DUNSFOLD DIARIES

With Philip Bashall

Llama drama

Land Rover's Llama project was a failure, but Philip has a soft spot for this beast of burden

AS THIS issue goes to press, I'm gearing up for the Lancaster Insurance Classic Motor Show at the NEC, which takes place on November 10-12. It will be the third time that the Dunsfold Collection has had a stand there, although I've been visiting as a paying punter for many years. The first time Dunsfold exhibited we had the OTAL amphibious Land Rover and V8 88in Series IIA on our stand. Last year it was the IIA Forest Rover, which was a real show-stealer. Continuing the theme of having something really unusual to catch the eye, I've decided to bring up one of our pre-production Llamas. It has a tilting cab, which is a unique feature on a Land Rover, and every so often I'll be able to tilt it forward to show off the engine.

That engine was, ultimately, the reason for the Llama's downfall. The Llama was intended to meet the British Army's need for a two tonne light 4x4 truck that could replace the 101 Forward Control.

One person can tilt the cab – just make sure nothing is on the seats

Unfortunately, the Army wanted a diesel truck with automatic transmission and all that Land Rover could offer them was a petrol V8 with a manual 'box! It delivered two pre-production Llamas to the Army's Chertsey testing ground in February 1986, fitted with regular SU-carbed 3.5-litre petrol V8s, but the Army ultimately decided to buy the Perkins-engined Reynolds Boughton RB44 instead.

The problem was that Solihull just didn't have a powerful enough diesel engine at the time. When the Llama was developed in the mid-1980s, Land Rover only had the 19J 2.5 turbo diesel in its range, which couldn't pull the skin off a rice pudding. The 200Tdi was still three years away from production and in fact I'm not sure that even a 200Tdi would have been man enough for the job. It's a great shame that Project Iceberg, the diesel version of the Rover V8, was canned in 1983. This would have been perfect for the Llama and could have been coupled to a Range Rover four-speed ZF auto 'box. Even a Perkins diesel would have been a better option than the 19J 2.5, but I guess there were political reasons why Land Rover couldn't be seen to use another manufacturer's engine.

So the Llama was doomed from the start. Personally, I think it was presented to the Army for evaluation too early, and

hadn't been refined enough for severe testing. Unlike regular Land Rovers, the Llama chassis is made up of straight rails that don't have the familiar Land Rover dip in the middle, and the rear platform or body sits very high up. Combine that with the narrowness of the chassis, the fact that it's suspended on coils rather than leaf springs, and you have a vehicle that's very wallowy and unstable when heavily loaded. That's despite the fact that the axles, which are modified 110 casings, are a foot wider than a regular 110's.

There were ten pre-production Llamas, four of which belong or are on loan to the Dunsfold Collection. The sole production example is in the Heritage Collection at Gaydon, and one further Llama was built up by Stuart Hibberd and his son Adrian from parts. It's owned by enthusiast Francis Seymour and is the only Llama that's registered for the road. The Hibberds went to great lengths to put it through the DVLA's Single Vehicle Approval test and it was finally registered as a new vehicle in 2000, with the appropriate number W11 AMA. It's clocked up about 5000 miles being driven to shows since then. We think there's another Llama pre-pro floating about within the JLR empire, too.

We can't drive any of the Collection's Llamas on public roads but I sometimes exercise them on private land and I always love driving them. Climbing up into a Llama is like getting into a little lorry, with comfortable seats and a proper dashboard. Land Rover was hoping to sell them to civilian operators as well as to the Army, so they were designed to have expected luxuries such as a radio and a proper heater. Why Land Rover never proceeded with the civilian versions, I don't know, because they had got quite a long way down the line with the project by the time it was axed.

Like the older 101, the Llama was to be offered with an optional winch. Made by

This is the very same Llama that will be exhibiting at the NEC show

"That engine was, ultimately, the reason for the Llama's downfall"

Superwinch, it was mounted at the back of the vehicle and driven by a long shaft from the transfer box power take-off. The cable was fed above the axles on fairlead rollers and exited below the front bumper – a bit of a clumsy arrangement, really. The rectangular hole you can see cut into the grille and front bumper is nothing to do with the winch cable, but is so that the cab clears a front-mounted towing hitch when it's tilted forward.

Talking of which, one person can tilt the cab on their own, which is just as well because you have to do that for routine jobs such as checking the oil. Just make sure that you've taken all your map books, cans of pop, tools and so on off the seats beforehand, otherwise they'll push the windscreen out if you tilt the cab a bit sharpish! As I know from personal experience.

The Llama we'll be exhibiting at the NEC show, which is pre-production vehicle number one, is recognisable by its Ivory White cab whereas most surviving Llamas are painted NATO Green.

The great thing about exhibiting at a show in Birmingham is that it's right in the heartland of Land Rover country, so you get old motor industry people coming up and saying "I remember that!" The Llama scores doubly well here, for its glassfibre cab was built by Reliant in nearby Tamworth. There are other Midlands connections, too – the indicators on the cab are from a Jensen Interceptor, and there's plenty from the British Leyland parts bin, such as the steering lock (Austin Montego), glove box (Austin Maestro) and transfer lever knob (Triumph Dolomite). The Dolomite knob was used because it has a sliding switch built into the top, which operated overdrive on the Dolly but works the electric diff lock on the Llama – this is literally made up from a wiper motor pulling a cable to lock the diff!

There's one other part worth mentioning, as it was shared with Ninetys and One Tens made circa 1986. If you have one of those, you may find that the unused segment at the far left, bottom row, of the warning light display has a pictogram of a tilting lorry cab. It's there because Land Rover planned to fit the same plastic panel to all those Llamas it was hoping to sell. Who knows how many Defender owners are driving around, blissfully unaware of the significance of this tiny piece of history?

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 to find out more.


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