

OLD SOLDIERS NE



The Bedford MJ traces its lineage back to the start of the Second World War, and its underlying technology comes from the days before The Beatles were formed. Maybe that's why it's still in service today – and why a small army of demobbed examples are still hard at it in the hands of civilian users. It's not just a great truck for enthusiasts, this one – the MJ is a true workhorse whose flexibility, rugged simplicity and phenomenal off-road performance make it as strong an option as it was when it was brand new

WORDS: MIKE TROTT PICTURES: DANNY CROALL

VER DIE...



There are people who go through a lifetime's off-roading without ever hearing about the Bedford MJ. Chances are you'd recognise a Pinzgauer or Land Rover 101, but the MJ? Well, when do you last remember seeing one?

Actually, it was probably more recently than you think. When you spot a 101 or Pinzgauer, you tend to notice it. But the MJ is understated, overlooked... so maybe it's more common than you realise.

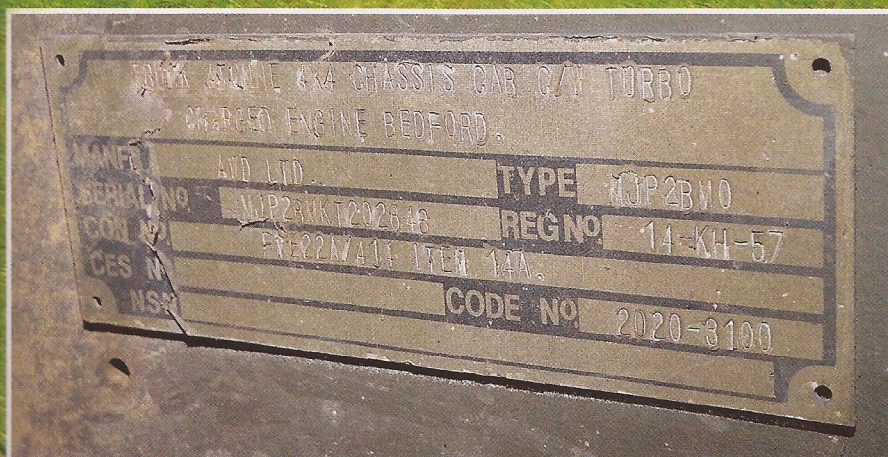
The MJ is like a prop forward in rugby, or France in a World War. It's right in there in the thick of the action, but when the story's told afterwards it never gets top billing. It's a modest and gentle giant which rarely receives the accolades it deserves.

Speaking of wars, the Bedford MJ can trace its lineage right back to WWII. Almost a decade before someone at Rover thought of building a 4x4, then.

In 1939, having declared war, Britain realised it wasn't as well prepared as it had first thought. There was a distinct lack of vehicles the Army could use for getting about on rough terrain, and if Britain was to have the slightest chance of defeating the pesky Germans (who were much better equipped in this area) it would have to do something about the problem.

The Government turned to Vauxhall Motors, the parent company of Bedford at the time, and asked it to come up with a vehicle that could out-perform Germany's ubiquitous SdKfz half-tracks. As a result, the QL was born – a four-wheel-drive, forward control vehicle that went on to serve many different purposes, most notably artillery tractor, petrol tanker and of course troop carrier.

The MJ's predecessor, the QL, was one of the first vehicles to use a forward-control design. Though the MJ was basically a revised version of the MK from the late 1950s, it traces its roots all the way back to the QL's introduction in 1941. The vehicle in the pictures is a late example whose chassis plate (inset) shows that it was made by AWD Ltd, the company that took it over from Bedford for its last five years before production ceased in 1992





The MJ's cabin is about as simple as it gets, with two basic seats and a dashboard that's nothing more than a steel shroud with a few necessary gauges on it. It's plenty spacious, though, so there's no end of opportunities to modify it if you want to create a suitable environment for long-range travel. Above, the transfer case is operated by a pair of mechanical levers, one for high and low range and the other for two and four-wheel drive

Over the years, Bedford developed the same simple design while retaining its classic attributes. Years turned into decades, war turned to cold war and the Army moved on from the QL to the RL and later the MK. Finally, in 1981, the latter was superseded by the MJ.

