

DUNSFOLD DIARIES

With Philip Bashall



Body Building

Most of us own Land Rovers for pleasure, but they were intended to be working vehicles. Philip looks back at some of the many different utility bodies fitted over the years

YOU MAY have read in last month's LRM that Land Rover has just launched a Commercial version of the Discovery.

Whether it will sell as well as the old Discovery 3 and 4 Commercials is anybody's guess – there's no doubting it has the loadspace inside, but a lot of people don't like the fact that the new Discovery's more rounded shape makes it harder to get bulky objects past the tailgate aperture.

At least Land Rover is continuing to market the new vehicle as a workhorse, just like its predecessors. There have been Commercial versions of the Discovery since the model's early days. I myself bought a Discovery 1 Commercial as a company vehicle brand new from Wadham Kennings in Guildford, because we could claim the VAT back. It wasn't a particularly sophisticated conversion: the side windows at the back were replaced with blanking plates given a smear of sealant before being riveted on, while the

captive nuts for the window catches on the opening rear windows (front hinged, since the Commercial was based on a three-door) were drilled out so that no one could fit windows again! Not that any of us would have done such a thing.

Long before that, my father was running utility-bodied Land Rovers for our family garage business. The main picture, above, shows Dad's Series IIA 109in in a typical situation, towing another 109 on our big trailer. Nicknamed Abel, for obvious reasons, it was our daily hack; an ex-Southern Electricity Board van that father converted with a lift-up Dormobile roof. Besides a multitude of tow hooks, it had a Feeny and Johnson trailer vacuum brake system that was operated by a lever on the steering column pulling a cable-operated control valve. It needed a bit of co-ordination, but once you got used to it, you could slow the Land Rover down by using just the trailer brakes.

This picture of Abel also shows a Dunsfold Land Rovers trademark, the

black-painted radiator panel. I don't know why, but it was just something we did. Curiously, I spotted an old Series IIA with a black rad panel recently, and it turned out to be one we'd sold back in the day. You can also see the black grille on my father's 88in, pictured far right towing a huge powerboat! That was a 1958 Series II with a massive Allard supercharger, but that's a story for another day.

Of course, people have been fitting different bodies to Land Rovers almost since the day they were launched. To stay warm, the Scandinavians liked to fit homegrown station wagon bodies with proper heaters, while on the other side of the world, in the Australian bush, trayback flatbed conversions were very popular. UK-based Land Rover enthusiast Tom Pickford of wwspares.co.uk is well known for his ex-Aussie trayback Series I that he's had for 11 years and he says it is one of the best Land Rovers he's ever owned. It's shown here, far right top, in a very un-Australian snowy setting.



Fifth-wheel conversion may have been by Dixon-Bate



Philip's Discovery 1 Commercial in the showroom



Eezion converted this One-Ton for the AA



Tom Pickford's Series I trayback



Unusual wooden box body on a Series IIA



Period publicity photo of the AirDrive digger restored by Rob Maude



Brian Bashall's 88in SII was supercharged

Just below the picture of Tom's trayback is a photo of a SIIA conversion I have no information about. It looks a bit like a horsebox, but I would have thought the centre of gravity wouldn't have been ideal for that. Maybe it's the unsung forerunner of the Luton van? All that wood must have made it very top-heavy.

Besides home-made jobs like that, there were lots and lots of professional conversions undertaken by independent companies. The Harrier back-hoe digger produced by AirDrive of High Wycombe has become a lot better known in recent months thanks to an outstanding restoration by Rob Maude, which won Best in Show at last year's Dunsfold Collection Land Rover Show. I recently found the period photo, above, of Rob's actual vehicle, the company demonstrator.

Rob was a big hit with the crowds at the Dunsfold show as he demonstrated the digger in action. It's based on a 1970 Series IIA and was adapted to use a newly-introduced hydraulic arm called the McConnell PA44. That was a revolutionary development in the digger world, so I'm told, because you could change the attachment at the end – swap the digger

bucket for a hedge trimmer, for example. At the time, you couldn't buy what's now called a mini-digger, so until McConnell's Power Arm came along there was nothing smaller on the market than a JCB.

Obviously, the Land Rover was a lot more mobile than a JCB, and with a compressed-air powered concrete breaker at the front, as on Rob's, a two-man team could make short work of digging a trench in a road: one could be breaking up the tarmac up front, while the other was scooping out the trench behind.

Another task that Land Rovers have always been good at is towing. At one time every village garage used to have a Landy pick-up with a towing crane attached. But there were some much posher car transporters based on Land Rovers, too, and a couple of them are illustrated above.

Top of the page is a very classy-looking fifth-wheel conversion, which I believe is by Dixon-Bate although I know nothing about the photo or where it was taken. I suspect the trailer is also by an aftermarket company such as Dixon-Bate or Rubery Owen, but the conversion was presumably approved by Land Rover

because it's carrying a Rover P5 saloon. It's a nice picture that has the feel of an official photo and I don't think it has been published before.

Just below that photo is another variation on the car-transporter theme, this one built for the AA by Eezion of Bedford. The 9x16 front tyres are a giveaway that it's based on a One-Ton, and of course it is front-wheel-drive only because the load bed has to be lowered down close to the road surface, using hydraulic rams.

Why anyone would go to the trouble of converting a Land Rover rather than using a regular flatbed lorry is beyond me, although it might have been useful for collecting broken-down 1970s supercars... How ironic that the Eezion is now far, far rarer than any of the Lamborghinis or Ferraris it would have transported.

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.