

Caddy



Hack

A false start at a British neoclassic builder to rival Excalibur created this Cadillac-based local celebrity

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Chilston Park is a handsome 18th-century house made up of triangular pediments, Diocletian windows and ornate cornices. Its walls may be made of brick rather than marble, but its builders were unashamed in their ambition to recreate a Roman villa – albeit with the sash windows, fireplaces and other conveniences of the time. Just one of countless neoclassical buildings to be found across the Western world, today it is appreciated as a luxury hotel, and considered refined, cultured and tasteful.

Not so neoclassical cars. Admittedly, we're dealing with a much shorter timescale here. Chilston's architects were looking back 2000 years, but no one is trying to make cars that look like Roman chariots. When the first true neoclassical car, the Excalibur, appeared in 1963, it was recalling just over three decades to the 1928 Mercedes-Benz SSK. Cars age much more quickly than buildings, however. FIVA defines a historic vehicle as anything of more than 30 years in age, but a house from 1994? Many would hesitate to even call it old.

So, if that's not why most neoclassic cars are generally looked down upon, perhaps it's just that most aren't done very well. Many fall foul of the 'uncanny valley' effect, where a few anachronistic details or incorrect proportions create something more offensive than either an exact replica or something that's only lightly hinting at historic designs. Most people love how both a Pur Sang Bugatti Type 35 and a BMW MINI look, but an NG or Mitsuoka? It's an awkward place in that middle ground.

Avoiding that unwelcome spot is what Robert Maidment set out to achieve when, having learnt how much Mercedes-Benz 540Ks were changing hands for in the late 1980s, he aimed to build a modern recreation with up-to-date driveability. It didn't need to fool anyone that it really was a 540K, or indeed any 1930s car – it just needed to swerve the uncanny valley.

Maidment wasn't about to build a car from scratch, however. The owner of a small but successful firm making exhibition displays, he wisely decided to leave as much of the engineering as possible to the experts by basing his creation on an existing, relatively modern car. He convinced his shareholders

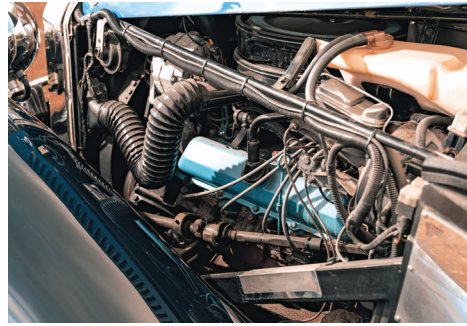


to fund a prototype vehicle that, it was hoped, would eventually be able to be produced and sold on a limited basis for half the price of a contemporary Rolls-Royce – around £50,000 in 1991, or the price of two Morgan Plus 8s.

Correctly realising that the single biggest visual issue with most neoclassical cars is the proportions of their wheels, Maidment began his search for a donor vehicle by measuring the wheel-to-wheelbase ratio of any car he came across, and comparing it to that of the 540K. He was already a Cadillac fan, and his own imported '78 Seville turned out to be the closest match. Its wheels were large in total rolling diameter and separated by a long wheelbase, while its tyres were relatively narrow and boasted deep sidewalls. Sensibly, however, he didn't chop up his own car, and instead found another 1978 Seville for sale that had a well-preserved interior but scruffy bodywork.

Maidment's design and engineering team consisted of a precision engineer who'd worked with his firm – but not on cars – and another local contact who had designed quarter-scale toy vehicles for children. And himself. Unperturbed by their lack of qualifications – which Maidment later admitted was utterly foolhardy – the trio aimed to make the car drive as similarly to the donor as possible, while keeping all of its advanced luxury features.

Straight away, that forced an early decision to forgo the 540K's open roof for a fixed item,



Seville's V8 sits low beneath a centre-hinged bonnet



but disguised to look like a convertible top. Maidment continued to refer to the car as a roadster for many years, but the rigidity of the fixed roof was essential, and it removed a significant source of complexity. The move also allowed the car to keep the Cadillac's existing registration number. Other hidden conveniences include the headlamp bars at the front, which, as well as holding the lights, form part of the bracing for the tubular steel frame that replaces the Seville's inner body structure ahead of the bulkhead.

In general, however, the 'roadster' largely avoids the uncanny valley problem, even if its wheels still appear a bit too wide – as does, from certain angles, its cabin. Beneath its hand-formed aluminium bodywork, the heavily cut-down Seville remains, even if it's just the minimum needed: the suspension is retained at the back, the roof is cut off in the middle, and the front has gone forward of the bulkhead, which itself was narrowed, with a strip cut out of the middle. And yet, particularly in its side profile, the car looks just like a scaled-up 540K. It's not tricking anyone – or no true enthusiasts, anyway – but still manages to look handsome.

Second to the profile, the rear of the car is the most convincing: only its 1950s-style reversing lamps draw the eye as an obvious anachronism, and the width of the car is less obvious. Like on the 540K that inspired it, there's a rear luggage hatch, but this one makes use of the Seville's

Despite appearances, Courier's tight-fitting top doesn't open. Above: profile does a convincing impression of 540K inspiration





'This isn't a hot rod off the line, but there's enough shove to enjoy effortless overtakes and relaxed cruising at high speed'

powered boot latch to raise the lid a few centimetres for opening, and also provides a soft closure. It reveals a rectangular space slightly larger than the hatch itself, rather than a hollow of the entire rear end.

