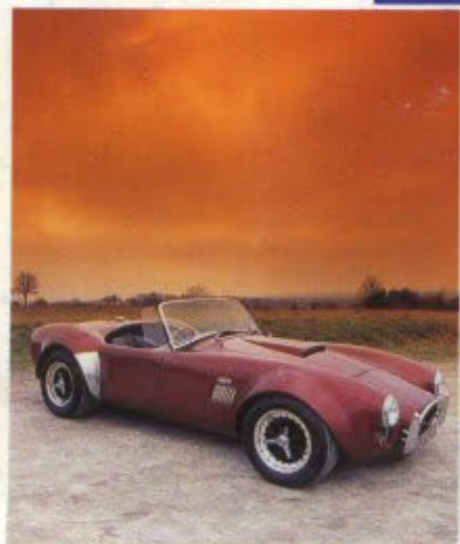


# Cobra

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# COBRETTI CHOICE

Since humble beginnings early in 1988, Cobretti Engineering has grown rapidly in stature and reputation. Today the company produces a choice selection of variably engined Cobra replicas to suit different depths of pocket. Peter Filby spent a day sampling the Cobretti Viper range.



HOW DO YOU START A BUSINESS when you've got considerably more determination and skill in the bank than capital resources? You work bloody hard for silly hours, that's what you do. You make up for financial deficiencies with sheer relentless energy and true grit. Take the odd risk here and there, grab what luck is going and stick to it. And pray.

That's what Bob and Martin Busbridge did when they started Cobretti Engineering. The business started early in 1988 in an incredibly cramped workshop at the back of a very nondescript suburban video shop. Hardly a showpiece for creative Cobra craftsmanship — more of a snake pit.

In those early, hard-fought days Cobretti was an agent for the ill-fated Brightwheel Viper Cobra. In prestige terms, it wasn't the ideal choice: Brightwheel's poor reputation and questionable approach to customer back-up service didn't help. Its eventual collapse caused real problems. But Cobretti was as positive as it could be about the situation. "We helped a lot of Brightwheel owners through all the trouble," remembers Martin Busbridge, "and we genuinely liked the car itself enough to be prepared to take all the flack."

Thing was, the Busbridge boys believed in the Viper. Basically, there was nothing wrong with it: it was well engi-

neered, nicely finished and worked. What it needed was a good reputation, the sort of thing you'd gain by a careful, professional approach to every aspect involved in building a successful company. So that's what Bob and Martin set out to organise.

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*'They've created several sides to the car's character.*

*Whatever depth of snake*

*'bite' you want, Cobretti can supply it'*

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Helping existing disgruntled customers was a good move. When Brightwheel finally went bust in autumn 1989, Cobretti's copying of the Viper raised a few eyebrows but, after all, the car was already a copy — of the defunct Sheldonhurst Cobra. Which was a copy of the . . . etc, etc. After all the initial fuss had died down, Bob and Martin were able to concentrate and get on with the job. Which they did very well. "It was totally logical that we should go the way we did," confirms



Martin resolutely. "We'd built a Rover V8 powered Viper back in 1987, we'd become agents and we'd already dealt with many of Brightwheel's suppliers. So naturally we were able to take over many leads and get owners of part-built cars out of trouble."

In a big step forward for Cobra kinds, the lads took another deep breath and moved, in June 1990, into decent 2000 sq. ft. premises in Sutton, Surrey. Now the Viper at last looked set for stability and a steady production run. Moulding quality and details such as door fitment had already been improved and kits supplied.

Already the renaissance was in motion.

Today, all the determination, crazy hours and effort invested in Cobretti must seem not just worthwhile but incredibly satisfying. As a Cobra replica specialist, the company is established and up there with the best. The experience has been gained, the car is better than ever, and — perhaps most significant — the transformation of Brightwheel's poor image is complete. The lads at Sutton have become genuine specialists in Cobras, they'll sort out *any* car (rectification, repairs, part or full builds), and they're well known for their fine relations with customers.

Above all, they've made the Cobretti Viper the equal of many other Cobras available in a crowded, competitive market. And interestingly, they've created several sides to the car's character; you can buy it in several forms. There's the silky smooth but deceptively quick Jaguar V12 engined version, the thunderous and fiercely accelerative American V8 interpretation and the decently rapid Rover V8 powered car. At entry level, there's also the Cortina based Viper 4. It's an incredibly versatile range. Whatever depth of snake 'bite' you want, Cobretti can supply it.

