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The First Three Shelby Cobras



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Exceptional Cars

The First Three Shelby Cobras

The sports cars that changed the game

Gordon Bruce



Porter Press International

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First published in February 2018

978-1-907085-55-0

Published by
Porter Press International Ltd

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Edited by Ray Hutton
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Printed by Gomer Press Ltd

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Introduction

While many of yesterday's sports cars have long since reversed into obscurity, the legend that is the Shelby Cobra seemingly knows no bounds. Posters of the Anglo-American masterpiece continue to adorn the walls of enthusiasts across the globe, while examples are still raced with vigour at the world's premier historic motor sport events. Even now, the alluring lines of this immortal snake turn the heads of the female of the species, just as they did in the 1960s – the seductive powers of this motor car are all-embracing!

Timing, they say, is everything and it was a sequence of unlikely coincidences that brought the Cobra into being. The rangy Texan Carroll Shelby had risen through the racing ranks to win Le Mans in 1959. Along the way he had grown to despise Ferrari and its founder; a sentiment that helped fuel his desire to create a car capable of beating the Prancing Horse in its own backyard. For many years the quintessentially British manufacturer AC Cars had enjoyed success with its Tojeiro-inspired Ace roadster, but now needed a meatier powerplant to give it a new lease of life. For its part in this three-legged saga, Ford Motor Company desperately required a model with which to challenge the all-conquering Corvette, both in the showroom and on the race track. Becoming the engine partner to Shelby's independent project suited the Blue Oval just fine – if things went well it could capitalise on the success but, if failure ensued, it could walk away relatively unscathed. Ever adept at spotting an opportunity, Shelby played both ends against the middle and persuaded AC to modify the ageing Ace to accept Ford's new thin-wall cast V8 engine, and cajoled the engine's maker into supporting the venture in return for having a weapon to temper Corvette sales that had been an increasing thorn in its side since 1953.

This absorbing backstory has been recounted many times – more often than not with varying degrees of fiction to enrich the already enticing facts, but there is no questioning that the Cobra had considerable impact on the world of road and racing sports cars on both sides of the Atlantic. This book is unique in primarily concerning itself with the first three Cobras made, namely the one and only prototype (CSX2000), the first production car (CSX2001) and the first works race car (CSX2002). All three vehicles nowadays dwell in the USA – CSX2000 and CSX2002 form part of the much-vaunted Larry Miller Collection of Shelby-inspired cars, while CSX2001 belongs to the internationally renowned private collector Bruce Meyer. It was on this trio that the incomparable Cobra phenomenon was founded.

Gordon Bruce
Buckinghamshire, England
February 2018

- The components of an automotive legend – Carroll Shelby and the one and only Cobra prototype CSX2000.
Private collection



Part 1

The first three Cobras

CSX2000 caused quite a stir when it was unleashed to the American press in spring 1962 – although based on an already antiquated chassis, it combined breathtaking bodywork with an astounding level of performance. Since those heady days, many a chancer has claimed ownership of a Cobra prototype but, as all aficionados of the model know, there was only ever the one pre-production example, which caused a second media storm in 2016 when it sold at auction for a cool \$13.75 million.

CSX2001 was another landmark Cobra – it was not only the first production version, but the first to be assembled by Shelby’s East Coast distributor, European Cars Inc. of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the first to dip a wheel into the world of competition. Although bred in the United States, it was in Europe that CSX2001 really made its mark, appearing in such major events as the Le Mans Test Weekend and the Tour de France Automobile in 1964 before posting significant results in hill-climbs.

CSX2002 was built to lead the charge on the circuits. It would have achieved an historic inaugural victory at the Riverside Raceway, California in October 1962 in the hands of Bill Krause, but for the inopportune breakage of a rear hub. The first win came four months later, courtesy of Dave MacDonald, and the car was subsequently piloted by Dan Gurney and Ken Miles before beginning a new career in Canada, where it whisked Eppie Wietzes and then Jean Ouellet to numerous triumphs.

- The first three Shelby Cobras are automotive celebrities these days, and in regular demand for key events around the world. Here the first two sit side by side at the 2012 Pebble Beach Concours d’Elegance.

Private collection

Chapter 1

Project Cobra

A natural entrepreneur, Carroll Shelby was prepared to turn his hand to anything, but had yet to fully make his mark on the world until his innate ability behind the wheel of a racing car drew the attention of Aston Martin's John Wyer. It was Wyer who placed him firmly on the international stage, which ultimately led to his famous victory with Roy Salvadori at Le Mans in 1959. Much as he had loved, and excelled in, the domestic American racing scene, his time on the best of the European circuits not only left him yearning for more international success, but recognition courtesy of a car of his own rather than somebody else's creation.

