
THE SNAKESKIN

♣ Cobra Club of WA Inc ♣

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HOW WIDE IS IT?

Have you ever been asked – “*How wide is your Cobra?*” and when you answer the question, you get the official width response that the 289 was 61” and the 427 was 68” wide.

My Cobra is 72” wide. I cut it in half – lengthways – and added 6” through the center then added 1.5” to each mudguard –making a total of 9” extra width.

Wow!! you say – that is a very wide Cobra. I thought so to, until the latest **Kit Car Magazine** arrived and had an article about Cobra Kits from all over America giving statistics on Kits the various companies produce. Nearly all showed a 90” wheelbase, with the odd exception at 94”, 96” and 98”. Heights were all over the place ranging from 44” to 52”, with the most common being 46” and 49” running a close second. Interesting to note, the original 289 was 45” and the 427 – 49”. Width of these Kits (all of which are called 427’s) were from 55” up to a whopping 76”, with the majority being 70”, 71” or 72” so when you see my car in real life, you can say “*Gee, that’s an average width Cobra!*”

Strangely enough when I acquired by Cobra body, I was told it was a copy off an original 427 Cobra with the original moulds coming from England. My car is now 72” wide – if I subtract the 9” I added to the width it makes my original 427 body 63” wide an yet the 289 was 61” and the 427 was 68” - therefore my 427 body must be from another original 427 model Cobra altogether (I think not). So how wide is your Cobra?

Harry Mac*Editor*

SHELBY’S NEW PROJECT

AC may still be turning out Cobras without the name (Ford owns the rights) but Carrol Shelby has at last started with a clean sheet after years of building ‘continuation’ cars and badging Dodges.

His sleek new road rocket, codenamed the Series 1 dare we say looks more Corvette on steroids than Cobra. The most radical feature is the car’s moulded carbon-fibre body and super-stiff chassis of boxed, extruded aluminium tubing with honeycomb aluminium sheek used for the bulkhead. There’s a 4-litre Oldsmobile V8 developed for Indy Racing under the bonnet. Power sounds modest at 320bhp and 290lb ft, but its performance rivals the legendary big-block with 0-60mph in 4.4 secs and the ton up to 11 secs.

To keep costs down Shelby has used Corvette discs and Camero instruments. The price is \$113,000 and production is limited to 500.

*Article from the current issue
“Classic & Sports Car” 1999*

THE FAMOUS MOTOR CAR COMPANY

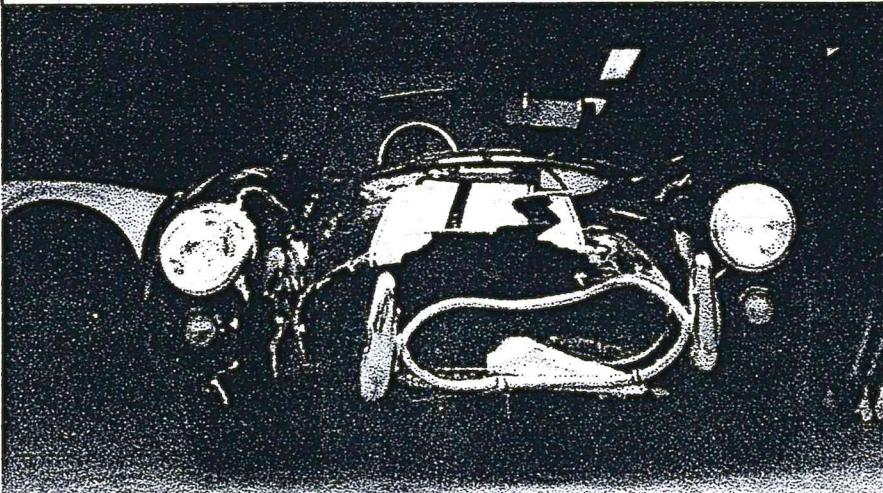
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QUOTE FOR THE MONTH: "I always keep a supply of stimulant handy in case I see a snake – which I also keep handy." W. C. Fields.



TERRY'S WOE
 Terry Lovell's magnificent Cobra a little worse off for Wear.