I spent a day getting bitten by three different versions of the Cobretti concept. Here are my reactions . . .



## VIPER V8, 5.7-litre FORD 351 cu.in.

Built by Cobretti for a customer a while ago, this was £20,000's worth of serious equipment, nowadays the same car could cost £23-25,000 including engine, but it would still be a good deal. Finished in Nissan metallic black, the car was beauti-



fully detailed and immaculately presented — the sort of 'vision' you just *had* to appreciate and harmonise with. It sported Cobretti's specially wide front wheel arches, 7x15 and 8x15 K&N Engineering alloys (as recommended by Cobretti) complete with spinners, and all the regular chrome hardware around the nicely made GRP bodywork.

The engine bay was a real picture. A thumping great 295 bhp, 351 Mustang V8 surrounded by just enough brightwork and stainless steel trim. It's a big lump, so had been mounted slightly forward to allow clearance around the dash area. A Toyota Supra 5-speed gearbox and Jaguar suspension completed the story. Top quality gear, to say the least.

It was much the same in the hot seat. Neat grey leather trim, dark grey carpet, ideal driving position and the sort of view down the bonnet that inspires emotion. Comfortable seats, door pockets and a shallow, lockable glove box for a modicum of practicality, and a small, low-set gear lever. A 13" Mountney steering wheel and 2" extra length built into the footwell to provide extra legroom for the 6'5" tall owner. If *he* can be comfortable, then so can I.

Start her up and we're in business. There's a lumpy tickover due to the high performance camshaft but the 351 sounds oh so deep and threatening, despite plenty enough silencing. There's typical Ford V8 shudder in the clutch but with enough revs she pulls away. The customer is no boy racer and wanted a manageable but quick machine. Requiring reasonable muscle from low speed, the steering soon lightens up and the Viper becomes extremely pleasant to drive. Docile in traffic and fierce under pressure from the right-hand pedal — the best of both worlds. Fully controllable when treated with care but bites viciously when provoked into real action. Never a dull moment.

The Viper's 'regular' V8/V12 chassis is a combination of ladder frame and space-

frame design with enough sheet steel panelling to create what is virtually a full centre body tub. Crumple zones and crash protection have been catered for, and the whole assembly is just heavy enough to impart a feeling of great strength and security. The front and rear Jaguar suspension (un-modified to make the builder's job easy) is fully adjustable and set in 'sporting' mode to balance comfort with roadholding. Does just the right job, too: the car feels like a thoroughbred performance charger, the driver full of confidence.

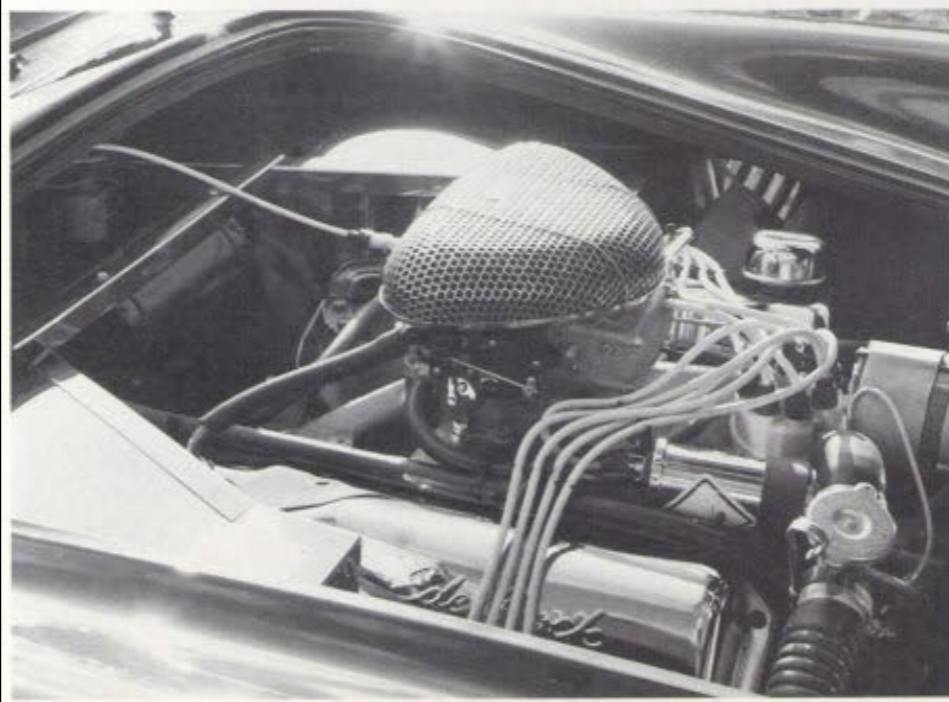
Firm but progressive braking pulls the show to a halt after enough miles to confirm that the Cobretti is a mature Cobra replica well worthy of comparison with the premier division machines. OK, I could criticise the instrument layout but, while we're talking about much almost inconsequential details in a Cobra, I would also

