

LETTS GO BACK IN TIME

John Pearson takes a road trip back into the '70s with a Range Rover Classic on a route he found in an old Letts Motor Tour Guide

PHOTOS: BOB ATKINS

The time-travel machine

OWNER: CHRIS BISHOP

Insatiable Range Rover Classic collector Chris bought this lovely 1972 two-door in 2012. 'It was a runner, but was far from original. The paintwork was white, with a black vinyl roof – and there was lots of wrong stuff on it, including later model lights and mirrors on the door instead of the bonnet.'

But the engine and chassis numbers matched those on

the registration document and overall it was a fairly solid vehicle. 'Some small sill repairs were needed, but the chassis is fine,' says Chris. So he bought it and started a project to return it to its original condition.

It took a while to source all of the correct parts, but eventually it all came together and has been resprayed in its original Bahama Gold. And doesn't it look a treat?

The Range Rover Classic is burbling along a narrow Bedfordshire country lane on a rare sunny day during what has been a horribly wet and miserable winter. As I accelerate from a corner, I see a couple in a Morris Minor Traveller coming the other way; they smile and thank me as I pull over to let them past. Then half a mile later I meet a man driving another Range Rover Classic, who grins and waves vigorously. It's as if I've been transported back to the 1970s.

I've had a long-standing offer from a good trade contact to borrow one of his Range Rover Classics for a day's drive. Chris Bishop is a collector and restorer of old Range Rovers

as well as being proprietor of Bishops 4x4 in Yaxley, just down the road from LRO HQ in Peterborough. He has recently rebuilt this lovely 1972 two-door Range Rover Classic; and while I was drooling over it one day, he repeated his offer. 'You're on,' I said. I wanted to make it a special drive. I knew that somewhere on my bookshelves at home I had a 1970s Shell Road Map of the Midlands – my idea was that maybe I could plan a pleasant route on roads as they were back when the Range Rover was new.

But by a stroke of luck (with a bit of help from my reluctance to sell or throw away old books and stuff), I spotted a Letts Motor Tour Guide to East Anglia (including Cambridge). Printed in 1970 when the Range Rover was

launched, this book includes 10 different routes of 100 miles or more throughout the region, giving historical information and detailing places of interest to visit.

It's a lovely look back to how things were, a real time-traveller to an age when currency was in pounds, shillings and pence, the roads were less crowded and touring the country by car just for fun was a popular family activity.

The average weekly wage was just £32, so few people could afford to own a near-£2000 Range Rover at the time. But those with the wherewithal would have been king of the road – and king off the road. With that elevated seat position, lusty 3528cc V8 engine and wonderful off-road capability, it would go absolutely anywhere – in imperious style.

And it is truly stylish: the Range Rover is a remarkable design that refuses to become dated. I slip behind the slim, three-spoke steering wheel while Chris is applying the finishing touch of sticking on a 'By Land Rover' oval on the back.

What's in front of me is timeless. The dash is clean and uncluttered. The seating position is high, which – combined with stick-thin windscreens pillars – provides a commanding, virtually unobstructed view not just of the road ahead but all around the vehicle.

For the first few miles I do curse the 'wrong way round' wiper and indicator stalks on the steering column, finding myself putting the wipers on when I want to indicate at a turning and vice-versa.

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ADVENTURE TIMEWARP TOUR

Leg one

Alwalton-Warmington

Highlight: St Botolph's Green

All of the 10 routes in the Letts Motor Tour Guide are tempting, but I chose number six, simply because it goes right past LRO's front door on the outskirts of Peterborough. We travel to many far-flung places in the UK and overseas, so it's nice to do a more local adventure for a change.

'All of the tours are circular,' says the book's introduction. 'And so you can start and finish at any point.' I take them up on that offer. As published, the route starts in Peterborough, but I choose to join it five miles to the west of the city at the attractive village of Alwalton (pictured below), which is home to our local, The Cuckoo.

In the centre of Alwalton is the church of St Andrew, which the Letts Guide tells me dates from the late 12th century and is built of local yellow stone. I'm surprised the book doesn't reveal that Alwalton has a significant motoring connection – it was the birthplace of Sir Henry Royce, the co-founder of Rolls-Royce. His ashes are buried in an urn under the floor of St Andrew's, and there's a plaque in his memory.

