

Hendricks Churchill

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Why Is a Well-Known Designer Suddenly Selling Used Cars?

Rafe Churchill, who has won design awards and is on Elle Decor's A List, doesn't need a side hustle. But an obsession with vintage Land Rovers has been hard to shake.

By Norman Vanamee

Photographs By Rafe Churchill, Theo Coulombe, courtesy of Ellsworth Classics

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Last year I impulsively placed an order for a brown-over-brown Audi Q7. About two months later I came to my senses. I canceled the order and bought 12 vintage Land Rovers.”

So reads an Instagram caption Rafe Churchill posted soon after he launched a used car business, Ellsworth Classics, from his house in Sharon, Connecticut, in 2022. Churchill had sold

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some real estate and “was in the unusual spot of having extra cash on hand.” His first impulse was to buy himself a new car (the brown Audi). His second was more complicated.

Ellsworth Classics features just one brand of used vehicle, but not (usually) the marque’s most expensive (i.e., potentially profitable) collector models. Instead it offers reasonably priced Land Rovers and Range Rovers manufactured between the late 1970s and the early 2000s. Churchill buys them one at a time from owners all across the country. He has a mechanic restore the vehicles to good working order and then gives them to a detail guy to clean—but with instructions “not to ruin the patina.”



To better understand this business venture, it helps to look at Churchill’s other occupation. He is one half of the architecture and interior design firm Hendricks Churchill, which he founded with his wife, the interior designer Heide Hendricks. Their work appears regularly in top design magazines, and they have been included on *Elle Decor*’s coveted “A List” for two years running. The firm takes on all sorts of projects, from new builds to restorations, but many of Hendricks Churchill’s standout commissions have involved exquisitely built older structures that they bring back to life in ways that simultaneously preserve and reimagine existing designs. Churchill, who was also a builder until he gave that up a few years ago to focus on home design, has a particular appreciation for well-made old things. “I’m the third generation in my family to work in the trades,” he said during a recent phone call. “I can spot good construction.”

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Land Rover began importing cars to the U.S. in earnest in the '80s. Its Range Rovers were early hits; the Discovery came later and lured a new generation of buyers. These were well-built and luxurious SUVs that became favorites with people with large country houses and/or stables. "I saw them around when I was growing up in Woodbury, Connecticut, but I didn't get to sit in one until I was a teenager working on a job."

Churchill bought his first Land Rover in 2009 and has owned them on and off for years. "I used to sell them after they got to 120,000 miles because they have a reputation—underserved, I would say—of being unreliable. But I was wrong. You just have to start taking care of them then." He isn't the only one obsessed with old Land Rovers. A number of restoration and rebuild companies have sprung up in recent years that take old models, usually Defenders, and install new aftermarket engines, suspensions, and high-tech electronics—projects that can cost in the six figures.

That corner of the business holds little interest for Churchill. "I was out in Montauk for a week or so this summer, and every other car was a rebuilt Land Rover," he said. "I walked up to one guy to compliment his Defender, and all he wanted to do was list for me everything they ripped out of it and replaced with something new. I mean, what's the point?"

Sometimes Churchill is forced to do some restoration, but he draws the line at any kind of modernizing. "I just had to replace the leather upholstery on a Range Rover, and I'm okay with it," he said. "But for me there's a parallel with my other work. I would never buy a historic house and gut it beyond recognition. Instead I would try to honor the house." This is an idea Churchill finds himself repeating often—with his mechanic, his detailer, and sometimes even his wife. "We were driving in a Range Rover and I pointed to its old clock, and I was like, 'I love this clock. I love it!' And Heide replied, 'Is that really necessary for you to say?'"

On a breezy day last April, Churchill held a sales event behind his and Hendricks's beautifully restored farmhouse and barn in Sharon. Around eight Ellsworth Classics vehicles, including a hunter green Range Rover with a rooftop tent, were set up in a field out back. There was a firepit where people grilled handmade hot dogs the couple had bought at a local butcher. A small crowd, many of whom arrived in Land Rovers, were darting among the impeccably preserved Rovers and asking Churchill about each one's history. "You definitely have to enjoy talking to be in this business," Churchill said. "Sometimes it's just listening to people tell stories about the Range Rover they grew up with."

Pretty soon visitors began cornering Churchill to discuss prices. One man asked if he could take an almost flawless diesel 1981 Series III for a test drive. A pained look crossed Churchill's face as he drove off. "I really think he's going to buy it," he said. "I mean, that's great, but I'm going to miss it."