

# ADIEU TO ADA

The oldest Land Rover in service with Mountain Rescue England and Wales has been retired and is going to be preserved at the Dunsfold Collection



**A**T the end of May last year, the North Dartmoor Search and Rescue Team announced that it had taken delivery of a new Land Rover. However, it was not strictly speaking 'new' because it was, in fact, already 12-years old. The vehicle in question is a 2013 Defender 110, and it was acquired from Hampshire Search and Rescue to replace an even older 110 at North Dartmoor, a 1993 model that has been known all its life as Ada. And this story is about Ada.

Why Ada? Because when it was bought new by the Langdale Ambleside Mountain Rescue team in the Lake District, the money to pay for it was generously donated by local benefactor Ada Hillard, whose charitable foundation is still doing good works throughout the UK by making grants to eligible registered charities.

Ada's Defender 110 served in the Lakes for 16 years before transferring south to join the North Dartmoor team, and at 32-years of age Ada is the oldest serving Land Rover in Mountain Rescue England and Wales.

And it's her age that led North Dartmoor to take the decision to retire her, even though she has less than 42,000 miles on the clock. →

# “THE DEFENDER WEARS THE SCARS OF ITS LONG CAREER WITH PRIDE”



North Dartmoor Search and Rescue Team vehicles on Yes Tor when Ada handed over her callsign to her successor

As the press announcement in May stated, ‘At the grand age of 32, her age is beginning to show, and although she is road safe and has low mileage, she is becoming unreliable for Search and Rescue operations, and it is time to retire her and replace her with something newer’.

North Dartmoor’s press announcement concluded by inviting anyone interested in acquiring Ada to notify the team of their interest and indicated that an online auction would be held before the end of 2025. Meanwhile, plans were put in hand for ‘Dart 51’, which was Ada’s callsign, to retire in grand style with a special event on Dartmoor on 7 December.

And what a magnificent send-off that event was. Ada was at the head of a convoy that left



Bonnet decal celebrates the generosity of Lake District benefactor Ada Hillard



Distinctive logo of Mountain Rescue England and Wales on the spare wheel cover

Rowtor car park on Dartmoor, about a mile or so south of Okehampton, and drove on old army tracks to the summit of Yes Tor, which at 2031 feet (619 metres) is the second-highest point on Dartmoor.

Accompanying Ada were her successor and the other Land Rover vehicles on both North Dartmoor’s fleet and neighbouring Dartmoor team’s, together with members of Devon and Cornwall 4x4 Response and their vehicles. At the summit, Ada handed over her Dart 51 callsign to her successor. You can find a delightful video of Ada’s farewell convoy on North Dartmoor’s Facebook page and on YouTube.

The story was picked up by a number of media outlets, including BBC Devon and local newspapers in the West Country. It was also reported in the United States, notably by Greg Fitzgerald on his Atlantic British Roverlog, who noted: ‘She’s old enough that you can import her to the USA where her Battenberg decals and long history in the English wilds would make her a story at any club meet-up’.

It was Dunsfold Collection and LRM snapper Craig who first spotted the story of Ada’s imminent retirement and sale on social media and swiftly drew it to the attention of Dunsfold’s trustees. It was quickly decided that Dunsfold would approach North Dartmoor Search and Rescue Team and register the Collection’s interest, because in Dunsfold’s view it would be a shame if the vehicle was sold at auction and lost the mountain rescue branding and all the paraphernalia that make it unique in the long association between the Land Rover and the UK’s

mountain rescue services.

In early January, Dunsfold made a powerful case to North Dartmoor that the vehicle deserved to be preserved and not turned into an off-roader or a camper or lost overseas. North Dartmoor’s board, led by chair James Watts, considered the matter and responded at the beginning of February. They would be delighted to accept Dunsfold’s offer, James reported, and James and some of the team, keen to see for themselves where Ada would be spending her retirement, would deliver the 110 to Dunsfold in person.

And that’s why snapper Craig and I are here at Dunsfold with Philip Bashall and assistant curator Josh Richardson, awaiting the arrival of Ada and the team, who set off from Okehampton this morning at 08:00. Ada has a tracker on board, and James has obligingly given us a link to it so we can watch the 110’s sedate progress up the A303 and across country to Dunsfold. In fact, we know the team are here before they do.

One of North Dartmoor’s trustees, Harry Price, team member Ian Cann, equipment officer Trevor Bishop, and chair of trustees James are soon enjoying fresh coffee and Jan’s homemade sausage rolls while Philip gives them a potted history of the Collection, before we all troop outside to examine Ada.

The Defender wears the scars of its long career with pride but overall is in pretty good shape. True to his word, James has ensured that Ada is in exactly the condition she was in when she completed her final day in service. All the Mountain Rescue and Ambulance decals are still in place, as is the North Dartmoor Search and



The Dunsfold and North Dartmoor teams when NDSART chair James Watts, second right, handed over the keys



Ada arrives at her new home at Dunsfold

Rescue Team signage. It’s touching to see the name Ada depicted in decals on the bonnet sides below the windscreens.

The radio equipment is still installed, although the radio itself has been replaced with a model that is no longer current. Blue lights front and rear are all functional, and the roof rack remains in place together with its red tarpaulin cover, which was used to store stretchers.

Inside is a bespoke dog guard behind the rear seats, but this folds down to allow a casualty on a stretcher to be placed inside the vehicle with space for a rescue team member to treat them. It



Ada retains all her search and rescue livery



In preservation she retains everything, including grille-mounted blue lights and winch



Luggage area divider easily removed so interior can accommodate a patient on a stretcher

has been used on numerous occasions during Ada's service with North Dartmoor. "Search and Rescue team members throughout England and Wales are trained as Remote Rescue Medical Technicians," James explains. "This results in a qualification that allows rescue volunteers to provide medical care and critical interventions to injured and ill casualties in remote and dangerous situations. When we have extracted a person on a stretcher to the nearest point we can access with a Land Rover, it can still be up to an hour's drive before we can get to the nearest point where we can meet an ambulance. Being able to load a stretcher into a Land Rover saves hours of carrying if that would otherwise be required to reach the ambulance."