The MJ's reign was to prove short-lived, as the government of the time went against the Army's wishes by abandoning Bedford in favour of British Leyland when the time came to renew its contract. The company was sold in 1987 to AWD, which continued to produce a modernised version of the vehicle until it too hit trouble and went bust in 1992.

Even in those few years, however, the MJ displayed enough usability to warrant itself as a capable tool even today. So what if it started life as the MK before the Beatles were formed? The technology that worked wonders in the

QL when Glenn Miller was at Number 1 with *Chattanooga Choo Choo* was still right on the money when the last MJ came off the AWD production line to the sound of Oasis.

Bedfords are still being used by the Army even now, and a whole host of demobbed examples are doing every job under the sun in the hands of private owners – who swear by the vehicle's ability.

None more so than Jon Beech, of Jon Beech Recovery. 'We use the MJs for their usability, durability, reliability and simplicity,' he says. 'But most importantly, if you have the spec right, there is no other vehicle on this planet that will out perform the MJ! We regularly use ours to recover or winch 44 tonnes when off-road, a task they do with ease!

'They frequently get overlooked, but in the right hands they're an awesome piece of kit.

Providing you don't overload it and keep the weight down, and make sure you don't fit the road-going army tyres – the bar grip type are much better – then it will pull 44 tonnes out of trouble no problem. There's nothing built yet that will out perform the MJ for hard, tough off-road work!

As for extreme off-road ability, Jon says this is 'the next best thing to a mountain goat.' No small statement given its huge footprint and 9.6-ton weight when fully laden (the Army's calls 'four-tonne' badge refers to payload alone).

Jon has two MJs, 'Kylie' and 'Ringo,' and they've been used for countless rescue missions. They've uprighted lorries, towed out stuck tractors and generally showed off the formidable power the Bedford's 'analogue' technology still carries.

James Robinson also operates two MJs for his Autohome business. These are used for

The big difference between the MJ and the MK that preceded it was the introduction of a 330ci (5.4-litre) straight-six turbo-diesel engine. This only produces 103hp, but a well tuned one will develop an ocean of torque while ticking over at a mere 300rpm. Driving an MJ off-road is a surreal experience – in low first, you can sit with your feet off everything while it crawls up steep, slickly muddy hills so slowly it barely seems to be moving. However much tractability you thought it was possible for a vehicle to achieve, nothing prepares you for it





Above: Two versions of the MJ were produced, with and without a winch. The latter, which fetches a premium now, makes a formidable recovery vehicle. Not that that's the only winch you get on a Bedford – when your tyres are 12.00R20s, you need a manual one to lower the spare from its mount on the chassis

Below: Start-up smoke is nothing to be worried about on a Bedford diesel – it's considered normal by people who know them. If the engine keeps chuffing it out once it's warm, on the other hand, those same experts would tell you not to buy it

off-road recovery and collecting stolen vehicles from remote locations. 'We have found over the years that no other vehicle matches the MJ,' he says. 'They are simple to maintain and parts are readily available.' No small matter, that.

The Bedford MK, which preceded the MJ, was fitted with a 5.4-litre multi-fuel engine that produced 98hp. With the introduction of the more powerful diesel engine in 1981, this time a 5.4-litre turbocharged six-pot slugging out 103hp, the MJ name was born. The engine in the MJ was mated to a standard four-speed transmission and was able to get the beast up to a respectable 55mph.

By this stage, you might be thinking a Bedford MJ on your drive sounds like a good idea. Just imagine the look on your neighbour's face as you rumble into the street as if the apocalypse has just been announced, sat there in your

go-anywhere up-yours ex-military goliath... Hell, they'd think you're their new leader.

They certainly would if you decided to use the roof hatch to its full potential, by mounting a machine gun and giving their garden gnomes a taste of heat. A subtle wake-up for suburbia if ever there was one. Some specialist companies will even make the cab on your MJ mine-proof, which should deter anyone with a pitchfork in their grasp.

Often, though, with these kind of visions, there is a drawback. The reality is that if you were to do such a thing, you probably couldn't get your MJ down the street without some jumped-up loser moaning that you were an inch too close to the wing mirror on his tragic Far-Eastern crumbox. You could probably just winch it out the way, though. Or drive over the top of it.

But seriously, are there any pitfalls? Should you really think about buying an MJ... and if you did, what would it be like to live with?

Well, first you may wish to know if they're mechanically sound. The MJ is certainly a simple beast, that's for sure. But is there anything you should look out for?

