

THE HOME GUARD'S ARMOUR'D VEHICLES

On 14 May 1940, Anthony Eden made his immortal broadcast that led to the formation of the Local Defence Volunteers, and, ultimately, the Home Guard. With time came proper rifles, ammunition, and uniforms, but initially improvisation had been the watchword – and nowhere was this more so, reveals **Alexander Nicol**, than in terms of transport and armoured fighting vehicles.



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Defending Britain in 1940

NCESSITY, AS we all know, is the mother of invention, and with the prospect of an imminent invasion the urgent need for the creation of an effective volunteer fighting force to help defend Britain in 1940 was indeed a necessity. The key element was that of an 'effective' fighting force, for assembling large bodies of men, however willing and enthusiastic they may be, would mean little if they were not adequately armed and equipped. But with so much of the British Army's equipment having been left behind on the beaches of Dunkirk, whatever military stocks remained in the UK were immediately allocated to the regular troops. This left little for the Local Defence Volunteers (renamed the Home Guard later in 1940).



The 1930s had seen the development of motorised military vehicles, and no army could be considered 'modern' without armoured fighting vehicles. The men of the Home Guard, despite popular depictions and the subsequent impression of Corporal Jones' armoured van from the BBC

television series *Dad's Army*, generally saw themselves as serious soldiers and set about providing themselves with armoured fighting vehicles.

A PRESENTATION ARMOURD CAR

In many instances, the first hurdle to be overcome by a Home Guard unit in any plans to acquire an armoured car was of obtaining the necessary funds. This was the reason why, at the beginning of August 1940, the Mayor of Barnstaple in Devon, Charles F. Dart, launched an appeal to raise the sum of £300 to 'provide a Presentation Armoured Car for the Home Guard operating in a wide area in and around his Borough'. >>

LEFT: Another ordinary saloon that has been adapted for use as an armoured car, again in the Tickler's jam factory, for the Maidenhead Home Guard.

BELOW: A third vehicle was donated to the 7th (Stroud) Battalion Gloucestershire Home Guard after the conversion of the other two, and transformed into an ambulance.



MAIN PICTURE: A pair of typical improvised Home Guard armoured cars, both of which were operated by the men of the 7th (Stroud) Battalion Gloucestershire Home Guard. This unit was fortunate in having a number of wealthy beneficiaries, with two local residents donating the vehicles, in both cases the popular Morris Cowley, that were used as the basis for the armoured cars, named *The Eagle* and *Daniel*. Using sheet steel of the approved thickness a local engineering firm then replaced the original bodywork with armoured shells. A number of other local tradesmen, as well as skilled members of the battalion, also played their part. No-one made a charge for any of the work. Finishing touches included the addition of camouflage paintwork, a pair of Hotchkiss machine-guns, wing-mounted markers to assist the driver with his steering, and even rear-view mirrors mounted on top of the armoured body. (ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE TANK MUSEUM UNLESS STATED OTHERWISE)

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TOP LEFT: Not all LDV and Home Guard units had the benefit of motor transport – as evidenced by this picture of men of the Rustington LDV taken in the summer of 1940. (COURTESY OF MRS MARY TAYLOR)

TOP RIGHT A volunteer with the Home Guard in the village of West Farleigh, near Maidstone in Kent, tries out his unit's newly-acquired armoured car on 29 August 1940.



mention in a letter to the Press or in public utterance, but it can be said that that territory is not by any means confined to one borough. Its scope is, indeed, such as to warrant the services of a large body of men and, I have suggested to the authorities, armoured cars facilities.

