

THE ROVER SD1 LAUNCH 40TH ANNIVERSARY

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Chateau Impney in Worcestershire, June 2016

At the start of last year whilst participating in the online forum of The Rover SD1 Club, I wondered, "what will this UK based club do to celebrate the launch 40 years ago, of the all new Rover 3500?" I guessed the club would perhaps do something special as this model still has a very large following. Most people over a certain age, at least in Britain, will have some connection to this once daring new model, with its award winning style & safety features being ahead of its time. Most will say they had at sometime owned one or two of the model variants or their neighbour or dad did so. Also, during the 10 years of the model's production run, it was seen on a daily basis throughout the country as super quick & sure footed police cars, known affectionately as a "the jam sandwich", so many people are familiar with the car.

Wind back the clock a little to 1987, when I purchased my very first Rover, a P6B. I bought this white coloured 1972 automatic & fell instantly in love with the sound of the burbling ex-Buick V8. It served me well for over 5 years but being still in my 20's, I unfortunately didn't have the required income to keep it lovingly maintained to a level which it deserved. Luckily a retired couple bought her in 1992, so off to Sydney for restoration she went, aboard the Indian Pacific.

Fast forward to 2011, where I found myself wanting to recapture a part of my youthful years, to cruise in a V8 Rover once again (I know you're thinking midlife crisis). So I spent about 6 months trawling through the web for the ultimate P6B, my main prerequisite was functioning air conditioning, however I kept hitting a wall in my pursuit for an ideal vehicle as not many P6B's were fitted with this option & those that were, rarely worked.

It was then during the usual heatwave period in Perth of January-February when I spotted an online ad for a nice looking Rover SD1 down in Wagin, the ad said "Ice Cold Air-con", so it caught my eye. Days later I drove down to have a look & take it for a drive. I was aware of this model but knew little about it. It was a Vanden Plas with Bitter Chocolate leather interior. It started up easily & as it was 37c outside I promptly flicked on the ducted air conditioning, which gave me immediate relief. I'd never ridden in one of these cars before & it felt a pleasure to drive, almost American, large & lazy with the rumble of that V8 under the bonnet. I had owned various V8 cars prior to my P6B but this SD1 felt more modern straight away.

I didn't buy it that day as I was put off by evidence of an oil leak, front seal I thought. I consulted my friend Neil Williamson who owns an SD1 in Oporto Red, he said "Don't be put

off, all these old English girls are incontinent".

This put my mind to rest & I bought it the following week & the car made it back to Perth easily, however the same could not be said of the air conditioning; aargh, it had obviously been recently re-gassed just to get it over the line. So two new compressor seals later & it hasn't missed a beat.

In January 2016 & I'd just received my quarterly issue of The Rover SD1 Club Magazine. Reading through I noticed plans were well in advance for the 40th anniversary celebrations, to be held on the 1st weekend in June. The venue is to be Chateau Impney, located in Droitwich Spa in Worcestershire. This venue was chosen as it is exactly where Leyland launched the SD1 in early June 1976 to the press, prior to it going officially on sale to the public. The Chateau was built in the mid 1800's in a French style as a private residence, however it is now a hotel & Bollywood wedding venue. I immediately expressed my interest to one of the organisers & club historian, Chris Powell.

My friend Neil Williamson (WAROC member) was living in the UK until recently & he also wished to join in the fun. My short letter to the club was published in the subsequent spring edition of the magazine, where I voiced my interest in attending the weekend of events. Kindly, Kev Clark the Events Organiser, offered to chauffeur us on the Saturday 5 hour journey, in his lovely Cashmere Gold Vanden Plas Efi.

Friday June 3rd soon arrived & Neil & I had planned to meet at the recently renamed & extended British Motor Museum, at Gaydon. We met at 12pm & wondered around for several hours, taking in many fine examples from each decade of Rover's history, all under one roof. Of course the highlight for me was the 7 seater SD1 estate prototype. With the SD1 fuel tank already safely placed ahead of the rear axle, this gave the designers at the time an opportunity to provide two rear facing child seats, which could then fold down under the rear luggage compartment when not in use, a clever idea at the time. It would have been a very practical wagon if ever it was put into production, sadly it never was, perhaps it would have always been playing catchup to the similarly formatted Volvo estate, which was already in production during those days.

We drove the 30 mins onto Chateau Impney, where we were checked in for two nights. Arriving at the car park I noticed a lovely red Vitesse & Chris Powell's silver North American spec SD1, which he personally imported from Virginia USA about 5 years ago & has lovingly restored. It's a beautiful example of the model in 5 speed manual form, as nearly all were to that region (quite the opposite to Australia).

