

Bavarian Supercar

From prototype to production ...



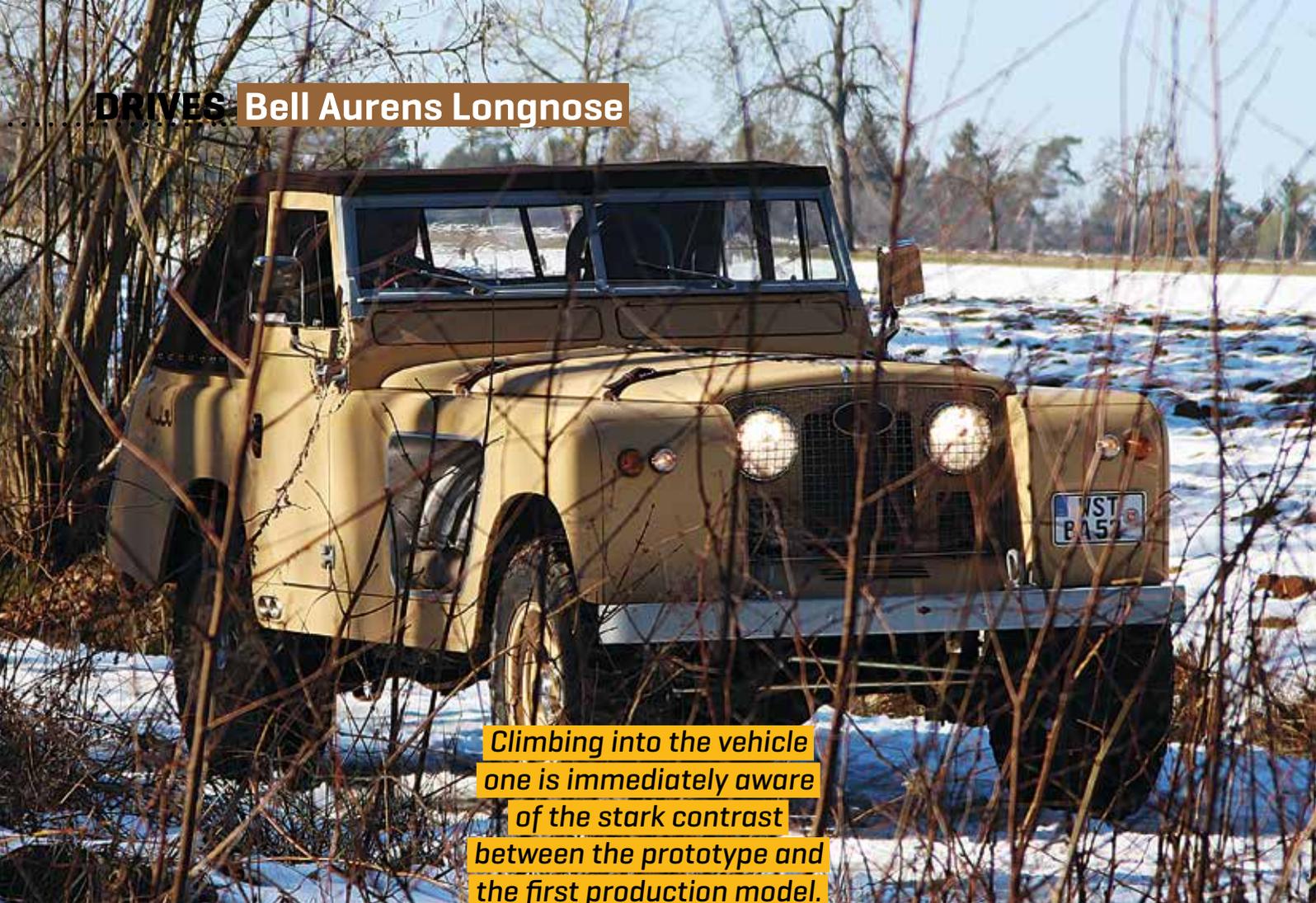
By Kevin Girling

*Photos by Kevin Girling,
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Simon Ward-Hastelow*



It was 2006 when Thomas Bell first committed to paper his vision for a Land Rover that would be entirely different from any other vehicle driven out of Solihull. This vision became a reality when the Bell Aurens Longnose Roadster was created, based on a Series Land Rover 109-inch, with the prototype being rolled out of the workshop in 2009 after a year in development.

In the last issue of Land Rover World we covered the prototype in detail (see November 2013) and this month we continue the story from prototype to production.



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WITH TWO VEHICLES NOW in existence, names were given to each: the prototype became known as Alphantier and the first production car was named Aqaba.

So now the dilemma was how to take something so rare and market it? We put this question to Holger Kalvelage of Bell Aurens; how he decided to accomplish it is an interesting story.

