

DUNSFOLD DIARIES

With Philip Bashall



Four-door soft top should have a taller Swiss-spec windscreen, which Philip will shortly be reinstating

The best Land Rover they never made

Here's why Philip thinks the Stage Two 100in could have been the best Land Rover ever

EVERYONE HAS their favourite Land Rover, whether it's a lights-behind-the-grille Series I, Defender Td5, or a Freelander. But one of my personal favourites is 'the Land Rover that never was' – the Stage Two 100in of the late 1970s.

For me, the 100in could have been the perfect Land Rover: a good-looking vehicle that's neither too long nor too short, and which would be great for towing. Sadly, it was never put into production, but about 36 pre-pro examples were built – and I'm hoping to gather together nine survivors for the Land Rover Legends show at Bicester Heritage this coming May 25-26.

This year is the 40th anniversary of the 100in, a project that was, sadly, still-born. It was a spin-off from Land

Rover's early experiments with coil-sprung vehicles, the project known as Stage Two (Stage One being the V8-powered Series Landies). After testing some coil-sprung mules at Eastnor, Land Rover had realised by 1977 that coil suspension was the way to go, and it was thought that 100 and 110in-wheelbase vehicles – rather than 90 and 110 – might make better replacements for the Series III 88 and 109.

As the first step in the development process, Land Rover built at least four 100in test vehicles. None of them is known to survive today, but they would have used modified Range Rover chassis and V8 engines. At least one, registered VVC 701S, was built to military spec and is likely to have been the vehicle that was sent over to France for military vehicle trials. The French were looking to replace their venerable Hotchkiss licence-built

Jeeps, and Land Rover thought a 100in V8 might be right up their boulevard.

The trials were promising and so Land Rover pushed ahead with a further 15 vehicles; this time, closer to prototype standard in that they had custom chassis with deeper side rails and new outriggers. But then they decided they would rather buy Peugeot-built copies of Mercedes G-Wagens instead, and Land Rover's military-spec 100in V8 suddenly looked as though it might be redundant.

Potential salvation came from an unlikely quarter: Switzerland, which was also looking for a new military light vehicle. The Swiss being Swiss, even their army trucks have to be eco-friendly, and they demanded four-cylinder engines. Also, because they have a lot of traffic lights suspended high above their roads, they wanted taller windscreens. Both these features, and more, can be found in



Originally built as a soft top, this 100in was later fitted with a truck cab for brake pad testing in Sweden



Line drawings were done in period at Land Rover

the three prototypes that survive in the Dunsfold Collection.

All three of our 100in are quite different in specifications. EVC 12T is a Station Wagon hard top with a 2.25-litre petrol engine – and a three-speed automatic gearbox. BAC 779T is a truck-cab soft top, with a 3.5-litre V8 and a four-speed manual. And LGH 512T is a crew-cab full length soft top, with a 2.5-litre petrol and a unique five-speed gearbox.

What they have in common are the axles – Range Rover at the front, but a Salisbury drum-braked axle at the rear, with a limited-slip diff – and the fact that they're all left-hand drive. I have to confess that until recently that wasn't the case: when my father bought BAC 779T in the early 90s, he converted it to right-hand drive so that it was easier to use as an everyday car (I know, I know!). In the last couple of months I've taken the bull

by the horns and put it back to left-hand drive and 24 volt electrics, as it was built.

To me, this truck cab is the iconic 100in, with its V8 and four-speed gearbox. It's the vehicle that inspired TV vet Mark Evans to build his own 100in hybrid, which starred in the series *A 4x4 Is Born*, and I wish Land Rover had built some of these as the run-out model for the Defender, rather than the tricked-up Works V8. The slightly longer 100in wheelbase would have made it something really special – it would have been the mutt's nuts of Land Rovers.

But back to BAC, so to speak. This vehicle never had the Swiss-spec taller windscreen, because it didn't go to Switzerland. Instead, it was used for a later project of brake pad testing in Sweden, which is why it was fitted with a truck cab; originally it was a regular soft top. Two of the 100in prototypes were adapted in this way, with Deluxe trim and seats, to make them more user-friendly in the cold and snowy conditions, and they had Series III grilles tie-wrapped to the front to disguise them.

LGH 512T doesn't currently have a taller windscreen, either, but that's because I had to put a conventional screen on so that I could adapt a regular hood to fit – the original was custom-made. I still have the frame for the taller screen, however, and I'll have replacement glass cut in time for the Bicester show. This vehicle stood outside the British Motor Heritage museum at Gaydon for many years, and became very weather-beaten, so we had to make replacement rear doors for it. We used Series III Station Wagon rear doors as a starting point, but these of course have a straight, diagonal rear edge ahead of the rear wheel arch, while the edge on the 100in rear doors is curved. Altering the Series III door frames to match the



David Maingot's 100in soft-top, with 'Swiss' screen



Station Wagon's rear doors curve to match arches

curve was quite a job, but we were then able to re-use the 100in outer skins.

You may notice that the curved wheel arch extensions on LGH 512T don't quite match the profile of the fronts, either. That's because the originals were missing and I had to use some rubber extrusions as a stop-gap. None of Dunsfold's 100in are perfect examples, but none of them has been fully restored: instead, they have been conserved. They all drive, although the three-speed Chrysler Torqueflite automatic 'box in EVC 12T makes it dreadfully slow, being coupled to a 2.25-litre four-cylinder engine.

Maybe this incompatibility of engine and gearbox helped sway the Swiss Army into choosing G-Wagens as well; exhaust emissions were certainly an issue with the four-cylinders. These unsuccessful French and Swiss contract bids were setbacks for a military version of the 100in, and the civilian model proved just as unlucky. It seems that Land Rover's marketing department felt the 100in was too close to the 110, and yet didn't offer great enough advantages over the 90, to be a viable option. And so, as we all know, Land Rover's new coil-sprung models would debut as the Ninety and One Ten.

A few of the 100in prototypes escaped by the back door, however, and there's now a lot of interest in the Stage Two project. Research by journalist Emrys Kirby, collector David Maingot and myself is ongoing, and we hope that the Bicester show will finally nail down the 100in story.

Best guess so far is that 15 French vehicles, 20 Swiss and one Danish were built for the military trials. We've tracked down nine survivors, but we think there's at least one more still to be found.

Can anyone help us to make it ten, rather than nine, 100ins at Bicester in May?

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.