



'MY MECHANICS THOUGHT THAT I WAS CRAZY'

Well, it may have taken him four years but ace restorer Franco Picchiotini's staggeringly good 107 station wagon restoration has proved them wrong. Who's crazy now...?

WORDS: RUSS BROWN. PHOTOS: TOM CRITCHELL



2009

The unpallet-able truth:
'We're about to rebuild this,'
Franco told his team



Now

The finest 107 station wagon
there is? Probably

This four-year restoration was the out-of-hours project of Franco Picchiotini, owner of the renowned Land Rover Team workshop (landroverteam.it) at Giussano, near Milan in Italy.

Franco bought the 107-inch station wagon as a £3000 pile of parts on pallets on one of his regular foraging trips to the UK. The five pallets met with much dismay from Franco's mechanics, who stated: *'Il capo ha perso la testa!'* Literally, 'The boss has lost his mind!'

Franco was happy to take that one on the chin. 'Okay, so they thought that I was crazy – but I just love the early Land Rovers with their galvanised profiles. They remind me of Meccano sets. And I particularly like the station wagons because they're so rare.' He's right about that – Land Rover made just 7001 of them.

Importing a Land Rover in kit form is hardly a unique concept. From the earliest days of production the Rover Company offered completely knocked-down (CKD) kits as a means of distributing vehicles to the farthest-flung corners of the world. However, none of these would have previously been on the road in the UK for 25 years and off it for a further 25 prior to being dispatched to their new home.

The kit was unpacked and clues to its history revealed. Artistic impressions of a pheasant and sea bass on the side panels suggested that a previous owner liked his huntin' and shootin'. Intriguingly there was a Dormobile badge on the rear door – even though that company's conversions were never available for Series IIs. Also, the most significant Dormobile signature, the lifting roof, was missing; this vehicle had the

tropical roof that was standard on 107in station wagons. Oh, and there was another component missing. The engine.

The UK registration, ULE 186, wasn't recognised on a DVLA search. Franco then realised that the numberplate maker had mistakenly transposed two digits; ULE 168 was registered in London in July 1957 but the record detailed it as having a 2052cc diesel engine.

This was impossible because there were no diesel engines fitted to 107in station wagons, so the DVLA had also made a mistake – not unheard of with vehicles as old as this. It was last taxed in 1982, leaving nearly half its life unaccounted for.

I contacted Jim Bullock at Dormobile to try to unravel the mystery. No luck – the company doesn't have production records going back that far. Jim did confirm that the style of Franco's badge was introduced in the early '60s so would have been more likely to be found on a Series II. He suggests the 107 may have been retrofitted as a camper then restored to a conventional station wagon at a later date.

One advantage of the vehicle arriving in kit form was that at least there wasn't much dismantling required. However, when embarking

on a chassis-up project you do actually need to start with a chassis – and in this case, that had been cut in half for ease of shipment.

To reunite it, Franco built a jig to ensure everything stayed aligned while he welded it. Closer inspection revealed a lot of rot, and Franco's philosophy towards rot is very clear. It is never patched; it is cut out and replaced with tailor-made sheet metal. He fabricated new crossmembers and outriggers, and checked their alignment by temporarily re-assembling the bodywork before painting the chassis.

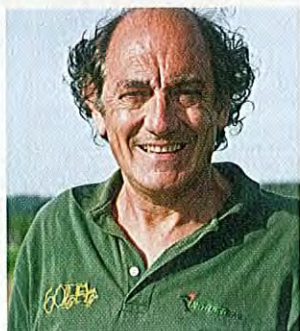
The bulkhead was in a sorry state so, having had previous experience of how much trouble these are to restore, Franco ordered a replacement from Radford Bulkheads in Aberdeenshire. The estimated delivery of six months eventually became almost a year, delaying the rebuild.

Every cloud, though... The wait for the new bulkhead did give time to complete other jobs, such as re-upholstering the seats, refurbishing those aluminium body panels that had suffered electrolytic corrosion, fixing up the drivetrain and – of course – finding an engine.

For that Franco got lucky. Not only did he find one the same age as the vehicle, it was in fine condition. The bearings were all good and it passed a compression test with flying colours. When he fired it up on the bench, it started on the first turn with perfect oil pressure. All it needed was a good clean and a coat of paint.

When the new bulkhead finally arrived re-assembly could get under way. The need for a total respray gave an opportunity for a change from the original drab Mid Grey. Franco couldn't make his mind up between Navy Blue and

'The 107 may have been retrofitted as a camper then restored to a conventional station wagon'



The fab fifty-one

OWNER: FRANCO PICCHIOTINI

Franco has been restoring cars for 35 years. His first was an MGA Twin Cam which he still owns.

He bought his first Land Rover, an 88in Series II, when he was 21 and has owned an astonishing 50 since. This 107 is his favourite, but most retain a place in his heart. He describes his first 80in Series I as 'unforgettable' and fondly remembers the Range Rover Classic LSE for its comfort on family holidays.

