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A very British SUV: How Land Rover used sport, competition and notions of adventure to reinvent the utility four wheel drive

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Key words:

Sport, adventure, branding, four-wheel drive, enabling, Land Rover

Paper first presented at the Design History Society conference 'The Material Culture of Sport' at the University of Brighton, 14th of September 2012

Abstract

This paper examines the uses of the Land Rover in sporting activities. It explores how these activities were used to promote and expand the brand as well as the changing (and at times contradictory) customer sensibilities, which significantly impacted both the brand and ultimately the design of vehicles themselves.

The Land Rover, originally envisaged as a 'stop gap' product for agriculture shortly after the Second World War, rapidly became established as the archetypal four-wheel-drive utility vehicle employed in a bewildering number of diverse roles. One such role to emerge in the 1950s was its use for expeditions, 'adventure' and the pursuit of sporting activities. Events such as the London to Singapore 'First Overland' expedition of the mid '50s, the 'Darien Gap' expedition of the '70s through to the 'Camel Trophy' of the '80s were milestones in its 'sporting' use. But there was also its use in amateur 'off- road' competition such as 'trailing' and its supporting role for the 'country set' through its use in hunting, shooting and equine sports.

It has been said that Land Rover capitalised on the colonial notions of African adventures as well as masculine ideas of 'off-roading' to sell its products. However these themes were absorbed quite late in the products identity with the history of the brand being more nuanced and at times contradictory than the vehicles iconic status would now suggest. It can be argued that Rover (the original manufacturer) played 'catch-up' with the uses buyers were putting the vehicle to and then retrospectively built a brand identity on these emerging 'value complexes'.

This led to a change in the value complexes associated with the vehicle and in time, spawned the proto-SUV the 'Range Rover' and, later, other models such as the 'Discovery', 'Freelander' and 'Range Rover Sport'.

Introduction

When we think of sport and the car one tends to picture competitive motor sport such as rallying or circuit racing. The reasons for a manufacturer becoming involved in such activities are relatively clear: technical development, publicity and the sporting reputation of its products. However racing is not a tradition Land Rover has been associated with, yet sport has been a significant factor in the companies approach to design, its brand management, and its reputation with buyers. Its history demonstrates arguably a more subtle use of sporting ideas born out of marketing necessity, which has in turn driven vehicle design. Models such as the Range Rover Sport, to sponsorship of the England Rugby team and imagery such as the Land Rover Defender collecting skydivers from an airfield are all recent testament to the importance of sport and adventure to the brand.[1] But how have these sporting connotations evolved around what started life as an agricultural vehicle?

Genesis of the Land Rover

The Land Rover, designed by the Rover car company, was originally envisaged as a 'stop gap' product for agriculture shortly after the Second World War. Pre-war Rover had developed a reputation as a quality carmaker aiming its vehicles at a growing middle class. The strategy had worked well but Rover ceased car production for the duration of the war and put all of its efforts into war work such as manufacturing the Rolls Royce designed Meteor tank engine.[2]

After the conflict Rover had hoped to return to its old markets but was faced with several problems. Firstly, its pre-war car designs now looked dated, secondly it was a period of considerable austerity where few customers were able to buy a new car, and finally government policy was having a direct impact on design and engineering amongst manufacturers.

Like many commodities in post war Britain, steel was being rationed and its supply linked to export sales. The government saw this as a tool to reduce the balance of payments by compelling vehicle manufacturers to sell overseas.[3]

These circumstances left Rover in a precarious position. Before the war the company did not have an export department and, in fact, only produced right hand drive cars. The managing director, Spencer Wilks, realised If they didn't export rapidly the company would go bust within two to three years.[4] Rover was surviving on completing its military engine contracts but these had been slashed with the cessation of hostilities. This necessitated some rapid and creative design thinking. The company had little time to develop an all new vehicle, could ill afford to purchase new and expensive press tooling, and besides, there was little steel to be had.

