

75 Years of Land Rover and its Role in this Country

By Dr Charles Waghorn



The rover company was originally Stanley Sutton, building bicycles in Solihull Warwickshire. They built popular Penny Farthing bicycles which were dangerous to ride until Mr Starley developed the Rover Safety Bicycle by the simple expedient of having two similar sized wheels with a rear chain driven wheel. They then started making motorcycles until 1905, however in 1904 they started making motor cars using as their logo a Viking warship symbolizing freedom and movement.

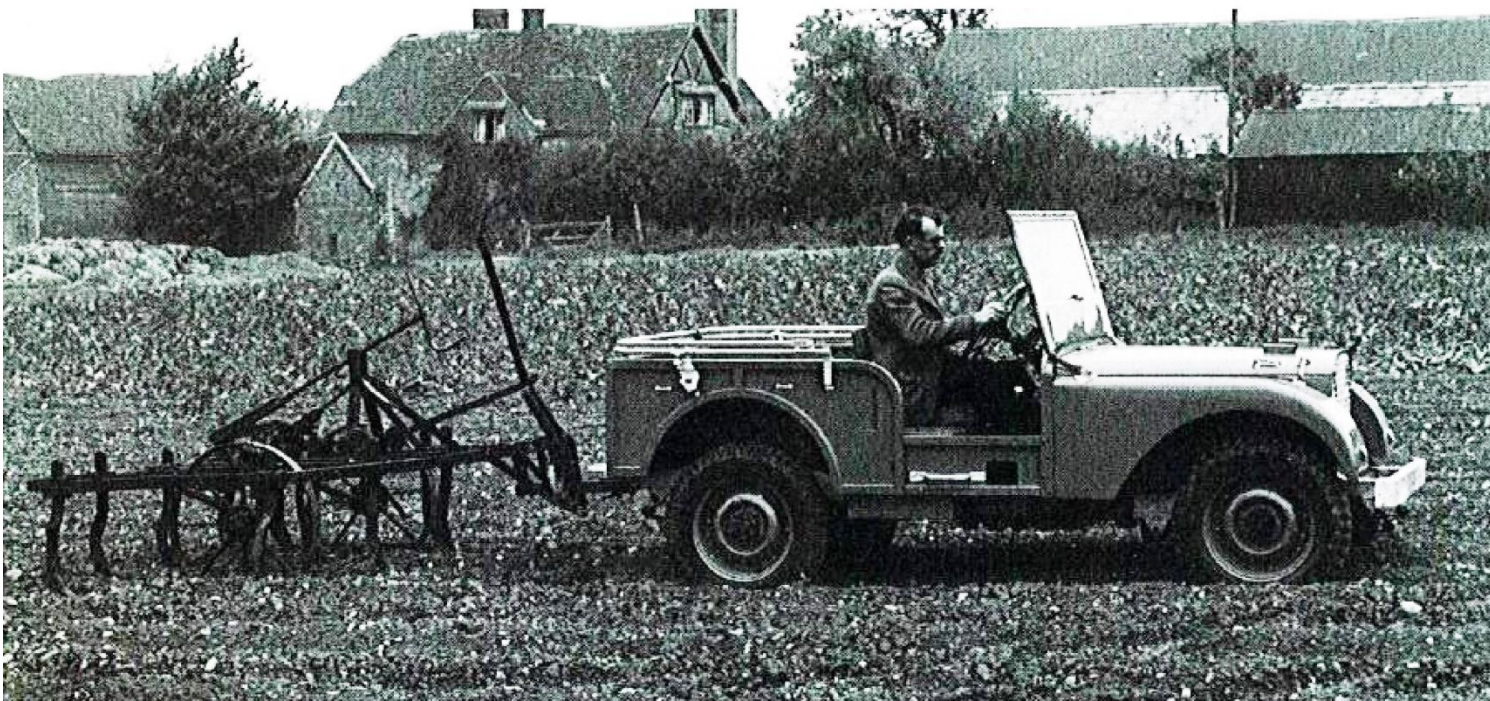


By 1925 the motorcycles were not selling well so they concentrated on manufacturing classy motorcars particularly the rover eight and rover six models. The company was struggling during the great depression era however until Spencer Wilks was appointed to the board from the Hillman motor company. He instructed their engineers, which soon included his brother Maurice Wilks, to design a new model resulting in the rover 10 in 1931. Sales improved and the company began to compete favourably with Ford and Austin and also secured several Royal and Government warrants.

