

Words and photographs: Alisdair Cusick

ORIGIN ^{OF} THE SPECIES

Arthur Silverton pioneered the concept of the performance 4x4. We take a close look at his personal development vehicle, the earliest incarnation of the Overfinch Range Rover





“It's a working piece of Land Rover history”



Most of the vehicles we feature in *LRM* are prime examples of their breed. Often well restored, cared for and polished to a deep gloss, they are a testament to their fastidious owners. But we aren't only interested in perfection at *LRM*: we're crazy about *all* Land Rovers. And every now and then something a little less than perfect catches our eye, and even though it may not look as though it just left the showroom, nevertheless has the editorial team racing to check it out.

One such vehicle is the Range Rover on these pages. Scroll through any car sale website and you can turn up a host of similar-looking vehicles, none of which would deserve a second look. But this car is different. Whilst it may be a little aged, it's a working piece of Land Rover history. What we have here is pretty much the earliest origins of the Range Rover that really performed. The Range Rover Sport, or Performance Sports Utility Vehicles we know of today all came from this vehicle, or more correctly from its owner, Arthur Silverton. That name may not mean much to many people, but I guarantee it will to his company. He was the man behind Overfinch, and this vehicle was his personal development car from 1986.

It's currently owned by Chris Bishop, of Bishops 4x4 in Cambridgeshire, who invited *LRM* to visit. Chris is a serial Range Rover fan, owning around 40 examples, and now specialises in restorations and rebuilds of

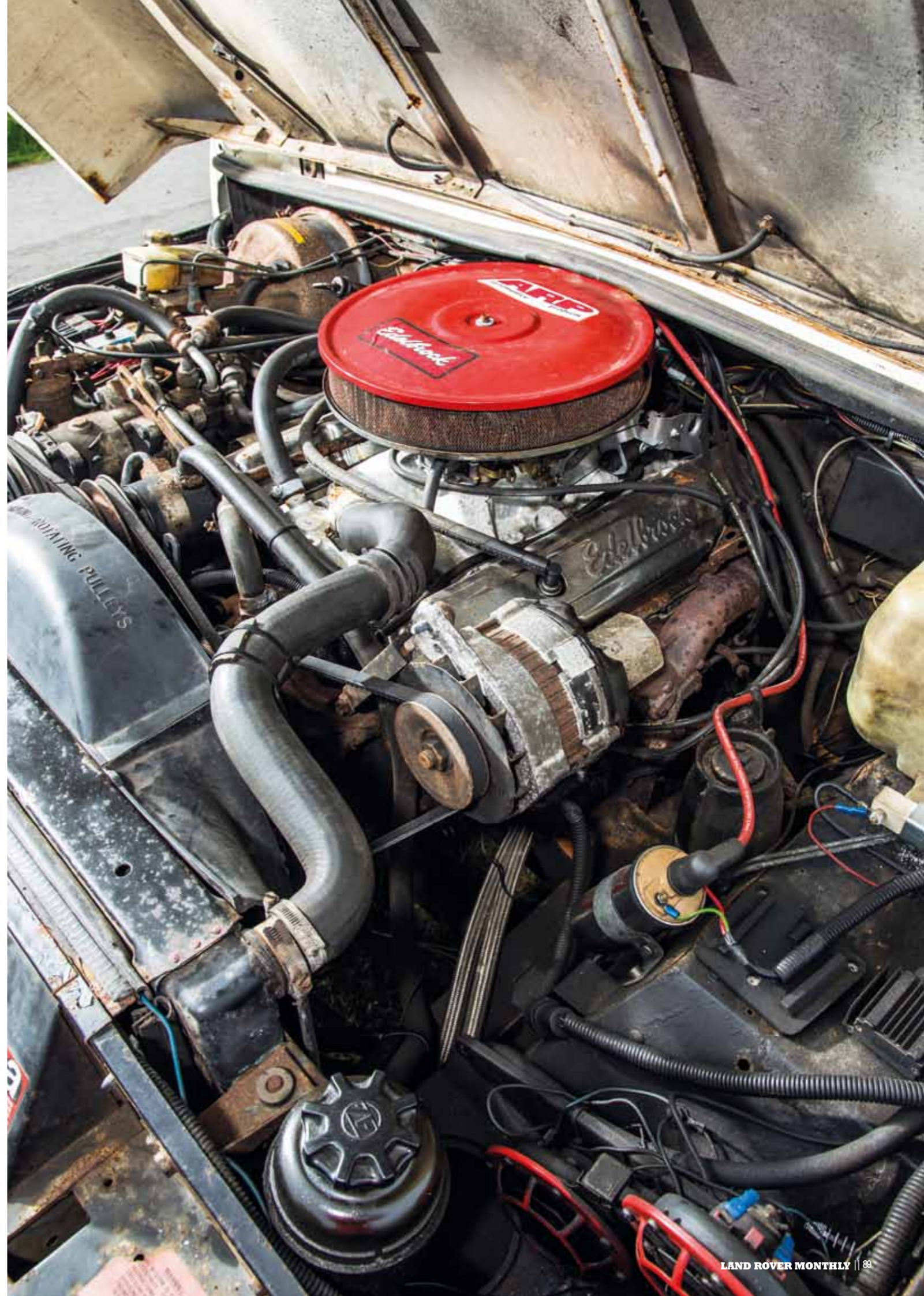
Left:
This car was said to have reached 60 mph in just 7.7 seconds and topped 123 mph at Millbrook

Range Rover Classics. Because of this, when he spotted the car featured here for sale a little over a year ago, he knew he had to buy it and save it.

