

The origins of the SUV



FIFTY YEARS AGO, farmers, soldiers, hunters and the odd explorer drove four-wheel drives. Four-wheel drives were listed in most car guides as commercial vehicles, along with pickup trucks and goods vans. The sight of a four-wheel drive on main street simply meant that a farmer had come to town for the day.



Three events changed all that.



In 1963, Jeep produced a vehicle called the *Wagoneer*. It looked like a family station wagon with fake wooden panelling. However, the Wagoneer shared most of its DNA with the Jeep Gladiator pickup truck. As such, four-wheel drive versions of the Wagoneer were both tough and capable offroad.

A few people have claimed that the Wagoneer was the first modern SUV, although none of these people appear to have actually driven one: the ride is rattly, boneshakingly hard and the handling crudely boat-like.

The Wagoneer was also rather poorly built. However, the Wagoneer was gradually improved and lasted, amazingly, until 1991.





The 1970 *Range Rover* is a more likely candidate for the first modern SUV. It was designed from scratch, as a vehicle for Britain's upper classes. Range Rover owners could effortlessly tow their horse floats up muddy roads while they rode up front in semi-luxury. When Range Rover owners returned to their mansions, their servants could clean out the interior with a hose (carpets weren't fitted to early models).

And the Range Rover wasn't just a pretty face; it was class-leading when it came to the rugged off-road stuff.

Although the Range Rover was sold as a luxury vehicle, 'luxury' was probably stretching things a bit. While the interior was very comfortable, it also full of plastics that seem crude these days.

Also, while the Range Rover's road manners were very good by the standards of the day, they wouldn't please the driver of a modern SUV.





In 1960s America, the cities were black with smog. Thanks to dirt-cheap petrol, the average American car burned fuel at an horrific rate, before expelling a toxic cloud of waste products out its exhaust.

In terms of efficiency, the average American car engine hadn't advanced much since the 1950s.

In 1973, the owner of a new, 2400kg Lincoln Continental, complained that his car was using 66.7 litres of fuel per 100 kilometres (US3.5 miles per gallon).

America's drinking habit meant that it soon burned through its own domestic oil supplies. Without many people noticing, America quietly switched from burning its own oil, to buying oil at bargain prices from friendly Middle Eastern governments.



Those Middle Eastern governments that weren't friendly were often simply overthrown.

One of America's biggest friends in the Middle East was Israel.

In 1973, a coalition of Arab states invaded Israel to regain lands lost to Israel during a previous war in 1967. With American help, Israel won both conflicts.

The Arab states were outraged by America taking Israel's side in the 1973 war, and retaliated by refusing to supply America with oil. This act kicked off a global oil crisis, with America at the epicentre. Oil prices quadrupled overnight. America's bloated and inefficient cars suddenly became unsaleable.



In a desperate response to the fuel crisis, the American government passed the *Corporate Average Fuel Economy* (CAFE) regulations. CAFE set clear standards for the fuel economy of passenger vehicles.

However, these regulations didn't apply to pickup trucks, and vehicles based on pickup trucks. Therefore, it didn't take long for car manufacturers to start evading the regulations by selling SUVs as work vehicles.

This meant that if you bought an SUV, your vehicle didn't have to meet any standards. This, coupled with tax breaks for commercial vehicles, paved the way for an explosion of American SUVs.





The luxury SUV was a child of economic deregulation. In 1979, Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister of Great Britain. In 1981, Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States.

Both politicians heavily deregulated their economies, especially the banking industries and stockmarkets. This led to a tsunami of economic growth, followed by a severe economic crash.

In the meantime, the stockmarkets went crazy, turning brokers into millionaires overnight, resulting in one of the biggest splurges in luxury items in history. Aside from mansions, top of the list of luxury items was motor vehicles.





During the 1970s, high fuel prices and anti-materialist hippie values had meant that many young people drove small, economical vehicles.

In the 1970s, being cool meant being anti-materialist, experimental, self-absorbed and environmentally caring.

This was about to change.

In the 1980s, being cool meant being powerful, and the biggest power came from having the most money.

And, the next best thing to sex and money is to fantasize about it: people who lived in characterless suburbs and worked in characterless offices fantasized about being rich, bold and powerful.

And the American car industry was waiting to pounce on office workers with dreams of power.



As detailed in the book: *High & Mighty*, researchers discovered that four-wheel drives:

“offered the promise of unfettered freedom to drive anywhere during vacations. These customers might have given up their childhood dreams of becoming firefighters, police officers or superheroes, and had instead become parents with desk jobs and oversized mortgages. But they told Ford researchers that [offroaders] made them feel like they were still carefree, adventurous spirits who could drop everything and head for the great outdoors at a moment’s notice if they really wanted to do so...”



”These buyers knew that most people going to national parks and other wilderness areas had no need for four-wheel drive, and that park rangers discouraged offroad driving in most places anyway. The buyers knew perfectly well that they probably had only two or three weeks of vacation a year, and would spend all but a week of it visiting relatives. None of that mattered to buyers...What counted was the fantasy of what they might want to do during a vacation, and the ability to show their friends and other motorists that they really were the bold people that they liked to see themselves as.”





Jeep never expected the Cherokee to become a best-selling SUV.

The fuel crisis of the late 1970s was over by the early 1980s, but America's car manufacturers had largely stopped building big gas-guzzlers because no one had wanted them a couple of years earlier, when the price of petrol was still very high.

