

SECOND ACT



The classic Range Rover had been developed out of all recognition by the time it was replaced by the P38... but does the newer car deserve the stick it gets?

Words and pics: Paul Wager

How do you replace an icon? It's a perennial question which has plagued car manufacturers ever since the first brand manager was appointed. Some makers just don't bother: the Jaguar XJS and original Range Rover both managed unfeasibly long lifespans with little more than successive updates to keep things fresh, testament to the soundness of the original design. When it is time for something new, some makers manage it successfully – witness successive generations of the Golf GTI, the MX-5 and the BMW MINI – while others don't get it quite right: Jaguar's S-Type, VW's first crack at the New Beetle and every small Peugeot since the 205.

Of course the Range Rover in second-generation guise does tend to get lumped in



with these as an example of how not to replace an icon. Public perception has been harsh to the P38 and even Land Rover itself has largely airbrushed it out of corporate history. Blame reliability problems and then once the cars dropped out of the warranty period an unfamiliarity among Land Rover specialists with its modern electronics and air suspension.

In reality though, the P38 can be made reliable with the right knowledge and although it may lack the classic appeal of the original it's a much more modern drive.

The main obstacle in its way though is just how good a job Land Rover had done of updating the original classic design over the years to the point where the late models are a world away from the original carb-fed two-door. All of which explains

why the late-model Range Rover Classic with its air suspension, fuel-injected V8 and modern dashboard is far more sought-after than the early P38. Is it worth the difference? We visited Range Rover aficionados Kingsley Cars and specialist Atkinson Land Rover to find out.

CLASSIC VOGUE SE

It may have first been unveiled in 1970 but the original Range Rover created a whole new market niche before the concept had even been invented and when successive upgrades took it from the rubber mats and wind-up windows two-door to the lavishly trimmed four-door, the blueprint for the modern SUV was set.

The Range Rover grew out of the Rover company's worries that demand for the successful

but very spartan Land Rover would begin to decline as postwar customers expected more sophistication. The first effort was an estate car based on the P4 platform called the Road Rover, a prototype of which can be seen in the Gaydon BMIHT museum. The idea was subsequently refined to include permanent four-wheel drive and the newly acquired V8 engine, with the result being known as the '100-inch Station Wagon'. Engineers Spen King and Gordon Bashford sketched up a purely functional bodyshell which after a tidying up by the design studio formed the chunky utilitarian shape which was to proceed largely unchanged into production.

The design was given the green light in 1968 and launched in June 1970 to universal popular acclaim. Even Rover was surprised at ►



RANGE ROVER VOGUE SE

Engine:	3947cc dohc
Transmission:	Four-speed automatic
Max power:	190 bhp
Max speed:	118 mph
0-62 mph:	10.5 secs
Overall length:	4714 mm
Overall weight:	2090 kg



This is what Range Rover folk mean when they refer to the 'soft dash' – the more modern Discovery-style dashboard moulding replaced the functional original style in very late model Range Rover classics.



The split tailgate has always been a Range Rover trademark, with this restored car having received a hand-made aluminium replacement for the rust-prone upper section.

the waiting lists which developed for the car and was surprised to discover people buying the car not for its dual-purpose off-road ability but for its status symbol and high driving position.

It was just as well that the basic design was so sound as British Leyland was incredibly negligent in its development of the car: indeed it wasn't until 1981 that a factory four-door was offered, with an automatic added the following year.

It was towards the end of the model's life that Land Rover caught up with the development of the car, the golden age for Rover when it was part of British Aerospace and was turning out designs like the 800-series Rovers and K-Series engine.

The original dashboard layout – complete with radio on the passenger side – even lasted until 1989, with the car getting the Discovery style modern soft-touch moulding in 1992. The same year the long-wheelbase LSE model was added, with an extra eight inches in the rear doors which gave it slightly better balanced proportions. The LSE used a self-levelling 'ECAS' air suspension system instead of the traditional coil springs which allowed the ride height to be dropped at higher speeds and also for loading yet also offer sufficient ground clearance off-road. This last-minute flurry of development transformed the Range Rover

and indeed the classic model carried on until 1995, a year after the P38 was launched.

The example in our photos is one of the very best out there: classic Range Rovers can look mint on the outside yet be surprisingly rotten underneath, but this one has been fully restored to probably better-than-new standards by

Kingsley Cars where proprietor Damon Oorloff is a confirmed Range Rover fan. When you're discussing the intricacies of getting the right satin black finish on the bonnet stay then you know you're dealing with someone who knows the importance of getting the details right.

