GARY PUSEY CRAIG PUSEY, GEOF MILLER, AND DUNSFOLD COLLECTION ARCHIVE

THE FIRST V8 LAND ROVERS

Restomod V8 Series Land Rovers and Defenders are all the rage now, but they had much more illustrious and groundbreaking ancestors over 50 years ago...

Stunning pale blue paint job with matching wheels draws attention to this anything-but-standard Series IIA

'DURING the mid-1960s, Land Rover owners across America sent hundreds of letters to the New York offices of the Rover Motor Company of North America,' wrote Michael Green 20 years ago in an article that can still be found online. 'The letters eventually reached the president of the company, J B McWilliams, and he noted that they all contained the same complaints about their 2.25-litre Land Rovers: 'lack of road speed, not enough horsepower, towing capacity is great but it takes forever to get anywhere, it slows down too much while climbing a grade...'. The letters arrived in their droves as American drivers, traditionally cosseted in huge vehicles with massive engines, found the Land Rover's motor just too small.' Clearly, something had to be done about it.

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The Buick-derived 3.5-litre V8 was a very tight fit but the original position of the radiator panel was retained

The view seen by many a surprised car driver who thought the pale blue Land Rover alongside them was 'just a farm truck'

Michael's father, Richard F Green, was 'at that time Rover's Western Zone Product Development Engineer, and he flew to New York to attend a meeting at which Project BOP was initiated.' In short order, McWilliams and his team settled on an 88in station wagon as the basis for a conversion that would be unlike anything seen before: a Land Rover powered by a locally-sourced 1963 Oldsmobile F85 engine, which was a version of the Buick 3.5-litre V8 that Rover acquired the manufacturing rights to in 1965. The objective, wrote an excited McWilliams, was 'to turn out a machine expeditiously so mouth-watering to the people in Solihull that they start building it soon thereafter.'

The result was the glorious 'Golden Rod', a bright yellow hot-rod with a top speed of over 85mph that retained the standard stepped front end of the Series IIA but had upgraded brakes, revised dash instrumentation, an adjustable driver's seat (something that the factory said was impossible to do), Rover P5 front and rear diff assemblies, bespoke wheels and wider tyres, a second fuel tank from an Austin-Healey sports car, chromed front bumper and rear over-riders, heater, air-con, rear door-mounted spare, wind deflectors on the rear body to help keep the windows clear, bespoke exhaust system, and many other tweaks.

Factory photograph of what is believed to be 88/84's engine bay as built

Golden Rod was built on the USA's West Coast and Richard Green drove it on a four-day test and delivery run from Dublin, California to Rover's North American head office in New York City, covering 3193 miles at an average speed of 55mph, with fuel consumption of just 11.3mpg. In due course it was delivered to Solihull but Rover HQ's reaction appeared to their North American colleagues to be underwhelming, to say the least. Sour grapes or 'not invented here' syndrome?

As Michael Green wrote, 'It wasn't until 1979 that a Land Rover V8 was introduced to the public. Even then, however, they [Solihull] got it wrong, by putting it in a 109. It was some years after that before a V8-powered SWB was introduced to the public, and not until October 1993 was a real 'Golden Rod' copy put on sale in North America, when the 3.9-litre NAS 90 was launched, best known, of course, for being available in a bright yellow colour scheme.' The whereabouts of the original Golden Rod appears to be unknown, but what a wonderful find it would be if it were unearthed.

Range Rover Chief Engineer Geof Miller commented to the writer: "Land Rover sales were struggling in the US, primarily because the vehicle was considered to be underpowered by American standards. Rover ended up securing the rights to the Buick 3.5-litre V8 and Rover North America quickly installed one in a Series IIA, although it was soon apparent that the standard transmission could not handle the significant increases in power and torque.

"Golden Rod's visit to Lode Lane was actually a bit of a farce," Geof continued. "Very few people in Engineering actually saw it, and we had the impression that the Americans wanted to come back in a few weeks' time to see Solihull's version. The idea was actually explored further and three V8-powered Series IIA vehicles were built at Solihull. The transmission issues meant the vehicle did not go into production. I think if it had, it is very likely that the 100in station wagon project would have been dropped, and we would never have had the Range Rover!"

Eventually, all three of the Series IIA prototype V8s would be allocated to the Range Rover development programme, and Geof's career at Land Rover would become intertwined with them for the next 20 years, as we shall see.

