

LAND ROVER CLASSICS



ABOVE: Pub club: (from left) Peter Keeling, Antony Barrington Brown, Tim Slessor and Nigel Hawker
RIGHT: First Overland publicity flier **BELOW RIGHT:** Companion Book Club edition



The Oxford and Cambridge Far Eastern expedition's overland drive from London to Singapore was the first of its kind in 1955. To celebrate its forthcoming 50th anniversary, John Smith met a team planning to recreate the trip

Story: John Smith

Photos: Antony Barrington Brown MBE and John Smith



New tyres in old

It must be a couple of decades since I last read *First Overland*, Tim Slessor's account of Oxford and Cambridge Far Eastern Expedition's overland drive from London to Singapore in two Series I Station Wagons in 1955, a truly amazing story. The book could have easily sat on my shelf a good deal longer as well, had I not come across Land Rover enthusiast Peter Keeling at the Dunsfold Collection's Open Day last September.

PAYING HOMAGE

Peter and long-time friend Nigel Hawker are hoping to put together a team of enthusiasts to repeat this epic overland drive in celebration of

the 'Oxcam' expedition's 50th Anniversary. Their plan is to set off on the fifth day of the fifth month in 2005, in a couple of period 86-inch Land Rovers. To maintain that retro feel, few concessions to the modern world will be made – only a modern First Aid kit, satellite phone, camcorder and possibly an overdrive unit and free-wheeling hubs for the vehicles. There will be no GPS system, just good old-fashioned maps and compasses, so both vehicles will be equipped pretty much as the original Oxford and Cambridge cars were when they set off, back in September 1955.

The route taken will also shadow that of the Oxcam adventure, but Peter hopes his team will

Golden Overland



LEFT: Kit list: 1955 Oxcam expedition went well-prepared

BELOW: Tweedledum and Tweedledee (Burma)



d tracks



ABOVE: London to Singapore – the overland route **LEFT:** Distinct lack of road markings in Great Syrian Desert

also venture into China. If they finally manage to reach the end post, Singapore, there will also be the great temptation to continue on into Australia. The overland journey to Singapore is expected to take about four months, but after that, who knows?

There will be other differences too; whereas the Oxcam boys were given a pair of brand new 86-inch Land Rover Station Wagons, expedition-prepared straight from Solihull, the Golden Overland team will be travelling in a couple of 50-year-old relics, both also 86-inch Land Rovers. Peter will be responsible for



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supplying both of these, as well as kitting them out and getting them ready for the 30,000-mile journey – no mean feat in itself. Although factory sponsorship on the grand scale is extremely hard to come by these days, Peter tells me he does have the promise of two Land Rovers from the Land Rover Series One Club (LRSOC). It will also be providing a supply of useful spares for the journey, as well as technical support.

