
Behind the Wheel: 1965 Shelby Cobra 427 Competition and 1963 ATS 2500 GT

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Few cars demonstrate the variety of early 60s racing technology better than these two headlining entries in RM's forthcoming London auction. We were able to drive both recently, back to back, on British roads.

Nearly 50 years ago, life was not – as many would have you believe – simpler than it is today. In single-seater racing, rear-engined cars were at the fore but in long-distance events (such as **Le Mans** and the **Targa Florio**), front-, rear- and mid-engined models from **Porsche**, **Aston Martin**, **Maserati** and **Ferrari** were all capable of victory.



In the USA, **Carroll Shelby** took **AC's** simple **Ace** and developed it into a Ford V8-powered World Championship-winning GT car, while in Italy the infamous 'palace revolt' of 1961 saw top engineers **Chiti** and **Bizzarrini** leave **Maranello** to form **ATS**: a hi-tech approach to racing and road cars that presaged the **246 GT 'Dino'** by many years.

History lessons aside (you can read RM's customarily well-written catalogue descriptions for the **1965 Shelby Cobra 427** and **1963 ATS 2500 GT** elsewhere on **Classic Driver**), what are the two cars, built within a year or so of each other – yet so totally different in technical terms – like to drive?



First up was the **Cobra** (est. £600,000 - 790,000). Not an everyday '289' Cobra, this is an original 427 (7-litre) 'side-oiler', a competition car from new and one that was raced extensively in period with a stunning win by **David Piper/Bob Bondurant** in the **1966 Brands Hatch Ilford 500** to its credit. Wearing its Wimbledon White/black bonnet paintwork, the low-slung roadster looks as if it's just been leathered down from the torrential rain that was a feature of that day.

The seat is a simple aluminium bucket, with minimal padding and thin black covering, while the hefty Simpson lap-belt is in typical US pro-racing style. Fully depress the (surprisingly light) clutch, keep a shoe poised on the throttle and a turn of the key starts the big V8. It's less 'a-hunka-hunka-hunka' than a constant, crackling 'bl-a-a-a-a...' from the trademark matt-black side-pipes.

If you know what I mean.



The footwell is a little crowded by the massive bell-housing but, once underway, controlling the big-block car at everyday speeds is easy and I will repeat that for effect: dead easy.

Without *really* treading on it, you can feel that it has one hell of a lot of horsepower (the catalogue suggests 607bhp...) but with its light yet communicative steering, easy 'change, firm brake pedal and comfortable driving position, I felt immediately at home in the 44-year-old **Cobra**. The wider body of the 427 clothes a revised chassis with coil springs, and the ride is more accommodating than you'd think.



However, despite losing the elliptic springs, and riding on road tyres, you soon realise that any indiscretion will be punished. Severely.

It's an easy 80 per cent car - but getting the last 20% is only for the brave.

Speaking of fearlessness, the estimate on the **1963 ATS 2500 GT 3.0-litre Coupé** (£600,000 - 1,000,000) does tend to concentrate the mind. As does the "is this first or reverse?" conundrum, and revving an unbelievably rare, hand-built V8 enough to pull away, with gearing set to allow the car a likely 150mph-or-so top speed.





Compared to the **Cobra**, the cockpit is beautifully appointed with fully upholstered seats and even electric windows. The timing equipment betrays its life in the current owner's hands as a machine for road rallying, with generous space for driver, co-driver, maps and intercom. I was genuinely surprised at the roominess and comfort of the red GT - particularly when you consider the **Le Mans** and **Targa Florio** histories of these jewel-like machines.



Ferrari-wise, it's more **Dino 246** than **250 LM**, and I even felt a bit of **F430** creeping in, looking down the sharply disappearing nose and enjoying the refined V8 singing away behind my neck. Like the **Cobra**, starting is by key (turn and press) and any car-park-stiffness of the clutch disappears with movement. A sophisticated rasp comes from the engine - you can just imagine this on open pipes at the **Piccolo Madonie** circuit, delicately moving from apex to apex, yet tough enough to cope with rough roads and rougher driving.

The motor produces its power in time-honoured racing fashion: at higher revs. That said, on road rather than track the delivery is very smooth and, buzzing along above 3500-4000rpm, the **ATS** asks to be pushed harder and faster. It's a driver's car.



The delicate, vertical gear lever slots into place with careful ease. The relatively 'flat' steering wheel is typical of early mid-engined cars, while the suspension is supple and sophisticated – although the Dunlop racing tyres are not best suited to everyday Tarmac in Essex.

The ATS project sits in the middle of **Carlo Chiti's** CV; post-**GTO** and '**Sharknose**' F1 car for **Ferrari** and before a stunning selection of technically advanced **Alfa Romeo TZs, T33s** and **GTAs**. A brief drive in the **ATS 2500 GT** shows what direction road and racing cars from **Maranello** might have gone in the 60s and 70s had differences been resolved.

It's sophisticated beyond its time. Think of it as a genuine 'car of the future' rather than 'what might have been' and you get the picture.





Both cars will be auctioned at **RM Auctions' Automobiles of London Sale** to be held at **Battersea Park** on October 28, 2009. You can read our full preview of the sale [elsewhere on Classic Driver](#), as well as viewing all the cars in the **Classic Driver** car database [HERE](#).

Text: Steve Wakefield

Photos: Classic Driver

RM Auctions in association with Sotheby's
46a Carnaby Street
London
W1F 9PS
UK

UK Telephone: +44 (0)20 7851 7070

Fax: +44 (0)20 7851 7079

North America Telephone: +1 519 352 45 75

Website: www.rmauctions.com

Email: mgirardo@rmauctions.com.

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