

THE MIDDLE WAY

If you want a practical, brisk classic then the Scimitar takes some beating, whether it's the Reliant original or the Middlebridge swansong. We meet a man who has put his own stamp on the iconic sports estate.

WORDS PAUL WAGER PHOTOGRAPHY MATT WOODS



As classic cars go, Reliant's distinctive Scimitar ranks as one of the most practical. Rugged Ford running gear, a fibreglass bodyshell and parts sourced from volume car makers make it an ideal proposition for the keen DIYer. They're affordable, too if you don't mind a bit of work to bring a tired example into usable condition.

Which is largely the thinking which inspired Jonathan Smith to go hunting for a Scimitar a few years ago. "I thought I'd buy one for the summer," he laughs. "They were cheap at the time and it looked ideal

for the dog..." but as you'll see the idea rather ran away from him to result in the car you see here.

Those readers well versed in the history of the car will already have spotted that this isn't in fact a Reliant at all but one of the later Middlebridge-built examples and although Jon hadn't set out to acquire one of these later, updated cars, he found himself intrigued when reading the adverts for Scimitars. A search for more information brought him to the Middlebridge Enthusiasts Scimitar Site (MESS) at www.middlebridge-scimitar.co.uk and Jon was convinced

that the Middlebridge was the model he wanted. See our side panel for more details but essentially the Middlebridge cars were a handbuilt low-volume production which continued after Reliant had ceased production.

The rather big stumbling block in acquiring a Middlebridge car is the fact that only 78 examples were produced and enthusiast owners do tend to hang on to them. Jon's search eventually turned up one in Cardiff but despite a five-hour round trip to view it he decided it really was in a state that put it beyond his skills to restore. ➤



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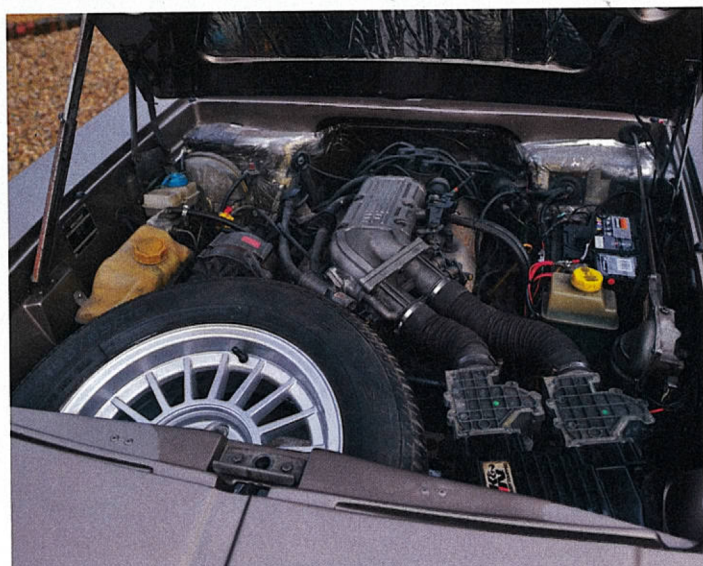


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TECH SPEC MIDDLEBRIDGE SCIMITAR GTE

- **ENGINE:**
2933cc Ford Cologne V6
- **TRANSMISSION:**
Five-speed manual
- **MAX POWER:**
150 bhp at 5700 rpm
- **0-60 MPH:** 8.5 secs
- **MAX SPEED:**
124 mph
- **OVERALL LENGTH:**
4.4 m
- **OVERALL WEIGHT:**
1266 kg



Ford power means that spares are cheap and easy to find.



Just a fortnight later, Mick from MESS was in touch again with news of a car in a barn in Shropshire. The owner, a Reverend no less, was about to advertise the car online having been forced to give up driving following a stroke and Jon dropped everything to investigate.

On arriving at the barn, Jon recalls a collection of old tractors

and other agricultural ephemera, with a blue Scimitar sitting in the middle. "I'm no car trader," says Jon, "But it looked like a good, honest car under the dust and I really liked the colour."

