

PROJECT TAURUS

We tell the fascinating story of the only surviving Taurus Defender 110 Light Armoured Vehicle



Cleverly designed to look at first glance like a standard Defender, the Taurus body is made from 4.5mm armoured steel

LRM CLASSICS

Only from the rear is it obvious that this is not a factory Defender body



AT first glance it looks pretty much like a normal Defender 110. But look again and you begin to spot the differences. Under the skin is a heavy-duty 110 chassis and drivetrain, the rest is anything but a standard Defender: it has a gross vehicle weight (GVW) of 3500kg and a kerb weight of 2450kg, is armoured to withstand a close proximity attack by an AK47 and has limited protection against anti-tank mines and explosive blast.

This is Project Taurus, a design for a Light Armoured Vehicle conceived in 1999 in South Africa by two local companies, Paramount Logistics International and Mechanology Design Bureau of Johannesburg, and brought to life with the support of Land Rover's Special Vehicles team in the UK, and BMW's executive board in South Africa. At this point in time, of course, the Rover car and Land Rover businesses were wholly owned by BMW. The original idea for the Taurus had apparently come from Paramount, which then worked with virtual engineering company MDB to perfect the design.

The objective of Project Taurus was to meet what was seen as a rapidly growing worldwide demand for a cost-effective 'non-aggressive' vehicle for use in peacekeeping and peace enforcement roles, where the use of overtly military vehicles was considered undesirable or counterproductive.

As you might expect with vehicles of this type, pulling together the full story of how the Taurus 110 was conceived and how it was built is not easy, and what follows is the culmination of many years' research and attempts at piecing together the jigsaw. What we can definitely say is that it is a very interesting and rare vehicle, and the example you see on these pages is believed to be the only survivor. →

DEFENDER 110 LIGHT ARMoured VEHICLE

In the 1990s, the demand for a specialist vehicle like this was being met by models such as the RG-31 Nyala, the RG-32 Scout, the Defender-based CAMAC Composite Armoured Vehicle (CAV) 100, and many similar vehicles, as well as discreetly armoured conversions of mainstream SUVs and even saloon cars. Market research carried out by the organisations behind the Taurus proposal had apparently identified major concerns with these existing options, including cost, supply limitations, build quality and global support logistics.

The market for vehicles of this type was significant. According to various sources, at the time Project Taurus was being initiated, the British Army had already taken delivery of around 1000 Defender 110 CAV-100s (generally referred to as Snatch), and the model was also ordered in much smaller quantities by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the BBC (to protect staff reporting in the former Yugoslavia), and the governments of France, Canada and Finland.

The South African-built RG-31 Nyala was acquired by Burundi, Canada, Colombia, Eswatini, Indonesia, Iraq, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Spain, UAE, United Nations and, most notably, by the US, which appears to have taken delivery of almost 2000 examples.

Sales of the South Africa designed Vickers OMC RG-32 Scout exceeded 700, with orders from Austria, Egypt, Finland, France, Georgia, South Africa, Sweden, Tanzania, and the UAE. How the Taurus would have fared in this highly competitive marketplace will never be known.

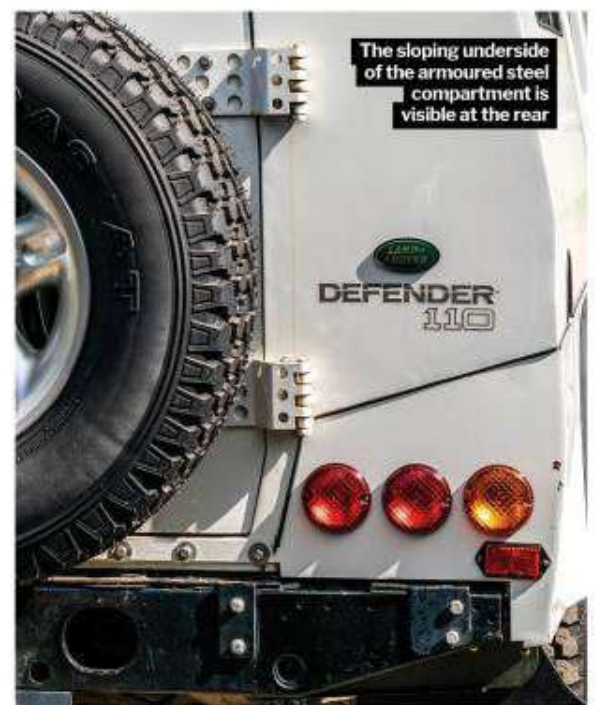
In the autumn of 1999, the BMW board in South Africa

approved the construction of six (or possibly seven, depending on who you talk to) Project Taurus vehicles which were to be built in South Africa and based on CKD (Complete Knocked Down) Defender 110 heavy-duty South African specification donors, with either Tdi or Td5 powertrains and standard manual transmissions.