There isn't much documentation with the vehicle other than a couple of MoT certificates and some service records, and Philip wonders when the timing belt was last replaced. No one from the team seems to know, and it transpires that the vehicle has been serviced for many years by a distribution company based in Cullompton, named Gregory's. "I understand that someone close to the company's owners was rescued by the team," explains James. "From that day onwards Gregory's kindly serviced all our vehicles at no charge."

"At one point the gearbox needed some work, and while Gregory's offered to remove and replace it, the company couldn't help with the rebuild. It was going to be an expensive job that would stretch the charity's finances, so we hunted around and Exeter Gearboxes kindly offered to do the reconditioning work for free, if we could provide the necessary reconditioning kit. Someone then introduced us to someone else, and that led to us being offered the reconditioning kit free of charge, which meant that the whole job was completed for free, which



Roof rack and cover designed to store easily accessible stretchers

was a very happy outcome for us." North Dartmoor's website and social media pages list a number of the significant incidents the team has been involved with over the years, and clearly Ada would have attended many of them, James says. "Ada would have participated in several hundred call-outs during her time with North Dartmoor. She was also instrumental in coordinating civilian evacuations following the discovery of World War II unexploded bombs in Exeter in 2021 and Plymouth in 2024. She also supported evacuations and welfare checks during the 'Beast from the East' storm in 2018.

"One of the biggest and most challenging outdoor events in the UK today is the annual Ten Tors Challenge, which is aimed solely at young people between the ages of 14 and 19. The event takes place on northern Dartmoor during May, starting and finishing at Okehampton Camp, and taking in ten nominated tors in under two days. Every year the Ten Tors is attempted by 2400 teenagers in 400 teams of six, and they must be completely self-sufficient, carrying all that they need to complete their route and stay out overnight safely. Since 2008, Ada has been part of the North Dartmoor Search and Rescue Team presence at the Ten Tors Challenge.

"And then there was the memorable call-out last year to locate a dangerously hypothermic runner. Unfortunately for me, I was the driver and as I crept through a raging ford halfway up Yes Tor I managed to tear off the exhaust on a submerged rock. It wrapped itself around the front axle so we had to cut it off before we could continue. Nevertheless, the runner was rescued and recovered fully."

I ask James if there were many expressions of interest in the vehicle after North Dartmoor's press release and the subsequent media coverage, and he tells me there were around a dozen formal responses, all of which were



Ada on a call-out amidst the splendour of North Dartmoor



North Dartmoor team members recovering stranded motorists during the 2018 'Beast From The East' storm

## “THE POTENTIAL PURCHASERS WERE PLEASED THAT ADA WAS GOING TO BE PRESERVED”



Ada on duty during the Through The Darkness Ultra Event on Dartmoor

### THE NORTH DARTMOOR VEHICLE FLEET

The North Dartmoor Search and Rescue Team is based at Otterhampton and is one of four teams within the Mountain Rescue England and Wales Dartmoor Rescue Group (DRG). The majority of its call-out area comprises the northern part of Dartmoor, including Dartmoor's highest peaks. However, a large proportion covers the area from Bude to mid-Devon and across into Exeter. Team members also support their neighbouring teams within DRG, on Exmoor, as well as both the Cornwall teams. Additionally, NDSRT has assisted with flooded areas outside the southwest over many years by providing water rescue technicians. To discover more, go to [ndsart.org.uk](http://ndsart.org.uk) or find the rescue team on Facebook.

- DART 71 (T522 RVA) Defender 110 3001d, ex-Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service. Repainted white outside by NDSART although still red inside.
- DART 61 (YK10 EXK) Defender 110 Puma 2.4 double-cab, ex-Caldar Valley Mountain Rescue Team. Acquired in 2025.
- DART 51 (0Y13 ZYR) Defender 110 Puma 2.2, ex-Hampshire Search & Rescue Team. Acquired in 2025.
- DART 01 (WA72 UPD) LWB Mercedes Sprinter, the NDSART control vehicle which houses mapping and search management computers, radios and a stock of kit. Purchased new.



Ada leads the convoy of NDSART vehicles and others during her farewell drive to Yes Tor

from the UK although it was clear that one or two were representing potential overseas buyers.

"When our board decided to accept Dunsfold's offer and concluded we did not need to auction Ada, I called all of the interested parties personally, to explain that she would be going to a prominent national museum," he says. "The vast majority of the potential purchasers thought that was an ideal outcome and were pleased that Ada was going to be preserved."

"Dunsfold really is the perfect home for Ada," James tells me as he and the team complete their tour of the Collection. "We are absolutely delighted that she will enjoy her well-earned retirement here. Many of our volunteers have a very strong connection with the vehicle, and absolutely everyone on the team is delighted that she has been preserved, not just for the benefit of future generations but as a testament to the hard work and commitment of the many volunteers who have served in her. Handing her over to Dunsfold was actually quite emotional!"

"It was only a couple of months ago that we reported the arrival of Annie the Ambulance at Dunsfold, an ex-Belgian military Minerva field ambulance, donated by Mike and Paddy Hardiman," Philip tells James as we say our goodbyes. "It's wonderful to see another historically important ambulance joining the Collection, especially one that has spent its entire life supporting the incredible volunteers in two of the UK's Mountain Rescue teams."