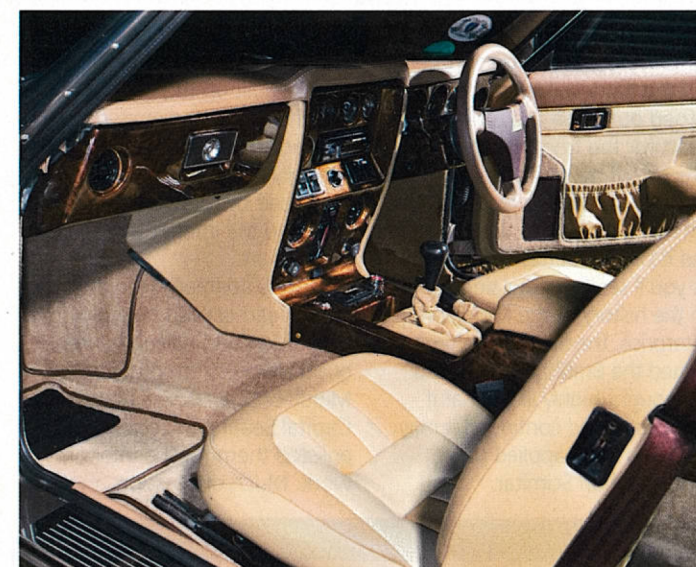
After a short haggle a deal was done, with the owner agreeing to MoT the car before Jon collected it. As he recalls, the MoT test was the first opportunity he'd had to check it

out underneath but with a fresh ticket, Jon pointed the Scimitar north and some 250 miles later was back at his Yorkshire home without incident.

He then proceeded to use the car over the summer and found its blend of performance and practicality just what he was after in a classic car.

Shortly afterwards, an invite to the 25th anniversary of the cars

saw him heading down to Gatcombe Park in Gloucestershire – HRH Princess Anne remains a famous Scimitar owner. Much elbow grease was expended in getting the car nice and shiny but when Jon pulled up at the event he realised that he was letting the side down somewhat. After all, car number 28 had lived a hard life, having been a press demo car road tested by Car



The Middlebridge cars were positioned as handbuilt cars in the Jensen mould and the interior even in standard form was a cut above the Reliant original.



Mechanics back in the day before being bought by a senior member of the Barr soft drinks family which apparently used it to haul rubbish down to the gates of the estate. It then passed to Barry Marsden, navigator to Graham Walker who acquired the tooling after the collapse of Middlebridge.

"It was looking a bit tired by then," he admits, with the

paintwork past its best and the car sitting low on its springs and it was this event which spurred him on to tidy it up. Although what happened was rather more than that. "If I'm going to do it, I'll do it properly," exclaimed Jon or words to that effect and he began stripping down the car.

A further twist in the tale came with the realisation that he had a blank canvas to work with,

something which was unlikely to happen again. This meant that although he wouldn't normally change the colour of a car, the Scimitar would have to be stripped back to a bare shell anyway, giving him the perfect opportunity to choose his own colour.

After (in his own words) pestering the entire family with colour swatches for the next few

months, Jon eventually decided on a 1970s Mercedes colour called Impala after seeing a car in that shade at the Techno Classica show.

The paintwork was done by a contact at the local Citroën dealer of all places who probably hadn't painted a fibreglass car since the days of the Bijou but did a superb job. During the preparation work several layers

RESTORATION TIMELINE



Jon's Scimitar as purchased, still wearing its original blue.



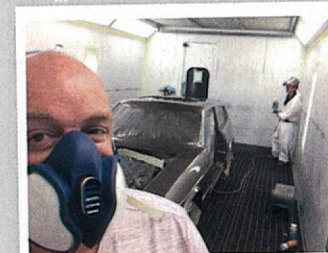
Much attention went into getting the doors right in particular.



A surprising amount of filler had been used at the factory.



Several coats of primer were applied to the prepared gel coat.



