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## 1904 – 1939

# The Amazing AC Car

*By John Spencer, AC Owners' Club Archivist*

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Even in the early 1900s there would be some history behind a new automotive venture. For AC Cars this can be traced to 1899 with the formation of Weller Brothers, manufacturers of self propelled cars and tradesman's carriers. In 1903, they exhibited the Weller 20hp 4-wheeled car at the Crystal Palace Motor Show. An advanced design, *The Autocar* predicted 'a brilliant future for its talented engineer'.

Financial backer, the butcher John Portwine, must have been impressed too. By 1904 he and John Weller had founded Autocars and Accessories Ltd, and they soon started manufacture of The Auto-Carrier, a simple 3-wheeled motorised delivery vehicle with tiller steering. This found a ready market over the next decade, selling worldwide in a highly diverse model range. In 1907 a mechanically similar passenger Tricar was introduced, the Company name was changed to Auto-Carriers Ltd, and the A-C logo was created. The Tricar sold well too and became recognised, along with Morgan, as one of the leading Cyclecars in the 'new motoring' era.

By 1911, world-wide demand outstripped capacity at West Norwood, and the Company moved production to the Ferry Works at Thames Ditton. In 1913 the first 4-wheeled A-C Light Car was introduced, with 4-cylinder 10hp and 12hp Fivet engines. A second 4-wheel design, a Cyclecar utilising the Tricar engine and drive-train, although widely advertised, appears not to have reached full production.

Motor manufacturing was generally curtailed part way through the Great War. Auto-Carriers became heavily involved with munitions and aircraft parts manufacture, with production of the A-C Light Car resuming as some normality returned. But, despite a very strong order book, general material shortages and industrial unrest badly restricted production. A revised Cyclecar, with flat-twin engine and shaft drive, seems not to have reached production. Nevertheless, development work had continued and in 1919 came John Weller's defining creation, and a landmark in motoring history, with the announcement of the world's first Light-Six engine. This was in full production by 1922 and, with its many advanced features, became the bedrock of AC engine production for 4 decades.

Though highly desirable, the 6-cylinder cars were expensive. Production of 4-cylinder cars therefore continued in parallel right through the 1920s. Anzani engines replaced the Fivet, followed by an AC-made variant of the Anzani. The cars all had 3-speed transaxles. A wide variety of attractive body designs were available, and the model name 'Aceca' appeared for the first time. The Marque earned a reputation for good quality and reliability – although ACs mid 1920s advertising slogan 'The Rolls-Royce of Light Cars' was not appreciated by one firm!

From the outset A-Cs were regular and successful participants in trials, and this continued with the Light Cars. But, in 1921 the focus changed dramatically. John Weller designed an open-wheeled competition car, which appeared in a number of guises for racing, hill-climbs and sprints, and long-distance record attempts. These achieved great sporting success over the next 4 years, including 57 records at Brooklands in 1921; the first under 1500cc car in the world to cover 100 miles in an hour; the world 24hr distance record – remarkably driven single handed; and three times winner of the Light Car and Cyclecar Challenge Cup. Thus was coined the slogan 'The Amazing AC Car', which adorns the Ferry Works to this day.

Competition success was not restricted to the track. In 1926, the Hon. Victor Bruce and Bill Brunell took their AC to the first British win in the Monte Carlo Rally. In 1927, Mildred Bruce won the Ladies Cup in the Monte and then, with her husband, completed a number of challenging exploits in Europe and Africa, including 17 world records during a 15,000 mile high speed test at Montlhéry.

Meanwhile, there had been no shortage of activity in the Boardroom. With the move to Thames Ditton, the Company was re-capitalised and renamed Auto-Carriers (1911) Ltd, reverting to Auto-Carriers Ltd in 1920. SF Edge joined the Company, and became Governing Director in 1921. The following year Weller and Portwine resigned their positions as Joint Managing Directors of the firm they had founded, and the name was changed to AC Cars Ltd.

Production difficulties continued well into the 1920s. Eventually, a lack of further development compounded the problems, and the Company incurred heavy financial losses. By 1926 Vauxhall had relinquished their substantial shareholding and in 1927 Edge took the Company into private ownership as AC (Acedes) Cars Ltd. However, bankruptcy loomed at the end of the decade, with Edge reputedly loosing £135,000 - a substantial fortune.