Also worth a look while you're turning around at the junction past the church is

Alwalton Lodge – a narrow building with a tower that's much bigger than the rest of it. Built during the 19th century using the porch from a 17th century building, it used to be the lodge for the manor house.

My next visit is to the village of Elton. Back in 1972 I would have had to queue to cross the A1 at its junction with the A605. Thankfully a flyover was built in 1976 or I could still be sitting at the junction now, unable to find a gap in the relentless traffic flow.

V8 opens for business

Once clear of the Chesterton village speed limit, the former A605 (now reclassified as the B671 since road improvements bypassed Alwalton and Elton) is a wide, undulating, largely traffic-free road, with sweeping bends. This gives me the chance to open up the Range Rover for the first time.

This is great. It surges along, with the V8 engine snarling purposefully, but I'm wishing it had one or more extra ratios in the four-speed gearbox. That's one major difference with new range Rovers, which have a multitude of gears and rev much lower at cruising speeds – kind of what you'd expect, given 40-odd years of development, I guess.

I'm soon slowing for the village of Elton. Letts tells me it's on the right bank of the UK's 10th longest river, the 100-mile-long Nene – the name of which, incidentally, is pronounced differently in Cambridgeshire ('Nen') and Northamptonshire ('Nen').

My guide says that the All Saints church was built on the pre-Norman Conquest foundations of an earlier church ('a theory supported by two 11th century standing crosses in the churchyard'). And it reckons that the west tower is its finest feature.

The church is on your right as you pass through the village, just before the Black Horse pub. But before you reach either of these landmarks is Heighton's, which these days is a garage and filling station, but back in 1904/05 used to produce motorcycles. Not a lot of people know that.

Letts mentions Elton Hall, which has sat imperiously in Elton Park since the 15th century, but reckons it has been rebuilt and 'Gothicized' over the centuries. Sadly, this impressive stately home isn't open to the public, so all you can do is admire it through the iron railings. Opposite the Hall entrance is the beautiful St Botolph's Green, a traditional English village green surrounded by old estate cottages.

The A605 used to loop right past the red brick wall that encloses what is now the Hall's garden centre, but these days you go straight on to the bypass and then turn right – sometimes easier said than done.

The bypass continues around Warmington, but I turn into the village to follow as much of the original A605 as I can – which isn't much, because the old road is closed just after the Red Lion pub and I have to divert through the village.

Leg two

Cotterstock-Kimbolton

Highlight: Cotterstock Hall

Letts next takes us to Cotterstock (right), although I think it has again missed a trick by not including a detour to Fotheringhay. There's a splendid church there as well as the site of Fotheringhay Castle, where Mary Queen of Scots was tried and beheaded in February 1587. It eventually fell into disrepair and was demolished in the mid-17th century.

I pass the 19th century Cotterstock water mill on the Nene before heading through the village towards Cotterstock Hall. When the Letts guide was published this was open to the public, but has long since been a private residence. Originally built in the 12th century, it's been updated over the years and is notable for being a place that 17th century poet and playwright John Dryden frequented to visit relatives. Its more recent claim to fame is as a location for the 2010 film *The Woman in Black*, featuring Harry Potter star, Daniel Radcliffe.

From Cotterstock I turn towards Oundle. According to Letts, this small market town beside the River Nene has 'many good 17th century buildings, including the Talbot Inn, which incorporates the staircase from Fotheringhay Castle'. Interesting to learn of this ancient form of recycling (or upcycling) after the castle was demolished.

Driving out of Oundle on the old A605, I discover that the bridge over the Nene has a width restriction of 2.1 metres – which is enforced by some sturdy metal posts. Bearing in mind the Range Rover is 1.78m wide, I'm breathing in as I approach the scarred and battered posts.

