

DUNSFOLD DIARIES

With Philip Bashall



MEMORABLE MAESTROS

Two of Dunsfold's most popular exhibits look like pumped-up Maestro vans – but they are all Land Rover underneath, as Philip Bashall explains

LAST MONTH I wrote about some of the more modern Land Rover 'mules' that we have in the Dunsfold Collection, and the problems that they can throw up. In the last few weeks we've had to deal with another stubborn mule – but one from a previous generation. It's also one of the few vehicles we have that isn't recognisably a Land Rover. Mules are often disguised, of course, because they are prototypes that the company doesn't want the public to know about, but you can usually tell that there's a Land Rover in there, somewhere. This particular mule looks like an Austin van – which is why it's so interesting to enthusiasts.

When Land Rover was developing the Freelander in the early 1990s, it built around two-dozen mules to test the Freelander's all-new four-wheel drive

system (historian James Taylor, in his book on the Freelander, says there were 22). The Freelander was completely unlike any previous Land Rover, of course. It had no low-ratio gears, and the permanent four-wheel drive was separated front and rear by an intermediate viscous coupling. This was because the transfer box – known as an Intermediate Reduction Device, or IRD – was geared so that the front wheels were driven slightly faster than the rears, giving the car a front-wheel-drive bias. The viscous coupling easily soaked up the difference.

The other big innovation with the Freelander was its Hill Descent Control which, when engaged by a switch on the gear knob, used the vehicle's ABS system to limit its speed to walking pace when coming down a steep gradient. Nowadays it's commonplace on four-wheel drives but Land Rover invented it and the

Freelander was the first vehicle in the world to have it. Worth remembering when someone tries to tell you that "the Freelander is not a proper Land Rover".

Naturally, Land Rover needed to keep all this new technology a secret for as long as possible, so they took the unusual step of putting the body from a completely different vehicle on their prototype chassis. They deliberately chose the least memorable model in the Rover Group range: the Maestro van.

Dunsfold has two Maestro mules: a G-reg right-hand-drive petrol version and a J-reg left-hand-drive diesel. Very little is known about them because they were regarded as hacks and were nearly all scrapped as soon as the Freelander was officially launched in 1997. However, we believe our petrol mule was the first one to be fitted with Hill Descent Control, although it has a switch on the dash

From facing page, left to right:
Freelander diesel mule arrives at Dunsfold
after 15 years in the SEME store; black
rubber sheet hid new 4x4 system from
curious eyes; petrol mule wears a 1989
G-registration; diesel mule's wheels
had to be redrilled for five-stud hubs



rather than the gear knob to activate it. The dashboard is a Maestro part, but heavily cut-about and gaffer-taped – the engineers used as much Maestro stuff as they could because, obviously, it fitted the shell to start with.

The bodyshell itself for both petrol and diesel mules is fairly stock, except that the wings have been extended to make the front end longer and accommodate bigger engines. There's also a tow hitch, for hauling a trailer loaded with ballast as part of the testing schedule. Underneath, however, it's pure Freelander, with the Freelander's chassis platform – which is why there's a big sheet of black rubber hanging down behind the rear axle, to hide the four-wheel drive system. On the diesel, the alloy wheels are from a Rover saloon but, because the saloon has four-stud hubs and the Freelander uses five studs, the centres of the wheels have been adapted to five-stud fixings.

Coincidentally, one of the drivers who tested these mules in the 1990s recently got in touch with me and let me see his original notebook. He was responsible for testing brakes and friction materials, and says that only three or four of the mules were fitted with the ABS system. He also says that they had problems with IRD units being launched – something that would afflict owners of the production vehicles many years down the line!

My contact reckons that Dunsfold's diesel mule was used for durability testing, which is why it has extra windows cut in the side of the van body, to give the driver better visibility on long drives. Our petrol mule was used for brake testing, and it's the one that's had most exposure in our Collection because the diesel has always been a non-runner. Until now – more on that in a minute.

The petrol mule was also borrowed by Roger Crathorne for a Land Rover press do at Eastnor Castle just a few years ago so that the journalists could have a go in

it. Until recently that would have been quite unusual for an official company event, but there seems to be a growing acceptance that these mules and development vehicles are part of Land Rover's history and should be recognised as such.

For the last 15 years or so, however, the diesel mule has been in storage. Roger Jones, who has run the British Army's REME historic vehicle collection since 1982, is a great supporter of Dunsfold and he's allowed us to keep a few exhibits in the store at Bordon, Hampshire. More accurately, it's the SEME store, because Bordon is the School of Electrical and

“You wouldn't believe how difficult it is to find Maestro van parts”

Mechanical Engineers, whereas REME is the actual Corps to which the soldiers graduate – the 'R' stands for 'Royal'.

Anyhow, Bordon has now closed and SEME has moved to Lyneham, so we had to remove the handful of Dunsfold vehicles that were still at Bordon. The diesel Freelander mule was the last one to be trailered away. Problem was, it had never run during our ownership because of an ECU fault and lack of keys. So an early, scrap Freelander was bought to donate its ECU and keys, and the diesel mule was clattering away in no time. Even the clutch still worked.

The fun didn't stop there. Before the diesel mule came into the Collection, it had been robbed of various parts,

including most of the front end. You wouldn't believe how difficult it is to find Maestro van parts now! I tracked down a new front bumper at Rimmer Bros and I sourced mirrors, headlights and indicator units on eBay, but I still haven't been able to find the headlight surrounds – this vehicle has the early square headlights. Can any LRM reader help? I contemplated buying a complete van just to get the headlight surrounds, but that seemed a bit drastic, even for me.

Besides the Maestro mules, Dunsfold also has the oldest surviving Freelander prototype. Chassis number seven, and wearing a 1994 K-registration, it looks much like the production vehicle apart from a few subtle mods, such as blacked-out surrounds to disguise the true shape of the front and rear lights. The upper and lower thirds of the vehicle have also been painted matt black, and there are press-stud fixings below the rear windows for attaching camouflage panels.

While it's an interesting vehicle in its own right, the K-reg looks much like any other Freelander and doesn't capture the imagination in the same way as the Maestro mules. Whenever I took the petrol mule out to shows, it was regularly voted as the vehicle that people would most like to take home with them! With its pumped-up stance, and big wheel arch eyebrows to accommodate the Freelander's wider track, it looks like a Maestro on steroids and I'm surprised that no one has yet built a road-going replica, unlike our prototypes. Maybe it's because early Freelanders are now cheap and easy to find – but surviving Maestro vans are much rarer?

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.