

HUNK OF BURNING GO



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Long-time Scimitar fan Mick Gaughran was growing tired of the plastic bathtub jokes – then he found this: a 150bhp Middlebridge version of his favourite estate. Trouble is, it needed a bit of work...

Take a good look at this car. While it might look like a Reliant Scimitar it is, in fact, a Middlebridge version of the popular GTE. I should explain. After Reliant went out of business, Nottingham-based Middlebridge acquired the manufacturing and tooling rights in 1987. Sadly, just 77 cars were made before the Scimitar was finally laid to rest. So, what was different? Well, although the Middlebridge version retains the classic Ogle sports estate design penned by Tom Karen, it is powered by a 150bhp 2.9-litre fuel-injected Ford Scorpio engine that's good for more than 140mph. This emphasis on performance is important as Middlebridge was owned by Brabham Racing, which was also competing in Formula One at the time.

But was it the performance that attracted current owner Mick Gaughran to the car in the first place? 'Sort of,' says Mick. 'I'd worked and welded my way through Triumph TR5s, a TR6 and TR7, as well as a Rover P4 and P5, plus a Coupe and a couple of Yanks as well. However, I'd always loved the look and driveability of the Scimitar ever since I got behind the wheel of a yellow SE5a back in 1974.'

In those days, Mick was just working as a humble apprentice, so it would be a few years before he could afford his dream machine. During the Eighties, and obviously feeling a bit flush, he clocked up three Reliant Scimitar SE5s, another

three SE5as and four SE6as. In 2001, he bought an SE6a V8, which joined his pride and joy – an SE6a turbo.

'Despite their power, I just couldn't shake the Del Boy/bath tub jokes from my well-meaning mates with their Triumphs and their Rovers,' said Mick.

But that was all about to change. In April 2003, Mick clocked a Middlebridge that was for sale and needed some restoration work. It was exclusive, fuel-injected, boasted wood and leather and, best of all, reliable. In short, it was just the job for getting rid of the Del Boy jokes. It wasn't going to be easy, though.

COLOUR CODE

After handing over the cash and getting the car back to his Northamptonshire home, Mick realised that the paintwork wasn't exactly the Middlebridge's strong point. Peeling lacquer, micro blisters and gel coat cracks were all giving Mick a few sleepless nights. So he got to work straight away, removing the inner wings and bulkhead-mounted components before stripping the paint. Actually, his son Matthew was responsible for the paint 'n' prep – Mick just supplied the beer for him and his mates while they were rubbing the car down.

Now back to a bare shell, Mick was able to see the extent of the bodywork problems. 'A lot of the cracks weren't visible until we got the paint off. I'm pretty sure that you'd have to search long and hard for a worse example. It was a restorer's nightmare,' he said. ▶



With the paint removed, Mick moved the car to a warm environment for six weeks to dry the body out. Matt and Mick then started to grind out all the cracks, marks and blemishes. 'It's really important that the grinding depths and lengths are much greater than the visible fault. It's also important to choose the right repair method – we used either glassfibre tissue, matting or gel, depending on the fault.' Eventually, the father and son team were able to add resin to the body to help prevent the reappearance of cracks in future.