The Rover Company started dabbling with aero engines and air frames as the Second World War loomed. They were approached by Frank Whittle, the designer of the Jet engine to cooperate with his Power Jet company (Frank Whittle was later uncomplimentary about the Rover Company, claiming that they set the Jet Engine program back by two years). Rover traded the Jet engine product with Rolls Royce for the Meteor tank engine which they produced during the war (actually until 1964)

After the war Rover returned to making motor cars however the economy was struggling and vital steel was rationed. The government encouraged exports of products to improve the economy. Maurice Wilkes who was now chief engineer at Rover had a farm in Anglesea Wales and had managed to acquire a war surplus American Troop Carrier. His neighbour had acquired a surplus Willys Jeep the ubiquitous American icon from the war. Wilkes liked the jeep so the two swapped their vehicles which deal included a chain saw.

A year or so later the jeep began to show signs of wear and when his brother asked him what he was going to do about a replacement he replied he was just going to get another - by then all the surplus vehicles had been snapped up. Wilkes began to take a closer look and decided he could build a better product. Legend has it that he drew the outline of the proposed vehicle in the sand at

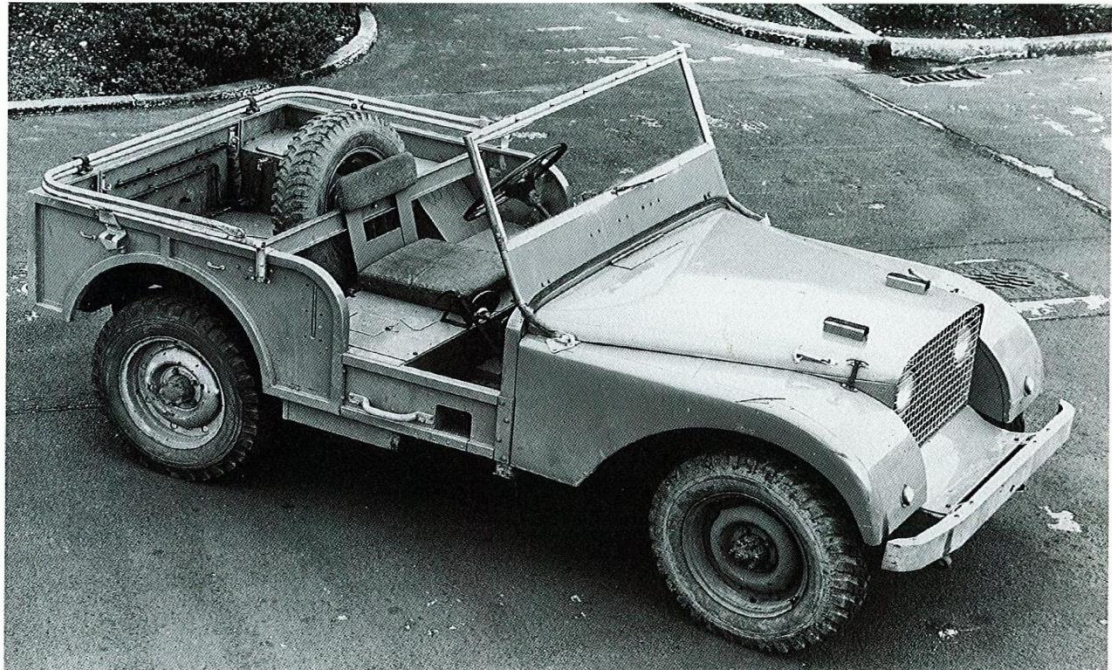


Red wharf bay in Angelsea. He immediately set the rover engineering department into designing a go- anywhere vehicle. He also realized that there was mechanization revolution in the agricultural world so his idea was to build a vehicle that could be used on the farm.

The first model was built on the a Jeep 80" chassis with a Rover 1600 cc engine but with the body being made of aluminium that was surplus from the war time aircraft industry, a vehicle with a steering wheel in the centre alleviating the need to change sides for exports thus the "LANDROVER" was born.

However the centre steer was not practical as there was not enough room for passengers and the emergence of another icon made it necessary to be a passenger vehicle as well. This was Harry Ferguson's iconic grey tractor with its revolutionary hydraulic three point implement linkage.

The "Centre Steer" is a subject of periodic rumours of its existence and is searched for with the zeal of people looking for the Holy Grail.



