

LAND ROVER

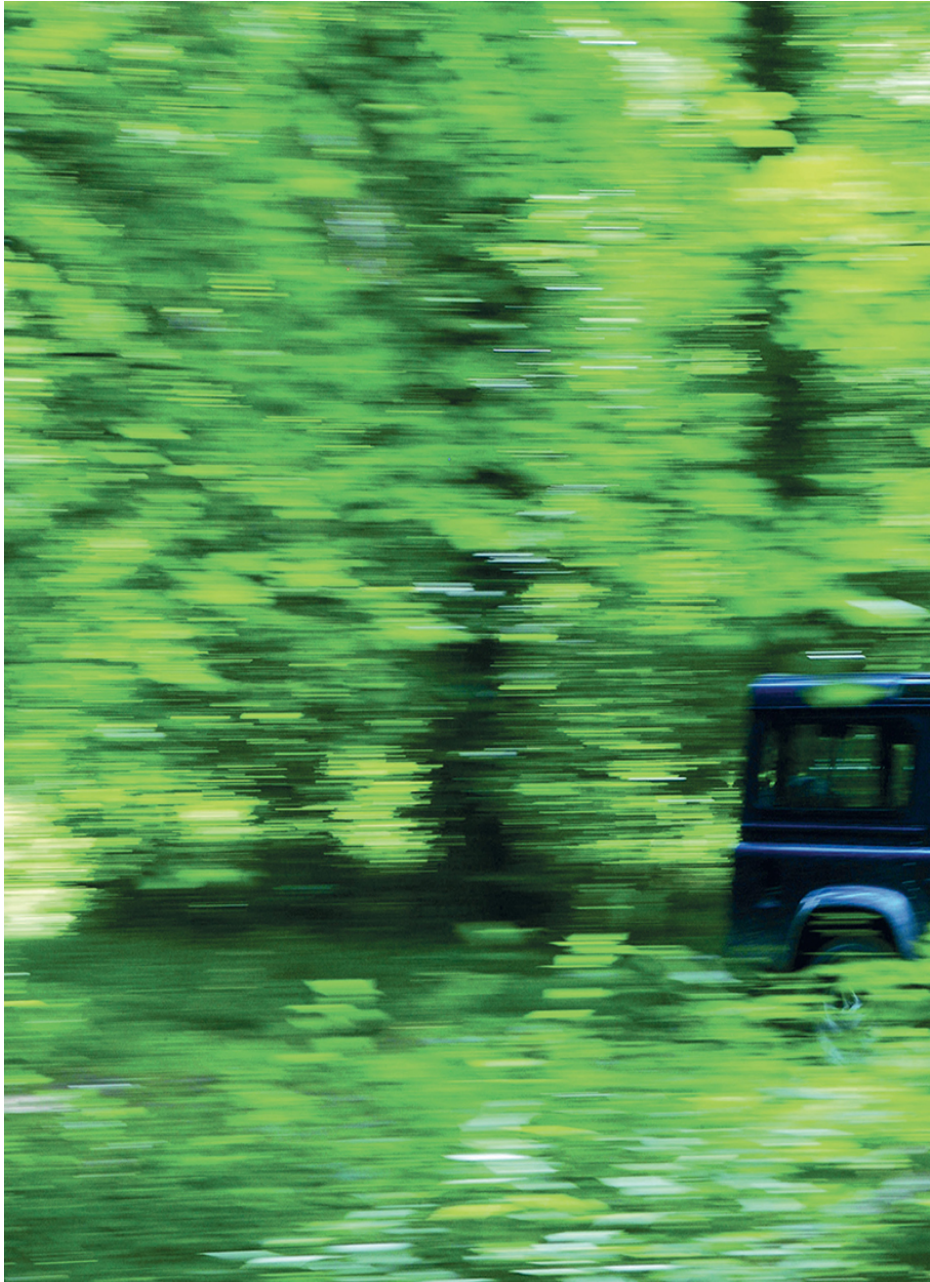
GRIPPING PHOTOS OF THE 4X4 PIONEER

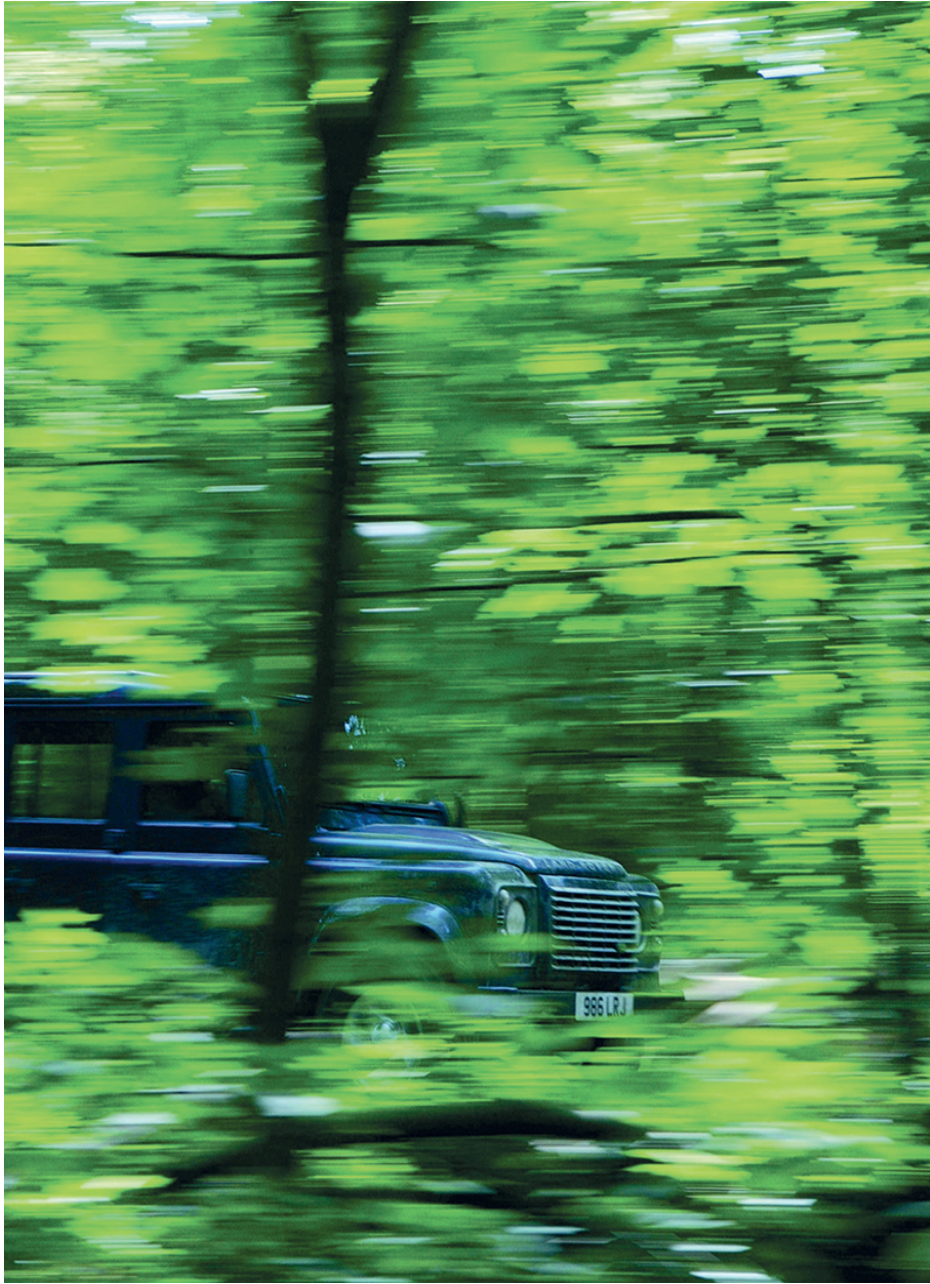


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INTRODUCTION

There is today a brand new and totally different Land Rover Defender that is not the focus of this book. It was long overdue. The original car lasted to the end of the line in 2016, before the word 'Brexit' had ever been uttered, and for Land Rover diehards its departure left a gaping hole not just a supporting wall of the British motor industry but in the fabric of the country. It was like someone had banned cricket from the village green, or decreed Christmas lunch was henceforth to be strictly vegan. The original Land Rover, stretching up along a muddy timeline from 1948 to 2016, was a proper institution.

The main reason we had to wave the four-wheel-drive pioneer goodbye was that in today's world, the final Land Rover Defender was at the absolute limits of its ability to comply with regulations governing the construction of, and emissions from, new cars. Even in 2006, the rules had started to impinge on it, when the side-facing seats in the rear of station wagons were deemed unsafe. It didn't have any crumple zones and the car had never any airbags. The Land Rover Defender hails from a far-back time when those things hadn't even been imagined.

