CARAWAGON vs DORMOBILE

BORN TO BE WILD

Whether it's lunch in the Lake District, or supper in the Serengeti, there's only one motor caravan base vehicle that's really wild at heart. ***Steve Rowe*** *checks out a couple of classic Land Rover conversions*

Freedom is the word most often echoed when a group of motor caravanners are asked to define the main appeal of this enjoyable lifestyle. Freedom to go where they want and when they want, not tied to any particular location or itinerary.

Well, if that's the case, then a four-wheel drive motor caravan, based on something like the good old Land Rover, must surely be the ultimate form of roving residence?

Certainly, that thought was in the minds of business executives at Martin Walter Ltd and Searle Ltd, in the early 1960s, since both companies introduced Land Rover-based motor caravans at this time.

The former were already famous for their Dormobile brand name, while the latter had developed an ingenious elevating-roof with an unusually solid form of construction.

To celebrate Land Rover's 50th anniversary (1948-1998), what better time to look back at these unusual conversions, which must surely embody the true spirit of motor caravanning adventure.

We were kindly loaned two classic Land Rover conversions by Simon DeBues of the Dormobile Owners' Club, and by John Carroll who edits *Land Rover World* — a sister magazine to MCM.

John bought his 1967 Carawagon a couple of years ago, and is currently in the process of rebuilding it, having already completed the restoration of the elevating roof. This unusual feature sets the Carawagon apart from other campervan conversions of the period, which tended to rely on canvas for their elevating roofs — as with the Dormobile.

The Carawagon's roof employs a principle that was initiated in the 1950s by a company called Calthorpe. Their elevating roof consisted of a flexible aluminium top section with hinged, semi-circular wooden sides. These ran down either side of the van and, when they were raised on their hinges, forced the aluminium roof panel up into a semi-cylindrical shape. In the Carawagon's case, the only difference is that the hinged panels were at the front and back of the vehicle, rather than along the side walls.

The result was a tunnel-like roof, providing standing height along the full length of the vehicle's interior. Our Carawagon's rebuilt roof was fairly easy to raise, but it did require some muscle to unfold the semi-circular wooden end sections.

In comparison, the roof fitted to our 1966 Dormobile was simplicity itself to operate, with a fairly light side-hinged mechanism. It was also much taller than the one fitted to the Carawagon, and provided a lighter interior, thanks to a couple of fairly large built-in windows.

In stormy conditions, however, the Carawagon's solid aluminium top would probably be preferable to the Dormobile's brightly-coloured canvas loft!

Both roofs hid a couple of canvas bunks, running along each side wall, although those in the Dormobile required slightly less effort to assemble.

In the space below, both vehicles also provided space for a couple of adults to sleep. In the Carawagon, a fold-out seat along the nearside was extended to form a large double bed while in the other Land Rover, the patented Dormatic seats offered a variety of possible configurations.

In forward-facing mode, they allowed up to five people to travel in comfort (thanks to a three-person bench seat in the cab), but the front seats could also be flipped-over to face rearwards, forming a dinette around the Dormobile's portable table. At night, both front and rear seats folded flat to form either two single beds or, with the rear seats pushed together, one large double bed.

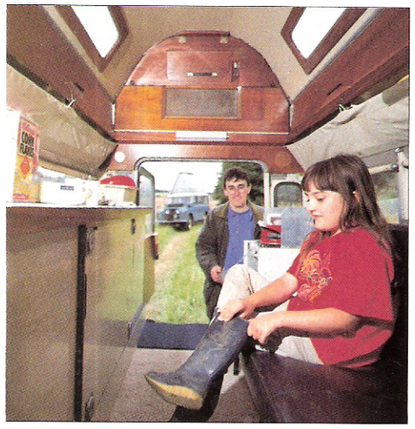
Equipment in these elderly motor caravans was fairly primitive, compared to most modern conversions, but both provided basic cooking facilities, with storage for a Porta-Potti if required.

