

**MODIFIED
NINETY**



PHOTOS: LAURENS PARSONS

SIZE DOES MATTER

When it comes to real power, there's simply no substitute for cubes. Jerry Thurston knows that only too well after experiencing this amazing 6.3-litre V8 Ninety

Sitting between the chassis rails of this deceptively innocent-looking Ninety is a 6.3-litre, 380bhp, Chevrolet small block V8. It doesn't just dominate the engine bay, it intimidates it: two mighty banks of cylinders capped with big, black rocker covers proudly display the logo of the tuning company, Edelbrock. Multiple shining exhaust header pipes squirm their way backwards like fat serpents disappearing into the bowels of hell. Bang in the centre is a massive circular air filter charged with feeding huge quantities of scrubbed air to a big four-barrel carburettor in readiness to satisfy eight greedy cylinders. It's not even running but it screams intent. I'm desperate to drive it, but a sane little voice in my head can't help questioning. Is that *really* a good idea?

For the full story of how this Ninety came to be we have to go back to the 1990s and to well-known Land Rover modifier Overfinch, which was then successfully cramming Chevrolet motors into Land Rovers. It knew that the small-block Chevy motor was the one to go for, its size and relative lack of weight making it ideal to pep up a Land Rover without weighing it down too much. Although Overfinch was best known for its Range Rover conversions, it also slotted these 350ci (5.7-litre) units into Ninetys and Defenders to produce the 570 HSE; and into the Discovery 1, which was known as the 570 HSi.

Leaping forward a decade or more to the more recent past, we meet Victor Jones. Victor is a petrolhead who loves V8s and Land Rovers in equal measure: having already combined his dual passions in the form of a Ninety fitted with a well-warmed Rover/TVR V8, it's hardly surprising that when he was offered the chance to buy one of the rare Chevrolet-powered Discos he jumped at it.



Low profile: little hint of the menace that lurks within



Although the Discovery was on the road and perfectly useable, for a perfectionist like Victor its condition left much to be desired. Giving it a full restoration was his first thought but the cost of doing this to the standard he wanted would far outweigh the finished value of the vehicle. That idea was scrapped – but it did make him come up with another. Why not combine the Ninety he already had with the Discovery?

The specialist chosen to make Victor's grand plan a reality was Derek Allfrey in Kirdford, West Sussex. Derek's extensive farm-based premises are crammed with Land Rovers in various states of undress: a Series III here, an early two-door Range Rover there, a Series I halfway through its restoration in the corner... Oh, and mind you don't trip over that V8. It's dark in here.

Derek, complete with overalls and cloth cap, heads a team of proper, get-your-hands-dirty mechanics. In a modern Land Rover dealership you'll find computers and plug-in diagnostic



The A-Team: Derek Allfrey (centre) with Richard Anderson (left) and Jay Batton

chassis and Terrafirma sports suspension, which lowered the ride height by one inch. With the axles in and aware that the Ninety would have massive performance, the brakes were totally rebuilt: vented discs replaced the solid type on the front, and performance-orientated pads were fitted all-round.

Now we come to the reason for all the fuss about this Land Rover. Powering the Ninety is

'The dream machine started at base level with a new chassis and sports suspension that lowered ride height by one inch'

units; here, it's folding machines and sheet-metal rollers. Derek's been in the game for decades and firmly believes that anything is possible – it just takes time.

The build of Victor's dream machine started at absolute base level with a brand-new Richards

a 383ci Chevy small block. Chevrolet built two basic versions of its V8; the 'small block' was used in cars, while the physically much larger 'big block' was used to power its light trucks and the very largest cars in its range. Although both were cast in iron, thin-wall casting