THE BIRTH OF A BEAST

When Shelby heard Enzo Ferrari was putting the 275LM into limited production to qualify for the FIA's GT class while at home Chevrolet was busy shoehorning its new 396 big-block into the Grand Sport Corvette he knew something had to be done, and fast.

The instant answer was more horsepower and Ken Miles set about developing a modified leaf-sprung 289 with a NASCAR 427 motor; it had a disastrous outing at Sebring in March '64. The engine was no problem but the chassis clearly needed development. With the help of Ford's new computer technology, Miles produced a widened, beefed-up chassis with fully adjustable independent suspension, but by the time the FIA inspector arrived in LA only 51 cars had been completed and homologation was refused.

In the prototype class the new 427 clashed with Ford's GT40 programme and Shelby was left with a batch of virtually unsaleable race cars. It was Charles Beidler, one of Shelby's best salesmen, who had the idea of marketing the fastest production car ever sold to the public for \$9,500 –and the 427 street car was born.

After wheel supply problems of the 427 was finally in full-flow by the end of '65 and dried up in '67 after 260 road cars, 31 semi/competition models and 19 full-house racers had been built.

Article from the current issue "Classic & Sport Car" 1999

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“A BLAST FROM THE PAST”

SPORTS CAR WORLD April/May 1986.

If the Good Lord had meant this car to go so fast, I used to think, He wouldn't have let it be built so perfectly. Because that was the impact of Ron Thorp's Cobra the first time I saw it run: it was almost unbelievably quick off the mark, and seemed able to keep accelerating for ever — yet it was so faultlessly put together. Nothing that could vanish off a hillclimb start line like that little green roadster should have had immaculately-fitted carpets, fastidiously-stitched leather seats and real doors that shut kluk-kluk. And to cap it all, when the day's competition was over — almost always with the Cobra winning its class — it would be driven home.

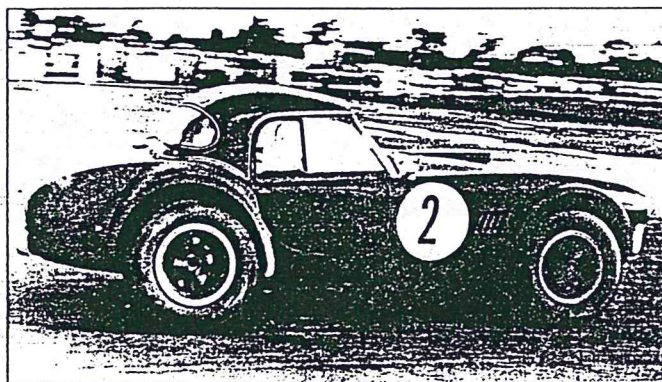
The driver was part of the package, really. Ron Thorp was a quiet-spoken, sandy-haired sort of bloke who, in his way, was as deceptive as his car. By the time he brought out the Cobra, he had done quite enough racing to know when to let a car do the work and when to apply a firm hand. And there was no doubt that this almost-inaudible man with his downcast eyes and gentle smile was as fierce a competitor as the other quick men of mid-'60s NSW hillclimbing — Col Bond, Don Baker, Paul Mander, Tom Sulman.

Ron had raced at Mt Druitt in a lofty Humber special built by Jack Masling; in 1962, he had bought Tom Sulman's less-than-pristine DB3S Aston Martin which, for all its well-worn shortcomings, was a factory-built car and a far cry from the Humber. When the time came to find a successor to the Aston, it proved to be a difficult task.

"I had enjoyed racing the Aston, but when I decided to get a more modern car there wasn't anything quite like it being made any more. The AC was about the closest, although compared to the Aston it was a lot more robust and a lot more

STRIKE FORCE!

In January, 1965, a crate arrived at Sydney docks from England containing a new 289 AC Cobra — the car that, in the hands of Ron Thorp, was to go on to clean up its class rivals and become a familiar sight at racetracks around the country, to which, of course, it was inevitably driven. Graham Howard recalls its racing past



powerful. Something else I hadn't expected at the time was to find that the Aston was nowhere near as tractable as the Cobra."

The Cobra was bought by correspondence. "AC was a good crowd to deal with; they kept me informed about how it was progressing," Ron says. Friends visited the factory near London and sent back photographs; finally, in January 1965, the large wooden crate was lifted off a ship in Sydney and the Vineyard Green roadster was revealed.

