In excess

When former speed freak Russell Pickering swapped the fast lane for green lanes he chose an 07 Defender 90 XS.

Words: Kev Baldwin Photos: Wayne Mitchelson

Russell Pickering has, by his own admission, always had a thing for machinery. Given he was once a farm worker, this 'thing', not surprisingly, began with tractors. Several years later, having made the sizeable leap from farming to finance, he swapped Case tractors for Caterham cars, and Claas balers for Kawasakis. Enjoying a new passion for speed, he relished life in the fast lane until one day he was out on his bike and witnessed an accident, which proved to be a wake-up call. 'I figured, now's the time to quit while I was still ahead!' The Caterham and the bike went up for sale the very next week. The Durham-based petrolhead was suddenly faced with the dilemma of how to fill the void of his empty weekends. 'Coming from a farming background I'd always loved Land Rovers, so I decided I'd get a nice Defender.'

From a featherweight Caterham to Defender is a quantum leap in terms of performance, so you can hardly blame him for a little self-indulgence on his choice of vehicle. 'It was a 50th Anniversary model with the 4.0-litre V8. It only had 16,000 miles on the clock and was immaculate.' In seeking out someone to check over the car before buying, he arrived at Land Rover specialist Cheviot 4x4 in Tyneside. With a view to doing some off-roading with his new purchase, he asked what modifications he ought to make. The response wasn't quite what he'd expected.

'All credit to Cheviot, they told me straight: "You don't want to do anything to this Land Rover! It's just too good to mess with."'

'I had been prepared to spend a fair bit of money, but I came away with a huge amount of respect for Cheviot's attitude and reasoning for actually turning money down. They told me to come back with something not quite so nice (or rare) and they'd be more than happy to help.'

That something turned out to be a Td5 Defender, which became Russell's off-road toy and helped to establish a close working relationship with brothers Dave and Pete Crossman at Cheviot. Sadly, the relationship between Russell, his Defender and the supplying Land Rover dealer wasn't quite so harmonious. Following a lengthy dispute over recurrent and unresolved faults from the day the car was delivered, and with faith in the vehicle diminishing, he sold the Td5 after just a year. Setting out to find a replacement vehicle, Russell knew what he wanted and how much he wanted to pay, but had a problem with the dealers' asking prices.

Driving a hard bargain

'I wanted something with factory warranty, but the dealers were asking crazy money for two-year-old Td5 Defenders. After six months of searching for the right vehicle at the right price with no joy, I started looking at new Defenders.'

Russell had done his research and, armed with the comparative price of an imported Defender, wrangled a deal on a new XS Station Wagon ex-demonstrator with a local outlet. But before you go rushing off to your dealership looking to beat the hair-gelled teenage salesman down on the price of a new Defender, we should point out that Russell had some extra bargaining power behind him.

'I'd been lucky enough to have some funds released, so the deal was helped by the fact I was looking to buy myself a TDV8 Range Rover Sport as well as the Defender.'

The two arrived within days of each other. The Sport racked up the miles for the first three weeks, as the Defender was already in the Cheviot North Shields workshop for its first round of modifications.

'There was rust on the chassis when it was delivered, so Waxoyling of the underbody was a priority,' recalls Russell. Improving the somewhat light dusting that Solihull provides on new Defenders these days is commonplace, but the other mods on this nine-month-old Defender are what set it apart from the usual 'new' Defender on the roads. Look in Russell's garage and you'll find evidence for his enthusiasm. Where his beloved Caterham once resided there is now a sizeable pile of shiny, new take-off parts removed from this Defender over the past nine months.

The XS spec Boost alloys were replaced with contrasting charcoal grey Zu Rims wrapped in 235/75 BFG M/Ts to replace the tame General Grabbers. Up front, a Mantec bumper houses an uprated WARN 9.5ti winch fitted with synthetic Plasma winch rope. The Safari Snorkel fitment was something of a test for Cheviot since Safari hasn't yet released a version of its

Roo Lite polycarbonate spots complete light show – includes Cheviot bar with roof lights

Zu Rims are scratched, as is the bodywork, and sidesteps are pretty crumpled, thanks to 'fun' off-roading. Cue the rock sliders...

Safari Snorkel is a modified Td5 item – Cheviot has not yet released a 2.4-litre version

popular raised air-intake for the 2.4-engined Defender. In the meantime, a modified Td5 version gets the job done. Italian brand Equipe provided the rear corner protectors while a QT diff guard, heavy-duty steering gear and one of Cheviot's own 'Bomb-Proof' branded steering-guards looks after things up front. Extended breathers are fitted to both axles and transmission although, ironically, it was a lack of a similar level of attention to detail in the breather department on Land Rover's part that has caused the only significant problem since owning the car. A badly placed fuel-tank breather, exposed to the elements (a worryingly common fault on the latest generation Defender), allowed moisture to be drawn into the fuel system with predictable results. A dealer recall modified the breather location, but Cheviot extended it higher, just in case.

