



Dunsfold Diaries

By Philip Bashall

EIGHT INTO TWO WILL GO

Philip Bashall remembers the first factory V8 Land Rovers – built in 1966



I've just returned from the big classic car show held at the NEC in November, where the Dunsfold Collection was exhibiting for the first time. It was a wonderful show, almost too big to get around in just one day, and on our stand we had two of our most interesting vehicles: the Australian OTAL amphibian that I wrote about in LRM February 2015, and the experimental V8-powered Series IIA.

This Series IIA was one of three built with bigger engines when Land Rover was thinking about making a sportier model. Geof Miller, who was project engineer for the original Range Rover, drove them extensively and I can remember him turning up in one at the Ordnance Arms pub in West London when I was a young lad. We used to go to the monthly Land Rover club meets there and, because Geof's Series IIA looked standard, nobody gave it a second glance – until they heard the sound it made!

Geof explains that it was Rover North America who prompted Solihull into experimenting with some hotter Land Rovers. The Americans were desperate to have a faster, more powerful Land Rover they could sell, and to show what could be done they shoehorned an Oldsmobile V8 into a Series IIA, put bigger rims, brakes and tyres on it, installed an extra fuel tank, had the body sprayed a vibrant pale yellow and the interior tarted up, and then shipped it over to

Lode Lane for assessment. It was known as Golden Rod and was a real eye-catcher; so much so that it inspired the Brummies to make their own version.

Rover had already toyed with putting bigger engines into Land Rovers. It had built two 109 Station Wagons with 2.6-litre straight-sixes (one of them for the Queen Mother), and an 88 Station Wagon with a 3-litre straight-six. But in 1965 it acquired the rights to make the Buick/Oldsmobile 3.5-litre V8 under its own name and, as the Americans had shown, this all-alloy, compact V8 was a near-perfect fit in the engine bay of a Series IIA. It was much lighter than Rover's iron-block straight-six, too. So in 1966 Rover built three 88 soft-tops with Roverised versions of the Buick V8.

These Series IIAs had oddball chassis numbers and ours is 8884-2158, the '8884' part being the workshop job card number – 88-inch vehicle 84 – and '2158' standing for the engine's capacity, 215 cubic inches, and eight cylinders. The other two vehicles were 8878 and 8879, the reason for the gap between them and ours being that 8884 was a slightly later build. As an aside, one of the other test vehicles had a Buick V6.

The three V8-powered 88s were painted dark blue, cream and light blue, respectively; the dark blue one had a three-speed Borg Warner Type 35 automatic transmission while the others had manual 'boxes. Because of the extra power that was being fed to the rear axle in two-wheel

Facing page and clockwise below:
One Tonne rims are the only clue this Series IIA isn't standard; testing at Gaydon in the 1970s; V8 is to early spec, with SUs; battery lives between seats; Geoff Miller's 'company car' off-roading.

Photo by Geoff Miller



Photo by Geoff Miller



drive, halfshaft breakages were a real problem and an early 80 transfer box with a freewheel device was used in one vehicle to help spread the load under acceleration, but this was ditched once further testing and development had cured the breakages.

Geoff Miller used 8879, the cream vehicle, as his company car and it caused quite a stir whenever he drove it on the M1, leaving the sales reps in their Vauxhalls as if they were standing still! From the outside the V8 88s looked totally standard apart from their slightly wider One Tonne wheels, which concealed heavy-duty brakes that were power assisted by a Forward Control servo, and which were shod with high-speed road-biased tyres. The axles were given taller-ratio 3.5:1 diffs that were under development, too. Off-road testing had shown a problem with carburettor floats jamming when the V8s were fitted with SUs, so the Land Rover versions were modified to take Stromberg CDs instead, just like the forthcoming Range Rover V8s.

And that was no coincidence... Quite late into the planning stage, the engineers decided that launching a V8-powered 88 onto the market was just too risky, what with worries about burning out clutches and breaking rear axles, not to mention the handling and roadholding implications of having an engine with roughly twice the horsepower of a standard SIIA. So the project was shelved and the three test vehicles were diverted into development of a more pressing concern: the forthcoming Range Rover.

Dunsfold's vehicle, 8884, had been intended as a high-mileage test vehicle under the original plan, to cover 100,000 miles on A and B-roads, motorways and in rush-hour city traffic. It was also 'fully loaded', as the Americans say, with an upgraded interior and heated front and rear screens – and I say 'screens', plural, because shortly before the testing was due to begin it received a change of hats and was turned into a Station Wagon. It was also repainted Masai Red, with a Sahara Dust roof, ahead of the Range Rover launch so that the colours could be evaluated. This is when it received its factory G-registration, in October 1968, and it's likely the front wings were upgraded to the newer 'headlights in wings' type as part of the makeover.

During the 1970s, the vehicle was used to tow a heavily weighted trailer at Gaydon Proving Ground for testing the friction characteristics of various road surfaces, something for which its power and torque made it ideal. But after that it fell into disuse, and it found its way into the Dunsfold Collection during the early 1990s. We had to take the decision whether to restore it in its later guise, as a Masai Red Station Wagon, or in its original form of a light blue Soft Top. The unusual light blue colour is what swung it; it's not unlike an early P6 saloon car's but our painter couldn't find a comparable shade in the Rover paint range and the closest match was actually a Volkswagen colour.

Before any paint could be applied, however, the vehicle needed a total rebuild. It had stood outside most of its life and was almost derelict. The chassis looked appalling but, after sandblasting, turned out to be not too rotten and was repaired – in fact, the chassis, bulkhead and rear tub are all the originals, with only the later front wings needing to be replaced. The axles are also the originals and so is the radiator, which is a modified Series IIA type fitted with twin electric cooling fans, there being no room for an engine-mounted fan.

Rover's engineers had found that the V8 fitted the engine bay remarkably well and they'd not needed to modify the inner wings, although the bulkhead was extensively remodelled because the engine sat further back in the chassis. Other mods included a second fuel tank under the passenger seat, which meant the battery had been relocated to the central seat position, since the V8's alternator occupied its normal position in the engine bay.

Sadly, by the time that chassis 8884 arrived at Dunsfold, the Roverised Buick engine had long ago been swapped for a factory replacement out of a P5 saloon, although the ancillaries had all been transferred to the new engine and so externally it looks like the original. The manifolds are a very early type and the shape of the sump is rather strange. We stripped the engine but all we had to do was re-ringing the pistons and put it back together. Even the camshaft was fine, which is unusual for a Rover V8!

Today, while I wouldn't name this Series IIA as my favourite vehicle, it's certainly one of them. How could it not be when you can dump the clutch in second gear and lay rubber? My favourite Land Rover is actually the OTAL amphibious vehicle – so having both of them on our stand at the NEC classic car show was more than I could have hoped for.

Dunsfold Collection

THE DUNSFOLD Collection is not yet open to the public, but is hoping to establish a permanent museum. You can help make that a reality by becoming a Friend of the Collection for an annual subscription of £35. Visit www.dunsfoldcollection.co.uk to find out more.