While the car was being run in, it was driven-rather-than-tested by the shortlived Sydney fortnightly *Australian Autonews*. The verdict was totally enthusiastic, noting the car's comprehensive leatherette-covered dash, its neat-fitting hardtop, the way it came equipped with a heater,

and the way the hood-bows for the foldaway fabric hood clipped into special carriers in the boot. To round it off, the Cobra had: "The best paint job this writer has seen on a production car".

For that was the whole magic of the car — it was a production item, although, granted, not very many were actually produced — about 560 of the smaller-engined cars, according to historian Michael Sedgwick. But with its 4727 cm³ (289 cubic inch) Ford V8 engine in EGA high-performance trim it offered 202 kW at 6000 rpm — 60 kW more than the complicated twin-cam 3-litre engine of the Aston — and 423 Nm of torque, and it provided almost racing-car levels of performance.

This was nonchalantly demonstrated during the car's first year of hillclimbing,

where Ron Thorp and the Cobra, running in the Production Sports class, were consistently faster than all the competitors in Sports/Racing in the NSW championship. One sports-racer beat the Cobra at that year's Australian titles, at Lakeland, near Melbourne, but the Cobra won the Improved Production section — and was driven to Victoria and back.

The only meeting the Cobra was not driven to that year was on the other side of the continent, the six-hour race at Caversham, outside Perth. At that time, the road across the Nullarbor included some 1200 km of dirt, and Ron wasn't going to put his car through that. Instead, the car travelled in Ron's van, with its roller-shutter door and its 80 km/h top speed. It wasn't a wasted journey: the Cobra came in second to the McKay/Martin Ferrari.250LM, 211 laps completed against the Ferrari's 223.

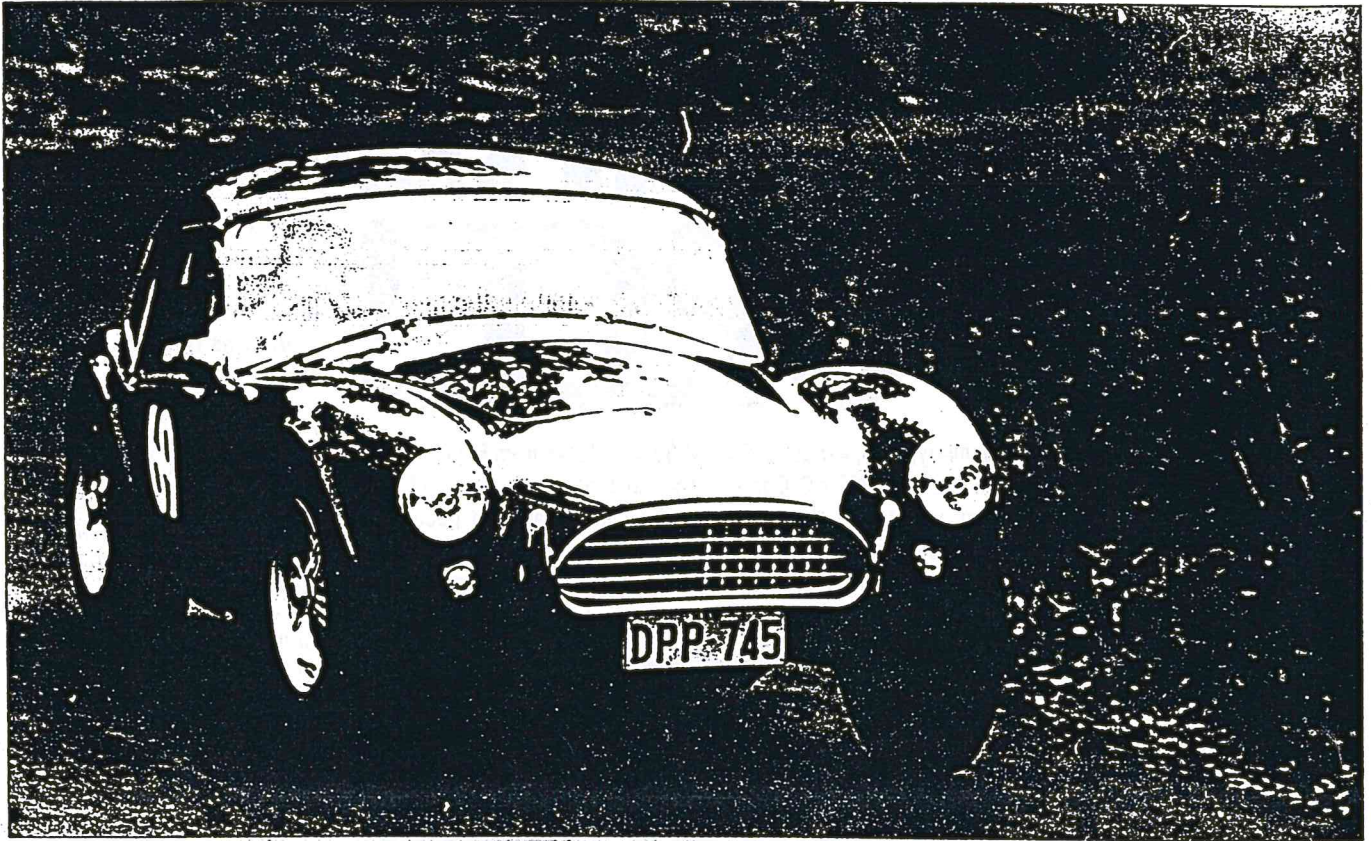
Long distance racing was something the flexible, moderately-tuned Cobra was well suited for, and the car ran twice more at Caversham, and in the first two Rothmans 12-hour races at Surfers Paradise, Queensland, with a 100 percent finishing record.

