

Stretching a point



Stefan Thiele discovers a new dimension to the story of the hunting Range Rovers specially constructed for East German leader Erich Honecker in the 1980s – and there's a very surprising English connection

Back in the February issue of *LAND ROVER enthusiast*, I reported on the discovery of two almost identical Range Rover long-wheelbase cabriolet conversions.

These vehicles had been hand-built by Karosserie Friedrich Rometsch in Berlin for top leaders of the former East

Germany, but I knew even then that they only told part of the story. There was a third vehicle, and through the pages of this magazine I asked whether anyone knew what had happened to it.

It didn't take long to get a response. Reader Rui Melo wrote in, and in the April issue, *Roverphile* carried a picture of

the missing third vehicle, undergoing some work in a garage in Portugal. Where it is now remains a mystery, but I'm on the track of it. But what I didn't know was that my enquiries would uncover a completely new dimension to the story of these Range Rovers, and with that, a fourth and distinctively different vehicle!

Custom build



Original vehicle dates from three years earlier than the ones discovered earlier

Impulse purchase

While routinely browsing some of my favourite Land Rover web sites, I discovered a sales ad for a special Range Rover. The text proudly proclaimed that this one was specially built by Karosserie Rometsch for Erich Honecker. I was stunned and I rubbed my eyes. Was this the missing one, the one spotted in Portugal that had since disappeared?

So the very next day I set off down the Autobahn in my Range Rover 3.9 SEi in the direction of the tiny village near

Soft-top has a pronounced bulge; later design was neater

Karlsruhe where this vehicle was located. On my first walk around it, I realised that this was clearly not the "Portugal" conversion.

Most apparently, the door handles were of the early, vertical style, while Rui Melo's

picture shows the later "letterbox" units. There were no running boards and no searchlights mounted to the A-post, features common to all the other conversions. And the car registration revealed that this was a 1982 Range Rover, whereas the other Rometsch conversions were from 1985 and later.

The owner told me that he had acquired this landaulet-style conversion earlier this year from a car dealer near Berlin. "It was an impulse purchase," he explained. Nicknamed "Erich", the mighty Range Rover with just 30,000 miles on its odometer "was a lot of fun to drive around" and more seriously, it served as a unique courtesy collection vehicle for the family-owned hotel business. However, after the initial excitement of owning an extravagant vehicle had faded, owner Frank Fächtschnieder

has now decided to part with "Erich".

I was more than a little confused. Was this a fake "Honecker"? And if it was genuine, as the friendly owner claimed, why didn't I know about its existence? Switching my brain into Sherlock Holmes mode, I decided to go for it and see if I could finally lift the veil of secrecy which still seemed to be hanging over the story of the Honecker Range Rovers. I was going to have to re-write the story that appeared in the February issue of *LAND ROVER enthusiast*.

A myth destroyed

Things got under way when I broke the news to Manfred Quillfeld, the retired senior coachbuilder at the former Rometsch works, who was responsible for all the body-conversion work on the known "Honeckers". And to my surprise, Mr Quillfeld was not particularly pleased to hear about my latest discovery!

Shipped to Germany on November 26, 1981 as a standard Lincoln Green two-door, the reappearance of SALLHABV2AA-118553 had finally destroyed a carefully nurtured myth. When I asked Herr Quillfeld about the strikingly different execution of the doors and some other elements of the body, he admitted that the vehicle I had found was the genuine first Jagdwagen of Erich Honecker. But he also admitted that Rometsch had not built it.

In fact, they had not even known much about it. Yet it had served Herr Quillfeld as a template from which he had taken measurements for the three Rometsch conversions I already knew about. So where had this "original" Honecker Range Rover come from? Herr Quillfeld could not remember.

Next I tracked down Siegmund Kronenberger, who had been the chief executive in charge of Honecker's large motor pool. He was able to



Extra switchgear; brass plate explains convertible top operation

shed more light on the story, telling me how he had approached Manfred Quillfeld in early 1980 with the idea of a stretched Range Rover landaulet conversion.

After some evaluation, Herr Quillfeld had declined the conversion job as "too big and too complicated" – even though money was not an issue. Deeply disappointed, Herr Kronenberger was forced to shop elsewhere. It seemed an impossible mission: Solihull had already given the project the thumbs-down and Mr Kronenberger's boss was getting a little uneasy.

The only hope seemed to be a man in Lingen, a small town near the Dutch border. Wolfgang Walter, then in charge of the German franchise dealership of London-based conversion specialists Wood and Pickett, agreed to do the job. But after a contract had been worked out (or so the story goes), Wood and Pickett pulled out of the deal and – for some unexplained reason – closed their German dealership.

Desperate

It was the spring of 1982. Herr Walter was desperate. He had lost his franchise but he had a contract to fulfil with the East German government. Fortunately, he discovered that the UK-based Morgan car company was prepared to step into the breach. There was no time to lose: the converted Range Rover was supposed to be a birthday present for Erich



Interior less luxurious than later types; big grab bar for rear seat passengers also strengthens body; gun rests are manually-operated, later ones were electric



Honecker, who would turn 70 on August 25 that year.

So Herr Walter personally drove the Lincoln Green two-door Range Rover across to Malvern Link in the UK, delivered it to the Morgan factory and made a substantial advance payment. Twelve weeks and one short test drive later, the converted Range Rover was driven back to Lingen.