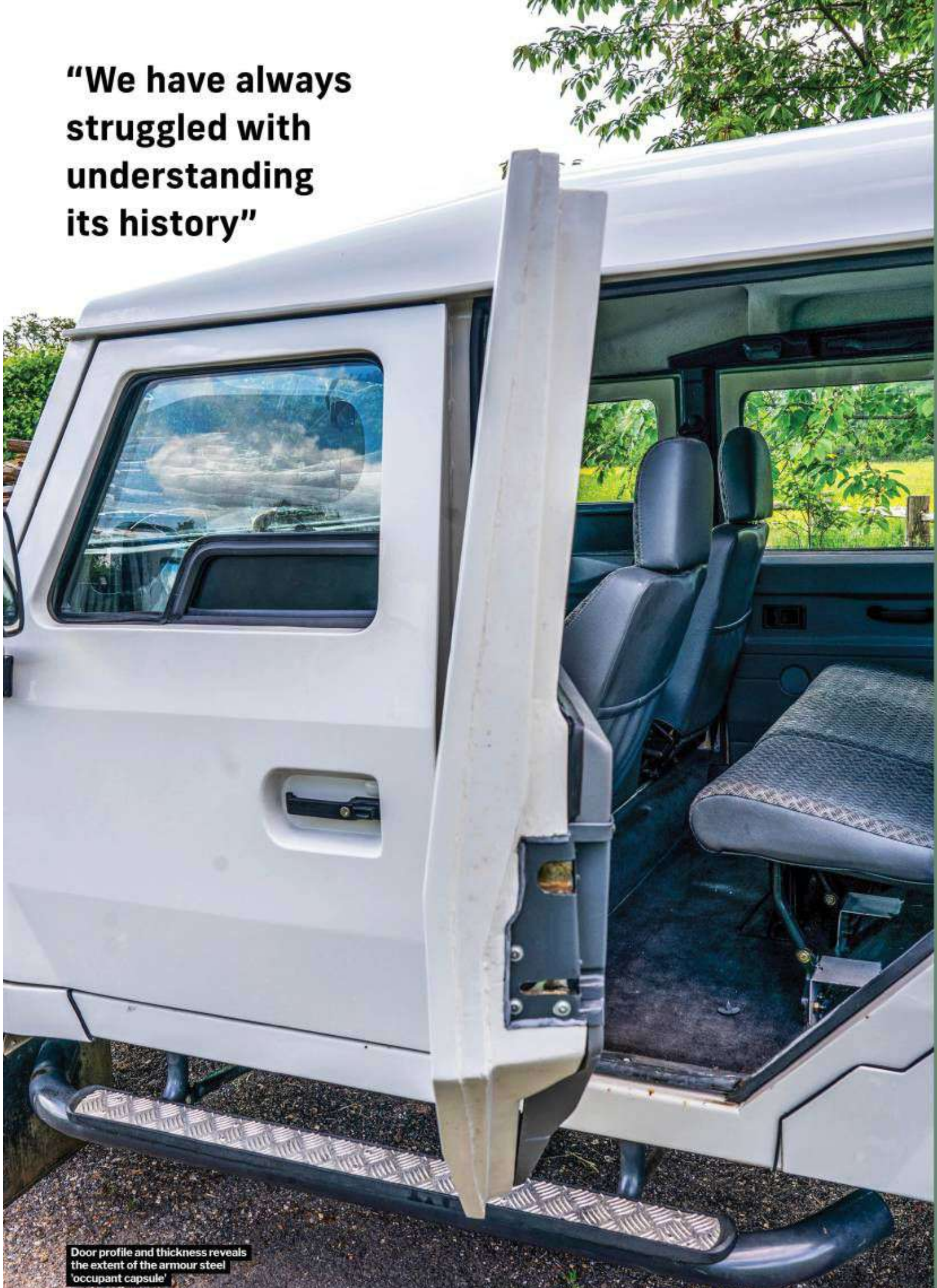
The standard Defender body was replaced by an armoured 'occupant capsule' with floor, rear wheelarches, tailgate, and rear body sides fabricated from 4.5mm armour steel. Doors were also made from the same material, mounted on an aluminium frame with an external glassfibre skin. The roof was a ballistically hardened 5mm GRP panel with an aluminium outer layer. The engine was contained within an armoured steel extension to the occupant capsule, comprising 3mm inner wheelarches, grille, and bonnet. All glazing was 28mm laminated safety glass.

It was intended that Paramount Logistics International would supply the completed monocoque armoured body and engine compartment, fully glazed with armoured glass. Discussions also seem to have taken place regarding the possibility of assembly in other countries, should customers considering the Taurus have required construction in their own geographies.

Standard Defender SA-spec front lighting was retained, and North American market rear lighting was fitted. The interior trim was standard Defender with air con in the front, also available for the rear occupants as an optional extra. Other proposed options were run-flat tyres, long-range fuel tanks, front and rear towing pintles and NATO tow hooks, and bull bars and windscreen guards.



