



ABSOLUTE PERFORMANCE

In the August issue **Nigel** gave us an exclusive insight into the world of Absolute Performance, manufacturer of turnkey Cobra replicas. This month he gets behind the wheel of the first C350 demonstrator, but does it live up to expectation?

Working at Sovereign Cars, the sales outlet for Absolute Performance, I've found myself in a truly privileged position. Spending day after day alongside the team that have created the C350 has been an emotional rollercoaster. The initial brief was to produce one of the best Cobra replicas money could buy. Period. Rather ambitious many might say, but when you consider the engineering prowess of Chris Simons (AP Managing Director) and Cobra connoisseur Larry Webb (owner of Sovereign Cars), it could just work. Six months on from that inaugural meeting, the first C350 has rolled off a trailer at the Hampshire showrooms. It's a time of mixed emotions. Larry has a grin like a Cheshire cat because he can at last put the car under the noses of eagerly awaiting customers. Nick (Larry's deputy) and I just want to get behind the wheel and give her some stick. As for Chris, well, he seems a little preoccupied. The truth of the matter is, he's not a happy bunny. Bearing in mind this is the first feature on the car, it could be construed as a damaging admission. However, in my mind it's exactly the opposite and optimises Chris approach to car building.

For those that didn't read my first piece on AP, a little clarification is in order. Chris is an ex-Formula 1 engineer and this comes with a serious amount of baggage. In short, nothing but perfection will do. With this in mind, the very first C350 was never going to meet with Chris's approval. A component car build is a learning experience and any builder can sympathise with the painful and expensive lessons learnt during any project. How many of you have said, "If I built another, I would....."?

However, unlike the one-time builder, Chris has the opportunity of rectifying any issues on subsequent cars. In reality, over 40 design changes have been documented and implemented in the next C350. Chassis number 0000002 to be precise. Typical issues include the routing of the main battery lead, relocation of the ECU loom and a modicum of other enhancements. Nothing too dramatic though, simply fine-tuning. This meticulous approach will continue, with future C350s being gradually honed to perfection. Having said this, car number 0000001 looks bloody amazing!

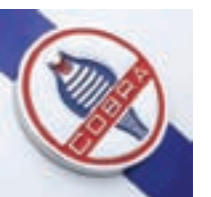
Before I start running through the C350 in detail, I need to cover the subject of bias. I make no apologies for being close to this project and see all those involved as personal friends. I'm proud to be associated with such a professional team of people but be assured, however, my vested interest will not influence my reporting one iota. That said, let's get down to business.

The concept behind the Absolute Performance range is to replica main dealer service standards. This includes showroom, sales staff, manufacturer's warranty, professional sales literature, owner's manual and of course, not least, an immaculate car complete with brand new registration.

Sovereign Cars have just expanded their premises by a staggering 2000 square feet, so the AP demonstrator can now boast its very own home. Standing at the entrance of the new showroom you are immediately struck by Larry's commitment. The amount of investment is staggering, not only to the AP project but to our entire industry.

No less than a quarter of the expansion has been dedicated to the C350 demonstrator! Complete with chequered flooring, bespoke signage, scripted

Left: The first AP C350 in all its glory. Imperial Blue with white stripe is a stunning combination and most popular with customers.



17 inch rims and huge stainless side pipes give the car an aggressive stance.



Above: Wind wings and sun visors come as standard.

Above right: The passenger roll-over hoop is an optional extra but it gives the car visual balance.

partitioning and neon lighting, it looks totally amazing. Add to this the background music from the jukebox and you could be fooled into thinking you were in a top flight main dealer franchise.

Entering the showroom you can't help but be drawn to the AP display. Lovingly finished in Imperial Metallic Blue, the car is visually stunning. It seems that however many Cobra replicas I see, it's this colour scheme that works like no other. Naturally, to add to the drama, white stripes run the car's entire amidships in perfect unison.

Strolling around the car in this environment is nothing but enchanting. The red and blue neon plays on the rear arches as if they were coated in glass. The highly polished twin side exhausts flawlessly echo the chequered flooring. And as for the chrome work, this sparkles under the HQI lighting. It's almost theatrical.