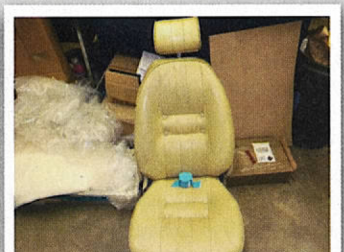
Masked-up Jon takes a selfie in the paint booth as the colour goes on.



The brown was chosen from a 1970s Mercedes-Benz paint chart.



Jon chose Capital Seating to create the new interior.



"I was adamant that I didn't want cream with blue piping..."

READER RESTO SCIMITAR



of filler were discovered in places, some of it applied at the factory which shows just how many man-hours went into making the Middlebridge cars.

As Jon reports, the bodysheet was essentially sound but some weakening of the area around the A-pillar was noticed, so this was sorted at the same time, while the door was also rebuilt – a trickier process than anyone had expected. The car has also been fitted with a period pop-up glass sunroof which Jon admits he really wanted to remove but the general consensus was that it

would create a lot of unnecessary work and possibly detract from the finished job by the time the hole had been filled.

Meanwhile, Jon had been enjoying the challenge of sourcing all the myriad detail parts which make a proper restoration, made all the more tricky since Middlebridge changed some details from the original Reliant production. Jon reports much assistance from the MESS club as well as Queensferry Road Garage and Graham Walker. The side repeater indicators turned out to be from

a Reliant Kitten, while the rear lights were a Bosch truck part but the hardest item to source turned out to be the rubber insert for the front bumper which cost over £200 used.

When it came to reassembly, Jon had a novel idea up his sleeve and it's one that has worked well. As you'll see from our side panel on the history of the Middlebridge enterprise, the firm at one time owned the Brabham name and it's thought highly likely that if production had continued it may well have been applied to a special edition Scimitar.

Jon duly took it upon himself to create what might have been and he built up this car as a 'Brabham' themed limited edition of exactly one. The badges were specially made with the Brabham logo used by Middlebridge at the time and the interior is simply a work of art.

"I was adamant I didn't want cream leather with blue piping," laughs Jon and having heard good reports from other Middlebridge owners about Capital Seating in Leicester he enlisted them for the interior work. Much discussion

followed, with Jon eventually trusting the advice of craftsman Peter Johnson who performed the work.

As for the oily bits, the Middlebridge cars boasted a galvanised chassis and stainless steel fuel tanks, so removing two of the Achilles' Heels of the Reliant cars and with the Cologne V6 running sweetly, Jon decided the running gear didn't warrant disturbing. A new set of springs was fitted to remove the tired stance but other than a few bearings and a set of tyres, the drivetrain was good to go.

This was late 2015 and Jon had set himself the goal of displaying the finished car on the MESS stand at the NEC Classic Motor Show. After a last-minute push, they both made it and as anyone who saw the car in the flesh will admit, it's a superb job.

The values of these Middlebridge cars have consistently been higher than the Reliant models, so this is the point at which you'll usually find us mentioning that the car's for sale. Not this time though: Jon's keeping hold of this one and we don't blame him.



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THE MIDDLEBRIDGE SCIMITAR

The Middlebridge story begins with the purchase by an Anglophile Japanese businessman Kohji Nakauchi of the rights to the Scimitar from Reliant for £400,000 in 1986.

Nakauchi's plan was to re-establish production at the rate of 300 cars per year as well as offering restoration and service facilities for the original Reliant-made cars.

The first Middlebridge cars appeared at the Earl's Court Motorfair in 1989, powered by the 150 bhp 2.9-litre Cologne V6 with a five-speed box. Among a claimed 450 modifications to the Reliant design claimed by Middlebridge were revised damping and a rear anti-roll bar with Middlebridge also adding a stainless steel exhaust and improving the chassis galvanising as well as fitting

restyled light clusters and different alloy wheels.

On the inside, the Middlebridge car featured upgraded trim materials, electric windows and standard stereo to justify its £24,000 price tag, which was an ambitious sell for the time, even for a car positioned as a kind of junior Jensen Interceptor.