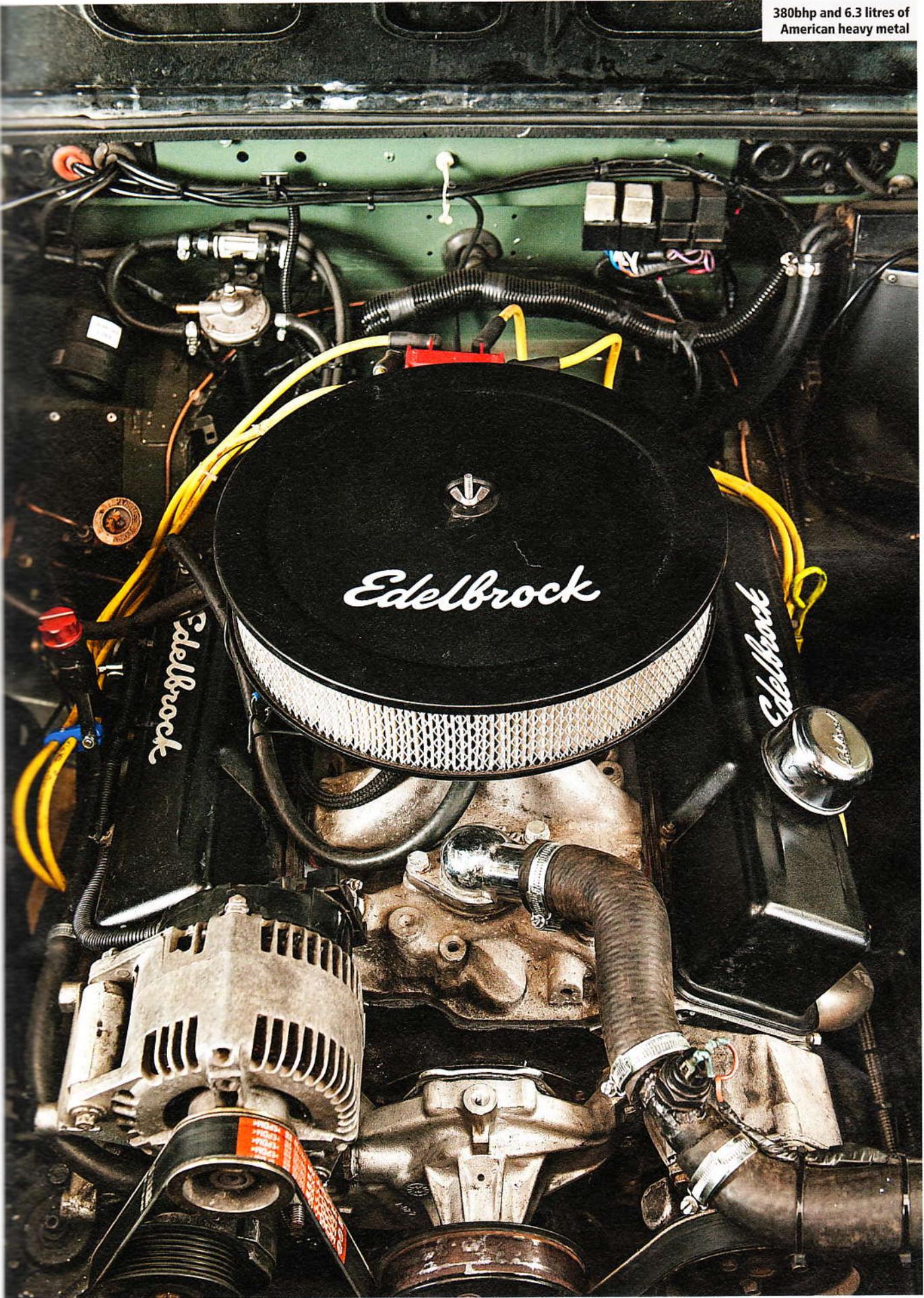
technology meant that the small-block unit was relatively light. The big block was completely the opposite. Embracing its light weight, Chevrolet gradually increased the capacity of the small block in the search for more performance. This meant that, eventually, the largest of the small blocks had slightly more cubic capacity than the smallest of the big blocks.

For decades, tuners have been mixing and matching parts from the different Chevy engines to produce specials. They discovered you could fit the longer-throw crankshaft from one of the big 400ci units to the 350 unit (like the one destined for this Ninety) to produce a hybrid called the 383. This went on to become almost as well-known as any of the standard Chevy units.

Fitting the new crank gave an instant increase in capacity from 5.7 litres to 6.3 but not all engines were suitable – the preferred unit for the conversion was one that had the main bearing caps held down with four bolts rather than two, because the extra strength kept the bigger unit safe as it revved. Provided you had the right base engine, you'd end up with a unit almost as big as the 400 – without the need to track down and spend yet more cash on the (very slightly) larger motor in its four-bolt form.

Victor commissioned American engines specialist Real Steel to deal with rebuilding the Ex-Overfinch lump. There was great excitement

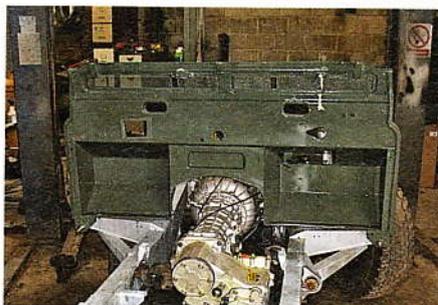
380bhp and 6.3 litres of
American heavy metal



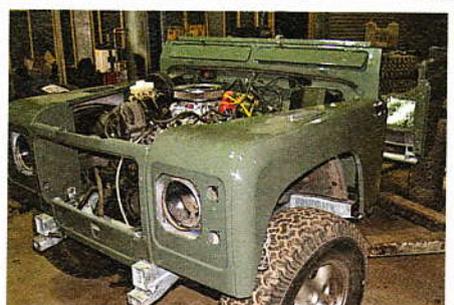
HOW THE DEED WAS DONE



Galvanised chassis gets any project off to a flier



ZF auto transmission ready for (heavy) duty



Keswick Green was a controversial colour choice



On with the freshly painted roof and sides



Bulkhead behind seats removed to fit roll cage



Chevy lump looks like it's always been there



TDCi rear seats add modernity and comfort



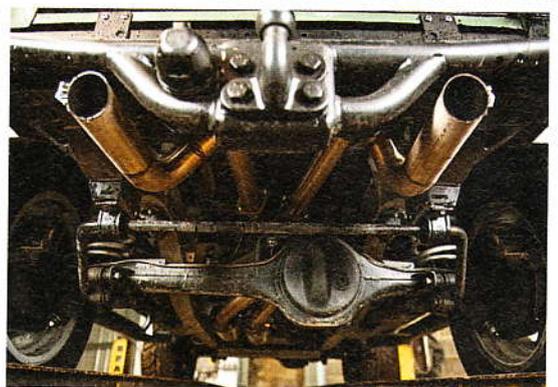
Auto shifter, centre console and Momo wheel are key mods

