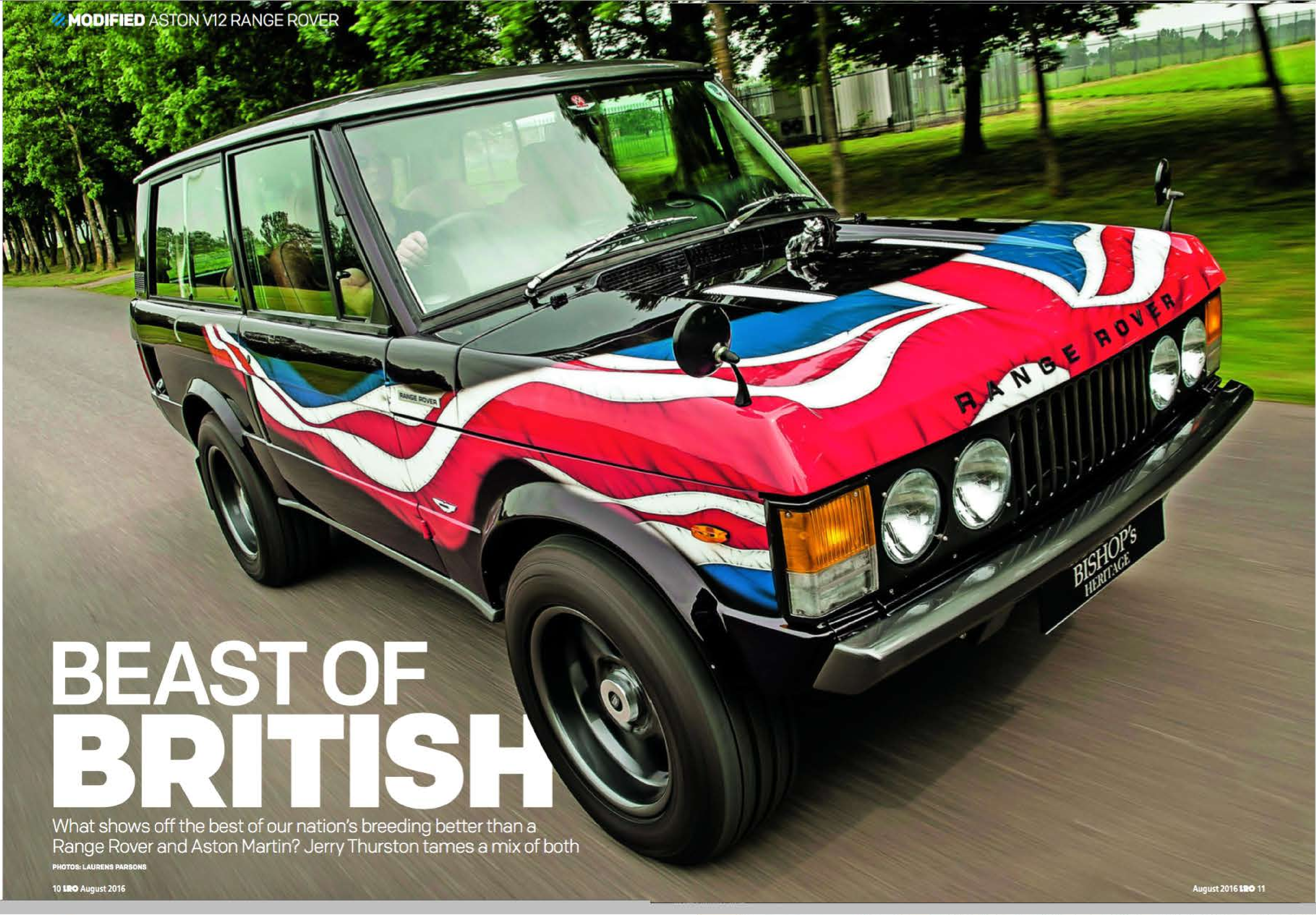
