of some old Landies languishing on a property up in Cumbria. He's really taken by an ultra-low-mileage Series III that's covered in moss and leaf mould but is, he says, incredibly sound.

The ex-Wilks IIA is a nice old thing but I'm surprised by how much more civilised is the green Series III 109in Station Wagon (pictured on the previous page doing some serious off-roading). Again, it's all a bit smoke-and-mirrors because the III was itself a mildly refreshed IIA, with an all-synchro gearbox that at least made it *feel* more modern. This example wouldn't faze a new Defender driver – unlike the older models, which have already terrified some of the less-experienced journos unfamiliar with crotchety gearboxes and approximate directional stability.

You can see in that picture on the previous page how older is sometimes better for off-roading, because older means smaller. The Series I is a full 25cm narrower than a modern Defender and the older vehicles are also lighter and shorter, which is why so many Series Is were hacked about for trialling from the 1960s onwards. Indeed, some would argue that, if a Series I has spent most of its life as a trials machine, it should be conserved as such rather than restored. Discuss.

Today's Defender 110 is a fabulous off-road tool, of course, but I can't help feeling that I've drawn the short straw as I try to ease it around a particularly tight corner on the rocky track leading down to Machir Bay. The inside of the corner is badly eroded, and as I literally inch my way down – watching the hand signals of my Land Rover 'spotter' like a hawk – the Defender ends up pivoting on two diagonally opposed wheels, suspension creaking as it gently rocks from side to side. For one, long moment I fear that it's simply going to topple into the inside bank; fortunately, the moment passes and the 110's immaculate panels remain undented, but it's a close-run thing.

Not surprisingly, Phil Bashall's beautiful Series I 107 pick-up is deemed too precious to subject to the rocky risks of the track or the salt-laden sand of the beach below, and it's with a sense of regret that I watch it depart for our next waypoint.

Facing page and above

Snapshots from Islay: Nick Wilks (in flat cap and tie) is reunited with his childhood friend, gamekeeper Duncan Fraser; Kilchoman Distillery uses a liveried Defender to market its wares; Series I 107in pick-up (top) looks right at home in villages that have changed little since the '50s.



Driving across a beach is lots of fun, mainly because it's rarely allowed in the UK, but it's not technically challenging: you just stay in second gear and keep your foot in, to avoid getting bogged down in the sand. It doesn't tax any of our convoy, which includes the ex-Wilks family Series IIA, and soon we're climbing the grassy headland again en route to our final destination – the former Wilks estate at Laggan.

Although most of the estate was sold in 1991, one house and a patch of land running down to the sea has been retained by Kathy Wilks, and it's here that I finally meet Duncan Fraser and his wife Annie. Duncan (pictured top right, with Nick Wilks on the left) looks like a considerably more amiable version of 1950s actor James Robertson Justice, and has a rich Scottish burr straight out of Central Casting. He was born on Islay and worked on the estate all his life, initially as under-keeper and latterly as head keeper. Spencer Wilks gave him a Land Rover for his estate duties – and not just any old Land Rover, but one of the near-mythical pre-production vehicles made in 1948.

Duncan can still remember its registration – GWD 744 – and pulls out a photocopy of an old photo, showing himself as a young lad standing next to the Series I, which is painted in the light green used for very early examples. The picture, which sadly is too poor to reproduce here, gets Roger Crathorne very animated:

**'It's possible
that the Wilks'
head gamekeeper
coined the name
Land Rover'**

he's never seen it before, and he tells us that this vehicle was chassis no 27 and is now lost.

Roger adds that GWD 744 was exhibited by Land Rover at the Highland Show in 1948, where King George VI expressed an interest in acquiring it. 'Sorry, your Highness,' he was told by Spencer Wilks, 'but I've promised that one to my keeper!'

The head keeper then was Duncan's father, Ian, and it's just possible that it was Ian who coined the name that's become famous around the world for more than 60 years. 'Mr Wilks came up and said to my father, "Look what I've got for you now",' recounts Duncan. 'The old man pulled on his pipe and said, "Ah, that's great, that's a real, proper 'land' Rover!" That's the story, and I can't prove it but my father always said that's what happened.'

Duncan passed his driving test on Islay in GWD 744, and well remembers putting it to daily use. 'If you shot a big stag way up there in the mountains, you would try to get as far up the hill as you could in the Land Rover, and then heave the stag in the back – it was always just me on my own, but I was a lot fitter in those days – and bring it back down.'

BUMBLING BACK to Islay's airport in a Stage 1 V8 Station Wagon – another from Land Rover's heritage fleet – I can't help peering at every tumbledown shed and overgrown ditch that we pass, wondering whether the remains of GWD 744 are still somewhere on the island.

Islay has that kind of time-warp feel. It's steeped in history, and its location as the westernmost outpost of Scotland meant that it played a significant role in World War Two, with more than 1500 RAF personnel stationed there and huge Short Sunderland flying boats moored in Loch Indaal. Sometimes the winds would get so strong, the Sunderlands had to be moored with their engines running to prevent them being blown back onto the shore...

Flying to Islay is not for the faint-hearted. But if you're a fan of the green oval, there's only one way to make the pilgrimage: take your Land Rover and catch the ferry across. No worries then about how to get your souvenir whisky home, either. **END**