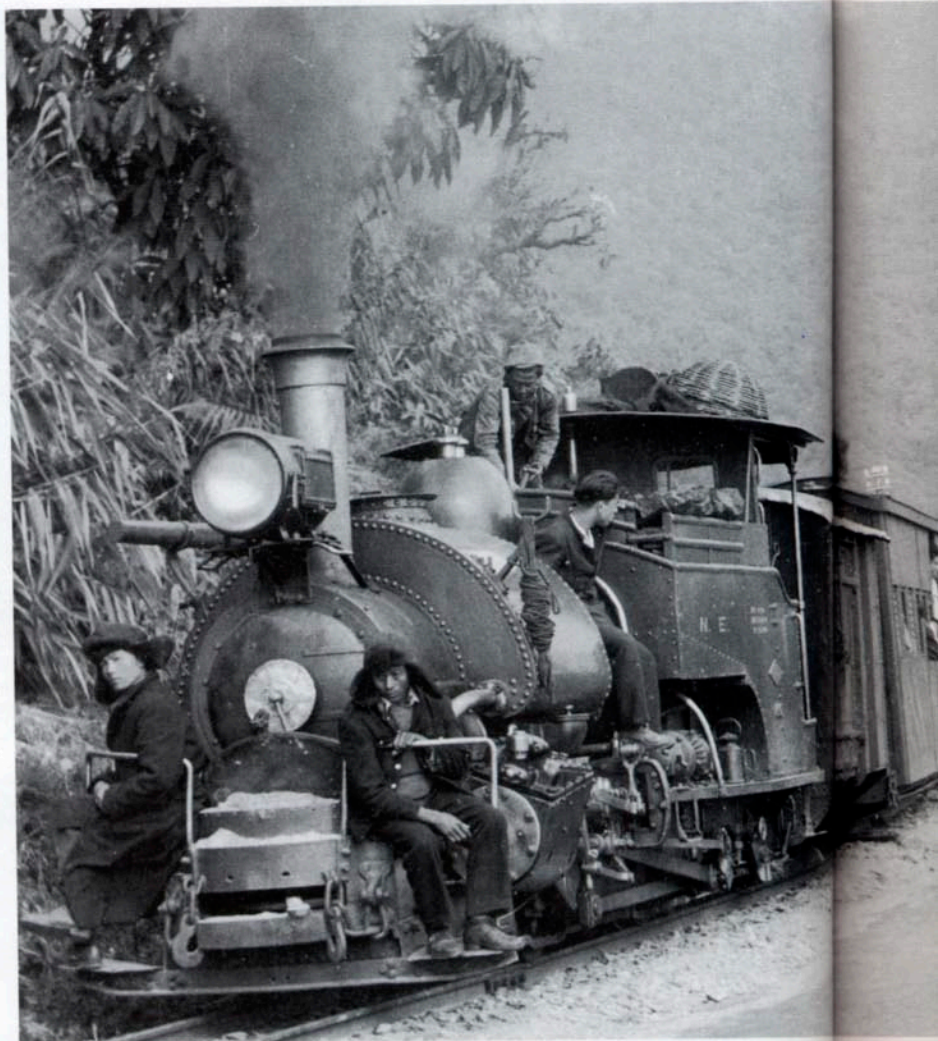
ALONG FOR THE RIDE

Series One Club committee member, Graham Powney, will also be joining the expedition, and Land Rover dealer Barratts of Canterbury, and Brian Bashall of DLR at Dunsfold, will be lending their support to this exciting adventure. It is expected that many more individuals and organisations will be supporting the Golden Overland adventure by the time they set off in May 2005.

Peter tells me the team will be camping throughout Europe, but once across the Bosphorus, they hope hospitality from curious locals will play a significant part in their arrangements. Fuel costs will no doubt be the greatest expense, and Peter estimates that with an average price of 50p-per-litre, the journey as far as Singapore will cost around £1000 per vehicle. An approach has already been made to the original members of the 1955 Oxford and Cambridge team for their support in this adventure, and it seems they are almost as excited at the prospect of new tyres in their old tracks as Peter and Nigel.

ORIGINS

To this end, a lunchtime pub meet with two members of the original Oxcam team had been arranged at the Crooked Billet pub on Wimbledon Common early last November, with me in attendance, sponsored by *LRW*. On the big day, Peter offered to take me from Fairseat to Wimbledon in his trusty steed, a 1954 86-inch Land Rover. I saw this as a golden opportunity to ask him about the



TOP LEFT: Highland pipers of Himalayan foothills **ABOVE:** Oxford climbs to Darjeeling alongside mountain train **BELOW:** Mahout and elephant make light work of logging

origins of his Golden Overland adventure, and also to tell me a little about his Land Rover. But with engine and gearbox noises reverberating relentlessly around the recently fitted hard-top, like so many coins in a contribution can, things got a little tarnished. The task proved far more difficult than expected, and our conversation quickly degenerated into something onlookers might easily have mistaken for a shouting match as we bumped our way along the M25 at well over 60mph.

Peter started by telling me that back in the 1980s he spent a lot of time travelling, much of it on old motorcycles, and much of it in India. When he came back to England he took a job in London, but hated it. He decided to move to east Kent, where he grew up, and set up a landscape gardening business. The 86-inch Series I we were travelling in was bought for this job. That was 13 years ago, and he has been driving this Land Rover everyday since, and expects to do around 12,000 miles a year in it. The present engine is the slightly





ABOVE: Desert breakfast

RIGHT: Stranded in Chindwin tributary: 'We did very well until we got to the middle'



ABOVE: Stilwell's military road 12 years on

later spread bore 2.0-litre type from a 1956 Land Rover, which he found in a wood with a tree growing through it. After six months searching for the owner, he eventually bought the derelict Land Rover for £100 and, after extracting the tree with a chainsaw and a little TLC, was able to drive it out of the wood. It was then broken-up for spares. A couple of years later the engine in Peter's everyday Land Rover began to get smokey, so he checked out the retrieved 1956 engine and decided to use it. That was six years and 72,000 miles ago.