He is particularly fond of rarer vehicles such as his ongoing 80in Tickford project. For off-roading, his Minerva is tops. 'I don't mind getting that one scratched.'



2.0 petrol – which is more than Franco saw when he first opened the bonnet



Series I rebuild



1

NOVEMBER 2009

The bulkhead is fitted temporarily to the chassis to help with checking dimensions



2

MAY 2010

It all fits! Franco leaves it like this for a while so he can admire the classic profile...



3

FEBRUARY 2011

A satisfying moment: period-correct 2.0-litre engine turns out to be in fine running order



4

NOVEMBER 2011

It's a long time since it looked like this. Beautifully refurbished rear tub is a real credit to the craftsmen responsible for it



5

JANUARY 2012

Surely now, when the team can see just how incredible the finished vehicle will look, they'll stop thinking the boss is crazy? Well, apparently not...

Bronze Green, so he flipped a coin. Blue it is.

The restored body panels were then aligned meticulously on the chassis, after which the team fitted new brakes, fuel pipes, electrics, window frames and Plexiglas windows. Franco replaced the warped Masonite door cards with aluminium copies to which he glued a thin layer of neoprene covered in blue vinyl to match the rejuvenated bodywork. The interior trim was completed with Hardura (a PVC-coated felt material) in the footwells.

Franco hands me the keys, fine fellow that he

TECH SPEC

- **Model:** Series I 107-inch station wagon • **Year:** 1957 • **Engine:** 1997cc, 52bhp, four-cylinder petrol • **Transmission:** Four-speed main gearbox, lockable to four-wheel drive in high ratio.
- **Tyres:** 7.50 x 16 Dunlop Roadtrak Major

is, so that I can take this lovingly restored classic for a drive in the beautiful Tuscan hills. But before I climb in, I take the time to admire the amazing blue paint job. I find it hard to believe that any Series I ever came out of the factory looking as shiny as this. It's stunning.

In the cab, there's more admiring to be done. Franco's attention to detail knows no bounds – every switch, dial and fitting looks like new. Taking the Series I for a drive, I feel I've been whisked back to simpler times: I imagine this must be what it felt like to be the thrilled first owner of a factory-fresh Series I station wagon on the drive home from collecting it.

Getting the vehicle to such timewarp condition certainly wasn't easy, as Franco himself admits. 'The toughest thing during the whole process was to try to preserve the originality of all parts.'

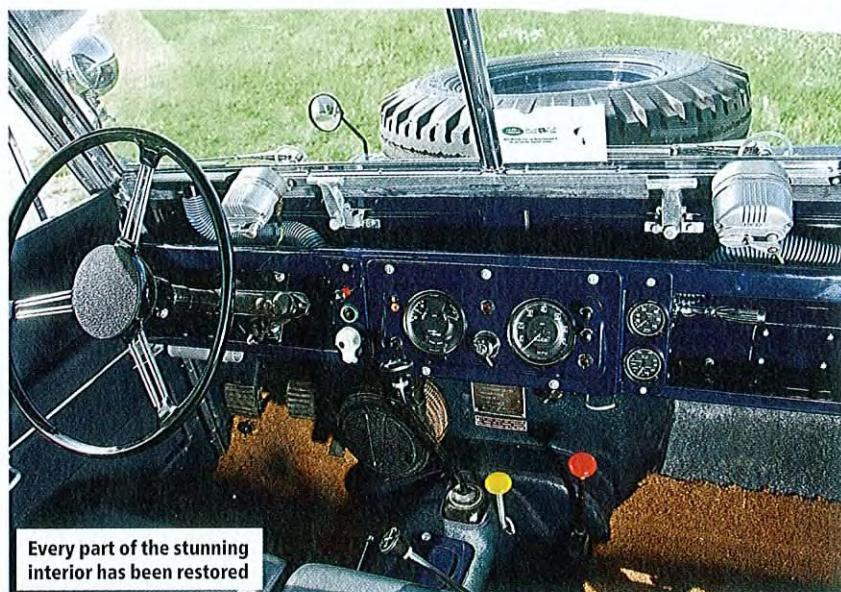
There are a few common-sense upgrades: as

well as the door cards, the bolts retaining the galvanised cappings have been replaced with flat-head stainless fixings, all aligned with their slots vertical so that water will run off. Rivet-counters may wince, but I can't fault this vehicle.

So, how much does a Franco Picchiotini restoration cost? Because this was a personal project, Franco didn't keep tabs but he guesses it would have cost about £42,000.

Does his team still think the boss is crazy? 'Yes, everybody thinks I'm crazy. But we're all very proud of this vehicle. It was very emotional for me the first time I started it up and drove it.' **LRO**

• We'd still love to unravel the mystery of the Dormobile connection and trace the missing quarter century in the life of ULE 168, if you think you can help, please get in touch.



Every part of the stunning interior has been restored



Franco has made his bed and now he can lie in it



'I imagine this must be what it felt like to be the thrilled first owner of a factory-fresh 107 station wagon'