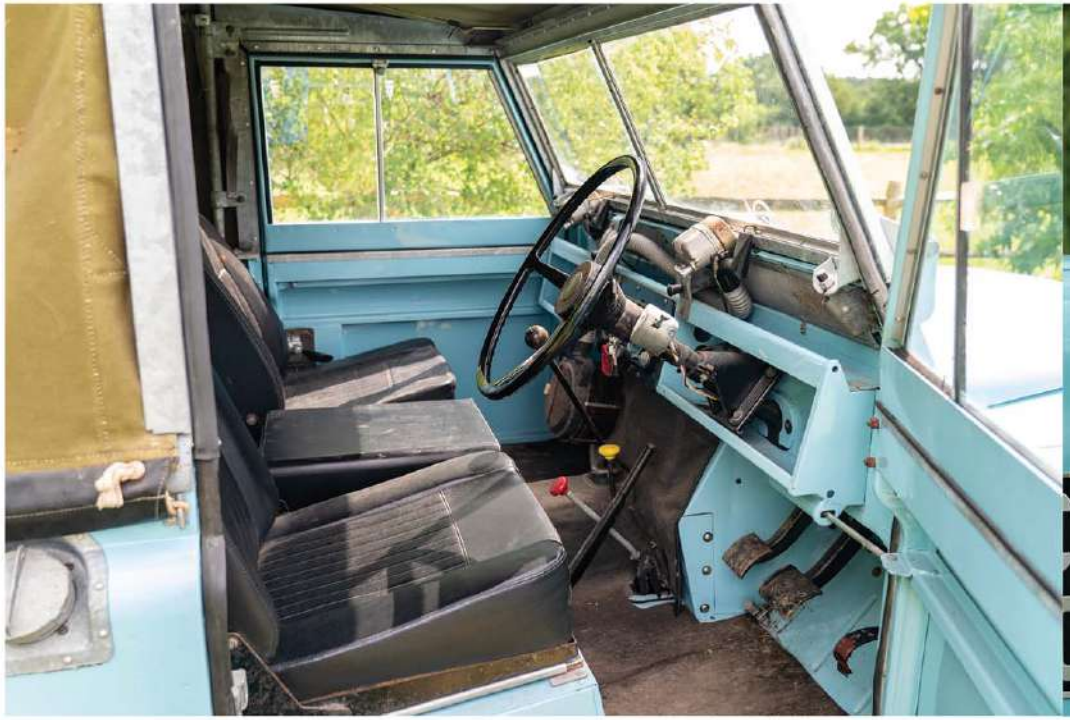
The three vehicles were given unique prototype chassis numbers 88/78/2158, 88/79/2158, and 88/84/2158, with the first two digits reflecting the wheelbase, the second pair the vehicle number, and the last four digits the V8 engine capacity in cubic inches. Only number 84 survives today, the last of the four fascinating vehicles led by Golden Rod that pushed the boundaries of what a utility Land Rover might become. Number 84 is in the care of the Dunsfold Collection and is regularly voted the vehicle visitors would most like to be able to take home.

Number 78 was built as a Limestone soft top and registered as OXC 811E on 1 January 1967. It was later fitted with a bespoke hood with larger windows, before being converted into a station wagon. Geof Miller used it as his company car and in September 1968 he and his new bride, Pat, went on their honeymoon to the Lake District in it.

Pat remembers it well, writing in *Land Rover Enthusiast* in November 2006 that she had been introduced to the V8 when she and Geof were 'courting'. 'The only telltale signs were the large tailpipe and a padlock on the bonnet, but of course one only had to hear the burble from the exhaust or see the acceleration from the traffic lights to realise that this was no ordinary Land Rover. It was amusing to see the

88/78 at Wastwater in the Lake District in September 1968, when Geof and Pat Miller used it on their honeymoon

At Eastnor on the 'Designer's Safari' in October-November 1968. Land Rover chassis engineer Gordon Bashford lends a helping hand



Standard Series IIA front end. When the production V8 Land Rover Stage 1 appeared in 1979, the front panel had been moved forward in line with the front wings

astonished looks on the faces of the boy racers in their Ford Cortinas when they were left standing by what they probably thought was a farm truck! Geof lived near West Bromwich and I lived in Luton, so these vehicles were often seen travelling on the M1 on Friday and Sunday evenings. Over the following couple of years, I got to know the Limestone vehicle fairly well, including on our honeymoon, with me keeping notes on fuel consumption and jobs to be done as I became a sort of unofficial technical note-taker.'

