

Early Discoverys in the South West

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Dave Moss reflects on the introduction of Land Rover's first Discovery, in 1989.



New Discoverys lined up at a rain-soaked Plymouth Hoe, when the model was launched in October 1989. Our man Dave Moss was there and remembers the event very well. (Photo courtesy Land Rover).

Looking down the time tunnel to the Plymouth-based UK launch of the Land-Rover Discovery in October 1989, 26 years now feels like several lifetimes in automotive history.



The launch was masterminded by the marque's new owner, British Aerospace, which had somehow recently been persuaded by the government to buy remaining remnants of the vast, sprawling BL empire for the knockdown price of £150M.

Sitting in a certain plush Plymouth Hoe Hotel at dinner, discussing current cars and the marketplace with fellow writers and the latest dynasty of Rover Group management, one fact still sticks in the mind today. Hindsight is of course wonderful – but neither my copious notes or recollections from the event suggest any calculated vision of how the Discovery might impact on the market it was about to enter. Press material and company people alike saw the first all-new Land-Rover since the Range Rover – 19 years earlier – as a vital plug for a wide gap in their range. There was no statement of bold intention to kick-start a totally new, leisure-oriented market sector... or any real sign of a master plan for the Discovery to head up a whole new corner of the 1990s motoring landscape, or become Land-Rover's best seller – perhaps even the marque's saviour.



Penned in 1985, this is one of the original design sketches for the Discovery (at that time its launch was still four years away). (Photo courtesy Land Rover).

In 1989, the SUV concept was still in the future, so the three-door-only Discovery entered a sparsely populated sector of the British market. The closest competition came from Japanese vehicles like the Mitsubishi Shogun, Isuzu Trooper, the Nissan Patrol and Toyota's Land Cruiser. In three-door form most of these undercut the Discovery's £18,660 starting price, though some compared more closely with the long established and more expensive Range Rover. Today it's unthinkable, but back then mainstream manufacturers didn't really do spacious, stylish, comfortable, luxurious, seven-seat 4×4 vehicles – because the modest market looked for quite modest specifications – and genuine off road ability.

1989 SMMT sales figures illustrate a very different market back then. The best-selling Ford Escort alone sold a hefty 181,218 units that year, while the Range Rover, then 19 years on

from launch, had no automatic diesel option. It accounted for just 5027 sales – 0.25% of a 2.3 million new-car market. The Discovery thus didn't appear likely to be a major profit centre any time soon.



The neat facia and 'control centre' for the first Discovery is very much of its time in the late 1980s. (Photo courtesy Land Rover).

The following morning, over 40 new Discoverys added to Plymouth's traffic jams, en route to create more traffic jams in the minor lanes of Cornwall and Devon. Opinion was divided on the zig-zag exterior graphics, and there was puzzlement over the optional, colour keyed handbags – now collectors items – sported by some vehicles in the surprisingly spacious and plush turquoise-blue interior, crafted with a so called 'contemporary edge' by Conran Design.

Comfort was a keynote, though the soft ride made for roll angles which limited enthusiastic cornering. However, off road ability, tested 'somewhere on Dartmoor' fully lived up to eager anticipation – and established legend. There was smooth, quite lively performance and – judging by the plummeting fuel gauge – depressing fuel economy from Rover's stalwart petrol V8, equipped with standard-fit manual transmission and offering, ahem, 144 horsepower... An optional, new, 2.5 litre direct injection diesel engine mustered a mere 111 horses, which, though absolutely at home off road, gamely struggled to cope with higher-speed life on Plymouth's dual carriageways. The diesel provided much better economy, but refinement and power output were not its strongest points.



It was far from perfect, but it was the right car at just the right time, and the Discovery has come a very long way since then. From being in at the start of a new market sector, it went on to play a central role in the development of today's vast lifestyle and family oriented 4x4 marketplace, becoming a steady and consistent seller, and a key part of Land Rover's growth around the globe. Today it faces plenty of competition, but its talents are many and various: it's a go-



Powered by the legendary Buick-derived Rover V8 engine, and with widely-praised 'uncluttered' styling, the original Discovery had the power to perform - on and off road - and looked the part too.
(Photo courtesy Land Rover).



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Since UK
introduction on
16th November
1989, the
Discovery has
carved its own
place in motoring
folklore. Twenty-
six years on and
well into its
fourth
generation, the
side graphics are
thankfully long
gone, but it
remains
distinctive,
competent... and
unmistakeable.



Like the Range Rover which arrived 19 years earlier, the V8-powered Discovery was a competent performer on tarmac, but importantly for many was also a formidable vehicle when used in off-road conditions, including barren deserts... (Photo courtesy Land Rover).



The original Discovery acquitted itself admirably in challenging jungle situations too, such as seen in this shot, taken during the ultra-harsh 1990 Camel Trophy event. (Photo courtesy Land Rover).

LAND ROVER DISCOVERY: 10 FACTS

1. 392,443 first-generation Discoverys were built in nine years – an average of 43,604 each year. There were 278,570 Series II models in six years, an average of 46,428 a year. Discovery 3 reached a total of 220,057 in five years, averaging 44,011 per year. The Discovery 4 is the current model, though the “4” badging has recently been dropped...
2. To avoid impacting on Range Rover sales, Discoverys built from original launch in 1989 were three-door models. The five-door followed in 1990 – once the Range Rover had been pushed further upmarket with appropriately higher prices.
3. In December 1989, soon after the Discovery was launched, it was announced that the



hyphen in Land-Rover was being dropped. It has not featured since.

4. A three-door Discovery Series II was built as a full-size mock-up in the mid-1990s, but no such car ever went into production.
5. The first Discoverys shared their headlights with the Freight Rover van, and rear lights with the Austin Maestro van. The door handles came from the Morris Marina...
6. A Discovery 3 was the four millionth Land Rover to leave the production lines on 8th May 2007. It was donated to one of Land Rover's key conservation sponsors – the Born Free Foundation, and deployed as a 'Rapid Response Rescue' vehicle.
7. Between 1994 and 1996, the Discovery was sold in Japan as the Honda Crossroad. It carried Honda badges, but was otherwise almost identical to the standard product.
8. By the beginning of 2014, 1,088,000 examples of the Discovery had been produced at Jaguar Land Rover's Solihull manufacturing plant in the West Midlands.
9. The Discovery has picked up 219 awards to date around the world, from both automotive titles and non-automotive bodies alike, including a 'Best of What's New' Award from US magazine Popular Science – and a Queen's Award for Enterprise in the Innovation category for its Terrain Response system.
10. In 2008, as part of Land Rover's 60th Anniversary and the 100th anniversary of the Royal Charter being granted to The British Red Cross by HM King Edward VII, the company donated 60 vehicles to the charity. Half of the vehicles were allocated to projects around the world and the other half were distributed throughout the UK.



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An amazing photograph, taken on the 1990 Camel Trophy event, and showing a dozen Discoverys snaking their way along a jungle track. (Photo courtesy Land Rover).

(Note: This feature first appeared in a slightly different format on our original 'Wheels-Alive' website in 2014, in celebration of a quarter of a century since the launch of the original Discovery).