TECH SPEC

- **Model:** 1985 Ninety station wagon
- **Engine:** 5.7-litre Chevrolet V8 stroked to 6.3 litres; additional Edelbrock performance package
- **Power:** 380bhp
- **Torque:** 450lb ft
- **Exhaust:** Modified 4-into-1 (x2) system. Ceramic-coated manifolds into twin, custom-made 2.5-inch stainless steel secondary pipes

- **Cooling:** Allisport radiator, engine and gearbox oil coolers with braided hoses. Twin Kenlowe fans
- **Transmission:** Stage 2 heavy-duty ZF automatic coupled to late-type transfer box (both by Ashcroft)
- **Differentials:** Limited-slip rear, soon to be joined by a limited-slip front
- **Brakes:** Vented

- front discs, solid rear; performance pads
- **Suspension:** Terrafirma sports, one-inch lower than standard
- **Interior modifications:** TDCi seats, Raptor console, Momo steering wheel, additional instruments
- **Safety:** Safety Devices roll cage (internal/external)
- **Performance:** 0-60mph: 7sec (est); top speed: 120mph (est)



Exhaust pipes emit the kind of threatening bellow you would expect from their two-and-a-half-inch bores



'It already puts out 380bhp and there's no need to rev it past 5000rpm, so it'll last for ever. What's not to like?'

When the mechanics opened up the engine – it's the four-bolt main bearing caps, so they turned it into a 383 'stroker' motor.

The build team decided to get rid of the modern, somewhat simplistic fuel injection and replace it with a good old-fashioned carburettor. The 1000cc (cubic feet per minute) carb came as part of the tuning package from US aftermarket modification company, Edelbrock. A lightweight aluminium inlet manifold feeds the mixture into two cylinder heads, and the valves are now opened by a livelier camshaft through exotic, roller-tipped rockers.

The resulting dynamometer figures reveal the impressive result: 380bhp and 450lb ft. Yes, it could make more if you changed the camshaft and carb, and the bottom end of the motor is more than strong enough to handle it. But why bother? It already puts out 380bhp (80bhp more than its already impressive Overfinch spec) and there's no need to rev it past 5000rpm, so it'll last for ever. What's not to like?

New manual gearboxes could handle the sort of power – and especially torque – that a worked 6.3-litre motor can dish out. Mindful of this, the guys decided on an Ashcroft Stage 2 heavy-duty ZF autobox, coupled to the same supplier's later-type transfer box.

A full repaint inside and out in Keswick Green is the final touch to the exterior preparation,

which includes the TDCi-style bonnet. The Keswick Green caused a little dissent in the ranks. Victor saw it on another Land Rover and wanted it, but the lads at Derek Allfrey tried their best to talk him out of it, suggesting something brighter. Victor stuck to his guns and, when the job was finished, he was rewarded by a 'yes, okay, you were right. It looks great'.

Victor's playing-down of the vehicle is soon to extend to the wheels. The Twisted Supersport 18-inch alloys are currently in the standard silver but he plans to repaint them in silk black.

The interior treatment follows the same understated theme. The bulkhead behind the front seats has been removed to accommodate the Safety Devices roll cage, which has both internal and external hoops. Passengers in the rear benefit from new forward-facing seats, as

'It's the noise I still can't get over. Hearing that V8 giving its all makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end'

fitted in the TDCi Defender. To fit these properly, the rest of the rear quarters had to be brought up to the latest spec, so the inner arches were removed and changed for the later type.

But what this machine is all about is how it drives... and I've been handed the keys. On start-up, the message of intent thumping through the 4-into-1 ceramic exhaust manifold

and 2½-inch-bore exhaust system is loud (very loud) and clear. Click the shifter back into Drive and squeeze the throttle pedal gently. Whoah! That already feels scarily quick, and I'm not even out of the farmyard yet.

After a few miles to acclimatise, it's time to let the big dog out of its kennel. I cruise down the slip road on to a nice, clear stretch of dual carriageway and mash the throttle. The box shifts up two gears in rapid succession and... back off – we're already doing 70mph. The case is well and truly proven: it drives beautifully and goes like hell.

Even a couple of days later, it's the noise I still can't get over. It's fabulous enough from inside, the bass rumble reverberating off walls as you cruise with the window open through town or down country lanes. But standing outside,

bidding farewell to Victor as he accelerates briskly away, the visceral experience of hearing that perfectly tuned V8 giving its all, makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

Now that the Ninety is finished, Victor is handing it over to his wife – who will drive it every day. That's exactly what I would do too, whether I had anywhere to go or not. **LRO**