

Centre Steer Prototype

CENTRE STAGE

Where does an experienced Land Rover restorer turn for a real challenge? Keith Barrett finds out.

WORDS KEITH BARRETT PHOTOS BILL SUMNER, JIM MACRI





Their 'Premier Collection', housed in a museum above their workshop, is well named'

Jim Macri and his crew of technicians at High Meadow Farm Rovers (HMFR) in Saxtons River, Vermont, USA are fervent Land Rover enthusiasts. Their mission: "To bring each of our vehicles back to its original and pristine condition. We do not do this for financial return"; their motivation: "Our love of these vehicles and our desire to

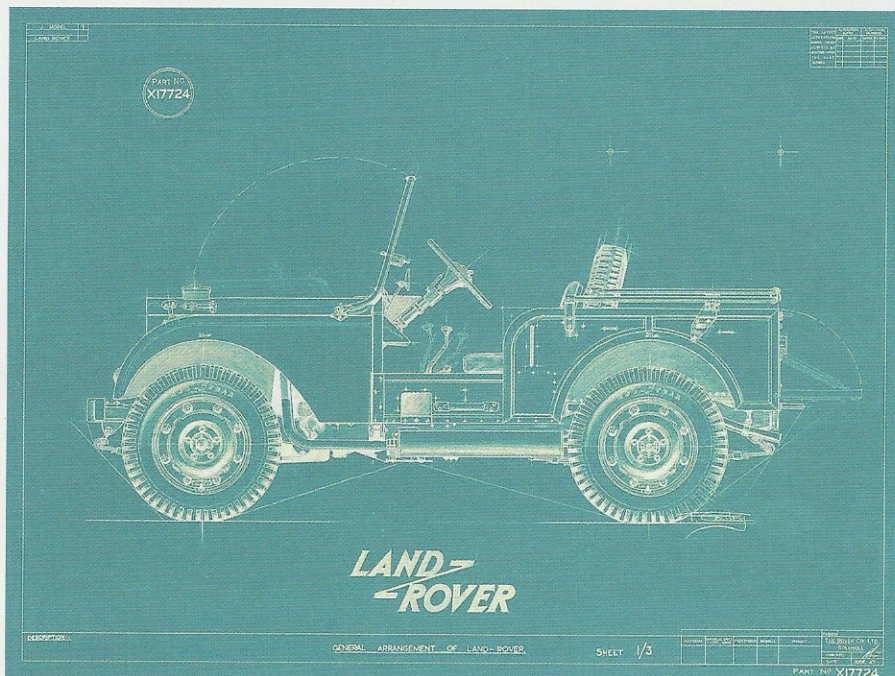
have others share in the beauty and utility of this iconic brand." They pride themselves in having created "the Premier Collection of vintage Land Rovers in the United States."

Their 'Premier Collection', housed in a museum above their workshop, is well named. It includes a 1997 Defender 90, purchased new by Jim, and now, after a

chassis off restoration, it's as good as new again. There is also a 1973 Series III 88in and a 1964 Series IIA 109in, both completely restored by Jim and his technicians. There are also some Series Ones:-

A 1957 SWB, completely restored by HMFR, has won more than its share of awards. The 88 has a 'little brother', built on

Centre Steer Prototype



The original Centre Steer Prototype

Dunsfold Trust Bill Hayfield replica. Jim and Glenn looked it all over, and compared it to the chassis on a GPW, the type used on the original Centre Steer.

From Cranleigh they travelled to Yeovil, to meet with Ian Cox of Cox and Turner Engineering. Ian was curious and advised that the proper engine would have to be a Rover P2 10HP, and thought that he should be able to find one. Jim was now sure that his dream could come to fruition.

Back in the US, High Meadow Farm Rovers got to work on their new project.

In the drafting office, Jim and his son, Jim Jr., spent over 2000 hours studying the plans and photos; enlarging, enhancing, measuring and scaling. The wheelbase provided a datum to which they could compare all measurements. The size, shape, and interrelationship of the vehicle's components were determined.

A 1942 Ford GPW Jeep, found in Florida, provided the chassis, transfer box, axles, and wheels. Ian Cox shipped over a rebuilt engine and gearbox from a 1947 Rover Saloon car. Jim Geroux of Haanen Packard Machinery in Hudson Falls NY, a machinist with a serious case of 'Roveritis', designed and constructed a custom adaptor to marry the Rover gearbox to the Jeep transfer box. Things were coming together. A bulkhead frame was fabricated and attached. A front engine Centre Steer vehicle does present a particular problem: the steering column lines up with the lump under the bonnet; matters of interference must be addressed. It was solved by some simple mechanics.

the chassis and drive train of an electric golf car; something for Jim's grandchildren to drive around the farm.

One recent acquisition is a September 1948 80in. R860149 "wasn't bad" when purchased by Jim. The crew thoroughly dismantled it, and every bit was gone over. It is now restored to 'as new' condition.

High Meadow Farm Rovers has well proven their ability to bring old Land Rovers back to life – properly, thoroughly. The vehicles show an amazing attention to detail. The quality of restoration is excellent.