The very first Land-Rover was a 'mule', constructed on a Jeep chassis and fitted with a Rover-designed body and a Rover saloon car engine and main gearbox. As the Land-Rover was intended primarily for export, Rover tried to save on tooling by making it with one steering position — in the centre — instead of in LHD and RHD forms. On test, however, the centre-steering design proved impractical. The single prototype was built in September 1947 and had probably been scrapped by the early spring of 1948. By then, the design had been considerably refined and the pilot-production models were slowly coming off the assembly lines.

The first batch of fifty Land Rovers, known as preproduction vehicles rolled off the line in early 1948. The company had intended to exhibit at the prestigious Paris Auto Show but were too late in production so they exhibited two models at the Amsterdam Motor Show in April 1948. They were an instant hit and soon orders were pouring in. In April the "Autocar" ran a review of the new vehicle and had some interesting comments : "because it opens up possibilities of the greatest value to those who live in the country, whether under cultivation or in the wild state" ; "much has been said and written in the past about the so called 'Peoples Car', much of it nonsense, that the advent of a really practical British vehicle which goes far beyond that over popularized proposal should be hailed with genuine acclimation" ; "on main roads it can average as much as 40 miles within each hour and its fuel consumption at that fast average is about 27 miles per gallon" and finally, "its appearance is starkly practical, there is nothing of the luxury vehicle about its looks".

Many Commonwealth Countries were being explored especially for their mineral wealth and these light, go anywhere vehicles were well suited. The Military also took an interest and soon began ordering. The Land Rover was intended as a stop gap measure for two years until Rover Car Production improved but the Land Rover model saved the Rover Company. These early 80" models are rare and have become very valuable. Soon there was a demand for a larger carrying capacity so the body was lengthened to 86" with a 107" body soon followed by a station wagon. The engine size increased to two litres. These

models were produced until 1951.

By now there was a demand for a more economical diesel engine which was slightly larger, so the models were increased again by 2" to become the 88 and 109, sizes that remained for the next 20 years. The Station Wagon was made to hold ten seats to take advantage of a tax concession.

These vehicles spawned a sudden rush of adventures going forth around the globe. In 1951 the two Wilkins brothers after graduating from Toronto University set off around the world in a new 80 inch Landrover achieving the goal in 2 years, this vehicle is now being restored by two other brothers in Toronto Canada. 1953 (the year of the Coronation) saw several expeditions. One was Brussels to Bombay involving a Minerva, a form of Landrover manufactured in Belgium.

Another expedition was from Bath to Rhodesia, an epic journey undertaken by the Beak family who settled down in this country.

([Overland Live - Overland Expedition & Adventure Travel : 1953: Heading South & Heading North](#))

In 1954 Mr and Mrs Teasdale and companion, left Australia for England and arrived the next year. (http://www.lrsoc.com/forum/forum_files/Motor1955.pdf) Very little is recorded about this expedition.

In 1954 a bet in a bar in Hong Kong saw another epic expedition in the form of a race between Oxford and Cambridge universities, from London to Cape Town and back (a journey of 17000 miles).(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxford_and_Cambridge_Trans-Africa_Expedition)

The best known expedition however, was the combined Oxford and Cambridge University expedition from London to Singapore in 1955. This was the subject of a book called the First Overland. (The expedition took off from the Grenadier pub in London, apparently the source of inspiration for the new Ineos Grenadier the vehicle that may take over the Defender role.) A Landrover enthusiast and film maker tracked the Oxford vehicle to the Island of St Helena whereupon he bought it off a farmer and restored it in England. He, together with David Attenborough (who was involved in the first documentary) and Tim Slessor, an original participant, aged 87, (and his grandson) recreated the epic journey in reverse; they called the trip and resulting film "Last Overland".



Landrovers acquired a degree of notoriety when two were used as get away cars in the Great Train Robbery.

In 1958 Landrover tried to refine the models somewhat and actually

employed a stylist in design, the result of which is known as the series 2 with the larger 2 ¼ litre engine. Large numbers of these were built and many of them are still running today. This series 2 (soon to become the series 2a with minor modifications) had the same variance, short wheeled base and long wheel base, soft tops and station wagons. It was manufactured until 1971.

In 1970 Rover produced a new luxury 4 wheel - drive vehicle named the RANGE ROVER, designed largely by Charles Spencer King, a nephew of the Wilks brothers, originally a 2 door vehicle with a V8 engine sourced from America and coil springs, It was aimed at the landed gentry. It took several years before a 4 door was produced but these vehicles were very popular and soon even had Royal approval, and was produced until 1986 before it was redesigned.