The Hurlock family bought the remnants in 1930. These included the High Street site in Thames Ditton, which had been purchased by Auto-Carriers in 1919. The lease on the Ferry Works was not renewed. William Hurlock was appointed Managing Director with brother Charles as General Manager. At the outset, the Hurlocks probably had little intention of making cars. Their

established business was the refurbishment and resale of heavy vehicles and machinery, and most of AC's manufacturing equipment and personnel had been dispersed. But, the AC service depot was still viable, and there was a substantial inventory of automobile components and part-finished cars. No doubt seeing a business opportunity, key people were re-engaged, essential equipment purchased, site services installed, and production slowly re-established.

Fifty cars were assembled using mainly legacy components. The Hurlocks now persuaded, a frugal budget was allocated and people set to work on the supply of new parts. By mid 1932 the Company's product and manufacturing policies had been established – a minimal range of proven bought-in mechanical components, the AC light-six engine in various states of tune, and a wide range of body styles finished to customer's requirements. The almost bespoke cars established something of a niche market, and the marque was advertised as 'The Savile Row of Motordom'. The appeal was further broadened when the March consultancy were engaged to design further options. For the period 1932 to 1939 at least 21 different models are recorded, ranging from conservative 5-seater saloons to exciting competition 2-seaters. The model names 'Ace' and 'Greyhound' were introduced, and the personal service meant there were probably never two cars quite alike.

Whilst much less extravagant, the competition heritage thrived. Throughout the 1930s ACs proved popular in trials and rallies, with many very fine performances in the UK and on mainland Europe. Most notably, Ray Morley took 13 awards in 14 UK events in 1931, and Kitty Brunell – the daughter of Bill Brunell, took an outstanding outright win in the gruelling 1933 RAC Hastings International Rally, with an all female crew which included Joyce Hurlock.

But, the realities of business and international politics were much less palatable. Car production realised a profit in only one of those early Hurlock years, and had probably only survived through cash injections from other Hurlock sources. Nevertheless, the Company had developed soundly in other respects and was well equipped to play its part when the call came. …….

*References and acknowledgements are recorded at the end of the 1962-2009 Section.*

# From war work to profitable car manufacture

In 1945 AC Cars Ltd faced an uncertain future. From 1937, British industrial production was increasingly directed towards re-armament and then the war effort, and AC's business had followed this national trend. With it came rapid expansion - capital equipment had increased markedly, the workforce had risen from about 140 to some 630, and output had increased some 10-fold. AC Cars had developed into a highly capable general engineering operation.

The main issue for AC's Directors was how to turn this legacy into a successful peacetime operation. The general scene in 1945 was difficult, with materials in short supply, everyday commodities rationed, and unemployment rising - Europe's economy was in tatters. Furthermore, Government permission had, understandably, been refused for any car design work during the war, and so AC had nothing suitable on the stocks. Had munitions contracts ceased abruptly the Company would have been very short of work. But, the work did continue for a while, giving breathing space that was to prove crucial to the Company's survival.

For car manufacture, AC's Directors decided to produce a saloon, and at least two fundamentally different options were quite thoroughly examined. The first and most radical concept, attributed to Director Edgar Sidney, had modern full width bodywork, torsion bar independent front suspension, and a 2.5 litre short stroke six cylinder engine. But, Charles Hurlock preferred a much more conservative approach. He was probably concerned about the time and cost involved in proving and tooling up for a totally new design, and the loss-making years of a decade earlier were perhaps not forgotten.

The conservative option won the day. The pre-war under-slung chassis was carried over, with significant modification to brakes, steering and suspension. Controversially, even to this day, beam-axle front suspension was retained to ensure a strong sporting feel. John Weller's AC light-six engine was installed, with development strictly limited. Progress was rapid with a 'hack' car on the road by April 1946, followed by the prototype in January 1947. The first production AC Two-Litre saloon left the factory in October 1947, and 12 more were completed before the end of the year.

The design found a ready market and production built up steadily. With exports a national priority, rewarded through preferential material supply, early cars were sent to a number of European countries, and to New York, Uraguay, Singapore and Australia. By 1949 three more body styles - drophead, cabriolet and 'woody' estate car, were available, and production was in

full swing at about 250 cars each year. Sales revenue came at just the right time and, with the Buckland Sports and 4-Door Saloon later added to the range, production of motor cars was profitable for the first time in 2 decades. The most prolific 4-wheel car in AC's 75 years at Thames Ditton was up and running, and Charles Hurlock's caution had been fully vindicated.