Three ideas seemed to have crystallised for Maurice Wilks (the younger brother of Spencer Wilks and the Chief Engineer to Rover at the time).[5]

- Aluminium, unlike steel, was not rationed so could be utilized without restrictions.
- A vehicle design was needed that would be in demand for export, thereby freeing up steel supplies and allowing Rover to again produce cars.
- Finally the Agricultural Act of 1947 was introduced to boost food production by guaranteeing prices to farmers. This, in turn, encouraged them to invest in new machinery and to become increasingly mechanised as a growing income was assured. It seems likely that Rover was aware of this development and wanted to take advantage of it.

Maurice Wilks was at the time using an elderly surplus wartime Jeep on his farm in Anglesey and realised that when it wore out there was nothing new he could replace it with that offered the same versatility or off road ability.[6] Therefore in 1947 the Rover board gave the go ahead to produce a prototype small 4x4 utility vehicle initially using many Jeep components.[7] After what would today be call 'proof of concept', the production vehicle was designed to use an existing Rover engine, gearbox and back axle and a body made of aluminium. This meant the only major new components necessary would be a transfer gearbox, chassis and front axle. A very boxy body of aluminium meant that the panels could be made without expensive press tools and as an added bonus it would not rust. By April 1948, the Rover for the

land – or the ‘Land Rover’ as it became dubbed - was launched at the Amsterdam motor show.

The new Land Rover rapidly became established as the archetypal four-wheel drive utility vehicle in countries of traditional British influence and was rapidly outselling Rover cars with the majority going for export.[8] The Land Rover was becoming a huge success for the company, but how was this rapid move from new model, of a type Rover had never before produced, to archetype achieved and how did sport play a part in this?

The Land Rover was soon employed in a bewildering number of diverse roles, with these often being demanded by customers, rather than generated by the manufacturer. The vehicle was very adaptable to new roles by the very nature of its expedient design and was therefore easily modified by virtue of being so simply built. It had been intended as a vehicle for agriculture and as a substitute on small farms for a tractor but the military also spotted the potential for the Land Rover and rapidly placed substantial orders. This soon sealed the vehicles reputation in agricultural circles as a go anywhere, jack of all trades and the British military contracts gave the vehicle a form of ‘quality approval’ for civilian buyers. However a market not initially recognized by Rover (but ultimately Land Rover’s key market) were private individuals using the vehicle for leisure. In the early 1950s some buyers were starting to purchase a utility Land Rover for expeditions and the pursuit of sporting activities. This was not a market Rover had initially identified for the new vehicle as they saw Land Rover essentially as a commercial type.

Land Rover and adventure

Now largely forgotten but well known as an adventurer in the 1950s and 1960s was Barbara Toy. Toy, with help from friends, managed to purchase a very early second hand ‘Series I’ Land Rover, named it ‘Pollyanna’ and undertook a solo expedition through North Africa and the Middle East only a few years after fighting in the region had ceased. This became the subject of her first book with the self-effacing title ‘A Fool on Wheels.’[9] Toy was to go on and publish a further six books of her travels up to the 1970s. In fact, by 1960, Rover had realised the marketing potential of her

expeditions and provided her with a brand new 'Series II' Land Rover and asked her to give up her now tatty 'Series I' in exchange, as having become a well know travel writer, the company did not want her to be seen in their 'old' model.

Sporting events, such as the 'First Overland' expedition of the mid 1950s, were also raising the vehicle's profile. This was a journey from London to Singapore, the first time the route had been attempted. The expedition was described as one of 'friendly rivalry' between Oxford and Cambridge Universities where two vehicles were used painted in the light blue and dark blue traditional Oxbridge colours and crewed by graduate students from the two institutions. The sporting credentials of the two universities were drawn on in how the expedition was promoted but in reality it was anything but a race. Rover provided two new Land Rovers for the trip and David Attenborough, then a junior producer at the BBC, commissioned a documentary of the journey with Tim Slessor, one of the participants in the expedition, writing a book describing the experience.[10] Land Rover was now being seen and read about as the vehicle of choice for adventure, independently of the company's own marketing.

