

185mph on the British motorway in 1963 - the real story from Jack Sears



The AC Coupé is rolled out of the Thames Ditton factory

Derek Hurlock, proprietor of AC cars decided that he would like to build a Cobra Coupé to compete with Carroll Shelby's Daytona Cobra Coupé at Le Mans in 1964. It was a very attractive car with a lower roof line and known as the AC Cobra Coupé.

In the November issue of 'Cars for the Connoisseur' editor Charles Harbord interviews Jack Sears about how the infamous 'M1 Incident' came about -

About a fortnight Le Mans AC thought they really ought to try and test the car to see what top speed it was likely to attain. We decided to get up at dawn on this early June morning and do a run up and down the M1 motorway. There was nothing special about that in those days when the M1 was used by other manufacturers with nearby factories such as Jaguar, Aston Martin and Rootes Group (Humber, Hillman and Sunbeam-Talbot).

So we all met at Southern Service Station, warmed the car up, and I went up the north carriageway for several miles, and clocked what I thought was terminal speed before returning south without passing any traffic – it being 4.30 am (*those were the days!* - CH). Back at the service station I told them how many revs I'd done, they knew what the back axle ratio was, they knew what the tyres size was, the wheel size etc etc, and from their slide rules (no calculators in 1964) they discovered that we had done 185mph. Then Peter Bolton, who was to be my co-driver, went off and did the same thing. We were both happy with the car and by 8.30 am I was back home in Norfolk eating eggs and bacon.

Around lunchtime I took a call from a journalist on the Sunday Times who had somehow picked up the story in a Fleet Street wine bar from a chap called Tony Martin, Derek Hurlock's nephew, who was on the administrative side of the paper and had been present earlier in the day. It must have been a 'quiet news day' because they blew up the story out of all proportion. It hit the headlines and the press followed the story right up to Le Mans, where sadly the car was destroyed after a rear tyre burst, putting Peter Bolton into hospital.



Jack Sears, immaculately attired as usual, exits the car after the high speed test. "...I was also dressed in my sports jacket and tie. I never thought to dress in anything else and if I was going to get arrested I may as well do it in style". AC Cars' MD Derek Hurlock's eyes are clearly watering.

Incidentally, the wreck of the car was brought back to the AC factory at Thames Ditton where it lay under wraps for many years before being acquired by an enthusiast and I believe it now resided in Scotland totally restored.

I am actually the only man in the world who has raced a Shelby Daytona Cobra Coupé, the AC Car Company Cobra Coupé and the Willment Cobra Coupé.

Of course all the publicity was good for AC but when the compulsory 70 mph speed limit was introduced in 1967 by the then Minister of Transport, Barbara Castle – a non-driver! I took a lot of flak for being responsible. Indeed at the time there were those who felt that sort of speed on a public highway was irresponsible behaviour and I had to live with this for some time. I am glad to say that I was eventually exonerated when, towards the end of her life, Lady Castle was interviewed by Tony Martin and asked whether the story concerning his uncle's car had any effect on her decision to impose the speed limit three years later. She remembered all the publicity but claimed that the speed limit was already under review long before - so I was vindicated!



The AC Coupé at Tertre Rouge during the 1964 race. Behind it is the official Shelby Daytona Coupé of Gurney/Bondurant - 1st in GT and 4th overall at the finish.



Jack Sears (L) and Peter Bolton (R).



Typical 1960s motorway scene - with 185mph Le Mans car

Editor's note –

The early 1960s GT battles between Ford, Ferrari, Jaguar, Aston Martin, Porsche, Iso and Alfa Romeo can truly be described as a 'golden era'. One of the features of the period was healthy (and sometimes not so) rivalry between various parts of the vast Ford Competitions empire which included Shelby American, Ford Advanced Vehicles and Alan Mann Racing. AC, the company who by dropping the 289 engine into their Ace roadster started the whole Cobra programme, decided to make their own closed, streamlined coupé to rival the 'factory' Shelby cars. It ran only once, at Le Mans, and as described was destroyed in a high speed tyre blow-out. Ferrari won the 1964 Championship but Alan Mann Racing, entrusted with the Shelby Daytona Coupés for '65, claimed victory the following year for Ford. English drivers Sir John Whitmore and Jack Sears were paired with American stars Bob Bondurant and Allen Grant in an often stormy, two-car European season.

We are indebted to the redoubtable Charles Harbord, editor of the monthly magazine 'Cars for the Connoisseur' for permission to reprint this extract from a fuller interview with 'Gentleman' Jack Sears that appears in the November issue. This feature would also have not been possible without George Stauffer's permission to use priceless photographs from his (sadly now out-of-print) book "Daytona Cobra Coupes", published in 1995.

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