





# KEPT OUT OF AFRICA

It was bought to use for making movies in Africa, but unlike its owner, it never got there. Was it this twist of fate that helped to perfectly preserve it?

Story: Patrick Cruywagen Images: Alisdair Cusick

**W**hat a year we had in 1958. The NY Yankees won the World Series, Elvis was forced to join the US Army, while paying passengers were now able to fly between London and New York. Meanwhile, at Solihull, Land Rover celebrated its first decade of existence and introduced the Series II to the world.

At around the same time, John Smith was working in London as a trainee assistant cameraman at Millbank Films, near Lambeth Bridge over the River Thames. One day as he walked past the nearby hospital he noticed a Series I with the words "Westminster Hospital Medical Team Trans-African Expedition" inscribed on the side.

John already had an impressive collection of books on African wildlife and had dreamt of filming there. Seeing this Series I made him decide to do something about it. He would buy a long-wheelbase Land Rover and head to Africa in it to further pursue his camera career. With help from his mum he was able to purchase a new Series II 109 from Henleys of London. Back then it cost £740.

The first official job for his new Series II was to get rid of the tatty old piano that he had left at his parents' house. So he asked his Dad for the best way to get rid of it. "You can chuck it off Beachy Head for all I care!" came the short, sharp reply. Good idea, thought John, and so he got a mate to throw it off the cliff while he filmed it all.

Beachy Head was (and still is) the most popular suicide spot in all of the UK. A lady walking her dog saw what happened and reported it to the police. They in turn called John's parents to say that his Land Rover had been involved in suspicious activity at Beachy Head.

The police decided not to take the matter any further after John explained what he had done. But someone tipped off a journalist about the incident and it made most of the national dailies who ran headlines such as "Piano



riddle at Beachy Head" and my favourite: "You asked for it Dad." This obviously upset his Dad though after a few months even he was able to see the funny side of it.

It was time to get serious and so steps were taken to prepare the Series II for the tough trip through Africa. John approached British Films in Tooting who expertly made all the modifications for him. Two eight-gallon water tanks now occupied the space just ahead of the wheel arches.

To get to East Africa where he hoped to do some work, he would have to cross the Sahara and to do this you need an adequate supply of water. A standard Series II LWB only has a 16-gallon fuel tank and so an extra seven-gallon petrol







Above (L to R): The SII's capstan winch today; one of John's earliest pictures of his beloved Land Rover; Patrick trying the neat hatch arrangement

tank was placed beneath the passenger seat. This feeds the main tank via an electrically-operated fuel pump.

As someone who has spent a fair amount of time on safari all over Africa it was the safari styled roof which I wanted to know more about. "The roof is a standard East African safari top which was fitted to most of the safari Land Rovers in East Africa. It was made for me by a company called Mangal Singh in Nairobi. I always found the Asians in East African to be extremely enterprising. They would always know somebody who could do something for you," says John as we climb on to the back to test it out. I open the hatch and am now able to stand upright. Perfect for when trying to scout the plains for wildlife. Once we were done the hatch perfectly slotted back into place.

The reason why John opted for the LWB version was so that he could sleep on the back when out filming. I run my hands over the wooden panels all around the safari top. They still look like new. It has been sturdily and well constructed, unlike some of the cheaper expedition gear out there today. John goes on to point out the PTO-driven

capstan winch, chequered plates on the wings and where the jerry can holders once stood.

John tried to keep things simple and functional. "It was about as prepared as I could have made it," he says. I have to agree with him. Except for the few bits that he added the rest of the vehicle and its main components are totally original. We lift the hood to reveal the original four-cylinder petrol engine. You can see that it has done less than 50,000 miles in its over 50 years of existence, as it still has the aluminium water pump, the swan-neck exhaust manifold and a rather interesting spark plug holder.

The reason for the low mileage is that John's Series II never made it to Africa - though he did, as he was offered work there by several large film companies in the 1960s. They flew him to Africa, paid him well and he got to trash their vehicles in the process, as just about all the filming he was doing was off-road. Meanwhile, his own Series II 109 stayed at home in his garage in Wimbledon, hence the near-perfect condition I find it in today.

