

OUR EUROPEAN CORRESPONDENT BUYS BACK HIS UNIQUE EXPERIMENTAL C4 CORVETTE IN PARIS FRANCE



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01 :: EX4607 outside a 15th Century timber-framed farmhouse close to Tom's Corvette shop in Kent, UK.

AT 115 mph the horizon approaches fast. But after midnight on a pitch black Monday morning on a French autoroute there is no horizon, just the ever-converging bright reflective white stripes that mark the limits of the superbly surfaced highway and the broken white lane divider stripes flashing past on our left, all picked out by the European halogen headlights of our C4 Corvette.

We are running late for the 3:00 a.m. Calais to Dover Sea-France ferry. My 22-year-old daughter Daisy is sharing the driving, and the Tom-Tom Sat-Nav shaking on the windshield is counting back our ETA at Calais, minute by minute. It assumes that we will be driving at the French speed limit of 81 mph, but in the middle of the night in a British registered car, 115 mph is the only way to travel on the empty A26. Sensibly, French speed cameras are always preceded by a warning sign one kilometer ahead, so we slow for those and every time we see red tail lights ahead in case it's les gendarmes. At these speeds, our '88 automatic coupe is well within its 155-mph capability and tracks rock-steady on its Z51 suspension with heavy duty 13-inch Z51 front brakes ready to slow us in a hurry if required. Alert C4 owners will already have noticed an anomaly, because those fat 13-inch brakes were only available with the 4+3 manual overdrive transmission in 1988 or the ZF six-speed in 1989.

This is no ordinary C4 coupe, but a GM

Engineering test mule with VIN plate EX4607 proudly displayed in the windshield, built in 1986 to test all the new-for-1988 features. This actual car must have spent weeks pounding round the General Motors Proving Ground at Milford, Michigan, with longer runs on the highway, testing all the changes for a year which saw the suspension, steering, and brakes vastly improved. That duty done, it was among a batch of Corvettes sent to England to assist in the development and packaging of the King of the Hill double overhead camshaft LT5 for the ZR1. This was designed in Britain by Lotus Engineering of Hethel, Norfolk starting 1986, and finally saw production for the 1990 model year. While Lotus designed the LT5 engine and subsequently tested the ZR1 package, another British design company Hawtal-Whiting Ltd of Leamington Spa, Warwickshire was appointed to develop the wiring, hydraulics, and instrumentation interfaces of the new engine. One of their employees at the time told me that they were also responsible for styling the LT5 engine and developing the 1991 nose and tail and the new 1991 Japanese-made wheels, but this is unproven.

Hawtal-Whiting Ltd registered EX4607 as an '88 Corvette with the Local Vehicle Licensing Office in Warwick on January 5, 1988, and it was given the license plate E282 LAC—the last two letters denoting the Warwick district in the heart of our

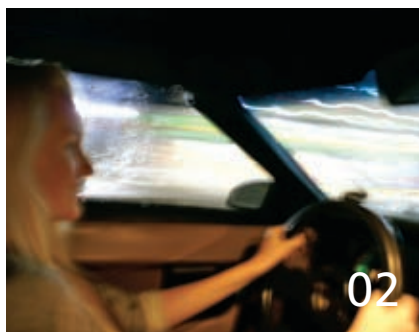
one-time auto industry region—which it still carries. Quite what Hawtal-Whiting used it for is unknown, but it was eventually sold to a farmer in Essex in the early nineties, and I bought the car from him in 1995. The foot wells were full of winter mud from the farmer's boots and the engine was in serious need of a distributor cap and rotor arm, but in 1995 this was still the current Corvette and desirable. A previous buyer had pulled out when he could not analyze the VIN using the Corvette Black Book, and did not believe it could be a prototype. These were tough times, so an offer from a French dealer which showed me a \$5,000 profit on EX4607 was accepted immediately, and I let a piece of Corvette history slip away.

Four years later, a Frenchman called me to ask why the new brake pads he had bought from Ecklers for the brakes on his '88 would not fit his calipers. I asked for his VIN to confirm it was not an '87, which uses a different pad, and the response was the magic EX4607. I immediately explained how lucky he was to have a pre-production prototype and a car that GM in the USA would have never sold to the public. His response came five days later in the form of a two-page letter from the Paris office of a leading American attorney, demanding the immediate replacement of the car with a new '99 C5 and 50,000 francs in damages for supplying a car "unfit for purpose." I laughed at first, because he should have been complaining to the French dealer who had sold it to him, and not to me. But then I sat down in shock when I remembered that the rest of Europe uses Napoleonic law, a legal system adapted by that mad dictator from the laws of ancient Rome, never to be messed with and incomprehensible to the Americans and British whose citizens are innocent until proved guilty.

It was my good fortune that the attorney's letter was a very bad English translation from an original that had been dictated in French. It was packed with glaring errors—I knew exactly what they were trying to say and I would have understood the French original but they chose not to send me that. So, after a weekend's careful analysis, I responded with

three pages innocently and aggressively responding to the numerous factual errors in the English letter, without revealing that I knew they were just the translator's fault. I finished with the suggestion that we would happily fit a set of production front brakes to the car if it was driven over to England. It was a moment of indescribable relief when my ploy worked; they backed down and accepted my offer. A few weeks later the car made the trip across the English Channel to remove the prototype 13-inch heavy duty brake caliper brackets with their non-standard pads and we substituted production brackets and pads, another document was signed accepting this as a full and final settlement of any further liability, and of course I kept the brackets. So we were friends again and the car remained in Paris for ten more years until August 2009, when a deal was agreed and I was able at last to buy the car back.

