

This unique and fascinating vehicle was Land Rover's first attempt at catering to the recreational market

YELLOW PERIL

Restored over ten years ago by Chris Herbert, the Yellow Peril is in great shape

EXACTLY when Land Rover started to think seriously about the recreational, lifestyle and leisure market is open to debate, but whichever way you look at it, the vehicle you see here undoubtedly has a powerful claim to have been a pioneer. Why? Because in my view it ticks all the boxes in terms of dramatic styling, an eye-catching paint job, big wheels with chunky tyres, short wheelbase, a side-hinged swing-out tailgate carrying the spare, and a 3.5-litre V8 – all things that together set it aside from the standard utility Land Rovers on offer at the time. And all this in early 1981.

In terms of the use of the 3.5 V8, it's fair to say that the Rover Motor Company of North America led the way in the mid-1960s by installing a 1963 Oldsmobile F85 engine (which was a version of the Buick 3.5-litre V8 that Rover acquired the manufacturing rights to in 1965) in a Series IIA 88-inch station wagon. This was the famous Mimosa Yellow vehicle known as Golden Rod, but fitting the V8 was really more to do with trying to get Solihull HQ back in England to address persistent feedback from US customers that the standard vehicles were underpowered and gutless, and to try to persuade Land Rover's top brass that a V8-powered Land Rover would clean up in the US market.

Golden Rod was sent to Solihull for assessment but didn't get the positive reaction that its American designers and builders had probably hoped for... Nevertheless, in late 1966 and early 1967 the factory explored the idea further →



Still looking cool and purposeful the Yellow Peril is a very good-looking Land Rover!



Peter Galilee's forensic research revealed how the Drayton Road team fitted Ninety wheelarches to a Series III



Black detailing against the Inca Yellow is a good combination



by building three V8-powered Series IIA short wheelbase vehicles, although it was soon apparent that the standard transmission could not handle the significant increases in power and torque, and the project went no further. As Geof Miller told me, there were also concerns that the general handling of the 88 was simply not good enough to deal with the higher speeds delivered by the V8.

Without lifting the bonnet there is little other than the sound of the wonderful V8 exhaust to differentiate these vehicles from a standard Series IIA, so to my mind they cannot be seen as anything more than engineering test beds.

Rover North America seems to have given the construction of Golden Rod more thought, because it was built with upgraded brakes, Rover P5 front and rear diff assemblies, and bespoke wheels with wider tyres, as well as a host of other tweaks including an adjustable driver's seat (something that the factory said was impossible to do), a second fuel tank from an Austin-Healey sports car, chromed front bumper and rear over-riders, heater, air conditioning, rear door-mounted spare, wind defectors on the rear body to help keep the windows clear, and a bespoke exhaust system.

Two of the Solihull Series IIA V8s were built as soft tops and one as a station wagon, and they were eventually assigned to the 100-inch Interim Station Wagon development programme. Only one survives today, BXC 975G, in the care of the Dunsfold Collection. You can read the full story of these fascinating vehicles in LRM October 2023.

Fast forward to 1976 and it was Leyland Australia that was the next to experiment, with its locally built Series III Game limited edition model. In production for about three years, it was a standard Series III station wagon with a few

"It was known as the Yellow Peril. Yellow for obvious reasons and Peril as it was a bit of a handful"

Subtle but distinctive forward slant to rear hood hoop can be seen clearly here



cosmetic alterations including 15-inch white spoke wheels and bigger tyres, bespoke wheel arch extensions, a swing-away rear spare wheel carrier, and some GAME decals. It retained the standard 2.25-litre petrol engine and every Game was painted, you guessed it, yellow, although in this case it was Yellow Devil.

From the early 1970s, Land Rover enthusiasts had been salvaging V8 engines from scrapyards and fitting them to their Series vehicles with varying degrees of success, frequently for use in the off-road trials that were so popular back in the day. Specialists such as Castle Engineering and Phillips offered adaptor plates for DIY conversions, so that owners could create something that the factory didn't offer.

