



CITY SLICKER

Cobretti's Viper is among the less celebrated members of the replica Cobra world but, despite its low-key existence, it's a car with much to commend it stemming from an eventful history that has produced around 200 cars. Ian Hyne drives a car recently completed on behalf of its owner and comes away very impressed following an unusual test drive.

Of the top of my head, I can't think of any Cobra replica manufacturer that isn't located close to the sort of open rural roads on which the power and performance of their products can be demonstrated to impressive effect. Nor do I know of one who works from quite such humble premises, ie. a large garage cum shed at the bottom of the garden. Even so, driving a Cobra replica through the busy traffic of south London is possibly a more relevant test than blasting along

open, two-lane black top and having been impressed with the Viper, I can say, hand on heart, that there's absolutely nothing wrong with what comes out of the garden shed – but of course, it's no ordinary garden shed. Part breeze block and part wood, it's got space for four cars, all the necessary equipment of welders, cutters, tools etc. plus phone, telly, stereo, computer – in fact all the comforts of home which of course, it is. That said, Cobretti wasn't always such a modest company.

Bob Busbridge started out as an engineering apprentice working on the electrical side of liquid pumping and metering systems for projects as diverse as Concorde and the Queen Mary and from oil rigs to oil refineries. Indeed, he was latterly offered an excellent job working in

the oil industry going all over the world but even in the UK, he spent a lot of time away from home and eventually decided on a slightly quieter life. That's when he got into kit cars setting up Cobretti in 1987 to carry out work on all makes of Cobra replica before becoming an agent for the Brightwheel Replicas Viper in 1989. This car was developed from the Sheldonhurst Cobra after Sheldonhurst went bust in 1985. Brightwheel soon followed suit at which point Bob decided to press on manufacturing the Cobretti Viper, taking the name in lieu of money he was owed by Brightwheel. It was a good decision as Cobretti has existed quite happily ever since, the only fly in the automotive unction being a 16-year legal wrangle over the Viper name which Ken Cook of Brightwheel claimed as his own, prompted by GM releasing the Dodge Viper.

The result, as ever, has been a gravy train for the lawyers as well as a final ruling that awards the Viper name to Bob while GM now call their car the SRT10. But enough of all that; of far more importance and



Cobretti



interest is the nature of the cars Cobretti has produced.

Brightwheel manufactured a range of Cobra replicas from a straight, Ford Cortina-based model through Ford Granada and Jaguar based cars and accepting engines from a four-cylinder unit through Rover V8, American V8 and Jaguar V12. Of these, Cobretti decided to concentrate on the Cortina-based car as it was doing very well at the time, and the more serious Jaguar-based cars. However, Bob didn't just continue manufacturing what Brightwheel had manufactured and instead, put his own stamp on the cars he made.

Today, there are few Cobra enthusiasts who would consider a Cortina-based car with a four-cylinder engine but, following Pilgrim's masterstroke in introducing the Sumo Cortina-based Cobra replica in 1986, the kit car market went wild for them as it reduced the cost of owning the shape to far more widely acceptable

levels. Of course, it wasn't long before builders grew tired of four-cylinder power and started fitting the Ford V6 as well as the Rover V8. Both these engines gave a decent power hike but few addressed the ability of the standard Cortina mechanics to handle the additional urge – except Bob at Cobretti.

Ford never raced or rallied the Cortina in kit-cannibalised Mk3 form. Their efforts missed it out completely going from the Mk2 Cortina straight to the Sierra. All most manufacturers did was fit harder rear suspension bushes and leave it at that which improved matters a bit but still created Cobra replicas with an extremely wayward back end. Like all the best ideas, Bob's solution was simple; he fitted a Panhard Rod which dramatically improved the rear axle location and created a far more driveable car blessed with much enhanced handling and roadholding ability. I well recall driving two of these cars, one fitted with a Rover V8, and thoroughly

enjoying the experience. Improved engineering aside, the neat touches and quality of finish gave no external clue to the cars' humble underpinnings such that Bob should have sold a great many more than he did but often, that's the penalty of being a small company.

