

DUNSFOLD DIARIES

With Philip Bashall



This official press shot of a Discovery 3 is unusual in showing a genuine registration number, in a period when fake plates were the norm



Late plates

Fancy a daily driver that's a part of Land Rover history? Philip has some suggestions

MOST ENTHUSIASTS know by now that a Discovery 1 with a G-WAC registration, or a Range Rover P38 registered M-CVC, was likely used on the press launches for these models, and as such they've become quite collectable. Even early Freelanders, with their R-BAC or R-BDU factory registrations, have their followers. But what about all the Land Rovers that have come after them?

At the moment, there are several pre-production or former press fleet vehicles from the late 1990s and 2000s turning up for sale that are going totally unrecognised. To most buyers and sellers, they're just ageing 4x4s that can be picked-up cheaply and possibly discarded when something major goes wrong. But these are just as much a part of Land Rover history as all the Series vehicles and Range Rover Classics that went before them. Sadly, our throwaway culture is condemning them to the scrapheap

rather than being repaired, as would have been the case in years gone by.

The original Freelander was probably the first disposable Land Rover and you can buy one for little more than pocket change today. What's even more distressing is that top-spec Range Rovers from the 21st Century are likely to go the same way, as road tax is ramped up every year on cars with high CO₂ outputs. If the cost of repairs doesn't kill them off, then fuel duty and vehicle excise duty will.

That hasn't put me off buying just such a vehicle to add to the Dunsfold fleet. I recently spotted a very early Range Rover Sport [pictured top right] for sale with a dealer over in Bath. It was wearing a VX54 plate, which gave it away as being a Land Rover-registered vehicle that was probably pre-production. And so it proved: the VIN turned out to be 900124, which is a long way ahead of the first production Sport, number 900505. In fact, we have an even earlier Sport in the

Collection, 900034, but that's not currently road legal. So this Sport for sale at the dealer in Bath could well be the earliest one left on the road.

The service book shows that it stayed with Land Rover until 2006, by which time it had covered 23,000 miles, and it was then sold into the dealer network. Interestingly, while registered as an HSE and fitted with all the HSE bells and whistles, it's not badged as such, which makes me suspect that Land Rover hadn't yet produced any HSE badges when it was built!

I decided to buy it sight-unseen, over the phone, and took the train to Bath to pick it up. Although it had clearly been sitting around for a while, everything worked and I drove it home without any problems. Unfortunately it was wearing horrible 22-inch Carlos Fandango alloys but by checking the original build sheet – available from a main dealer – I found a set of correct-spec alloys and tyres on



VX54 plate alerted Philip to the fact that this was a very early Range Rover Sport



Philip is now on the look-out for a pre-pro Freelander 2 with a VX56 registration



Heritage Defender on a factory plate, snapped during a press trip to the Isle of Islay in 2015



By the mid-90s, Land Rover was using fake plates for photography, as on this Disco 2

eBay for about £600. Other than giving it a good service, I've not had to do anything to it yet, although I did polish the cloudy headlight covers – a new experience for me, since I've never owned anything this recent as a classic Land Rover.

Fact is, though, that if you want a Land Rover to use everyday, there are lots of tempting buys out there right now. The Discovery 3 is a sure-fire future classic and the Freelander 2, while less likely to become really collectable, is a brilliant and very underrated vehicle. In fact, I'm looking out for one as a courtesy vehicle for work at the moment. They're pretty much bulletproof and very reliable; you rarely have to touch them. But I want to find an early pre-production example, which will add value to the Collection in the long-term as well as earning its keep meantime.



OE64 on this Discovery Sport is a factory reg

There's a picture on the wall behind me as I write of a Freelander 2, registration VX56 EFR, on the launch in Morocco, and something like that is exactly what I want. Funnily enough, I've just found two pre-production vehicles for sale via a Facebook group, but neither of them is quite early enough for me. I'll keep looking until the right one turns up.

As for petrol or diesel, I don't mind; they're both good engines in Freelander 2, although I'd be very happy if I found a petrol version because they are rare, most buyers having chosen diesel when the Government told us it was the right thing to do... The petrol engine in Freelander 2 is actually a Volvo straight-six, and we have a prototype vehicle in the Dunsfold Collection that still has the Volvo logo on its cam cover and oil filler cap!

Another Land Rover that I'm actively seeking out is a nice pre-production Discovery 2, because we don't actually have a single example of a Discovery 2 in the Collection. I'm not a great fan of them, to be honest, and the ones I've seen that have good provenance have turned out to be too rusty to make me want to bother with them. But there must be others out there: S-VOA and S-VHP are the registrations to look out for. If you see one for sale, let me know.

If you want to get some idea of the factory plates that were used on pre-production and launch vehicles during the 1990s and 2000s, the CVC Register website – www.cvcregister.co.uk – is a

good place to look. Frustratingly, from the mid-1990s onwards, Land Rover started putting fake plates on vehicles used for official photos, so the only way to find the genuine registrations is in period magazine road tests.

As I've said before in these pages, you also have to beware of private plates when looking at vehicles that are for sale. My Range Rover Sport mentioned earlier was on a private plate for much of its life, and only reverted to its original factory number when its last owner sold the vehicle. If you'd seen it on the street before that, you wouldn't have had a clue as to its real age. There are various phone apps that will let you check a vehicle for previous registrations, but they usually charge you for the privilege these days.

Having bought the Sport, I must confess that I've got the hots for a Range Rover Sport SVR – a mate came to visit in one recently, and when I heard it go up the road, I thought "Blow me, that sounds good" – or words to that effect. I'll be replacing my Discovery 4 before too long, and I have a sneaking feeling that its successor will be a supercharged V8. A diesel? Nah. No thanks.

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.