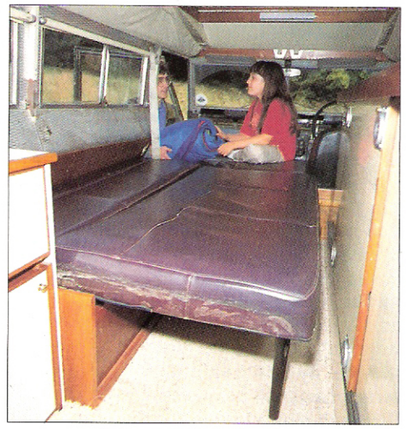
In the Carawagon, the space behind the nearside settee had been utilised to

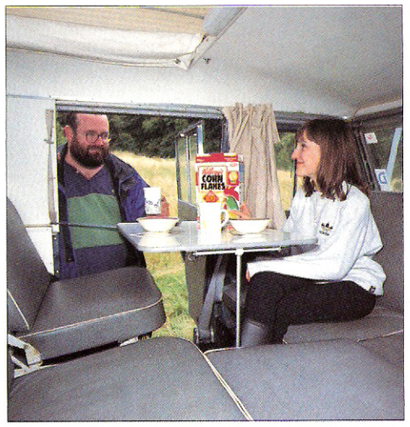
Muddy marvels! Two robust Land Rover conversions come face-to-face — the Carawagon on the left, and the Dormobile on the right

TIME TRAVELLERS

CARAWAGON vs DORMOBILE







Above: inside the Carawagon, with the unusual elevating roof in its raised position

Above centre: the nearside settee pulls out to form a double bed

Above right: Carawagon's basic kitchen facilities include this two-burner hob/grill, and a water pump (no sink) on the offside

Above: the Dormobile's kitchen is slightly better equipped, with cooker and sink units

Above centre: versatile Dormatic seats can be set up to form a dinette

Above left: at night, the seats fold down to form two single beds, which push together to form a double if required

provide a small kitchen unit with a two-burner hob/grill revealed by lifting a hinged flap of work surface, and storage provided in the cupboard below.

On the offside, this cooker unit was matched, somewhat unconventionally, by a stand-alone water tap in the middle of the work surface. There was no sink unit underneath this tap, but instead a portable washing-up bowl had to be placed underneath to hold water. In some ways this wasn''t a bad idea, given the limited confines of the vehicle, but spillage had to be avoided, and a separate waste container was necessary.

Running along the entire offside wall, the work surface under the tap would put many modern conversions to shame, and was matched by ample storage in the cupboards below. There was no fridge, or even a cool box, fitted in the Carawagon, but the basic nature of the conversion suggested the use of a portable cool-box or fridge, which would probably be more useful anyway if a safari or similar trip were planned. I suspect that most people who bought these conversions were real lovers of the outdoors, preferring to eat outside the vehicle, rather than cooped-up inside.

Above: with 4WD engaged, the Carawagon reaches the parts other motor caravans wouldn't even attempt

Left: the timber and aluminium roof is easy to assemble, but requires some muscle power

Only slightly better equipped, the Dormobile also had a nearside kitchen at the rear, but this included a sink unit as well as a two-burner hob/grill. The luxuries didn't stop there, however! A roof locker, storage cupboards and a fold-out seat were enough to excite even the poorest of off-roading chefs.

Kitchen facilities were matched by a fair amount of storage in the offside wardrobe, and the owner, Simon, had fitted a large roof rack to store all those safari essentials.

If anything, the basic nature of these vehicles would probably be desirable if you were contemplating a round-the-world trip or desert crossing. The type of equipment needed for each journey would probably vary enormously and a basic layout leaves space to add any extras that may be necessary. In these situations, chintz curtains and luxury carpet are the last things you want to be wasting valuable space and loading capacity on.

If anything, it's probably the Dormobile that carries the utilitarian theme through to its highest (or lowest?) level.

