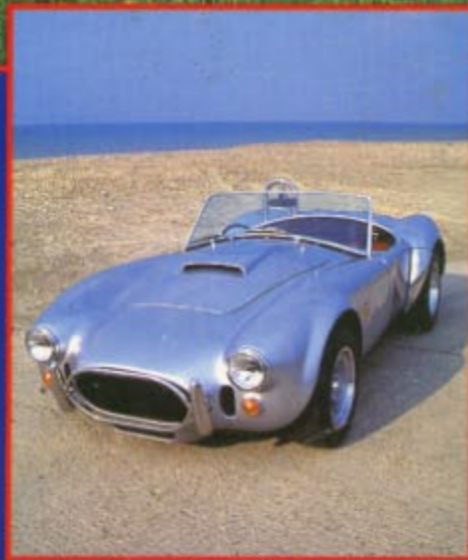


The KIT CAR COLLECTION Series

# COBRA

*Replicas*



By Iain Ayre



AN IN-DEPTH GUIDE TO BRITISH COBRA REPLICAS

## Chapter 9

# COBRETTI THE INSIDE STORY

The Cobretti name and product is  
as tough as its Jaguar suspension, and  
is still going strong despite  
considerable ups and downs over  
the last few years.

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS A NEW COMPANY HAS TO come up with is a decent name.

"Cobretti" sounded rather good.

"You can't call yourselves Cobretti," said Ford, "it sounds too much like Cobra, and we own the name Cobra."

*Cobretti Viper is distinct from most replicas by its extra flaired front arches. You'll also find a few changes under the skin of this example.*







"Bollocks," said Cobretti.

"Mumble," said Ford, and went away.

The Cobretti story started in 1987, at which point Bob and Martin Busbridge were doing quite nicely as builders of all sorts of Cobras, but mainly as agents for the now defunct Brightwheel operation.

According to Cobretti, when that all went wrong, the company accepted the rights to the Brightwheel design, and the name 'Viper', in lieu of the money they were owed. They and their existing customers with half-built cars then got together and helped each other out until everybody was on the road.

There had never been anything wrong with the Brightwheel car, which was available either in low-budget Cortina form, or with a Granada base, or built from Jaguars with American V8s. During the good times of the Eighties, life was sweet: a well finished Jaguar-based Cobretti with a decent American V8 would sell for £25,000.

The new Predator model came out, fitted with a small but effective supercharger in the vee of the 350 Chevrolet, and chucking out some mad amount of power. The Viper's distinctive bubble front arches covered an extra foot or so of track, and the very hefty chassis meant a good ride and a very low centre of

*Above: You wouldn't notice it from here, but this Cobra replica runs Ford based suspension rather than the more usual Jaguar stuff.*

gravity. Regular readers will know that I finished up building one, after road testing a beautifully finished Chevy-powered Viper V8.

The reason for my choice was in the details, really: all the good class UK Cobra replicas have a lot going for them, and making a choice is quite hard. What I wanted was a car to use for charging up and down the country for 20,000 miles a year, so the cruising ability was uppermost. Also, the car is visibly a development of the Cobra idea, rather than an exact replica, and I preferred that approach. The extra foot of track makes a noticeable difference to the handling, too, as you can imagine.

The Jaguar rear end on the Viper V8 is used unshortened, and the front end geometry as well is pretty much what Jaguar intended. The Cobretti chassis is probably overweight by a couple of hundred pounds: even the plate over the transmission tunnel is 3mm thick. This Forth Road Bridge approach to chassis building means that if you hit a Land-Rover head-on, the Land-Rover comes off very badly indeed, and the



*Above: It may look mean, but this Cobretti is easy to drive thanks to its light controls. Below right: Engine is a standard Rover 3.5-litre V8.*

Cobretti chassis is still usable afterwards. See *Car Builder*, Jan '91.

The 300 BHP easily available from a fairly stock 5.7 litre Chevy engine will haul this weight around no bother, however, and although a sensible cruising MPG requires a very delicate right foot, the economics work out quite well in running costs. Rebuilding a Chevy engine is laughably cheap, and they're so unstressed and tough you can expect to get 100,000 miles out of them before you even have to take the lid off.