In 2013 Jim and his crew were showing some of their Land Rovers at the British Invasion show (www.britishinvasion.com). They were pleased with what they had on display and were 'shopping' for ideas for a new project. Jim liked the MGs, the Triumphs and the Austin Healeys, but these marques did not quite strike his fancy. He preferred Land Rovers. He had done a Defender, a Series III, a Series IIA, and a Series One. What next?

'The steering column lines up with the lump under the bonnet; matters of interference must be addressed'

What predated the Series One? Jim was intrigued by the 'Holy Grail of Land Rovers', the Centre Steer prototype. Was it possible to build one? Jim thought about it – a lot. He decided that he would see if he could create an absolutely correct replica of the 1947 Land Rover Centre Steer prototype.

In the spring of 2014 Jim and his chief technician, Glenn Parent, flew to the UK. They visited Philip Bashall at Dunsfold DLR. Philip generously shared his wealth of knowledge, and photographs and plans of the original prototypes. He brought out the



A small selection of the collection at High Meadow Farm Rovers



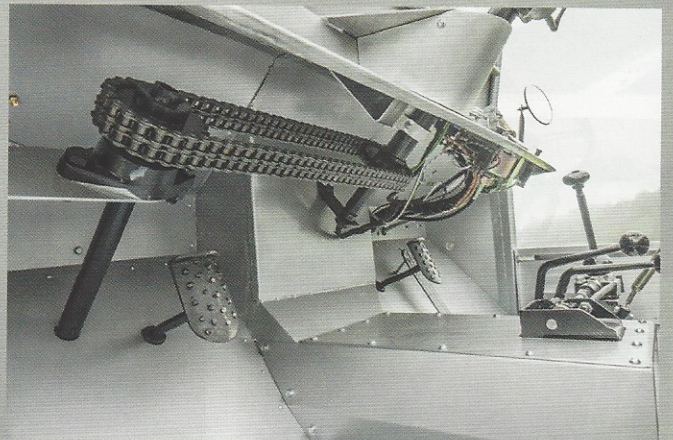


A gentle turn of the period correct Rover P2 steering wheel directly turns a sprocket attached to the bottom of the P2 steering column; a timing chain transfers the rotation to a second sprocket, which is at the top of a shaft aligned to the left of the engine. The bottom of the shaft connects

into a GPW steering box and, after that, the steering is all 1942 Jeep.

By the autumn of 2015 the chassis was rolling. The organisers of the British Invasion convinced Jim to display it at the September show. Although it did not fit into any of the show categories, it still won a special award.

The chassis needed a body. Jim contacted Joe Stafford, owner of Panel Craft LLC. Joe had been creating bodies for almost 40 years – beautiful, compound curved shapes for Cobra, Jaguar, Delahaye, Cunningham, Porsche; names that conjure up visions of speed and exotica. This project would be different; Joe was unfamiliar with the design, the curves were less complex (and possibly less forgiving), and he had little to refer to. But Joe was sure that he was equal to the challenge. In April of 2016 the rolling chassis was delivered to Panel Craft's shop in Bethlehem, New Hampshire. Joe did not have to use his English wheel, and his (magic) panel beating skills were not tested, but the Rover posed its own set of unique challenges. With no subtle differences to





Jim Macri holding a replica of his replica

study, it was a one-off project of a vehicle he had never done before. He had only some old photos and plans for reference to see how the body flowed and where the breaks were in the curves. He had to create symmetrical panels, and have them stay that way, while mounted on a 70-year-old non rigid tube chassis. Joe's aim is "to always strive to do better today than the day before, to complete each project to a better standard than the previous one". Using big jigs and blocks to keep everything in place, while riveting and welding, he accomplished his goal. Photos and comments can be seen on Panel Craft's Facebook page, www.facebook.com/panelcraftNH.com. The post-

ings from April 2016 to April 2017 document the construction of the body.

The Centre Steer was brought home, and the crew finished off the final details. Jim Macri had had a vision. It took a lot of passionate, dedicated, skilled craftsmanship to bring that vision to reality. Jim is first to give credit to everyone who had a hand in its build. On 9 June 2017 the creation was unveiled at the British Motorcar Festival in Bristol, Rhode Island. It will be shown again on 16-17 September 2017 at The British Invasion in Stowe, Vermont.

The restoration shop is still busy. Jim Macri and his crew: chief technician Glenn Parent, senior technician Dana Earthrowl,

and assistant Jacob Parent are currently restoring (frame off, nut and bolt, of course) a LHD 1951 Series One 80in, and a 1959 Series II 88in.

When Jim Macri was a young man, he spent a summer on Martha's Vineyard, MA. There he fell in love – twice. He married his first love, Jane. And she supports his second love, Land Rovers. It took several years before Jim bought his first Land Rover, but he is making up for it now; the stable is filling up. No matter how many more join the queue, there is one that will always be his favourite; the High Meadow Farm Rovers' "J" (Jim) Model Land Rover Centre Steer Prototype. **■**

There he fell in love – twice. He married his first love, Jane. And she supports his second love, Land Rovers