



A Land Rover Ninety is shown from the side, parked on a dirt path. The vehicle is silver with blue and white stripes. The background is a grassy field under a clear sky.

THE LAND ROVER FACELIFT

Story: Patrick Cruywagen | Pictures: Alisdair Cusick

John Brooks is Land Rover's answer to a cosmetic surgeon. Read on to see how he tastefully transformed a barely £1500 Ninety into a £25,000 dream machine





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Below:
The underside of the transformed Ninety is as immaculate as the peerless, gleaming bodywork – and the handling is impeccable, too



John Brooks from Cult 4x4 in Suffolk is fast developing a reputation as a top transformer of Land Rovers. In the summer you will see his stand at the big Land Rover shows. It's nothing flashy, as his Land Rovers (or his wife Sam) tend to do the talking for him. Normally these machines attract the punters in their droves.

Our respected columnist Frank Elson had the following to say about one of John's creations, a Td5 Defender 110, at the 2016 Billing show: "Martin [who had purchased the Defender from John] joked about John being a perfectionist but, well, if you saw the vehicle you would agree with me that it was not simply as good as when it came out of the factory, but a whole lot better! I crawled all over it and couldn't find a mark, or a flaw, or anything to question. It just happened to be the perfect example of a rebuilt Defender 110."

To find out whether Frank was telling the truth, I have made my way to John's workshop on a farm in rural Suffolk. Despite the cold, spring is in the air, and just down the road from the workshop is a 'castle on the hill'. Yes, it's the same one Ed Sheeran sings about in his hit single. The shiny, grey, 1985 Ninety has us all mesmerised; it doesn't look like anything from the year that gave us the first mobile call in the UK or the launch of Comic Relief. It looks brand new, and nothing like the rusty and sorry-looking 'before' picture that John had emailed me.

John is relatively new on the Land Rover rebuild and restoration scene. Just like the rest of his family, he used to run a construction company with 25 staff members. After building a big villa in St Tropez in 2010, he found himself disillusioned and down while driving back to Suffolk via the M25 and A1. He decided there and then that this was not the life for him, and so he decided to take a year out from working life.

During those 12 months he converted a 1989 F-reg One

Ten into a Defender 110 TDCi. John explains. "It was the first TDCi body that Land Rover ever built, and I got it from the company. It actually has smooth plastics on the dash, and it's a very rare vehicle." John was hooked, and knew there was no way he'd be returning to the construction business.

From there, his rebuild and restoration business just grew and grew. He explains his business philosophy: "I try to keep the builds as original as possible, so I mostly use parts that Land Rover would have used. I believe that what they do is right, and I don't think anyone can do it better. Customers ask for things such as automatic gearboxes, a later dash and heated screens. Those builds are obviously not period-correct, but as you know the customer is always right. Also, some of them want their Defenders to drive like an Audi, but we all know that is impossible..."

This specific Ninety project began at the 2016 Billing show, when Peter O'Sullivan, a Brit living abroad in Germany, walked onto John's stand. Peter wanted a LHD Ninety with an auto gearbox and 300Tdi engine.

When John goes to a show, he has a questionnaire that potential clients have to fill out, so that he can get some sort of idea of what they want. John will then sit them down and go through the list to find out specifics like wheels, colour and build details. This is all done so he can give them a 95 per cent accurate quote. As part of the deal, John also offers to send regular updates on the build via email. If the client does not have a base vehicle for the project, then John will normally source one for them. "We try to buy category C or D-damaged vehicles and completely put them back together again," he explains.

This Ninety project began with a derelict donor vehicle, and a chassis from Bearmach that was manufactured by Richards Chassis. The chassis had the special cradle for the rear fuel tank instead of a standard Ninety one. This was to be a ground-up restoration. Later axles were sourced from reputable breakers, and all-new wheel bearings, brake discs,





Above:
Did an original Ninety ever look this good back in 1985? One thing's for sure – it never had a 300Tdi engine under the bonnet...

seals and bushes were installed. The 300Tdi engine was completely rebuilt before being mated to a refurbished auto 'box from a Discovery 1. Once the chassis was rolling the engine and gearbox were put in place, and then John started running all the brake and fuel lines. Next, the fuel tank was put into position.

The engine was fired up before the body was put back on. This was not John's first LHD rebuild, so he was comfortable making the bulkhead and footwell changes to facilitate this. The original bulkhead was in a dire state and needed a complete rebuild. John then made sure that there was the correct gap between the bulkhead and the rear tub, so that the doors would fit properly. This was followed by lining up the rest of the bodywork. His creation was now starting to take shape.

After we put the Ninety on the ramp at his workshop, I inspect the undercarriage. It looks perfect; the brake lines have been methodically installed, while the new chassis looks so different to the average Ninety one.

Although John is a one-man business, he is quick to acknowledge the role of others in his meteoric rise – such as Darren Martin from Suffolk 4x4: "He knows so much about Land Rovers that he has probably forgot what he has already taught me," jokes John.

If John has a problem, then Darren inevitably gets a call. If he is struggling with the electrics, he'll bring in top spark Adam Sharpe from Auto Electrics in Norwich.

As we hop into the Ninety for a test drive, I ask John if he is happy with the car. "I think this is one of my better efforts, but they don't get easier," he says. "You learn with each one, and improve. You might decide to galvanise something that you didn't the last time."