'All Bedford engines smoke when cold,' says James Robinson. 'But they should clear after a short while. Best to avoid if it doesn't clear fairly quickly. Another issue can be cab rot, mainly in the floor and around the roof gutter, though at present there are plenty of good cabs about. Watch out for excessive noise from the transmission as well, or difficulty engaging both low and high ratios using the transfer box.'

Stuart Garner of Armourgeddon is yet another owner of not one but two Bedford MJs. One of them is the vehicle in our photos; it serves at





One look at the spring packs bolted to the top of the MJ's axles will tell you everything you need to know about ride quality. It's designed to carry four tonnes, let's not forget. The good news is that once you put a bit of weight in it, the ruggedness starts to settle down: better still, possibly, conversions are available to downgrade the truck's gross weight to 7.5 tonnes, allowing it to be driven on a standard licence

Armourededdon's tank paintballing and military vehicle driving site near Husbands Bosworth in South Leicestershire.

'You do have to watch for cab rot,' he agrees, 'around the doors, roof and wheelarches. But generally they are pretty bulletproof. They are easy to get at, apart from the starter motor – but in the seven years we've been running ours, we've only had one starter motor problem and that's it.

'They are generally very reliable and you can get lots of bits for them. I can't really say anything bad about them – they are just a brilliant wagon.'

All good, then. Size aside, is there anything at all to put you off buying an Bedford? 'The MJs are picking up in price at the moment,' says Stuart. 'The cheapest we bought one for was around £2000, but now you're looking at around

£5000 for a good one.' Still not a fortune when you consider what you're getting.

David Selway knows the MJ better than most, having previously done a monstrous trek from the UK to Cape Town with his partner Tisha in their Big Orange Bedford (called 'Bob,' obviously). 'The Bedford MJ is a simple beast with little to go wrong,' he explains. 'Give it clean fuel, clean oil and clean air, and it will run forever. There is no on-board computer, no motherboard and no microchips. No power steering either, come to that!

'Listen to your Bedford. Your Bedford will tell you if something is amiss. Whether your ears and brain are tuned in might be another matter. However if you hear a "funny noise," stop awhile and check it out. More often than not it will be something simple that can be fixed in minutes.

'Look after your Bedford and it will look after you. Treat it with respect! Check the oil, water, air and tyres every day. Walk round with the engine running, listen for odd noises and look for escaping oil, fuel or air. It should be obvious when something is not quite right; just use your eyes and common sense.

'If the engine timing is well set up it will tick over very slowly at about 300rpm. The noise at tick over is unique – a sort of hollow "plonk, plonk, plonk." Very often someone with a "mechanical ear" will listen and say what sweet music it is!

'You tend to cruise at around 45mph in a Bedford MJ. At 50mph, it just takes that much more concentration to keep in a straight line that the extra 5mph just isn't worth the effort. Also, our truck had a problem with steering shake that we just couldn't solve. It seems a lot of MJs have this problem. At around 50mph the steering wheel would begin to vibrate and then seriously shake – like you get in a car with unbalanced wheels.

'It would be nice to go a bit faster and get to your destination a little bit sooner, and to this end you might consider changing the standard four-speed gearbox for the five-speed. But there is no point if you can't cure the steering shake anyway. Just slow down to 45mph and the problem goes away.