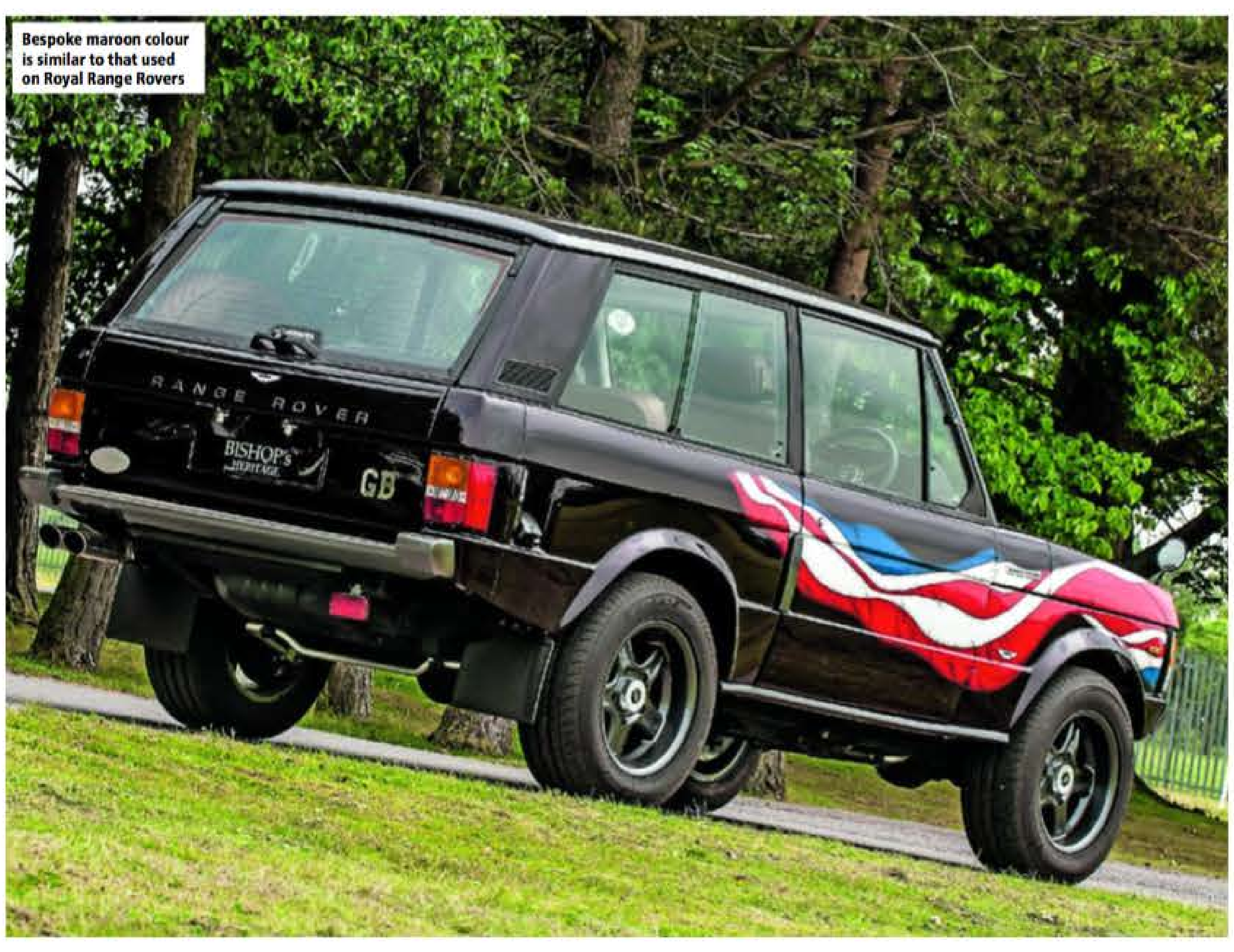


