

Reliant Scimitar SE4

by Sam Glover

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE 2994cc/V6/OHV

POWER 136bhp@4570rpm

TORQUE 192lb ft@3000rpm

GEARBOX 4-spd manual

0-60MPH 9.4sec

TOP SPEED 122mph

MPG 22.1

PC GUIDE PRICES C/D £7000,
C1 £5750, C2 £2750, C3 £1250

WHAT TO LOOK FOR...

The Scimitar's glassfibre bodywork has a tendency to sag over time, and it wasn't well-aligned with the chassis at the factory. Restoration with intelligent strengthening is possible – as our test example proves – but it's a fairly involved task. The chassis is robust, but check for rust in the rails and outriggers. The Essex engine is understressed and durable, along with the rest of the Ford drivetrain. Overheating is a common problem, though, so check for signs of headgasket failure. Check the front suspension and trunnions for rattles. Electrical gremlins are usually due to dodgy earths and are easily fixed. Inside, the seats are flimsy and some trim is hard to find.

Reliant had all the right ingredients to produce a successful Grand Tourer. It had a well-equipped factory in Staffordshire with a capable workforce, excellent links across the motor industry, a wealth of engineering knowhow and world-leading expertise in glassfibre bodyshell moulding.

The Tamworth-based concern began to dabble with the concept in the early 1960s, and by 1962 it had a competent offering in the form of the Sabre Six. A chain of rally successes demonstrated that the little sports car was an able performer, but its kit car-like bodywork repelled buyers.

Reliant manager, Ray Wiggins, found the solution at the 1962 Earls Court Motor Show. Exhibited on the Ogle Design stand was one of two sharply-styled coupés commissioned by the Helena Rubenstein Cosmetics Company. It was based on a Daimler SP250, but neither Daimler nor Ogle had any firm mass-production plans.

Wiggins calculated that the glassfibre body would slot more-or-less straight onto the Sabre Six chassis and opened negotiations to acquire the design.

The Scimitar SE4 was launched at Earls Court two years later. Ogle's managing director, Tom Karen, had made a myriad of bodywork tweaks to suit Reliant's preferred construction methods, increase cabin space, and assimilate the bumpers and windscreen of a Ford Classic. The car's styling weathered the productionisation process well, and it still looked as modern, elegant and faintly Italian as ever.

As you'll have spotted from the Tech Specs boxes, the Capri and Scimitar have an engine in common.



Reliant Scimitar SE4

'Few cars of the 1960s could match the Reliant Scimitar's grip, poise and balance'



Two well-sorted and similarly equipped rivals show their mettle on the undulating B-roads of East Sussex.

Underneath, the Sabre's cruciform ladder chassis was elongated by two inches, its Ford Zephyr straight-six was tweaked to 120bhp and its suspension was softened to befit the Scimitar's GT aspirations. A four-speed Ford gearbox, live rear axle and Triumph TR4-derived independent front suspension remained.

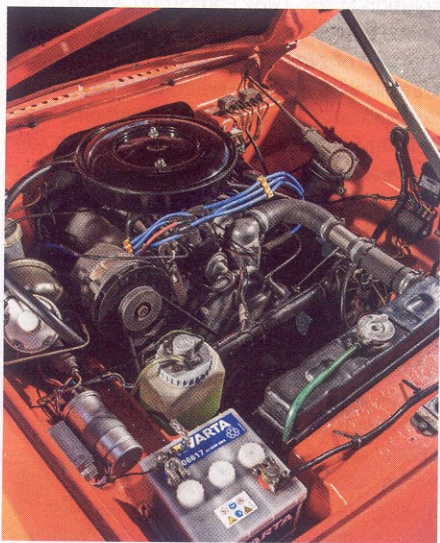
Motoring journalists weren't keen on the longitudinal Watt's linkage suspension at the rear, but Reliant quickly responded with a double trailing-arm set-up and a small transverse Watt's linkage to locate the axle

laterally. The result was a fast, fabulous-looking and fine-handling car that held its own among the likes of Triumph, Austin-Healey and Daimler.

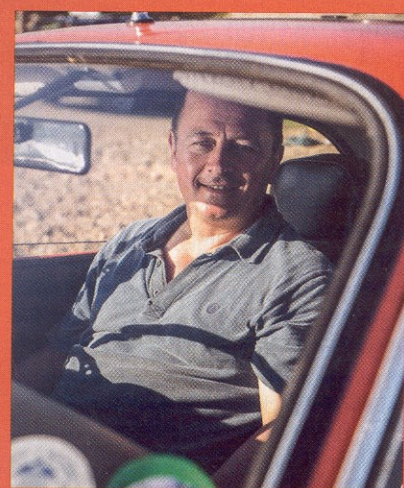
Matters got even better with the launch of the SE4a in 1966. The cumbersome Z-car engine was swapped for Ford's new Essex V6, stowed far back behind the front axle. The access problems this caused were countered by near-perfect weight distribution. The handling advantages were enhanced by an array of suspension tweaks by former BRM designer John Crosthwaite, which substantially lowered the car's roll-centre and added extra pliability all-round. The SE4b followed in 1967 with a scattering of minor upgrades.

Few four-seater cars of the 1960s could match the Scimitar's grip, poise and balance. Today, its B-road dynamics remain impressive. Girling front disc brakes and rack-and-pinion steering help to point it into corners with precision, and the torquey engine drags it out with muscular acceleration. It's a joy to hurl around, with oversteer available on request.

The controls are nicely weighted and the woofle of the twin exhausts provides added encouragement to exploit its capabilities. It's comfortable, fairly spacious and extremely long-legged in top gear. Reliant had struck GT gold. The Scimitar template that the SE4a established would serve the company well for a further 20 years.



The Essex V6 is a very snug fit in the Scimitar.



THE OWNER

GEOFF PINCH: Geoff's Scimitar was the fourth SE4b to leave the production line. It was restored in the mid-1980s, and the fact that it looks so good today is tribute to the quality of workmanship. Geoff uses it for classic rallies and regular long trips around the UK and Europe. 'I've covered more than 4000 miles this summer alone,' he says. 'I like it for being a little bit different without being inaccessible like more exotic makes. Everyone bemoans the low values of Scimitars, but I intend to cherish them while they last.'



...so which one's best?

The Ford Capri, actually. Of course, each car has its plus points, and each its foibles, but we're judging this on practicality and long-distance touring ability. The more agile Scimitar is so very close to the Capri, but it is also less accommodating. And that engine bay is too tight for roadside fettling in comfort. Yes, the Triumph GT6 is the prettiest car here but you need to be in superb athletic condition (or masochistic) if you're thinking of spending several hours in one without a break. And the MGC GT, bless it. A lot of hard work and extra non-original equipment has gone into making it drivable... but again, not too far. So the Capri ticks most of the right touring car boxes as well as being the one with the least alarming running costs profile. It's a bit common, but you can't have everything.

Gervais Seymour ■