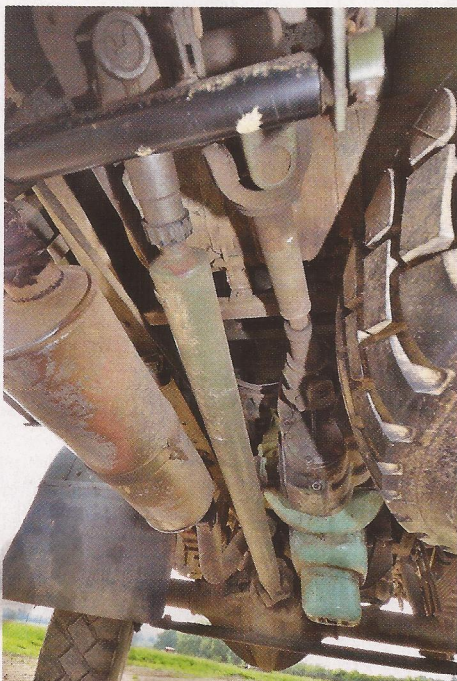
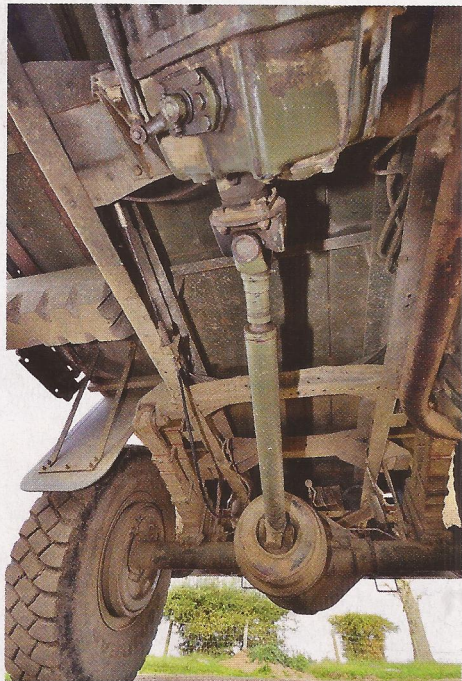
'The ride is hard. You just have to take a look at the massive leaf springs to see why. However the ride is totally transformed when the vehicle has some load on board. But try not to hit any speed ramps too fast!

'Fuel consumption varies massively. On smooth tarmac roads across the desert, we achieved 19mpg – better than a lot of the older Range Rovers and Land Cruisers. Off-road in sand, however, our consumption would generally be about 10mpg and in seriously deep sand we estimated we were doing about 5mpg.'

If you buy an MJ now, there's almost no end to the duties it might have performed in its Army days. Dumper truck, petrol tanker, roadway laying vehicle, recovery vehicle, light reconnaissance drone carrier, signals vehicle, artillery control centre, bridging truck... it's a true go-anywhere, do-anything hero.

Below left: Behind the MJ's 5.4-litre diesel engine, a four-speed manual box turns a prop running back to a remote transfer case. This is seen here alongside the prop running forward to the front diff

Below right: This is the rear prop, viewed from beneath the transfer case. The linkage seen on the underside of the case illustrates the kind of technology the MJ is made of, which in turn is why it's still so dependable after all these years





Above left: MJ's offer a whole new level of scope when it comes to modding. David Selway turned his into a home on wheels for overland expeditions. The camper unit on the back is a thing of complete wonder – more about the truck, and its travels, next month



Above right: Jon Beech has two MJ's which he uses for heavy recovery work, and he reckons there's nothing else in the world that compares. Pulling a 44-ton dead weight off road? Not a problem...

In standard form, the MJ has drop-down sides and tailgate, and the canvas cover and bows were often removed to make room for containers. On some variants, a hydraulic crane was fitted – making use of the same virtues that make it so popular with recovery services today.

More than two decades after production ceased, you'll still see Army MJ's on Salisbury Plain. Look further afield and you'll see them in service across Africa, too, as well as Turkey, Belgium, Bangladesh and the UAE.

Make no mistake, this is an all-rounder of the highest order. It's a hero of a truck that could carry up to 20 fully equipped heroes of the soldier kind – or you could throw the detachable

seats away and shove a bed in there... maybe a kitchen as well... and perhaps a bathroom?

It's certainly been done, as you'll see in next month's issue when we reveal more about David and Tisha's travels through Africa aboard Bob.

It's funny how times change, though. Back when Bedford's military trucks were first making a name for themselves, they were ahead of their time in terms of the driver being positioned above the engine, foreshadowing the design now seen on most heavy goods vehicles across the UK and Europe. Bedford prospered for decades by doing the simple things well – without the likes of the MJ, many military tasks and operations would have proved impossible.

So if a Bedford MJ decides to invade a street near you, as it ticks by you with its ominous presence, take a moment to admire its glory. Imagine the adventures, trials and tribulations of each MJ – and indeed the lives of all those servicemen who have operated, ridden in and survived aboard these epic, timeless and masterful examples of great British engineering.

You can see the AWD-built Bedford MJ in our pictures at Armourgeddon, near Market Harborough in Leicestershire, whose wide range of experiences include military vehicle driving and tank paintball battles. For more info, visit www.armourgeddon.co.uk.