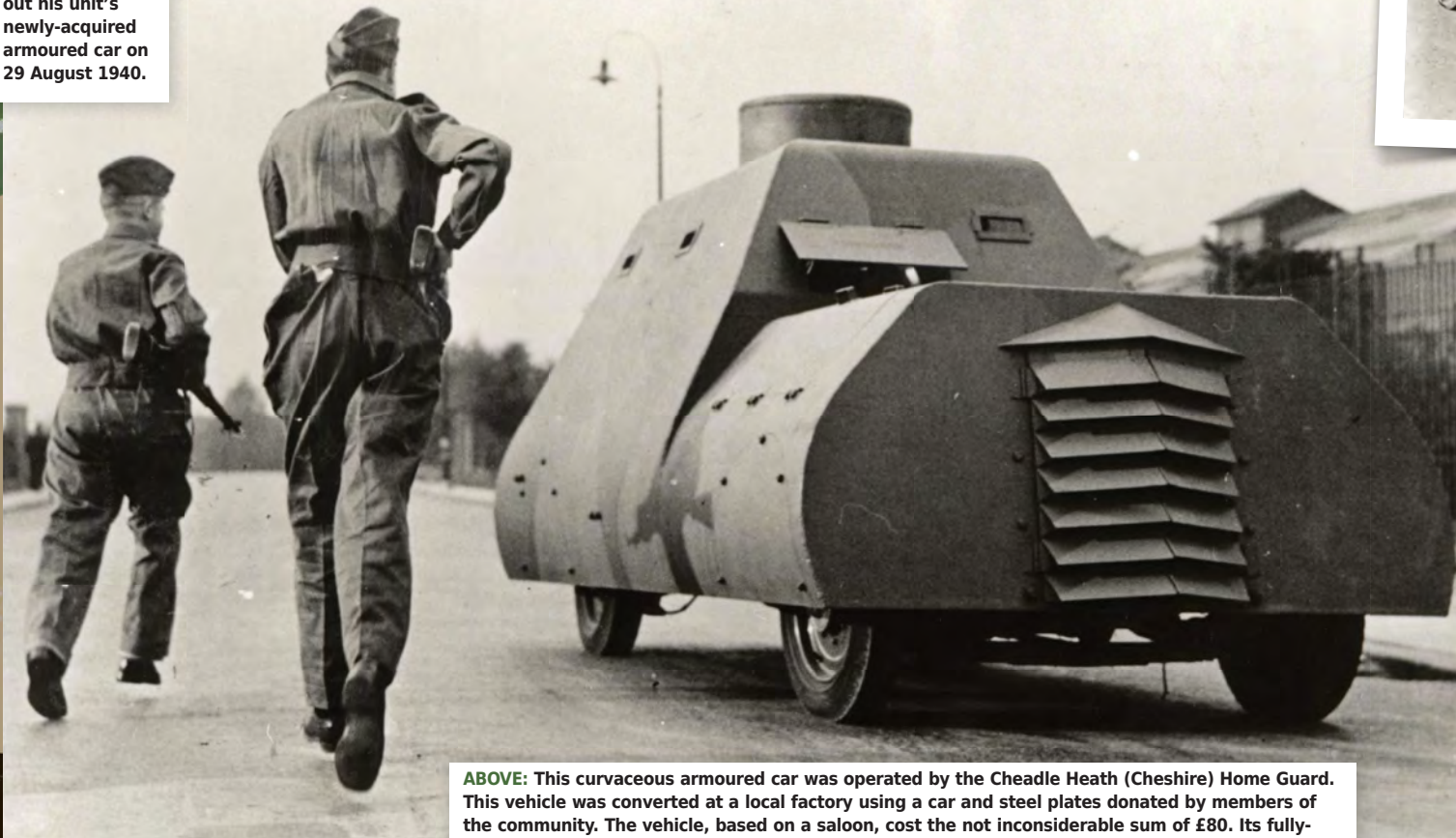
In his letter, published in many newspapers across the South West, Dart wrote: 'The keenness which has been manifested throughout N. Devon in the building up of the Home Guard – to give the former L.D.V. their new official designation – coupled with a consideration of the importance of the defence work which they have undertaken, have prompted me to make an offer to the War Office. That offer is: to undertake the raising of a sufficient sum of money for the provision of an armoured car for the exclusive use of the Home Guard in the area covered by the local battalion. The details of the extent of that area are not, of course, proper material for

