



ACED IT

After years of searching, Kevin Kivlochan found his perfect AC Ace. Trouble was, it hadn't turned a wheel for more than 40 years. We take the freshly restored racer back to the scene of its Fifties successes

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hen Kevin Kivlochan told me he'd bought an AC Ace, I knew it would be something special. Later, when he called to say it was finished and ready to be driven, but that he'd left it unpainted in its natural aluminium, I had my doubts.

But they were misplaced. The car is utterly stunning. With its powerful twin spotlamps angled outwards in order to provide a good light spread in the darkest corners of Le Mans, it looks exactly what it is - a proper no-nonsense Fifties competition car. And given that it

achieved several podiums in period at the Chateau Impney hill climb, we've taken it back there for our test-drive.

Before I climb in, I have a peek under the bonnet. I'm greeted by a transverse leaf spring, a pair of matching three-branch exhaust manifolds, and the open intakes of three downdraught Solex carburettors perched in a row on top of that legendary jewel of a motor - the Bristol straight-six. Simply engineering artwork.

I lift the hinged aluminium latch that links the front and side elements of the wraparound perspex windscreen, reach inside to pull the release cord, open the featherweight door and climb in. I lower myself into the period-style aluminium bucket seat, specially constructed by DK Engineering and trimmed in hide by RW Racing Services to match the passenger's seat. The big wood-rim steering wheel has instructions dymo-taped on to one of the drilled aluminium spokes. They read '60kph 2nd 3500rpm' and '80kph 3rd 3500rpm' respectively, enabling Kevin to respect the pit lane and safety car speed limits at Le Mans. The 6000rpm tachometer redlines at 5500, although Kevin says the engine is built to take 6200 in anger. Following his instructions, I twist the red cut-out switch to 'on', flick the fuel pump switch, turn the key, listen for a few moments while the fuel finds its way up front, then push the starter button. Bristol sixes always sound good; the exhaust has a muted but spirited bark. I wait and watch the gauges for a few moments while all six pots promptly settle into a smooth idle.

Kevin is a lot taller than me, so I sit low in the cockpit and can just about reach the controls. The gearlever towers from the transmission tunnel, a feeling exaggerated by the elongated aluminium knob at the top of the stick. The clutch feels heavy but the gearlever slots easily into first which, to my surprise, is synchromeshed. Moving off cautiously, the worm-and-roller steering feels heavy initially but it soon lightens up once the Ace is in motion.

First time out, I want to get a feel for the car so I'm slow and careful. The ratios seem perfectly matched to the power and torque of the engine, which is remarkably smooth. After the left-hander I pass the Chateau on my right and gently pop the Ace into third. There's a switch on the lever to activate a J-type overdrive on third and top gear, fitted for long, fast circuits like Le Mans. Out of curiosity, I engage it and the overdrive slips in seamlessly. But it's too high, so I knock it off, drop into second for the course's most challenging bend, then give it a blast up the hill.

On my way back down I notice a straight-line vagueness that I'd expect from a steering box of this period, but once it's loaded up and the rubber is biting, the ambiguity is gone. In fact after a couple of runs, I find that relaxing my grip on the wheel amplifies the sensations; feedback wasn't lost on-centre, it was merely subdued. I select top gear to test flexibility - the revs spool up turbine-smoothly and the torque is such that it will even pull from an indicated 30mph. Rather amazing for a car built for the track.

After just a couple of runs I'm into the Ace's groove, revelling in the cam change around 3500-4000rpm. The 1971cc BMW-derived six might not spin up like modern overhead-camshaft screamer, but rasps addictively as 140lb ft of torque smoothly joins the party. Feeling confident, I start to enjoy the way the car grips in corners and how consistently progressive and strong the front disc/rear drum brake set-up feels. This time, as the roundabout looms, I don't rely on the synchromesh but heel-and-toe as I drop down from third into second and I boot it round to the right. I can't resist smiling as the tail slides and I flick the wheel to the left to gather it up. What a cracker to drive this is.

It's hard to resist comparing the Ace's handling to that of its big brother, the Cobra. In a well-sorted racing Cobra you experience some intentionally induced on-limit understeer, but drive with a justified fear that it will bite you with snap oversteer at any given opportunity. By comparison the Ace turns in accurately and, thanks to the anti-roll bars at both ends that Kevin had specially developed by racing dynamicist Nigel Rees, it settles calmly into a four-wheel drift - an elusive scenario in any Cobra. The Ace never feels intimidating; the driving experience is more comparable to its earliest ancestor, the original Tojeiro Bristol 'LOY 500', than its venomous ultimate evolution.

Although set up for the track, this Ace's spring rates are so good that the ride is comfortable even on rural country roads. Kevin always fancied owning an AC Ace Bristol, and had been looking for the right car for 12 years. Eventually, his patience was rewarded.

During his search, he got to know Victor and Rosie Yates, who owned three ACs - an Aceca, a Greyhound and this Ace Bristol, chassis BE 232. The last-named had spent the first year of its life as a factory development car registered to AC Cars of Thames Ditton, and was fitted with a special lightweight aluminium body. It was also raced in the ownership of its first two private owners - Geoff Wilson and a limited company named Power Maintenance Service. During this time Wilson and Vic Hassall scored many wins and fastest laps at venues such as Goodwood, Mallory Park, Shelsley Walsh, Prescott and Chateau Impney. In August 1965 the AC was bought by Victor Yates, who noted a unique gearlever guard that stopped reverse being erroneously selected - thought to be a works development modification for Le Mans.