In 1989, that kind of wedge would also have bought you a Mercedes E230 estate, a BMW 325i Touring or an Audi 100 Avant Turbo quattro, so Middlebridge knew it was being ambitious with its pricing.

As well as Middlebridge Scimitar, the Middlebridge Group also operated Middlebridge Engineering and Middlebridge Racing and in 1990 acquired the Brabham racing team. This explains the Brabham decals and detailing in

the trim of Jonathan's car which aims to show what a Brabham-themed limited edition might have looked like, had Middlebridge decided to capitalise on the famous name.

As for the Middlebridge Group, it never quite attained the optimistic 300 cars a year production target and production ended in 1990 in rather bizarre circumstances. Having become involved in a deal to acquire a £10m vintage Bentley known as 'old number one' in return for the assets of Middlebridge Scimitar plus some £6.8m in cash, the Middlebridge Group became embroiled in a legal dispute as to the identity of the Bentley in question and attempted to withdraw from the deal. The court found against Middlebridge and awarded £100,000 damages plus held it

to the purchase of the Bentley – and in 1990 that was enough to render the operation insolvent. In November 1990 the contents of the Beeston factory were auctioned off, with Graham Walker buying the body moulds and rights to the name and shape.

The cars which were produced during the Middlebridge era however, are a credit to the vision of the people working on the project, the upgraded features working well to make the car an attractive product some 22 years after its launch. The interior is particularly nice, while the upgraded handling and smoother power delivery from the 2.9-litre engine are both impressive. Find out more about this fascinating era in Scimitar history from MESS at www.middlebridge-scimitar.co.uk.

THE RELIANT SCIMITAR

The Scimitar had been launched in 1965 using a modified version of the chassis from Reliant's previous Sabre model and a body style derived from the SX250 originally produced by Ogle Design for the Daimler SP250/Dart chassis.

Known as the SE4 and badged Scimitar GT, this was a neat coupé powered by the 2.5-litre Ford straight-six engine and was a well regarded performance car.

With the relationship between Ogle and Reliant now cemented, the following year the firm provided Ogle with a Scimitar chassis as the base for a design it had been commissioned to produce for the automotive glazing firm Triplex.

By then Ogle Design had recruited rising design star Tom

Karen – whose later credits would include the Raleigh Chopper and Bond Bug – who was responsible for styling the Triplex concept. Named the GTS, for Glazing Test Special, it was styled to showcase Triplex's ability to produce large, complex laminated glass panels and Karen used an estate car style to achieve this, employing two large curved rear side windows and a glazed roof made from Triplex Sundym glass.

Liking what they saw and wanting to update the Scimitar, Reliant management commissioned Ogle and Karen to revise the Triplex GTS into a production design and with a redesigned chassis to give more rear footwell space, the result was the car badged as the Scimitar GTE and known as the SE5.

The Scimitar had gained the 3-litre Ford Essex V6 in 1966 when the straight-six engine had been discontinued and this had given it respectable performance with a 120 mph top speed and 0-60 mph in 9.4 seconds. The combination of the muscular Ford V6, Tom Karen's neat styling and the estate car practicality made the car unique on the market, with the Volvo and BMW competitors offering only four-cylinder power.

In 1972, the GTE received a revised chassis, upgraded interior and restyled rear lights, in which form it was known as the SE5a. Further changes came in 1975 when the design was revised to make the driving experience less overtly sporting and lend it more mainstream appeal. The

fibreglass bodysheet was made longer and wider, while modern (this was the '70s remember) rubber bumpers were fitted and the suspension became softer. Only 550 cars were produced in this SE6 form before further changes to spring rates, braking and steering were made and the model was given the name SE6a.

The SE6a would live on until 1979 when the 3-litre Essex engine was discontinued by Ford and Reliant turned instead to the 2.8-litre 'Cologne' V6 good for 140 bhp. Interior revisions and chassis strengthening modifications were added at the same time to create the SE6b and the car would continue in this form until November 1986 when production ceased. **CM**