The next morning we had breakfast with Chris, with whom I've chatted over the internet for several years. He's been a wealth of information (being the club historian) & has helped me on numerous occasions during that time, I was glad to finally meet him. We waited until mid morning for other SD1's to arrive as not everyone stayed the night before. Departure time was planned for midday however we all chatted & swooned over the cars for too long & finally got under way after 12.30pm. Roughly 20 SD1's set off from the car park & we did a lap of honour around the extensive chateau grounds (this is all being professionally filmed you know) & lined up to take photos in front of the entrance. We set off in Kev Clark's Vanden Plas Efi, me in the back & Neil as navigator.

The planned 5 hour course was to be pretty much the same circular route which Rover suggested to the press 40 years ago. This included high speed motorway, "A" roads, hilly & winding roads through the scenic Wye Valley in Wales. Motoring magazine writers would have really been able to push the new "Rover 3500" through all of these challenges & put it through its paces then hopefully give a commendable appraisal, which indeed they did.

I realised setting off that this was the first time I'd ever been in the rear of an SD1. Looking across Neil's shoulder through the windscreen, the dash appeared like a 70's cockpit, it had never occurred to me before.

We were soon in convoy on the M5 heading south towards the M4 where we turned towards the River Severn Bridge. At one point Kev suggested I needed a photo opportunity of each of the cars, so soon we were doing nearly 90 mph overtaking each in our convoy, before we zoomed ahead towards an exit & caught up later. We stopped prior to crossing into Wales for a coffee/restroom break & circulated once more viewing all the cars. An interesting vehicle in the group was a series 1 "ute". Ian Thomas the new editor of the club magazine bought it last year (he says "I had too many red wines whilst browsing through eBay") & managed to get it relicensed just in time for this weekend. It had been converted into a ute many years ago but was not a going concern until Ian got hold of it. We set off across the bridge into Wales & stopped in the queue to pay the £6.60 toll. There was a bit of a delay ahead in the convoy & it turned out to be Ian in his ute, apparently because his vehicle was now considered a "Commercial Vehicle", he had to pay twice the amount at £13.20. He told us later that he thought the toll booth chap was joking, apparently not; it's a bit rich to pay twice, for half a car!

On with the journey through Wales, perfect weather & everyone still in convoy, we passed through scenic Tintern & stopped in Monmouth for a lunch break (a sandwich in Sainsbury's). Back on the road I was still enjoying my chauffeur driven ride in the back seat. Driving through Ross-on-Wye we picked up the M50 & then took some relaxed back roads returning to the Chateau, arriving just before 6pm.

A quick freshen up & then down to the bar for 7pm pre-dinner drinks. There were 50-60 of us (more members had arrived) seated at tables of 8, for our preset 3 course dinner. Of course what else but a menu from 1976, starting off with a prawn cocktail. We sat with a group from Belgium who brought their LHD Vitesse. Ian was also at our table & he entertained us with a few more ute stories, this time we helped him drink the red wine.

Sunday morning, up again for breakfast buffet. Today was to be the day of the Rover SD1 National, where once a year SD1's from all over Britain will come together & so they did. Chris suggested we may get about 40-50 cars, he wasn't really sure. Our allotted space was the rear car park, a space which would easily fit about 500 vehicles. By 10am we had 50 cars, then 60, then 70. By midday we had a total of 75 SD1's in all the variants which saw production. There were many Vitesse examples, Vanden Plas & Vanden Plas Efi. 6 cylinders of 2300 & 2600 & even the 4 cylinder 2000. I enjoyed chatting with the owner of a fine example of the diesel version, featuring the Italian sourced 2400 turbo, now very rare in the UK as they were mostly marketed in Europe. Of course there were plenty of 3500 V8's in carbureted & fuel injected form & in auto & manual.

I didn't get to chat to all the owners but did meet quite a few people who had travelled from very far. Some from Norway, Germany, Netherlands & France but I think I had perhaps come the furthest distance to this Mecca kind of day, unfortunately without my car. The day was perfect, not a cloud in the sky & 25c.

There were awards presented for many categories & a huge cake to be cut, very tasty too. Chris Powell thanked everyone for attending & declared the day the best turnout of Rover SD1's in 10 years, a round of applause followed with smiles on all faces. So for me it was a wonderful weekend of events, probably the most SD1's I'll see again for a very long time.