When heart problems forced Shelby's premature retirement from the circuits at the end of the 1960 season, the desire grew ever stronger. However, he possessed relatively little engineering knowledge and no money, so creating a Ferrari challenger from scratch was out of the question – he was also a man in a hurry and therefore in search of a quick automotive fix.

Having successfully raced an Allard J2X early in his career, Shelby was aware of the potential advantages of teaming a lightweight British-designed and built sports car with American V8 muscle. With this in mind, he is reputed to have approached Healey, Aston Martin and other manufacturers with his plan, but without success.

The AC Ace was another British product with which he was more than familiar, owing to the model's considerable success in American sports car racing, and when he contacted its maker in the autumn of 1961 it transpired he was pushing an open door. Bristol's BMW-inspired 2-litre engine had been the preferred option of Ace customers since 1956, but the car's latest

rivals were more powerful. More pertinently, as Bristol had just moved over to large-capacity American V8s for its own model range, the production days of the 2-litre engine were numbered. Thanks to the suggestion of renowned AC racer and car tuner Ken Rudd, AC had begun offering the Ace with the 2.6 litre straight-six unit of the MkII Ford Zephyr, but didn't see it as a long-term solution and thus broadly agreed to Shelby's proposal, providing a suitable American engine could be sourced.

Shelby initially approached General Motors, but of course it already had a performance sports car, the Corvette, and did not feel the need of another. The story was very different at Ford, who had created a new thin-wall lightweight 221cu.in. (3.6-litre) V8 for the Fairlane that seemed ideal for the type of multi-role car Shelby envisaged. Moreover, Ford was not only desperate to supply its dealers with a rival for the Corvette, but also to add a roadgoing race car to its upcoming Total Performance programme – the none-too-subtle shift in image from safety to performance by which it planned to attract America's car-crazy baby boomers.

Shelby's dream was suddenly on the road to reality and Ford stuck a toe in his pond by delivering one of the new engines to AC Cars at the beginning of November 1961. The engine's arrival reputedly flummoxed the company's storeman, who had no idea what was in the crate, but imagined its strange foreign-looking FoMoCo label meant it probably hailed from Japan – FoMoCo is of course nothing more bizarre than a contraction of Ford Motor Company!

What's in a name? One of the oft quoted items of Shelby folklore is that the Cobra moniker came to



This company publicity shot of an early 289 model serves as a reminder of how visually similar the first Cobras were to the last of the Aces, the wheelarch extensions being the only major difference.
Giles Chapman collection



- AC Ace BEX 229 at the 1958 Sebring 12 Hours, where it was a class winner in the hands of George McClure, Duncan Forlong and Richard Milo, later the first owner of Cobra CSX2001.
David Milo

- This image displays AC Ace chassis AE01 – the first production example of the model. When compared with the later Ace 2.6 and Cobra, note the flatter windscreen and Ferrari-esque styling around the radiator grille.
Giles Chapman collection



Carroll in a dream, by which he was awoken sufficiently to jot the word down on a notepad retained by his bed for just such eventualities. The veracity of the detail is by now immaterial, as the label proved to be a truly inspired choice and continues to spawn a range of eye-catching reptilian headlines, while setting the pulses of enthusiasts racing with expectation. The Cobra name even encouraged Alejandro de Tomaso to select Mangusta for the name of his Giugiaro-penned successor to the Vallelunga, as Mangusta is Italian for mongoose – a creature renowned for its ability to fight and kill venomous snakes, especially cobras!

Work on Shelby's prototype began in mid-November 1961 and almost exactly three months later the finished car was despatched to Shelby American's temporary home in Santa Fe Springs, California, that consisted of no more than a small corner of the premises belonging to renowned hot-rodder Dean Moon. It had been an astonishing turnaround, though probably seemed



like a lifetime to Shelby himself, who was desperate to get the programme underway and cement his tacit arrangement with Ford. Until the first cars rolled out of the door there would be no income and that was a potential problem for the impecunious Shelby.

Enter Ed Hugus, a regular racer on the American national circuit who also competed at Le Mans for no fewer than 10 consecutive years. A friend of Shelby's, Hugus was appointed: American Cobra distributor for all states east of the Mississippi; the first dealer; and the first assembler, as which his European Cars organisation would ultimately put together some 19 early examples, starting with CSX2001. More fundamentally, according to a recent biography on the man, Hugus funded the first seven cars out of his own pocket – an act of trust and generosity without which it seems the project might not have lasted long enough for Ford to commit to a fully financed agreement.

- The Cobra was based on the AC Ace 2.6, not the Ace Bristol, and already featured many of the chassis and body updates often erroneously attributed to the Cobra – such as the low bonnet line and narrower, slanting intake. *Giles Chapman collection*

“The Cobra name even encouraged Alejandro de Tomaso to select Mangusta for the name of his Giugiaro-penned successor to the Vallelunga.”