Climbing into this Vogue SE, it's immediately



By the end of the classic Range Rover's life the evergreen Rover V8 had swollen to a handy 4 litres, with an even beefier 4.2-litre unit offered in the long-wheelbase LSE.

obvious how far upmarket the Range Rover had moved by 1994; it's a world away from the original two-door but also in a different league from even the early four-door models which were always positioned as a more upmarket car. Where early cars have a light, spacious feel these later models feel more cosy in the style of an executive saloon, especially with the later Disco-style dash which is higher and chunkier than the functional original.

Interestingly, although the 'soft dash' model is the one everyone wants, Damon admits a preference for the previous model and once he explains it I can see what he means: the later dashboard sits higher than the base of the screen, the difference hidden by a black mask in the glass. There's also a chunky plastic moulding covering the inside edge of the glass,

(the glass is bonded in on the soft-dash cars) and the end result is a smaller field of vision, especially for the taller driver.

On the other hand, it's all pretty modern compared to the older cars and the chunky switchgear is more Rover than BL in its feel, as is the interior ambience.

The driving experience is very modern too, with this one running a 3.9-litre fuel-injected version of the old Rover V8 engine producing a useful 180 bhp and 227 lbf.ft torque. The LSE got an even beefier 4.2-litre version of the engine good for 200 bhp. Despite the fuel injection it still sounds very much Range Rover and has that trademark woofle which will be familiar to anyone who grew up in the countryside.

Most later Range Rovers are automatics like this one, using a ZF four-speed unit which suits

the more refined character of the cars as well as the use they tended to be put to. Coupled with the elevated driving position and air suspension it makes for a serene driving experience and the Range Rover feels surprisingly brisk for a 4x4, with the air suspension reducing the trademark body lean in hard cornering and making it possible to achieve pretty brisk cross-country progress. Part of that of course is down to the fact that the classic Range Rover is so much smaller than the current crop of big SUV's: it weighs in at almost exactly two tonnes and it's some 40 cm thinner than the current BMW X5 meaning it can be threaded through traffic as easily as a Transit.

In an era when the idea of today's front-wheel drive 'crossover' SUVs would have been laughed out of the product planning meetings, the updates to the Range Rover weren't allowed to

OWNING THE LATE RANGE ROVER CLASSIC

To get the lowdown on the nitty gritty of these cars we visited Atkinson Land Rover (0121 559 5255) in Halesowen where Paul Atkinson has amassed a mountain of information after restoring and maintaining countless examples. The main trap for the unwary he points out is that these later Range Rovers can often look very presentable on the surface but be horribly rotten underneath. As we flick through the photo albums of customer restoration jobs it's obvious what he means: the outer panels are largely bolt-on and not structural, but when they're removed the cars can reveal alarming rot in their central structure, sills, inner arches and floors, as well as the chassis. Interestingly, it's the soft dash cars which rot worse than the older cars and they rot everywhere the older cars do, plus in the bulkhead and scuttle corner area which is almost impossible to repair neatly. The air suspension on the Classic is pretty reliable, reckons Paul – helped by having the compressor sited under the car where it remains nice and cool.

impact on its off-road ability. You wouldn't want to do it in such a beautifully restored example but this air-suspended automatic Vogue SE would still get you into and out of all the muddy trouble you could want just as competently as an original two-door. All of which shows just what a hard act the second generation had to follow. Was it really the lemon it's made out to be?

P38A 2.5 D HSE

Previous Land Rover projects had used animal codenames – Llama, Eagle, Jay etc – but apparently the late '80s product planners weren't so imaginative and simply used the name off the side of their office: building P38, section A. Interestingly, the project actually began life codenamed Discovery until that name was appropriated for the production vehicle of that name, whereupon the Range Rover gained the codename Pegasus.

A range of designs was produced by various styling houses and by Land Rover's in-house team, all using the 108-inch LSE chassis. At the customer clinic stage it was the more conservative Land Rover design which won.

The engines were essentially carried over, the petrol powerplants being further developments of the Rover V8, this time in 4-litre, 190 bhp and 4.2-litre, 225 bhp form.

By now though, the diesel effort needed to be rather better than the afterthought which it had generally been. The unrefined Italian VM engine had been replaced very late in the Classic's life by Land Rover's own well regarded 300TDi but this still lacked the refinement for a car positioned as far upmarket as the P38.

The answer lay in BMW's straight-six M51 unit which was used in its 3 and 5-Series and also sold to other clients including Vauxhall/Opel. This refined unit formed the basis of BMW's bigger diesel engines until very recently although it was only just powerful enough for the task: its 136 bhp was good enough for the 3-Series but struggled in the 2115 kg Range Rover. It was, however, a leap forward from the older four-pot engines and was an essential part of the range.