But, new work did not stop there. In 1947/48, with government assistance driven by the need to help disabled servicemen, AC invested in a 3-wheeler invalid carriage programme. Sales of these made their first substantial contribution to revenue in 1949/50, and with continuing development became the Company's main source of income for the next 30 years. With other general engineering projects, such as the Southend Pier Trains, also coming on stream in 1949, and products such as the Petite 3-wheeler in the pipeline, the transition from war work was successfully completed and the Company's immediate future secured.

If the Two-Litre had been a conservative choice, the next new AC model was anything but. John Tojeiro had acquired a reputation for making fine-handling sports–racing cars. Vin Davison demonstrated his Lea-Francis engined Tojeiro at Thames Ditton, and the Hurlocks took on both Davison and his car. With the car tidied up considerably, the trusty AC 6-cyl engine installed, and a second chassis built to display the sturdy tubular ladder-frame chassis and all-independent suspension, the AC Ace was presented to a surprised public at the 1953 London Motor Show.

By the spring of 1954 the production prototype was on the road, and by May the first customer cars were delivered. Aces were soon appearing in competitive events, with the redoubtable Ken Rudd amongst those enjoying an 'Indian Summer'. Then in October 1954 AC brought further delight for their aficionados with the announcement of the Aceca, essentially the Ace underpinnings with a beautifully sculptured light alloy coupe body.

By 1955, with their fine handling and low weight, the new models were making their mark at all levels in racing, rallying, and hill-climbing. These included, with Aces, a Class win for John Gott in the 1955 Tulip Rally, and Hap Dressel's fine performance at Sebring in 1956. John Weller's 1919 light-six was having a great finalé! But, the engine was nearing its development limits and, with Ken Rudd's influence very evident, the Bristol engine was offered as an option. So equipped, over the next 5 years ACs enjoyed a string of Class wins in the world's premiere World Sports Car Championship events and International rallies. At National level the Ace-Bristol enjoyed total domination, winning its Class in Sports Car Club of America Championships for 5 years to 1961.

With Two-Litre production tailing off by the mid 1950s, AC came under some pressure to produce a new 4-seater, and the prototype Greyhound was shown to the public in 1959. Reaction was mixed. After the fine lines of the Aceca the styling was not well received, and AC reacted quickly with changes to the prototype. Within a year, further substantial revisions to both chassis

and body style had been finalised and the model was in production. Most cars had Bristol engines fitted but, 43 years after its announcement, 6 were blessed with the last production versions of John Weller's light-six, by then producing 102bhp.

By 1961, with supplies of the Bristol engine becoming more difficult, AC were looking seriously at alternative power units. In the late 1940s they had begun working on completely new designs of boxer engine, and by the early 1960s had run extensive road trials of both flat-4 and flat-6 units. Reputedly, enquiries had also been made about the availability of both the Daimler and Buick (later Rover) V-8 engines and, in 1963, the one-off AC Drophead MA 200 prototype was run with a US Ford 289 V-8 engine.

Again, Ken Rudd came up with the solution, this time a Ford Zephyr 2.6 6-cyl engine. Soon the Ace and Aceca were offered with this unit, the Ace with a re-styled nose allowed by the reduced engine height. One Greyhound was also so fitted experimentally. Levels of tuning ranged from standard Ford to Raymond Mays light alloy 12-port heads with 3 twin-choke Weber carburettors. Production looked set to continue for some time, until a Texan with other ideas knocked on the door ……..

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1962 – 2009

# From Cobra domination to Brooklands and beyond

The Cobra was Carroll Shelby's brainchild. The 1959 Le Mans winner held an ambition to build such a car, and was seeking out opportunities. In 1961 the Chevrolet Corvette gave GM a distinct sporting image and Ford were looking to do likewise, through what became the 'Total Performance' racing programme. This included getting track success with their new thin-wall lightweight V8 as well as their Indy engine programme, barely underway, and the later Cosworth F1 engine. What Ford needed, and quickly, was an agile chassis and race support. In England, AC had a great handling car that had swept all before it in the USA. When Carroll Shelby called Thames Ditton in 1961, he had already secured promises of the Ford V8s and finance for racing. AC, Shelby and Ford were soon in business.

