

DUNSFOLD DIARIES

With Philip Bashall



Getting to Stage One

Philip has bought another rarity – this time a Stage One prototype

RECENTLY, WHILE scanning some old photos, I came across the wonderful shot pictured above. It must have been taken on the off-road course at Solihull some time in 1979-80 and it shows a Stage One 109 V8 that's run into a spot of bother, with a Stage Two 100in close behind.

Finding this photo was very timely, for a couple of reasons. First, if you're a regular reader, you may remember that just a few of months ago I wrote about the Stage Two 100in Land Rovers that we have in the Dunsfold Collection. These were a short-lived 100in-wheelbase variant of the coil-sprung prototypes that Land Rover was experimenting with ahead of its transition from leaf-sprung Series IIIs. These 'coilers' were code-named Stage Two, and followed on closely from the V8-engined Series III 'leafers' that were dubbed Stage One.

Thanks to the knowledgeable people of the Stage Two group on Facebook, we

may know the identity of the 100in that's behind the Stage One. You can tell from the windscreen that it's one of a batch made for French military trials – a second batch, built for the Swiss Army, had custom taller windscreens, to suit the overhead traffic lights that the Swiss are so fond of. And it could be chassis number two, registered BAC 865T, a few digits away from one of the Dunsfold vehicles, which is BAC 779T. That's not 100 per cent certain, though.

The Stage One is unidentified but I suspect it's an early production vehicle rather than a pre-pro. The back of the photo is credited to the Plessey Company Ltd., which was a manufacturer of radio installations, and so – looking at the aerials – I'd guess the Stage One is 24 volt equipped. Because it's also left-hand drive, has a military-spec bumper and is painted a sand colour, it could be a military demonstrator intended for the Gulf states.

The Stage One is the second reason for mentioning this photo: on the ramp in my

workshop right now is the latest addition to the Dunsfold Collection, a prototype Stage One 109 pick-up. It was registered as THP 74R on April 15, 1977, and started life as a 2.25-litre Series III that was converted to take a V8. It's in my favourite colour, Export Sand, and with it also being left-hand drive and a Stage One and a pre-pro, it ticked all the boxes for me – I might have been less enthusiastic if it were painted white, red or black.

Export Sand is one of the longest-running colour options in Land Rover history. Bronze Green is paint code number one, and Export Sand is number four – and it ran from Series Is right through to Defenders. When you bear in mind that THP 74R is left-hand drive, and has a military-spec bumper, it's tempting to think that it may have been spec'd for military sales in the Middle East, but that's total speculation at the moment – I hope to find out more very soon.

THP 74R's early history isn't known, although the vehicle itself has been on enthusiasts' radar since the 1990s, when



collector Mike Street – who runs the company SHB 4x4 Hire – bought it from another dealer. At the time, he had no idea it was anything special and just took it in as a runaround. Fortunately, collector Robert Ivins bought it; then, more recently, another dealer acquired it and carried out a sympathetic restoration, before attempting to sell it at auction. The estimate was £15,000-17,000 but the bids didn't get anywhere near that and I was able to make a successful offer later on.

Well-known Land Rover photographer and author Nick Dimbleby did an article on the vehicle back in 1999, in which he said "there's no doubt that THP 74R has had a hard life and is now in need of some TLC". Well, he was right about that – from the holes in the load bay, I suspect it was fitted with a recovery crane at some point – but in fact the Stage One has survived in incredibly good condition. Nearly all the paint is original, apart from some repairs to the bulkhead, where the new paint has been carefully blended to match the old, and it still has its original engine, gearbox and axles... It's in remarkably good shape overall, with a genuine 36,000 miles recorded since new.

I have to credit the dealer I bought it from for restoring the vehicle with a light touch. The chassis was shot blasted, repaired where necessary and then powdercoated, and the wheels were refurbished, but he had the paintwork carefully polished and waxed so that it really shines without losing that all-important patina. My only major expense since buying has been to change the tyres for some Dunlop T29A lookalikes that are now made in Malaysia. They're useless on the road, and they would wear out very quickly on tarmac, but they look right and that's what's important to me!

Apart from fitting new tyres, and carrying out a full service, all I've done is



This Stage One has survived in remarkable condition, retaining its original paint and prototype grille badge

remove a few non-original parts that THP 74R was wearing when it went to auction – namely Defender side steps, rear mud-flaps and a new canvas tilt. I suspect these may have been fitted to increase its appeal to a US buyer, because being a left-hand drive V8 Land Rover that's over 25 years old would normally make it very attractive Stateside. However, if there's one thing that US Customs don't like, it's anomalies in the paperwork – and because this vehicle is a prototype, with a four-cylinder chassis number but a V8 engine, that probably explains why nobody snapped it up for export.

Unfortunately, I don't think THP 74R will be at the Land Rover Legends show at Bicester Heritage on May 25 – 26; I've already made the selection of Dunsfold Collection vehicles that will be on display, and I wouldn't dare drive the Stage One up the motorway on those imitation Dunlops! But we are hoping to contribute to a record gathering of nine 100in Stage

Twos at the show – and there's just a chance we could make it ten.

As I hinted in this column two months ago, a 'lost' 100in is believed to survive, possibly in Lincolnshire, where it was last sighted. I've just found a photo that I took of it in about 1989 (below), by which time it had probably already lain derelict for seven years. It did pass into the hands of an enthusiast later on, however. Does anyone know where it is now?



Who knows the whereabouts of this missing 100in?

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.