The idea for the Land Rover arose on a farm in North Wales. There, in 1947, one of the directors of Rover, maker of quality cars for the affluent middle classes, was having problems with a battered Second World War Jeep that he used for odd jobs. When it worked, its four-wheel drive and light controls made it the best thing in the world for belting across fields to reach stricken livestock or broken fences. When it broke, though, Maurice Wilks was forced to drag its sorry carcass back to the Rover factory in Solihull near Birmingham, for repairs. Being a bit of old war surplus in an austere and peacetime Britain, getting hold of spare parts was impossible.

Another thing that Rover was having trouble getting its hands on was the steel needed to start making the saloon cars beloved of doctors and solicitors in Britain's leafy suburbs. Surrounded by problems, though, Wilks suddenly had a brainwave. Could Rover get through the tough times by making its own version of the Jeep, only not tilted at an angle but at landowners and farmers? If they could build it from something other than steel, perhaps it would work. Just as his Jeep was a relic of the recent conflict, so there was a lot of unused aircraft-grade aluminium sheet kicking around. And so it was that Wilks and Rover's engineers formulated their plans for a 'Land Rover'.

Their starting point, logically enough, was a Jeep chassis and axles, but the 1.4-litre four-cylinder engine was from a Rover car, and the single seat was in the middle of the vehicle in the style of the hybrid tractor/pick-up that Wilks envisioned.

A pretty sophisticated four-wheel-drive system was devised with driveshafts to the front and back and power transmitted through a specially designed transfer case. The front-wheel drive was permanent, and used a freewheel device on the front driveshaft to allow the front and rear wheels revolving at slightly different speeds.

There was a lot of scepticism inside Rover about the venture, but the prototype was built in just a few weeks and everyone who drove it was immediately impressed by its performance. Its tenacious grip and ability to claw its way up steep and slippery inclines was a revelation. The board was persuaded to approve it and, because it was viewed as a stopgap for the time being, that could be built cheaply using jigs and hand tools, it wasn't going to break the bank.

Wilks saw it not just as a go-anywhere vehicle but a do-anything vehicle. He insisted that there should be 'power take-off' points front, middle and rear. That way, the vehicle

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be driven somewhere remote but still be used as a power source to animate a from a circular saw to welding gear. All sound, ultra-practical thinking.

Rover soon ditched the central seat for traditional right- or left-hand drive with two small passenger seats alongside. They wanted solutions and not problems, after all, that production was going ahead a more powerful 1.6-litre Rover engine was fitted chassis with tough leaf springs was designed, and the simple aluminium body became boxy and flat-planed in a quest to make it as cheap and easy to manufacture as possible. From being a crude, Rover-powered Jeep, the Land Rover was its own man and it met the public for the first time at the Amsterdam Motor Show in April 1948.