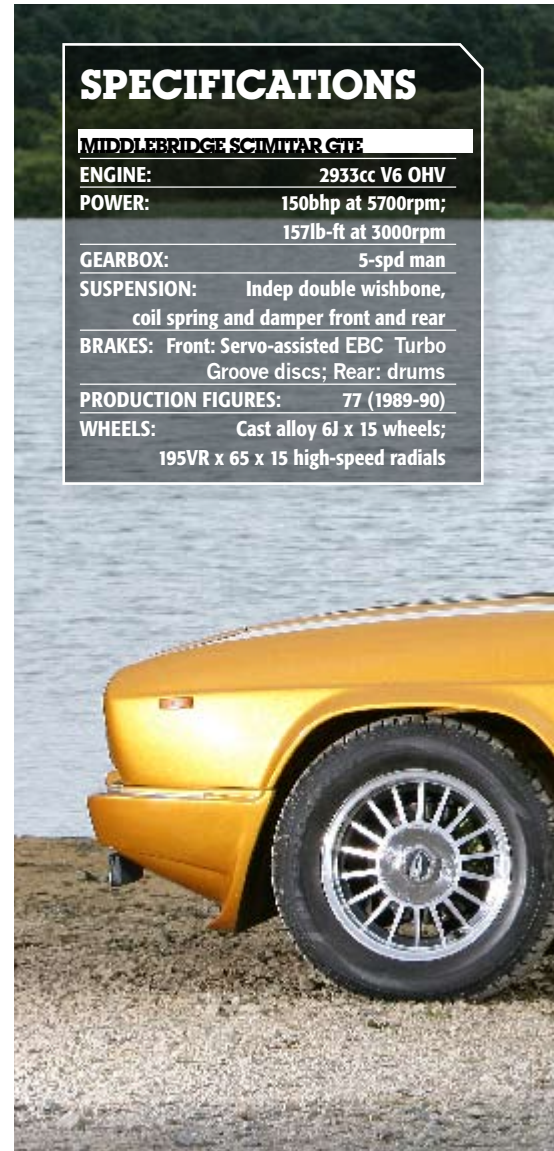
Job done, it was time to spray primer and guide coats to the body. This was followed by more rubbing down, more primer and more prep. 'At long last, we were able to spray two two-pack base coats and several coats of lacquer.'

It was at this point that Mick started to get cold feet about his choice of paint colour – Titan Gold Pearl. 'Oh my God, did she look bright when she was done!' said Mick. 'I was very worried and desperate to see the car in normal daylight. When we eventually rolled her out, she was bright – but not over the top. I breathed a huge sigh of relief.' With just a few bits of trim to touch up, the car was on the road a

SPECIFICATIONS

MIDDLEBRIDGE SCIMITAR GTI

ENGINE:	2933cc V6 OHV
POWER:	150bhp at 5700rpm; 157lb-ft at 3000rpm
GEARBOX:	5-spd man
SUSPENSION:	Indep double wishbone, coil spring and damper front and rear
BRAKES:	Front: Servo-assisted EBC Turbo Groove discs; Rear: drums
PRODUCTION FIGURES:	77 (1989-90)
WHEELS:	Cast alloy 6J x 15 wheels; 195VR x 65 x 15 high-speed radials



week after it left the garage and was on the Reliant Sabre Scimitar Owners' Club stand for the Ally Pally classic show.

INSIDE JOB

Despite being in constant service, Mick still found time to revive the car's interior. Everything had that 100,000-mile look: 'The leather was cracked, the wood was bleached, the carpets... don't even get me started on the carpets.' In between shows and touring, Mick removed the dash and sent it away for re-veneering. Handily, this meant he could concentrate on the wiring before getting to do the fun bit – screw it all back together. After deciding that the tired seats needed refurbishing, he chose to up the ante and include Scimitar logos on the new leather, as well as heating pads from an MGF.

With all the refurbished wood fitted, next on the 'to do' list was to lay a carpet set from Coverdale before applying the finishing touches, like the one-off steering wheel centre designed and built to the original Ital-Volanti wooden sample spec.

With all that extra power under the bonnet, Mick decided to turn his attention to stopping. 'I'd been unhappy with the brakes on the Scim for a while,' said Mick. 'They just



By his own admission, Mick Gaughan is just an 'average' classic car enthusiast. After starting out as an apprentice engineer in the Seventies, he got heavily into classics. 'I think my wife has given up trying to understand me and cars – but was shocked when my son brought home another Scimitar for himself,' said Mick.

Mick looks after his own website (www.middlebridge-scimitar.co.uk) and is getting ready to celebrate the company's 20th anniversary this year. He's also an active member of the Reliant Sabre Scimitar Owners' Club.

felt really poor compared to my other cars. So, one day, I decided to do something about it and ordered a set of Powerstop Turbo Groove discs and a set of EBC Greenstuff pads, all topped off with a set of AVO fully-adjustable shocks 'n' springs.' After a short bedding in period, Mick was sold. 'They're a great improvement – easily 25 per cent better than the standard kit. The pads are also made of Kevlar, so they leave less residue on your alloys, which is a nice bonus.