Another aspect of the car which had appealed to Ron had been the prospect that it could be uprated quite simply using factory-listed performance options. From the 1966 season, this was what he did, and the appearance of the car started to change, becoming less the lean-limbed, graceful roadster of 1965 and more the wide-tyred, pumping-iron sports-racer.

The egg-crate grille was removed, and, after an experiment with a larger four-barrel Holley (there were problems with fuel surge), the bonnet acquired a hump to cover four double-choke downdraught Webers. The original silver-painted (not chromed) six-inch wire wheels were replaced with

“A BLAST FROM THE PAST”

SPORTS CAR WORLD April/May 1986 (cont:)



One of the Thorp Cobra's first outings at Dapto hillclimb in '65 (above). In WA for Caversham 6-hour race (below right) — first of three consecutive visits that the Cobra made to Caversham for the classic '60s event

black cast-magnesium Halibrands, still knock-offs, running racing Firestones on 6.5-inch front rims and 8.5-inch rears. To cover this wider rubber, John Steel in Wollongong nicely flared the guards.

These changes meant the car had to run in Sports Racing for hillclimbs, but the added power and traction improved an already highly-effective car: Thorp and the Cobra were again fastest sports combination and he was second outright in the 1966 state series — once more the most consistent challenger to young Colin Bond in the Lynx Peugeot.

For hillclimbing — unless it was raining — the Cobra ran with just an aero-screen. “For the likes of hillclimbs, I preferred the hardtop off if it was a nice day,” Ron Thorp recalled. “I did most of the circuit racing with the hardtop on; I preferred to race with the top on.”

This would have particularly applied for the car's long-distance races,

where the neat top and alloy-framed side-screens would have been most comfortable by racing standards, especially in the rain.

It rained, in fact, at Caversham for the '66 six-hour race, and the Cobra won. The Ferrari LM was there again, but in the hands of new owner Andy Buchanan it uncharacteristically retired with a broken rear wheel bearing. The Cobra was the only finisher to cover more

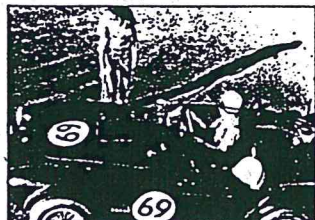
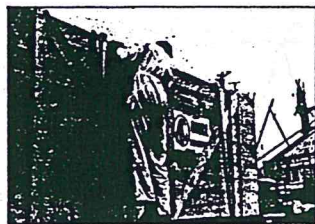
than 200 laps.

