

# Know your Rovers: The First Land Rovers, 1947 – 1953

by Miles J. Murphy

Rovers chief engineer Maurice Wilks came up with the idea for a "Land Rover" while on holiday in Wales during the Easter Break, 1947. Earlier in the year, Wilks purchased a surplus U.S. built Willys Jeep for his own use. Not only would this vehicle serve as the inspiration for the "Land" Rover, but it would provide many of its components for the very first Land Rover. Among the items used were: chassis, the complete drive train, up to and including the Jeep transfer box. The Jeep steering assembly, up to and including the steering box. The prototype Land Rover had a centre steering wheel (neither LHD or RHD) linkage to the Jeep steering box via chain and sprockets. From photo evidence it would appear that many other items were from the Jeep were incorporated into the prototype. Quite a number of these bits 'n pieces have remained standard items on civil and military Land Rovers to this day.

Simply put, without getting too bogged down in the history of the times, and the Rover Car Company's reasons for getting into the 4x4 business - the Land Rover was intended as a stop-gap product to keep the company "in business" in the lean years following World War Two. At that time all Rover had to offer was its pre-War luxury car designs that no one wanted or could afford. There also had a prototype "compact" car in the works but the market for that vehicle did not seem to be materialising.

The post World War 2 British economy was in shambles. Strict rationing was in the order of the day and there was an enormous foreign debt to take care of. The Ministry of Supply ordered (that's putting it mildly) all manufacturers to export up to 75% of their products. This draconian policy was necessary to bring in the vitally needed hard currency to help service the debt. Truck and tractor manufacturers were doing brisk trade overseas, but there was little or no demand in the rapidly changing post-War world for what Rover had to offer. Prior to the Second World War the Rover Company did very well for itself providing luxury cars for the upper classes. So smug were they that they never built left hand drive vehicles, there being more than enough business at home and in the right hand drive colonies.

Another post hostilities problem Rover faced was the rationing of raw materials, least of which was a severe shortage of steel. The Ministry of Supply controlled the flow of these vitally needed raw materials, and companies were allocated stocks based on their export performance. Export was something the Rover Company had little experience with.

With the future of the company at stake, the decision was made to rush head long into getting a four by four into production. All the usual design and development procedures were dispensed with. There was neither the time or the money to develop engines and gearboxes, or the tools, jigs, molds, presses and dies that are a necessary part of getting a production line going. Everything needed for the new vehicle would have to come from available stocks and used "as is" or modified. Major components such as the chassis and the bulkhead would have to be made by hand. Once they got the "show on the road" - if ever - then and only then would money be invested in the necessary tooling.

No sooner had Wilks returned from his holidays that work began. The above mentioned hybrid Jeep/Land Rover prototype was driving about in September 1947. The engine and gearbox came from the Rover car line. The new body on the Jeep chassis was a type of aluminium used in aircraft manufacture as was the paint the vehicle was finished with. Both of these items come from stocks held by Rover from its wartime aircraft manufacturing efforts.

While the prototype was being built more Jeeps were acquired for test and evaluation purposes. However, these vehicles were "purchased" by Rover staff and "not" by the company itself. Wilk's Jeep is believed to have been the donor vehicle for the Land Rover prototype. The prototype met its demise early in 1948. Why the first Land Rover was dismantled is a mystery. If it had something in common with pre-production and production models a fellow could understand the need to take it apart to see what it was - or was not - falling apart. It is possible Rover was destroying the evidence. I'm sure that the Willys Overland Company of the USA would have something to say about their product being used to help another company develop a vehicle that would soon overtake them in the world market. Lessons learned building the prototype helped with design and development

of the pre-production vehicles. Work on the pre-production Land Rovers commenced in late 1947. In all, 48 pre-production vehicles were built, the first rolling "off the line" on or about March 11th 1948. In some way or other most if not all - were different from each other. All had a galvanised chassis, some of the first had an integral bumper while later ones had the bolt on type. All were skinned in Birmabright, with the first 40 vehicles painted a light green (sage green). The final 8 were painted in a darker shade of green (bordering on olive green).

The first time the public got wind of the new Land Rover was an article in "The Times" newspaper on April 20th, 1948. The first public appearance of the Land Rover was held ten days later at the Amsterdam Motor Show, held in the Netherlands between April 30th and May 9th, 1948.

The last of the 48 pre-production land Rovers were completed around the end of July, beginning of August 1948. By that time production models were already rolling off an adjacent assembly line. By the end of 1948, the pre-production batch were spread all over the place undergoing trials and the like. Some were sold to early customers whose orders could not be filled by production models. Quite a number of these pre-production 48 survive to this day (what else is new, eh), including the first R.01.

The first production models had permanent 4wd. The galvanised chassis of the pre-production batch had given way to silver paint and duralumin replaced the birmabright. In time, the silver painted chassis would give way to green and after a May

1949 Ministry of Defence order for 1878 vehicles, Land Rovers were finished in bronze green, regardless of whether they were destined for military use or not.

The production models were constantly being refined. With the phenomenal success of the 80" Land Rover, the Rover company could now invest in machinery to do the work that had been done by hand. Constant feedback from customers kept the Land Rover in a constant state of change. Every-month or two, there would be something new to take note of.

Trying to identify a specific model is no easy task, serial number or not. There always seems to be an interim model between two distinct versions. Nothing was wasted. While stock of a particular part lasted, it would continue to appear on a "new" model, until there was no more. A number of "interim" Land Rovers were shipped to North America sometime in the early 1950's.

Six are known to exist, three are on the road, and two are under restoration. The serial numbers date them as 1950, but they have features dating from mid 1949 to at least mid 1951. One unique feature to all is the relocation of the bulkhead sidelights to a non-standard position on the front wings. The fairings that housed the sidelights in their original location are still there. The most recent of these "N.A. Spec" 80" Land Rovers was discovered in superb complete, original, rust free condition in a Tuscon Arizona junk yard. Its owner is restoring it to original condition - wing mounted lights and all.