In about 1972/73 Land rover tried an epic PR exercise with its new Range Rover, which became known as the Range Rover Vogue. A joint services team headed by Col Blashford-Snell drove from Anchorage to Tierra del Fuego attempting to bridge the Darien Gap in Panama, a 250 mile stretch of jungle which had not ever been crossed. It was a brutal exercise, at one stage they advanced 30 miles in 17 days. They needed a pathfinder vehicle so they found a battered series 2 in Panama City which fared better than the heavy Range Rovers. They hired all the local prisoners to cut the road. It was very wet but when Blashford-Snell asked a local if these were the rains - the response was "no man this is just humidity". They did finally finish the 17000 mile journey. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hQKFxpu518>)

Land rover also sponsored several Camel Trophy races in various parts of the world, but that is another story.



In 1971 Rover made more modifications to the base model and produced the series 3. These modifications were largely aimed for the American market, with the headlights being moved to the wings.



new plastic grille was designed, much to the consternation of the Australians who liked to use their old metal grilles for their barbecues. The improvements were also made to compete with the emerging Japanese vehicles. This is the most common series vehicle still running. In 1976 the one millionth vehicle rolled off the production line (incidentally over 4 million vehicles rolled off the line by 2007.) In 1979 the V8 engine was put into the series pickup and station wagons and the suspension was beefed up to compete with the Toyota Land Cruisers especially in the Australian and African markets. These were the last Land Rovers to have leaf springs, legendary breakers of backs.

In 1983, Rover produced a completely new design known as the 110 and 90 County models with improvements such as windup windows and coil springs.

In 1989 Rover produced another new model. The Range Rover by now was aimed squarely at the luxury market, so the company produced a comfortable 4 x 4 named the "DISCOVERY". This vehicle was also a hit and soon had many variants with 5 doors and different engine options.

The big event in 1990 was the arrival of the new "DEFENDER", probably the most recognizable of all Landrovers. Like most Landrovers it had the aerodynamics of a brick. In 1994 the Range Rover was upgraded to a more sophisticated model that included complicated electronics which caused many problems. In 1997, another new model was produced for the growing SUV (Sports Utility Market) market, that had been created by the Toyota Rav. This model was known as the "FREELANDER", known as a soft roader. This model was produced until 2006 followed by the Freelander 2 until 2012, all with new electronic aids like traction control etc. Meanwhile the company, now owned by BMW had produced the Range Rover Sport, The Discovery 2 and several new Defender models with new upgraded engines but still with the familiar boxy shape. The Discovery 3 and 4 followed but in 2011 the company produced another upmarket model which they called the LRX Concept, which was unveiled as the Range Rover "EVOQUE", a luxury off roader aimed at the market between Discoveries and Range Rovers.



Note the name was the Range Rover Evoque rather than the Land Rover Evoque.

In 2016 the production of the Defender, the mainstay of the Land Rover image was finally stopped after some 2 million cars, much to the chagrin of dedicated Landrover owners. Jaguar Landrover had previously announced the closure and promised to produce a "New" Defender. This was met with scepticism around the world and it took 4 years until it was unveiled in 2020. There have been very mixed reactions to the model "It's not a proper Landrover", "too electronic" were some. However the reviews have been generally favourable. Gone are the days when you could drill holes and bolt on bits like you could with the old models. When the Defender model was stopped, Sir Jim Ratcliffe apparently Britain's richest man, and head of the Ineos company saw an opportunity to fill the loss of the Defender by designing and producing a remarkably similar vehicle, the Ineos Grenadier. (Ineos, unsurprisingly are a bit sensitive about the comparison, but the reviews so far have been most favourable)