Rough and tumble

This Defender may be smarter than your average off-road equipped Defender on account of its youth, but Russell dismisses any suggestion that this truck is merely some blinged-up posing toy. 'It regularly gets used off-road on events in Scotland every six to eight weeks, in the Argyle Forest. They're not full-on challenge events – I've no desire to do anything that extreme – but they're tougher than you'd expect. The organisers offer a choice of two routes over the weekend, tough or shiny. We always go with the tough groups, which did surprise them at first.'

True enough, a huge scrape in the black paintwork on the driver's door, the scratched Zu Rims and the beaten-to-death sidesteps are testament to Russell's enthusiasm and determination to have fun. Russell shrugs off the trail rash with a smile: 'It's not the end of the world – I can fix it!'

With frequent 600-mile round trips to Scotland a regular occurrence, some interior improvements were made to the notoriously cramped 07 interior. The combination of MUD Rails and a smaller diameter Moto-Lita steering-wheel free up extra legroom in the front, while in the back the removal of one of the folding rear seats creates extra space for recovery kit and luggage. Russell explains that the new folding rear seats have their downside: 'The seats are great, but even when they're folded up they take up so much space, there's still no room to put anything in the back. We have a German Shepherd dog we sometimes take with us, so one of the seats had to go.'

Other additional interior luxuries include an Outback roof console and the addition of Carling Switches within the dash binnacle to control the winch, and roof lights mounted onto the Cheviot light bar over the screen.

The 07 XS replaced Russell's original choices of a 'too rare and nice to be messed with' special edition 50th Anniversary 90 with the 4.0-litre V8 and an unreliable Td5

Moto-Lita wheel and Carling switches are interior mods

'CHEVIOT WON'T SELL YOU ANYTHING YOU DON'T NEED. AND WHEN THEY DO A JOB, IT'S DONE RIGHT'

Class act

The switch and roof console are particularly neat installations and typical of the kind of workmanship that keeps Russell loyal to Cheviot 4x4. 'I like them because they'll not sell you anything you don't need. And when they do a job it's done right. Take the roof console, for instance. They're a bit of a pig to fit, especially where the sun visors need to be cut and trimmed down. I didn't even realise the sun visors had been chopped until they told me. The finished result is that good!'

Russell already has his next round of modifications in mind. He points to the battered sidesteps. 'People seem to think those steps are a load of rubbish, but as you can see they'll take some hammer!' Nevertheless, as his confidence has grown with this vehicle he figured that rock sliders are an overdue addition to try to keep the still shiny panel work on the straight side. A couple of extra inches of underbody clearance is already waiting in Cheviot's workshop in the shape of Old Man Emu springs and shocks.

So does this self-confessed speed junkie have any plan to uprate the engine? 'Not really. I've been told you don't really want to mess too much with this engine. The 2.4 is a fairly stressed unit in the Defender, so I think I'll leave it alone. It doesn't go anything like as well as my old tuned Td5, but the taller sixth gear is great for the long journeys up to Scotland. Besides, I've got the Range Rover Sport if I want to drive fast. Now that's a really beautiful car – or at least is it now since the dealer fixed the transmission!' With a Range Rover Sport sitting on the driveway, you'd be forgiven for thinking the Defender is purely a weekend toy. That was the original plan, but the more Russell's tweaked his Defender over the past eight months, the more he's come to love it.

Similarly Russell's fiancé, Michelle, has fallen under its spell to the degree that she'll only ever drive the Defender. A woman who passes over the charms of a Range Rover Sport for a Defender is a good sign. No wonder Russell proposed! **LRW**

Specification

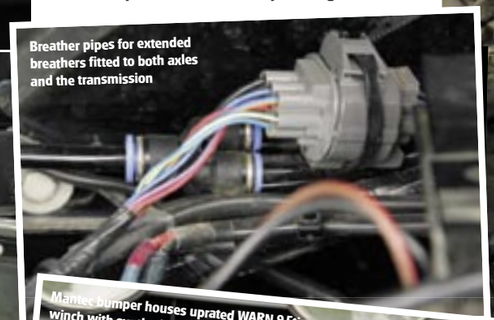
2007 Defender 90 Station Wagon XS
Engine: Standard 2.4Tdci
Transmission: Standard six-speed manual.
Axles: Standard

Modifications
- Equipe Rear Corner protectors
- Scorpion detachable rear tow hitch
- Mantec winch bumper
- WARN 9.5ti winch fitted with Allbright solenoid
- Plasma winchline
- Zu Rims
- 235/75x16 BFGoodrich M/Ts
- Moto-Lita Steering wheel
- MUD Rails
- Outback roof console
- Carling Technologies switches
- Roo Lite 180s
- Cheviot 'Bombproof' steering guard
- HD Steering arms
- QT Diff guards
- Safari Snorkel
- Cheviot roof light bar
- Extended breathers
- Midland 78 CB
- Parrot Bluetooth

Owner profile

Owner: Russell Pickering
Occupation: Financial advisor
How long have you owned it? Nine months
How much did it cost? £23k for the standard Defender
How much have you spent? A lot!
Most expensive modification? Wheels and tyres

Rear corner protectors from Equipe, and soon there'll be two inches of extra clearance, courtesy of Old Man Emu springs and shocks


Breather pipes for extended breathers fitted to both axles and the transmission

Mantec bumper houses uprated WARN 9.5ti winch with synthetic Plasma rope

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