**“We have always
struggled with
understanding
its history”**



**Door profile and thickness reveals
the extent of the armour steel
'occupant capsule'**



Interior is more or less standard Defender

Although the initial stages of the project were authorised and funded by the BMW board in South Africa, there seems to have been close co-operation with Land Rover's SVO and Military Engineering teams in the UK.

"The sole survivor has been in the care of the Dunsfold Collection since around 2008," Philip Bashall tells me, adding that "due to its weight and the obvious implications for towing, the Collection has never been able to display it at any Land Rover shows. It's a fascinating vehicle but one that we have always struggled with, in terms of understanding its history."

A surviving South African tax disc reveals that SALLDHM871V 842432 was given the Gauteng Province (covering the Johannesburg and Pretoria regions) registration number MWX 394GP and taxed for road use in South Africa on 1 September 2001, but whether it is the first one built is unclear. James Taylor thinks it is the fifth. It has not been registered for road use in the UK, and probably never could be.

During some recent research we discovered paperwork that reveals that the Taurus left Johannesburg Airport as air freight on 7 November 2001, and it is interesting to see that the consignor was listed as Ford Motor Company South Africa, Ford having acquired Land Rover from BMW in March 2000.

The air freight declaration lists the vehicle's destination as Land Rover France, based at Argenteuil a few miles northwest of Paris. The Taurus was due to be exhibited at the Eurosatory military equipment event in Paris, which is the largest international exhibition for land and air-land defence and security. By all accounts it was favourably received. Another crumpled piece of paper in the cubby box shows that it was later collected from Argenteuil by a British road haulier and delivered to Nick Youdan at Land Rover Special Vehicles at Solihull.

There it remained until it was given to the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust before being transferred on long-term loan to the Dunsfold Collection. "I've always been led to believe that only three were built," Philip tells me, "so it's interesting to learn that six or seven were signed off for construction, although my guess is the project was cancelled before they were all completed. Our example is still fitted with the show wheels and tyres that it wore at the Paris exhibition."



Bespoke door hinges required to support the 4.5mm armoured steel doors with 2.8mm laminated glass



Original SA licence disc dates from 2001



Standard SA-spec includes air con



Ambient air temperature gauge on front bumper



Laminate windscreen with special frame is a visual clue to what's beneath the skin



Driver's side window has letterbox-sized opening aperture

With a weight of 3.5 tonnes, the Taurus feels solid and planted on the road



The Taurus name reappeared around ten years later on another armoured Defender, although this was a 127 with an open rear loadspace that was built by a different South African company. You can find several of them for sale with armouredvehicles.co.za, the marketing platform of Tibs Transport, a company in Pretoria that has been involved in the refurbishment of ex-military and ex-police vehicles since 1986.

"They are based on the Defender 127 and were built in 2012 and 2013 by TFM, a South African company with a long history of producing armoured vehicles," Tibs director Peter Arnold tells me. "We currently own more than ten of them, which we have sourced from various mines around the country, so it's fair to assume that they were originally manufactured for a single mining company. Typically, they were fitted with a dog 'compartment' in the load tray, which had a light tubular frame and a canvas tilt. I think the Paramount and TFM projects were not connected, but at the time both companies were located within ten kilometres of each other here in South Africa."

But now it's time to take Dunsfold's Taurus 110 for a strictly-not-on-the-road spin on a private track. As soon as you open the door you know this thing is solid. A glance at the bespoke door hinges tells me all I need to know about the weight of a door made of 28mm armoured glass and 4.5mm RB390 armoured steel.

Inside it is reassuringly standard Defender, although it is difficult not to notice the thickness of the glass surrounding you. It's also decidedly peculiar not to be able to wind down the window as usual to get the necessary elbow space. The Taurus has a miniscule letterbox-sized opening window on the driver's side, which is next to useless in any practical sense.

The standard Td5 gets us underway without any fuss, but the first rough patches I come to on the track reminds me just how heavy this thing is. I can only say I've never driven a Defender that feels as relentlessly solid and planted as the Taurus, and I wish I could drive it for longer and faster than the track allows.



Meaty bonnet takes two people to raise it

Four-page colour brochure was created by Land Rover SA, but no sales were made



Time to get under the bonnet, although despite the addition of a single gas strut it still takes two of us to lift it. The Td5 is of little interest, but the test wiring harness is very much so, and we wonder whether this was a South African installation or a Solihull fit. One of the connectors goes to an ambient air temperature sensor which fits onto a magnetic base on the front bumper.

The armoured engine tub is fascinating, as are the plastic front wings which play no part other than cosmetically. It's very clear that the purpose of the armoured capsule is primarily to ensure the occupants of the vehicle survive an attack, rather than to keep the vehicle running and driveable.

Quite why the Project Taurus 110 did not proceed beyond the creation of a few prototypes isn't known, but my bet is that a combination of two things conspired to kill it: firstly, the failure by the South African Police Service and the South African National Defence Force to place any orders, and, secondly, because Taurus didn't meet with new owner Ford's approval. The surviving Taurus 110 will be on display at the Dunsfold Collection's Autumn Open Day on 14 September.