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KILLED BY THE COBRA

Shelby's V8 vision beat AC's pretty Ace replacement into production. This unique prototype shows what might have been

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IMAGINE BEING BORN WITH every advantage of a winner: supportive parents, an athletic body, and the heart of a champion. But there's also a curse. Your big brother is already a success, and he doesn't want to step aside. In the car world, this was the fate of AC's MA 200.

In the early 1960s, AC Cars needed a new roadster to replace its ageing Ace. Prototype MA 200 showed a promising direction for the company, but fate intervened. The Ace was given an unexpected reprieve as the Cobra, and MA 200 went from potentially being the next big thing to becoming a mysterious footnote in history.

Here's what we do know. MA 200 spent its early years in the same den as Carroll Shelby's Cobras, which meant that Shelby and MA 200 must at some point have been physically very close. But, although partnered with Shelby on the Cobra, AC wasn't interested in his help on MA 200. In fact, when Shelby was recently asked about the car, he replied: 'I've never heard of it.'

MA 200's existence created some conspiracy theories. It had the same 289ci Ford V8 engine as the Cobra, but a longer wheelbase, proper wind-up windows, and a full convertible top – features more popular with the American public than the

bare-bones Cobra's. Was MA 200 meant to be a Cobra replacement? Was AC trying to hamstring Shelby and build complete cars on its own? There were no witnesses to support this, but that didn't stop *Road & Track* publishing a spy shot of MA 200 in 1964, identifying it as the 'New Cobra'.

The real answer to MA 200's existence seems to be much less sinister. In later years AC chairman Derek Hurlock had a conversation with *Classic Cars* magazine, noting that MA 200 started life as a replacement for the Ace. Engineer ZT Marzewski was designing a new flat-six engine and was allowed to develop a car to match (the first two letters of his last name are the 'MA' in MA 200.) It was nothing like AC had ever built before – inboard rear disc brakes, inboard front suspension, and a square tubular steel chassis under a more modern aluminium body.

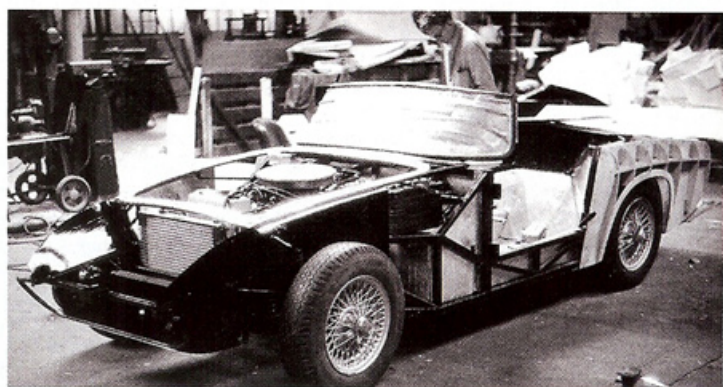
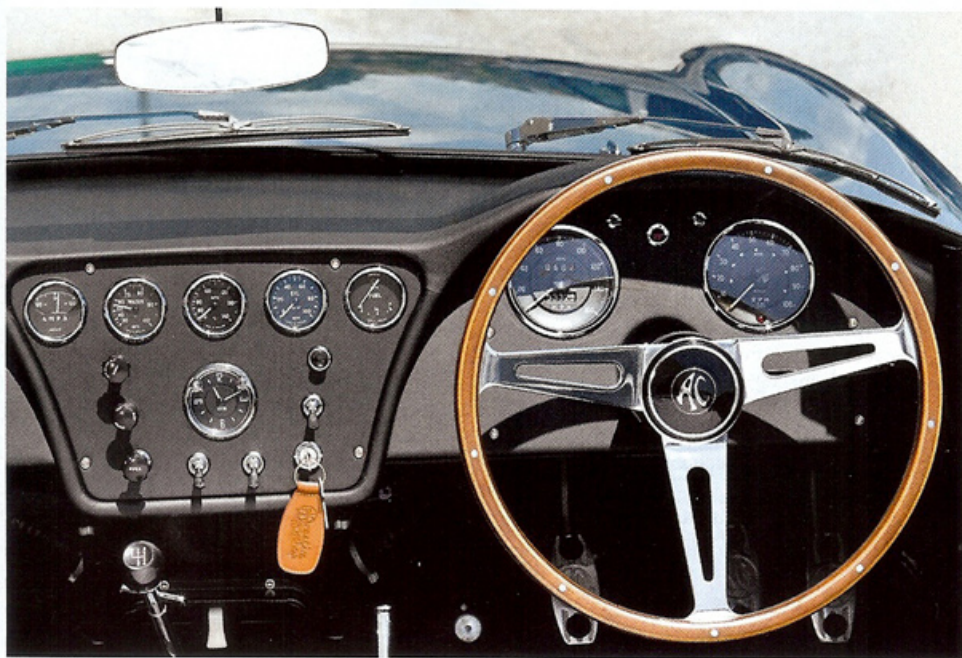
Meanwhile AC was developing its relationship with Carroll Shelby and Ford. So AC entered the 1963 Le Mans 24 Hours using Ford's V8 but racing under the AC name. When one of the cars finished a respectable seventh overall, Ford gave AC one of the race car's leftover handbuilt High Performance (HiPo) 289 V8s as a reward. AC dropped this V8 into MA 200, replacing its own flat-six with a less expensive, more powerful engine. →