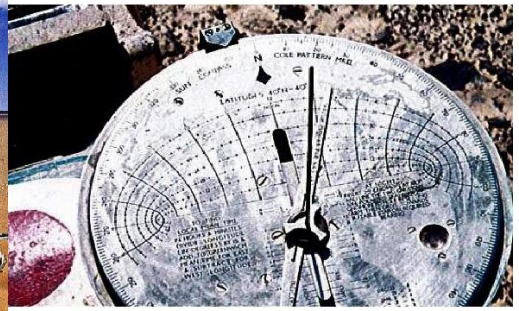
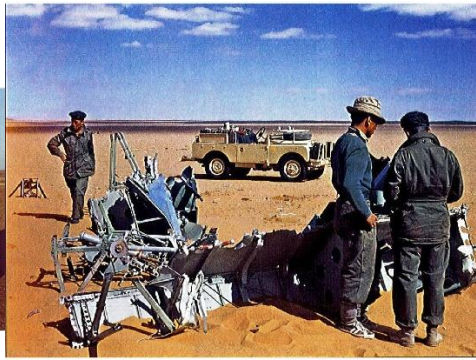
The ownership of Land Rover is a convoluted story in itself. Initially, obviously it was part of the Rover car company. In the turbulent socialist times in Britain in the 60's and 70's the government essentially nationalized the British motor industry creating the Leyland Motor Corporation. This led to the demise of most of the British Motor Industry. In the process to privatize the industry British Leyland was created and lasted from 1968 to 1978. The successful Landrover division was separated and Landrover Limited was created in 1978. In 1994 Landrover was sold to BMW who made some technical changes to the models mainly involving engines. In 2000 Landrover Limited was sold on to Ford Motor Company who also made changes mainly involving engines. However in 2008 Ford sold Landrover to Tata Motor Company, the giant Indian conglomerate. Tata had also bought the Jaguar brand and merged it to form Jaguar Landrover. It is rumoured that it is soon to be changed to JLR dropping the two iconic British names.

Africa has a long association with Landrover. In North Africa many years after the war a RAF team of 6 series one Land Rovers went in search of 3 Blemheim bombers of the SAAF.

In 1942 these bombers set off from a base south of Tobruk on a training exercise over the desert. Having returned over the base they flew on but one developed engine trouble. They landed in the desert and fixed the problem but could not decide on their location. They took off again but failed to find their base and had to land with fuel running low. The next day having drained the fuel from 2, the 3rd took off in search of the base, however it ran short of fuel and had to land, so now there were 2 stranded parties.



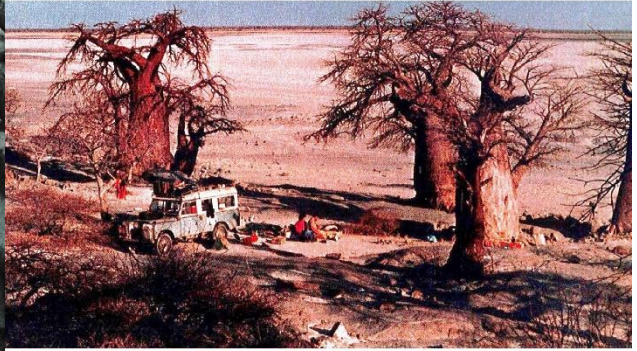
Both crews failed to ration their water and the heat and severe sandstorm hampered various searches for them and 8 days later a Wellington Bomber found the 2 aircraft only one man was still alive. The other bomber was found and the remains of the servicemen were returned and buried in Tobruk.



1975 a joint services West to East Sahara expedition lead by squadron leader Tom Shepherd, a navigation expert, were to test the new Landrover 101, a military gun tractor. It was very successful although it did not last long in production.

Landrovers arrived quickly in Rhodesia. L39 arrived here in July 1948, despatched to Puzey and Payne, however they have no early records existing, so we do not know for whom it was ordered. Another 6 were dispatched in December 1948, the earliest evidence I have is a 1953 BSAP photograph. We know the Government took ownership of many Landrovers for the Army, the BSAP (who used them for many years especially the Santana version built under licence in Spain) The Roads, Tsetse and Veterinary departments, but it was probably National Parks who gave them most publicity, many excellent records and stories being told in Mike Bromwich's book on the National Parks. Landrovers were involved in making the road from Makuti to Kariba, and then in the dam construction itself. These photographs, courtesy of Jono Waters, show them on site, and finally ferrying the Queen Mother at the opening in 1961.