Underneath, the LSE chassis used for the styling bucks was retained into production, suitably beefed up for the modern age to reduce NVH issues and retaining a further development of the air suspension used in the later Classics. Inside, the style was decidedly more like an executive saloon than an off-roader, with a car-style instrument pod and a swooping centre console.

Buying diesel engines from the Bavarians proved to be the tip of the iceberg: BMW took control of the firm in 1994, making the P38 the first product to be launched under its ownership. Clearly the new management took a great interest in the design of this upmarket new approach to the Range Rover concept and unsurprisingly, the X5 appeared just a few years later.

So on the face of it a sound package: the best of the old model, the most refined diesel engine in the business and a smooth new style. What could go

RANGE ROVER 2.5 D HSE

Engine:	2497cc sohc
Transmission:	Four-speed automatic
Max power:	136 bhp
Max speed:	106 mph
0-62 mph:	14.3 secs
Overall length:	4715 mm
Overall weight:	2115 kg



The P38 debuted a suitable diesel engine at last: the straight-six BMW engine. Its refinement was just what the Range Rover needed but its 136 bhp struggled in the heavy Range Rover body.

wrong? Plenty, as it happened. The P38 used a lot of electronic controls compared to its predecessor and it's fair to say that there were more than a few teething problems with control modules and similar. The air suspension was also troublesome: air leaks, ride height sensors and compressor problems all

contributed to a reputation for unreliability. Although work had been done on the mapping to improve the torque characteristics of the BMW diesel, it still simply wasn't powerful enough for the big Range Rover, which together with the thirst of the V8 petrol units made the Range Rover sit awkwardly



The interior of the P38 was much more car-like, with a swooping centre console and loads of luxury touches designed in from the start,

in the market. If BMW had provided the 3-litre common rail injected version of the engine which was already under development for the 530d, things would have been very different but that had to wait until the L322 was launched.

All of which was a great shame as the

reliability problems were attended to by Land Rover – which to its credit was still releasing updated parts after the model had left production – and later models were generally less troublesome. Speak to any specialist today and you'll discover that there are relatively

P38A MYTH AND RUMOUR

Their reputation for being troublesome just isn't justified says Paul Atkinson. Problems are generally down to lack of knowledge or poor maintenance – this is the sort of car where ignoring little problems can create big problems in the not too distant future.



The main issues are electrical problems – especially the Body Electronic Control Module – and the air suspension. But whatever you do, says Paul, don't convert them to steel coils. Yes, kits are available but they're not factory authorised Land Rover conversions and you could run into problems with insurance companies not wanting to cover the cars.

Key to suspension issues advises Paul is to get any air leaks sorted immediately. Unlike the Classic the compressor is located in the heat of the underbonnet area so if any leaks cause it to work overtime it won't last long. There's also a filter in the system which should be changed regularly.

As for the airbags themselves, they're made of thick rubber like a tyre sidewall and so don't tend to get damaged but will perish over time. Yes, you'll have to replace them at some point but probably only once every 100,000 miles. And use proper OE-quality parts, too – the very cheap pattern airbags can cause problems with threaded connectors not fitting.

On the electronics side, many of the problems are caused by basic issues like earthing problems or damaged wiring – or simply battery drain. The receiver amplifier for the remote locking is a common issue and a revised part was issued after the car left production. There's an easier fix though – simply pull the blue wire off the unit, in which case the remote range will be shorter but the battery drain will be solved. Aftermarket alarms, hands-free kits and stereos are all likely culprits too.

Having said that, the Body Electronic Control Module can and does cause problems with its onboard software corrupting and since it controls everything from the seats to the engine management and immobiliser it can cause havoc. There are several specialists out there who can sort it out though.

simple fixes for all the common faults and if you know the dodges the P38 can be a very simple vehicle to run. And it should also be pointed out that nearly all owners of BMW X5s with air suspension on the rear axle have also seen the dreaded 'air suspension inactive' error message.

The example you see in our photos, also for sale at Kingsley Cars, is one of the nicer P38's out there: the model has got to the stage in its lifespan where there's a big gulf between the tidy examples and the hundreds of really tatty examples going for £3000 upwards on any number of used car lots. You could be lucky at that sort of price level and find an honest car but it's pretty unlikely and in reality most cheap P38s will be hiding big bills. Far better to buy a decent one like this in the first place and know you're starting with a clean slate.