As any enthusiast of old motorcycles will tell you, mechanical maintenance becomes second nature, and Peter Keeling is no exception. He services his Land Rover every 3000 miles and, as a consequence, it has never let him down with anything that couldn't be fixed by the roadside. He has become a real enthusiast of the marque and regularly attends club meetings. Last year he drove to the *LRW* show at Eastnor, and later drove 330 miles to the LRSOC's annual summer gathering at Tywyn, on the mid-Wales coast,

winning the farthest travelled award. More recently he took part in the South London and Surrey LRC's annual London-to-Brighton run, where great interest was shown in his forthcoming venture.

GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

So how did Golden Overland get started? It seems that three years ago an old friend asked Peter if he would be travelling around the globe again. The question stuck. He thought he would like to drive overland in a Series I, perhaps to Hong Kong, and discussed the idea with Les Lawrence, the LRSOC's Kent and Sussex area rep, at a pub meet in the Robin Hood, near Maidstone. When Peter mentioned the idea of travelling overland, Les lent him a copy of *First Overland* and told him that two of the team, Tim Slessor and Barrington Brown (BB), had given a lecture at Dunsfold as recently as 1998.

One of the team from the earlier Oxford and Cambridge 1954 Trans-African Expedition then gave Tim Slessor's telephone number to Peter, and the ball was soon rolling. He knew his old



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ABOVE: Syria, 12th Century Crusader castle – Krak des Chevaliers

ABOVE RIGHT: Burma Road, turn left for China
TOP RIGHT: Fording the Farah in Afghanistan



friend Nigel Hawker, who had been on several safaris in Africa, was the ideal person to help, and soon had him installed as the venture's business manager. There were other good contacts too; Peter Simpson – a marketing, design and printing wizard – was well-connected in the holiday trade, and Ian Hunt had spent 11 years in east Africa training Land Rover mechanics for Cooper Bros. (Land Rover importers since 1948). He is now involved in European four-wheel-drive events.

Altogether, Peter and Nigel hope to put together a team of five, travelling in two Land Rovers. This will leave space for a Chinese guide for that part of the journey, and maybe for the occasional local to hitch a lift in distant lands.

Time quickly passed and we soon found ourselves outside the Crooked Billet. We were early and made straight for a parking space outside the pub's front door. Inside, Nigel Hawker was already installed at one of the tables, and it was not long before Tim Slessor and BB appeared at the door.

BELOW: Local tribesmen pose with rifles

For me, the very prospect of having a pub lunch with two of the original 'Burma-or-Bust' team was pretty exciting stuff, and I certainly had a bag full of questions to ask.

BIG READ

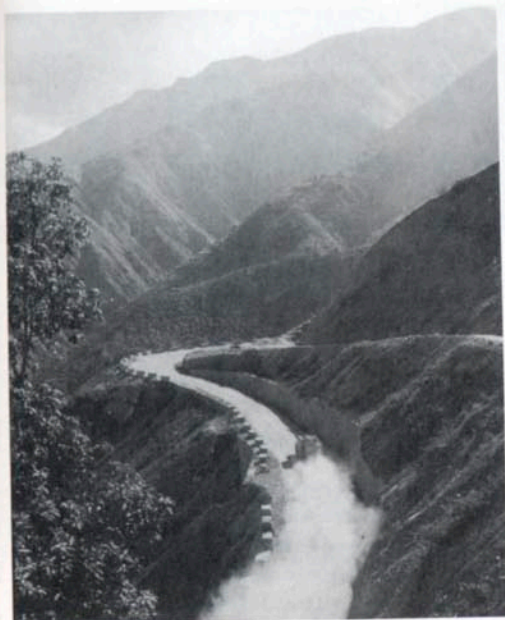
For the benefit of those readers who may not have had a chance to read the story of *First Overland*, it makes terrific reading and is hard to put down, especially if, like me, you're a bit of an adventurer as well as a Land Rover freak. It's written in a very straightforward style and has all the excitement of 'Boys Own' adventures of the period. These days a Harapp's

first edition is extremely hard to find, but The Companion Book Club edition occasionally turns up in charity shops. Tim and BB, who are now both enjoying life in the seventh decade, are keen to see the book back in print as a paperback. Maybe a special 50th Anniversary edition would go down well?

