



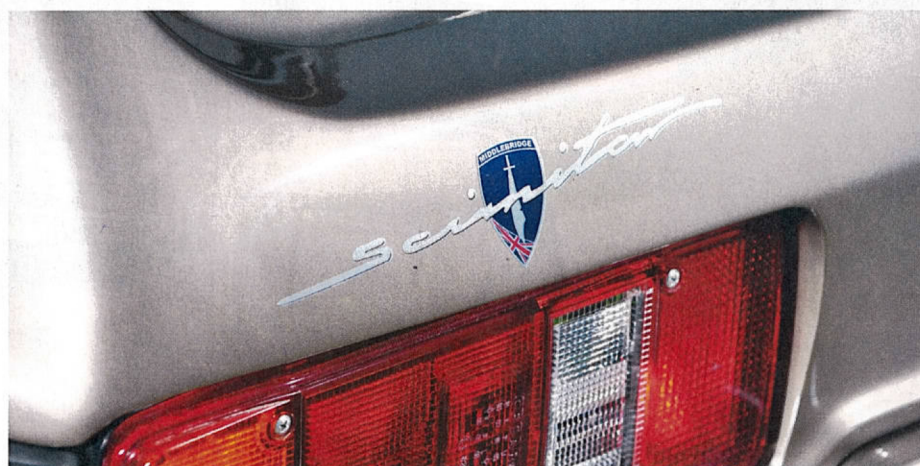
ESTATE OF MIND

We consider two of the first 'lifestyle' sports estates in the shape of the Volvo P1800ES and Reliant Scimitar GTE. Words: Paul Wager Pics: Matt Woods, Adam Tait

Today the hot ticket in car design is niche marketing, the concept having given us everything from the Qashqai to the horror of the BMW X6, but back in the '70s the idea of combining a sports car and a practical estate was a new concept.

It was Reliant which got there first, launching the Scimitar in 1968 and hotly followed by BMW's 2002 Touring in 1969. Volvo then revealed the P1800ES estate in 1972 and Lancia joined the party in 1975 with its Beta HPE. Most were based on mainstream saloon models but the Reliant was different: designed as a single model it was the only one which could genuinely claim to be a sports car in its own right. Sadly, that was probably the undoing of Reliant which didn't have sufficient volume to remain afloat in the long term. All of which explains why the car you see here is one of the later 'Middlebridge' Scimitars produced after the Tamworth firm's demise.

In its heyday though, the Scimitar GTE sold well and was a relatively common sight, helped when Princess Anne was publicly nabbed for speeding in her own example. The Volvo too has survived in decent numbers worldwide thanks



to its rugged Swedish build, while the BMW was never a big seller in the UK and the Lancias mostly suffered the short lifespan of all Betas. This month we compare the P1800ES with the Scimitar GTE and try to find a favourite.

Scimitar GTE

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 coupe 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 all made from Triplex Sundym glass.

Lining 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 was revised with a tweaked 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 bodyshell 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.

Reliant Scimitar GTE

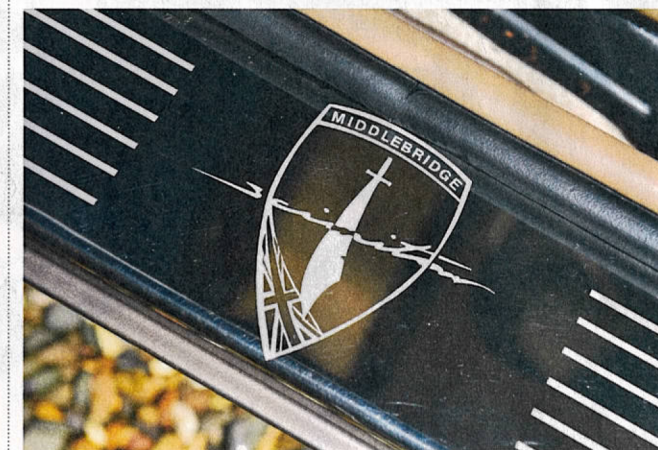
Engine: 2994cc Ford Essex V6
Transmission: Four-speed manual
Max power: 140 bhp at 5000 rpm
0-60 mph: 9.4 secs
Max speed: 118 mph
Overall length: 4.4 m
Overall weight: 1266 kg

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



→ THE MIDDLEBRIDGE SCIMITAR



Readers well versed in Scimitars will have noticed that the car in our photos isn't a Reliant-made original but one of the few Middlebridge-manufactured cars and big thanks are due to Jonathan Smith for the chance to photograph his immaculate car.

