

DUNSFOLD DIARIES

With Philip Bashall



Cunning disguises

As new Defender mules are spotted on test, Philip recalls how the camouflage of Land Rover prototypes has evolved over the last 35 years

SO, PICTURES have started to emerge of the New Defender on test. Clearly, the bodies are not the real thing. A short-wheelbase version has been photographed that has comically truncated rear doors, which must be all of 15 inches long, but the timing is about right for these mules to be seen out and about. Word is that Land Rover will reveal finished versions later this year, to capitalise on the 70th anniversary of the marque, and the new Defender will be launched in 2019.

Today's artfully-disguised prototypes are a far cry from how Land Rover did things when it was testing the original Defender, in its Ninety and One Ten form. Back then, disguise amounted to little more than a strip of black insulation tape down the centre of a Ninety's windscreen, to make it look a bit like the split-screen of a Series III! That tape is still present on prototype Ninety number one, which is in the Dunsfold Collection, and we also have prototype number two. The former is painted Masai Red, the latter Russet Brown, although both had been brush-painted NATO Green during testing, to make them look like Army Land Rovers.

Number one is the quirkier vehicle of the two. For a start, it has a genuine 90 inch wheelbase, whereas production Ninetys are actually closer to 93 inches (2362 mm). I've heard three reasons why the Ninety gained another three inches. First, the contemporary Daihatsu had a bigger load space than the Ninety prototype, so it needed that bit of extra length to make up the difference. Second, the ride was a bit too choppy, and third, the rear prop was so short that it was having to work at too acute an angle.

These first prototypes were based on the cut-down chassis of 110 launch vehicles, because the 110 had been introduced a year ahead of the Ninety, and they carried registrations from that series, CWK 30Y and 40Y, respectively. Just to confuse things further, number one has 110-type axles but number two has Range Rover axles – with the back one modified to take drum brakes!

There's a number of visual differences between numbers one and two, as well. Apart from its Stage 1 V8-type grille, number one looks much more like a SWB Series III than number two, which has 110-style wheelarch eyebrows. The



Ninety prototype no.2 getting some trialling exercise



Ninety no.1 arrives at Dunsfold in NATO Green

wheelarches on number one have never had eyebrows fitted and they look as though someone's just taken a power saw to the wings to cut the arches. Maybe the idea was to keep the vehicle looking as much like a Series III as possible, to throw people off the scent.

When these two vehicles arrived at Dunsfold, they were in the NATO Green that had been slapped on to militarise them, and in the photo, above, you can see number one even has WDI (maybe an

Contrasts in camouflage: from left, 2014 RR Sport L494, plus 2012 and 2014 Discovery Sport prototypes



“Land Rover has gone back to old military tactics for camouflage”

in-house jokey reference to War Department 1?) stencilled on the front bumper. Fortunately, we were able to strip the green paint off without damaging the original colours underneath.

By the time of Land Rover's next major launch, the 1989 Discovery, disguises had become a little more sophisticated, although they mainly involved a lot of gaffer tape! A fake tortoiseshell roof was stuck on to Discovery prototypes to hide their distinctive stepped profile. Older number plates were also used to deliberately add confusion: Dunsfold's 1988 pre-pro Discovery has a non-factory B registration from 1984, for example.

However, when the P38A Range Rover was being tested, the engineers couldn't do much to alter its basic shape, so they simply covered the exterior panels with what I would call a canvas bag – basically a fabric tent that was zipped and Velcro'd in place to hide everything underneath. We have a prototype P38A with all its disguise kit in the Collection, which is the oldest known survivor. Chassis number 35, it was mainly used around the factory to test the heating system and interior parts, and it still has the heating patterns sketched on the window glass in black marker pen.

A similar kind of rear-body tent was also used to camouflage Freelander prototypes, along with visual tricks such as blacking out the headlight surrounds with paint to disguise their shape. But by the late 1990s, Land Rover was becoming more ambitious with its disguises, often cut 'n' shutting older vehicles to fit the new running gear being tested.



This P38A Range Rover, now in the Dunsfold Collection, still has its canvas disguise



Spot the join? Freelander 2 test mule uses a Freelander 1 bodysell, with stretched rear doors

Sadly, we don't have any Discovery 2 prototypes in the Collection but we do have a Freelander 2 (above) that is basically a lengthened Freelander 1 body on 2 running gear. To accommodate the longer, 105 inch wheelbase its rear doors have been cleverly extended and you have to look quite hard to spot the deception. The wider track was harder to conceal, so the engineers fitted chunky wheelarch extensions. Because the vehicle is painted gloss black, these blend in well and you would have had to be something of a Land Rover anorak to tell that this wasn't just a Freelander 1 with a mild body kit.

However, since the turn of the Millennium, when everyone with a camera phone thinks they're a spy photographer, Land Rover has gone back to old military tactics and started using disruptive camouflage patterns to break up the outline of a vehicle and make it harder to recognise. Indeed, Dunsfold's 2003 Discovery 3 prototype has a black and white livery of random straight lines and sharp angles that's very reminiscent of the Dazzle pattern used on Allied shipping in World War One.

Lots of variations of this have been tried over the last 15 years and three examples can be seen in the picture (left) of three prototypes being delivered to the Collection on a low-loader. The fuzzy style

used on the 2014 Discovery Sport nearest the lorry cab is particularly effective; even in this photo, you can see how difficult it is to make out the vehicle's shape!

But for the ultimate disguise, we have to go back to the mid-nineties and the famous Freelander/Maestro van mules, for which the bodysell of an Austin Maestro van was plonked over the all-new 4x4 running gear of the forthcoming Freelander. Twenty-two of these mules were built and Dunsfold has two of them. Unlike most test vehicles, these mules had a certain style to them and whenever I've taken one of the Dunsfold examples to shows it would often be voted the vehicle that the public would most like to take home.

On these Freelander mules, Land Rover used a big sheet of black rubber hanging down under the back to hide the 4x4 drivetrain. Given the interest in what the underpinnings of New Defender are going to be like, maybe that's a trick they should think about using again?

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.

