

Bygones

Scimitar No 5... by Royal appointment

Owners of an iconic, locally-built, car of the 1980s will be reunited in Nottingham on Sunday. **Andy Smart** tells the story of the Middlebridge Scimitar

SLEEK and shiny, Middlebridge Scimitar No 5 rolled off the Beeston production line ready for delivery to HRH Princess Anne.

According to sources, the Princess Royal still drives her black, custom-made Scimitar, one of 78 built during the company's short life, and one of eight she has owned.

Strangely, Beeston has twice featured as a car-making centre. Humber, which went on to make such celebrated cars of the 1960s as the Sceptre and Hawk, started manufacturing there at the end of the 19th Century.

And, 80 years later, an attempt to revive a Reliant favourite started and finished there.

Reliant halted production of the Scimitar around 1986. Two Nottingham businessmen, Peter Boam and John McCauley, were convinced there was still life in the car. But acquiring the rights was another matter. Neither had the cash needed to make their dreams come true.

The venture capital came from a Japanese businessman who was a classic-car enthusiast and owner of the Middlebridge Group.

John McCauley combed the UK and Europe looking for the right site for his Scimitar factory. He finally selected one at the corner of Humber Road and Lilac Grove in Beeston.

Little did he know it was on the same site where Humber cars were made until its relocation to Coventry in 1908.

Investment in the Scimitar plan ran at £400,000.

The next generation of Scimitar owners could now specify the colour they wanted, what kind of interior finish they preferred - Wilton carpets, wood dashboard, and the like.

They were bespoke, handmade cars that cost about £25,000.

Production started towards the end of 1988. The factory was opened in October 1989 by Princess Anne but only about 70 models would be made before the dream ended.

Middlebridge concentrated its investment in other areas. The Scimitar branch went into receivership with the loss of 35 jobs in Beeston and car production ended in 1990.

The last Scimitar sold for £17,400, around £8,000 less than the list price and the factory was auctioned off in 774 lots.

The last chapter in the Middlebridge Scimitar story was written last year, when staff held a reunion at a Sawley pub.

This year, to mark the 21st birthday, the owners of these fine, British-made cars have been seen at Autokarna, in Wollaton Park, where 14 of the 78 cars made attended.

John McCauley, ex-managing director of Middlebridge, cut the 21st birthday cake with a Scimitar Sword.

On August 15, at the Curborough sprint track, Staffordshire, a further 14 cars attended the Reliant Sabre and Scimitar Owners Club's sporting weekend and many cars were adorned with the new Middlebridge Badge.

It had been resurrected by Mick Gaughran - one of the Middlebridge registrars - after discussions with Dan Mitchell - the other registrar - and John McCauley.

Mick and George Sampford, owner of No 63, had tracked-down a manufacturer of top quality, badges to fit on to the grill. At last, some cars were now wearing the badges that should have been fitted to the Scimitar 21 years ago.

Mr Sampford said they had tracked down all but eight of the Middlebridge Scimitars.

Nottingham City Council has granted Middlebridge owners permission to display the cars around the city's Robin Hood Statue on Sunday.



Production line: The black model at the top of the centre row is Scimitar No 5, awaiting delivery to Princess Anne, who is pictured below, opening the Middlebridge Scimitar plant in 1989.



Mr Sampford said: "The inaugural meeting of Middlebridge Scimitars was held in Nottingham's lovely Old Market Square last year, where five former employees came along to meet us - we are hoping to see more staff attend this year to actually meet the people who built our cars from scratch, 21 years ago, and drove them from the assembly line for the first time in their long, motorised life."

For more information, visit the website www.middlebridge-scimitar.co.uk.



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