Standing back a few feet I can appreciate the detailing and effort that has gone into making the C350 aesthetically pleasing. The choice to use the DAX Tojeiro as the base kit immediately pays dividends due to the aggressive stance of the car. Opting for the 17 inch Hallibrand wheel and tyre package (standard

fitment), the profile leaves one in no doubt this car means business. Serious business at that! As for the four into one big bore stainless side pipes, these have been painstakingly polished to a high lustre. Oh yes, laser cut escutcheons frame the pipes as they emerge from the bodywork. Actually the more I look, the more chrome work jumps out at me. Bumpers with overriders, lights, windscreen surround, side vents, badges and I'm sure there's a few other bits I've missed. I just hope future customers like valeting!

Moving to the front of the car and squatting to one's knees provides a perfect view of the beast's mouth. A large steel radiator matrix nestles comfortably in the background (chosen over aluminium to provide additional frontal impact protection). Equipped with three, yes three, electronically controlled fans, there is little risk of overheating even on the hottest summer day. However, most prominent to onlookers is a stainless wind deflector which straddles the entire width of the opening. Moving my eyes slightly downward, a Mocal oil cooler comes into view. Mounted on highly polished stainless brackets it comes complete with race quality crimped connections and braided hose to boot.

Interestingly, many private builders forgo this option while building their own cars due to budget restrictions, but by-God, it doesn't half finish off one of these monsters beautifully!

The rear of the car on first inspection looks like any other DAX Tojeiro and to be fair, it is. Chris has a few nice touches up his sleeve for future customer cars, but like many other ideas, he has threatened to break my kneecaps if they go into print.

A twist of the bootcatch reveals a lovingly trimmed boot. Executed to Chris's precise instructions, AP uses one of the best men in the business when it comes to trim. Fitted out with Wilton carpet, naturally, the contrasting leather edging adds that air of refinement. The battery is hidden behind a removable panel, leaving enough clutter-free space for at least one, if not two, medium sized suitcases. If, however, you look under the boot lid itself there is a little surprise. Trimmed in a way I have only previously seen on classic cars, the finish is simple yet optimises Chris's attention to detail. If you want to know the secret you will have to come along to the showroom and take a butcher's.

Finally, before moving on to the interior I gently

close the boot lid. Unlike other Cobra replicas you don't have to turn the handle and struggle to engage the mechanism. With the C350 you apply a small amount of pressure on the lid and a reassuring click tells you the operation is complete.

One of the reasons I'm building a Cobra replica myself is the scope for further detailing within the interior and engine compartment. The C350 does not disappoint in either case.

The interior is finished in soft cream leather with the occasional flash of blue, thanks to the contrasting piping. The carpets, as with the boot, are in deep blue and again are religiously edged. The cockpit exudes quality in its entirety and once installed I'm sure you could be mistaken for thinking you are in a Rolls Royce. However, the devil is in the detail and here are a few areas which are worth a quick mention.

Effortless door opening. Interior lighting. Leather door hinge gators. Under-dash panelling. Aluminium shelled AP seats. Beautiful period Smith's instruments. Moto Lita wood rimmed steering wheel. Laser cut demister vents and screen escutcheons. Leather padded rear bulkhead. It goes on and on and on. Amazingly,



Above: Specially fabricated under-dash panels give that professional finish.

Above left: Cream leather interior contrasts perfectly with Imperial Blue paint. The Moto Lita wheel sets interior off perfectly.



Top: Silky smooth 5.7 litre Chevrolet V8 power.

Above: Twin catalytic converters ensure the strictest emission standards are met.

everything apart from the last item is totally standard on all C350s, just in case you were thinking this is a top spec car being marketed at a rock bottom price.

Finally, before the test drive there is the matter of the engine bay. Twisting the bonnet catches, which in themselves have a positive stop, allows the bonnet to glide open on twin gas rams. Before me is a brand new fuel injected 5.7 litre Chevrolet V8. In all honesty, anything smaller would be an insult. The very latest Tremec 5 speed gearbox can be seen snugly tucked into the tunnel, but the sea of chrome keeps bringing my eye back to the Chevy 350. Dressed with the AP Edelbrock engine package, the cast aluminium rocker covers and air cleaner seek respect from any admirer. If that were not enough glitz, a chromium plated alternator, billet alloy pulleys and loom tidies reflect endlessly in the highly polished engine bay panelling. Once my eyes get accustomed to the glare, blue silicon hoses can be seen transporting the coolant. In front of the engine is a huge, and I mean huge, aluminium header tank. It's capacity is designed by Chris to ensure effective cooling for the American V8. Peering deeper into the heart of the beast, the cats can be seen either side of the engine,

along with braided hosing working its way from the thermostatic sandwich plate to the cooler up front. Closing the bonnet I notice the fire retardant quilted blanket on its underside. This engine is actually put to bed every night!