'My suggestion has met with immediate and appreciative approval from those responsible for our military defence dispositions. I propose, therefore, to proceed at once with my appeal to the public in all the area affected, for approximately £300. This sum will enable us to have armoured car of approved design, constructed we hope locally by local craftsmen for local use, and to offer it as a gift to the War Office, who would, of course, be

entirely responsible for its manning and arms equipment. 'It does appear that unless we can provide an armoured car by our local effort it would be unreasonable to expect the War Office to be in a position to provide every local battalion of the Home Guard with such super equipment. But such a gesture from the community has already been carried through with success in the cases of other units in different parts of Britain, enabling those units to be even better equipped for their work. I find that there is a strong local desire to emulate these examples.'

TICKLER'S TANK

Amongst the many of the early Home Guard armoured cars was one built for the Maidenhead Home Guard



ABOVE: This curvaceous armoured car was operated by the Cheadle Heath (Cheshire) Home Guard. This vehicle was converted at a local factory using a car and steel plates donated by members of the community. The vehicle, based on a saloon, cost the not inconsiderable sum of £80. Its fully-armoured body, it was claimed, was proof against machine-gun and rifle-fire. A revolving turret was also fitted through which a Lewis or Vickers machine-gun projected. A pair of large double doors were fitted at the back which enabled the vehicle to also be used as an ambulance.

BELOW: This early Tickler armoured car may be the Sunbeam after conversion. Note the periscope fitted at the rear of the main body.



The inventive Maidenhead battalion also undertook a simpler, and no doubt, quicker conversion to a Standard saloon car by covering the radiator with armour and removing all the windows and replacing them with armoured plate. No less than seven rifle slots were cut in the plates and a Vickers machine-gun was mounted on the roof, making this otherwise ordinary car into a fearsome machine.

Not every Home Guard unit had the resources or imagination to produce such sophisticated vehicles. Nevertheless, the platoon from the village of West Farleigh near Maidstone was able to convert an old 30hp Buick into an armoured fighting vehicle. The Buick, which

around the chassis of a 1935 Sunbeam 25hp saloon. Donations enabled the £5 to be raised to buy the car. The head of the Maidenhead Home Guard was a Colonel W.H. Tickler, the owner of a well-known Berkshire fruit-preserving firm, who placed the staff and facilities of his factory at the disposal of the battalion. Once inside the workshop, the original bodywork was removed and replaced by an armoured shell. This had been constructed from steel plates found around the factory and had a surprisingly streamlined appearance with a machine-gun in a turret. When the vehicle was shown to the local press it was inevitably christened 'Tickler's Tank'.

It was noted that plans had been drawn up for a second version. This was to have two turrets from which four machine-guns could provide a complete circle of fire.



MIDDLE LEFT: Both the vehicle and the Home Guard volunteer (proudly showing his First World War medal ribbons) seen here are from the Luton Home Guard, wherein lies a clue as to the manufacturer of the source vehicle - in this case a Vauxhall 20/60 saloon.

LEFT: A revised design of the Tickler armoured car, with improved driver's visibility, a co-driver's position and the addition of a revolving turret.

H·G AMERICAN HOME GUARD



ON THE outbreak of war in 1939, American citizens in the UK had been advised by their embassy to return home unless their business or occupation made it essential to stay in London. Many decided that it did and defied their neutral status by forming what they called the American Mechanised Defence Corps. Affiliated to the Home Guard, the unit was officially referred to as the American Troop Home Guard. The unit was established by Mr. A.P. Buquor, a member of the American embassy staff in London, who was in turn supported by the millionaire anglophile Charles Sweeny. Commanded by General Wade Hayes, who boasted four rows of medals and whose US service went back to the Spanish-American War of 1898, this unit took on the responsibility of guarding the London District HQ one night in eight.