1963 AC MA 200

ENGINE 4736cc V8, OHV, Autolite 4100 four-barrel carburettor **POWER** 318bhp @ 6100rpm **TORQUE** 321lb ft @ 4000rpm
TRANSMISSION Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **STEERING** Rack and pinion **SUSPENSION** Front: lever-action with inboard coil-over-dampers, lower wishbones, anti roll bar. Rear: lower wishbones, strut-type coil-over-dampers, anti-roll bar
BRAKES Discs, inboard at rear **WEIGHT** 1207kg **PERFORMANCE** Not tested

'JUST AS SIMPLE ECONOMICS GAVE MA 200 A V8, IT ALSO MADE THIS ROADSTER AN ORPHAN'



Right and far right AC boss Derek Hurlock with his daily driver outside company HQ in Thames Ditton, Surrey; engineer ZT Marzewski at work on the aluminium skin. Note wooden formers around the rear wheel.

As development continued on MA 200, production began to heat up on the Cobra. The Ace, which was reaching the end of its lifecycle, was reborn with the American-installed Ford V8. AC had its hands full with orders for a car it already knew how to build, so investing in MA 200 made no sense. Just as simple economics gave MA 200 a V8, it also made this roadster an orphan.

While the Cobras went off to burn up the tracks of the world, MA 200's only accolades were schoolyard envy. In late 1963 it became Hurlock's personal transport, ferrying his daughter to school every day. Yet the idea of producing MA 200 was never far from Hurlock's mind. Cobra production never reached its full potential, and he wanted to build a more sophisticated car. The Ace/Cobra was too spartan, and MA 200's complicated chassis was too expensive to build. This helps explain the 1965 AC 428 Frua, a car with the sleekness and comforts of MA 200, but built on a chassis based on the Cobra Mk3's.

Hurlock held on to MA 200 until 1968, when he sold it to a Dr Roger Field. Field made one modification that would add to its mystique: he replaced MA 200's original racing-spec Ford HiPo V8 engine. Engines had no collectable value at that time, so there was no anxiety about discarding one of the first, handbuilt HiPo 289s. The new powerplant was a Ford 302ci V8, a rebuilt engine with its own significance (more of which later). It is unclear if Field knew what

fateful engine he had installed, and that information was buried with him in 1983.

No-one really paid much attention to the new engine as the car spent several decades passing between new owners. Even Hurlock didn't identify it when he was reunited with the car at an AC gathering in the late 1980s. But in the summer of 2006, South Florida-based attorney Mark Gold was scanning the internet for a rare toy to enjoy. He was searching England for a Cobra, and came across a cryptic ad for an AC V8 prototype. The broker didn't have many particulars, but the pictures and speculation were enough for Gold to put together an agreeable offer. 'I stole it,' he says with a devilish grin. Gold's gaze then grows longer, suggesting that he invested close to the car's real value bringing it back to life.

MA 200 made the trip to the USA a few months later. From the outside it looked like it needed barely more than a new coat of paint but, underneath the skin, the roadster was on life support. It was time for a complete restoration.