Apologies for rambling on so much, but when it comes to Cobra replicas, looks are of paramount importance. After all, they have become more of a showcar than the blood-curdling beasts of the 60s.

OK, now it's time for my first drive. Hopping into the seat provides a driving position much the same as any other DAX. The AP seats, however, unquestionably provide additional under-thigh support and seem to be slightly more rigid, probably due to the aluminium construction. Once I finish shuffling my lumbar region, my six foot two frame is easily accommodated. On with the full harnesses and I'm ready for the off. Turning the key once kicks the fuel pump into life. Turning the key once more results in a resounding..... non-event. I try again and again. I look up at Larry rather sheepishly, hoping I haven't busted his new toy. Smiling, he simply points to the gearstick.

Looking down, I see the starter button. Nestled in the centre of the gear knob, a single press provides immediate ignition. No choke. No coughing. No blipping the throttle. Just a silky smooth idle thanks to the fuel injection and electronic control unit (ECU). As one would expect, Chris has mapped the ECU courtesy of his laptop to provide certain functions such as rev limiter, fan control and gauge operation.

Selecting first and removing the handbrake highlights an immediate difference to the standard Tojeiro. The handbrake is of the normal variety and not the Jaguar fly-off design. The latter is recommended and supplied by DAX because it's always in the down position, whether the brake is on or off. This obviously aids cabin access. The problem is, however, you can easily drive off with the handbrake on (not a good idea) and they are notoriously poor in operation. You just try getting one through an SVA test! Hence, entry to the



C350 requires stepping over the erect handbrake, but in my opinion it's worth the inconvenience.

Pulling away is effortless and a slow drive through the Hampshire countryside is in order. Choosing my usual test route for potential Cobra purchasers allows me the ideal opportunity for direct comparison. With only a handful of miles on the clock I will take things easy.

It is immediately apparent that the spring and shock rates are set too soft, understandable due to the car's zero set-up time. However, the steering feels positive with little shake through the column, a common problem on the badly rutted Hampshire 'B' roads. This is one area Chris has modified in future customer cars.

Brakes feel good as they always do on a Tojeiro and as for the clutch, this is heavy as per usual on an American V8 powered car. On this latter point, a design update is in the pipeline, so watch this space.

Listening to the rumbling beast is very pleasurable. The exhaust note is not too loud, but purposeful. Rattles are practically non-existent, but one or two are present. Don't worry though, fault reports have already been completed and e-mailed to AP for Chris's attention!

Body roll is apparent, not surprising when you consider the soft settings on all four corners. Instrumentation is clearly visible and the column stalks work well even though they do not have the best period feel. Need I say that this is also being reviewed?

What about performance? Well, the 5.7litre unit is brand spanking new and Chris has set the rev limiter to 3000rpm to stop us Sovereign boys thrashing the nuts off his firstborn. As if! However, with limited rpm and tight internals the performance is keen enough. Gearing is superb thanks to Tremec and the 3.54 differential. Cruising at 70mph in fifth is effortless and just over 2000rpm. As for acceleration, the lower gears and 350 cubic inches are enough to put a grin on my face.

Arriving back at Sovereign was I disappointed?



Definitely not. The build quality is superb for us mere mortals, though Chris is on a crusade to hit perfection. My views are confirmed by all the positive comments we received at the Donnington Kit and Performance Car Show, the car's first outing. More set-up time is obviously required, but that was a given even before I sat behind the wheel.

Prices start at £38,000. This includes VAT, 12 months manufacturer's parts and labour warranty, 6 months road tax and a full tank of petrol. An optional extras list is available but the standard car is very much the same as the demonstrator. The only differences are the second roll-hoop, Edelbrock engine dress up kit, quilted rear bulkhead and oil cooler.

Finally, I must end by saying that the first C350 was sold within 2 hours of the demonstrator hitting the showroom. The second, 3 days later. Both customers ordered blue paint and cream leather interior, what more can I say? If you are tempted, please call Sovereign Cars on 01256 895188 or visit the showrooms at Andover Road, Whitechurch, Hampshire. RG28 7RL. It will certainly not be a wasted trip.