

DUNSFOLD DIARIES

With Philip Bashall



DEMOB HAPPY

Land Rover prices may be rising, but there are still bargains to be had in the ex-military world, says Philip

REGULAR READERS will know that I have a massive soft spot for ex-military vehicles of all kinds, not just Land Rovers.

It's a passion I inherited from my father Brian, who started collecting them in the 1960s. In fact, the Dunsfold Collection itself came about as a direct result of my father's hobby.

One of my favourite events of the year, therefore, is the massive War and Peace Revival show that's been held in Kent for over 30 years. It's the biggest gathering of ex-military vehicles in the world, and because of its easy access from the Channel it draws a huge number of visitors from the continent. It's one of the very few shows where you can see tanks rumbling around, there are air displays, and it attracts the most amazing finds from around the world, including a growing number from the ex-Soviet states.

The show has traditionally been held at Paddock Wood hop farm, where it

returned in 2017 after a few years of relocation to Folkestone Racecourse. It runs from Tuesday to Saturday in late July and I've just returned from a great week there with my mate Roger Jones, guardian of REME's historic vehicle collection. We went down the Saturday before and took the Dunsfold Collection's prototype Land Rover Wolf (main picture, top right) as a centrepiece for our stand, which we then used to promote the Collection. This vehicle, based on a 110 Defender, was built in 1994 and has a unique high-roof hardtop; it's only covered 8000 miles but you can bet they were very tough ones!

War and Peace is as much a social event as a trading one for me, although I use it to move on all the non-Land Rover military surplus stuff that I've acquired during the year when I buy job lots of stillages. There are always vehicles for sale, too, and I was briefly tempted by an amphibious Jeep, although these are now seriously expensive. I saw a basket case

restoration project for sale at €55,000, and there's a fully-restored one being advertised on the internet for €135,000.

But even they pale into insignificance compared with the genuine WW2 six-wheel-drive Jeep that was on offer at War and Peace. Based on a friend's offer that was rejected, I'm guessing the asking price may have been a quarter-of-a-million. Right at the other end of the scale, a standard Jeep in good condition will cost £15,000 or more, and that means they're becoming old men's hobby cars which younger enthusiasts can't afford.

That is why you see so many Land Rovers at shows such as War and Peace... At £4500-5000, the classic square-rigged Lightweight military Land Rover is a third the price of a Jeep, and perfect for taking to military vehicle shows. The term Lightweight is a bit misleading because they aren't any lighter than a standard SWB Land Rover, but they are lighter than the standard military version. They're also



four inches narrower than a standard Series IIA, which meant that two of them would go side-by-side into a 1960s Armstrong-Whitworth Argosy transport aircraft; their official designation was, in fact, Airtransportable rather than Lightweight.

Like many others, the prototype Lightweight in the Dunsfold Collection (above) had been updated by later owners after it was disposed of by Ruddington Auctions in 1973: it had been painted blue and fitted with Volvo seats and big tyres, among other things, and ended up on eBay in 2008, which is where we spotted it. This Lightweight was one of six prototypes built for evaluation by the Army and almost every panel is different from a production version – doors, bulkhead, wings, bonnet and even the front grille panel. The chassis and bulkhead were very rusty, possibly because it was used for beach landings, but now that it's fully restored it's a cracking little car.

Lightweights were built from 1968 to 1984 but are getting quite hard to find in unmolested condition, now that so many have been civilianised with non-standard engines. But there are other options out there if you fancy something a bit different. Ever heard of a Perentie Land Rover (above, top)? Until recently, there were just a couple of these Australian-built army vehicles in the UK, but now that the Aussie Army has been kicking them out, there are some super original ones being imported.

The Perentie was made by JRA Ltd in Australia in the 1980s and 90s to replace the Army's Series vehicles and it is a fascinating machine to take to a European show. Based on the Defender 110, it has the huge advantage of a galvanised

"A Perentie's galvanised chassis means it will last for ever"

chassis and bulkhead, plus an Isuzu 3.9 four-cylinder diesel or turbodiesel. They were well maintained during their service lives and, although a bit agricultural to drive, they are superb value for money.

At the time of writing, The Defender Centre near Stourbridge, West Midlands (www.exmod.co.uk), has a 1988 soft-top, MoT'd and ready to go, for £10,800, and an impressive 1991 turbo 6x6 dropside for £19,200, both including VAT. And these aren't clapped-out Army cast-offs, by any means: the 6x6, for example, has recently had a new engine, transmission and front axle. Most importantly, they are effectively rust-free, and their galvanised chassis means they will last for ever.

But if that kind of money's still too strong for you, then you could do a lot worse than consider a Minerva (opposite page). A Minerva is a Series I 80 inch Land Rover that was built under licence in Belgium for the national army, but with a slightly reshaped body that's made in steel rather than Birmabright alloy. You might think that's a disadvantage, but the steel body makes a Minerva ride better – and not many people use a Series I every day, so corrosion isn't so much of a problem.

That said, I have a Minerva sitting outside my office right now which has come down from London for some work; the owner uses it to smoke around town. They are great little trucks, and because the exhaust pipe exits under the driver's seat, they have a lovely crisp exhaust note, too. Screen folded down, roof off – what a great thing to cruise around in on a summer's day!

Only the very earliest Minervas used Land Rover-built chassis and bulkheads, which were shipped over as CKD kits, and you can tell a locally-built chassis because it doesn't have a hole for the PTO in the rear crossmember. Yes, they do rust, but most of the survivors will have had replacement bulkheads during their service lives, and reconditioned engines too. Every Minerva I've ever seen has had a red-painted engine, which indicates that it was rebuilt in Belgium rather than sent out like that from Solihull.

The best part of 10,000 Minervas were built, and as late as 1985 there were still nearly 2500 serving with the Belgian Army, so they are not particularly rare. Until two years ago I was buying these in running order for £2000-3000 but now you're looking at £5000-6000. That's still half the price of a Series I, and a third the price of a WW2 Jeep, for something that looks, goes and sounds very much like one. It's the bargain of the decade.

THE DUNS FOLD 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 for more info.