I began by asking how the idea of travelling overland to Singapore first came about. Tim told me how he and Adrian Cowell shared the same stairwell in Cambridge and that, while having coffee together one evening, Adrian suggested an adventure to Hong Kong, via Soviet Russia and China. Perhaps influenced by his time spent doing National Service in Malaya three years earlier, Tim suggested Singapore instead. This was a journey of some 15,000 miles through 20 countries and in two places, Burma and Thailand, there were no connecting roads, just mountains, rivers and jungle. It would be an adventure of epic proportions and had never been done before.

Their adventure is well documented in *First Overland* but I was keen to discover how the two Land Rover Station Wagons had really performed. I'd read how shock absorbers had broken, road springs failed – despite strong leaves being added to springs by Rover's agent in Beirut (the team were assured this was standard procedure for all cars entering the Middle East) – and shackle pins snapped. Studs also came out from one of the steering levers attached to the swivel-housings and Cambridge's dynamo packed up too. Then there was the dreaded problem of changing rear wheel bearings which, on Series I models, normally requires the retaining collar to be pressed off with a 20-ton press – mention of this brought a wry smile to the face of both Tim and BB. 'We did that 19





times', said BB. 'The Rover Company only gave us half-a-dozen spare hub bearings, so we topped up stock at local Rover agents as we went along', continued Tim.

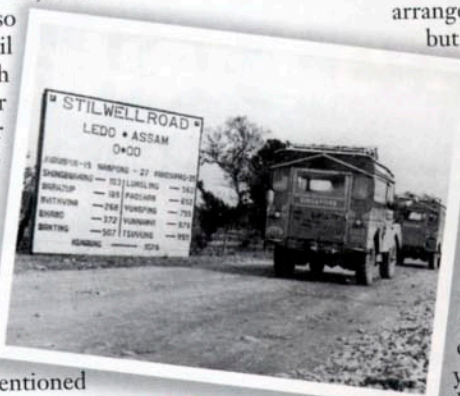
They went on to explain how retaining collars had to be chipped away at to weaken them, then the axle shaft up-ended onto its splines so as to bang it down on a rock face until everything began to drop off. With wheel bearing replaced, a new collar was then steamed in the pressure cooker to expand it before dropping it into place. 'It always seemed to wobble-wobble as it made its way down the shaft,' said Tim, gesticulating with his hands, 'by which time it had cooled and needed a few heavy hammer blows to finish the job.'

'Nineteen times!' I muttered. I could hardly believe it. I'd already mentioned to Peter on the drive up that I saw rear wheel bearings of the semi-floating axle as the Achilles' heel of a Series I. But to be fair, Rover had told the Oxcam team: 'You don't want a cross-country vehicle. you want a cross-country miracle,' and were viewing the trip as a proving ground for the recently-introduced 86-inch model. Not long after that, the new 109 Series I Land Rover was given a new fully-floating rear axle, which then became optional for the 88-inch model. With a tendency to crack like carrots, the new thinner half-shafts then became the weakest link, with the splined end invariably lodging itself solid in the differential. That rarely ever happens on the earlier 80, 86 and 107-inch models, so I know where I'd put my money.

Early in *First Overland*, Tim stated that, 'Each car could carry 50 gallons of petrol in built-in tanks'. I was curious to know exactly where these

ABOVE LEFT: New highroad into Nepal
ABOVE: Bandit country: Jeep escort through Central Burma

were located. He and BB explained how the passenger under-seat locker box had been removed and a second standard tank installed. A further three customised tanks were then installed immediately behind the transom panel, each one carrying a further 10 gallons. This arrangement gave the cars a range of 1000 miles, but because of the extra weight, these tanks were not filled unless it was thought there would be no fuel station along a particular section of the route.



ABOVE: Assam, start of the Stilwell Road

TEAM EFFORT

Despite testing several components to destruction, the team agreed at the time 'that if we ever repeated the journey we should not hesitate to take Land Rovers again'. I then discovered that Tim and BB did in fact do the journey again, just two years later, and they indeed took an ex-demonstration Land Rover bought at a knock-down price from the factory. They drove this Land Rover overland to Calcutta, then shipped it to Burma from there.