BEAST OF BRITISH

What shows off the best of our nation's breeding better than a Range Rover and Aston Martin? Jerry Thurston tames a mix of both

PHOTOS: LAURENS PARSONS



Bespoke maroon colour is similar to that used on Royal Range Rovers

It's the day before the Queen's 90th birthday celebrations. A stunning Range Rover Classic two-door, followed by a windowless, canvas-topped Defender 110 (see p14), sweep majestically up the A1. Both proudly wear flowing Union Flags air-brushed on to their bonnets, and sport deep metallic maroon paint in homage to the colour reserved for the Queen's state vehicles.

The 110 is an old friend, previously featured in the November 2010 issue of LRO, and is serving as back-up car for today's shoot. It always gets a reaction – and the combined presence of that and the matching Range Rover Classic causes other road users to stop and stare in amazement. When the flag-bedecked bonnet of the Range Rover Classic is opened, even long-in-the-tooth Land Rover fans' jaws drop, for it conceals a sensational 5.9-litre, 48-valve Aston Martin V12. So, which visionary is responsible for this unspeakably tasty combination?

Meet Chris Bishop and the team at Bishops 4x4, the guys who were daft enough, brave enough and clever enough to turn an outrageous idea into reality. Among the Peterborough-based specialist's 'for-restoration' stock there was one particular Range Rover Classic fitted with the wrong motor, just begging for a transplant. The lads were sitting with a beer after work and the conversation turned to that vehicle, and the possibility of using it as a showcase for what they could do. Before long, they made a decision that would, in the long run, involve thousands of pounds of expenditure and countless hours of hard work over a two-and-a-half-year period.

But let's start with the most obvious question of all. How on earth would you even come up with the idea of shoehorning an Aston Martin V12 engine into a Range Rover Classic? This crazy idea can be laid at the door of Chris Bishop himself. He's an Aston Martin addict who, finding himself without an Aston in the garage, was feeling serious withdrawal symptoms.

Cylinder-lightful

Why a V12, though? In the best British adventurer's tradition, because it's there and because they said it couldn't be done! I'm pretty sure that if Aston Martin made a V16, the guys would have tried to shove that under the bonnet instead. As it is, the Aston V12 is the biggest and best power unit they could get their hands on.

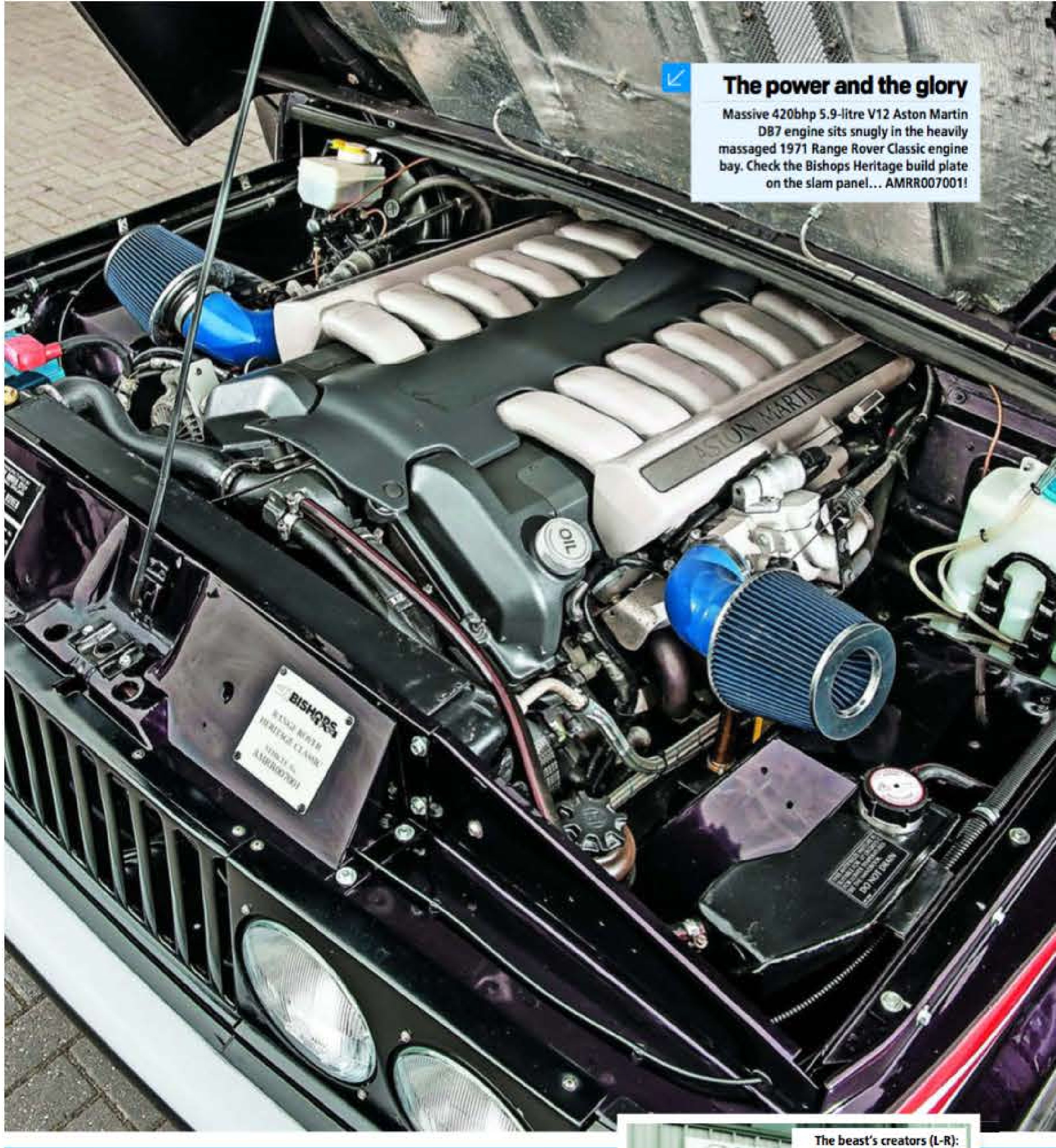
To start the conversion the team had to buy a complete (albeit accident-damaged) DB7 sports car. It was the pragmatic choice – by Aston Martin standards DB7s are plentiful, making them cheaper than other models that use the same engine. That's if you call more than £5000 for a shunted car 'cheap'.