Smooth and controllable

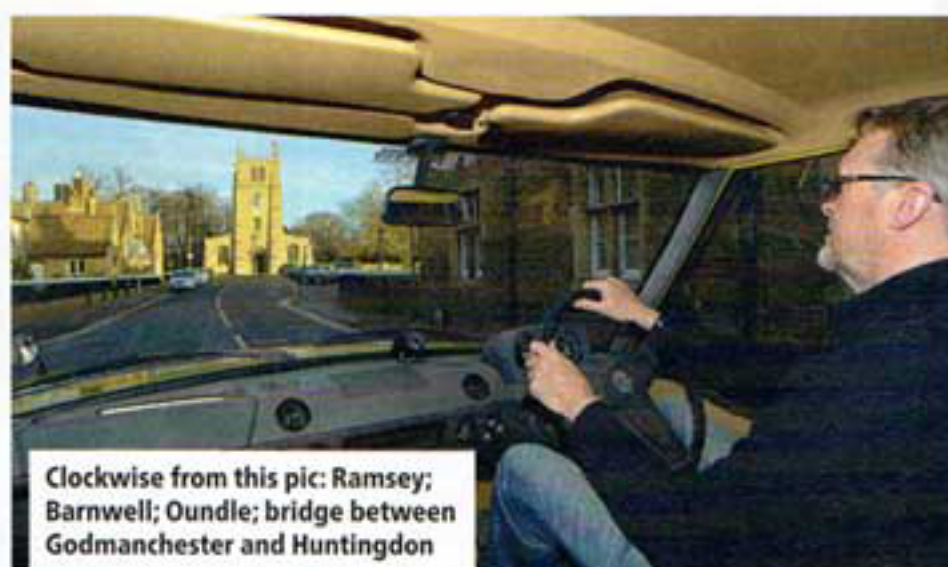
Chris Bishop and his team have done a good job with the Range Rover: it's smooth and controllable at low revs with reassuringly precise power steering (optional at the time) as I trickle along between the posts. Phew. I cross the Oundle bypass into Barnwell. Its most notable building is Barnwell Manor, home of the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester, in the grounds of which are the ruins of the 13th century Barnwell Castle. From Barnwell I pass through Thurning and Winnick before heading to Kimbolton. The Letts guide says: 'Kimbolton has a welcoming high street, with the church at one end and the castle at the other.' I have to say that my arrival is less than welcoming, with a grumpy woman in a Toyota parking her horn impatiently because I hold her up for a few seconds.

Kimbolton's medieval castle is now a school, but it is open to the public a couple of times a year. Its most notable occupant was Catharine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first wife, who was banished there after Henry annulled their marriage – not such a bad place to be banished to. She died there in 1536 and is said to haunt the building.

The Talbot Inn incorporates the staircase from Fotheringhay Castle – an ancient form of recycling'

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Clockwise from this pic: Ramsey; Barnwell; Oundle; bridge between Godmanchester and Huntingdon

Leg four

Sandy-Peterborough

Highlight: Ramsey Abbey ruins

Says Letts: 'Sandy, a busy town on the River Ivel, with the traffic of the A1 roaring by, is one of the centres of Bedfordshire's prosperous market-gardening industry. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has its headquarters at The Lodge, a mile south-east of the town.'

There's significantly more traffic roaring by on the A1 than when Mr Rolphe researched his book, but the RSPB is still at The Lodge, which I pass while climbing towards the 800ft transmitter tower on Sandy Heath.

I pass through Potton, Gamlingay, Waresley and Abbotsley, before arriving at St Neots. There was nothing outstanding enough in the villages en route to warrant a mention in the guide. And St Neots is notable only for 'the remarkable carving in its church roof'.

Bucken Palace (now Buckden Towers), is on the town's high street. 'Now a Roman

Catholic centre, it was formerly a fortified palace of the Bishops of Lincoln. It was built about 1493 and Catharine of Aragon occupied one of the corner turrets of the main tower before moving to Kimbolton Castle,' says the guide.

Godmanchester is next, and I cross the Ouse from it to Huntingdon over its stone bridge, which was built in 1332. This is where the Roman road Ermine Street used to cross the Ouse, and the bridge was still used by heavy traffic until the A14 bypass opened in 1975.

Speed on to Ramsey

I can see why Letts says: 'If you wish to explore all the places mentioned, you may find a single tour will provide two or more days' motoring.' I've concentrated on driving rather than exploring, but time is still tight so I speed through St Ives and Warboys to Ramsey. 'It has lost many of its old buildings through fire. Its former abbey dated from the 7th century, but all that remains are the 13th century Lady Chapel and the ruined 15th century gatehouse, now National Trust property.'

Next are Whittlesey and Thorney. The guide should take us to The Waterfowl Gardens, Pearkirk. This was part of the Wildfowl Trust, but it closed some years ago.