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 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 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. Inside the Middlebridge car featured upgraded trim materials, electric windows and standard stereo to justify its £24,000 price tag.

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 is a rarity even in Middlebridge circles.

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 impressive, 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 www.middlebridge-scimitar.co.uk.

The Scimitar didn't end there though, since Reliant sold the design to Middlebridge Group based in Nottingham which put the car back into production badged as the Middlebridge Scimitar GTE. Apart from the substitution of the 2.9-litre version of the Ford V6 now being used in the Sierra/Granada and a five-speed manual or optional four-speed automatic, the cars were essentially identical to the Reliant versions (despite a claimed 450 modifications) but were positioned as a bespoke, handbuilt car.

Middlebridge had some success with the Scimitar, producing a steady trickle until suffering massive losses in an unrelated court case which left it insolvent and forced the final end of production after less than 100 cars were made.

Even ignoring its history the Scimitar is an enigmatic car, with average examples representing great value for money and the Middlebridge cars commanding strong prices. Back in the day, the Reliant was priced alongside the Volvo and BMW but road testers all reckoned the Scimitar to be the driver's favourite of all the sports estates. In its 1972 *Giant Test* of the GTE, P1800ES and 2002 Touring, *CAR* remarked that the Reliant was not only the best-looking and the quickest, but the best screwed-together, surpassing the Volvo by some margin.

The Scimitar feels more like the product of

a mainstream maker than you might expect, especially considering the design originated in the 1960s. That, though, should come as no surprise since although the three-wheelers are an easy target for jokes, Reliant actually turned out high-quality products. Indeed, its expertise with fibreglass bodywork resulted in contracts to produce the Metrocab bodywork plus the RS200 Group B rally car bodyshell, truck cabs and Transit high roofs for Ford.

Driving a Scimitar is an interesting experience with a feel which is very much '70s rather than '60s – certainly when these cars were new, the feel from behind the wheel was bang up to date which is reflected in the road tests.

The car's high belt line and the low driving position give it a sports car flavour, while the dashboard of the SE5a and later examples is a neat effort with plastic mouldings which wouldn't disgrace a volume brand. The array of dials shows you're in a car with sporting pretensions and it's plushly trimmed. The rear is particularly neat, with two individually sculpted seats either side of a big central armrest.

Firing it up, the Scimitar sounds its sporting intentions with the characteristic Ford Essex beat familiar from many a Capri and the four-cylinder Volvo simply can't match its exhaust note. The Middlebridge cars used the later Cologne V6

which has a similarly characteristic note and both the Ford V6s give the Scimitar a muscular feel with plenty of torque.

On the move, the Scimitar does feel like a properly engineered design rather than a low-volume special and in many respects it's superior to contemporary Lotus and TVR products. The bodyshell is impressively stiff without squeaks and rattles, while the performance on offer is vastly superior to the Volvo. "The GTE absolutely eats the other two," claimed *CAR* when testing it against the BMW and Volvo, reckoning its tractability made it easier to drive than the competition.

When it comes to handling, the Scimitar is well known for its competence and you'll see examples being hillclimbed with some success. The rack-and-pinion steering is precise and the Watts linkage keeps the live rear axle in place well, with the car feeling nicely balanced. Driven hard, the Scimitar behaves in the modern way, with an initial touch of understeer, the tail then breaking away when provoked.

Practicality? Those individual rear seats make the Scimitar purely a four-seater but they fold flat in seconds to give a useful amount of space. Rather than a full hatchback tailgate, you've got just the opening glass window which means heavy loads have to be lifted a fair



The Scimitar originally used the 3-litre Essex V6 provided by Ford, but when that became obsolete Reliant fitted the firm's Cologne unit as found in the Capri 2.8. Middlebridge used the later 2.9-litre unit from the Sierra/Granada.



Some 450 modifications over the original design were claimed by Middlebridge. The interior was where the revamped Scimitar received the most attention, with electric windows and wooden dash added to justify the £24,000 list price. This limited-edition car celebrates Middlebridge's brief ownership of Brabham.

“The estate was unveiled in 1972 but was destined to be a short-lived offering since production of the P1800 ended in 1973”

height to be posted in, but it's still a useful load carrier more than capable of taking a bike or a pair of dogs.

So, a competent all-rounder then from a small British car maker, styled by the man who did the Raleigh Chopper and powered by a Capri engine. How does it compare to the exotic Frua-styled Swedish competition from a major international car maker?