In his time in Africa John worked for World Safari, 20th

**"John's Series II never made it to Africa - though John did"**







Century Fox, Paramount Pictures and ABC and was involved in some pretty big productions such as *The Last Rhino*, *The Lion*, *The Last Safari* and *Africa*. John was living his dream while his Series II 109 patiently waited for him back in Wimbledon.

Amazingly, most of this film work was done in a stripped-down Citroen DS19. Due to the soft suspension, this made it perfect for tracking shots over uneven terrain. But when things got really rough and bumpy he would use a Land Rover. John recalls how the vehicles were used to get the animals moving along. "Lots of the work involved provoking the animals to charge, as this created the drama we needed. This was not David Attenborough-type filming. As the vehicles we used were stripped down the only protection we had was to keep moving."

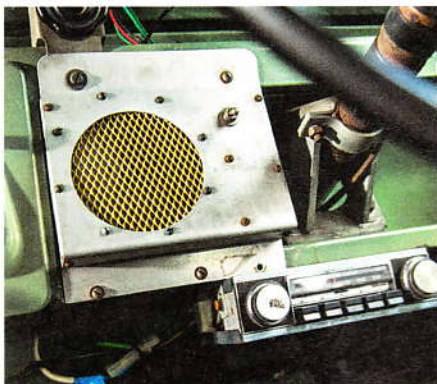
John shows me some old black and white images of a hippo with its mouth wide open, right next to the Land Rover he was filming from. They were normally accompanied by professional hunters and if ever their lives were under threat, the hunters would have to take action. Obviously this type of practice does not occur today.

While he was enjoying the film work John never gave up on his dream of crossing Africa in a Land Rover. So while filming *The Last Safari* in Kenya he purchased a Series I short wheelbase and headed south towards Durban in South Africa. It was a journey of 5000 miles, which took him through Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Back then, all except South Africa had different names. "Unlike today the whole route except South Africa was along dirt tracks. I had no winch but the Series I did the job so I didn't need one," explains John.

After a decade or so working in Africa, John was reunited with his Series II when he returned to the UK. At last it started to see some filming action. It was used on the set of *Eagle Rock*, a B-movie about climbing filmed in the Lake District. Then the British Army hired John and his Land Rover to shoot a recruitment video. Finally his Land Rover found itself on standby during the shooting of the Bette Davies movie, *The Nanny*. Most of the filming was actually done in the Elstree Studios though they did use the Land Rover for one day.

Other than this it was used on several holiday trips to

**Above:** Is this what they mean when they talk about having a Land Rover with a long-range tank?







Europe. John was asked by a Hungarian friend to go and pick up what was thought to be a very valuable painting in Hungary. At the time the Iron Curtain was still firmly in place so John had to be careful.

Before departing, he loosely fabricated a tailgate in which he planned to smuggle the painting. In Hungary, the painting was indeed concealed this way, and the tailgate was sealed up with rivets. Afterwards the rivet gun and drill were thrown away as a precaution.

Unfortunately, after all that back in the UK, Sotheby's declared the painting to be worthless!

John was able to do all the maintenance work on the Series II himself. "I'm lucky and know my way around a Land Rover. I can do most of the jobs myself. I rebuilt the gearbox after things became a little noisy," he says.

In 1980, John left the film industry but couldn't bring himself to sell his Land Rover. Then in 1986 he literally spent several months laboriously repainting the chassis and after this he refused to drive it on a salted road again and so it stood in his garage for almost 30 years.

This explains why it looks the way it does today. "It always lived in a garage, it never went significantly off-road plus I maintained it as best as I could," says John.

Most original Land Rovers that are over 50 years old have had a rebuild or two plus a few paint jobs done to them in that time. To find something that looks exactly the way it did all those years ago is becoming harder and harder. Some might even argue it's nigh on impossible.

Clueless owners, rain, rust, wear and tear, all conspire to prematurely end a Land Rover's life. As for the Series II, most of them were trashed as they served as real workhorses throughout their lives.

This is what makes John and his Series II so special. It will still be around for future generations to enjoy. Thanks to John, one day my young son will be able to do just that.