'This car needed to have major work done 25 years ago,' Jason Wenig declared as if it were obvious. Wenig owns the Creative Workshop in Dania Beach, Florida, and by the time he got his hands on MA 200 it was falling apart to the touch. MA 200 was never built with long-term ownership in mind. The aluminium body was perfect for keeping weight down and fighting corrosion by the elements. But the chassis was steel, and no

precautions had been taken to stop the galvanic reaction of the two metals that results in corrosion. Everywhere the chassis touched the aluminium body, the decay had reached a critical point. Along the bottom few inches of the car the paint itself was holding panels together. Moisture had also seeped into the steel frame, and rust was found in half the chassis.

So how could a one-of-a-kind car be restored when most of the parts were hardly off-the-shelf and no-one bothered to write down a colour code? 'The disassembly process is like a crime scene,' says Wenig, describing the documentation a car like MA 200 gets. 'Every part is photographed and tagged because it is impossible to get this original environment back. Break a bolt and it's gone forever.'

The Creative Workshop staff had to wear new hats as automotive archaeologists. Gold received original documents, blueprints and pictures shortly after he purchased the AC prototype. The whole team would pore over these materials, using jeweller's loupes to get every last detail. What they discovered was that Marzewski had an unfortunate tendency to utilise rare parts.

He probably did not know it at the time, but MA 200's Ford transmission was an uncommon unit used only in a handful of 1962 Ford Fairlans. The tail-lights were borrowed from a Ford Taunus coupé. The Porsche 356 foglights were a very specific and seldom-used type. 'You're looking at

the last pair of these Porsche foglights on the planet!' Wenig may have exaggerated the rarity of these pieces, but they were still some of the most costly parts on the car.

Possibly the worst news for the Creative Workshop team was the AC factory pictures that showed the original radiator from a Jaguar E-type 3.8. There were just over 15,000 E-types produced before an upgrade in 1965 to a 4.2-litre engine and a new cooling system. 'Of all the things to rot on a car, the radiator is usually the first to go,' says Wenig. 'So we were looking for an extremely short production-run part, one of the most volatile parts, for a sought-after and valuable car.'

The original trim pieces also provided a challenge for the team. 'The bumpers were the most expensive and time-consuming items on the car,' says Wenig of the hand-formed aluminium units that, over the years, had been improperly repaired with glassfibre and spray paint. To make them correct once more, the team had to fix the rest of the body, create a template that sat 1/8in away from the car, and then hammer and polish new aluminium pieces. 'Between the cost of the bumpers and the foglamps, you could have bought yourself a nice new car.'

The final piece of the puzzle was the engine. The 302 V8 that was pulled out of the car carried an odd serial number. As it turned out, Field's restored engine was actually an enlarged 289 Ford V8 that was originally used in the beginning of Ford's GT40 racing programme. MA 200, which never saw a track day in its life, had carried the heart of two champions.

As significant as the second engine was, it was decided that it would not be used in the restored

roadster. MA 200 was being returned to the condition of the day in 1963 when Hurlock first hung a licence plate on it. That meant MA 200 needed its HiPo 289 V8. The engine was long gone, according to Gold, but he was able to hunt down the next best thing. The original's production order number was 1664, signifying that it was the 1664th HiPo 289 produced. Gold was able to find order number 1445, which meant the two engines were only 218 blocks apart and were probably cast on the same day.

After 36 months of specialised work, AC's MA 200 was returned to the condition that Hurlock experienced in the 1960s. It was back from the brink and ready to show off. 'This car is all high-performance engine and not much weight,' says Wenig. 'It is unbelievably powerful and unbelievably fast.'

AC never brought MA 200 to a major car show or had a public viewing, so it wasn't until 47 years later, at the 2010 Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance, that MA 200 had its world debut.

Carroll Shelby was a last-minute addition to the Concours' education panel. He never walked the concours lawn, so never saw MA 200. Just like back in the '60s, Shelby was close but didn't meet the roadster that had been lying in wait to take his Cobra's place.

MA 200 would go on to win its class at Amelia Island. Its exceptional condition means the car now spends just as much time attending concours events as it does driving on the coastal roads of its new home in South Florida. It is almost 50 years since work first started on MA 200, but the car is only now getting the recognition it never had the chance to earn. **End**



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Above
Restoration work took MA 200 back to its raw structure – and sourcing correct parts caused much head-scratching; the result, on flowing Floridian roads.