Other privateers started to undertake expeditions and by the late 1950s a long-wheel-base Station Wagon model was introduced to carry passengers, rather than just goods, in difficult terrain. The model name 'Station Wagon' was adopted from the American term for a large people-carrying vehicle suitable for collecting a group from a railway station. However, revealingly, many users insisted on describing it as a 'Safari Land Rover', a term never officially adopted by Rover, as the model became inextricably linked to expeditions, particularly in Africa.

Nearer to home the UK Caravan Club was also an early adopter of the Land Rover as it was seen as an ideal towing vehicle.[11] This lead to club meetings where once the Land Rover was unhitched, 'off-road' competitive trials were undertaken. This formed the early history of 'off-roading' as a past time in the UK and lead to a demand for used Land Rovers purely for competition and as a fun vehicle. In many ways this was an early precursor of the SUV or Sports Utility Vehicle [12].

During the 1960s Rover began to realise the potential of a 4x4 for sport and leisure. However the Land Rover was thought of as too utilitarian to satisfactorily address this emerging market, particularly in the US. This led to a desire by Rover for a gradual change in the value complexes associated with the vehicle and in time, spawned the proto-SUV the 'Range Rover'.

At twice the price of a Land Rover, the Range Rover, launched in 1970, was rapidly seen as an 'up market' and increasingly aspirational car. Rover was keen to state the Range Rovers comfort over long distances on road, but also its off road credentials. The company didn't want buyers to think the brand had gone soft and this was again achieved by the use of sporting competition and adventure. The British Trans-Americas Expedition in 1972 led by John Blashford-Snell used two Range Rovers and followed a route from the tip of North America to the tip of the southern continent via the infamous 'Darien Gap' in Panama where there is no road connection between the continents, only swamp and jungle.[13] This exposed the vehicle to the key market of North America and, simultaneously, established its reputation as being as tough as the existing utility Land Rover.

Other sporting applications

The Land Rover was already well established with the 'country set' through its use in hunting, shooting and equine sports, which were all closely linked to the vehicles agricultural origins. Royal sporting use of the vehicles for such activities was used in contemporary Rover press releases, cementing the idea of 'Britishness', quality, utility and the royal seal of approval, all in one message.[14] The same buyers now embraced the Range Rover and its manufacturer (now British Leyland) after government investment prompted by the Ryder report of 1975 were eventually able to move the vehicle further 'up market'. This was achieved by the design of increasingly plush interiors and various engineering enhancements.[15] This made sound economic sense, as even though a Range Rover may have cost more to manufacture than a Land Rover, the retail price was considerably higher still, leading to significantly increased margins per vehicle.

Sporting use of the Land Rover and Range Rover, in keeping with the times, took on a more aggressive and macho image in the 1980s most typified by the Camel Trophy. The event, a gruelling off road competition, made up of 20 or more international teams equipped with a Land Rover product each, was held annually in various remote parts of the world.[16]

However, by the late 1980s there was a new gap in the model range between the still utilitarian Land Rover and the now luxurious Range Rover. Lack of investment once again meant it took until 1989 for the gap to be filled with the new Discovery. The Discovery marketing made much use of sporting and leisure imagery as well as the dramatic imagery from the Camel Trophy as did the smaller Freelander launched in 1997.

By 1998 the Camel clothing company, the main sponsors of the Camel Trophy, wanted to move the focus away from off-road driving by introducing events such as canoeing and mountain biking, and thereby showcase its outdoor clothing further as it distanced itself from the parent cigarette brand. As a result Land Rover decided to cancel their involvement with the event and in a press statement made by Martin Runnacles, Rover Group Marketing Director, he stated, ‘...with the changing character of the event it will no longer provide us with an active demonstration of Land Rover's brand essence - future activities will concentrate on our customer base with the emphasis very much on rugged off-road adventure.’[17]

From 2003 Land Rover briefly replaced its involvement with the Camel Trophy by a similar event, the tri-annual ‘G4 Challenge’.[18] However aggressive off-road driving was becoming inconsistent with Land Rovers growing desire to project an image that was environmentally aware. Therefore, somewhat ironically, the company themselves decided to include elements such as cycling and canoeing in the new event, just as the Camel Trophy had attempted to do. However with the economic down turn of 2008 and a change of ownership of Land Rover Ltd from Ford to Tata, the third G4 challenge was canceled, thereby ending (intentionally or otherwise) Land Rovers official association with competitive motor sport.

