Book review – Land Rover Design – 70 Years of Success

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Title: Land Rover Design – 70 Years of Success

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There are many technical and historical books about the ubiquitous Land Rover, but Nick Hull takes a different approach, celebrating its seventieth birthday by charting its styling history. In this original work he looks at how the essentially functional Land Rover developed its own style, particularly as the range expanded into Range Rover and Discovery.

The author is operating in familiar territory; he worked in Jaguar's styling studio in the 1980s before moving to Peugeot and then headed interior design for Honda. Subsequently he has lectured and written on automotive design. His masterful *Jaguar Design* was published in 2015 to considerable acclaim.

In 1970, the Range Rover started the trend towards what later became known as the SUV. While the market for the basic and increasingly crude Land Rover continued to plough its very functional furrow, the Range Rover and its later siblings moved steadily towards the top end, luxury market. Solidly profitable, as the author describes, Land Rover managed to retain its autonomy through the maelstrom of British Leyland and into subsequent privatisations. BMW bought Rover Group as essentially it wanted to get its hands on its Land Rover division. Later, when Ford acquired what had become Jaguar Land Rover, it was the 4×4 specialist which again held the main appeal.

Hull shows how the cohesiveness of the Land Rover division had much to do with its styling group which successfully resisted attempts by Austin Rover, and BMW to break it up and merge it with their own styling operations. By the time of the Ford takeover, Land Rover

design managers knew what to expect. Styling director Geoff Upex amusingly described how he had his people brand a Land Rover design studio overnight “So when the Ford guys walked in they’d think ‘well this is one place in the world where you’d design Land Rovers.’” Upex said he had his people assemble a range of spurious projects cutting foam models to fill the studio space vacated by the departure of Mini (kept by BMW) and Rover, sold to the ‘Phoenix Four’ managers. “I was determined Ford should not start dispersing the design team.”

VERDICT

Hull’s strength is his ability to talk stylist to stylist, and his interviews with serving and former members of Land Rover’s design team render first hand any number of fascinating insights. If the last two decades fill more than half the book, this is a reflection of the increasing complexity of the Land Rover range, although as the book shows, the Land Rover itself received minimal stylist attention in its last iterations. When discussing recent history, the author’s tone is occasionally too uncritical and the reader would welcome the occasional opposing view. Today’s Range Rover is not universally admired – in some eyes for example the styling has for some time appeared unnecessarily aggressive. The company has recently been caught out by the backlash against diesel; electric vehicles because of their less voluminous powertrains could be shaped quite differently. It would have been interesting to have had some discussion of the stylists’ ideas for their electric SUVs, which, like other manufacturers, Land Rover will soon be building.