



BRIDGING THE GAP

MIDDLEBRIDGE SCIMITAR AT 30

With the demise of the Scimitar, Middlebridge saw an opportunity to revive and improve it. We drive one 30 years on from its launch to see why it's so special



The Middlebridge Scimitar was launched at the Earls Court Motorfair in October 1989. Press releases from both Ogle Design and Middlebridge note that the timing coincided with the original GTE's 21st birthday. By drawing attention to this connection, Middlebridge perhaps hoped that journalists would understand that this new Scimitar represented a more mature take on what at the time would've been considered an established cult classic.

Fast forward to today and observing Mick Gaughran's stunning example, it's easy to appreciate why Middlebridge's car deservedly holds the mantle of being the ultimate Scimitar. Every facet of the car, inside, outside and beneath its plastic skin, has been subtly enhanced.

The release at the car's launch states: 'The [Middlebridge Scimitar] GTE' undoubtedly appeal to both the executive looking for an estate car with sports car styling and the sports car enthusiast seeking scintillating performance.'

That latter point was crucial as far as Middlebridge was concerned. Its Scimitar had

to be quick enough to reflect the company's motorsport interests; Middlebridge's racing division bought Brabham to break into the world of Formula One in 1989.

As such, rather than the 2.8-litre Cologne V6 used on the final SE6s produced by Reliant, the Middlebridge Scimitar graduated to the more modern 2.9-litre version; the same 12-valve engine as fitted to the Ford Scorpio, in fact.

As you might expect, Mick's Scimitar is placed at low revs, that V6 providing enough torque for it to effortlessly glide along the road. However, open the taps fully and the change in character is remarkable from around 3000rpm. There's a sudden urgency in the way this car accelerates, while the throaty growl from the twin-exit exhaust is equally satisfying, reminding you that this is indeed a sports car.

Middlebridge cars were specified with Ford's T9 five-speed gearbox, but the Ford M4LD four-speed automatic (as fitted to Mick's car) was available as an option. Such is the strength of the aforementioned mid-range acceleration that the urge to lift off the throttle creeps in from as

little as 4000rpm, but hold your nerve and you'll find the 'box is willing to rev to almost 5000rpm before changing up. Rather than blunting the car's sporting edge, the transmission merely removes the rigmarole of changing gears yourself from the act of driving quickly.

What's more, it transpires that hurried progress doesn't hurt Mick's wallet, either. Middlebridge ditched the SE6's troublesome Solex-Pierburg twin-choke downdraught carburettor in favour of Bosch Jetronic fuel injection. It benefits reliability, certainly, but provides a marked improvement in fuel economy, too - SE6s average 20.5mpg, whereas Mick quotes over 30mpg for his car.

WORDS Chris Hope PHOTOGRAPHY Stuart Collins



Mick's boot lid includes the signatures of Middlebridge finance, Kohji Nakauchi, Middlebridge Scimitar founder, John McCauley and Tom Karen, who designed the original 1960 Scimitar GTE.

1989 MIDDLEBRIDGE SCIMITAR
ENGINE 2933cc/V6/OHV **POWER** 150bhp@5700rpm **TORQUE** 157lb ft@3000rpm **TOP SPEED** 140mph **0-60MPH** 7sec
FUEL CONSUMPTION 30-34mpg **TRANSMISSION** RWD, four-speed automatic (five-speed manual standard) **ENGINE OIL** Castrol Classic
 XL120w50 5 litres **GEARBOX OIL** Castrol Dexron 11 (see owner's manual for capacity) **AXLE OIL** Castrol EPX80w90 2 litres

WHAT TO PAY PROJECT £9000-11,500 | USABLE £12,000-17,500 | GOOD £18,000-26,000 | EXCELLENT £30,000+ | PRICE WHEN NEW £24,000

It's 30 years since the launch of the Middlebridge Scimitar - expect a big celebration at this weekend's Silverstone Classic.

OWNER'S VIEW

MICK GAUGHRAN

'I have owned all the Reliant Scimitars (and I still do) but what stands out is the fact that I can jump into my Middlebridge after two weeks, turn the key and it'll start. What's more, it'll drive from stone-cold exactly the same as it does after a decent drive.

'Fuel injection makes a big difference, too - 33 to 34 to the gallon is what I get. I'll do 600 miles on a single tank, easy. I've been all the way through France without needing to stop at a petrol station. It gets used a lot for events and touring - it's been to Malaga on three separate occasions.

'It's only ever needed routine maintenance. Even before I got the car it's never been totally restored. All I did when I got it was put a front bumper on it - I had to because the original was wrecked - replace the exhaust, fit new tyres and have the two front seat bases recovered.

'I'm so impressed with how well it's done over the past 17 years.'



LAVISH LIVING

Mick's Scimitar does feel very special inside, befitting the air of exclusivity these cars would have exuded in period. Middlebridge was pitching its product - which cost £24,000 in 1989 - against those of BMW and Mercedes-Benz. Mick says that the bill for his car's original owner would have been well over £28,000, however, because it is fully-optioned.

The SE6 architecture remains the same, right down to the Triumph warning light cluster between the speedometer and rev counter - the former now reads up to 160mph - but such is the quality of the Wilton carpets, the swathes of burnished walnut and the leather lining the seats, door cards and much of the

remaining interior that you could be easily fooled into thinking that you're sitting in a Bentley.

Moreover, the body has been altered and strengthened in several places, resulting in a car that disguises its body-on-chassis construction surprisingly well. There's usually an almost complete absence of squeaks and rattles within the cabin; it only ever betrays its true underpinnings over uneven surfaces.