For the first 12-hour at Surfers, in 1966, Thorp enlisted hillclimb rival and former owner of Thorp's Aston, Tom Sulman, as co-driver. They won their class in a trouble-free run but the car was thoroughly outpaced by the front-line enduro sports-racers and was in fact also outdistanced by the under 2-litre Improved Production leaders David McKay/Bill Brown (Volvo 1800) and by the works-supported Datsun



“A BLAST FROM THE PAST”

SPORTS CAR WORLD April/May 1986. (cont:)



Fairlady.

The following year the Cobra this time co-driven by Ray Strong encountered a rare case of mechanical trouble at Surfers and, although it won its class against scant opposition, brake troubles left it more than 100 laps behind the Roxburgh/Whiteford Datsun.

The 1967 Caversham race was a cliff-hanger. This time the rain was so heavy the Cobra was in real trouble, aquaplaning even at reduced speed. With two hours still to run, the Cobra had a three-lap lead over the local pair, Doug Mould and Jeff Dunkerton, in a hot Cooper S. With the talented Dunkerton driving, this lead was nibbled away until with just half an hour to go — and with the rain getting worse and the Cobra's aquaplaning clearly visible from the pits — Dunkerton overtook the Cobra to be on the same lap. Seven minutes from the end, he passed the Cobra again and claimed the lead.

Well, no one can win them all, and the whole idea of the Thorp/Cobra equipe was to compete, not just to win. Competing mostly against the front-line single-seaters, Thorp and the Cobra again won their class in the 1967 NSW hillclimb series, going faster than ever, with Thorp now an expert at the precise point-and-squirt technique which allowed the dark green car to jump up hills so effectively.

At the same time, Thorp had other things on his mind. He had enjoyed the car greatly, and could see it still had a lot of potential. But there were other things he wanted to be doing.

"I can't think of a race I didn't finish in that car, and I had very few biffs. To stay competitive you would just have had to keep bolting new bits onto it. It was in very good condition: it had a wonderful body — it had no scuttle-shake, it was a very rigid car. Unlike other aluminium-bodied sports cars, it still has no signs of cracking and the doors still close beautifully.

"But at that time I'd got

the build-up to the 1985 Australian Grand Prix — 21 years after Ron had first landed it.

Only one other Cobra has raced in Australia, the factory 427 car which Ken Miles wrestled around Lakeside in 1965, unable to match the scampering Lotus 23s on the continuing swoops and swerves. If there was a future for Cobras in Australian racing, it would have been in developments of production-based sports car racing like Marque Sports which flourished in NSW and Victoria in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But by then Cobras were getting old, and not getting any cheaper.

For 1966 Cobra was given flared guards, big wheels and tyres and bonnet hump; it's shown here on start line at Dapto 'climb (top left). Crated Cobra arrives at Sydney (above left). Thorp being congratulated after his second place at Caversham in '67



interested in flying and I didn't have time for both. I had to make a decision which way I was going to go."

He decided to go flying. The car was advertised and sold — never to be used again in competition, although it has never been without a loving and appreciative owner. Current owner is the Adelaide super-enthusiast John Blanden, who invited Ron to drive the car in the parade of historic vehicles which was part of

It is probably no coincidence that all the Thorp Cobra's subsequent owners valued it too highly to see it primarily as a racing car.

And indeed, when you come to think of it, Ron Thorp felt much the same way. Here is his typically low-profile classified ad for the car late in 1967: it says it all.

"Ron Thorp's AC Cobra needs no introduction. Owner driven and maintained from new. A real sports car and a pleasure to drive." **SIDW**

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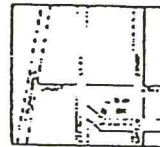
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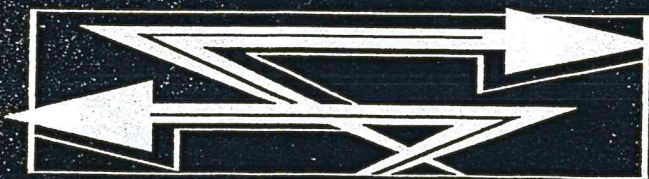
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NOTES

Current issue of "Classic & Sports Car" magazine has a nice poster showing all 100 cars selected for the "Car of the Century" and on the reverse side of the same poster is a magnificent picture of a Lamborghini Miura P400.

Next meeting July 28, 1999