



A Brief History of the Sabre and Scimitar

Sabre (SE1 and SE2)

In 1961 Reliant (who had been producing 3 wheeled vehicles since 1935) launched their first four wheeled car in the UK – the open sports Sabre 4 (SE1) with the Ford Consul 1700cc engine. The Sabre had evolved from the Sabra sports car, which had been developed in collaboration with Autocars of Israel, for whom Reliant had designed and developed four wheeled cars for local production since 1958. The fixed head Sabre 6 (SE2) followed in 1962 with the Ford Zephyr 2553cc straight 6 engine and a redesigned shorter bonnet.

Scimitar GT Coupé (SE4 series)

Whilst looking to improve upon poor Sabre sales, in 1962 Reliant obtained the rights to the Ogle designed Daimler SX250. They were able to mount it on a slightly modified Sabre chassis (still utilising the Ford 2553cc straight 6 engine, but now with triple SU carburettors) and launched it in 1965 as the fixed head Scimitar GT Coupé (SE4). The rear suspension was modified after the first 59 cars had been built and a total of 297 SE4 cars were produced.

As a result of the relationship between Reliant and Ogle Design, the Scimitar Coupé body was used as the base for a design concept commissioned by Triplex to demonstrate heated and laminated glass in automotive applications. The innovative style of this project caught the eye of the Duke of Edinburgh who was so taken with the Triplex Glazing Test Special (GTS) that he used it for two years as his personal transport; this was to be the first of several links with the Royal Family for many years to come.

A change in engine size was forced on Reliant, when the straight 6 engine was made obsolete by Ford. The introduction of the SE4a in 1966 saw the first of the 2994cc V6 Scimitars. This increase in power gave the car a top speed of 120mph with a 0 to 60 time of 9.4 seconds. Improvements were also made to the rear axle location, which improved high speed stability. The SE4b (launched in 1969) had a redesigned front suspension. The SE4c (a SE4a or later SE4b with a 2.5 litre V6) was launched in 1967 as a reaction to the oil price rises caused by the Arab-Israeli seven day war. Reliant produced 539 SE4a, 52 SE4b and 118 SE4c, which clearly established the Scimitar GT as a fast and civilised 2 seater. Production of the GT ceased in 1970 with a total of 1006 Coupé being produced.

Scimitar GTE (SE5 series)

In 1967 Reliant approved development of the Ogle designed Grand Touring Estate (GTE) with the rising waistline and sloping roof over a design based on the GTS with its large rear expanse of glass. Originally built on a modified Coupé chassis, before production a completely new chassis was designed to gain rear footwell space. In 1968 the SE5, a 4-seater 2-door Sports Estate with an opening rear window, was launched amidst considerable interest. Chassis upgrades and a restyled interior, heater and rear lights led to the SE5a in 1972. HRH Princess Anne was given a Reliant Scimitar GTE by her parents for a joint birthday/Christmas present (the first of 8 the Princess Royal has owned) and she still uses a Middlebridge Scimitar GTE as personal transport.

Scimitar GTE (SE6 series)

Introduced in 1975, the new SE6 was longer and wider than the SE5a and sported rubber bumpers and softer suspension aimed more at the executive rather than the sporting market.

In 1976 after only 550 cars had been produced, Reliant introduced the SE6a, which had several minor improvements to the door hinge area, spring rates and power steering pressure as well as a change from Girling to Lockheed brakes.

In 1979 Ford discontinued the 3 litre 'Essex' engine that Reliant had used for 13 years. The replacement 2.8 litre 'Cologne' V6 engine was fitted to the Scimitar and, along with minor trim changes and strengthening, resulted in the SE6b. Production of the Reliant Scimitar GTE ceased in November 1986 with 3908 SE6a and 407 SE6b cars leaving the factory.

Scimitar GTC (SE8b)

At the same time as they introduced the SE6b GTE, Reliant also started production of a convertible Scimitar, the GTC. In production for over 6 years, just 442 vehicles were produced. The convertible concept suited the car very well; the rear seats were still individually folding and the car could still carry a reasonable luggage load. The GTC was only available with the 2.8 litre engine and the later SE6b and SE8b had galvanised chassis.

Middlebridge Scimitar GTE

In 1986 Reliant sold the rights to the Scimitar GTE to the Middlebridge Group. There were a host of relatively minor changes, but the main difference from the SE6b was the Ford 2.9 Injection V6 engine, a 5-speed manual or 4-speed automatic gearbox, galvanised chassis and multi-spoke Performance Alloy wheels.

The Middlebridge Group went into receivership in 1990 after suffering massive losses in a high profile court case involving a Bentley race car. Only 78 cars were produced and the rights were purchased by Graham Walker Ltd.

Scimitar Small Sports Series

Designed by Giovanni Michelotti in 1978, the Reliant Scimitar SS1 was not launched until 1984. The German built chassis and well engineered independent suspension all round was woefully let down by the quality and style of the composite body panels that were bolted to it. Galvanised chassis started to appear on the 1300 and 1600 models from number 600 and all were galvanised by 900 (all 1400 and 1800Ti chassis are galvanised). Available with a 1300 Ford CVH (later 1400) with 4 speed gearbox or 1600 Ford CVH with 5 speed gearbox, the car was enjoyable, but not particularly fast (100/110 mph top speed and a 0 to 60 time of 12.7/9.6 seconds would not even keep up with the 1966 SE4a).

To take full advantage of the great handling and grip available Reliant eventually launched a Nissan 1800 Turbo injection version in 1986, which gave the car the top speed and 0 to 60 times it fully deserved (126 mph and 6.9 sec). William Towns was entrusted with the task of improving the looks and styling of the SS1, which resulted in the Scimitar SS2 (intended to be available with an American 3.1 litre V6); unfortunately this never reached production. In 1989 the SST was exhibited with fewer creases and shut lines and much smoother bodylines, but very few were produced.

Scimitar Sabre

In 1991 the SST was updated with smoother bumpers and side skirts and renamed the Sabre. Finally the Small Sport looked as good as it went. Initially available with the same engines as the SST (1.4 Ford and 1800Ti Nissan) this became the Scimitar Sabre in 1992 when the Ford engine was replaced with the much more powerful Rover 1.4 16v K-Series unit, the turbo engine was phased out and the interior was given a slight facelift. The last Scimitar Sabre cars started being built in 1993 (they have 1993 chassis numbers) but some were completed/registered much later!

All four wheeled vehicle production ended at Reliant in 1995.