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# OUR CARS



## BACK TO LE MANS



### 1963 SHELBY COBRA 289 FIA 'HAIRY CANARY'

Raced by *Kevin Kivlochan, classic.cars@bauermedia.co.uk*

**ENGINE** 472cc, V8, ohv **POWER** 409bhp @ 6500rpm  
**PERFORMANCE** Top speed: 170mph; 0-60mph: sub-5sec  
**MILES THIS MONTH** 300 **COSTS** £9200

#### HAVING SPUN MY FRIEND

Shaun Lynn's Cobra at night during the 2004 Le Mans Classic and made a rather difficult trackside phone call to tell him I wouldn't be completing the lap, I was determined to face my demons in my own car this year. But that didn't quite go to plan...

My 1964 Cobra's rebuild is now well under way with Alan and Alec at Thunder Road, but a quick call to Alec to talk through the remaining works elicited a long silence before a quiet voice said: 'I think you should come and see the car for yourself.' It seems that

the 45kg of filler that had been removed from the original, unmolested, ultra lightweight aluminium FIA body was also adding some strength.

Thunder Road could either have the car ready for Le Mans Classic by sacrificing some of its originality, or do the job properly – adding three months to the rebuild and missing the event. I wasn't keen on either outcome, and a quick glance at my credit card statement reminded me of my £5000 (€6000) pre-paid entry fee – there had to be another way.

I called 'Gentleman' Bill

Bridges to see if he liked the idea of doing Le Mans with me in his 1963 Hawaii Grand Prix Cobra. Bill didn't have the necessary differential: 'You can borrow mine,' I said. Bill had never raced at night before, let alone at Le Mans at night: 'You'll be OK, honest,' I said. Then it turned out to be his wife Caroline's birthday weekend: 'Ah.'

A few weeks later I met up with Lawrence Kett of G&A Fabrications (01932 225523) to assess the planned build of the car and the bodywork. Lawrence has been working with Cobras for 30 years and everyone in the know recommends him. We agreed on a plan to modify the front wings back to 'slab-side' and remove the oil cooler scoop, returning the car to the specification in which Jack Sears raced it at Croft in 1964 and when it competed in the 1965 Angolan Grand Prix. At the same time Thunder Road would continue with some of the detail

work. And by now Bill had had time to buy Caroline enough shoes to get a pass for Le Mans.

Come race weekend our team pitches up in the Houx Annexe campsite with Bill and myself as drivers, Sam Smart as chief mechanic, James Chaney and Adam Price as pit crew, Ali Cobb as official team photographer, Gerry Hawkridge as moral support and Dave Smith as resident pub landlord and chef, tasked with serving beer and a full English breakfast every day. It's all about priorities.

The best time from two practice sessions, one day and one night, decides grid positions for the first of the three races and we qualify 35th out of 78. I'm nominated to start the races and in final preparations I spot Sam putting a mobile phone in the glovebox – just in case. I ignore this and hope it won't be needed.

Sitting on the trackside grass, I cycle through the checks in my

Discover what the Classic Cars team has been up to over the past month

mind. I left the car in first gear, didn't I? Not reverse?

The first of the three races features the traditional 'ear of corn' Le Mans start, with the drivers running across the track. The French flag drops for the start and I spring across to the car – which doesn't start. Eventually under way, I fall back to virtually last place and finish the lap in 49th place having seen a Bizzarrini spin and hit the concrete wall hard at the Porsche curves. Not good for the nerves. But Bill's car is beautifully built and exceptionally tight, making it relatively neutral and predictable to drive, good for building my confidence quickly, and I finally hand over to him in 21st position.

We run a clean, sensible strategy, building our position each time out and start the last race from 19th, so each place we take now is tougher but also sweeter. On my last few laps I see a Porsche 904 in the distance and another Cobra ahead of that. I can see I'm reeling them in slowly, but I'm not sure whether I'll run out of time before handing over to Bill for the final stint.

Bill insists on racing in period fashion as much as possible, which means without the hard-top. On the incredibly long Mulsanne Straight my head is buffeted by the wind, pushed forward in a side-to-side motion that made judging braking distances hard.



I enter Tertre Rouge on my final lap and can see the 904 closer than ever. I catch him on the exit of the first chicane and set my sights on the Cobra. Thundering along the last section of the Mulsanne at 170mph, heading towards the tight right-hand corner at the end, the cars are similar in pace and my only way past is to draught the other Cobra and pull out sharply to the right before it. Running parallel, I out-brake him into the bend and take the position. Very satisfying. Worth £5000? Oh yes.

We finish ninth overall, fourth in class, and the mobile phone is never needed. Job well done, demons defeated.



Top: 'Team Hairy Canary'. Left to right: Bill Bridges, Kevin Kivlochan, Ali Cobb, Gerry Hawkridge, Sam Smart, Adam Price. Above: racing drivers' champagne breakfast, Le Mans Classic-style. Left: moral supporter Hawkridge toasts the team's endeavours with beer. Below: Porsche 904s proved easier meat than rival Cobras

