

DUNSFOLD DIARIES

WITH PHILIP BASHALL



Home after 45 years

When his father's old Series II trialler turned up on eBay, Philip just had to buy it

I'M A sentimental old fool, so when my late father Brian's Series II turned up on eBay last year, I had to buy it, even though it meant paying far too much for something that was practically a wreck. But this vehicle was a huge part of my life when I was growing up. As a kid, I travelled everywhere in it, usually sitting in the middle seat – or, if I was feeling really brave, in the rear tub in between the roll cage.

The reason this Series II was fitted with a roll cage was that in May 1971 it competed in the very first Welsh hill rally, named the Senior Service Hill Rally after the cigarettes made by tobacco company and rally sponsor Gallaher. My father decided he should enter this event in a Land Rover to help promote our family business, and bought a 1959 Series II in Bronze Green with a soft top, registered VAA 123. It would have been just over ten years old at the time and have a relatively

expensive purchase. He then repainted it in Old English White over dark blue (I think the blue was a Morris Minor colour) and stickered it up with Dunsfold Land Rovers lettering.

Albert Wiltshire, who ran the agricultural supplies business next door, welded up a roll-cage for it from box-section steel, which was bolted to square plates on the chassis via holes cut in the floor. I'm pleased to say that the business is still going strong and so is Albert himself, although he can't remember exactly how he built the roll cage... "It was 50 years ago now, boy!"

Other mods included heavy-duty rear springs and dampers to compensate for the weight of the cage, heavy-duty axle cases, seat belts, multiple-washer jets mounted over the windscreen, engine waterproofing, stops to secure the 'elephant hide' seats, a single wiper switch, and twin Hella horns. Ironically, I still had those Hella horns lying around

the workshop until just a couple of years ago, when I threw them out, thinking I'd never need them again!

My father entered the first Senior Service Hill Rally in May 1971 with business partner Frank Smith as navigator, but they were excluded for a technical infringement. Later that year, in September, there was a second hill rally, which was opened up to foreign entrants and dubbed the Senior Service International Hill Rally, and this time my father finished second overall in VAA 123.

After a relatively short rallying career, which included some AWDC and Rover club events, the Series II was repainted Marine Blue and fitted with a hardtop for use as Brian's daily driver. However, his new partner, my step mum Joanne (in the picture, top right), didn't care for it and so VAA was sold to a smallholder in the mid-70s. And that was the last I heard of it, until Series II expert Paul Bohan happened to see it for sale on eBay.



VAA was repainted Marine Blue in the mid-70s

Without Paul's incredible knowledge of all things Series II, the true identity of VAA 123 might never have come to light. The vehicle had been repainted red when it was used by a paragliding outfit at a Lincolnshire airfield, and it had lost its original registration. But Paul discovered that it was VAA 123 and tipped me off. Of course, I had to buy it, even though it was in terrible condition: the bulkhead wasn't even attached to the chassis!

Nevertheless, despite years of neglect, VAA had remained remarkably original, bodily and mechanically. During the Christmas break in 2018 I started a full restoration to put it back into 1971 Senior Service Hill Rally specification. I decided to replace one of the rear tub sides, which Brian had dinged and was full of filler, and the rear light panels, which had been butchered by a subsequent owner to take nasty over-sized tail lights.

Sadly, the registration VAA 123 is now on a modern Audi, but I bought VAA 999 as a close substitute. Really, the plates should be the white and yellow reflective types that it wore in 1971, but the black and silver pressed plates do look good. The reborn VAA's first outing was to the Dunsfold village fête in May this year, and it was amazing how many people remembered it from back in the day.

So far, I haven't had time to make up a replacement roll cage but otherwise VAA is very close to how it was when my father owned it. One change I've made is to fit 7 x 16 Michelin XCL tyres rather than the 6 x 16 Bar Grips that Brian used: the 6s would have given better acceleration and low-down torque on the steep sections of the hill rallies, whereas the 7 XCLs are more suited to the kind of road driving that I'll be doing.

Although VAA has been fully restored, it still smells and sounds exactly the same as I remember from my school days. And it still does 'bangers', a Brian Bashall trademark – turn the ignition off as you back off the throttle, then immediately switch it on again, and the exhaust will backfire loudly! Maybe I should weld a strap around the silencer to hold it together, just like my father did...

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 see more.



Brian Bashall tackles the water splash in VAA during one of the Senior Service Hill Rallies



More than 40 years later, VAA was in a sorry state after being used as an airfield runabout



Now resplendent in its old trialling colours of white and blue, VAA is back in its spiritual home