The furniture is made out of steel panels (Carawagon has the luxury of wood and laminates), and the upholstery is a tough and practical grey vinyl.

As Simon pointed out, the only problem here is that the steel furniture can rust if damp gets into the vehicle but, in fact, it was our Carawagon which had suffered the most interior damage over the years. Its owner, John, had rebuilt some of the furniture, where damp had slowly caused it to disintegrate — he copied the original materials, however, and the refurbished interior is now as-good-as-old!

The biggest shock, for someone used to driving 'on-road' campervans, such as the 1973 VW Westfaila, was the crude nature of these Land Rovers once sat behind the steering wheel. For a start, both vehicles had the 'crash' gearbox which was standard on Land Rovers at the time.

This meant that first and second gears were engaged with a mechanical clunk, which was sharply felt through the gear lever. Partly as a result of this, and the greater wear it probably induced, the gearboxes in these Land Rovers were noisy in lower gears, and not much better in higher ones.

The noise from the transmission, together with the lack of power noise from the engine, meant that speeds above 55mph were not really on the cards.

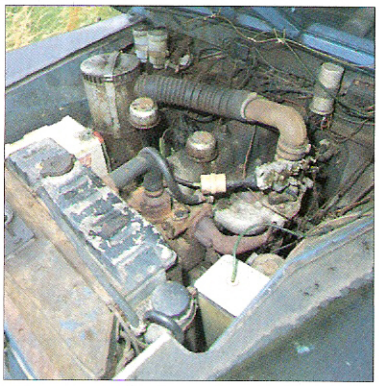
In its favour, the Carawagon was fitted with an overdrive, which reduced the engine noise a little, but 'agricultural' was still the best word to sum up the cab environment.

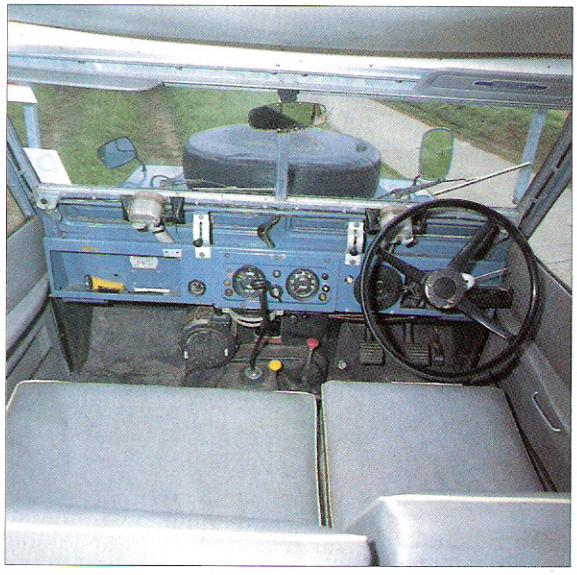
To the uninitiated, the other surprise from the driver's seat was the 'wooly' steering. I suspect that, even in the 1960s, this was seen as fairly imprecise — think of the Mini for instance. It certainly lacked the positive, direct control which we now all expect in our vehicles but, having said that, it wasn't dangerous but just took a little while to get used to.

Braking also left something to be desired, when compared to that of modern vehi-

Above: the Dormobile's owner, Simon DeBues, had this roof rack specially built

Right: the roof is simple to operate, almost doubling the interior space





cles but, at the speeds travelled in these vehicles, this was never going to be dangerous.

I feel as if I am 'betraying the cause', when mentioning all these driving quirks, because everyone involved with these vehicles seems to be a fanatic. They accept all the foibles, and enjoy the back-to-basics driving experience which is on offer.

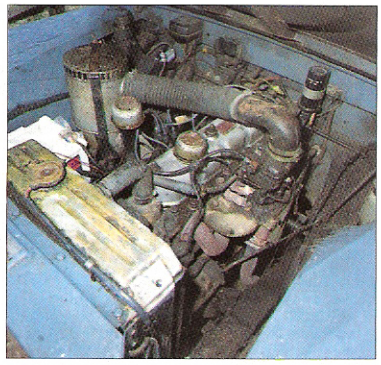
Of course, there's one situation where the tables are turned, and its us two-wheel drive motor caravanners who are literally stuck in the mud. If you've ever tried to drive of a damp pitch on a grassy, sloping camp site, then you'll appreciate the concept of a four-wheel drive motorhome.