> 'The Rover is a compact unit but the Aston V12 is far less so, being more than two cylinders longer'

That's £5000 invested even before you start restoring the base Classic ready for the transplant. There's so much more to be taken into account when you're considering stuffing a motor with 420bhp and 400lb ft of torque between the chassis rails. For starters, persuading the engine to sit comfortably meant the front portion of the chassis rails had to have cut-out sections let into them before re-welding with additional strengthening to compensate for the 'new', narrower rails.

The slicing didn't stop there – while the Range Rover engine bay can easily swallow the venerable Rover V8, shoehorning the V12 in was quite a different matter. The Rover is a very compact unit but the Aston V12 is far less so, being more than just two cylinders longer on each bank. A good proportion of it needs to sit under the scuttle. That meant hours of measuring the bulkhead and scuttle area, followed by very careful cutting and exacting re-welding. The result is obsessively precise and neat, to the point of looking factory-finished. There's even a subtle little arch grafted in at the top so the upper edge of the bulkhead follows the line of the inlet manifold neatly.

There's only so much cutting you can do to help things fit, though. Even after all that, the motor still wouldn't squeeze in and the alternator needed to be re-positioned, which meant re-routing the ancillary drive belt and making custom idlers to suit.



The power and the glory

Massive 420bhp 5.9-litre V12 Aston Martin DB7 engine sits snugly in the heavily massaged 1971 Range Rover Classic engine bay. Check the Bishops Heritage build plate on the slam panel... AMRR007001!

'Could an LRO reader build one too?'

Chris Bishop raises an eyebrow and smiles. His face says: 'Really? Are you mad?' I've just asked the above question. After a few seconds' thought, he says: 'Possible, yes. Probable? That's a different matter.'

Just the cost of collecting the parts to produce a replica is a scary thought. Even the basis, an early two-door Range-Rover Classic, is getting increasingly costly. You may find one about £4k – but that merely buys you a heap these days.