It's the sum total of the little things that help an overall top-quality restoration. John noticed that the brakes were falling to pieces on his donor vehicles, and so he started

putting stone shields on the new brakes. All vehicles leave his workshop with a six-month warranty, and he only services vehicles that he has restored or rebuilt.

As Alisdair our photographer tries to get the perfect cover shot, John walks and talks me around the Ninety. Despite the sunshine it is still cold outside, and I'm sad to be leaving behind the comfortable TDCi half-leather heated front seats. Also non-standard are the four half-leather inward-facing seats in the back. It feels like we are in the movie *Back to the Future* from 1985 – the same year that this Ninety first saw the light of day. The only difference being that John has given the Land Rover a few modern-day enhancements, a few of which I have already mentioned.

Some of the other extras worthy of credit are the black headlining, TDCi steel doors, Wolf alloy wheels and Cooper Discoverer LT235/85/R16 M+S tyres. The latter is due to German winter driving regulations. The day after our shoot and interview, John is going to drive it across to the Continent for the tough German equivalent of the MoT test, before handing it over to Peter. I just know that Peter will be over the moon with his Ninety.

I have seen many rebuilds and restorations, and this is definitely right up there with the best of them. I suppose it helps that John enjoys what he is doing.

"There are a lot of people in it for the fashion and not the passion," says John. "In a year or two from now, people who purchased a Defender for a fashion item will realise that these vehicles don't drive like a sports car, and maybe they will sell it. My thinking is that these cars should still be used for work, which is what they were made for. This Ninety was restored to be driven and enjoyed."

The 200 hours of labour that John has put into this Ninety has breathed another 30 or 40 more years of life into something that was declared dead or undesirable. He's most definitely the Suffolk Land Rover Surgeon.



CULT 4X4

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WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Ed Evans on what to check when purchasing your dream Ninety



ANY NINETY needs a critical pre-purchase inspection, even if it has been rebuilt or restored. On a rebuilt example, it's important to check the quality and thoroughness of the work that's been done, otherwise problems can be expected further down the line – and fixing these issues may involve going deeper and making repairs that should have been attended to in the first place.

Rebuilt and restored

The real quality of a rebuilt or restored Ninety can be confirmed by looking behind the new paint job and the smart cabin. Check body-panel alignment, especially where new aftermarket front wings have been fitted; note how well the doors shut and latch, check for hinge play by lifting the open end of the doors, and inspect all doors for aluminium corrosion returning as tiny spots, usually around the bottom edges.

Bulkheads sometimes survive well, or corrode disastrously, so be aware of repairs to the bulkhead top. If done well, these should not be a problem. Any wiring repairs should be neat, insulated, and properly routed and secured. Connections should have been made with bullet connectors, rather than crimped connectors.

The chassis will most certainly have been repaired, if not renewed, so check the quality of welding. If there's too much underseal hiding welds or patches, treat it with suspicion. A rebuilt vehicle should have a clean chassis – galvanised or well painted and protected, but visible.

There are no inherent engine problems that would not have been addressed by a good rebuild. Nevertheless, unless you see receipts from a reputable engine builder, don't assume it's well built and will last well. The same applies to the transmission and axles.

Time and mileage since any rebuild also play a factor. Although the vehicle may have been restored, new parts may, by now, be worn and nearing the time for replacement, and the same applies to hidden chassis and body corrosion. Apart from taking this cautious approach with a restored vehicle, it's necessary to also apply the checks for unrestored vehicles, which neatly leads me onto my next subject.

Unrestored and original

A Ninety in any condition should be subjected to all the usual checks that apply to any vehicle, including a long drive to

confirm the engine temperature is correct, that it doesn't develop smoking when hot, and that it starts correctly when cold and hot plus will idle smoothly. All of the checks already listed for rebuilt vehicles also apply here, especially to the chassis and underbody.

Anything can go wrong with any engine, but the petrol four-cylinder mills are as good as you can get. The diesels are solid, too, and if you find a 2.5 turbo that's running well, it will probably stay that way given correct driving and maintenance. Many early turbo diesels failed in the first few years and have often been replaced with Tdi engines, which is a downer if you want originality, but a plus if you want performance. Any remaining turbo diesels should be fine; the design was improved to give a stronger bottom end. If you find a rare 3.5-litre V8, the usual Rover V8 checks apply. These are dependable engines if given good servicing, especially oil and filter changes. Otherwise, expect wear on the camshaft and associated valvetrain parts.

Check the transfer-box ratios and diff-lock work, and listen for a clunk from the transfer-box area when rocking on the clutch between first gear and reverse. That may indicate damaged mainshaft splines, although it's an old problem and any affected vehicles should really have been sorted by now.

Suspension is easy to replace, but visually check that the vehicle sits level. Also, carefully inspect the front turrets under the inner wings for corrosion, as well as the rear spring

mounts on the axle and chassis.

Inspect the seats for sagging or distortion, and tears in the material, and note the condition of seatbelt webbing. Headlining fabric (where fitted) is likely to be parting company with the backing material, and to fix this means stripping much of the interior to remove the linings.

Rusted rear body cappings indicate problems with the seals between the rear tub and the roof side panels. This may require new cappings to be fitted when the roof is lifted to replace the seals. Even though the bulkhead top may be free of rust, pull the carpets away inside to check the front footwells and the surrounding metalwork for corrosion.

Remember that when any older vehicle is dismantled for rebuild, many more problems will be found than were apparent when it was in one piece.

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