*While previous colour pages depict a Jaguar V12 powered Viper, shots on this page depict the Ford 351 cu.in. engined example. Thumping great Mustang V8 sitting neatly in engine bay makes good viewing.*



*'The mega front arches actually enhance the original shape of the Cobra, as they emerge quite sharply from flattish wing panels, rather than forming the more usual blended bulge.'*

*Pictured here is Cobretti's Chevy 350 cu.in. powered Viper. Body has the optional narrow front arch treatment while dashboard has the obligatory speedo and rev counter obscured by the steering wheel*



add that the Mini heater was real hot stuff. Despite the cold air that day, the hood being *exactly* where it belonged (anywhere but on the car!), I was a very comfortable man. Give me more...

### **VIPER V8, 5.7 litre CHEVY 350 cu.in.**

Another gem of a Cobra replica. This one used much the same body/chassis as the Ford example, again with all-Jaguar suspension (set slightly firmer) but with 350 cu. in. Chevy power shoving out about 300 bhp. Again a customer's car, but with another major difference — it had been involved in a serious accident. It hit a Land Rover doing about 65mph. The Land Rover was a write-off, shortened by two or three feet, and the driver wasn't in very good shape either. However, the Viper driver in his full harness was completely unhurt, and had the car shipped back to Cobretti. They cut off the damaged section of chassis, rebodied the car and have returned it to its owner in 'as-new' condition.

Having seen the pictures of the Land Rover and the damaged bit of Cobretti chassis, you approach driving the car with total confidence. It's painted a lovely deep metallic red; Cobrettis are sent down to Dorset for painting, and it's worth the trip. A great cosmetic finish for a hugely strong chassis.

Like the Ford V8 example, this car's arches and track are very wide indeed, although the wheels and tyres are within sensible limits. Looking around the beast, the mega front arches actually enhance the original shape of the Cobra, as they emerge quite sharply from flattish wing panels, rather than forming the more usual blended bulge. The doors are light, and lightly mounted. The boot lid retains its exterior hinges, and its fitting on this car is perhaps not up to the standards of the rest of the body. However, I'm given to under-

stand that exterior hinges are to be illegal as of 1992, so the whole arrangement will have to change. Bear that in mind now, and do be careful not to run anybody over when you're driving backwards in a Cobra, in case the boot hinges injure them.

The black leather trim job is again attractive, the footwell treatment in particular. Scrambling in, the steering wheel presents itself at exactly the right position and angle. Your hand also falls naturally to the Toyota gearbox's lever, which has a short throw reminiscent of a TVR or Lotus. The handbrake on this car is central and mounted well back, an odd arrangement, but functional enough. Most people choose a side-mounted lever instead. The pedals are offset to some extent, but well within normal limits.



The instrument positions are a matter of personal choice. This particular car copies an original Cobra fairly closely, i.e. the speedo and rev counter are completely obscured by the steering wheel spokes as with the Ford powered car. The theory is apparently that in the original you weren't supposed to have time to look at them. There always remains the audible warning, of course — when you hear the valves bouncing, you're over the red line whether you can see it or not.

As this was also a customer's car, it had again to be treated with respect — as well as enthusiasm. Starting the engine produces a healthy blatt which settles into a nice mellifluous whuffling sound. A wonderful grumbling of anticipation. So let's get on with it.

The low speed steering is pleasantly light and the ratios on the Toyota five-speed box well-spaced. The clutch is a sensible weight. It's now hydraulic, replacing the original and much heavier cable arrangement found in earlier cars.

The brakes are sharp and powerful.