The thin-wall Ford V8 was lighter than the Zephyr 2.6. There was plenty of room in the AC Ace's engine bay, and the Thames Ditton team made numerous changes to the chassis, drive-train and wheel-arches to take the substantial increases in torque and speed. By early 1962 Cobra production was underway at Thames Ditton, all for the USA. Perhaps that is why the European announcement, in October 1962, was so low key. But the figures were utterly startling at the time - 4.2 litres in a modified AC Ace, and 0-100mph in 10.8secs!

Driven by racing, the Cobra's development was rapid. The model was homologated with the FIA as 'Shelby American', the engine was soon increased to 4.7 litres and the steering modified to rack and pinion. On the track, three US National Championships were secured in 1963, but success at International level did not come so easily. High-speed aerodynamics were poor even with a streamlined hard top, the handling something of a challenge, and there were the inevitable teething problems.

By the start of the 1964 season Pete Brock's Shelby Daytona Coupé, then allowed by the regulations, had resolved the aerodynamic issue for racing. Shelby mounted a serious attempt at the FIA World Championship, with strong support from UK teams including Willment Racing and AC Cars. But, success again eluded the Cobra, with an SCCA Class Championship as consolation. Sadly, AC's superb A98 Le Mans Coupé was ill-fated, but not before AC had achieved a great deal of publicity and some notoriety by testing the car on the London – Birmingham Motorway one quiet Sunday morning …….. at 185 mph!

With a 7-litre Corvette rumoured, a completely re-engineered chassis with larger diameter tubes and double-wishbone coil-spring suspension was developed. AC had the awesome Cobra 427 in production for Shelby by the end of 1964, but the 100 roadsters required for homogolation were not completed by the April 1965 deadline. Nevertheless, with the 289-engined leaf-spring cars well sorted in both roadster and Daytona Coupé forms, Shelby American won the 1965 FIA World Championship in the GT Category, a fitting reward for everyone involved on both sides of the Atlantic and a fine International finalé for John Tojeiro's chassis. However, with FIA regulations having been significantly revised, Ford and Shelby were by then concentrating on the GT40 programme and the Cobra's front-line International racing programme was essentially over.

Demand for the Cobra road cars in the early 1960s was such that manufacture and development of all other AC models ceased almost overnight. The following summary illustrates the general pattern of Cobra production at Thames Ditton, which fell into 4 main groups. For each of the two chassis types - the early leaf-spring and the later coil-spring - there were cars built by AC under contract for Shelby, and cars built by AC to market themselves, as follows:

a. 592 leaf-spring cars were built by AC under contract to Shelby, these leaving Thames Ditton between February 1962 and November 1964. Engines and gearboxes were mostly fitted by Shelby in the USA. The first 75 cars had 4.2 litre (260 cubic inch) engines, nearly all of the remainder 4.7 litre (289 cu in). A few had 7 litre (427 cu in) engines. Cars were mostly LHD and initially marketed as 'Shelby AC Cobra Powered by Ford', but this varied with time.

b. AC built a further 62 leaf spring cars between September 1963 and July 1966 to market themselves. All had 4.7 litre (289) engines fitted in the factory, were mostly RHD, and were marketed as the 'AC Cobra'.

c. 315 coil-spring cars were built by AC under contract to Shelby. The first 2 left Thames Ditton towards the end of 1964, the remainder between January 1965 and December 1966. These were mostly LHD, with nominally 7 litre (427 cu in or 428 cu in) engines fitted in USA, and marketed as the 'Shelby Cobra 427'.

d. A further 27 coil-spring cars were built by AC Cars to market themselves. These left Thames Ditton between 1966 and 1969. All had 4.7 litre (289) engines, and were marketed as the 'AC 289 Sports'.

Of the very few exceptions to this pattern, the most notable are approx ten units supplied as 'Chassis Only' for fitting with the Daytona Coupé or similar special bodies for racing. Regarding Mark numbers, the leaf-spring cars were not assigned a Mark number during production, but

became Mk I by default. The coil-spring cars are recorded in the AC Factory Ledger as Mk II. There is no known factory record of a Mk III in this period.

