

DUNSFOLD DIARIES

With Philip Bashall



The Tank Museum, Bovington

Meet 'The Bastard'

Philip explains why the Big Lightweight is his least favourite in the Dunsfold Collection

I'VE JUST returned from the Dunsfold Wings & Wheels air show, which, of course, couldn't be more local; it's held at the Dunsfold aerodrome that is familiar to millions as the test track for BBC TV's *Top Gear*. Wings & Wheels is a great show and I always take a number of vehicles along from the Collection. This year we had a static display of 21 Land Rovers, ranging from a Series I to a camouflaged Range Rover Sport prototype – it's as much about cars as it is about planes.

However, to get some of the Collection vehicles out of storage I first had to move our Big Lightweight. Its proper name is the 110in Air Portable Bonneted Control, but it's basically a larger version of the well-known half-tonne Lightweight that I talked about in last month's LRM (both vehicles are pictured together on the facing page), so it's universally known as the Big Lightweight.

I call it The Bastard. It's my least popular vehicle in the Collection... why do I dislike it so much? Because it's horrible

to drive. The steering is all over the road, the suspension bouncy and the throttle so over-sensitive that the slightest bump causes the engine to surge. It has to be the worst Land Rover I've ever driven! Sure, it could have been refined had it gone into production, but this turned out to be a stillborn project and it never progressed beyond three prototypes.

The reasoning behind the Big Lightweight was sound enough. It was intended as a modern version of the old Morris Quad gun tractor that you may recall from your days playing with Dinky toys and Airfix kits. The WW2 Morris was used to pull a 25-pounder field gun, and the Big Lightweight was designed to tow the latest version of the Army's 105 mm gun. In between there would be a powered trailer for carrying ammunition, driven by the vehicle, while the gun crew sat in the back of the Land Rover.

The Big Lightweight would be the filling in a three-vehicle sandwich that was being developed by Land Rover as a private venture in the mid-1960s. On the

bottom, so to speak, was the half-tonne Lightweight. In the middle was the Big Lightweight, and at the top was the 101 Forward Control. As we now know, the top and bottom vehicles made it into production and were fairly successful, but the 101 could do everything that the Big Lightweight did, only better, so the Big Lightweight was dropped after three prototypes had been built.

Those three prototypes had chassis numbers 110/1, 2 and 3, and the Collection's vehicle is chassis 110/1. They are all slightly different, with 110/1 having recessed door hinges – presumably to maintain the flattest possible sides, for loading into aircraft – a different bumper and a unique rear crossmember. Number 3 had opening bulkhead vents, unlike 1 and 2, and may have been fitted for radio with 24-volt electrics.

The underpinnings for all three were the same, however, which is to say, slightly bizarre! Up front was a 2.6-litre Rover straight-six, as used in the Series II Forward Control. At some point chassis

110/1 lost its original engine, however, so it's now fitted with a prototype 3.0-litre. This is coupled to a Turner five-speed commercial vehicle gearbox, which has an extra-low crawler gear.

Behind the gearbox are two transfer boxes, one piggy-backing the other. The first is used to select High or Low ratio and also drives the front propshaft. The second box is coupled to the first and is locked in High ratio – it's the first box that determines whether it's being driven in High or Low – and it drives the rear propshaft and trailer coupling. Holes in the chassis show that at least three positions were tried for the rear box.

Incidentally, the powered trailer (pictured below right) was later used on the 1975 British Joint Services West to East Expedition across the Sahara, the first real-world endurance test for the 101 Forward Control. Four vehicles covered nearly 7500 miles over 100 days, and the team reputedly drank 4000 cups of tea to keep them going!

Engine and gearbox aside, the rest of the Big Lightweight is a real mix of parts. On 110/1, the steering box seems to be an adapted car unit and it sticks out of the front panel. The rear leaf springs are One Tonne heavy-duty items but the fronts are parabolic and wider; the axles are ENV narrow-track Forward Control but with a lower diff ratio of 5.57:1. On the right-hand side is a large vacuum tank for the trailer brakes. Road wheels are also the wide FC type, fitted with 9x16 tyres.

There's a mount on the bonnet to locate a spare tyre but you'd never be able to lift the bonnet if one was fitted! And it would be impossible to do so now,

“The Big Lightweight would be the filling in a three-vehicle sandwich”

because the bonnet has a raised wedge on its upper surface to clear the Zenith carburettor that was used on the original engine. It ran with an SU carb at first, but that had problems with flooding during the off-road trials, so a downdraught Zenith 36 IV was installed, which meant the bonnet had to be reshaped to clear the air pipe feeding it. When I restored the vehicle, I had to find another engine and I happened to have a prototype 3.0-litre, so I used that, with a single SU and the original-style oil bath air cleaner.

Land Rover kept chassis 110/1 for testing but 110/2 and 3 were put through their paces by the Army, and there are photos of them with their service registrations being tested at Bagshot (main picture, opposite) on the ultra-wide ‘bog trotter’ Terratyres that were being tried at the time. After these trials, numbers 2 and (possibly) 3 were released through the Army's Ruddington sales in 1973, and number 2 was later allocated the civilian registration ROU 198M. After spending several years on a Kent

smallholding, it was rescued by an enthusiast and is believed to be under restoration in the Midlands. We don't know what happened to number 3.

Chassis 110/1 was used for cutting the grass at Solihull after its testing days were over, gaining a custom-made truck cab with a flashing light on top. In 1972, with the help of chief engineer Tom Barton, the Dunsfold Collection acquired it, and trustee Richard Beddall volunteered to go up to the factory and drive it back. He reported that he left a cloud of grass cuttings in his wake!

With the help of Rover, we obtained its original registration, VXC 100F, and in 1990 embarked on a complete restoration – the rear crossmember had rotted out from all those damp grass clippings and we had to remake the tailgate, which had been lost during its days as a mower, together with the left-hand front wing because it was damaged beyond saving.

Since then the vehicle hasn't done many miles, other than a drive from Solihull to Gaydon for the 50th anniversary celebrations in 1998. It's appeared on TV, though. When Quentin Willson came to Dunsfold to film *The Car's The Star*, I happened to be standing near the Big Lightweight when he asked me what was my favourite vehicle in the Collection. Being lazy, I pointed to the Big Lightweight and said: “Well, of course, that one's very special,” which prompted him to suggest that we go for a drive in it. So there's footage of me with my arms going in and out like a fiddler's elbow as I wrestle with the steering and bounce around on the road... I guess it serves me right!



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THE DUNSFOLD COLLECTION is not 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 to find out more.