According to Rover records, after Geof had replaced the 88 with a Range Rover as his company car, number 78 lost the OXC 811E registration when it was transferred to a prototype Rover P8 allocated to the Engineering fleet, presumably because someone there had asked to retain the OXC plate as a 'cherished' number for some reason. The 88 was given the replacement number TXC 363E on 1 December 1972, but just four months later the vehicle was scrapped following barrier tests.

The second V8 88in, number 79, was built as a Navy Blue station wagon and fitted with a Borg Warner three-speed automatic transmission. According to Rover records it was registered NXC 199D on 1 December 1966, although Geof Miller's records seem to suggest it was registered PXC 199F. It was used for a while as a company car by Philip Crowther, who was the Assistant Chief Engineer on the Range Rover project. Number 79 was scrapped in July 1971.

The last of the trio, number 84, was completed as a Pale Blue soft top. It was initially unregistered, which is why it carries the later registration number BXC 975G, that was issued on 3 October 1968. Number 84 was designated to become a mileage test vehicle and was expected to drive 100,000 miles on a newly devised 'Southern Test Route' that would incorporate the M5 motorway as well as the usual mixture of A-roads and B-roads, and city driving through Birmingham. Geof Miller wrote in 2007 that the vehicle would also be 'in various states of load – unladen, half-loaded, fully laden, and towing a one-ton trailer.'

Series IIA cabin was largely unaltered

The challenge of bringing together a primitive Series IIA Land Rover with a high-performance 3.5-litre V8 engine was not straightforward, as Geof recalled. 'Despite fitting 11 inch brakes from the 109, 3.5 differentials from a Rover P5 car, and higher-speed road-biased tyres, we still harboured serious worries about the ability of the clutch and rear axle to cope with the much higher torque figures. Also, the general handling of the 88 was simply not good enough to deal with the potentially higher speeds.'

Shortly before the mileage test was due to start the project was cancelled, together with any remaining ideas that the Series IIA V8 88in might go forward into production. The three vehicles became mobile test beds on the Range Rover programme. Following assessment of the first two 100in station wagons, numbers 100/1 and 100/2, there were concerns about axle strength, and a 'centre diff gearbox' that had been a 1950s project was taken out of storage and fitted to number 84 for assessment. These trials led to the decision to include the third diff in the specification of the 100in station wagon, later to be known as the Range Rover. Around this time number 84 was converted to a station wagon and painted Masai Red with a Sahara Dust upper body.

After the launch of the Range Rover in 1970, V8 88in prototype number 84 was reallocated to Rover's Research Department as a high-powered tow vehicle for road-load data testing, and later fitted with a special 'Skid Test Trailer' on which both trailer wheels could be instantaneously locked in order to measure road surface friction. In this role it was once again reunited with Geof, who had been appointed head of Track Control and Technology at the Gaydon Proving Ground in 1979.

88/84 with Skid Test Trailer at the company's Gaydon Proving Ground in the early 1980s

88/84 as delivered to the Dunsfold Collection in 1993. It was restored by the Collection in 2008-2009

In addition to a tuned engine, the vehicle was fitted with Range Rover tyres on wide rims, modified suspension and a special ballasted front bumper to achieve improved stability during testing. A single seat was fitted in the rear for the instrumentation operator to control the bank of instruments and computers.

"Probably one of its most important contributions was its final task before retirement," Geof recalls, "when it made a trip to the USA to carry out friction testing on an American proving ground prior to the approval of Rover SD1 brake performance for the US market."

Number 84 and its trailer were retired in 1987, the same year that Geof himself took early retirement. This very interesting and historically important Land Rover was facing an unpleasant end at the hands of the local scrap merchants, but a timely intervention by Roger Crathorne led to it being diverted on 1 January 1991 to the Heritage Motor Centre at Gaydon.

In June 1993, Dunsfold's Brian Bashall agreed a vehicle exchange with the Heritage Motor Centre that saw BXC 975G join the Dunsfold Collection. At that point the vehicle was a rather tired and tatty Masai Red station wagon, but during the chassis-up restoration it received in Dunsfold's workshop in 2008-2009, it was returned to its original soft top configuration and repainted Pale Blue. It still has its unique Buick engine mounts.

As the sole survivor of those four V8 vanguards (until someone rediscovers Golden Rod) BXC 975G is always in demand. This year it was one of the vehicles chosen for display when the Dunsfold Collection opened its new museum building in June and it will also be on show at the museum's first Public Open Days on 23 and 24 September, tickets for which can be ordered on the Collection website: dunsfoldcollection.co.uk.