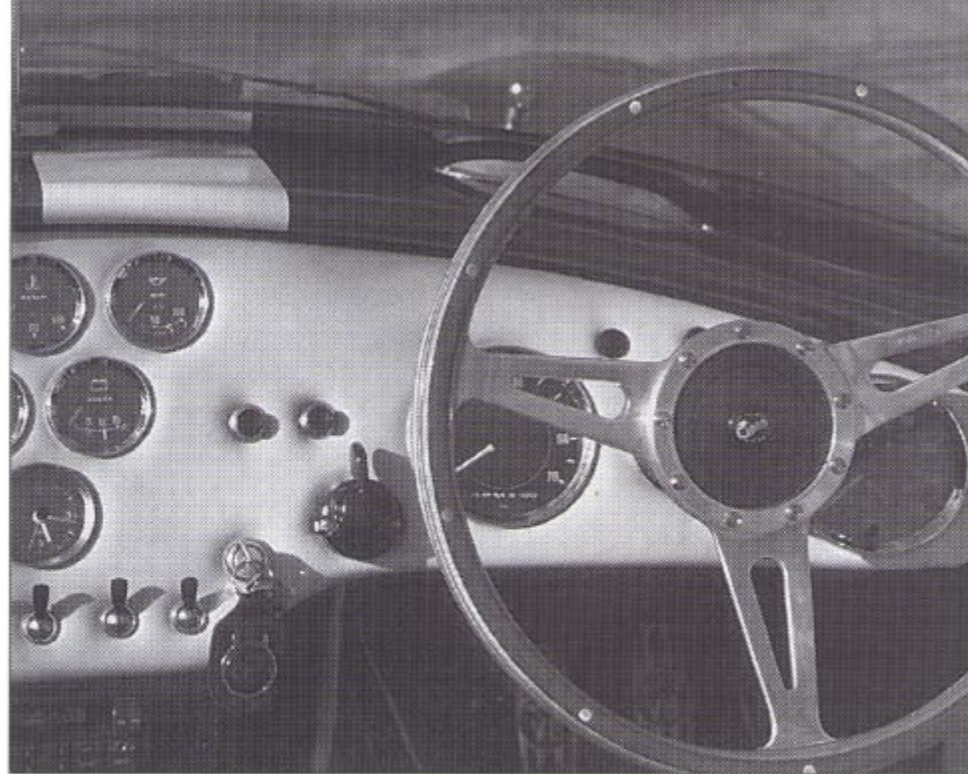
The Jag and Chevy combination is all very well when times are good, but the approaching depression, compounded by a government panicked into a series of expensive mistakes, burst the bubble. A serious Cobra was now worth not a great deal, irrespective of its pedigree and cost. The big Cobretti factory in SW London was still full, but it was full of half-completed cars that nobody could afford to finish.

With no end in sight to the gloom, brother Martin had had enough, and wanted to get on with something new. The partnership was dissolved, and he shot off to get on with a bit of travelling. Bob



Busbridge carried on, but the end of the partnership was translated by the gossip as the end of the business, and that stopped the orders dead, which then actually did finish off the business. The biggest losers were the taxman and the factory landlord, however.

After a rough few months, Bob collected himself together. There was no reason why he couldn't still buy bodies from his original supplier, and he had been working with Ferrari man Colin Bruce on a completely new lightweight Cobretti chassis, which looked very promising. Bob retreated to the long, narrow garage at the bottom of his garden and got back to work:



*Above: Despite this car's cheaper price tag, it certainly has all the right bits when you settle into the driving seat.*

with a good product, low overheads and a small but improving number of customers, things now look a lot better than they have for a while.

The light purple car with the white stripe is the first example of the new generation Cobretti Vipers, and it is designed to make the best of the available options. The new chassis runs a standard Rover V8 with lightweight Ford suspension. The componentry is carefully balanced: the standard Cortina running gear has been proven well able to handle the 200 or so BHP from a fairly standard Rover engine, which is after all made of light alloy. If a naughty Rover is used, the Sierra rear end can be used, giving fully independent suspension and a diff that will handle a fair old kicking.

The frequent use of the Cortina front uprights in all sorts of racing cars means you can get any of a number of fancy brake calipers, so budget Ford components can be blended quite successfully with the small V8. A Chevy would be too much, however: too heavy and too torquey. You'd still need the big chassis and the Jag running gear for that.

So, how does this new car go? Well, it went up against the big boys at *Kit Car's* jumbo Cobra test day, and it came out rather well, considering it cost about £5000 less than most of the other cars there, and about £15,000 less than the very tasty ones. I drove it up there, just for fun, and I enjoyed it.

The new Cobretti Viper is a sports car, not a monster. There's a lot to be said for monsters, but not

many people can afford to build them these days. The car looks exactly the same as the monsters, and it does have the crucial V8 engine to give it that roughness and the bellowing chords from the twin sidepipes that for me are compulsory for Cobra replicas.

The customer car pictured has only skimmed on the Jaguar componentry. The rest of the traditional Cobra goodies are all very much in evidence: leather interior, lashings of chrome everywhere, replica Halibrands with spinners, leery sidepipes. Even when you clamber in, the illusion that you're in a serious top class replica is maintained. Press the starter, grumble grumble woomph. It sounds like a very serious car, too. As soon as you touch the controls, however, you can feel that it's a different animal.

The steering is very light, particularly with the big skinny-rimmed Moto-Lita as fitted to the original AC Cobras. If you wanted to use a weeny fat little polo-mint affair, which I don't, it would still be possible to park the car without enlisting the aid of Popeye and a can of spinach. The rest of the controls are all remarkably light too: clutch, gears, brakes. The contrast is similar to the difference between an MGB and an MG Midget, or if you like between an Austin A60 and a Morris Minor, which is what the MGs are under the skin.