It made a huge impact and the production line cranked into life four months later at ten Land Rovers a day; it went on sale at £540. By then a true appreciation of the Land Rover's potential had formed and a few orders had trickled in. Not bad for a vehicle that hadn't even existed two years earlier but it all still felt like a big, risky step into the unknown.

Early owners, however, were astonished at how the Land Rover could bounce across fields and charge up hills with gusto, and that its excellent wheel articulation and approach and departure angles of 45/35 degrees meant it could pick its way over just about anything. It wasn't fast but there was plenty of torque for what really mattered – pulling power.

Buyers were immediately won over by this no-frills workhorse with panels that could be removed. To own one was never to be without one again, and the word soon spread. Rover shifted 5,000 annually but in its first financial year sold 8,000. In 1949–50, sales doubled. The company was then selling two Land Rovers for every one of the Rover cars. Quite unexpectedly, the tail was now wagging the dog, and it wasn't just the agricultural world that had worked out the Land Rover's tactical advantages. Police forces, electricity boards, forest rangers, contractors and adventurers all ordered them and, from 1950, so did the British Army.

The booming popularity brought plenty of feedback and Rover responded by starting a rolling programme of improvements. The first, and most significant, came in 1950, when the freewheel was dropped. In order to properly co-ordinate the front and rear wheels, four-wheel drive was now selectable thanks to a simple but ingenious dogleg clutch mechanism. In high-ratio range for road use, the Land Rover could be driven in two- or four-wheel drive, but four-wheel drive now engaged automatically when the low range was engaged.

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By the end of 1951 the engine had expanded in size to a 2-litre, which boosted to low-speed, heavyweight duties. This was, it was understood, mostly a commercial and demands for more cargo space saw the wheelbase increase from 80in (like the old Willys Jeep) to 86in in 1953, when an even longer 107in wheelbase joined. One year later sales hit 100,000, and no one was more surprised than Maurice Wilks. Land Rover's little sideline had now become its most crucial asset.

In 1956, wheelbases were up again to 88 and 109in as the engine bay was modified to take Land Rover's first diesel engine, extending fuel consumption from 22 to 25mpg. Land Rovers were becoming a common sight all over the world – with some 70 exported – and the fact that there was nothing else like it on sale threw up a coroner for the BBC. If a Land Rover was reported on radio or television on a battlefield parade, reporters were not allowed to use the brand name, and the BBC had to refer to it as 'field car' to dodge the issue.

Almost 200,000 Land Rovers had been built by 1958, when the arrival of the Series II forever rendered the earlier model the mightily revered Series I. Roomier and with more substantial bodies and bigger engines culminated in the Series IIA of 1961. Its output peaked at 56,564 in 1971, which included many kits of parts assembled in far-flung corners of the globe. By the time the Series III model took its bow that year the Land Rover operation found itself part of the ill-served British Leyland organisation. The tough-as-old-boots, four-wheel-drive pick-ups, wagons and vans could be profitably adapted in myriad ways for any number of purposes, and the Range Rover sister marque had broken totally new ground in a luxurious off-roader with a coil-sprung chassis that made it as smooth to drive on tarmac as it was relentless in the rough. Little wonder that Land Rover Ltd became a separate entity in 1978, with a £200 million war chest to spend on new models. Most of the focus was on improving the Range Rover, Series III Land Rovers received a more powerful V8 engine option.

The most fundamental change in the Land Rover's long and illustrious career, however, occurred in 1983. As sales were growing of Toyota's Hilux and other Japanese-made four-wheel-drive pick-ups, the old-fashioned leaf springs in the Land Rover, the comp

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that by then severely hampered its on-road appeal due to the bumpy and uncomfortable ride quality, just had to go. So in came a new Range Rover-style chassis frame with heavy-duty coil-spring suspension all round. Now Land Rovers were at least tolerable on long road trips, especially when towing horseboxes or vehicle trailers. Slight wheel increases to 90 and 110in were accompanied by a switch to full-time four-wheel drive as the Range Rover's five-speed gearbox was also standardised. There were a few concessions to the modern motoring world too, such as wind-down windows instead of sliding ones, while a wider track improved roadholding.