Climbing into this 2.5D HSE straight after the Classic it's immediately obvious that the P38 was designed to be more car-like inside, less alien to a potential customer who may be stepping out of an Audi or Mercedes saloon. With its piped beige leather, this particular example has a really upmarket feel to it and it immediately feels more airy and spacious than the older car. The control layout is immediately more intuitive than even the soft dash Classic and it's obvious that it's from a different era. The design is clearly more cohesive than the late-model Classic which by the mid '90s had evolved many times over from its original concept – and of course the P38 simply wasn't in business for long enough to be significantly altered during its lifespan.

Fire it up and the straight-six BMW diesel purrs into life with a sound which is a world away from the clattery VM engine or even the 300TDi. It certainly sounds the part and on initial acquaintance feels brisk enough to make you wonder what all the criticism was about but it's when you're in a hurry that it starts to feel breathless – especially with a heavy trailer hitched up.

As the air suspension lifts us gently into the air, I glance down at the mileage of 132,000 and realise that this particular P38 pretty well disproves the myths surrounding the cars: everything works exactly as it should, from electric seats to air conditioning and the car

LSE, COUNTY AND VOGUE

It's common to refer to all the late-model Range Rover Classics as LSE but that's not quite right: the air suspension was first introduced to the Range Rover Classic in 1992, at the same time as it received the Discovery dashboard moulding to create what is referred to as the 'soft dash' model. The standard model at the time was badged as Vogue SE. The LSE model – badged as County LWB in North America – introduced at the same time was the ultimate incarnation of the classic design and was a range-topping model based on a longer 108-inch wheelbase with the air suspension and a new 4.2-litre version of the evergreen V8.



The unmistakable Range Rover bonnet style was carried over from the classic to the P38 and remains a recognisable feature of today's model line-up too.

does have an air of quality which is at odds with all the rumours. It does have a full history behind it though and by all accounts the P38 does need proper maintenance if you want ownership to be a trouble-free experience.

On the road, they do feel appreciably larger than the older car but handling is very similar to the air-suspended Classics as you'd expect given the similarities in the chassis. The outer dimensions of the newer car are just 8 cm wider than the original yet its wider track does make it feel slightly more planted and from the driving seat it's more refined.

In diesel form the P38 lacks the point-and-squirt nature of the V8 cars, which feel closer in spirit to the petrol-powered Classics: 0-60 was quoted as taking 9.9 seconds for the 4.6 HSE even with the standard automatic, although there's a hefty penalty at the pumps for driving one hard: you're looking at 13 mpg although with a gentle foot the less thirsty 4-litre can manage 27 mpg – still not diesel territory but usable, especially with an LPG conversion.

CONCLUSION

The holy grail of Range Rover ownership was always a mint early two-door but prices have spiralled massively upwards in recent years and in truth, they do feel out of their depth in today's

traffic – and terribly basic, too with their wind-up windows and rubber matting. The more civilised four-door in well-equipped 1990s trim has the chunky classic appeal of the original yet is as usable today – fuel economy aside – as any brand new Chelsea tractor. There are those out there who feel that the soft dash was taking things a bit too far in terms of modifying the original design and we're tempted to agree with Kingsley Cars' Damon Oorloff who suggests that the best compromise was the revised post-'89 cars which immediately predate the soft dash model, especially the late-model 300Tdi diesel engine with the high spec most of these seemed to have.

So where does that leave the P38A? Well, it won't be long before all those really tatty examples have either been rescued or disappear altogether but right now there are some cracking bargains to be had. At some point it's going to be a classic if only for its rarity value.

The bargain hunter in me is drawn towards the P38A but if it came down to it, I reckon the Classic wins. Ever since a mate's dad used to take us on a short cut across the fields on the school run in his brand new early four-door model, I've had a soft spot for the original Range Rover and the sheer usability of the cars lets it edge ahead. **CCM**

THANKS TO...

Kingsley Cars near Witney for providing the pair of Range Rovers in our photos. As you can see, the P38A is one of the nicer examples out there right now and is a whole lot of car for £4850. It's the Classic which is truly mind-blowing though and the attention to detail which has gone into its restoration explains why its price tag is a whisker shy of £30,000. In reality this 71,000-mile Vogue SE is in better condition in some ways than when it left the factory back in 1994 and Kingsley has developed a system of painting the Range Rovers while partially dismantled similar to the way they were done in Solihull. This provides an impressive finish free from dry areas and overspray, while the vinyl is also removed from the C-pillar to create a subtly more modern look. The air suspension has also been entirely overhauled with new Dunlop airbags and compressor. It's just as good inside, with not a mark on the seats or dash – oh, and the headlining is all good, too. Find out more at www.kingsleycars.co.uk or 01865 301190.

And if the soft dash perfection of this one isn't enough, how about one of Kingsley's restored two-doors? Built up using a brand new two-door shell, they come with updated powertrain and custom trimmed interior.