Cobra production for Shelby stopped with the last of the December 1966 deliveries. The AC 289 Sports continued to be sold, but in very small numbers. It ended as quickly as it had begun, and AC Cars were again in need of a new product.

The new coil-spring chassis was one legacy from the Cobra programme. Although in production by late 1964, this chassis was first shown to the European public at the 1965 London Motor Show. Coincident with the announcement of the AC 289 Sports, the new AC 427 had essentially the same chassis design, with the wheelbase extended by 6 inches, a Ford 427 cu in engine, and coachwork by Frua of Turin. The plan was for the chassis to be shipped to Turin where the bodies were fitted, then returned to AC for painting, trimming and finishing. Whilst the show car had an aluminium convertible body, production bodies were in steel. Convertible or Fastback (coupé) styles were offered, and the choice of fittings were bespoke. The production engine was 428 cu in, the model being re-named AC 428.

The industrial, political and economic climate was not kind to this high performance Grand Touring car. When production was curtailed in 1973 just 29 Convertibles and 51 Fastbacks had been completed. Additionally, a prototype MkII Convertible, and a prototype 4-seater version with a quite different structure, were finished but not put into production.

When Peter Bohanna and Robin Stables first demonstrated their prototype mid-engined Diablo to AC Cars in 1972, one could sense history repeating itself. AC took on the project and its founders, and the totally re-engineered AC 3-Litre 2-seater was announced at the 1973 London Motor Show. The model attracted much favourable comment. AC made plans to manufacture up to 35 per week and, with the first road car running in 1974, full-scale production within the year seemed feasible.

But, legislative demands were burgeoning, and this was an ambitious project. Unlike earlier models, before production of the 3-Litre could start the Company was faced with an extensive programme in order to prove the design and demonstrate compliance with the new legislation. When a pre-production car failed the recently introduced 30 mph barrier crash test – by a small margin - a further redesign of the monocoque and front structure was necessary. By the time a second test was passed in 1976 – by a substantial margin - the cost of development and Type Approval had soured. This eventually reached an estimated £1M, with nine prototype and pre-production cars.

AC car production having been at a virtual standstill for ten years, the Company were totally reliant on other products to fund this development. The main income stream was from the invalid carriage programme, the first versions of which dated back to 1948. But, these were now the subject of some public criticism. Nevertheless the Board were surprised when, in 1976, they were informed by the Department of Health that production would cease in March 1978. With the Town Car project also discontinued by the Company, profitable production of the 3-Litre suddenly became crucial to AC Cars survival. The Company persevered, and after a number of changes to the model name, the first AC 3000ME was delivered towards the end of 1978, a LHD car destined for the Belgian agent.

But orders for the car did not take off as hoped. Unfavourable press comment, about the lengthy development and the cars handling at the limit of adhesion, gathered a momentum. Only about 70 more cars were made before production ceased at Thames Ditton in 1984. But that was not before the model had made an impression. Re-setting the rear wheel toe-in and a change of tyre resolved the handling issue. The drive-train was re-engineered for the later 2.8 litre Ford V-6 and trialled in one car. The separate body unit readily lent itself to change, and in 1981 Ghia produced a stunning new 2-seater on a standard rolling chassis, and in 1982 a 4-seater on a stretched monocoque.

In 1984, manufacturing and marketing rights were sold to a new company, AC (Scotland), and use of the AC trademark licensed. Production was established remarkably quickly on the outskirts of Glasgow, and a further 30 cars were made. However, financial woes loomed, a receiver was appointed, and the license agreement terminated in November 1985. The Ecosse Signature, with a clear engineering link to the AC 3000ME, appeared in 1988, but little more was heard of the Project. The AC 3000ME had great potential, but was in the end defeated by a shortage of development funding and costly Type Approval. In 1986, the Hurlocks sold their interests in the business, and AC Cars 75-year association with Thames Ditton drew to a close.

But, as one door closed then another opened. From the mid 1970s Brian Angliss had been repairing and re-building Cobras. His company, CP Autokraft, steadily made the transition to manufacturing new cars, progressively acquiring the original Cobra production equipment and drawings from AC Cars, and licensing use of the AC name in 1981. A further licence to use the Cobra trademark, in Ford ownership since 1965, was agreed in 1986. By 1987 CP Autokraft and the Ford Motor Company had taken joint ownership of AC Cars Ltd, and a new purpose built factory within the old Brooklands race track was up and running in 1988. They had also acquired a multitude of jigs, tools, body bucks, manufacturing drawings and spare parts for many of the earlier AC models. Even the old Singer sewing machine made the move from Thames Ditton!