The international media was first notified of the concept when the prototype was still in the build process. The story captured the imagination of both TV and print outlets until the prototype was finished and rolled out at a launch party. Among those present were invited guests who had indicated an interest in purchasing a Longnose. There was also plenty of awareness around the world thanks to the step-by-step build process being well reported on the company Facebook page. The launch party created an international media buzz and in Germany itself every television motoring show covered Bell Aurens.

The first order for a Longnose came from a man who picked up on the story and contacted Bell Aurens. Ironically he was not one of the original interested parties that

attended the launch, but was already an enthusiast of Land Rovers, pre-war Bentleys and, in the words of Holger Kalvelage, “other jewels of automotive history”. This customer loved the idea of an off-roadster.

A visit to the factory and a test drive was enough to convince him to place an order and the work started. An initial project meeting and briefing established the engine choice, material choice and all the other detailed variations the customer required. This process was ongoing throughout the build cycle with the customer making regular visits to monitor progress.

We were lucky enough to visit the factory when both Alphantier and Aqaba were in residence and available for testing. The customer very kindly gave permission for us to test drive it; naturally the editor pulled rank and selected himself as the first driver of the first production model. Personally, I

have to say that it was probably the most spectacular Land Rover drive I have ever experienced. The vehicle is fantastic!

Climbing into the vehicle one is immediately aware of the stark contrast between the prototype and the first production model. The trim level in Aqaba is exceptional with an abundance of features that are impossible to absorb in one go. It was only afterwards when reviewing pictures that you begin to realise just how many little features have been added, which we missed when actually sitting in the vehicle.

For the owner of Aqaba the attention to detail is fantastic with every trim feature made by hand, either from leather, wood or fabric in spectacular fashion. Whether it is a chrome part, a custom leather seat or a spare fuel tank strap, the design, finish and workmanship is some of the best we have seen.

The owner also wanted the vehicle to be as versatile as possible so specified three different roof options: a hard-top, a soft-top and a Bikini top. There are also two screen options: a full screen and aero screen for both driver and passenger.

Drive or be driven is the motto at Bell Aurens. The Aqaba offers a pure driving experience, with none of the following: traction control, launch control, stability



control, flappy paddle gearbox to name a few. For a driver this is as good as it gets and once you get used to the Longnose, and that sense that you are at the helm of a large yacht, Aqaba is amazing. The sound of it, the feel of it and the wind in your hair make this vehicle fun and exciting to drive. It's the kind of vehicle that turns grown men into big kids and leaves them with a huge grin on their face as they exit the vehicle after a test drive.

Unfortunately the Land Rover World test budget does not run to the use of an airfield as a test track. There were no timed laps, handling tests or smoking tyres during our visit, but in reality both Alphatier and Aqaba were better suited to a trip down the winding roads and the beautiful countryside and villages of Bavaria. Aqaba has a JE Engineering supplied 5.0 V8 under the bonnet where, thanks to shifting the cab backwards, there is plenty of space. There is no engine management system in use which makes it about as simple as possible should you ever need to work on the engine.

One of the key objectives of the design was to make everything as simplistic as possible, enabling the entire vehicle to be serviced anywhere in the world using the most basic of Land Rover tools almost. Having driven

across Africa in a Defender, which can be fixed in almost any African village by a mechanic, I can certainly understand the benefits of that design. As I drove Aqaba through the Bavarian countryside my mind was in Africa and dreaming of the prospect of the ultimate trip – driving a Longnose from South Africa, across Botswana and beyond.

BACK TO REALITY, THE TEST DRIVE . . .

As we had reported on the prototype the positioning of the engine, gearboxes and the passenger compartment offers a well balanced mid-engine concept with great weight distribution between front and rear axles. Both Alphatier and Aqaba are perfectly balanced vehicles.

It is effectively a 109-inch with a 5.0 V8, so moves very quickly and with a manual box it is a driver's dream. While the clutch was not excessively heavy I recalled memories of the early five-speed manual North American Specification (NAS) Discovery gearbox mated to the 3.9 V8. This left me wondering how long the clutch and gear box might last mated to an even bigger 5.0 V8 engine. NAS manual Discoverys were abandoned very

BAVARIA, GERMANY HOME OF THE LONGNOSE

Bavaria, Germany, is home to the famous Neuschwanstein Castle built by 'The Fairytale King', King Ludwig II, and the inspiration behind Disney's Sleeping Beauty castle. It's also home to the city of Munich, the place where Hitler began his rise to become one of the most terrifying dictators in history. Munich is a city that was almost completely destroyed in the Second World War and also the scene of the tragic Manchester United plane crash of 1958. On a happier note, Oktoberfest is legendary and Munich is also home to Olympiapark, the site of the 1972 games. Even today you can skate on the Olympic ice rink or swim in the stunningly large Olympic pool. Bavaria is steeped in history, some of which is sinister but surprisingly it is also the region where probably the most expensive Land Rovers in the world are hand crafted by engineers who might better be described as artists.

