

Robison On Rovers #3, March 20, 2000

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1,450 words

Robison On Rovers

A new owner

With the announcement of Ford buying Land Rover from BMW I thought it appropriate to delay the completion of our Discovery valve repair for a little bit . . .

In the past decade Ford has bought Jaguar, Aston Martin, and Volvo's car division. Our service department works on all of those makes, and I've seen firsthand what happened to them. I'd like to share my thoughts about how Jaguar has evolved over the past decade. I think you can see the possibilities for Rover in them.

One of the things I like about my old Range Rover is its handmade feel. There is a sense of warmth to the leather and woodwork. All the seams and joints convey the feeling that this truck was built by individuals, not spat from the maw of an industrial assembly robot. Somehow, when sitting in an Explorer or Suburban or Lexus 470 you get the feel of a mass produced product that is not present in the Rover. I'm afraid this hard-to-describe hand built quality will be lost when Ford begins to make its presence felt. It will take a few years, but we'll see a big change in Land Rover's look and feel.

Why do I think this will happen? One word – Quality. A handmade vehicle may convey a warm and comfortable feeling, but it's just not going to provide the reliability of a machine built unit. Why not? Well, think about the processes: For example, in the old style factory someone sits with a spool of wire and a board and makes wire harnesses one wire at a time. Every now and then they slip up and use the wrong color somewhere. Occasionally the wires are an inch too long or too short. It doesn't seem like much, but those are the things future breakdowns are made of.

Even using the best materials, that wire that's a little too short going into a door switch will eventually break or pull apart, and stuff like that makes for dissatisfied customers in today's climate.

At one time – when all cars were handmade and designs were simple – quality came from using the best materials. Makers like Land Rover, Ferrari, and Rolls Royce achieved world renown for this. But times have changed. Now quality comes from using adequate materials assembled in such a way that the systems will work for many years without breakdown.

Quality today is designed in by huge engineering staffs, and built in by robotic assembly systems that do it the same every time and don't forget to put things in. People are quick to criticize the marginal materials used in popular cars today – the flimsy metal in a Honda's fenders or the plastic interior in a new Ford. But the sad fact is that Rover cannot come close to the reliability record of a Honda or a Ford. Our Rovers may be great performers off road. They have character, and they're unique. But they're also like British motorcycles of the 60s – great performers that always require tinkering. That's fine for hardcore enthusiasts, but how about all the families buying Discoveries in recent years. Is that what they expected? I think not.

I believe Ford is going to change all that. I saw it happen in a big way with Jaguar and we'll see it here. The reliability of Jaguars in 1990 when Ford came in was shameful. Door handles fell off. Rear shocks blew out. Climate controls didn't. Warning lights were always on. Front ends wore out at 50,000 miles. The service departments couldn't handle it - they were already overworked stripping and painting the 87s because the factory did it wrong, and changing the engines when the main bearings fell apart and oil poured onto the ground.

The first major Ford influence appeared in the 1993 model year. Warranty claims for the 93s plummeted. Customer satisfaction soared. By 1996 Ford had increased reliability by an amazing degree. Warranty work dropped off so much that some dealer service departments actually ran out of work. Today Jaguar's quality is up with the best of them.

When I looked at the changes in a 93 Jaguar – countless little design improvements - I realized what huge engineering resources are needed to make a successful car today. Ford probably has more engineers just designing heating systems than Jaguar had in the whole company. This change made it clear that the factors for success in the car industry had changed in a fundamental way in recent decades.

These improvements came about in many areas. Changes started in the engineering department and went right through the assembly line and final inspection areas. Comparing 1988 (pre-Ford) and 1995 Jaguar sedans one can see the changes made to bring quality to an acceptable level. Seats are now made with molded foam inserts instead of horsehair and felt pads. Dashboards are now molded in one piece rather than handmade from 20 pieces. Suspensions are simplified and they don't wear out like before. Countless problems were solved, most by design change.

Not all the changes were design. Trunks don't rust out in two years anymore. Body panels fit correctly. There's no question that new Jaguars are tighter than any older one ever was.

But there was a price for all these improvements. Jaguars lost their warm handmade feel. They became another mass produced product. It was very easy to tell a Lincoln from a Jag in the 80s. It's not so easy now. I know - the two cars do look different. But the feel is much the same. The Jaguar now has the same slick manufactured look and feel as a Lincoln. Or for that matter, as a Mercedes or a Lexus.

Aston Martin is similar. The new DB is much less of a "kit car" than any previous Aston offering. But it lacks the unique feel of the old James Bond cars, and it's too similar to an XK8 for my \$150,000. Park those two side by side and you see another side of Ford influence. Like parking a Taurus SHO next to a Sable.

I wonder how long the other handmade specialty carmakers can last in today's environment. Startups like Panoz or Avanti don't seem to make it. Will there be a place for companies who make a few thousand hand built cars-as-art alongside giants making cars by the millions? Morgan, Ferrari, Lamborghini, Lotus, even Rolls Royce? Much of the handmade feel disappeared from Rolls when the BMW powered Seraph arrived last year. How long can they last? I for one will be sad to see them go.

I guess the enthusiasts among us who value the old handmade feel need to make sure our (soon-to-be) antiques stay in good shape, because they won't be making them much longer. But I suspect many of the buying population will embrace these changes just as they did Jaguars'.

As this is written – the day after the announcements – I have received several emails speculating about Land Rovers being sold in Ford showrooms and fixed in Ford service departments. Don't look for that to happen anytime soon. Around here, Ford and Lincoln dealers aren't Jaguar dealers and that is not changing. You don't order Jaguar parts at the Ford parts department, and you use different diagnostic systems to fix them. I would expect the same with Land Rover. Ford is not spending billions to add a companion to the Explorer.

Ford influence in the service department is in areas the public does not see but feels – parts distribution, training, and warranty administration. I'm sure the last item is a source of great concern to many Rover dealers who aren't looking forward to warranty repairs at Ford labor time allowances.

In the past, Ford has been wise enough to know where they can make a valuable contribution – engineering and production – and leave the sales channels unique. Ford's influence at the dealer level will stay in the background. They are well aware that many Range Rover owners want to feel distinct and different from F150 and Ranger buyers.

In the last ***Robison on Rovers*** we diagnosed and disassembled an engine that suffered from carbon fouling. Its valves were sticking and it was losing power whenever that happened. We had sent the heads to the machine shop, and now they are back. Stay tuned for the reassembly in ***Robison on Rovers***.

Notes:

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