We had great fun driving these vehicles up slopes and across terrain that would have left any other motor caravan shaking in its boots!

Four-wheel drive was easily selected using a push-down yellow lever on the floor, and came with the choice of high or low ratios, courtesy of a red push/pull floor-mounted lever. The choice between low and high ratios was only available when the vehicle was in 4WD mode — low ratio helping when steep muddy hills had to be climbed. In two-wheel drive, only the high ratio could be used — speeds are, of course, usually much higher when on the road, so this is entirely sensible.

If I've whetted your appetite, and you're thinking about buying one of these vehicles, it's best to do your homework, since old Land Rovers can be more expensive to maintain than normal van conversions. For instance, although the bodywork is mainly aluminium, the chassis and bulkheads are steel and can rot in a big way. The early petrol engines are fairly robust but, unusually, the diesels tend to be weaker, and are very noisy. Also, the rubber suspension bushes can be expensive to replace if they have worn out.

I'd recommend reading the *Guide to Purchase and DIY Restoration, Land Rover Series I, II & III*, published by Haynes and written by Lindsay Porter. Also, if you do take the plunge, consider joining the relevant club, such as the Dormobile Owners' Club — they have about 50 Land Rover owners currently listed, who will probably be happy to pass on their experiences and advice.



Top left: our Carawagon was fitted with a 2.3-litre four-cylinder petrol engine

Top centre: the Carawagon's cab, with a padded cover shrouding the central storage box between the cab seats

Above centre: the Dormobile's cab has bench-style seating for three people

Above: also fitted with the 2.3-litre petrol engine, this Dormobile lacked an overdrive unit, as fitted to the Carawagon

SPECIFICATIONS

Model: Land Rover Carawagon.

Type: elevating roof.
Berths: 2+2.
Base vehicle: Land Rover Series IIA, long wheelbase.
Engine: 69bhp 2.3-litre water-cooled petrol engine.
Transmission: four-speed manual with overdrive. Selectors for 2WD or 4WD and high/low gear ratio.
Year: 1967.
Standard equipment includes: solid aluminium elevating roof, with twin canvas bunks; nearside kitchen unit with two-burner hob/grill and storage; offside kitchen units with fresh water tank and a manual pump, as well as a large area of work surface with cupboard storage below; removable table with screw-on legs; nearside bench seat which pulls out to form a double bed and has a back rest which can be removed and, with the help of screw-on legs, be turned into an portable bench seat; cab storage box.
Value: £2000-£5000 — depending on the condition of chassis, mechanicals and interior, rather than age.
Production history: Produced from the early 1960s through to 1986.
Converter: Searle Ltd of Sunbury in Middlesex (no longer trading)

Model: Land Rover Dormobile.

Type: elevating roof.
Berths: 2+2.
Base vehicle: Land Rover Series IIA, long wheelbase.
Engine: 69bhp 2.3-litre water-cooled petrol engine.
Transmission: four-speed manual. Selectors for 2WD or 4WD and high/low gear ratio.
Year: 1966.
Standard equipment includes: elevating roof with twin canvas bunks; Dormatic seating for dinette and twin beds; nearside kitchen with two-burner hob/grill and sink, with water pumped from a plastic container; offside wardrobe and fold-out seat; dinette table stored against rear door.
Value: £2500 to £6000 — again, value is dependent on condition and originality rather than age. (American collectors will pay over £10,000 for a mint example)
Production history: Produced from the early 60s to mid 70s, with a handful of special-orders built up until 1984.
Converter: Martin Walter Ltd, Folkestone, Kent (no longer trading).