And then you need to pop out to find yourself an Aston Martin DB7 V12. I had a quick call around some breakers who deal in such high-end salvage, and the best price I could find was £5000 for a really smashed-up one. And to get it running you really need a pair of custom ECUs at around £800 each.

Not a weekend DIY job.

The beast's creators (L-R): Steve Brown, Chris Bishop, Robert Lovell, Darren Moore

It's still a Range Rover

Paint and trim were the only jobs farmed out. The soft brown leather and wool carpets lift the interior beyond the ordinary to the opulent – without losing the original feel of a two-door Range Rover Classic.

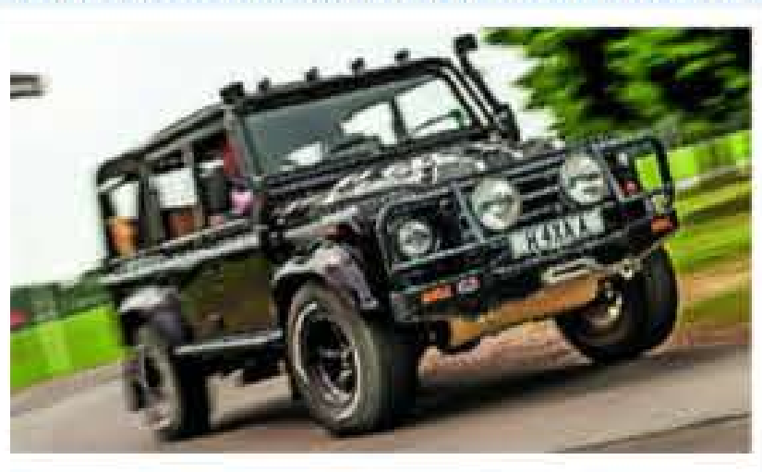
'Chuck your kit into the 110 and follow me'

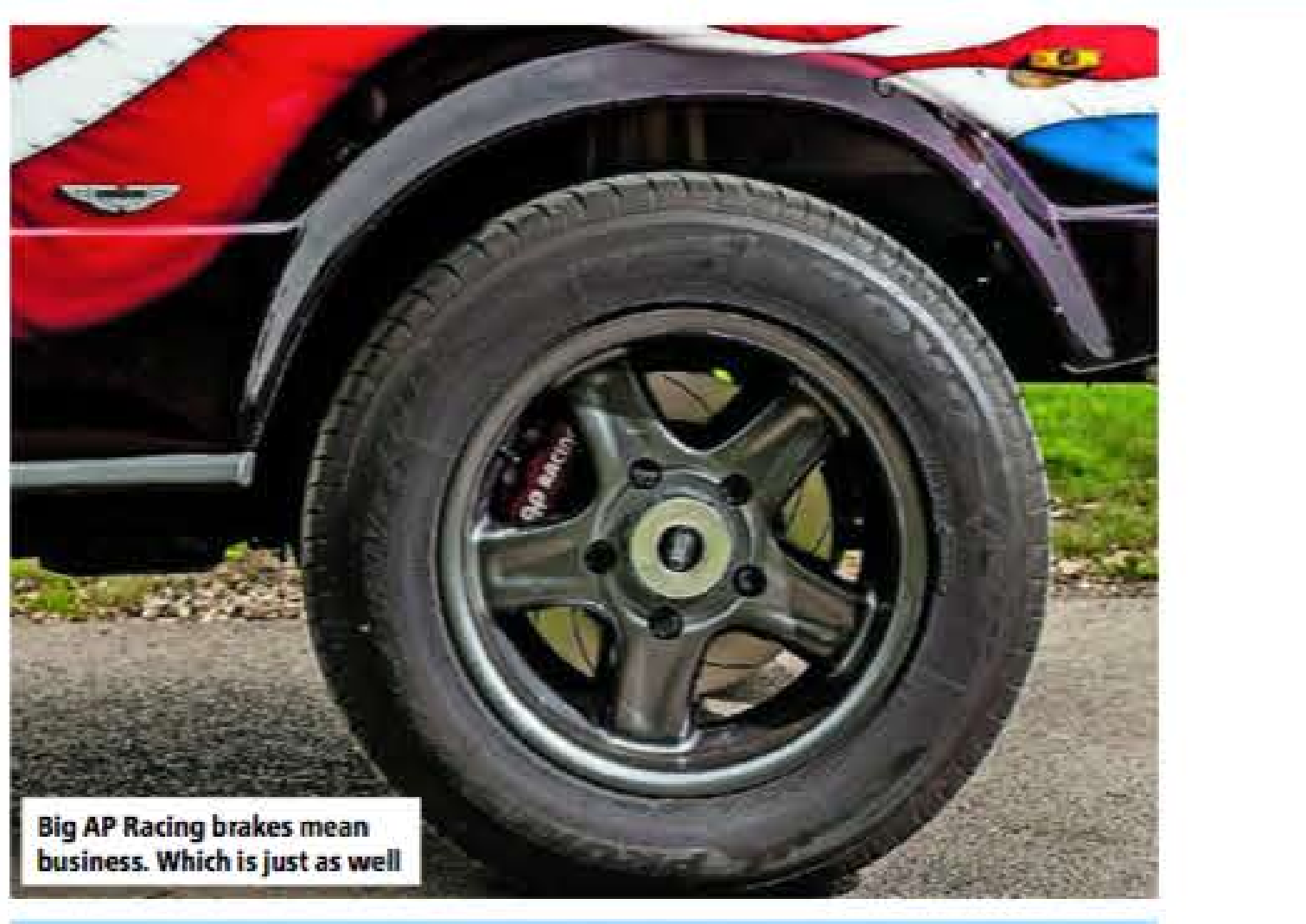
With its canvas-covered seats, no windows, no door tops and bags of power, 'The 110' as it's known at Bishops is a mix of Special-Forces-meets-custom-build-meets-parts-carrier. The door tops and windows in the canvas sides are never fitted: if it snows it fills up; if it rains it gets wet.

