

# Not Purrrrrfect

**It's plastic, not tin. But the Reliant Kitten was certainly original. Dan Lockton recalls his experiences.**



What's the ideal blend of cheap fun and practicality for a young driver? On paper, a four-seater car, easy to park, with go-kart handling, great acceleration, 60 mpg, a big boot and no rust sounds compelling. And indeed it was.

The Kitten was never a common sight even when new, as Reliant only made 4,000 of them. It shared a lot with the Robin, but had a new front end with Allegro headlights, much more comfortable seats (replacing the Robin's primary-school chairs) and more room inside as the engine was shunted further forward. Oh, yeah, that extra wheel made a big difference, too.

Styled, like the Raleigh Chopper, by Ogle Design's Tom Karen, the Kitten was launched at the 1975 Motor Show. The name was chosen in an employee competition; I don't know what the winner got. Reliant's own all-aluminium, 40 bhp 850cc engine was up front, driving a live back axle on cart springs via a (pretty noisy) drivetrain in the fibreglass 'echo chamber' transmission tunnel between the low-slung front seats. The tiny steering wheel was almost vertical, giving a kind of sports car feel, or at least a very different feel to, say, the Mini's tractor-like arrangement. The

gearchange was extremely slick and direct, with the stick protruding from the centre console just like the recent Honda Civic. A lot of the fittings came from the bins behind Longbridge when no-one was looking, but were none the worse for that.

As a hand-built car from a small company, the Kitten was always going to be more expensive than its mass-produced rivals (Mini, Polo, Fiat 127) and though the advertising made much of the amazing economy (60 mpg at 50 mph, 70 mpg at 40 mph), sales were very slow. Winning the Total/Mobil Economy Runs—allowing Reliant to use the "world's most economical production car" tagline—didn't help much.

Which? and What Car? slammed the Kitten for various foibles, mostly quality control issues; Motor Sport and Autosport loved it, as it was about the closest you could get to a vintage car in a modern body. In 1982 Reliant stopped making the Kitten, though it enjoyed a limited reincarnation in India as the Sipani Dolphin.

Having a soft spot for the more 'marginal' side of motoring, a Kitten seemed a good choice as a first car once I passed my test. £450 later, I was driving back

from Staffordshire to Devon (A38 all the way) in a red 1981 Kitten estate, with new MoT and stylish tan leather steering wheel surround. The car had been advertised in the Reliant Kitten Register 'Mewsletter', the main source of info on these models, and the seller had five other partially cannibalised Reliants dotted around his house and garden, as is often the way. I'd chosen the Kitten 'estate' because the side-hinged back door was a lot more convenient than the semi-hatchback of the 'saloon' version, and gave a really



useful size boot which I looked forward to filling with obsolete electrical junk picked out of skips (a kind of hobby of mine).

What was it like to own? Great fun, tempered by moments of fear and worry, as with most old cars, especially at this end of the scale. It was fantastic to drive—the light weight (half a ton), very direct steer-

ing, 10-inch wheels and tiny turning circle (24 feet, less than a London taxi's) meant that parking and other manoeuvres were incredibly hassle-free. You felt in touch with the road in the same way you do in a go-kart, or when sitting in a shopping trolley being pushed down a hill by drunk friends. The rock-hard suspension helped in this regard, too. In fact it was so hard that it was over a week before I noticed that one of the shock absorber brackets had rusted through and snapped—it made so little difference. The kick-in-the-back acceleration was impressive, too, allowing me to win many a traffic light drag race, at least up to about 30 mph.

The Kitten was so narrow that it was trivial to fit through gaps between other cars, and look in the mirror and laugh at the people behind trying to do the same and having to go up onto the pavement to get past. Somewhere in the City I managed to drive the Kitten down a narrow alleyway with a cast-iron bollard in the middle to stop cars—I had to fold in the wing mirrors, but it was narrow enough to fit past it! The most fun I had with the turning circle was at some roadworks where, irked by the long wait, I decided to do a U-turn and take a shortcut I knew. It was easy to spin right round within the width of the road—easy for the Kitten, that is. The S-class Mercedes behind, trying the same trick, ended up doing a five-point turn, blocking the road to much hooting, and hitting its back bumper into a wall in the process. I felt slightly guilty, since that back bumper alone probably cost double what my car did. Similarly on