As fuel prices dropped again, there were plenty of buyers for mid-sized American station wagons but few sellers.

Cautiously, Jeep developed a model that would appeal to middle-class customers who lived in cities. Thanks to an assertive driving position, a passably car-like interior, and features like power steering, the Jeep Cherokee was an immediate hit.





Ford soon followed with the Explorer (above), which was first proposed by Range Rover owner Edsel Ford II, but initially rejected as having too limited potential.

After the Cherokee's wildfire success, however, Ford rushed the pickup-truck-based Explorer to the market.

Unrestrained by the safety and fuel regulations governing passenger vehicles, the Explorer was both cheap to build and extremely profitable.

And extremely unsafe. Thanks to its pickup truck origins, the Explorer was heavy. Worse, Ford's accountants ensured that the Explorer was fitted with the cheapest tyres.

Explorer owners, high on a sense of invulnerability, would roar along, often without wearing seatbelts. The cheap tyres would gradually heat up, then blow, after which the Explorer would roll over, often mashing the occupants in the process.





But American culture is eternally optimistic.

After Jeep lost a longstanding contract with the US army in the early 1980s, Jeep's management were looking around for new customers, but there were doubts that the public would buy such a vehicle in sufficient numbers to make full scale civilian production worthwhile. However, the marketing whizzkids did a deal with jean-maker Wrangler, the new Jeep Wrangler became trendy, and the rest, as they say, is history.

With the teenagers of America buying (and often rolling) Wranglers in huge numbers, there was little incentive to improve the vehicle, so the Wrangler was left largely untouched till the late 1990s and has remained in its own evolutionary blind alley to this day.





Back in England, despite having invented the Range Rover, Land Rover had no intention of making it available to the masses. The masses had to make do with the basic Land Rover, with origins dating back to the end of World War II.

This was a mistake.

As the stock market began to boom in the 1980s, Mitsubishi put out the Pajero/Shogun, which was an instant success.



The Pajero could go anywhere a Land Rover could go, but in relative comfort, and with a level of reliability that Land Rover owners could only dream of.

Suddenly Land Rover realised that its traditional market was about to disappear under a flood of cheaper and often better Japanese models. So, in 1989, Land Rover fought back with the release of the Land Rover Discovery.



The Discovery was an instant hit with the British army, explorers and farmers alike, but it also made a big impact on the brash young men and women of the 1980s stock market boom, known at the time as *yuppies* (Young Urban Professionals).’



In London, Paris and New York, Land Rover vehicles often became the transport of choice for the very rich.



During the week the husband would drive his Porsche to work while the wife dropped the kids off at the private school in the Land Rover or Range Rover; these vehicles were perceived to be an upmarket, practical and a safe way to move families around at a time when many popular cars were death-traps.

As SUVs gained a largely undeserved reputation for safety, their use spread throughout the Western world, until they became the fastest growing segment in virtually all sections of the luxury car market.





The Germans came late, but they aimed far higher up the food chain with the BMW X5 (above) and Mercedes M-Class (below).



The original urban four-wheel drives were largely the domain of the rich, and the object of quite a bit of envy and amusement – after all, the nearest most SUVs came to going offroad was when they were parked on the pavement outside the private school, waiting for the owners' spoiled kids to saunter out.



But the ruling ideas of any age are the ideas of the ruling class. In other words, as soon as the rich people had an SUV, everyone had to have an SUV.



Now every major passenger vehicle manufacturer is earning a significant percentage of its total income selling offroad or pseudo-offroad vehicles that are all clones of one or more of the models above. But designing a new model costs money and takes time, so carmakers, rushing to cash in on the offroad lunacy, have simply raised the suspension of ordinary passenger cars like the Honda Civic, added crude four-wheel drive and re-issued them as pseudo-offroaders (in this case, the CRV, above).



The common term for this type of vehicle is 'softroader', because it's simply not designed for real offroad use. Many lack even four-wheel drive. But every sector of the passenger car market has been transformed by the SUV, even the minicar sector, with makers like Daihatsu issuing tiny passenger cars in offroad clothes trying to gain credibility through a vague resemblance to more upmarket models.



The typically rugged, genuine four-wheel drive is now almost a dying breed, replaced by a sea of vehicles aimed at everybody from the very rich to the very poor, but having in common that they subtly or unsubtly appeal to the lust for power within us all.



The granddaddy of them all was the Hummer H1, three tonnes of pseudo-military vehicle, which appeals, according to one of Hummer's salesmen, as: "a vehicle for people who like to make a statement."



The Hummer's basic statement is "fuck you". Hummer's own market research showed that the typical Hummer buyer was vain, insecure, self-centred and had little concern for the consequences of his or her actions on others.

Hummer sales collapsed in the aftermath of the 2008 financial meltdown and never recovered. The last Hummer was built on May 24, 2010.



All attempts to sell the brand failed, so it was closed down.

The Hummer was a rare failure in the world of SUVs. SUVs are now the largest single sector in the motoring world in many countries, replacing everything from luxury limousines to family wagons. But you can't just drive *any* SUV; you have to drive the *right* one.

In this world of economic winners and losers, your choice of vehicle is like a sign above your head, telling everyone where you fit in the financial food chain.

Don't blame the car companies; in a world run by bankers, what you look like is more important than what you really are. So, carmakers are simply giving customers what they want. What the customers want is to feel good about themselves. And it works, sometimes, at least until these customers, or their SUVs, grow old •