Today, the Cortina based car has become a Sierra-based car but it's something Bob isn't keen to promote to his customers on the grounds that, in his opinion, though cheaper than its Jaguar-based stablemate, the Sierra-based car doesn't give value for money. Whether it's a Sierra-based four-cylinder car or a Jaguar-based V8, the time and effort involved in the build is pretty well identical, the costs aren't hugely different, especially if Bob builds it on your behalf, and come the time to move them on, the Sierra-based car will bring a price of £8 - £9,000 while a Jaguar-based car will go for anything from around £15,000 upwards. However, that's one for individual enthusiasts to



A distinctive aspect of the Cobretti body is the wide, flat top wing which resulted from increasing the car's width to suit the wider Ford Granada front subframe.

consider for themselves. Anyway, it's a Jaguar based car we've come to see and which, being very recently completed, shows the level Cobretti has now reached. Actually, this car was bought as a kit back in 1997 but for various reasons familiar to may, never got finished. Thus the owner brought it back to Bob in 2008 and asked him to finish it. Beneath the pristine silver paint lies the chassis which is a hugely confidence

inspiring structure. It has four main-rails in 40 x 80 mm box section steel tube with a full tubular frame around the front and rear bulkheads. This is then clad in sheet steel on the floors, tunnel and footwells to create a frame that's both torsionally stiff and hugely strong. The mechanical components come from the Jaguar XJ6 Series 2 or 3 or the Jaguar XJS. At the front it uses the Jaguar wishbones, uprights, brakes and anti-roll bar with



Gaz adjustable coil spring damper units. At the back, the Jaguar IRS system is separated from its carrier and the standard components fitted directly to the chassis suspended on four Gaz coil spring damper units. Again, standard brakes are retained, vented front and inboard, solid rears, operated by the Jaguar master-cylinder and servo. The steering column is also Jaguar but operating a modified Ford Fiesta rack and pinion, while finally, the pendulum pedals are Cobretti's own. The engine is a Chevy 350. This is a 1986 engine that has been fully rebuilt by Bob and which develops 360 bhp and around 300 lbs ft. It's mated to a TVR spec. T5 box driving a Jaguar 3.31:1 Powerlock differential. Wheels and tyres are usually 7 15 front and 8 x 15 rear fitted with 215/60 and 235/60 tyres but this car bucks the trend by using 16" rims fitted with 55 profile tyres. AS a simple list of components, the Cobretti is much like several other Jaguar-based cars but it's the finish and attention to detail that distinguishes the car, not necessarily in being better than others but more in being slightly different. On top of that, being such a small company, Bob is happy to build in personal customer preferences. These differences first appear in the body which has two distinctive aspects to it, the most obvious of which is the front



Following a long court case involving Brightwheel and GM over the name Viper, it now belongs to Cobretti and is a registered trademark, hence the TM.





There are some fine, hand-built details on this car. The discreet accommodation of the side repeater is one and the aluminium lining of the exhaust exit is another.

wings. Way back in the eighties when Sheldonhurst first obtained a Cobra body, they found that in order to fit it over the Granada front subframe with the desired wheels and tyres fitted, they would need to increase the width of the front end. This they did and the Viper's widely flared front wings with their flattish tops were the result that has marked the car apart ever since. Also, for me, the back end seems to sit higher than that of other cars. I mentioned it to Bob who said that being newly finished and having covered fewer than 300 miles, this car would settle on its springs and take on a more purposeful stance at the rear which is true, but it still looked high to me. Not that it's a fault; it's just different.

Internally, it's much as you would expect with all the standard Cobra features. Bob favours the instrument layout with the rev-counter low and to the left of the wheel and the speedometer on the right.



The ancillary instruments are centrally arranged in an inverted triangle with a row of the Jaguar rocker switches underneath. These were fitted in order to comply with the IVA regulations but Bob acknowledges it doesn't look as good or as period as it should and that it may be changed for more authentic toggle switches. That aside, the wheel is an authentic Moto-Lita wood-rim, the handbrake comes courtesy of the MGB and the seats are the standard Cobra buckets. There's a shallow glove box on the right and though there's precious little you can fit in it, the elasticated door pockets make up for it. Again, there's nothing out of the ordinary but it's very neatly done in black leather and carpet and looks suitably inviting.

The final area for detail attention is the engine bay, the bonnet rising on twin gas-rams to reveal a suitably clinical and chrome encrusted Chevy 350. The bolt-on chrome componentry, stainless steel braiding and polished alloy rocker covers is easily achieved but the thing that lifts it from a high standard to exemplary is the expert application of the stainless steel engine bay lining panels. It's a class job and worthy of the best the Cobra world



can offer. So, with a formidable chassis, well proven mechanical installation and a finish quality to be proud of, the only final aspect of the car to determine is how it drives. On this score, this test drive would be unusual A) because with just 300 miles on the clock, Bob is still attending to the niggling little problems that always arise in the immediate post-build period and B) that rather than taking in the deserted roads of rural England, we would be driving the car in and around Cobretti's Morden, South London base.

