DUNSFOLD DIARIES

WITH PHILIP BASHALL

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Despite the 'S' registration, this Carmichael FT6 fire tender was converted from a 1960s Series IIA 109

Going Forward

Philip discusses the pros and cons of Forward Controls

SOME YEARS AGO, I owned a Forward Control Land Rover that had four slots cut into the flat-bed behind the cab. The previous keeper put the slots in to locate the wheels of the 80in Series I that he transported to off-road trials in the back of the Forward Control. Try doing that with any other kind of Land Rover!

That unique load-carrying ability is what made the Forward Control so special in Land Rover's product range of the 1960s. The idea was simple: move the driver and passenger forward so they're sitting right at the front of the vehicle and you straightaway free up a lot more load space. By adding a separate frame on top of the chassis to carry a load bed, Land Rover could offer a vehicle that could carry 30cwt, or one-and-a-half tons, yet still had unrivalled off-road capability.

This design was known as the Forward Control, for obvious reasons, and was offered as a 109in Series IIA from September 1963. Land Rover had experimented with an 88in version, too, but decided not to go ahead with it.

I recently came across a black-and-white photo of a Forward Control chassis, reproduced here on the page opposite, which is extremely interesting because it appears to show a prototype Series IIA. Certainly there are lots of unusual features: vent hinges on the bulkhead that date it to 1959-60; early-type half-shafts; a plain front panel; the strange location of the choke and hand throttle at the back of the seat box...

The chassis is also left-hand-drive, and the cab appears to be painted Bronze Green and is fitted with oversized US-spec indicators. It's a weird vehicle and not something I've seen before.

Philip used to own this SIIA, with fixed-side body

The Series IIA Forward Control wasn't a total success for a couple of reasons. First, because Land Rover's 2.25-litre, four-cylinder engine struggled to pull its extra weight along; the diesel version had an even harder job. So, from August 1963, Land Rover offered the 2.6-litre straight-six from the Rover P4 saloon as an option. The Forward Control was the first Land Rover available with a six-cylinder engine but, as James Taylor explains in his excellent new book *The Complete Catalogue Of The Land Rover*, initially the 'six' was for export only, because there weren't that many engines spare while the P4 was still in production.

Dunsfold's Series IIB chassis number one is powered – if that's the right word – by a 2.25-litre diesel

Rarely-seen picture of a prototype Series IIA Forward Control chassis – note the left-hand drive

Swiss fire service had several Forward Controls

Prototype Land Rover bus remained a one-off

The other problem with these early Forward Controls was that they had a standard Land Rover track and therefore could be a bit unstable off-road. Which is why, in January 1967, the Series IIB was introduced, with heavy-duty ENV axles and a wider track. Unlike the regular 109in Land Rover, the Series IIB Forward Control was called a 110, since its wheelbase was actually 109.75in. The headlights were also repositioned lower down – it's the easy way to tell a IIA and a IIB apart, although a few late IIAs were made with the revised arrangement.

The Dunsfold Collection has the first production Series IIB Forward Control, chassis 33500001A and registered NXC 511D. It's pictured at the top of this page shortly after a total restoration, when we lent it to a Land Rover event in 2007 to celebrate the launch of the Puma-engined Defender. I bought it in 2004 as a rusty old pig of a thing, but complete and very original in every respect, including engine, gearbox and axles.

You can just make out in this shot the diagonal bracing bars for the canvas tilt, which run from the corner posts to the inboard ribs that support the tilt. There are no central posts, which means that, on a dropside body, the sides can be lowered while the roof is still in place. Parts for this hood frame are now very scarce, along with other components unique to the Forward Control such as the front panel and the bottoms of the doors. The chassis, too, is different from any other Land Rover's.

By the time the Series IIB Forward Control came along, Rover had stopped making the P4 saloon and so there was no problem sourcing its six-cylinder engines. Land Rover therefore dropped the four-cylinder petrol but retained the 2.25-litre diesel as an option – which is what's fitted to chassis number one. She's a slow old thing: the transfer box has slightly lower gearing to compensate for the diesel's modest power and she's flat-out at 45mph. You can't fit an overdrive, either, because the gearbox (which was shared with the One Ton) has a longer mainshaft – and a lot of Forward Controls were fitted with power take-offs to drive optional equipment such as a hydraulic centre-mounted winch, a fire engine pump or a cherry picker. The latter were popular with electricity boards, and we serviced quite a few at my father's garage back in the day.

At least the Forward Control's 9.00x16 tyres helped raise its cruising speed a little. The Series IIB wheels had a significantly greater offset to help improve its track, which means they are now some of the most desirable Land Rover steelies for off-roading because the offset improves the steering lock: you're looking at £600 for a set of four these days. And the step ring that was fitted to each front wheel is absolutely vital for climbing up into a Forward Control – there's just nothing to stand on otherwise!

Once you're in the cab, however, a Forward Control is much like a regular Land Rover to drive, apart from the steering column being a bit more upright. Series IIAs had a floor-mounted 'pudding stirrer' gearchange that wasn't very easy to use, so on the IIB it was relocated to the centre tunnel. The low top speed is the most limiting factor for drivability.

The Forward Control was never a big seller for Land Rover, and the V8-powered 101 of the early 1970s was for Army use only. That didn't stop independent companies from offering their own versions, particularly fire tenders from the likes of Carmichael and HCB-Angus. The picture that heads the page opposite is of a Carmichael FT6 that used to be in the Dunsfold Collection, and which was converted from a standard 109 Series IIA by mounting a second bulkhead at the front of the chassis. The driver and passenger sit either side of the engine, while their old seatboxes are now used by the crew behind them!

Despite their character, it's the Series II Forward Controls' restricted usefulness that keeps values down (£10,000 will buy you the very best) – plus, of course, the space you need to garage one. Although you could always park your 80in on top to save space, of course...