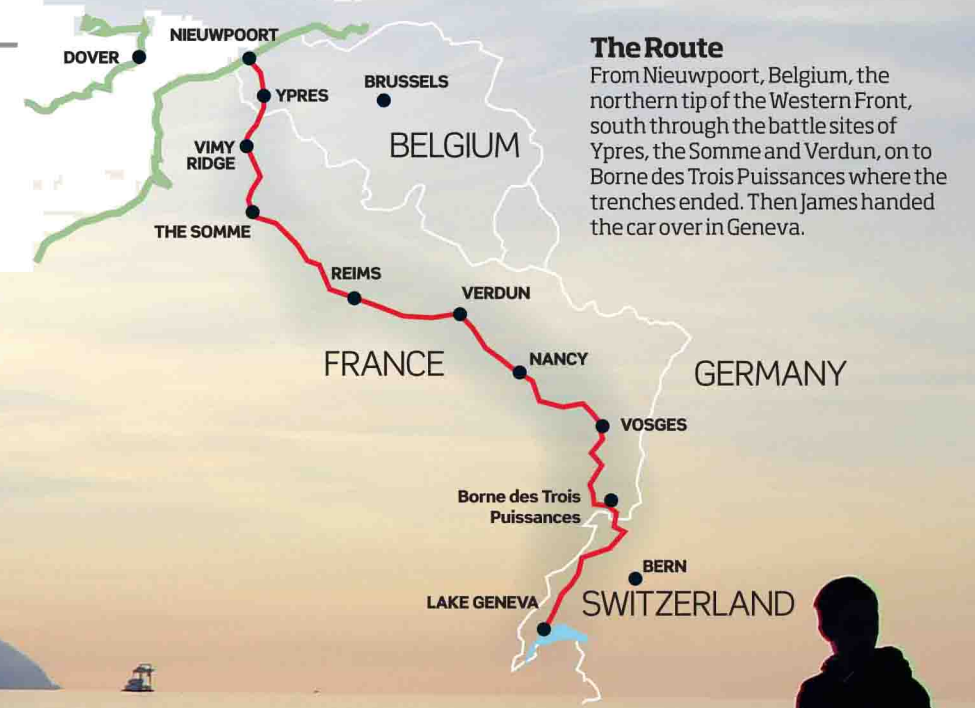


# A time for peace

Reflecting on the outbreak of The Great War a century ago, James travels the length of the Western Front in a **Middlebridge Scimitar**

WORDS & PHOTOS JAMES WALSH



**The Route**  
 From Nieuwpoort, Belgium, the northern tip of the Western Front, south through the battle sites of Ypres, the Somme and Verdun, on to Borne des Trois Puissances where the trenches ended. Then James handed the car over in Geneva.



'My chances are fairly good. I'm driving a Scimitar - and arguably the best of the breed'

I'm standing under an umbrella in the quiet drizzle at dawn, staring across the dank, grey, mist-soaked fields of Flanders. The senses run wild and waves of unexplainable emotion wash over me as I imagine ghostly figures trudging across the landscape and disappearing into the fog. This is it. That place. The one we all read about. From this point 100 years ago, a fortified line of filthy trenches, dug-outs and barbed wire cut a meandering wound in the landscape, 440 miles south to the Swiss frontier. This is the Western Front. Having set off from the coastal town of

Nieuwpoort, the northernmost point of the 1914 trench-line, I have begun my rainy journey south through Belgium. My task is to drive the entire Western Front in less than two days. In a classic British sports car. In this weather. Fortunately for me, the chances of reaching my destination are fairly good. I'm driving a Scimitar - and arguably the best of the breed, a Middlebridge version. Restored by Swiss owner Louis Guigoz to meet the strictest standards of roadworthiness in a country notoriously hostile towards classics, he has, in effect, created something unique.

Strict emissions laws drove Louis to install a cleaner Scorpio engine in place of the original so he could more easily import the car, a process which still took four years. The pile of paperwork is a testament to Louis' commitment. Why a Scimitar? 'I saw one many years ago on Putney Bridge while I was working in London,' he says. 'I knew then, that one day I must own a Scimitar'. Unable to attend the Middlebridge's recent 25th birthday celebration, Louis had his car sent over from his home in Geneva to Gloucestershire, where it sat alongside dozens of other models. Now



Kit inspection: shovel... wellies... Scimitar... check.

## Grand Day Out



Ypres was rebuilt, as was the car.

Handsome, practical. The Middlebridge Scimitar's got it all.

understandably, he wants it back. And I'm the man to deliver it to him.

So, having brought the car back over the English Channel, my first target is Ypres. The town stood right in the path of Germany's plan to sweep through Passchendaele, across into France and then encircle Paris. But the allied forces kept them out and everybody dug in for the next few years. I park up outside the Menin Gate, a memorial inscribed with the names of almost 54,896 Commonwealth soldiers who fought nearby and whose bodies were never found. It's a sobering start to the trip.

I view the Middlebridge in daylight for the first time. It's still a very handsome thing, as practical as it is pretty. Reliant ended Scimitar production in Tamworth on a high in 1986 with the 2.8-litre Cologne V6 under the bonnet – but the ultimate Scimitar had yet to surface. When it did, two years later, the Middlebridge Scimitar emerged from a factory in Nottingham with more than 400 modifications including a 150bhp 2.9-litre version of the Cologne with fuel injection

and a five-speed Ford T9 gearbox. It was a well sorted car, but sales didn't hit target and Middlebridge went into receivership in 1990 after selling just 77 units. I am in car number 29, a Jaguar Navy Blue model which Louis has gently fettled to his satisfaction.

