

# DUNSFOLD DIARIES

With Philip Bashall



## MYSTERY WAGON

*This 2.25-litre Series I has a curious history – and Philip would love to know more*

**S**PRING IS on the way, which reminds me that I really need to get on and finish the restoration of VAC 265, a 1956 Series I 86 station wagon. We have our Open Weekend coming up on June 10-11, which we have now re-christened as The Dunsfold Collection Land Rover Show. I'd like to have the car ready for that, and show it at some other events over the summer, too. The plan is that it will take over duties from our grey 1954 107 pick-up, which has been seen a lot over the last few years. I love the 107, it's comfortable and it's quick, but it's starting to become a bit old-hat now that everyone seems to have one!

Where all this interest in the long-wheelbase Series Is has suddenly come from, I don't know. They've always been

the black sheep of the family, largely unloved and unappreciated, but suddenly people got interested in them and now there are some cracking examples out there, whether original or nicely restored.

The interesting thing about the 86in, VAC 265, is that to the best of our knowledge it's the first Land Rover to have had a 2.25-litre engine grafted into it, sometime in early 1956. Exactly what happened that year is far from clear. The engine is a pre-production unit, number 45, and it's mated to a prototype bellhousing, but just what Rover did with the vehicle is a mystery.

There are a lot of weird things about this station wagon. For a start, it has a blue-painted chassis, and we know it's always been painted blue because there is a nice area of untouched blue paint where

the handbrake mechanism bolts to the chassis. For a vehicle built at this time, the chassis should be black, yet it appears to be the original.

Chassis 176601126 was built as a right-hand drive export station wagon, in Dove Grey with blue trim, on January 24, 1956, but did not leave Despatch until May 3 that year. It appears in the middle of a batch of similar Station Wagons being exported to Ethiopia, Libya, New Guinea, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Bahrain – and yet this one stayed at home. Why?

The obvious answer is that it was kept back for testing the new two-and-a-quarter petrol engine. Perhaps it was involved in some kind of accident at the factory – it has certainly had a replacement back wheelbox at some time





Clockwise from facing page:

The almost-finished VAC 265 – and, above left, as it arrived at Dunsfold for restoration; chassis has been refinished in blue, to match the colour found on the bracket behind the handbrake mechanism, above; interior had been heavily 'customised' by a previous owner in the 1970s; original chassis needed repair but was savable.

– or maybe the original engine seized because it had been run without oil. We just don't know. In such a situation, it's easy to imagine the Engineering Department asking if it could be passed on to them for development work.

Fair enough, but the vehicle was not registered as VAC 265 until October 4, 1956. This implies it was run on trade plates before that. It was then sold on November 19 to a Land Rover dealership called Evans in Wimbledon, London, but why would Rover let go of a development vehicle with a prototype engine straight into the dealer network?

Again, we can only speculate. Perhaps someone at Evans knew someone else at Rover's service department in Seagrave Road, London, and was quietly allowed to buy this prototype vehicle under the radar. You can imagine the conversation: "We've got this Station Wagon with a non-standard engine, and you can have it cheap as long as you understand it comes without a warranty and you keep quiet about it!"

The fact that the front diff casing has dents in the top, where the bigger 2.25 engine banged against it as the suspension compressed, could be significant here. Maybe the engineers simply realised they were onto a non-starter with the 86in chassis, and decided to get rid of it sooner rather than later.

We had a major breakthrough (we hope) in uncovering the vehicle's history as a result of showing one of Dunsfold's Series IIs at the Goodwood Revival last year. A chap phoned up afterwards and said he'd been telling his dad all about it, as a result of which they went on the Dunsfold website and looked at the

## "This Station Wagon was driven round Europe and as far as Russia"

picture gallery. His dad spotted VAC 265 and said "Oh, VAC! I know that car!"

According to the son, his father was a very close friend of someone who worked at Seagrave Road, and he went along as a passenger in the station wagon when it was driven all round Europe and as far as Russia. Apparently, dad and his driver had some problem with the front of the engine and had to get parts shipped out from Solihull to, I think, Yugoslavia.

I know this vehicle has had a replacement timing cover, so I'm guessing that the crankshaft pulley hit the diff and broke the timing cover. Dad also said that there was a long-range, 40 gallon, flat-slab fuel tank fitted to the rear tub – and, lo and behold, there are indeed holes for fuel pipes in the tub.

Interestingly, our station wagon pops up in a 1950s Pathé News film which you can see on YouTube. Search for Land Rover Owners' Club First Rally, move the sidebar to 5.53min and you'll see VAC 265 performing a garaging test.

Because this vehicle will be subjected to a lot of scrutiny when it's finished, I'm going the extra mile to get it exactly right. It came from the stash of Land Rovers

that were found in a warehouse up north, being stored for a Norwegian collector who went bust. The warehouse owner was on the point of sending all the vehicles for scrap, but thank heavens he had the foresight to send me copies of some of the logbooks first. I rang up John Craddock, he went to take a look, and between us we rescued all the vehicles.

The station wagon was in atrocious condition. Its cylinder head had been removed and left off, so the pistons were all seized, but fortunately I've been able to re-use the original block and cylinder head, and salvage the crankshaft. The chassis needed a new crossmember and repairs to the dumb irons, but otherwise the running gear is all original.

Whoever owned it during the 1970s was obviously a good customer of his local B&Q, because the interior was completely lined in fake wood panelling and every piece of galvanising was drilled!

I won't learn the full story of VAC 265 until our weekend in June, because the son of the old boy who went on the European jaunt wants to surprise him with the finished vehicle at the show. Maybe, when he's reunited with it, the memories will come flooding back. This is one of the reasons we hold the show, of course: in the hope that new information will come to light. Why not come along and see VAC 265 for yourself?

**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 [dunsfoldcollection.co.uk](http://dunsfoldcollection.co.uk) for more.**