These new Land Rovers were, without doubt, the most capable four-wheel-drive vehicles for serious work on all kinds of demanding terrain. With their separate chassis frame and modular construction, they were also still the most readily adaptable of vehicles, able to be specified and custom-built any which way for roles from the battlefield to the built-up town. Suddenly, though, there were a lot of other options around as more car-like and off-roaders arrived from Japan to tempt buyers away from the hardcore Land Rover. The Defender no longer had to try and be all things to all men; after the Land Rover Discovery sports utility vehicle (SUV) arrived in 1989, the 90 and 110 were rebranded as the Defender and Freelander to have the specialised market for a no-compromise off-roader all to themselves.

Still, the traditional Landies were labouring under a burden that was impossible to shake. The stout separate chassis, being the main load-bearing component, could not be made any other than heavy and substantial; there were limits to how fuel efficient a Defender could be as a result, and not much could be done to improve its active or passive safety, all of which were matters of pressing legislative importance in the 1990s and 2000s. Something like the Jeep Cherokee offered consumers the lofty driving position and excellent off-road performance they yearned for, but featured car-like road manners and could be fitted with every available safety feature. The Defender, frankly, was a cumbersome 1960s lorry by comparison, but in the final reckoning, it was still the most able vehicle in the severest off-road conditions.

In 1990, the staple Land Rover gained its own 'textual' model name for the first time: the Defender. Simultaneously, a turbodiesel engine was offered. Four years after the venerable V8 power unit was axed, in the UK at least, and in another four years the staple engine became a brand new, and far more responsive, five-cylinder turbo

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the Td5, with a computer-controlled electronic fuel-injection system and a central filter to extend service intervals.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the Land Rover organisation changed hands like a hot girl at a barn dance, being owned (in chronological order) by British Aerospace, Ford and finally India's Tata, which merged it with Jaguar to form by far the biggest based car-making group. Throughout all of the head office changes, though, the Land Rover Defender production line plodded on unchanged. Only in 2006 did the vehicles get a series of improvements to keep them just about abreast of modern standards. They included a totally redesigned dashboard (more user-friendly but meaning the swivelling a pod under the windscreen had to be sealed up for good), a new heating and ventilation system, a less-polluting 2.4-litre turbodiesel engine specially adapted from the Ford Transit for off-road use, a six-speed gearbox and a more refined, quieter transfer box. The front end sprouted a prominent bulge so the new engine could be positioned to allow deflation of the front air bag in the event of a pedestrian impact.

It was all worthwhile stuff, because Land Rover was still selling 20,000 to 25,000 Defenders every year. The majority, without doubt, were gainfully employed in no-nonsense jobs: on farms, with rescue services, in industry and in countless other roles. Yet the Defender's living-legend status still saw plenty of private motorists choosing it as an everyday car. It was, now, quite unlike anything else on sale.

In off-road forays, naturally, it was completely at home wading through water or muddied tracks or else bouncing its way over shingle or rocky outcrops. On the highway it was no more as comfortable or responsive as a 'normal' car, but life in the slow lane was no deterrent to most ardent fans. Not just that but the Defender's absolute form-following-function gave it a time-honoured credibility that marked its owners out as lovers of true off-road vehicles.

Some of all this has inspired this book. If you have owned or driven one of the most inspiring British vehicles then you'll fully recognise them in all the various situations in which they are illustrated. But if you simply love the idea of traditional Land Rover, maybe the content – including many previously unpublished photos, and others that capture the essence of the marque – will inspire you to get one of your own ... and take it for the hills with a big grin and a firm grasp on the steering wheel.

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