This is no unloved hack, though. Drilled, vented discs glint through the colour-coded Mach 5 wheels; and on the TDCi bonnet that covers the transplanted and well-sorted Td5, a custom-painted Union flag underlines its Britishness.

I turn out of Bishops' premises, put my foot down and the turbo spools: growl, *whooosh*... Bloody hell! Stuff it into second – the gearbox will take it as fast as my arm will move to enjoy another wall of Td5 turbo-torque. Ease off, squirt around a roundabout, put the power down and off we go again.

And I've not even driven the V12 yet. This is a great day.





Big AP Racing brakes mean business. Which is just as well

TECH SPEC

- **Year** 1971
- **Model** Range Rover Classic two-door
- **Chassis** Structurally strengthened
- **Engine** Aston Martin 5.9-litre V12, 48 valves
- **Power** 420bhp
- **Torque** 400lb ft
- **Transmission** Land Rover ZF automatic with LT230 transfer (both modified). Defender axles
- **Brakes** AP Racing six-pot front calipers, AP Racing 362mm grooved and vented discs
- **Suspension** Heavy-duty springs and Bilstein dampers
- **Interior** Leather re-trim with bespoke flat-screen dashboard, Aston Martin DB9 push-button start
- **Wheels** 18in five-spoke alloys
- **Tyres** 285/65 R18 Toyo Proxes T1 Sport SUV

Headlight grille designed to evoke Schuler memories

Under the heavily modified chassis went a pair of stronger, later Defender-type axles kept under control by heavy-duty springs and Bilstein dampers. In order to bring this beast back from the crazy speeds achievable, the front axle is equipped with around £3000 worth of bolt-on kit, consisting of 362mm AP Racing grooved and vented discs squeezed mercilessly by a pair of six-piston calipers.

With the V12 sitting pretty, you still have to plumb everything in. Some of it was easy-ish, like the making and fitting of inlet tubes with their free-flowing air filters to the inlet manifold. Most of the ancillaries, such as the exhaust system, was much more involved; cut, tack, check, re-cut if necessary and then finally weld. If you do this umpteen times from the exhaust manifolds all the way back to the tailpipes, you have a custom-made stainless exhaust system.

