

British Armoured Trains in WWII – By David Gray



During November 1940, Derby held its War Weapons Week as part of the WWII National Savings Campaign. As with most other locations, Derby had a large indicator board set up in the town centre on which each daily total raised was recorded so the citizens could see how their savings were progressing and whether or not they had reached their total.

The picture (*left*), in my collection, shows the board after five day's saving. Although the object of War Weapons Week was to raise money to buy all types of military equipment, here the total for each day is represented to its right by the number of aircraft that could be bought with the amount indicated.

What we are interested in as far as this article goes is the wording at the bottom of the indicator board, partly obscured by the two men updating the figures. It is still relatively easy to make out what the message says:

‘NOTICE: You are invited to view the **ARMOURED TRAIN** at Derby Station on Friday November 22nd.’

Various exhibitions and displays were organised during these savings weeks to encourage people to pay small sums to visit events, the money would then go into savings.



After a short time, I was able to find another photo for sale which showed the actual armoured train on display at the station (*left*). We can see a lot of people standing on the platform, and members of the armed forces on the train and standing around no doubt answering questions from the public. On the back of the photo is the stamp of the *Derby Evening Telegraph* next to the hand written caption ‘Derby Armoured Train Nov 22 1940.’

We can see here that the engine is actually in the middle, with an armoured wagon at the front and the back. This was probably the first, and last time these people were to see an armoured train, particularly as close as this. There were very few in service during the war and they were disbanded before the war ended.

Armed and armoured trains first saw use in the 19th century in the American Civil War, Franco-Prussian War and Boer Wars. Into the 20th century, armoured trains were employed extensively, especially during WWI and the Russian Civil War. Capable of mounting large guns and thick armour, the train was a formidable opponent on the battlefield. Of course, unlike tanks and planes, trains are restricted to established railway networks. So, when Britain faced the threat of a Nazi invasion during WWII, 13 armoured trains were established across the country to bolster the home defence.



The British Army established **12 standard-gauge armoured trains** to patrol vulnerable rail routes along the coast (*left*). These armoured trains were primarily for coastal defence against German invasion, using converted locomotives and steel wagons, armed with 6-pounder guns, machine guns, and small arms, operated initially by Royal Engineers/Armoured Corps, then Polish forces, and finally the Home Guard, before being disbanded in 1944 as the invasion threat faded. These trains served as mobile firepower, patrolling key rail lines like those in Scotland and the Kent coast, with even a (13th) miniature armoured train used on the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway.

Purpose & Creation

- **Invasion Deterrent:** Developed in 1940 due to fears of a German invasion, leveraging Britain's extensive rail network.
- **Mobile Artillery:** Served as faster, more heavily armed mobile gun platforms than tanks, offering quick response.

Armament

- **Main Guns:** QF 6-pounder Hotchkiss guns, often taken from WWI-era tanks.
- **Machine Guns:** Vickers or Lewis guns.
- **Infantry Weapons:** Bren guns, Thompson submachine guns, Lee-Enfield rifles.

Operation & Crews



• **Crews:** Initially operated by the **Royal Engineers** and manned by the **Royal Armoured Corps**, they were handed over to **Polish Armed Forces** units (*left*), in late 1940. By 1942, as the invasion threat receded, they were largely manned by the **Home Guard** (often railway employees) until they were disbanded in November 1944.

• **Composition:** Each train typically consisted of an armoured steam locomotive in the centre, flanked by two armoured wagons.

- **Deployment:** These trains patrolled the coastline from Cornwall to the Moray Firth in Scotland.

Notable Examples

- **Standard Gauge Trains:** Several numbered trains (like J and K) patrolled coasts, from Fife to Berwick-upon-Tweed.
- **Miniature Train:** A narrow-gauge train on the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway (RH&DR), powered by the steam locomotive 'Hercules', armed with Boys anti-tank rifles and Lewis guns, credited with shooting down German aircraft.

The "Miniature" Armoured Train

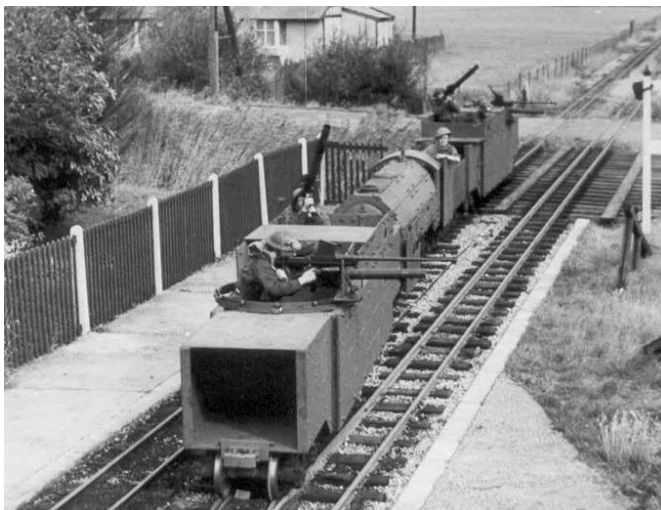


A unique 13th train was created for the **Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway (RH&DR)**, a 15-inch gauge miniature railway in Kent (*left*).