The wideness of the track seems odd in town, as the view down the bonnet includes the right arch, but still tempts you to underestimate the size of the car. Touching the kerb when you think you've got a foot left is a timely indication of the actual width. However, that same characteristic gives a feeling a real sure-footedness as soon as you get on to the open road. In unexpected spring sunshine over the Epsom downs, the Cobretti swoops up and down the narrow roads, going exactly where you put it. The exhaust note remains civilised throughout (quieter than the Ford), although you can hear the muscles flexing every time you put your foot down.

The standard 350 Chevy pulls lustily. There's no shortage of sheer grunt and at speed the car feels rock steady. The suspension on this particular Viper is set rather hard, to cope with the roads around Aberdeen where it lives, but that didn't make it twitchy — merely a little bumpy at times.

The steering lock, as well as the lightness, is unusually good for a Cobra, adding to the car's practicality. The wide track at the front allows the use of reasonably sensible tyres. This makes the Cobretti more civilised than it looks: it would be a suitable car to use for a long weekend, with room in the boot, good manners and a considerable degree of handling and grunt to play with, should you find the odd empty bit of road.

Oh for the chance to have more experience of the real exhilaration provided by a fabulous machine. It only served to further confirm the Cobretti Viper's coming of age. Take this car seriously — it means business. Now for something a little different . . .

#### **VIPER 4 1.6-litre Cortina**

There's quite obviously a generation or two out there who are simply unaware of the Cobra legend or just don't care about it anyway. They're not so pre-occupied with brute force and muscle that they can't enjoy the Cobra image with anything less than a thunderous sounding and fiercely quick V8. They're the people who've made the Cortina four-cylinder powered snake such a whopping success over the last couple of years — particularly for Pilgrim GRP. But the Cobretti Viper 4 wants that market, too.

The economy Cobretti made its debut at the National Component Car Show at Sandown Park in August 1990. The lads in the factory had built a ladder chassis — much lighter and simpler than the full V8 job yet still plenty strong enough — and gone out and paid a mere £100 for a mechanically decent Cortina 1600 donor. Apart from a clean and a service, no other work was done to the engine. Nor the 4-speed gearbox.

At the front end, the Viper 4 uses the full Cortina suspension and subframe

assembly, plus its steering. At the rear, it's again all Cortina although the prototype has Escort Mk.2 shockers for the time being; eventually it's getting the fully adjustable jobs. There are Cortina brakes throughout, a shortened Cortina propshaft and even a Cortina fuel tank. The heater unit? Yes, like the big Vipers, it's a Mini.

Sitting there awaiting our attentions, the car looked undeniably desirable. With its standard Cobretti GRP body finished superbly in BMW lazer blue and highlighted by a full set of regular Cobra chrome hardware, it looked no different to any other Cobra — unless you count the wheels.

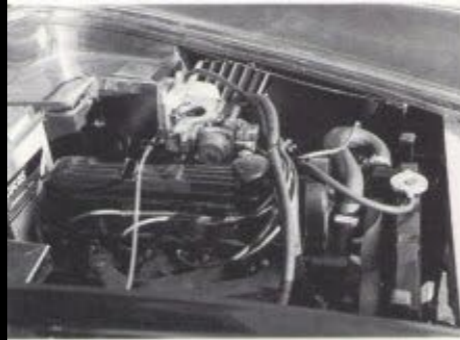
These are late 1970s-style replica Corvette alloys of 8x15" size all-round, fitted with SR-rate Firestone 205/60 tyres. They alone make the Viper 4 look different.

In the cockpit — Cortina base or not — it's the usual story of Cobretti quality; the same level of trim as with any other car from the range. Blue and grey leather, grey carpets, Jaguar dials in a leather covered dashboard, all good Cobra details. No glovebox lid but it's optional anyway. Glovebox lids are about as vital on Cobras as roof racks.