The Series III you see on these pages was built in early 1981 and registered PRW 819W on 3 March. Like Golden Rod and the Australian Series III Game, it is also painted yellow, Inca Yellow, which was a standard British Leyland colour that had made its Land Rover debut on the Stage 1109-inch V8.

Staff Dewson was Land Rover's Principal Engineer at the time and takes up the story. "I remember the vehicle being constructed at the company's Drayton Road Vehicle Engineering facility. My boss at the time was an Australian named Bob Platt, who was the Executive Engineer in charge of current model development. Bob was keen on the leisure market, and he was the driving force behind making the vehicle. Mike Sheehan was the overall boss at Drayton Road and was also keen to investigate the leisure market, particularly in the US. Really, it was just a look-see vehicle, a concept if you like, rather than a prototype."

Before joining the Drayton Road team, Bob Platt had worked in Leyland Australia's



Bespoke roll cage built by Drayton Road team complete with beautifully made grab-handles



Chassis plate added after the vehicle was sold by Land Rover



Snapped at Leeds dealer, Arnold Wilson, by Jonathan Stockwell



Yellow Peril was the grandfather of the NAS 90 prototype

bus and truck division, and he must have been aware of the Series III Game and the commercial and marketing thinking behind it.

At Drayton Road, the result was rather different from the Game station wagon: a V8-powered soft top 88in with a Stage 1 front end, wheelarch eyebrows, bespoke roll cage, custom-made sloping rear hoops with a tailored plastic hood with big side windows and a zip-up rear panel, black painted body cappings and front bumper, wide aftermarket white wheels and chunky tyres, and that Inca Yellow paint job with decal side stripes. According to Staff, the chassis number V8 88 LR32 means that it was the 32nd project since number one in the Series III range.

"It was known as the Yellow Peril," John Faulkner, the junior engineer who did a lot of the work, told me. "Yellow for obvious reasons, and Peril as it was a bit of a handful. The leaf springs were rubbish, and on the road one or other of the front wheels was usually off the ground." Staff Dewson agrees. "When the vehicle was finished, I took it for a drive around Birmingham. The ride was awful!"

Astonishingly, in December 1982 the Yellow Peril was sold into the dealer network and appeared on the forecourt of BL dealer Arnold G Wilson Limited in Leeds, where it was photographed by Jonathan Stockwell with a sticker price on the windscreen showing £6995. The custom wheels and tyres had been taken off before it was sold and replaced with standard wheels and tyres, which looked slightly ridiculous under the wheelarch eyebrows. Some commentators have speculated over the years that the vehicle had been 'dressed-up' to look like a DIY enthusiast's special, but that theory can be thoroughly debunked now – it was all an official company job.

Staff Dewson remembers heading off to a custom wheel specialist and buying the wheels for the Yellow Peril. "They cost £800, which was a lot of money in those days, and that's why they were removed before the vehicle was sold. The idea for a 'leisure market Land Rover' would be shelved for a few more years until it was dusted off again in 1987 when the one-off Cariba appeared, complete with the wheels that we'd used on the Yellow Peril."

The name of the person who bought the Yellow Peril from the Leeds dealer is unknown (if you know, we'd love to hear from you) but it reappeared for sale a couple of years later with Renault dealer, Fultons of Durham, and local lad and diesel Land Rover owner Rob Messer bought it for £3000 with just over 30,000 miles on the clock. Rob promptly fitted a tuned V8 that had been fitted in a mate's Morris Marina day racer, which took the original 90-odd horses in the de-tuned V8 fitted at Drayton Road up to an estimated 200bhp. That engine remains in the truck today, making it an interesting drive, to say the least...

Sadly, it was around this time that the original front seats were replaced and lost, together with the unique forward-facing folding seats in the back that had been fabricated by the Drayton Road team. The rear sloping hood hoop was also modified to accept a standard cover, although these changes are easily reversible. The custom-made black hood has been lost. Fortunately, the original engine was preserved and is still with the vehicle today.

Rob used Yellow Peril initially as his daily driver and kept it for 16 years before selling it to his younger cousin John in 2002, by which time it had covered around 61,000 miles. It was John who contacted LRO's Peter Galilee to see if he



could find out more about what Rob and John thought might be some kind of prototype vehicle. In early 2004, Peter carried out what amounted to a deep forensic examination of the vehicle that convinced him that it had indeed been built by the company. His lengthy report on the Yellow Peril is still in the history file over 20 years later and makes fascinating reading.