- **Purpose:** Because of its proximity to occupied France, this small railway was strategically important for patrolling the Kentish coast.

- **Armament:** Too small for heavy 6-pounders, it was armed with two **Boys anti-tank rifles** and four **Lewis guns**.

- **Combat Success:** This "toy" train is credited with shooting down multiple German aircraft, including a **Messerschmitt Bf 109**, a **Heinkel He 111**, and a **Dornier Do 17**.



In 1940 the **RH&DR** was taken over by the military during World War II. the railway line was used to deliver troops along the coast and a miniature armoured train (*left*), was used on the line.

It was also used by the Department of Petroleum Warfare in the construction of PLUTO ("Pipe Line Under the Ocean") intended to supply fuel to the Allied forces after the D-Day Normandy landings. New Romney station was appointed for the production of the 140 cm diameter pipes.

The pipes were loaded on flat wagons and transported by rail to Dungeness for further assembling.

The war years took their toll of the Romney Hythe & Dymchurch Railway, the miniature railway being requisitioned by the War Department. During the latter stages of the construction of PLUTO considerable damage was caused to the track on the extension when, to speed up the work, lengths

of pipe were dragged along the track bed by bulldozers, resulting in its reduction to a single track after the war.

Following cessation of hostilities, the line re-opened, with Laurel and Hardy cutting the tape, although it would be some time before the line was fully operational, with double track.

Armoured Train K

When Britain was threatened with invasion in 1940, the War Office sanctioned the creation of several armoured trains, each allocated an identification letter, between A and M.

These trains were given particular areas of railway line to patrol, covering areas such as that between the Tyne and Tweed, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. A number of trains covered areas in Scotland, armoured train J, for example, being responsible for patrolling the Kingdom of Fife.



Armoured train K, powered by a single locomotive, No 7573, was armed with two 6-pounder guns, as well as six Bren machine guns, two Vickers machine guns, four Thompson sub-machine guns (Tommy guns) and numerous rifles carried by the crew. All in all, this was an impressive array of weaponry at a time early in the war when the most heavily armed British tank, the Infantry Tank Mk II Matilda, mounted only a

single 2-pounder gun and one 0.303 Vickers machine gun. Initially the train carried some 14,000 rounds of ammunition which was later increased to some 38,000 rounds of varying calibres.

Generally, armoured train K was restricted to short patrols largely because of the vital need to keep the east coast main line free for normal traffic. However, the 12th Armoured Train Detachment of the Royal Engineers, the unit which operated armoured train K, was given permission to patrol a number of lines, including the Glencorse, Penicuik and Macmerry branch lines as well as those to West Calder, Linlithgow and Inverkeithing. K also patrolled the Waverley Line to St Boswells and Peebles as well as the Gullane and North Berwick lines. On the East Coast infrequent runs were made on the main line to Berwick on Tweed and on branch lines to Eyemouth and Duns. Patrols were carried out weekly.

The End of The Armoured Trains

As the threat of invasion receded, the armoured trains were withdrawn from service in England. However, Scottish Command argued that the trains were of importance to the defence of coastal areas in Scotland and also that the crews of the trains were keen and demonstrated considerable interest in their work. As a result, the three armoured trains in Scotland remained, although a decision from Whitehall regarding non-standard weapons on the trains resulted in the Tommy guns being removed from service.

In early September 1944 LNER informed the War Office that locomotive No 7573, which powered armoured train K, was due for its five-yearly boiler examination, and requested its release to Stratford

for this reason. Although there were sufficient engines to maintain the three armoured trains, it did raise the question again of whether they continued to be of any useful purpose.

By that stage of the war, there was clearly little threat of an invasion of Scotland and the decision was taken to withdraw the armoured trains from service. The Railway Executive Committee was informed by the War Office of this decision on 5 November 1944.

Royal Armoured Saloons

Beyond the coastal defence trains, the **London Midland and Scottish Railway (LMS)** built two armoured saloons in 1941 for **King George VI and Queen Elizabeth** to provide bomb-proof transport during their wartime travels. These 56-tonne carriages featured internal armour and were used throughout the conflict.