

DUNSFOLD DIARIES

With Philip Bashall



ABOVE ALL, IT'S A... JEEP?

The Land Rover was a re-invention of the WW2 Jeep – and Philip Bashall is a big fan of those, too



EVERYONE has heard the story about how Maurice Wilks, chief engineer at Rover just after WW2, used an army-surplus Jeep on his farm in North Wales, and how it was the inspiration for him and his brother Spencer to develop the Land Rover. Bits from another Jeep were used to construct the so-called Centre Steer, the forerunner of what would become the Land Rover.

So it's not surprising that magazines occasionally like to compare a WW2 Jeep with a Series I. Not just magazines, either: you may remember how the Chris Evans-fronted relaunch of BBC TV's *Top Gear* had a sequence filmed in Blackpool where they pitched a Jeep against a Series I. Dunsfold was asked to supply the Land Rover but we declined, and having seen what the telly people did to the vehicles, I'm very glad we did!

Like it or not, the reality is that the original Jeep will out-manoeuvre a Series I off-road. That's partly because it's lighter but also because it's more flexible. Literally so – the chassis is made of an open C-section, rather than boxed-in like a Land Rover's, so it has considerable torsional flexibility. That also means that Jeep chassis rarely rust, because water can't get trapped inside.

You can imagine what a revelation the Jeep must have been for our boys during WW2. Before it came along, the British Army was relying on vintage Austin Seven radio cars and asthmatic Morris Eights. Then the Jeep appeared, and it was nippy, quick and easy to drive. OK, so it was left-hand drive and it didn't have much weather protection, but as a tool for the battlefield it was brilliant.

I've restored several Jeeps as well as Series I Land Rovers, and I love both

types of vehicle. The closest Land Rover equivalent to the Jeep is actually the Belgian-built Minerva [pictured top right]. With its steel body panels, side-exit exhaust and left-hand drive, it somehow feels more truck-like than its British relation and it always reminds me of a Jeep to drive.

The Jeep is much lighter to operate than any Land Rover, however. The steering is very easy and the vehicle weighs about 70kg less than a 1948 Series I. Yes, it only has a three-speed gearbox, but it has a transfer box like a Land Rover (or rather, the Landy has a transfer box like a Jeep's!) and its sidevalve engine is a useful 2.2-litre capacity. The 1600cc Land Rover engine produces a maximum 80lb ft of torque but the Jeep's slogger of a sidevalve gives around 105-110lb ft, which is very useful when you're off-roading.



Clockwise from facing page:
Philip sailing on the Solent with friends in his amphibious Jeep GPA; Jeeps outnumber Land Rovers in this early All-Wheel Drive Club meeting; steel-bodied Minerva is closest in spirit to a Jeep; pre-production Land Rover no L09, formerly in the Dunsfold Collection; Philip's last Jeep restoration, a 1942 example.



The Jeep also has a couple of ingenious features to make life easier in the field. The headlights are mounted in bowls on top-hinged brackets so that, with the bonnet raised, they can be flipped up to face backwards and illuminate the engine bay. Anyone who has broken down in a Land Rover at night will appreciate that! And the dynamo's top adjusting bracket has a spring-loaded lever so that the fanbelt can be instantly de-tensioned before wading deep water, to prevent the fan blades from spraying water all over the engine bay.

My own involvement with Jeeps goes back to the mid-60s. We always had Jeeps in the family so as children we were taken to school in one, and when the All-Wheel Drive Club came along there were plenty of Jeeps at trials meetings. Take a look at the picture [above] – there are loads of Jeeps and only a few Land Rovers! My late father, Brian, restored our first Jeep in about 1970 and we must have had 15 Jeeps pass through our hands over the years.

By far my favourite was the amphibious Jeep, the GPA. It was ex-British Army and had ended up after the war on a Scottish loch, one of half-a-dozen that had been bought by a salmon-fishing operation. I've sailed everywhere in that GPA: Lake Windermere, the Belgian canals, and the Solent off Fawley during a weekend at a military vehicle show nearby. We had plans to sail across to the Isle of Wight for a beer, but changed our minds when we saw the size of the boats using the shipping lanes!

A GPA is now worth crazy money, over 100 grand, but Jeeps generally have never been expensive. You can still buy a



"You could build a Jeep from scratch, though the DVLA wouldn't like it"

genuine WW2 Jeep for £10,000-20,000, although you have to be careful because the French company Hotchkiss built them under licence from 1955 right up until 1966 and there are plenty of Hotchkisses that have been 'Americanised' to make them look older than they are. There are some subtle differences between the WW2 Willys- and Ford-built Jeeps and the ones built by Hotchkiss; the biggest clue is that only the French Jeeps had a 24-volt electrical system but there are slight changes to the body and chassis pressings, too. If you're thinking of buying a Jeep, Haynes do a very good Military Jeep Enthusiasts' Manual for 20 quid.

A Jeep will cost similar money to restore as a Series I but the great advantage is that you can buy literally anything for them. As with Series Is, genuine ex-military parts have all but dried up, and with Jeeps you're reliant on stuff made in China or the Philippines, or possibly Hotchkiss parts, but at least you can get everything. You could actually build a Jeep completely from scratch, although the DVLA wouldn't like it!

By now you might be thinking, if Jeeps were so good, what was the advantage of the Land Rover? Well, the Land Rover was definitely a more advanced vehicle. It was stronger, it had better towing ability, and for the farmer it had a useful power take-off facility. It was also much more usable in a British climate because of its doors, side windows and full hood, and the seats were more comfortable – relatively speaking.

That said, if I ever see a Jeep for sale at a good price, I can never resist buying it. Lord knows why, because I'll end up spending silly money on it and then hardly ever use it. I would, however, still like another amphibious GPA, because they are such huge fun. And then there was the flying Jeep, a rotor-equipped prototype built by the British during WW2 which could glide down to Earth after being dropped from a transport aircraft. That's something a Land Rover could never do!

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.