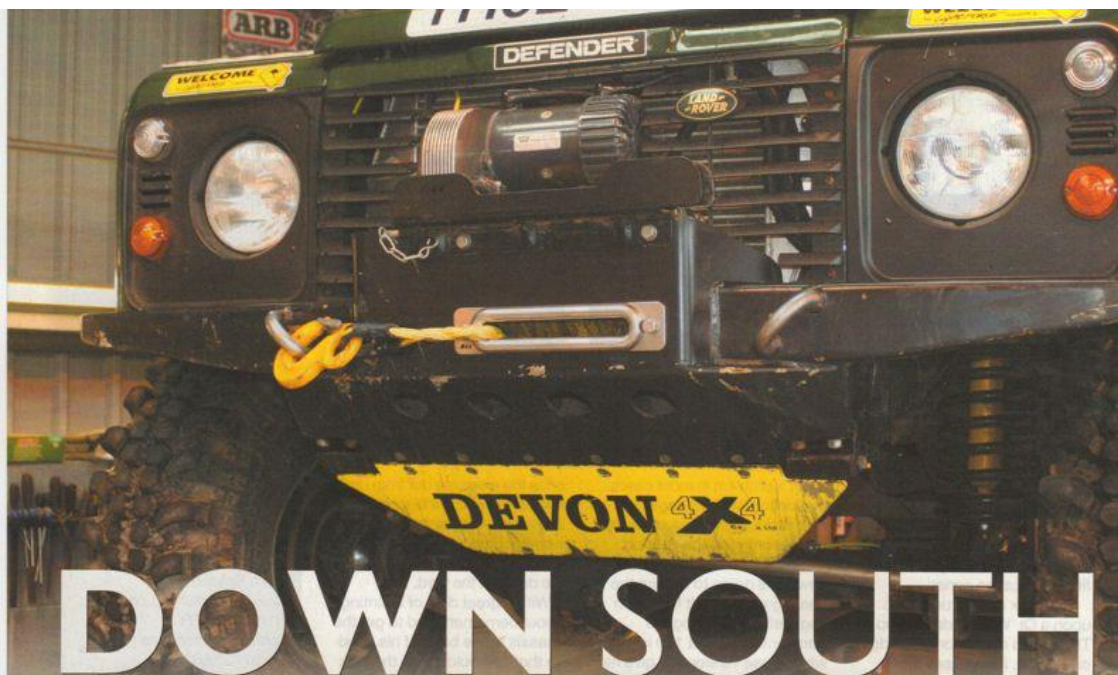




DOWN SOUTH

Charlie Thorn checks out three of the many 4x4 companies based in the South West

DEVON 4x4 Interview with Simon Buck

Tell me something about your early years in your own words. I married Liz, my wife, 22 years ago. Then, about 16 years ago, after trying all sorts of things, I came back to the motor trade. We were buying and selling cars but I drifted into more and more 4x4s, and eventually I only dealt in four-wheel-drive cars. It was important to us that I did them up to sell properly and we developed a good reputation for being a fair trader.

I sold my first car when I was 16 and in over 30 years of being in the motor trade I have never been taken to court, and I've never had a summons or anything like it, and I have never even had a visit from Trading Standards. They only call to check our fuel pumps in the petrol station outside that we also run, and I am quite proud of that.

So when did you and Liz move into these premises here on the A361.

We came here 11 years ago. We were still selling only 4x4s and Paul joined me here as an apprentice ten years ago and Martin, my service manager, has been here nine years. Mathew's been with me working and crewing for me eight years. I am proud that most of our staff are long termers. In those early days

all those workshops were used for was to maintain and prepare sales vehicles.

So when did you get serious and start competing?

I used to read the off-road magazines – all of them, cover to cover – and, in 1998, I eventually did my first organised event. At the time I was mucking about off-roading with North Devon Off-Road Club. The first real serious event I did was the Shamrock Safari in Ireland, which was awesome, with my pal Nobby Clark who was an ex-Para and a super guy. I later did the Rain Forest Challenge with him, but that's another story.

We turned up at the start at around midnight in my white 90. It had a steering guard and a particularly dodgy snorkel, plus one of Dave Wilkinson's Southdown winch bumpers I had picked up secondhand with an XD 9000i winch.

There were competitors with roll cages, rear winches, GPS – I looked around and said to Nobby "do you think we should slide off home boy, have we bitten off more than we can chew here?" He said "no, calm down mate we'll be all right".

We managed to drive and do everything all those other guys did with their diff locks and all

their other gear. So that was it, the bug had really bitten us then.

After that I did the Bulldog Challenge in a green 90 with Mathew crewing. I had cut triangular shaped windows in the sides of our hardtop so that I could look back over my shoulder. Well, there was a picture of that car in *LRM* and this is important in the history of our business thanks to your magazine funnily enough.

I had a phone call from a guy in London and he asked if I could supply him with a set of these windows. So I said "no problem I'll send you up some". He then said "actually I would really like you to fit them for me". Well I said "I'm sorry but we don't do outside work".

But he said he didn't mind paying however much it would be, so I eventually agreed to do it for him. He came down from London to my very embarrassing workshops as they were then, driving a six month old Anniversary Commercial Tdi. So here I stood with my hands shaking as I cut big holes in the side of this thing.

I asked him out of curiosity "how did you here about us?" and he told me he had seen a picture of us in *LRM* and had got a magnifying glass and took our number off the rear wheel cover. Can you believe it?

So Liz and I started thinking about selling and stocking off-road gear. About six months later a guy called Tony Finch turned up who worked for Internet Powerdrive as it was called then, and he asked me if I would be interested in selling Warn winches for the West Country.

So we started selling and fitting Warn winches, and we said to ourselves, if we are selling winches we might as well make and sell the bumpers and the ropes and shackles and the diff guards and the tank guards and snorkels and on and on it went until we arrived at where we are here today.

That is really how the mail order side of our business took off. We now make our own range of D44 products in-house. We export to 21 countries and we are at present the largest Warn dealer in the country. We are the UK importer for Simex tyres and the largest ARB and Old Man Emu dealer in the UK. We are one of the largest outlets for GKN overdrives.

Our product range here is generally driven by our own requirements when competing in our own Land Rovers. What I don't want is for anyone to come back and say "you sold me this and it doesn't work". Our aim here is to try to attain zero warranty work.