It's clear from the book that having four-wheel-drive vehicles with eight forward gears, had made a major contribution to the success of the expedition. Was there anything else as essential, I asked.

'Yes', replied Tim, 'the winch. It was a drum type, not a capstan winch'.

'A Turner mini-winch?' I ventured - during the 1950s these had been specially-adapted to fit Land Rovers, making a useful alternative to the factory's own Aeroparts capstan winch.

'No. It had a German name... Koenig, from Texas', Tim remembered.

'We used it mainly when fording rivers', continued BB.



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And there had certainly been plenty of rivers to ford. The key to that, Tim reminded me, was first removing the fan belt, and then only sending one car into the river at a time so that the other could effect a winch recovery from the bank, if necessary.

'With such a wide selection of 4x4s now available, would you still choose a Land Rover product today?' I enquired. Without too much hesitation, 'Yes,' came the reply. Then, with a smile, 'if only for old times sake.'

I went on to ask if there was anything else they saw as a key element to the success of the Oxcam adventure. 'Not having a leader', came the reply.

Tim and BB explained how each man in the team was in charge of a specific area – BB, for example, was a medical advisor, so on health matters they all did exactly as he said. End result, nobody fell ill throughout the entire 30,000 mile journey. He was also in charge of photography and filming. Tim kept the diary, recording in detail the events each day for later publication. He was also assistant cameraman. The other members of the six-man team were: Nigel Newbery, quartermaster, who kept the stores. He was also the Oxford mechanic: Henry Nott, whose job was to keep Cambridge on the move; Adrian Cowell, business manager responsible for the team's finances and all forward planning; and Pat Murphy, navigator and chef.

After an excellent lunch – I highly recommend the Crooked Billet to anyone passing Wimbledon Common – we stayed for some time, but everyone was keen to leave London before that daily phenomenon, euphemistically known as 'rush hour', began, so we eventually bade farewell to the intrepid duo. But not before asking BB and Tim to sign the original Harrap first edition of *First Overland*, which I had taken with me for the occasion.

On our way back to Kent, I asked Peter Keeling if he thought he would be attempting the Stilwell Road into Burma. This is the great road that US General 'Vinger Joe' Stilwell, Deputy Supreme Commander, SEAC (South-East Asia Command) had his troops cut through the northern Burma jungle from Ledo

ABOVE LEFT: Desert maintenance **ABOVE:** Nairn Bros bus speeds Great Syrian Desert from Damascus to Baghdad **ABOVE RIGHT:** Wading. Who cares about broken bridges?

to Myitkyina (pronounced 'Mitch-in-ah') in 1944. It was a major Allied supply route from India to China, built to help in the fight to drive invading Japanese forces from mainland Asia. Apart from 50 years of total neglect and Monsoon rains, it remains to this day exactly the same as when the Oxcam team last used it – an overgrown, washed away, broken bridged, jungle track. Peter did not totally discount the idea, but thought that apart from the difficult terrain, obtaining permission to cross the India/Burma border would probably make it impossible.

RECOMMENDED

To anyone planning an overland journey by Land Rover, I would recommend reading *First Overland*. Not only is it a great story, but it's full of useful information. The Appendices alone contain a range of notes on medical advice, car mechanics, navigation, stores, cookery, and so on.

For those wanting a taste of the North Burma Jungle, I recommend the US Signal Corps' official film of the forgotten war, *The Stilwell Road*, which is now available on video (DD video, 1996). Also, Sam Fuller's film *Merrill's Marauders* (US, 1962), a wartime drama set in 1942, about US special forces behind enemy lines in Burma heading through the jungle towards Myitkyina, is also well-worth watching.

Peter welcomes advice from anyone with recent overland experience of Asia, particularly China, and also from anyone with good mechanical tips from the outback. He already has interest in his venture from TV companies and is looking for other organisations to get behind this great event. If your firm or organisation can help in any way, please get in touch with *LRW* at the usual address, we'll pass your details on to Peter and the team. In the meantime *LRW*, will be following their preparations in the run-up to 2005 ■



ABOVE: Anatolia – Oxcam's first camel

www.goldenoverland.com

Visit the official website to register your practical support for Peter and Nigel in this exciting adventure