### Settling in for a long haul

The original velour seats were replaced with leather and they're immensely comfortable. You sit low behind the wheel and it feels snug, but despite the lack of room for my right elbow there's more than enough space to relax. Of course, one of the greatest assets to that shape is the generous boot, where there is ample space for the family luggage. Cabin quality isn't up to Mercedes' standards of the day, but despite some alarming gaps in the dashboard trim and a few cheap-looking switches, everything works well.

Any minor squeaks are drowned out by the rumble of that engine as the spires of Ypres vanish into the mist

behind me. I cut through the Ypres salient towards the Somme; I've been here in summer and in the sunshine the landscape is a tapestry of green and golden fields, but now, in the depths of winter, the sodden mud is shrouded in a thick blanket of grey mist. I shudder as I imagine what hell it must have been, to sit for months here in water-filled trenches; the sporadic crackle of machine gun fire, bullets rattling into the barbed wire just above the parapet.

I join the autoroute for a while, where the Middlebridge's composure is notable; there's just a quiet whistle of wind outside and a pleasant grumble from the Cologne V6 under that long bonnet as the miles sweep by. I cross Vimy Ridge and drop into the vast sweep of soggy green terrain below, peppered by numerous cemeteries marking the Battle of The Somme, and stop at one.

A cold breeze slices through the branches of some nearby trees and there's the distant sound of a tractor. The clear-up

#### Tech Specs

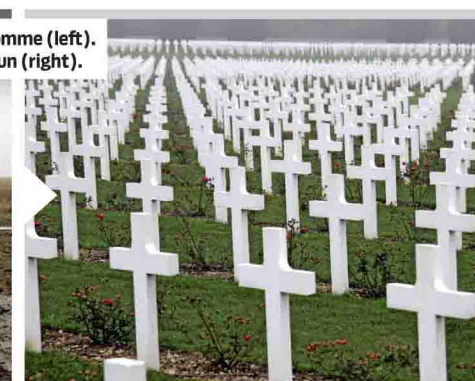
**ENGINE** 2935/6-cyl/OHV  
**POWER** 150bhp@4800rpm  
**GEARBOX** 5-spd manual  
**TOP SPEED** 136mph  
**0-60MPH** 7.8sec  
**PRICE NEW** £24,000  
**VALUE NOW** £9000



James found the cabin a fine place to be stationed on a 1000-mile continental trip. Owner Louis fitted new Ford Scorpio engine to satisfy Swiss emissions legislation.



The Somme (left). Verdun (right).



James roughs it next to The Meuse.

operation after the war was extensive, but farmers are still turning up items in these fields in a tangle of tree roots, bones and rusty bombs. There's still danger too, particularly in the form of unexploded chemical shells.

Mind heavy with somewhat dismal visions, my right foot becomes heavier as I thunder south, further into France. I need to make Verdun by dusk, because I have decided to fill the Scimitar's big boot with camping gear and pitch my tent for the night. I fall asleep, rain lashing against canvas, and wake next day to a silent, drizzly morning, dawn breaking through fog hanging over the River Meuse.

Discreetly, I shove the wet canvas into its bag, quietly shut the door and turn the key carefully as if hoping the car will start more quietly that way. It doesn't. There's an explosion of 150 horses and I rumble off site as curtains twitch wildly through the rain-soaked caravan windows.

### Pounding further south

After a brief wander around poignant monuments to the heroic French fight for the city of Verdun, it feels comforting to be back in the Scimitar's cosy cockpit. Within hours I've pounded a long way south, winding my way up into the spectacular Massif des Vosges in bright sunshine.

I start to demand a little more from the car; more vigorous tugs at the wheel send it darting through roads dissecting thick forest and steep-sided peaks, where both French and German troops hacked trenches into the granite landscape and remained stuck in stalemate from 1915 onwards. This is no Lotus, but as sunlight slices through the trees, I descend into the foothills of the southern side with a huge grin and the German border just a few miles away.

In the village of Jonchery, just short of my target, I find one last official monument, to just one man. Local teacher Jules-André Peugeot was called up for compulsory military service in 1913 and on the morning of August 2, 1914 – the day before war was declared – went to investigate reports of German troops crossing the nearby border. He ordered them to leave immediately but Lance Corporal Peugeot was shot and died minutes later on the steps of a nearby house. He was the first French soldier to die in a war that was to claim nine million souls.



The Scimitar breaks for the Swiss border and its home garage.

## 'As sunlight slices through the trees, I descend into the foothills with a huge grin'

And then my journey's over. A few miles away at the Borne des Toise Puissances (the site of the 19th century border of France, Germany and Switzerland), I rest on a tree stump at the southern edge of the Western Front trenches, listening to the rustle of wildlife in the nearby shell-holes overgrown with brambles. It's a peaceful, sunny end to a humbling journey, during which the Scimitar never missed a beat.

Amid the madness of a decade that saw many eccentric, ostentatious and occasionally preposterous vehicles, Middlebridge got it absolutely right. The team applied passion and spirit to their favourite car and made it the very best it could be. Ingenuity, belief in their objective and unshakeable spirit led them to this. It was a gutsy, brave move.

I admire them and all the other splendid chaps on this humbling journey through terrain of huge historical significance – men whose footsteps I followed and whose footprints will never be forgotten. ■

**Thanks to Mick Gaughan, Middlebridge Club, www.middlebridge-scimitar.co.uk**



On Lake Geneva's tranquil shores, the car is returned.