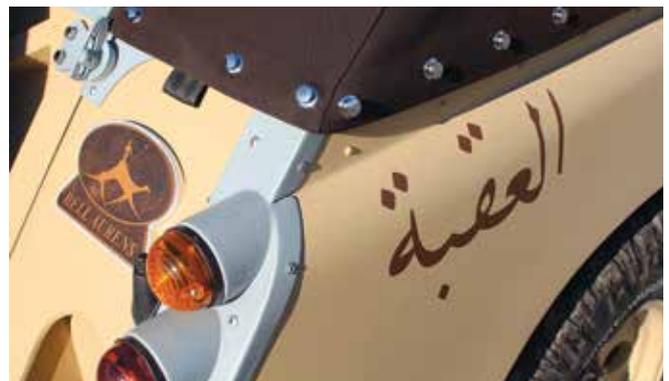


IN MINIATURE

In the April 2011 issue of LRW our feature story showcased the most extraordinary model of a Series II Land Rover built in France. Land Rover enthusiast Laurent Pierson, an engineer and model builder, created a 1/8 scale replica of his own Series II. Kevin Girling read about this on Facebook and went to Vichy, France to see the model up close and to meet the builder.

When researching information for this month's feature we felt there was an interesting connection. Laurent had heard about the Longnose and decided to go and see it for himself. His model of the Series II went as well and was photographed on the bonnet of the Longnose. Maybe if you cannot spend over €350,000 on a Longnose, Laurent can produce a scale model for your enjoyment.

Work on the model Longnose has already started as these pictures illustrate and the project is simply waiting for the first customer. Having seen the quality of the model Series II, the Longnose will be nothing short of stunning!





quickly after many mechanical failures. Since that was many years ago, hopefully the technology has improved since a Longnose with an automatic box does not sound attractive at all. However, for Aqaba Bell Aurens was able to get around the problem by using a specially reinforced clutch to deal with the increased horsepower. One sacrifice made in the interests of safety is the addition of large disc brakes front and rear, which I think can be forgiven given the prospect of trying to stop a V8 109-inch fitted with just drum brakes.

Looking at the finished article one could argue that with Aqaba, Bell Aurens has taken Land Rover unwittingly into the world of the super car, which puts it beyond the reach of most Land Rover enthusiasts. For the lucky ones Bell Aurens can turn dreams into reality.

The desire to own a limited edition vehicle such as the Lamborghini Sesto Elemento (I believe only three out of a projected 20 have been built so far) is one of the key forces behind a purchase decision. Only the truly affluent can afford super cars. With prices starting at around €250,000 per vehicle

DO YOU WANT ONE?

The build cycle is lengthy but if you don't want to wait there is a solution. Buy the prototype for €225,000 plus taxes and trim to your specification. Alphantier is not just a mock up but a fully functional unit. As we all know a Land Rover is like a Meccano set where everything is bolted on. Equally, parts can be unbolted, modified or replaced to fit the need. The 4.6 V8 powered prototype is for sale and is a great base vehicle to start with. Trim, to the same standard as Aqaba, can be added or you can specify something completely different to achieve the style and finish you desire. Contact Kevin@4x4experience.ca for details.

Bell Aurens is clearly looking at a different customer demographic. It is anticipated there will only ever be around 10 built. Admittedly the Longnose is at the lower end of the super car price range and the 0 to 60 time is a long way from that of the Sesto

Elemento, but it is still very much, as Top Gear might describe it, a budget super car. The Aqaba does have one big advantage over the £2million Lamborghini and others in the super car category, apart from a more attractive price – it goes off-road as well! Try that in a super car; most would struggle to get over a kerbstone!

Bell Aurens will generally offer customers a choice of carburettor aspirated Rover V8 engines such as the 3.9, 4.6 or the 5.0. Engines are supplied by world renowned engine specialist JE Engineering and the options are all a far cry from the little four-cylinder block that once occupied the space under the bonnet.

Any regrets for Bell Aurens? None at all. There is, however, one outstanding dream. Sadly for Bell Aurens the UK's Top Gear show, which can entice a greater interest in a vehicle throughout the world, has yet to show any interest in the Longnose. Bell Aurens always thought and hoped that an off-roadster would have appealed to Jeremy Clarkson or 'Hamster' Hammond as he's already a Landie fan, who would test the car and offer a verdict.