Based in London the unit equipped itself entirely at its own expense, eventually possessing items still unavailable too much of the rest of the Home Guard. This included light and heavy machine guns, sub-machine guns, hand-grenades and a number of vehicles, such as the armoured car shown here being examined by Winston Churchill and Hayes in July 1940.

Built on an American chassis and equipped with items such as a periscope, (see the left-hand side of the windscreen panel), and sealed door it is almost certain that this vehicle was imported complete from the United States.

had been presented to the platoon by a local resident, was transformed into an armoured car simply by welding or bolting steel plating over the windows and radiator. No machine-guns were available, so slots were cut into the steel plating through which rifles and pistols could be aimed.

Many of the Home Guard armoured car projects were the result of >>

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JONES' BUTCHER'S VAN



ALMOST AS central to the 'Dad's Army' cast as any of its actors was surely the famous van owned and operated in the series by Lance Corporal Jones of the Walmington-on-Sea Platoon as the delivery vehicle for his butcher's shop business, and also doubling-up as the local Home Guard vehicle. In its latter role the van has probably become the most famous Home Guard vehicle of all time - albeit an entirely fictional one! Nonetheless, this fictional role was probably not too far from fact in terms of the variety of improvised vehicles that were pressed into Home Guard service throughout the war. In the case of Corporal Jones' van, of course, it was used for transport and patrol purposes and its size enabled it to be used as means of transport for the entire platoon. One of its modifications, of course, was the provision of multiple loopholes along the body of the van through which the platoon could fire their rifles.

The van itself was a 1935 Ford two-ton BB Box Van that had originally been acquired by the BBC's props department and it first appeared in an episode of Dad's Army on 11 September 1969 called 'The Armoured Might of Lance Corporal Jones.' The van also appeared at the Imperial War Museum in 1974 to promote an exhibition on 'The Real Dad's Army'.

Since its use in the BBC series the van has changed hands at least twice, most recently in 2012 when it was sold by auctioneers Bonhams for £63,100 to the Home Guard Museum, Thetford. More recently it has returned to the screen in the new 2016 Dad's Army feature film.

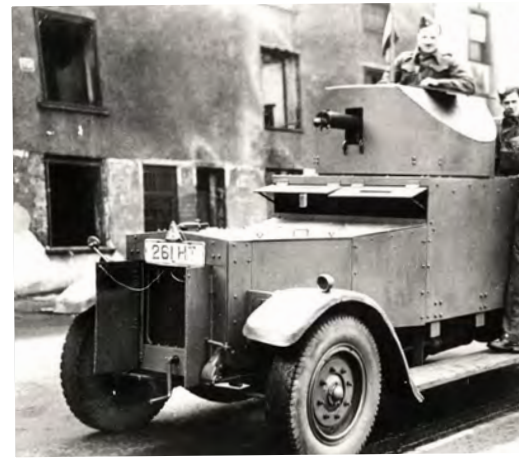
TOP RIGHT: The armoured car built by a young volunteer, Peter Wise, and a few of his colleagues of the Bristol Home Guard.

MIDDLE RIGHT: Another ordinary saloon that has been adapted for use as an armoured car, again in the Tickler's jam factory, for the Maidenhead Home Guard.

individuals or smaller groups. In February 1941 the Daily Mirror announced the completion of one such vehicle, construction of which had begun the previous August: 'A Home Guard, aged twenty, and three of his colleagues have proudly reported for duty in a five-ton armoured car. They made it themselves to present to their battalion. It is worth £1,200. For six months they worked three or four nights a week, carrying on into the small hours through air raids.