Predictably, the driver feels pretty good in this environment. The driving position is good, the controls are all properly posi-

*While Chevy V8 monster lurks in the background, replica 8x15" Corvette alloys identify Cortina based Viper in foreground.*





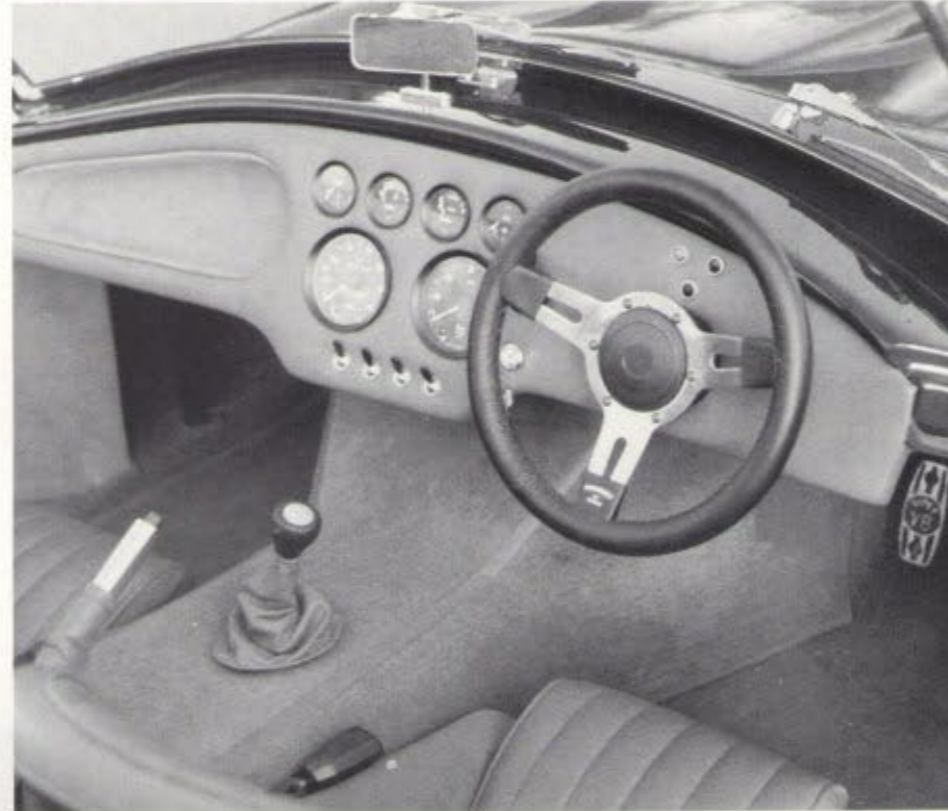
tioned and there's plenty of room. It's not much different to a 'real' Cobra except that the centre tunnel is much lower and less obtrusive. Same can be said for the Viper 4's cost, and that's what *really* puts a smile on the driver's face. As seen, the demonstrator would cost about £10,000 from Cobretti, including some £6000's worth of parts and goodies — the paint job, trim, wheels, tyres, weather gear etc. Build the car yourself, though, and you could be on the road for about £4000 as long as you economise on the details.

So what's a £4000 Cobra like to drive? Much the same as a £10,000 one, I would think, especially if it runs the same 1600cc motor. Dead easy either way. Start the engine, depress the light clutch, shift the

featherweight gear lever and you're off. No typical Cobra wickedness about this one. Anyone can enjoy the experience: we even had the restaurant waitress lapping the car park to prove it!

Of course, the lady didn't give it much wellie but, if you rev the four-banger and stir the 'box, the Viper can show a decent turn of speed. All very good and quite competitive with other traffic as long as you forget any ideas of muscle. This is a modern MGB; it might have the body of a heavyweight bruiser but it's not there to fight.

To compensate for being something of a pretender, the car is truly versatile. It can be used by the whole family, in any traffic conditions and for any type of journey. The



*Advantage of the Cortina based Viper is getting all the image without the cost. Due to low centre tunnel, cockpit is spacious. Car also a doddle to drive.*



steering is light, the brakes are light and the experience is refreshing — if not exhilarating like the rest of Cobretti's range. Thanks to the wide tyres, there's plenty of feedback through the steering and you're also constantly aware of the live rear axle bouncing a little on rough surfaces.

A good sports car for the money, by any standards. The point is, as Cobretti are keen to state, that the Viper 4 gets you going on a low budget. After that, you can develop and improve the car as and when you wish. You can buy all the right parts and accessories from Cobretti to uprate the car to quite evil levels, V6 power included.

Starting point is the body/chassis kit at £1950 plus VAT. Some 250-300 hours later you're on the road in Cobra style. You have a well finished car that's been properly engineered by a company used to engineering real heavyweight machinery. You can drive it daily without a problem. You've joined the clan. And you haven't broken the bank.