So what is so special? Well, as we touched on last month in *Sport 2 vs Overfinch Classic*, Overfinch is the pioneer which made Solihull's luxury model really perform. If you missed that feature, Arthur Silverton was a man who saw potential in the Range Rover almost from its very beginnings. He was looking for perfection, and found the Range Rover wanting. At a time when the factory was happy with the execution of its "100in Station Wagon" project, Silverton wanted more. By the mid 1970s he had dabbled with 4.4 V8 engines, a Jaguar V12 and then later discovered the 5.7 GM V8, which seemed made for the Range Rover. At the time his conversions were marketed under the name of Schuler Presses, manufacturers of body pressing plant, and then the simpler Schuler name. By 1978 Silverton had spent a number of years perfecting the Super Range, a two-door Range Rover initially running a five speed 'box, Dell'Orto-carbed 3.5 V8. With swan neck manifolds, different valves, exhaust, electronic ignition and a full blueprint, it trimmed four whole seconds off the standard factory 0-60 of 14.6 seconds. The extra potency was transmitted through a 4in wider track, with road biased Avon 15x7 tyres and Koni dampers. Inside, luxury continued with deeper pile carpet, leather and air conditioning. Once he swapped the Rover V8 for the GM, this first prototype was to set the basic recipe for the next 20 years of how to make a Range Rover go fast in comfort.

Silverton changed the name of his Range Rover empire to Overfinch in 1985, by which time he had firmly set out his stall as the de facto tuner of Range Rovers. Various options were covered from basic handling and braking, right through to 5.0, and 5.7-litre GM V8 models, plus a pioneering automatic and viscous transfer box conversion and Ferguson FF anti-skid brake system, running off a sensor on the output shaft of the transfer box.

With that background, progress of course had to be made in line with the donor factory vehicle. Enter our featured car, the second prototype to wear the '64 SPL' number plate. A four door model from December 1986, it was one of the earliest 3.5 EFI vehicles as standard, and most likely the first vehicle wearing the newly branded 'Overfinch' badging, Arthur Silverton fitted his trademark 5.7 V8, and a four speed GM700 gearbox, with viscous transfer box. The transfer box is significant, because at the time the factory only offered the LT230T. With that, DIFF-LOCK was selected manually, and on the move the gears made for a fair amount of whine. The chain-driven viscous-coupled Ferguson transfer box automatically split torque 37/63 and removed any driver decision regarding DIFF-LOCK.



“There's still an indecent amount of progress for a large 4x4...”



BROCHURES/HISTORY



Chris has kept early brochures and the car's original leather wheel, as fitted by Arthur Silverton

When traction was lost, drive automatically engaged, and thanks to the chain, noise was greatly reduced at speed, too - on a two-door, gear noise was claimed to be cut by half. One quirk is that contrary to the way the factory system worked, Low range is back, and High range is forwards, towards the dash.

The 5722cc engine produced 280bhp at 5000rpm, and 340 lb-ft at 3000rpm, which in the mid 1980s was really exciting stuff. In 1988, a visit to Millbrook test track by respected journalist David Vivian saw him reach an off-the-speedo 123mph, and roar the 0-60 dash in what he described as “a barely credible 7.7 seconds”.

To move beyond the two-door Super Ranger prototype, this four-door prototype kept the lowered, stiffened suspension and Koni dampers, but added Monroe Airmatic struts on the rear to help control unwanted roll further, controlled via a dial on the dash.

Large floating discs were fitted to the front brakes, using standard pads, of which the original discs are still fitted and usable today. Overfinch contemporary John Eales, of JE Engineering favoured Mintex pads on his ‘Dakar’ conversion, but standard pads wisely avoided the need to build up heat before the brakes were effective.

Inside is mostly standard Range Rover (bar

the reversed transfer box lever).

Arthur Silverton fitted a three spoke leather steering wheel, which is now replaced with a wooden rim Momo, though Chris still has the original item.

“In the 12 months I’ve had the car, I’ve just replaced one track-rod end and some bushes to get it through the MoT, then gave it a run,” he says.

Which is how it is today. Looking around it, age is beginning to catch up a bit. There’s a little crustiness appearing on the doors, tailgate and bodywork, but what do you do? Fettle it, maintaining originality and uniqueness – or go full out, restore it and instantly cast aside the hand of its maker?

Wisely, Chris intends to do the former. “Generally, it has been left as original as possible. It has had seven owners, but fortunately they have each been respectful of what it is, so now I intend to keep it that way, and store it carefully to preserve it, and stop it going too far.”

Only a few details have been altered over time – the vertical grille, and the personal



plate are gone – and the wider alloy wheels are off the car, in storage. On the road, the exhaust gurgles nicely, and there’s still an indecent amount of progress for a large 4x4. In the mid 1980s it must have been incredible to be keeping up or overtaking Golf GTIs and the like, dropping jaws in the process.

Despite being aged, the potency is still enough to surprise. “Everything is quite raw on it,” shouts Chris, as he enthusiastically swings through a set of fast bends. “The later

Overfinches were much more refined in comparison. It gets into top gear quickly, then it seems to go on forever.”

Many test vehicles get built, hammered on shakedown or crash, to be broken for parts to build the next one.

So it’s a rare treat to be able to poke and prod one all these years later, especially one that was so ahead of its time. The factory would take nearly 20 years until it could produce a model offering similar performance.

Age may just be catching up a little now, but the modifications to Chris’s car still hold the magic touch that inhabits Overfinch Classics.

Their success was in the intelligence that went into their work. The intelligence of one man, with a particular desire, and a meticulous eye for detail.

For all its rawness in 2014, you can tell it is special, over and above a production car. Next time you see a Range Rover Sport, tip a nod to Arthur Silverton, and to the vision that went into this, the first Overfinch Range Rover.

With thanks to Chris Bishop, of Bishops 4x4, Peterborough. Tel: 01733 242888.

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