Produced until 1986 as the AC Mk IV, the AC Cobra Mk IV is a significantly updated version of the 1960s coil-spring Shelby Cobra 427 and AC 289 Sports. It was built nevertheless to the same fundamental design, using traditional methods, but in a modern facility. The standard engine was Ford's 302 cu in V8 but some were fitted with much larger units, up to 427 cu in. Later, lightweight models also became available. Former Thames Ditton craftsmen joined Autokraft, and for the first time since 1939 production car body panelling was being made in house. Autokraft's workmanship and attention to detail were of the highest order, producing some of the finest quality AC cars of all time. Indeed, one is reminded of that 1920s advertising slogan for which SF Edge had incurred the wrath of Rolls-Royce. By 1996 about 400 had been made, the majority of which were exported.

Before the move to the new factory Autokraft had been working on a completely new model. The appearance of the Ace of Spades on the Ford stand at the 1986 British Motor Show surprised many, and it was this design that led in time to development of the 'Brooklands' AC Ace. But, before that was to reach fruition an application was made by Ford, in 1990, to wind up AC Cars. After 2 years of legal wrangling Ford agreed to sell their 50.96% interest in AC Cars Ltd to Brian Angliss, and to continue to support AC with engineering and hardware.

The new AC Ace received EEC Type Approval in 1993 and was launched at the London Motor Show. Production levels of up to 700 cars a year were mentioned, a figure probably within the capacity of the Brooklands factory. But, output built up slowly. Although powered by a similar Ford engine to the Cobra Mk IV, the Cromweld stainless steel monocoque and hand-formed aluminium body was expensive to make and, despite the premium price, the Ace sold at a loss. By 1996 less than 50 cars had been completed and, even with the continuing healthy demand for the Cobra, the Board was obliged to call in a Receiver.

The Company was bought by Mr Alan Lubinsky and re-named AC Car Group Ltd. A number of significant changes were introduced aimed at making the business profitable. A good example was the one-piece hand-formed aluminium bonnet-wing structure of the Ace, which alone was reported as costing £8K to make. This was changed to a composite structure. To challenge the burgeoning Cobra kit-car business AC made the bold move of offering the option of a carbon fibre bodied Cobra, then the largest such moulding in the motor industry. With much simpler underpinnings needed for the body, production costs were drastically reduced and the AC Cobra MkIV CRS sold for about half the price of an aluminium MkIV. The performance and handling benefited too from the lighter weight and lower centre of gravity. Retired Formula 1 drivers were soon turning up to conduct reviews! Further cost reductions were achieved, firstly by downsizing the Brooklands factory and then, in 2001, with the move to a smaller unit at nearby Frimley.

Other new models were also progressively added to the range. The much lighter Lotus V8 engine was tried in the CRS, giving further performance improvements. The Superblower model comprised a supercharged version of the Ford V8 in the aluminium bodied Cobra. Both of these engines were also available in the Ace, and the Aceca name was re-introduced with a 4-seater coupé version of the Ace. The prototype Mamba coupé could also be seen by visitors to the factory, with a body style redolent of the 1960s Cobra 427 and the roadster's streamlined racing hardtop.

The Company celebrated its centenary in 2001 with great hopes for the future. But demand did not take off as hoped. Whilst the Cobra Mk IV CRS was well received and found a steady line of customers, the much higher priced Superblower sold slowly. The revised Ace received mixed reviews, and the Aceca, Lotus-engined cars and Mamba did not reach production despite considerable effort and expenditure on development. By 2004, production of the Ace had ceased. Production of bare body/chassis units for a number of aluminium continuation cars, being made under contract to Shelby, was transferred to a small industrial unit near Guildford, and the equipment for manufacturing carbon fibre cars was moved to Malta. Establishing production there with a new workforce was a difficult undertaking. Only a handful of AC Mk Vs were made before that factory was closed, with the model now superseded by the recently announced AC MK VI to be made in Germany.



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The AC Owners' Club Archive

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