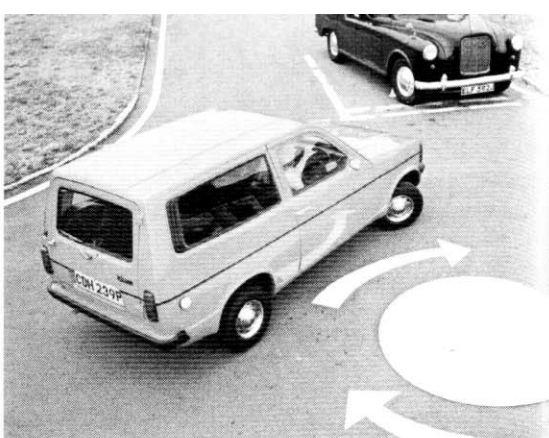
the 'cheap' front, it really did sip petrol. I regularly got 60 mpg or more on long journeys, even with the car heavily loaded with junk.

I won't pretend it was all good. My penchant for using the full extent of the steering meant the rack wore out pretty quickly, so I replaced it, managing to get something upside down in the process, which led to a very scary test-drive round a roundabout in Purley. A valve-spring broke as I was driving down to Devon late one Friday night, but I was able to continue (very slowly) for the next 20 miles on 3 cylinders. That was fun. Some kids smashed the window to get in and nick my £5 car boot sale radio, also breaking off a big chunk of dashboard. An attempt to cut corners in polishing the Kitten for a classic car show, by smearing cooking oil over the body (gives an amazing glossy sheen!) backfired once the car became caked in road dirt and dead flies. It had a lovely permanent chip-shop smell afterwards. The windscreen wiper fuse used to blow while driving in heavy rain on the M25—sticking my arm out to wipe the windscreen while driving along wasn't a good idea, though I still had to do it a few times.



But these were all minor mishaps. The main trauma came when driving across Salisbury Plain in an almighty storm—howling winds and horizontal rain—on a January afternoon. As I went over a bump, the exhaust fell off (it had been going for a while), so I pulled in as soon as I could, up onto a verge to do what I could to tie it up. The exhaust wasn't the real problem, though...

Did I mention it was very windy? As I opened the door to get out, a huge truck went by, and the backdraught from that, together with the wind, tore the door right out of my hand, and off the hinges too. That was pretty scary. Like a fibreglass kite, and not much heavier, it was blown off down the road, bouncing on its edge and landing in the inside lane of the A303, followed



by loads of important paperwork which I'd stuffed into the door pocket. A Range Rover swerved to avoid the mess. I picked it up as soon as I could: I didn't want any more accidents.

After a few days of driving with the door held (sort of) back in place with gaffer tape and a rope all the way under and over the car and getting in and out on the passenger side, I went and got a beige Robin door instead from a bloke in Slough. By that point I'd removed most of the exhaust pipe, including the silencer, and it was making a deliciously rasping four-stroke burble. The trip to Slough involved driving past Windsor Castle, and I like to think that the Kitten's raucous purr woke Prince Philip from some afternoon slumber.

It's often the way, though: once a car starts to sport different coloured body panels, it goes into a kind of spiral of decline (pity the Polo Harlequin) and more and more goes wrong. I resprayed the door, eventually, but it never quite matched. I had to park the car under a tree which covered it in gungy sap, so it became hardly worth cleaning. The paint was so thin that T-cut just revealed the bright pink primer underneath. A leaf spring broke giving the Kitten a lopsided gait. Poor earthing led to the headlights failing while driving through Brixton late at night. That wasn't fun, though I was able to fix it by the roadside. The police stopped me a few days later because "the car looked a bit of a wreck". I thought that was slightly unfair.

Eventually the little gear that drives the oil pump shattered while I was doing about 60, filling the crankcase with bits of gear, and the car came peacefully to a halt. I had no easy way of doing the necessary repairs and was just about to move house, so when a scooter



dealer in Tooting offered me £100 for the Kitten, I took it, very reluctantly. That car had been a great friend to me, and for all its faults, had been tremendous fun.

The dealer told me that with a bit of tidying and a replacement engine out of a Robin, he reckoned he could get £1,000 for the Kitten. I was dubious, think-

ing it would surely be scrapped, but looking at the DVLA's online vehicle check today, it's still taxed and on the road, so someone's still enjoying the benefits of Kitten motoring, and wondering every day why it smells like Harry Ramsden's. **OT**

*When he's not writing about Reliants, Dan works as a designer and an engineer. He has a website at [www.danlockton.co.uk](http://www.danlockton.co.uk).*

