

DUNSFOLD DIARIES

With Philip Bashall



THE ONE TO HAVE

Is a pre-pro Series I still the ultimate collectable Land Rover? Yes – and no – says Philip



YOU'D IMAGINE that a pre-production Series I would be a must-have for any serious Land Rover collection. There are maybe 19 survivors from the 48 that were made and, after all, this is where it all began. So it may come as a surprise to learn that the Dunsfold Collection – renowned for its focus on prototypes and 'number ones' – doesn't have a pre-pro.

However, I did own pre-pro L09 myself for a few years; a very rare left-hand-drive survivor. Sadly, I had to part with it in 2010 when my dad Brian's health started to deteriorate and he needed care at home. I had to raise some money quickly and L09 was the easiest vehicle to sell without having to be advertised. It went to a good mate, who still has it, and ironically it's ended up not far from the place I'd bought it from a couple of years earlier.

I'd always wanted a pre-pro and before that the only chance for the family to acquire one had been back in the 1970s, when Brian got wind of R04, which was local to us. He was beaten to it by another

enthusiast, Tony Hutchings, and the vehicle is now in the National Motor Museum at Beaulieu. Tony is an expert on pre-pros and wrote a book about them in the early 1980s, so there was some consolation in knowing that it had gone to a good home.

Fast-forward to 2008; my stepmother had died and left us a little bit of cash, so we decided to invest some in a pre-pro that Ken Wheelwright had restored. Ken was having a bit of a thin-out of his own collection (he just loved restoring these

things) and I managed to prise L09 away from him. It didn't need much doing, as you'd expect, but I rebuilt the gearbox and I upgraded it with a correct pre-pro bonnet, which has 1/8-inch rather than 3/16-inch domed rivets and a slightly different style of ribbing on the underside. Of course, you can't just go out and buy a pre-pro bonnet, but restorer Tom Pickford was having a small batch made by a specialist in alloy so, for a cost of about £1000, I managed to secure one.

L09 had become derelict in later life but it was very unusual in that it was still left-hand drive, and retained its Lockheed braking system. Most of the left-hand-drive pre-pros – distinguished by the L in front of the chassis number, whereas R denoted right-hand drive, of course – were converted to right-hand drive by the factory, apart from this one. And only the pre-pros were fitted with brakes made by Lockheed; production vehicles had a Girling system. The reason for that could simply be that the Girling representative gave a better pub lunch, but it's true to say that the Lockheed brake shoes are a





"The Tickford is a Land Rover for the more mature gentleman"



horrible design and work better in reverse than when going forwards. L09 also retained the front hubs, swivel housings and other parts that were uniquely cast in phosphor-bronze for the pre-pros.

While a pre-pro looks superficially like an early production Series I, there are dozens of detail differences. Most notably, the chassis is galvanised and the bumpers are welded to the chassis rails. The rear tub is handmade and it lies over the seat box – so you can't remove the seatbox without lifting the rear tub first! Also, there's a gap between the tub and the seatbox specially designed so that if your wallet falls out of your back pocket and drops down, it will slide off and fall out of the vehicle...

There are loads of other differences: bigger radiator, alloy sump, wider windscreen divider, hood stick sockets on the windscreen frame: the list goes on.

Even now, seven decades after the pre-pros were made, it's still possible that lost examples will come to light. Last year, R07 surfaced in a garden in the West Midlands. The owner was having a clear-out and asked a local enthusiast if he was interested in a couple of old Land Rovers; if he didn't want them, they were going to the local breakers! Fortunately the chap recognised R07 for what it was and dragged it out of the garden with his Range Rover. Jaguar Land Rover got interested and it's now scheduled for restoration in the new heritage workshop at Solihull.

Sadly, R07 turned up too late for our last Dunsfold Open Weekend in 2015, where we had the largest gathering of pre-pros ever seen: 13 of the 19-or-so survivors. Among the ones that didn't

make it were from Australia (hardly surprising), Scandinavia (this one has dropped off the radar), an example that's completely dismantled for restoration, and one that's in Plymouth! That last vehicle should have been there but the lorry driver tasked with bringing it didn't realise that it was needed for Sunday and not for the following Monday, so he left his lorry parked up over the weekend.

There's no doubt that, among collectors, a pre-pro is still the Holy Grail and a mint, correct and fully restored one could fetch up to £150,000. At this level, the price is almost an irrelevance, for there are people who will pay whatever it takes to own such an icon. Personally, however, I found my experience of owning L09 rather anti-climactic – it was no different to drive from any other early, pale green Land Rover.

Which is why I'd nominate two other Series Is for the title of ultimate collectable Land Rover. One is the Tickford-bodied Station Wagon, which is, shall we say, a Land Rover for the more mature gentleman. It has a waterproof body, proper door seals, door locks, bucket seats and a heater. Tickfords look wonderful although their construction is actually pretty crude, using wood screws to hold the alloy panels to a frame made up of all kinds of wood – not just ash.

Dunsfold Land Rovers has a Tickford going through the workshop at the moment. The tinwork ahead of the windscreen is all rolled, folded and welded, which means that the inner faces of the alloy and steel were left unpainted from new, so you can imagine what kind of state they get into. Even so, there are more Tickfords around than you might

think – about 40 at the latest count. I've had six go through my hands alone. There used to be one on a farm just ten miles down the road from here, but the body was hacked off decades ago and it was turned into a bunny hopper. The current owner has restored it as a standard 80" but it does have a dedicated Tickford chassis number.

The other real rarity is the Rolls-Royce B40-engined 81", of which there are maybe 10 left from a total of 33 made. It's certainly rare but it's not actually very nice – the engine is heavy and it's semi-rigidly mounted to the chassis, so you get a lot of vibration and harshness, particularly when you back off the throttle. It does go like stink, however! Unfortunately, it's not so good at stopping, because it has standard Series I brakes. We're thinking about taking the Collection's Rolls-engined 81" on the Series One Club rally in Ireland this year.

Fact is, on the open market no other Series I will knock a pre-pro off the top of the desirability stakes – we'd jump at the chance to acquire one for the Collection. A good place to start looking would be Tanzania, in East Africa. This was where, in 1947, the British Government launched the ill-fated Groundnut Scheme, a plan to grow peanuts and boost the local economy. It was a total disaster and was wound up in 1951, but two pre-production Land Rovers were shipped over there and never returned. Maybe they're still there.

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.



Clockwise from facing page:

Thirteen of the surviving pre-production Series Is lined up for a special celebration at the 2015 Dunsfold Open Weekend; Tickford Station Wagon is distinctive but rather crudely constructed (top right); a rare day when pre-pros L48, R14 and L09 (nearest camera) were at the Dunsfold Land Rover's workshop; 1949 Rolls-engined 81" is quick but not that refined; pre-pro bonnet has smaller rivets than standard.