Peter mentioned the vehicle to Roger Crathorne, who recalled something yellow and loud, and steered Peter in the direction of Staff Dewson, who of course was able to confirm that it had been built at Drayton Road.

Peter's article entitled 'Blast from the Past' appeared in LRO in July 2004 and is well worth reading, especially if you're interested in how he went about verifying the vehicle's factory provenance. Among the many interesting conclusions that Peter reached was the way the Drayton Road team had fabricated the wheelarches. "The best proof of this rare vehicle's prototype status comes from the wheelarches," Peter wrote. "Plastic eyebrows were available in the factory at the time this vehicle was built, but they don't fit a Series III. So how's it done? At the front, the eyebrow sits lower than on a Ninety or One Ten, with excess plastic cut away at the bottom. The Series III wing outer panel has been taken from production without the aperture cut out, then the aperture has been formed by hand to suit the eyebrow.

"At the rear it's the same. Series III arches have a long, Farina-style trailing edge: the Ninety/One Ten eyebrow is too short. The solution: two complete new body side skins have been fitted over the original sides, taken from production without the wheelarch cut-out. Who can do such things? Only the factory. It's from clues like this that a prototype is validated."





Bespoke side hinged tailgate with reinforcement plates on the outside and inside of the tub

SEE IT AT DUNSFOLD

The Yellow Peril will be on display at Dunsfold's Autumn Open Day on 20 September, together with the only surviving factory-built Series IIA V8, the two Stage 1 V8 88 prototypes, and the Collection's NAS 90 prototype. There will also be a Defender 50th Anniversary V8, and JLR Classic will be exhibiting a Works V8, making it a truly unique gathering. Tickets are on sale on the Dunsfold Collection website: dunsfoldcollection.co.uk

John Messer barely used the vehicle after Peter's article was published, and for the next six years it was almost permanently on a SORN. In 2010 it was bought by Chris Herbert who grew up in the same County Durham village as Rob Messer and had been looking for an interesting restoration project.

"Rob and I were into Ford Escorts back in the day, but I remember him driving round the village in the Land Rover. You didn't see anything like that in those days. I was actually looking for another Escort but when I saw an old Lightweight in Newcastle one day, I started to think that maybe a Land Rover project might be interesting.

"I heard that Rob's old Land Rover might be for sale, and I ended up buying it from John and the

renovation started almost straightaway, helped by my nephew Andrew Herbert. The chassis had a few holes and needed new outriggers, but that was all pretty straightforward. It needed new door tops, footwell panels and rear tub sections – all the usual things, really. When I bought it, I didn't know it had been in *LRO* or that it was definitely a factory prototype. John never mentioned any of that, and I was really shocked when I found out.

"It was finished in 2014, and I contacted Peter Galilee and invited him to come and see it, and that resulted in a second article in *LRO* in December 2014 entitled 'Blast from the Past Rides Again' that brought the story up to date. I'm really pleased that it's now appearing in *LRM*.

"I've owned it for 15 years and was aware that the two Stage 1 88 V8 prototypes are part of the Dunsfold Collection, and having decided to part with it I thought I would offer it to Dunsfold. I was delighted when they said they wanted to add it to the museum collection. It is a unique and important part of Land Rover history, and it's now where it really belongs."

I couldn't agree more, and I think the Yellow Peril really does represent the beginning of the recreational, sporty, cool and powerful 'leisure and lifestyle' Land Rover.

It was followed by the Ninety V8-based Cariba and then the production Defender 90SV (sadly without a V8), and there is a clear link to the first NAS 90 V8 (yellow again), and the Defender SVX 60th Anniversary model (no V8). And finally, of course, to JLR Classic's Works Bespoke V8 programme, which is probably the pinnacle of the company's pursuit of the recreational sports utility market. And at its prices you can have any shade of yellow you want!



Chris Herbert, left, with nephew Andrew Herbert and Rob Messer