

DUNSFOLD DIARIES

With Philip Bashall



PUGH, PUGH, BARNEY MCGREW... BASHALL?



Philip explains why he's not a great fan of Land Rover fire tenders

THERE'S a very nice Series I fire engine in the Dunsfold workshop at the moment. It's a vehicle I've known for some 15 years, a 1954 86in that was factory built as a fire tender, probably for the Ministry of Supply. The chap who owns it lives locally and he asked us to bring it up to scratch with, among other things, a new set of 7 x 16 tyres – these were standard fit on fire tenders and it's great that you can buy them from Avon again.

While various companies were happy to convert your Land Rover into a fire engine back in the day, HCB-Angus and Carmichael being just two of them, Solihull itself offered a factory-made fire tender which even appeared in the Parts Book. Besides the 7-section tyres, the standard spec for a Series I fire tender included heavy-duty suspension, engine oil cooler, eight-bladed fan, a PTO for the

fire pump, and a governor to keep the engine running at a constant speed while driving the pump. The oil cooler and bigger fan were fitted for the same reason, because the vehicle was likely to be stationary for extended periods with the engine running at moderate revs.

The other standard fitting on a fire tender was, of course, the colour red. Red bodywork, red seats, red wheels... everything. The exact shade of red may have varied but Poppy Red was a regular export colour for the USA and that's what we use when restoring a fire tender; in fact, we analysed the original paint on a survivor vehicle that came in from Australia and it was indeed Poppy Red.

That Australian fire tender had done only 2000-3000 miles and that's very typical of such a vehicle, whichever country it lives in. By their very nature, fire tenders cover hardly any miles in

their working lives and they are often remarkably well preserved when they're decommissioned decades later. But that doesn't mean the chassis are always rust free. Far from it, because the water tanks drip onto the chassis, and we find that most such vehicles will already have had a replacement rear crossmember or will be needing one.

The Series I pictured top right belongs to the Dunsfold Collection and is a very typical fire tender, the kind of vehicle that would have been used to administer first aid to a fire until the big boys arrived. This particular example, a 1956 86in, was bought new by ICI for use underground in an explosives factory in Wales, and was gifted to the Collection when the factory closed. It's very original, with hose reel in the rear bed, pump hanging off the back and hoses coiled around the bonnet for sucking water up from ponds and the like.



I sent my father off on a jolly to Wales to pick it up, which turned out to be something of an epic trip because he couldn't understand why, despite his long experience, it was so difficult to trailer home. He found that the water tanks at the back of the Land Rover were still full, which was sloshing around and causing all kinds of trouble for the trailer! Once he was able to stop and empty the tanks, the problem went away, of course.

With their red paint, fire tenders always look very cheerful, and you'd think that their colourful liveries and all that extra equipment such as axes, ladders and so on would give them lots of collector appeal. They're usually low mileage and in pristine condition – what's not to like?

Well, I'm going to upset a few people now and confess that I've bought a few fire tenders in my time and broken them for parts because of those low mileages, and the fact that Land Rover fire engines are generally cheap. And that's because they're useless!

Think about it. There's nowhere to put anything, not even a suitcase, so if you and a mate want to go off for a weekend somewhere then you can't take any luggage. A Series I fire tender is best treated as an ornament: something nice to tuck away in the corner but useless as a vehicle to own, apart from making (short) trips to shows.

Land Rover didn't offer a long-wheelbase Series I fire tender but you could buy aftermarket conversions, and I know of two or three 107in versions. My painter is spraying one at the moment, in fact, although more accurately it's an ex-fire tender because the previous owner removed the pump and threw away all the

equipment to turn it into a standard – and more useful – pick-up. You can often spot a former fire tender by silver-painted galvanising, holes cut into the bodywork for lockers and hoses, and knackered clutches. Why is the galvanising painted silver? I can only think it's because firemen have long periods of waiting around and need something to occupy their time.

As I've said, fire tenders that have come straight out of service are invariably very low mileage. There are two

“A Series I fire tender is best treated as an ornament”

Carmichael Range Rovers in the Dunsfold Collection, and the six-wheeler pictured above right came direct from the Swiss Federal Railways that had ordered it new in 1974. Dunsfold trustee Richard Beddall travelled to Switzerland to bid for it in a government sale, found it was in perfect original condition and drove it home!

That said, you have to be wary of low recorded mileages, because they don't take account of the many hours that a fire tender may have spent with the engine running while stationary. The good news, however, is that usually the engines were connected up to a pre-heater so they were

Clockwise from facing page:

Just some of the Land Rover fire tenders made over the decades: lovely ex-Australian Series I; Carmichael-bodied IIA Forward Control 109; Carmichael Range Rover 6x4 airport crash tender; 1956 86in donated by ICI to Dunsfold; ex-Swiss Federal Railways Carmichael Range Rover 6x4; Defender 130 crew cab; HCB-Angus Series III 109

always warm and ready to go when called out on a shout.

Between the extremes of a Series I and the Carmichael Range Rovers, which were built until the mid-1980s, there was a big variety of Land Rover fire tenders. The factory continued to offer them into the early '60s but after that they farmed the conversion work out to specialist firms. The Series IIB Forward Control was popular for this, and the Ministry of Supply bought a large batch of six-cylinder versions, but as far as I know the 101 V8 was never turned into a fire truck.

Prices for fire tenders are not high, and we had a very nice 1988 Carmichael 6x4 advertised on the Dunsfold Land Rovers website recently for a whisker under £8000. However, be warned, unlike ambulance versions, fire tenders are not easy to turn into camper vans unless you ditch the body entirely, because they don't have the internal height needed in a camper.

Frankly, Land Rover fire tenders don't do much for me – plus I don't look good in baggy trousers and a yellow helmet. I once had to dress up as a fireman for an episode of TV's *For The Love Of Cars*, where I was demonstrating a Series I fire tender in action, and it was more Trumpton than Towering Inferno...