Aside from its impressive refinement, the road holding and stability of Mick's Scimitar must also come in for praise. It doesn't wallow at all around corners, largely as a result of the revisions made by Harvey Bailey Engineering Ltd, which uprated the front and rear dampers and springs and fitted a rear anti-roll bar.

The communicative steering is power-assisted, but not overly so, and requires only small inputs. We suspect that this is as a result of the smaller-diameter Italvolanti steering wheel - Mick believes that his Middlebridge is the only one that has the wooden centre insert fitted.

The steering lightens nicely mid-corner so that you have to never wrestle with the wheel; combine this with the suspension changes, and this Scimitar's handling feels genuinely sporty.

Although the seats only offer light bolstering, they nonetheless do a fantastic job of holding you in place. They're comfy, too, with generously-sized seat bases, and can be easily adjusted to provide a relaxing driving position, while headrests on all four seats are another sensible addition.

BUILT TO LAST

Despite ticking many boxes for period buyers looking for a car that was specially suited to winding B-roads and sprawling motorways, Middlebridge only produced 78 Scimitars. However, it's testament to those who built them and the owners who care for them that the rate of attrition is incredibly low. Mick says: 'One car was stolen in 1992 and has never been found. I'd dearly love to know whether it still exists or has been crushed, but the insurance companies have no details. Every single other one survives.'

As the Middlebridge Scimitars turn 30, that's certainly something to celebrate.



Mick has enhanced what is already an impressively luxurious cabin with a fully-electric Webasto sunroof for summer and heated seats and windscreen for winter.



15-inch alloys from Performance Wheels Australia, complete with centre caps, were one of the many improvements introduced for the Middlebridge Scimitar.



Most Middlebridge Scimitars have the 12V Cologne V6, though two cars were built with the Cosworth 24-valve. Mick adds: 'I've driven the Cosworth version and it's a very, very quick car.'



'Nearly every single Middlebridge Scimitar has a towbar. They're great towing cars, but apart from that, as the rear bumpers are incredibly rare, it offers much needed protection' MICK GAUGHRAN



MIDDLEBRIDGE SCIMITAR AT 30

Middlebridge states that in creating its Scimitar, it introduced 450 different modifications.



'THE V6 IS PERFECT'

DAVID SIMISTER EDITOR

The Scimitar GT-E – as I've been finding out with my own SE6a, which has already made a few appearances in CCW's Our Classics pages – is a superb grand tourer, and I love how the Middlebridge takes Tamworth's three-door shooting brake even further in that direction. The dashboard layout and driving position will feel immediately familiar to anyone who's owned an SE6 or one of its immediate successors, but the copious helpings of wood and leather inside, and the body-coloured trim outside, lend it an even more upmarket demeanour. The 2.9-litre version of the Cologne V6 is a gem of an engine, and perfectly suited to the job in hand – lazily taking a couple and a week's worth of walking gear up to the Highlands on a wave of torque – too. I wish the Middlebridge could have been honed and improved even further, because in Cosworth-tweaked form it definitely had the potential to become a shrunken Aston Virage.



HOW MIDDLEBRIDGE WAS ALMOST A GREAT BRITISH SUCCESS STORY

When Scimitar SE6 production ended in November 1986, so Reliant could concentrate its efforts on producing its S51 sports cars in greater numbers, a pair of Nottingham-based businessmen, John McCauley and Stuart Bird, spotted an opportunity. Both felt that there was a demand for an upgraded GTE, hand-built and produced to a higher spec.

McCauley (who had built a close relationship with Tamworth while working for Lucas) and former Audi employee Bird, approached Reliant in June 1987 to buy the manufacturing rights and all the tooling for the GTE and convertible GTC. The cost was £400,000, with a further £2 million to get their project up and running.

The Japanese owner of Middlebridge International, Kohji Nakauchi, provided the pair with the financial backing required and Kohji installed former Aston Martin mechanic, Dennis Nursey, as Middlebridge's chief executive. Cars would be built at a plant in Beeston, Nottingham.

Expected output was 300 cars per year, but was nearer one to two cars a week. McCauley and Bird parted ways with Middlebridge and Dennis Nursey brought in ex-Aston Martin and Tickford director, Steve Coughlin, to turn around the car's fortunes. His improvements to management and production might have been successful had it not been for the decision by sister company Middlebridge Engineering to buy Bentley Number One.

Middlebridge Engineering had been responsible for restoring a number of Aston Martins and Maseratis for customers in Japan and agreed a

deal with the Bentley's owner, Ed Hubbard. The aim had been to restore and then sell the car, but Middlebridge identified what it felt were discrepancies in its authenticity and tried to back out of the deal. A court battle ensued, which Middlebridge lost at the cost of £10 million.

Prior to this, Middlebridge Racing's purchase of Brabham in 1989 for £1 million had already left the company's finances stretched. The Bentley dispute served as the final tipping point, forcing Middlebridge to fold.

Mick adds: 'It's a shame because the Scimitar was only ever supposed to serve as a stepping stone. Kohji wanted to mate superbly engineered Japanese powerplants to a proper British aluminium-bodied sports car. I personally think that the plan was brilliant, but obviously taking on Bentley Number One was a big mistake.'



Middlebridge Scimitars being built at its factory in Beeston, Nottingham.



SCIMITAR CELEBRATION AT SILVERSTONE!

The Middlebridge Enthusiasts' Scimitar Set will have a record number of cars at this weekend's Silverstone Classic – 27 cars are booked but Mick is hoping for 30. Middlebridge Scimitars will take to the circuit on Friday lunchtime for a parade lap behind the Cadbury's Formula 3000 Reynard

race car, which has been restored specifically for the Silverstone Classic. Kohji Nakauchi, John McCauley and Dennis Nursey will also be in attendance.

■ silverstoneclassic.com
■ middlebridge-scimitar.co.uk

