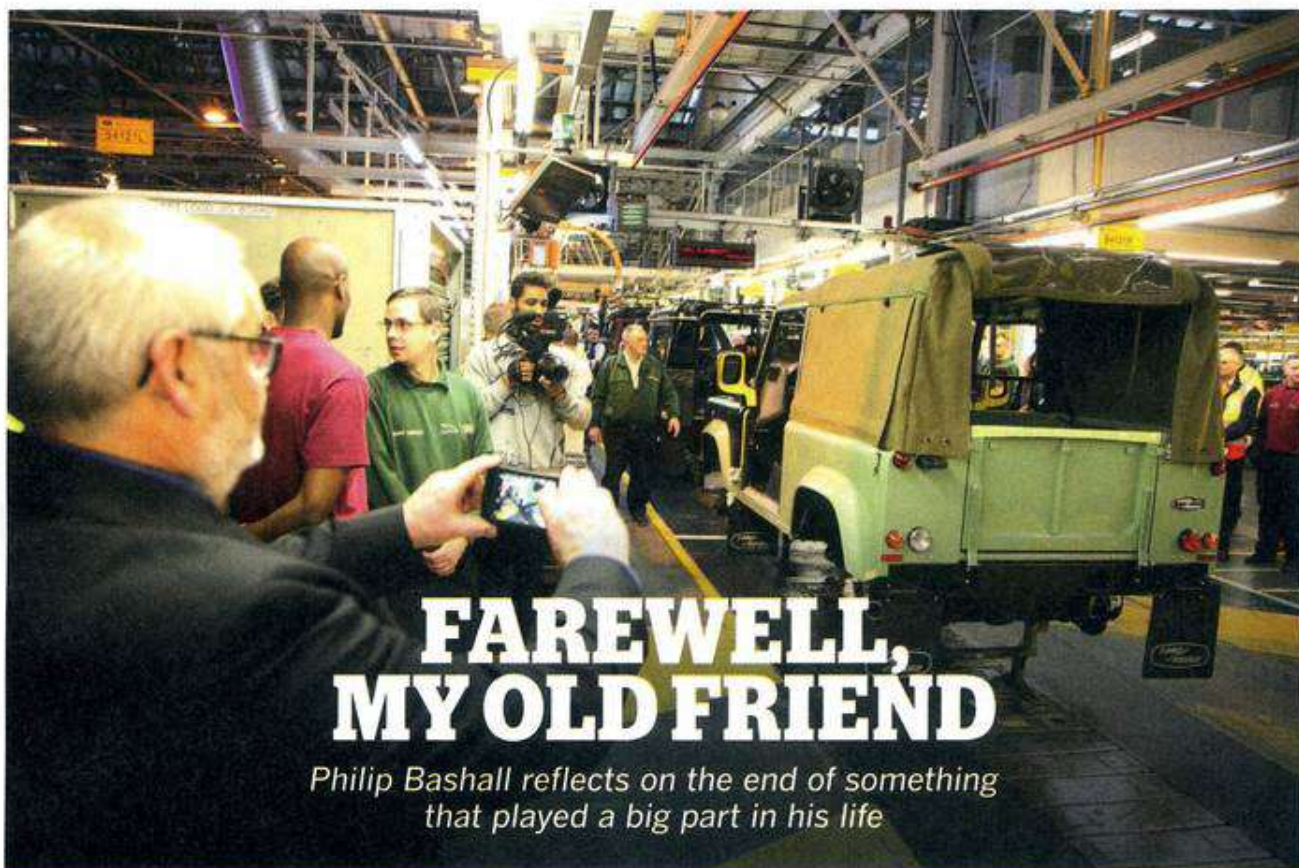


Dunsfold Diaries

By Philip Bashall



FAREWELL, MY OLD FRIEND

*Philip Bashall reflects on the end of something
that played a big part in his life*

IT WAS a sight I never imagined I would see: the Defender production line standing empty, without a single vehicle on it. For me, this was the most poignant moment of the day that the last 90 came off the line, January 29, 2016.

My first visit to the assembly shop was in 1968, on a factory tour with my father. We were shown around by Tom Barton and I saw military Land Rovers being built up. Oddly enough, I rarely visited the shop over the years; it always seemed a rather secretive and taboo place, although Dunsfold became more involved when the 90 and 110 were launched in 1983-84.

Nevertheless, not to see the Land Rover as we know it being built at Solihull will feel very odd. I can't remember the last time I went past Vehicle Despatch and there was hardly a Defender there. In days gone by, Defenders were all you ever saw! Series Land Rovers and Defenders were always built in the same building, although the actual position of the line changed over the years, and the assembly shop seemed almost like a ghost town at the end.