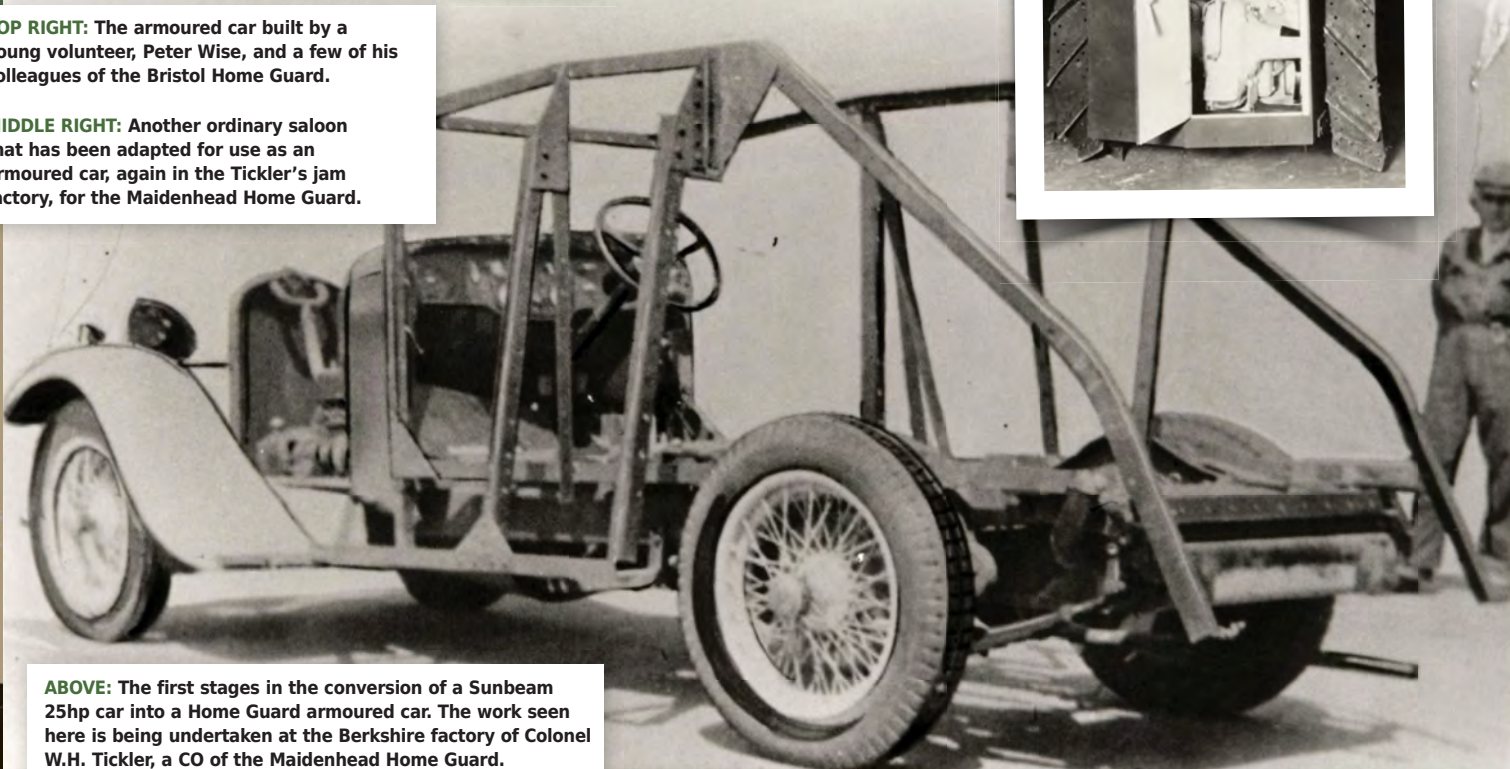
'The young Home Guard, Peter Wise, of Bristol, told the Daily Mirror: "We call it the Scrounge because we scrounged every single piece of material for her from friends and made her entirely with our own hands. We must have put in hundreds and hundreds of nuts and bolts. She was built with blood and sweat and toil and tears."