P1800ES

The P1800 was something of an aberration for Volvo, a company better known for making sturdy, sensible saloons built to shrug off the Scandinavian winters. There's even a tenuous link with Reliant, since lack of capacity at Volvo's Swedish plants mean that the early P1800s were built by Jensen, less than 20 miles up the road in West Bromwich.

The P1800 in fact wasn't the first sports car from Volvo – that honour went to the short-lived P1900 of 1954, which was a low-volume exercise using PV544 running gear in a tubular chassis with a fibreglass body. Just 68 were produced in 1954, but the idea of a Volvo sports car didn't go away and the P1800 was designed essentially as a coupe version of the Amazon, using that car's floorpan and mechanical bits.

The elegant shape was marketed as being designed by Italian design house Frua, but in

2009 Volvo eventually admitted that the P1800 had been the work of Pelle Peterson, a Swedish employee at Frua.

The P1800 was launched in 1960, using the 1.8-litre B18 engine from the Amazon which although not lacking in power didn't create a car fast enough to match its exotic looks. After production was moved to Sweden in 1963, the engine was upgraded in 1969 to the 2-litre B20

engine which with Bosch D-Jetronic injection provided 135 bhp and transformed the car, now with a top speed of 120 mph. The estate was unveiled in 1972 but was destined to be a short-lived offering since production of the P1800 ended in 1973 – ironically, due to the cost of meeting US-market safety legislation.

Back in the early '70s, the P1800ES and Scimitar GTE were considered natural rivals,



Like the Scimitar, the P1800ES uses a glass tailgate.



Volvo P1800ES
 Engine: 1986cc
 Transmission: four-speed manual
 Max power: 135 bhp at 5500 rpm
 0-60 mph: 11.3 secs
 Max speed: 116 mph
 Length: 4.3 m
 Weight: 1130 kg



The Volvo's four-cylinder is the B20 unit from the Amazon range, equipped with Bosch's electronic D-Jetronic injection for a handy 135 bhp. The car's elegant detailing is very different from the '70s Reliant, both inside and out.





→ BUY ONE

Thanks are due to Michael Sainsbury at Car Storage in Kent for the loan of the Volvo P1800ES in our photos which is currently for sale. Restored back in 2006, the car is finished in Petrol Blue with a tan interior and has 129,000 miles showing which means the tough B20 motor is nicely run in. The car comes with a big file of history and photos showing previous restoration work and is described as being in good usable condition for your £13,500. For more details on either the Volvo or the secure storage facilities located near Tenterden, visit www.carstorageinkent.com or call 07887 564149.

although the Volvo was the more expensive of the pair. They both share similar sports-estate styling with similar proportions and both use a glass tailgate but the similarities largely end there. Stood next to a Scimitar, the Volvo's elegant detailing seems more 1950s than the Scimitar's plainer '70s approach which reflects the fact that the P1800 had already been around for a fair while before the estate version was introduced.

The Volvo's interior is designed with a lighter touch than the Scimitar, too: it's a more delicate affair with the slender dash panel running the width of the car and trimmed with petro-wood. There's no centre console which makes the interior feel both more spacious and less sporting than the Scimitar but it's a neat design and Volvo gave you a full complement of gauges behind the slender-rimmed three-spoke wheel.

The B20 engine lacks the vee burble of the Scimitar's Ford unit but with the Bosch injection it's a willing performer and not light on torque, although its peak of 123 lbf.ft is shy of the Scimitar's 152 lbf.ft. The P1800 feels light on its feet in a straight line and in isolation is a tidy-handling car. In a direct comparison with a Scimitar though, it betrays its saloon origins, with greater body roll although it's able to hold its own on smooth surfaces. Road testers in the '70s found the P1800ES disturbed by rough surfaces during hard cornering, judging the rear end – again a live axle design – to be less well located than the Reliant. The trade-off to this though, is that the Volvo does offer a more gentle ride,

although it's lower-geared than the Reliant so is spinning faster at motorway speeds.

Inside, the two are neck and neck on practicality although the lack of a centre armrest in the rear bench makes it possible to squeeze three passengers into the rear of the Volvo.

Conclusion

Despite frequently appearing in group tests when new, the Reliant Scimitar and Volvo P1800ES are

very different prospects as a classic car today. The Middlebridge Scimitars and P1800 may be closer in value but a respectable Reliant car can be bought for a fraction of the price demanded for a P1800 in similar condition. Of the two, the Volvo has the greater traditionally classic appeal but the Scimitar appeals to those who love the '70s way of doing things and as a child of that decade myself, I'm drawn to the Scimitar – the great value they currently offer only adding to the appeal. **CCM**