In recent years Land Rover has still been closely associated with sport but in more subtle ways, more in keeping with the aspirational image of their current products by sponsoring events such as the Burghley Horse trials and the Rugby Premiership.[19] The companies product range has also continued to make links with sporting connotations, most obviously it might be argued by the naming of the Range Rover Sport model.

Conclusion

The use of Land Rovers for sport, competition and adventure parallels the relationship between design and branding at the company over its 64-year history. The shift from the vehicle being used to go 'off-road' out of necessity (i.e. functional design and marketing which promoted these values) then to 'off-roading' for competition or pleasure, (i.e. motoring as leisure) and finally to the potential of the vehicle to take you on an adventure, even if in reality a vehicle was used for nothing more demanding than the commute to work.[20]

In 1994 David Gartman described the first period of the car from 1885 to 1918 as 'a luxury item (often little more than a curiosity), affordable to only a very limited number of people.' In the second period from 1919 to 1958 he stated, 'the technological variation decreased as mass production took hold but competition in the market increased.' The final period from 1959 he characterised as the era of 'mass car ownership where a new range of consumers with different needs and desires were able to afford a car'. [21] By the end of Gartman's second period the Land Rover had been in production for 10 years. However Rover's huge sales success in these early days does not entirely fit the general trend he describes as 'mass production taking hold but competition in the market increasing'. Certainly mass production was employed in the manufacturing of the vehicle, however, Land Rover had virtually no competitor in its traditional markets. For a further ten years until the early 1970s Land Rover was able to sell all it could produce, as a result of being so well established in these markets even though competitors were beginning to emerge.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a shift with Land Rover's consumers increasingly having desires rather than merely needs. In an echo of the changing sensibilities toward

another car born of utility (but in an early motoring age), the Ford Model T, 'it was no longer enough for a product to be affordable and functional [now, not even a utility 4x4]. In an increasingly crowded automotive market the product also had to be *desirable*.' [22]

Sport was a key factor in creating this desire amongst consumers. If the relationship between sport and Land Rover since 1948 was to be characterised, the vehicle could be described as a sport *enabler* rather than a competitor. This enabling function allowed the brand to absorb the sporting connotations along with the other value complexes associated with the Land Rover, whether it was sporting, utilitarian or merely as capable transport.

Design and marketing at Land Rover have become increasingly closely linked with regard to how new vehicles are developed, with the two working hand in hand to make best use of the brand identity.[23] By contrast, early thinking at Rover, with regard to the Land Rover was lead by engineering and a belief that a market existed. In many ways Rover and later Land Rover Ltd played 'catch-up' with the uses buyers were putting the vehicle to and then retrospectively built a brand identity and design strategies on these emerging 'value complexes'. [24] This rich, and in automotive terms, extremely long heritage has been both an asset and at times a hindrance to the Land Rovers brand identity as the consumers sensibilities have changed. However, ultimately, the company has managed to use sport and its associated values such as heroism, drama and exhilaration and link them to its products both old and new in a manner which now appears seamless and in keeping with contemporary sensibilities.

Brand values have allowed the Land Rover to not merely be a technical artifact but to become a concept. It carries a range of values, some controlled by the manufacturer, but many as a result of its heritage and design history. Sales at Land Rover are currently booming, which seems due in no small part to how the brand has linked the utility and heritage of Land Rover to its sport enabling characteristics to create a very British SUV.

Notes

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