'Peter, the gunner of the car, is in civil life assistant manager both of a large butcher's business and a garage owned by his grandfather, one of Bristol's ex-Lord Mayors. But although he works a twelve-hour day - incidentally, he cannot pass his medical examination for the Army - he has put in every spare moment he has on the car ... Commander of the car is Home Guard J.S. Booth, a draughtsman aged twenty-seven, while first and second drivers are Home Guards K.J. King, aged thirty, and J. Richards, aged twenty-four, both constructional engineers.'



The Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer of Saturday, 17 August 1940, revealed that 'a man who served his apprenticeship in a Yorkshire town has designed an armoured car for the defence of a Northern factory at which he is employed'. The reporter went on to add that 'it will be used for patrolling and defending the works in case of an enemy invasion, and it has been praised by military experts, who consider it to be one of the finest armoured cars they have seen':

'The designer is Mr John Brook, who was formerly a draughtsman at a colliery, where his father, the late



ABOVE: The first stages in the conversion of a Sunbeam 25hp car into a Home Guard armoured car. The work seen here is being undertaken at the Berkshire factory of Colonel W.H. Tickler, a CO of the Maidenhead Home Guard.

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LEFT: Another of the Villa-Campbell armoured cars based on a Dodge chassis. Here Villa can be seen holding a machine-gun for the photographer, while Campbell takes the wheel.



BELOW: As well as adding radiator and windscreen protection, all the other windows have been removed and replaced by steel plate.

Councillor G.A. Brook, was engineer for many years. His design has converted a second-hand 17hp 1937 car into a mechanical dragon which roars along at 50 miles an hour, consumes a gallon of petrol to every 15 miles, and cost only £80 to build. It has a steel superstructure in one piece, which fits right over the engine, the body and wheels; and the thick steel plating is proof against machine-gun and rifle fire. Further, it is streamlined so that bullets will glance off instead of penetrating it.

'The driver looks through an open metal windscreen, but this can be closed and he can see through specially drilled holes. In the armour are six gun-slits through which men can fire.'

THE MOBILE PILLBOX

It was not just standard production cars that were adapted by the Home Guard. Conversions of the Fordson Major tractor were attempted, with what can only be described as limited success – speed not being the tractors' greatest asset. A more successful adaptation was that of truck chassis by the Concrete Company, known as the 'Bison'.

This company took a 6x4 or 6x2 truck chassis and turned it into a mobile pillbox. Produced almost exclusively for the Home Guard, there were two types of Bison. The first comprised a separate concrete cab with a rear pillbox, whilst in the second type the Bison was built with a single body. Composed of a

thick layer of concrete with gun ports, there is no doubt that it would have been immune from small arms fire, and possibly even a light field piece. Many of these Bisons were used for airfield defence. The great advantage of the Bison was that the basic principle was easily adapted to any size of truck.

One Company of the 12th (Saffron Walden and Dunmow) Battalion Essex Home Guard built four armoured lorries which were, it was stated, 'available to take reinforcements as far as [the] Thames Estuary'.

At one time the Morris Motor Company was the maker of almost half Britain's motor cars and its value to the wartime economy was immense. Like many large companies it started its own defence force and, predictably, built its own armoured cars.

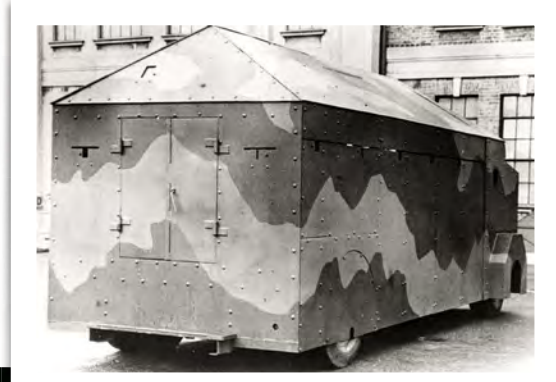
Other attempts at producing armoured fighting vehicles were made by Sir Malcolm Campbell, who famously held both the world land and water speed records, and his mechanic and friend Leo Villa. Using designs drawn up by Villa, the pair constructed a number of vehicles for the Home Guard. Their most impressive collaboration was 'Tubby the Tank Buster' which carried a short 6-pounder gun, similar to those fitted to First World War 'Male' tanks.

