

A LIVING HISTORY LESSON

Peter Galilee reveals the inside line on Solihull's inspiring tribute to Series/Defender production

Putting together the 'Celebration Line' was a huge project – and staff have barely been able to keep up with visitors wanting to enjoy this unique experience at Land Rover's Solihull factory. Part early production line and part history lesson, it tells the stories behind the product that was to become the world's most recognisable vehicle – and also allows visitors to take one last emotional look at the Defender in the making.

During our visit, we talked to the three key movers: Roger Crathorne (ex-PR manager for heritage, enthusiast and technical at Land Rover), Michael Bishop (instructor/tour guide at Land Rover Solihull), and Phil Bashall (proprietor of Dunsfold Land Rover, Surrey) to find out about the backroom work behind what turned into a kind of Land Rover autobiography in metal.

Where did the idea for the Celebration Line come from?

Roger: 'It was my idea. For Ferguson's 50th anniversary, they had put an exhibit together, like a production line. I thought, "We could do that – but we could do it much better". My idea at first was for a moving exhibition. I tried to do it at Land Rover's 55th and 60th anniversaries.'

Michael: 'Roger saw the Ferguson thing at the Royal Show. I was over from Australia that year and I'd seen it. For the 65th anniversary we had a rolling chassis in a tent, with a couple of yellow lines to represent a production line.'

How did the idea get approval?

Michael: 'Ways to mark the end of Defender production were being discussed. Zoe Amarilli, venues manager for Solihull, Eastnor, Gaydon and Halewood Land Rover Experience Centres, liked the idea and pitched it to her bosses. Zoe said people needed to follow the story and should be able to walk in between the exhibits.'

What happened first?

Michael: 'We got BB's – Antony Barrington Brown's – camera. He photographed for Tim Slessor's 1950s book *First Overland* – that's when Land Rover expeditions really took off.' Roger: 'We'd already been offered the camera. So the first step was to put it in a glass case.'

Michael: 'Then I talked with Phil Bashall of Dunsfold Land Rover. We approached Peter Hughes of the Series One Club for a loan of their cutaway rolling chassis. At the time, all we had were the two 1949 'DEL' 80-inches.'

Roger: 'I warned Phil. He couldn't start without a firm order number, but he started researching.'

So, what did you need?

Michael: 'Zoe got the project signed off around April 2014. Then we got the creative people involved. It was potentially four vehicles, but ended up as three because of the cutaway. The original idea was to make an exact reproduction of the 1948 assembly line. But you can't do that – there just aren't enough 1948 parts around, and we wanted it correct. So the decision was: 1949. It split into two things then: building the cars and the creative stuff. Roger had retired and lived down south, but kept popping into Dunsfold. I was here at Solihull doing the rest.'

You aimed to build correct 1949 vehicles – from what?


Roger: 'Phil has a lot of original parts in his stores. But some things were like gold dust, like fuel tanks. And you can't get gearboxes, engines, axles... things like that came from Phil's scrap.'

Phil: 'I'd been talking to Roger during the summer of 2013, then through the winter. So I'd had about a year of rounding things up: wing panels, tailgates, axles, engine, gearboxes. It's like doing a restoration, but without any vehicle to restore! I got Geoff Cousins – he's a local hot-rod man near here – to make five back bodies. And I ordered some reproduction 1949 chassis through the Series One Club. I paid for all that before the project was signed off – not the right way to do it, but if I hadn't, it couldn't have been done on time.'

Michael: 'The cutaway rolling chassis was the key. From that we could make the skids – those frames the chassis sit on. The chassis were painted at Solihull. Obviously Land Rover has skills in-house to do Autobiography cars – they're painted by hand.'

What about creative input?

Michael: 'Roger, Zoe and I met with the creative people. They said, "Give us all your archive material, we'll come up with a story". I said, "I'll give you 10 per cent" and they came back after a week, saying, "There's no way we can do this – there's too much!"'

'Zoe's boss, Dave Saunders, had been feeding back to Zoe what he wanted. Roger's original idea was for an exact replica production line, but we realised that a full rivet-counter experience wouldn't work for a lot of visitors. So there are basically five key stories: Birth Of A Legend; 



Michael Bishop spent hours fettling parts



Phil Bashall finishes off the first built-up vehicle at Dunsfold



Finished '49 Land Rover is loaded on to a truck for the trip to Solihull

Design And Engineering; Manufacturing; Capability; Lifestyle. The whole thing ends with a current-model Defender.'

How long did it take to put together the 1949 vehicles?

Michael: 'We got the chassis painted and sent to Phil so he could start. The cutaway rolling chassis was refurbished at Solihull.'

Phil: 'I finally got the go-ahead in August 2013. I'd spent three days over the bank holiday getting rusty engines out of the scrap stillage and cleaning them. They wanted everything finished by September, so they could build the exhibition space during September when they were shut. But the creative people had problems, so it was delayed. I did all my work in six weeks – I had the vehicles stacked in the workshop one on top of another with dust sheets over them. We had customers' cars in the workshop as well!'

So how did the whole thing finally come together?

Michael: 'We'd come up with an area in the factory – we wanted it to be an experience as if you'd stepped back into the past, with all the noise from manufacturing around you. But it had

to be kept secret. We slowed down on factory tours, but you'd get people turning up from overseas – for some, their only chance to do a tour. So there was this cat-and-mouse game – we were always hiding Series I chassis and bodies, so nobody would see them. The walls went up over a weekend in October. We'd blacked out the windows so people wouldn't know what was going on. I drove the tilting car in myself, and the station wagon. We wheeled in the other vehicles. It was really something – guys on the production line were going, "Whoa! Look at that!" Exhibition boards had been printed by then. It went live in early January this year.'

Looking back on all that effort and the finished line, how do you think it's all turned out?

Roger: 'My role was to liaise with Phil and help get bits. We're still working on it – I just picked up two body parts this week! Defender ending – it's not just about legislation, the building that Defender is assembled in needs to go through a programme of total refurbishment. But I think they'll keep the Celebration Line. I think they'll use it – or maybe parts of it – elsewhere.'

Michael: 'The team here was brilliant. They knew

I was under a lot of pressure – I was running around like a maniac. It was an interesting project to manage, though. And when the Celebration Line was announced, the phones here went bananas, the press started calling...'

Phil: 'I say it myself – though I probably shouldn't – probably only Dunsfold could have done it in the time we had. It was madness sometimes. And there was more to it than just buying bits and bolting them together – a lot of this relied on Series I enthusiasts right up and down the country. But the end result is wonderful and it's an honour to be involved with it. Well done, Land Rover, that's what I say.' **LRO**

Visit the Home of the Legend yourself

The Defender Celebration Line Tour has now sold out, but there are several different factory tours, including one dedicated to Range Rover. To arrange a visit, see solihull.landroverexperience.co.uk (0121 700 4619). Keep up with things at Solihull Land Rover Experience via [facebook.com/Solihull.LRE](https://www.facebook.com/Solihull.LRE).



The walls go up and the exhibits are brought in



Finished exhibit tells the tale of the world's best-known vehicle



The 'tilt test' 80in gives visitors a lift