Incidentally, I do wish we could stop the media's habit of referring to every Series Land Rover as a Defender. To me, a Defender is a Land Rover without galvanised body cappings... But of course, it's too complicated to try to explain to non-enthusiasts that a pre-1990 Land Rover

should not be called a Defender. It could be worse: whenever I've worked in the film industry, Land Rovers have been universally referred to as 'Jeeps'.

The Dunsfold Collection was asked to supply seven vehicles for a special parade at Solihull on the last morning of Defender production: our Forest Rover, Series II 109 Moy Elevator, Series II 88 V8 prototype, Lightweight prototype, 101 Ambulance, British Army Rally 90 and polished alloy 50th anniversary 90. I really wasn't sure that some of these vehicles could be transported to Solihull, but the company sent down some covered wagons and, amazingly, everything fitted inside them – even the 101 and the Forest Rover. I could hardly believe it.

During the parade, the vehicles were driven by Land Rover employees or specially nominated drivers. I drove the Forest Rover, because it's a bit scary; my friend Graham Archer, who is ex-military engineering at Solihull, had the honour of chauffeuring TV presenter Vicki Butler-Henderson. She and Quentin Willson were the comperes for a presentation in front of all the workers – or associates, as they're now known. That's one thing you notice about Solihull these days: the factory is much more egalitarian. In the old days, management always wore a suit and tie; that's how you could spot them. Now you're as likely to see the bosses mingling with the workers – sorry, associates – in casual jackets.

Clockwise from facing page: Philip photographs the last Defender; H166 HUE getting its final inspection; door protectors no longer needed; historic vehicles at LR's Experience Centre; the end of the line – literally.



At least there have been no compulsory redundancies as a result of Defender production ending. Everyone who wants to is being redeployed – indeed, a handful are going to be restoring Series Is, as part of the company's entry into the heritage market. Who would ever have imagined that Solihull would be offering restored Series vehicles for sale?

Inevitably, on the Defender line I bumped into loads of people I'd got to know over the years, and not just the high-ups but old friends like the lorry drivers, too. The nice thing about it was that everyone seemed happy, and not at all miserable – although I can only imagine what it must have felt like to be one of those guys on the assembly line, hanging up their tools for the last time. What must they have been thinking, knowing that those tools will no longer be required and will probably go in the skip?

Talking of tools, I learned something new while I was watching the final batch of Defenders being built. The plastic 'eyebrows' on Defender wheel arches are held on with plastic rivets, which have a shank that you knock through with a hammer. It's an awkward job when the wheels are on – but I noticed that the workers had cut down the shaft of their hammers to leave just a short stub, so there was more room to swing them. Now why didn't I think of that! Obvious when you see it.

It was all over by mid-morning in the Defender shop, with the last 90 coming off the line at 09.22am, but the day didn't end there. Land Rover had a last-minute request to bring some vehicles down to London for that evening's recording of BBC TV's *The One Show*, and when I was offered a lift down to watch it I didn't hesitate. Not having any official duties to perform, I was able to relax and enjoy the show. I even came away with the presenters' script. It's a bit of Land Rover history, after all.

None of our Collection's vehicles were involved with the BBC programme; instead, Jaguar Land Rover supplied some from their own heritage fleet – and, because there wasn't time to get them all loaded up onto transporters, the old Landies were driven down the M40 and into central London! Respect is due to the drivers; imagine tanking down the motorway in the 101. Mind you, it probably did the vehicles the power of good, having a decent blast for once.



All in all, the last day of Defender production was a good one. The weather stayed dry, and I'm really chuffed that I was invited as a representative of Dunsfold. It seems unlikely now that the Defender line will be reassembled in another country; there were rumours of it going to Turkey, or possibly India. But those ideas seem dead in the water now. The Defender is dead; long live the (new) Defender!

You might imagine that I'd be really sorry to see the end of the current Defender, but I'm not. I embrace change, and the fact is that the Defender had run its course. The other day, I saw some electricity provider vehicles with cherry-pickers mounted on the back – and they were Toyota Land Cruisers. Until recently, they would have been Land Rovers. Why is that? Something needs to change.

I have no idea what the new Defender will look like, other than that it can't resemble the current flat-fronted one for safety reasons. But I do hope that it doesn't end up with the same jelly-mould shape that characterises the rest of the range. I like my Discovery 4 because it looks like a Discovery should, and because I can load an engine on a pallet into the back. Maybe not everyone needs to load engines into their Land Rovers, but the Defender above all shouldn't be led just by styling considerations. It needs to have enough weight to be able to tow properly – and to be a stable platform for customers like utility companies.

I'm optimistic that the new Defender will be absolutely incredible. It's very unusual for a vehicle manufacturer to end production of something before its replacement is ready, and that suggests that Land Rover is taking its time about getting it right. They have the resources and the technology to make something really special. There's no reason why the new Defender should not be the best utility vehicle ever. Full stop.

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.