Jag and Chevy Cobras have notchy gear changes, stomp brakes and meaty clutches: you know that you're dealing with big boys' toys. This new Cobretti, in contrast, is a lightweight sports car, probably more in the mould of the predecessors of the 427 such as the Ace.

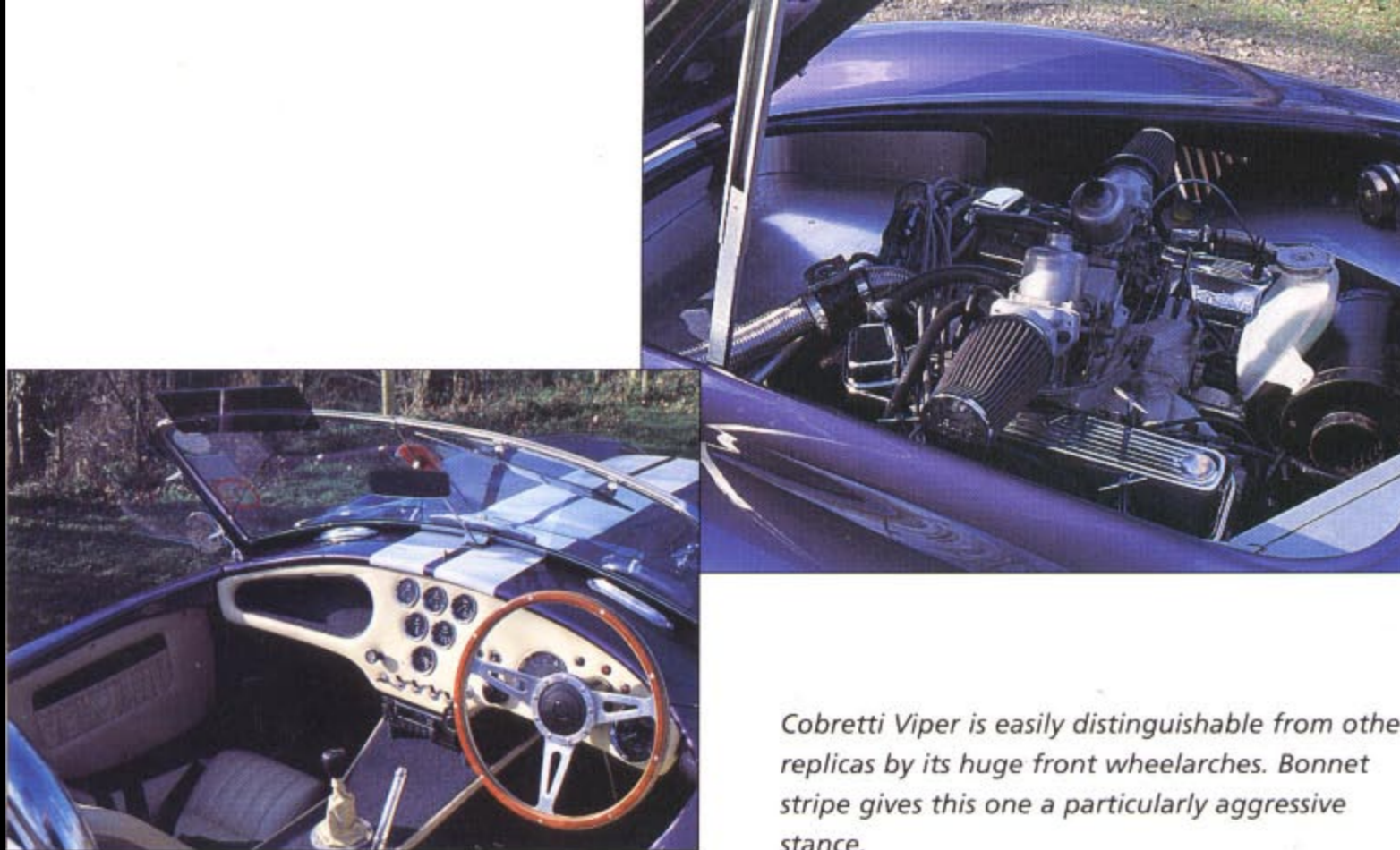
The very wide front track means the same go-kart stability you feel in the bigger Cobrettis, and the added advantage of that set-up is that the wheels don't need massive offsets. This means that the steering weight and geometry is pretty well standard Ford, which in turn means it won't try to take your thumbs off if you hit a bump on lock.

The Rover V8 in a fairly light car gives a respectable amount of power, and makes the full range of all the right noises as you blip and flick up and down the box. This is not a demanding or challenging car by any means, and it has no massive reserves of grunt just waiting to slam you into the back of the seat as the cam smacks into song: but it's fun, it's nice to drive, it looks the business and it's £5000 cheaper than the big boys.



*Above & opposite: DJ's Dax is the big daddy of them all. Interior of latest demonstrator is unquestionably different! Below: This Cobretti Viper has Ford based suspension with Rover V8 engine and 5-speed gearbox.*





*Cobretti Viper is easily distinguishable from other replicas by its huge front wheelarches. Bonnet stripe gives this one a particularly aggressive stance.*