Sadly, Victor became almost blind over time and was therefore no longer able to use his cars. When he passed away, his widow Rosie initially felt too emotionally attached to his cars to let them go. After a year or so, she decided it was time and offered Kevin first refusal on the Ace.

The old thick red paint had protected the body, but after sitting dormant in a barn for 40 years it needed an engine rebuild, new gearbox, new wire wheels, new suspension and a new handbrake assembly. Luckily, though, most



LIVING WITH AN AC ACE

'The BE232 project took far longer than anticipated. The body had been painted somewhat amateurishly by the previous owner and gave a lot of extra work, but all that thick red paint certainly protected the metal while the car was in storage all those years. The main chassis tubes were all good but some of the smaller metal tubes at the front by the radiator had rotted and had to be replaced. The most challenging thing was fitting the correct wheels with the right offset because I wasn't prepared to spoil the contours of the car by stretching the arches. That proved surprisingly challenging because there was no engine or gearbox in the frame to weigh it down. We loaded the car with bags of potatoes so we could make sure tyres wouldn't rub anywhere. It took ages to get that sorted but now the car handles amazingly.'

Initially the car as a project cost Kevin £110k. He reckons it's currently worth about £350k but hasn't dared to calculate the restoration cost.

'I wanted something I could use on the road and occasionally enter into historic races. To me the Ace is 20% race car and 80% road car - I fully intend to drive it into work on sunny days. My wife and I are also planning a holiday in Ireland with it.'

[AC Ace Bristol]

The ex-works Ace
has lighter aluminium
bodywork



'For me, it's 20% historic race car and 80% road car
– I fully intend to drive it into work on sunny days'



Triple Solexes crown an engine whose design is fundamentally pre-war



Raw aluminium, raw driving experience

'The head gasket failed during qualifying – but this was Le Mans, I couldn't just give up...'



Wing vents and cut-down windscreen modifications were made for the Le Mans Classic

other items were salvageable – even the bumpers and fuel filler cap, which needed neither changing nor re-chroming. Body and chassis work was entrusted to ex-AC employee Lawrence Kett of G&A Fabrications in Walton-on-Thames. The engine, gearbox and differential were rebuilt by Ian Nuthall at InRacing. Once all the various components were restored, the puzzle was reassembled by Thunder Road Cars in Cheshunt. RW Racing of Brackley subsequently fitted the components necessary for historic racing.

Purists will no doubt notice the vents cut into the front wings. It was always Kevin's aim to race the car at the Le Mans Classic, and since the AC Ace that ran in period with a cut-down windscreen also had wing vents, the French regulatory body insisted that because Kevin's car had the former, it must also run with the latter. Kevin's main concern was that the car should not be over-restored and that original patina should be maintained where possible, so it can be seen that the car is the genuine article. This is one of the reasons why he decided to leave the car in unpainted aluminium. Another is simply that he thinks it looks great. I agree.

In 2016 Kevin fulfilled a dream when he took his Ace to the Le Mans Classic, until the cylinder head gasket failed during qualifying. He managed to borrow a spare from Angela Lowe, owner of another Bristol-engined Ace. Mark Richardson, Angela's mechanic, offered to help Kevin change it but neither he, nor Kevin's mechanic Neil, had the correct tools. 'There was nothing else to do but go to the bar and get completely hammered,' says Kevin. 'But in the morning, I saw sense. This was Le Mans – I couldn't just give up. I saw Patrick Blakeney Edwards – who has a company specialising in Bristol-engined Frazer Nashes – scoffing champagne and oysters. I approached him for help, but he couldn't spare any mechanics. As I turned to walk away he said, "Oh sod it, I'm bored anyway. I'll do it myself".'

Patrick, his co-racer Steve Brooks, and Keith Lessiter of the Bristol Owners' Club rolled up their sleeves and got stuck in, joined by fellow Ace owner Mike Harrison. There are 14 cylinder head

retaining bolts on the Bristol engine and most are inaccessible without the correct spanner. Steve took an angle grinder to a spare spanner and began reshaping it until it was able to move a tiny amount against each flat surface. Slowly but surely, they removed every head bolt. After five hours Patrick and Steve had to leave as their own race was about to begin. Kevin and Mike worked for a further five hours. 'Mike is my hero,' says Kevin. 'When the head eventually went back on we had no torque wrench, so we had to make do with a bar on the end of the spanner.'

Kevin started his first race from the pit lane in 53rd spot. Remarkably, the car lasted the race and he finished in 32nd place at 3.30am. Patrick and Steve found Kevin to congratulate him, and he bought them a beer to thank them. Later that morning, Kevin started his second race from 32nd spot, and finished 26th overall and third in class. All in all, a terrific achievement.

At last September's Goodwood Revival Kevin was able to make up five places in the rather wet Lavant Cup race because of the car's excellent handling balance, ultimately finishing eighth.

Over Christmas, Kevin received a phone call. It was Rosie Yates, Victor's widow. 'I love what you've done with the car,' she said. 'Vic would have been proud.'

Thanks to: Goodwood Revival (goodwood.com), Chateau Impney, Droitwich Spa (chateau-impney.com)

AC Ace

Engine Bristol 1971cc OHV straight-six, three Solex 32BPI carburettors **Power and torque** 160bhp @ 6000rpm; 140 lb ft @ 5000rpm **Transmission** Four-speed all synchromesh with overdrive on third and top **Suspension** Independent all round, double wishbones with transverse leaf spring and Armstrong telescopic dampers, anti-roll bars **Brakes** Front discs, rear drums **Steering** Worm and roller **Length** 3848mm **Width** 1511mm **Weight** 885kg **Performance** Top speed: 115mph; 0-60mph: 8.2sec **Price new** £2011 **Current value** £350,000