At the front, meanwhile, while the radiator cowlings mimics the shape of a 540K's, the grille material itself is that of the original Seville, but reconfigured and turned on its side. Both the Cadillac script and bonnet ornament sit above. Keen to be able to continue calling it a Seville without getting into legal trouble, Maidment telephoned Cadillac to ensure that it wouldn't object to the name on the project. Initially dismissed many times – presumably as an odd foreigner chopping up a car in a country where Cadillac had only ever been a niche player – Maidment eventually received a written letter of approval from a General Motors executive.

Inside, however, there's no mistaking this for anything other than a late-'70s Cadillac. In one sense that's disappointing because, other than the split windscreen and the view over the long bonnet, the experience mirrors that of driving a Seville. But there is something impressive about getting behind the wheel of a one-off and finding not a kit-car-style dashboard of flat pieces of wood wrapped in leather, but a proper, productionised panel.

Like the bulkhead behind it, the dashboard was narrowed and rejoined at its centre to fit the car's tapering front – and it's very well done. That the '78 Seville featured a very traditional interior for its time, clearly Art Deco-inspired with its wood accents, metal detailing and geometric shapes, appears to have been



Clockwise from main: dash has been neatly filleted to fit the new application; Seville's chairs major on comfort rather than support; all mod cons (for circa 1978)



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Where Chilston Park is revered, the Courier divides opinion. Below: grille badge and script reveal true identity

a lucky coincidence. As Maidment intended, the Seville dash allows the car to maintain a features list that still sounds modern today: powered seats, cruise control, climate control, adjustable intermittent wipers and automatic headlights. It also enforces a significant offset to the steering wheel, while the pedals are slightly off the driver's centre line, too.

Originally fitted with the Seville's standard 5.7-litre Oldsmobile Rocket V8, the car was upgraded to the 300bhp 6.6-litre that's wedged in behind its louvred engine covers after its first 10,000 miles. Thanks to Bosch injection, this starts with a turn of the square-headed GM key, and is suitably hushed on Chilston's gravel drive, where the column-shift auto 'box allows easy, low-effort manoeuvring. Lean on the throttle more heavily, however, and the engine burbles with each prod of the pedal.

Blunted by the three-speed Hydramatic self-shifter, this car isn't a hot rod off the line, but when held in gear it does get a move on, with enough shove for effortless overtakes and relaxed cruising at high speeds. An exhaust bypass is activated by the donor Seville's rear demister switch and, with this, the Caddy roars more like its pre-war inspiration – but with the uneven rumble of an American V8 rather than the bark of a Mercedes straight-eight.

It is when pressing on along a sweeping country road that this car makes the best case of itself. The engine delivers ample pace, while the relatively modern chassis rides over poor British roads with a serenity a 540K couldn't approach. It doesn't handle half badly, either: the '78 Seville was the beginning of Cadillac's move away from handling characteristics benchmarked against battleships, and it shows



here. There's still significant roll, but it grips once it has adopted its angle of lean and it doesn't have the side-to-side or fore-and-aft wobble of 1960s land-yachts.


It didn't handle so well straight away, though. Maidment had to modify the rear springs and dampers to compensate for the car's lighter rear end, but it now allows easy, brisk progress where a 1930s car would be much harder work. Its steering deserves particular credit, being well insulated, light and relatively play-free. The braking is modern in feel, too, but could really do with some extra force. It's easy to reach a corner with too much speed thanks

'It roars like its pre-war inspiration - but with the uneven rumble of a V8 rather than the bark of a Mercedes straight-eight'

to that hulking V8, and you'll either be laughing or screaming when you turn the wheel and the whole car takes a second to shift its weight to one side, before leaning its way around.

Unsurprisingly, Maidment's Cadillac ended up being a much more expensive and complex project than initially expected. Every estimate he got to build more ran into the hundreds of thousands per car, far more than he imagined he could ask for them – especially after both the classic market and the British economy tanked in 1991. It was only by pulling in favours from local businesses that he got the car finished, while the turnaround of the early '90s recession allowed his firm to use the prototype as a PR exercise for its patented 'frictionless' hinges, as used on the doors, rather than force its sale.

Instead, Maidment enjoyed his creation for 21 years and 40,000 miles, which included not only everyday shopping trips, but also displays at Alexandra Palace and Goodwood, as well as time trials at Silverstone and Crystal Palace. Its name was eventually settled as the Courier Cadillac, after Maidment's company, Courier Products. Earlier versions of 'Courillac' and 'Couriadillac' were thankfully abandoned.

To many, however, it was known simply as 'The Haverhill car', having become a moving landmark of Maidment's hometown until he sold it via Bonhams in July 2011 to present owner Alan Carrington. Maidment found he'd been using it less and less, and felt it would be better looked after if it was in regular use. That it's done another 8000 miles since is testament to the rightness of his original design. 

Thanks to Alan Carrington Classic Cars, where the car is for sale (01622 880005; alancarrington.com)