It had cost the not inconsiderable sum (in modern money) of 80,000 Euros, but Morgan had done the job in record time. They had stretched the chassis and body by 50 cm and fitted a hydraulically-operated convertible top (possibly of Rolls-Royce origin). Back in Lingen, Herr Walter entrusted the rest of the conversion work to a local garage. A Warn electric winch was mounted, Japanese-made alloy wheels were shod with a set of 275/60 R15 General XP 2000 rubber and some



Footwell courtesy lights are a nice touch

The story so far

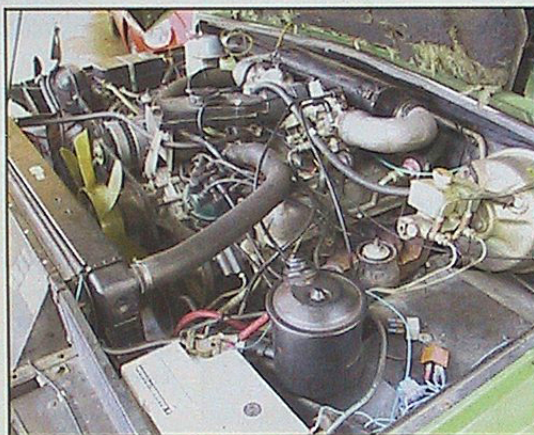
Just in case you missed the original article in February, let me back-track a little. Former East German leader Erich Honecker, his right-hand man Gunther Mittag and his security director Mielke shared a common passion for hunting. A secluded forest north of Berlin in the old German Democratic Republic was stocked with hundreds of deer, specially imported from Hungary so that Honecker and his cronies could use them for target-practice. To get around these killing fields, they used specially-converted Range Rovers, kitted out as hunting vehicles ("Jagdwagen" in German).

Custom build

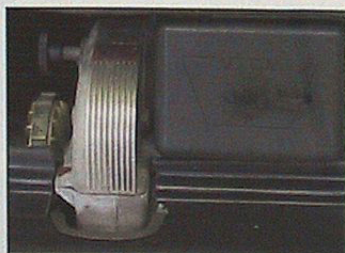
undisclosed mechanical work was performed. Herr Walter remembers that the German workforce was encouraged to work overtime to get the job done quickly by means of an extra 5000 Euros on top of the bill for the modifications!

Mission accomplished, the Range Rover was registered for regular street use on July 1, 1982. After some final shake-down testing, it was picked up and paid for by two East German envoys and driven across to East Germany for the

Original carburettor V8 engine has done just over 30,000 miles



The road wheels are alloys, but spare is a factory-issue steel with unused tyre; winch is by Warn



If you're buying...

I believe that the asking price of €32,000 is pretty much a bargain for what must be the most important Range Rover conversion in German history. But if you want to buy, why not dig a little deeper and cough up a further 76,694 Euros, which is the asking price for the best of all the Rometsch conversions. It has just 6000 miles on the clock and is still for sale in Berlin. Unfortunately, the price isn't negotiable.

Now, if only I could do a deal for my well-kept 3.9 SEi...

big birthday party.

Honecker must have enjoyed his new toy tremendously. It was so much bigger and so much more refined than the Rometsch-converted 1976 Series III Land Rover 109, the Mercedes G-Wagens and the Lada that he was then using as hunting-vehicles.

Elegant presence

The best view of this amazing Range Rover is from high up, when the vehicle's sheer presence and elegant dimensions are clear. But a closer look immediately reveals that the detailing is crude by the standards of the later Rometsch copies. The rear doors are smaller, the windows are manually operated and the gun-supports on the rear doors can be set at only two different heights. By contrast, the Rometsch conversions feature an electrically operated lifting device, run by a concealed electric motor of Mazda origin.

There are no running boards and, although there is a Warn electric winch, the front end lacks the visual presence given by an integrated bull bar. But what struck me most was the odd and pretty sad-looking three-seat arrangement on the rear bench. Where is that fantastic lambswool-covered chaise longue of the later cars? There's no doubt that the

Rometsch conversions excel with their masterly execution and truly outstanding fit and finish. Perhaps Herr Quillfeld had the last laugh after all!

Differences with the later vehicles are obvious from the outside as well. When raised, the convertible top seems to bulge, whereas the Rometsch versions form a straight and smooth line with the fixed roof above the front seats. Perhaps Honecker himself requested improvements on the later Range Rovers. But he must have loved that funny-looking miniature fire extinguisher which is the only genuine East German-made item on board.

Big impact

Driving the Honecker Range Rover is a pleasure. With just over 30,000 original miles on the 3.5-litre V8, the engine purrs silently and the gear selection is precise and has a tight feel to it. Unlike its Rometsch-built siblings, this one has a collapsible, roof-mounted gun-support bar. There is also an oversized Webasto heater control bolted right in the middle of the dashboard. A neat touch is the additional courtesy light in both front footwells, while a slightly corroded brass plate on the dashboard explains the procedure for raising and lowering the soft top.

So while there's little doubt that the Rometsch conversions improved on the original, it's this 1982 vehicle which is the prototype. And Morgan's clever conversion

made a big impact on Rometsch, forcing them to realise that the job could be done. From then on, the project became a matter of pride, and Erich Honecker could rest assured that he would always get the best of all Range Rover conversions from the best of all conversion specialists in Germany. ■