Climb aboard and the driving position is comfortable and supportive with all the controls well sited. The pedals feel good, the gear lever with its replica pull-up gate is nicely positioned and the wheel feels good in my hands except that, though authentic, these wood-rim Moto-Litas always feel too thin to really get hold of. I mentioned it to Moto-Lita's Simon Green a few years back and he said that Moto-Lita will always make custom wheels for people so, if you want a thicker wood rim, all you have to do is ask.

There's a dash-mounted ignition key and a brief twist has the engine sucking though its 750 cfm carburettor and firing with a machine gun bark. It's quite loud but it's also exactly what you expect to hear.

Turning out of Hillfield Avenue, Morden onto the A217, the Cobretti feeds into the growing surge of Friday afternoon traffic but proves pleasantly docile as we go with the low-speed flow. The car rides smoothly, the Gaz springs and dampers steamrollering the bumps and absorbing the potholes as the motor barely ticks over at between 1,500 and 2,000 rpm. Bob guides me through the maze of streets in search of slightly more open roads and, having lived here for over thirty years, he knows where to go. Soon we're rolling along, the car still in totally relaxed mode as the constant use of pedals, gears, and wheel show the Viper to be an easily manageable car to thread through a city's heavy traffic. A couple of points make manifest themselves, one being a

flat spot when you press the throttle at low rpm. To my mind the 750 cfm carb is on the big side which Bob acknowledges but adds that, rather than the carb, he feels the problem is down to a slight exhaust blow on one side. Although the car has already been delivered to its owner, part of the build agreement was that Bob would have it back and sort out any slight niggles which he is doing. It's all part of the service. The second is a slight kick back on the steering when encountering bigger bumps and potholes. It's very light and at higher speed I probably wouldn't have felt it. That aside, it's all good but while driving such a high performance car in heavy city traffic reflects the manner in which it will spend a great deal of its road time, it's frustrating not to be able to open up the Chevy.

Bob used a 1986 engine for the rebuild in order to allow the use of a carburettor in respect of IVA – and it's quite an engine. Ali heads, roller rockers and double-pumper carb add up to around 360 bhp and not a great deal less torque. At 1313 kgs, the Cobretti is a little heavier than most of its contemporaries due to the higher steel content in the chassis but it's still got it's got 285 bhp per ton which will translate to some real urge on the



The interior is comfortable and adheres to the Cobra norm. Switches are from the Jaguar to comply with IVA but the owner may change them.

and progressive brakes, a reasonably light clutch, slick, click-click gear change and surprisingly light steering that had it skirting mini roundabouts with a neat side step and a shimmy on the exit. That said, it was a shame we couldn't really wind it

component set at £1,995 or for a Sierra at £1,200. From there, the company price list covers everything from engines to wiring looms, instruments, trim and Cobra brightwork. The long and the short of it is that, building a Jaguar-based Viper yourself will cost you between £15,000 and £20,000 or, if you want Bob the Builder to do it for you, it'll come out at between £25,000 and £30,000.

Again, it's competitive with the Viper's Jaguar-based contemporaries but what you get from Bob is a little more manufacturer interest and assistance in the build and he's always there to sort out any problems and offer advice and more concrete assistance. With only around 200 cars produced since 1987 and most of those in the early years, there aren't that many people who beat a path to Bob's door but he's very happy with his diverse Cobra work supplemented by a steady trickle of half a dozen or more kits a year but if he's happy, his customers are even more so as they get a level of service and assistance that's hard to better as well as a car that, at project's end, will happily stand beside anything else this industry can produce.



The engine bay is exactly what you would expect to see and demonstrates the same level of quality finish as the whole car. It's a Chevy 350 offering 360 bhp.

right road when it's got a few more miles on the clock and Bob has completed his list of small finishing jobs.

But though I didn't drive this car in the manner in which most Cobras are driven when the chance arises, over the years, I have learned what's important in these cars and that you can tell just as much about a car from low speed driving as you can from really poking it. Whichever type of driving circumstances permit, the basics don't change and on this car they were all pretty well spot on. It's got a good driving position, taut, responsive and effective controls, good, smooth

up but then, there's always another day. And so to the \$64,000 question; what will it cost? Well it ain't \$64,000. IN respect of pricing, everything Cobretti supply is individually priced and that starts with a body chassis kit which, whether for four-cylinder, V8 or Jaguar V12, comes for £4,250 with £390 extra for powder coating and an extra £165 for non-standard gel-coat colours although Bob much prefers and strongly recommends painting. Thereafter, you pick and choose what you want him to supply. At the more basic eng of the build he can supply a completely overhauled 2-axle Jaguar

Further information

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Another distinctive aspect of the Cobretti body is a seemingly high tail. This car is newly built so will settle on its springs but it still sits higher than most.