Work out hoses to persuade the Aston Martin water pump to circulate fluid through the radiator and sort some fuel pipes, and at long last the V12 can be made to run in its new setting. That in itself was a task of brain-numbing proportions. The chances of persuading the complicated Aston Martin engine control unit (ECU) to work in a low-tech 1971 Range Rover Classic were zero, but there was another option available to wake the beast.

At its most basic level, the magnificent Aston unit is two Ford V6s grafted together. With this in mind, Bishops bought in a pair of fully tuneable ECUs, one to supply information to each bank of cylinders. These were then mapped with the critical information once stored on the Aston factory ECU; this is just the starting point. Once you've transferred all the critical base settings such as spark timing and fuel flow information, all set against revs and speed to the new ECUs, the motor will then run. But to make it run superbly you're going to have to refine the settings further to take into account the fact that the engine is now installed in a vehicle with totally different characteristics.

> 'Persuading the V12 to run in its new setting was a task of brain-numbing proportions'

Oh, and while you're at it, you'll need to re-map the gearbox too, because the 4-speed Ashcroft upgraded ZF autobox sourced from a Discovery 2 needs its additional Ashcroft 'compushift' setting mapping to suit the particular engine. You can't use the original gearbox ECU, as this is specific to the engine it was previously mated to. The change-up and lock-up points for a 2.5-litre Td5 diesel with masses of torque at low revs are very different to those needed to get the best out of the revvy V12, for example.

What did Chris think when he first heard the Aston unit start up in the Range Rover setting? 'Frightening, but utterly amazing. We're especially proud of the fact that it fired up first time, despite everything that had to be done.'

Finally, it's done. But even then it wasn't a case of slapping some insurance on to it and charging off down the road to enjoy the thrill. Because of the colossal number of changes Bishops had made, the vehicle clearly couldn't be described simply as a 1971 Range Rover with an alternative engine. Doing so may have made it possible to retain the original registration number, but this was never on the cards for Chris and his team. Instead, they took the correct route, filling form V627/1 followed by a trip to have the vehicle inspected and then the eventual issue of a Q plate to indicate it's a radically altered vehicle.

Visual treat

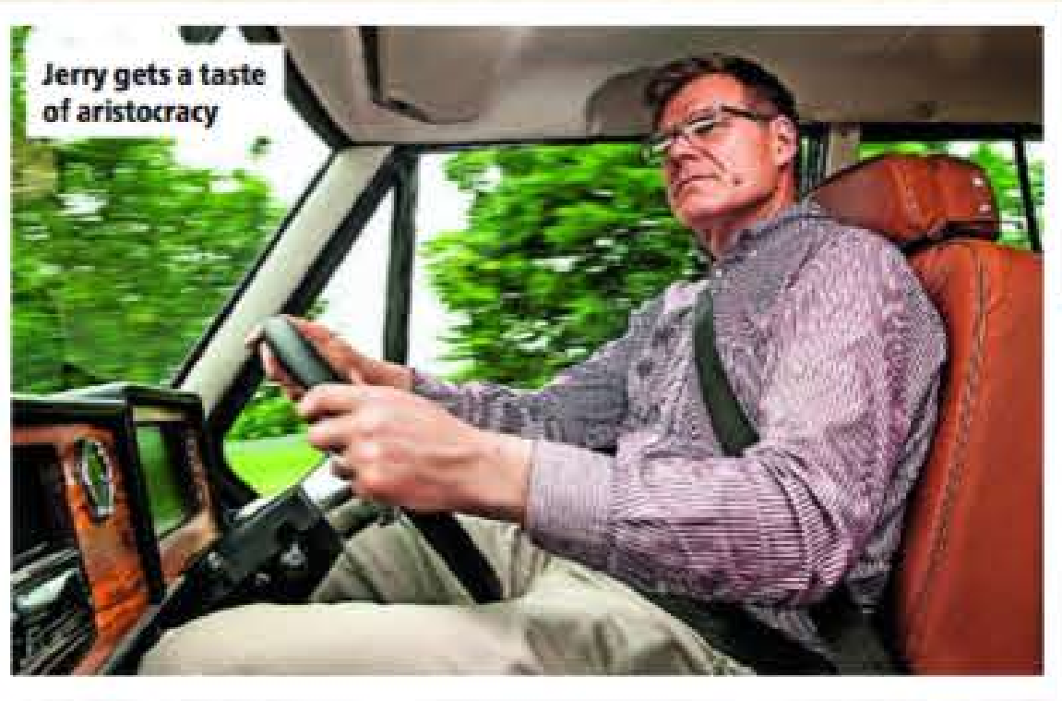
I reckon the Classic absolutely hits the brief for a 1970s-built Range Rover. The wide, 18in wheels and big sticky 285 Toyo tyres demand flared wheelarches. The arches have been fashioned in alloy, along with the bottoms of the wings, to give what used to be called a Coke-bottle shape. The whole treatment is very reminiscent of the mods that Schuler used to do to their bespoke vehicles – and it really is a visual treat.