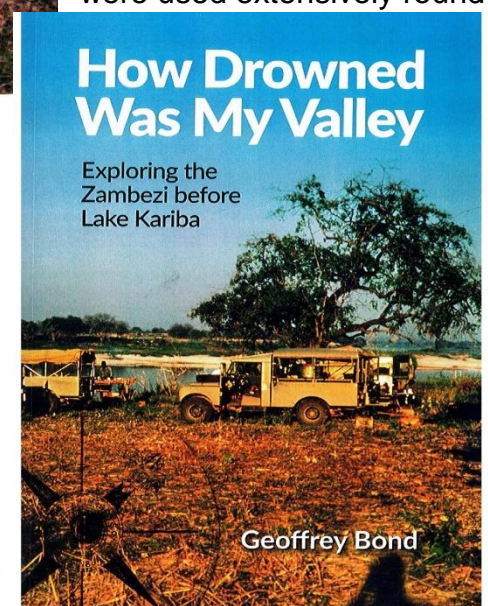


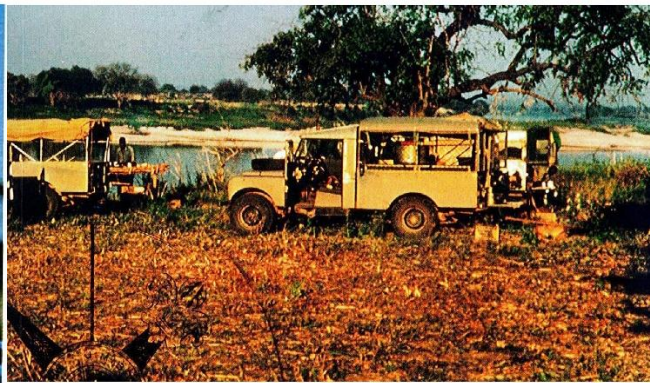
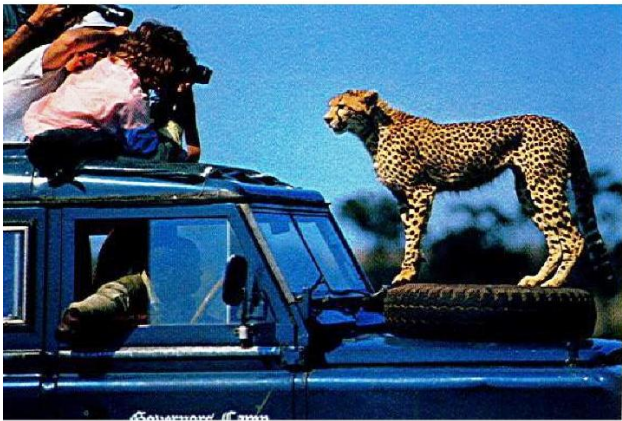
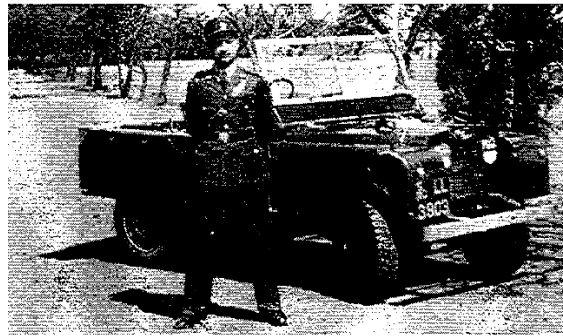
The cover of the BSAP motor transport history shows an idyllic scene of a patrol man relaxing by the side of his fire with the kettle on for tea writing his daily report.



the world for exploration, none more so by the late professor Bond in his travels around the Zambezi Valley before the valley was drowned

During the 70s Land rover used by both official and private sectors came under attack and many were modified with innovative mine proofing done by several companies in the country. They were slow and heavy and the fuel consumption was abysmal but the occupants usually arrive alive. Not all survived however. In the 60s the Ministry of Health started a mobile X Ray unit which was used in the Rural Areas. It was also used by missionaries. Land rovers were used extensively round





In the 80s and 90s newer better priced and more comfortable vehicles arrived from the East, particularly from Japan, which saw Landrover lose popularity as a 4 wheeled drive off road vehicle. However in the last 20 years or so, the more luxurious Range Rovers and Discoverys are gaining popularity and since 2020 the new Defender is being sold.

Landrover has a long and proud history in this country and the number of restoration of old vehicles being undertaken means the iconic vehicles will be around for a long time.

This month Land rover enthusiasts are celebrating 75 years of the famous vehicle by joining in the annual 4 x 4 Club Jamboree at Donnybrook in 2 weeks time. The 4 x 4 Club started out 30 years ago as the "Landrover Owners and Enthusiast Club" but with the influx of people with other vehicles it was changed to the 4 x 4 Club of Zimbabwe.

If there is one word that could be associated with Landrover it would be "Adventure", and I will end with a verse slightly modified from the poem by American Robert Frost entitled "The Road Not Taken".

***"I shall be telling this with a sigh Somewhere, ages into the future Two roads diverged in a wood,
and I Took the one less travelled by***

And so began my great adventure"