Daisy and I just made the 3:00 a.m. ferry at Calais and cruised through Kent with the sun rising on the early commuter traffic. After two hours of sleep, I drove down to work and started removing 14 years and 47,000 miles of Parisian grime from this precious C4. When I previously owned the car, I thought it was probably a production '87 coupe with an EX VIN plate attached, but over the ensuing 14 years, I realized this was unlikely. It was also during this time that I learned that an additional C4 VIN is stamped on the outside of the framerail in front of the left front wheel, hidden by the front inner fender. We unscrewed this and to my delight revealed the letters EX4607 stamped into the vertical face of the rail. So was this an all matching numbers car too? On C4s the engine stamping is always hard to see, but removing the diverter valve and the compressor bracket revealed one more secret that I had not looked for back in 1995. The first Flint Engine Plant stamping was ZLA (350 TPI with automatic) and the date March 26, but the important number EX4607 was there too. Amazingly there was also a cancelled earlier stamp of EX46017 where



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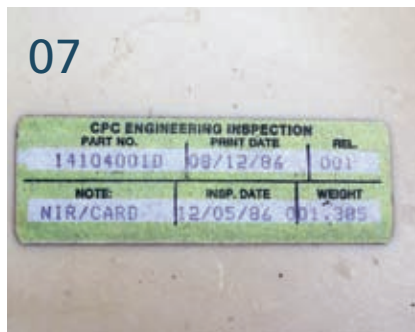
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02 :: Daisy Falconer drives the EX4607 Corvette at 125MPH on the French autoroute towards the cross-Channel ferry at Calais. **03** :: Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) displayed though original windshield shows this to be an Engineering Prototype, not for public sale. It was registered in the UK in January 1988. GM would have crushed it. **04** :: Short frame number, or VIN Derivative, is stamped here on

all C4 Corvettes, normally hidden by left hand front inner fender. **05** :: This decal appears on many components throughout EX4607, here on front inner bumper support. **06** :: Gas filler lid has a functional experimental positive release catch, still works perfectly. **07** ::

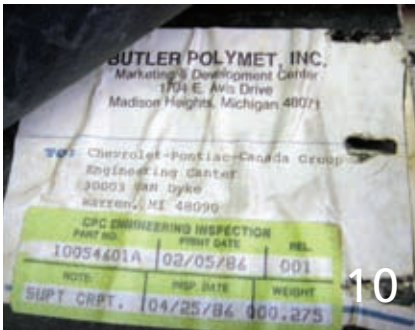
Inspection labels on almost all components identify parts on EX4607 and record metric weight. This tag is on prototype white molded front inner fender. **08** :: Wheel center cap emblem was much bigger than final production version—actually a 1986 nose emblem.

RIGHTHAND DRIVE

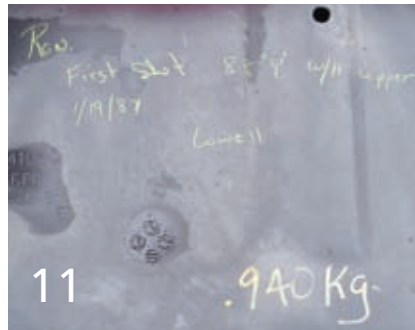
EUROPEAN CORVETTE SCENE



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09 :: Engineering Mule combines Z51 suspension and 13-inch brakes with the 700 R4 automatic transmission which was never an option in 1988. **10** :: 1988 was the first year for ducted air extraction from the rear compartment; this is the label on the prototype left hand duct beneath the carpet. **11** :: Message from Lowell to Ron, hidden between upper fender and hood, discovered after 23 years. Please email RightHand Drive if you know these guys, or can add anything about the early American history of EX4607. **12** :: New tires improve the ride on any C4; note the oversize wheel emblems and cream colored inner wheel house.

someone had lost concentration, added the extra digit, and then had to start over.

With the car up on a portable lift, we removed the wheels and the inner fenders to reveal and record the many CPC Engineering and EX4607 prototype stickers which were still attached to the suspension components, brake discs, hood panel, even the right hand door, and carefully cleaned everything. The CPC Engineering stickers had survived 21 years of northern European weather, but to keep them safe for another twenty, we wrapped them in clear waterproof tape. They record preliminary part numbers, issue dates, and most importantly the exact weight in grams—essential to achieving a low-mass car and critical to meeting fuel economy targets—a process well described on the C5 in the late James Schefer's All Corvettes are Red.

The car had been very well cared for in France, but there was still plenty of work to do to make it just the way I wanted. The push-drive pellets in the headlight motors had turned to dust, but while we were replacing them we found that the motors were actually non-matching prototypes for the improved '88-'96 design stamped with EX numbers, driving unique hand-built prototype rotating mechanisms. The telescopic hood stay, also suitably stickered, was provided with upper and lower pivot brackets on the right as well as the left side finally adopted for production. The unused 17-inch spare wheel carries a tire embossed "not for sale" and like the jack carries a CPC Engineering sticker. Most striking from the outside are the prototype 17-inch wheels with their unique oversize emblems on the bolt-in center caps. One of these was missing its checker, but a 1986 nose emblem was perfect match and fit—all credit to GM for producing a better proportioned smaller emblem for the production '88. Open the hood and be struck by the pristine cream-colored prototype inner fenders. Open the doors and the prototype new-for-1988 carpeted door steps don't match, and the sample label on the back from Stevens Auto Products says the color is Medium Cognac, while the rest of the car is in samples labeled Light Saddle that made production as Saddle.

The car is rich in interesting detail, and there is much more still to discover, but my favorite so far is the message found above the upper inner fender when it was unscrewed from the hood: "Ron—first shot 88 'Y' W/H upper 1/19/87—Lowell." Does any reader remember GM Engineers Lowell and Ron who were probably working at the GM Tech Center in Warren in January 1987? **CF**