COUNCIL PROPERTY

Many newspaper proprietors at first opposed recruiting amongst their staffs

on the grounds that ARP duties already occupied as much time as could be spared from their day-to-day work, but they were overruled by popular demand. In the first few weeks after Eden's announcement, for example, over 200 volunteers from The Times alone had enrolled. Eventually the paper's proprietor, John Astor, himself succumbed, eventually becoming the Commanding Officer of the 5th City of London (Press) Battalion. He even >>>

BELOW: What was once an AEC Regent double-decker bus has been converted into an armoured personnel carrier for the London Passenger Transport Board Home Guard. The driver had his own hinged armoured door, with the passengers gaining access through double rear doors.



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BELOW: Men of a Yorkshire Home Guard battalion ambushing their armoured car during exercises on the Yorkshire Dales. The caption for this picture suggests that the chassis on which this vehicle was built came from a Sunbeam saloon car. Note that a Molotov cocktail can be seen exploding in the road behind the armoured car.



MIDDLE & RIGHT: For some of the armoured vehicles supplied to the Maidenhead Home Guard by the Tickler's jam factory an interesting method of radiator protection was employed - such as that on this converted Ford V8. Here a 9-inch wide container with a cavity in the middle, and mounted at the front of the vehicle, is being filled with gravel and pebbles. In tests carried out on the device in the summer of 1940 all of the bullets fired at it failed to penetrate both sides of the container and the gravel contents. A piece of steel sheeting, tested at the same time, was cleanly pierced.

took the step of having his own Rolls-Royce converted into an armoured car.

Another unit which was similarly equipped was the 47th (London County Council) Battalion. The historian David Fletcher describes the vehicle thus: 'The armour, such as it was, usually amounted to steel plate no more than 6mm thick and hardly even bulletproof although the .303-inch Vickers machine gun in the turret was real enough. Cooling air for the radiator must have been drawn in under the armour since there is no grille or doors at the front, but [it had] hinged panels on the wheel covers, which would come in handy if it was necessary to change a wheel.' It is known that the battalion also operated an armoured car of similar appearance and which was based on a 1936 Standard chassis.

Other public body Home Guard units also built armoured vehicles, including the London Passenger Transport Board Home Guard. Formed from the management, drivers, conductors and mechanics from a number of the London bus depots, this unit, somewhat naturally, used the vehicles most readily on hand - their buses. London Transport eventually



BELOW: Yet another of the many armoured cars produced by Tickler's jam factory for the Home Guard - a 'Molotov Slinger' can be seen in one of the pictures.



COMMUNITY SPIRIT

The Camelford Home Guard proudly sported a 2.5 litre Jaguar four-door saloon, its radiator armoured and with a body-conversion that held a Bren gun. Other luxury cars were generously handed over by local individuals, such as the Vauxhall 20/60 saloon of the Luton Home Guard which was heavily armoured, though it initially carried no weapons.

formed seven Home Guard battalions, serving under such exotic names as the 'Camberwell Tram Depot Home Guard', or the 'Dartford County Bus Depot Home Guard'.

Four wheels was not always the prerequisite of a Home Guard's armed or armoured transport. The Port of London Authority Home Guard equipped small craft with weapons and river craft, such as motor boats were employed by the Birmingham Home Guard.

By comparison the Blackburn Home Guard shielded a little Austin Riley with very little armour plating but fitted it with a 1918-pattern A2 Browning automatic rifle.

The very purpose of the LDV and, in due course, the Home Guard, was that of, as its first name indicated, local defence by local people. This generated a strong sense of community spirit to which many people contributed - all of which was evident in the production of many of the armoured cars brought into service from 1940 onwards. ©