So I continue to Peterborough, which at the time our Letts guide was written, 'has been designated a New Town, which means its population of some 60,000 is liable to be doubled in the next decade'. He wasn't wrong – in the 2011 census the population had reached 183,600 and is no doubt higher still in 2014. I agree with Mr Rolphe about the 12th century Peterborough cathedral: 'It is a magnificent building noted for the loftiness of its Romanesque nave and its fine west front.'

Britain has changed a lot since the Letts guide was compiled. But you can still find some uncrowded country roads that are unchanged since the 1970s. You can time-travel back the way. So, what of the Range Rover? It was a sensation back in the 1970s and it is very capable and relevant in 2014. LRO

Leg three

Pertenhall-Old Warden

Highlight: Armchair comfort!

I continue through Pertenhall on the B660. It's 'one of the many pleasant villages in north Bedfordshire with an ancient church and manor house,' says Letts. Then I pass through Boleynst before reaching the outskirts of Bedford.

My guide has a lot to say about this county town, not least through its association with John Bunyan, the Christian preacher and writer who penned *The Pilgrim's Progress*. 'In the High Street stands the well-known statue by Sir Joseph Boehm of John Bunyan. There is an interesting collection of Bunyan's personal possessions and relics in the Bunyan Meeting House and Museum in Mill Street. The Borough Library in Harper Street has many rare editions of his books,' says Letts.

Both of these establishments are still there, along with the bronze statue, although the library is actually in Harpur Street, not Harper. Sadly, Bedford's traffic is a lot worse than when Wilfred E Rolphe visited the town in the early 1970s to research the Letts guide. Today it's jammed and going nowhere, so I decide to

give John Bunyan a miss and continue south-east towards Cardington. Anyone who's bypassed Bedford on the A421 will have seen the two giant landmarks Cardington is famous for – its airship hangars. Says Letts: 'Cardington is still dominated by the great hangar from which in 1930 the airship R101 set out for India on her ill-fated maiden flight. At Beauvais in France she crashed in flames, with the loss of 46 lives. The dead were buried in Cardington churchyard and the airship's ensign hangs in the church.'

From balloons to Rihanna

The airfield and hangars have seen many varied uses over the years, including building and storing barrage balloons and training their operators, a meteorological research establishment, RAF base, producing gases for use by the RAF, carrying out gas explosion experiments and the training of driving instructors. It's been used by rock stars such as Paul McCartney, Rod Stewart and U2 for rehearsals, as a film studio for Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and various Batman movies, and for a Rihanna music video.

I've been driving the Range Rover for a while now and it's proving to be remarkably comfortable. The seat is supportive and the

ride is good, although there's a fair amount of body roll. I would prefer a little more legroom, but it's just about okay.

Performance from the 156bhp engine may be a long way short of what the current fourth-generation Range Rover delivers (SDV8: 334bhp/SDV6: 292bhp), but despite its age this vehicle is perfectly capable of keeping up with modern traffic. This really is a vehicle you can still use every day – although whether most owners of one in this perfect condition would want to subject it to everyday use during a British winter with its salt-covered roads is another story.

From Cardington I drive to Old Warden, which 'was built as a model village in the mid-19th century by Lord Ongley'. Letts tells me. This wealthy local MP also brought from the continent much of the carved wood that decorates St Leonard's church.

But our interest is outside the village, at Old Warden airfield – the Shuttleworth Collection. This extensive display shows the history of flight from the early 1900s to after WW2. There's also a display of old cars, bikes and horse-drawn carriages.

Sadly there's just too much here for us to see and carry out the rest of the drive today, so I carry on towards Sandy.

You can do it too

GET ONLINE... AND PICK UP

ARCHIVE GUIDES CHEAPLY

I had the Letts Motor Tour Guide East Anglia (including Cambridge) and Shell Road Map No 3 (Midlands) on my bookshelves, but you can still find secondhand copies of both online.

Amazon has a number of the Letts Guides to various regions, with prices starting from under £1, and you can

find copies of the East Anglia one at abeebooks.co.uk for less than £7 including postage.

I found several 1970s Shell maps, including one of the Midlands example, for sale on eBay. Prices were all around £1 or £2.

So, it's possible to get the authentic route guides and create your own drives for very little trouble.

Why not give it a try and do your own time-travelling?

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