Get outta the way! Best not to dawdle in front of this

So, what's it like to drive?

Sublime. It's actually difficult to describe the sense of exhilaration and delight that comes over you the first time you put your foot down. In that moment, you understand completely why Aston Martin and Rolls-Royce favour V12s – the seamless, silken nature of the power delivery is exemplary – as are handling and braking.

Fast? Don't ask silly questions! Never have I driven something that is so utterly lunatic and bonkers while simultaneously being completely undramatic and unflustered. It doesn't spit and cough and fart like a big, grumpy V8 – it just delivers. I'm desperately trying not to use the phrase turbine-smooth, but...



Jerry gets a taste of aristocracy

The shade of metallic dark maroon is Bishops 4x4's signature colour, so it exactly matches their previously built sister 110. The flawless paint with subtle grey roof, topped off by four coats of lacquer, suits the Classic perfectly. This, plus the interior detailing, was the only part of the project entrusted to outside specialists.

The exterior paint is broken up by three white Aston Martin badges; one on each flank and another on the tailgate. Combined with the Range Rover lettering in dark grey, it looks understated and classy. The airbrushed flag on the bonnet, which trails back along the flanks, took nearly two weeks to do and is superbly executed, perfectly embodying the 'Best of British' theme of the vehicle.

Unfurl the flag

But – blimey, this is hard – that flag just isn't quite to my taste. Don't get me wrong. It's far from a deal breaker and if the vehicle were mine I certainly wouldn't be booking it into the spray-shop in a hurry. I'm just not sure that it needs it.

However, I'm happy to declare my love for the four-round-headlight grille treatment, which pays deliberate homage to the early Schuler/Overfinch Range Rovers.

The interior is a mixture of original and bespoke: leather seats, of course; sumptuous carpeting; even an original coolbox in the back. There are a few things that elevate the interior to the extraordinary. The dashboard is a Wood and Pickett item that Chris had in stock, modified to make it more different still. In the middle of the dash is the start button taken from a DB9 Aston Martin flanked by a pair of chrome-rimmed gauges. Turn the radio on and a pair of ex-Aston Martin tweeters rise from the dash top.

> 'The airbrushed flag on the bonnet took nearly two weeks to do and is superbly executed'

These details are lovely but are knocked into next week by the driver's instrument 'panel'. With the key out, all you see is a flat, matt screen; key in and twist, and the dash displays the Bishops 4x4 logo followed by a display that gives you a virtual representation of the instruments you get in a Range Rover Classic – rev counter, speedometer etc. But it gets better. Change the engine to sport mode and the Range Rover instruments disappear to be replaced by the dashboard layout you'd see in an Aston Martin. Wow... that's off this planet on the cool scale.

Whisper this. I have an admission to make about my relationship with Aston Martins. You see, I don't really like them. I've *tried* to, really I have, but I've never managed to be other than ambivalent. That is until I was lucky enough to drive this vehicle. Now I find myself a bit like the Range Rover – converted to Aston Martin power.

• Thanks to Peterborough Arena, home to LRO's September 17-18 show (peterborougharena.com). LRO