One problem that Mick did have with the stuff under the bonnet was the dreaded

running hot. After checking the usual suspects, like a leaky head gasket or a dodgy thermostat, he decided to upgrade the cooling system by fitting a 14in Kenlowe heavy duty fan and an uprated high efficiency radiator along with new hoses and clips. The cooling system was uprated from standard because the car would be used in France and southern Spain where the ambient temperatures are much greater than in Blighty. 'Well hopefully they are,' quipped Mick. 'That's the reason for the trip, after all.' Despite the upgrades, the problem still

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BEHIND THE WHEEL

With a fuel injected 2.9-litre engine that's good for 140mph, the first thing you notice about this Middlebridge Scimitar is how much poke it's got. Whether you're just making a clean getaway from the lights or need to overtake a caravan, this engine has got plenty of get up and go. It's also got plenty of slow down and stop,

thanks largely to the upgraded brakes. Those EBC Greenstuff pads really sink their teeth into the Powerstop Turbo Groove discs, so there's plenty of bite from just the lightest of touches on the middle pedal.

Moving between the gears doesn't cause you any dramas, and neither does the steering – it's quick and responsive, offers plenty of feel. This

means that you can get the best out of its handling, which on the whole is drama free.

The Middlebridge feels more of an evolution on the Scimitar theme, rather than a total revolution – but it is, in almost every aspect, a highly competent car.

And one that Mick's improvements have only enhanced.



wasn't solved and Mick was stumped: 'There was plenty of head scratching, I can tell you.' Eventually, he decided the water pump must be the culprit. Technically, this was the easy job, but our hero had the misfortune to shear off three of the pump bolts in the process of changing it. Bad luck. 'On removing the old pump, I discovered that the impellor had sheared off – so it was definitely the source of the problem. I managed to drill and tap the bolt holes, but it was a struggle and there was quite a bit of swearing involved, too.'

Umm, did he create some new, interesting and unusual swears words? 'A few...'

GETTING BETTER

Those that know Mick, know that the phrase 'as standard' doesn't regularly crop up in conversations with him about his classics. 'Basically, if I think something can be improved – and let's face it, with old cars most things can – then I improve it. I want to use my classic regularly, so I don't see the point in suffering.'

To this end, Mick has fabricated a new tow-hook and eye (one which is accessible

without taking the front splitter off), new rear hatch hinges and seatbelt anchor straps. He's also made up a new stainless steel spare wheel tray and fitted a heated front windscreen ('a godsend on frosty mornings').

Next on the 'to do' list was dealing with the wheel centres. 'I knew that they would eventually fall off or go dull, but I wasn't sure which route to take: I liked the idea of stainless steel because they clean up easily.' Mick found that the original centres were still available from a company called Performance Wheels in Perth, Australia, but they were pricey. Especially when you think that they fall off fairly easily. So Mick decided to try and make the centres himself. 'I think they look good, but I wouldn't do it again'. It took a lot of hard work and a lot of stress to get them anything like the finished product.

Now that the car was road-ready, Mick was able to clock-up some quality time behind the wheel. 'That was back in 2006, and it was then that I realised just how much I missed my Webasto sunroof. I'd fitted them to my previous Scimitars so, eventually, I bit the bullet and treated myself

to an electric Webasto – it's fantastic: no more struggling to open the roof, you can just get on and enjoy the summer.'

So far, so good. But there's another surprise waiting for you when you pop the hood – a rather fetching pair of stainless steel free-flow exhaust manifolds. Sourced from Graham Walker Ltd, they help the engine put out a few more horses and a bit of extra torque. 'I've also fitted a couple of rarer items,' says Mick. 'Namely, the polished and ported inlet and throttle bodies, a K&N air filter and a chip for the engine.' All of which make for a rather 'enthusiastic' driving experience, as you'll see from our Behind The Wheel section (above).

Suffice to say that Mick is happy with his car, and that the regular trips across to the continent help keep it fit and healthy. As if one Middlebridge wasn't enough, his son and daughter decided that Mick had a bit too much time on his hands so they treated him to another Middlebridge at Christmas.

Does it need restoring, Mick? 'Of course it does!' Here we go again... ■



DID YOU KNOW?

With a top speed of 140mph, this Scimitar is enough to get you into trouble with the law – as one of the Middlebridge's most famous owners found out. Princess Anne had put her order in for car number five, but the production schedule was running late. Consequently, she borrowed a pre-production prototype, during which time she managed to get a speeding ticket. One, we suspect, was not amused.ga