



Inaugural meeting of the Heron Car Club

BY PATRICK HARLOW

Next year is a special year for the Constructors Car Club as it celebrates its 35th year. Having played a small part in the formation of that car club it was quite exciting to be playing yet again another small part in the formation of another club. As most of them are members of the Constructors Car Club I felt it opportune to mention it here.

While 2023 is the 35th year for our club, it is also the 40th anniversary of the launch of a very special car that ranks as this country's most successful production car, ever. Working in a garage under his house Ross Baker along with two good friends were working on a unique car. None of them were aware of the sensation this car was going to be at an Auckland show the following year. Ross Baker was the visionary and driver of the project, Chris Cooke was his man Friday, Pete Guilford

was a Heron enthusiast, general dogsbody and light entertainment.

Each evening after Ross got home from work, Chris would come around for tea after which they would venture downstairs, later joined by Pete and these three musketeers would work on a car that was totally unique to New Zealand and that many believed could not be built. What made the car so unique was that it was a fibreglass monocoque car with front and rear subframes attached directly to the fibreglass one-piece body. These days it could not be done without the financial backing of somebody like Elon Musk. The amount of money that would need to be spent getting such an unusual car tested and compliant for today's roads would make most people's eyes water.

Ross Baker was an A-grade mechanic and with his wife Bev, owned a service station and repair workshop in Rotorua employing 8 people. As a side-line

business he ran a company called Heron Developments Ltd with Chris Cooke as its sole employee. It is hard to believe that from these beginnings an exotic sports car would emerge or that Rotorua would in a



Above: A siege of Herons travelling through Pukekohe.

Pic Credit: Chad Wichman

few short years claim the title of producing New Zealand's most successful production car.

The first piece of plywood had been cut for the formation of the plug in 1979. In 1982, Paul MacDiarmid, the fourth musketeer and owner of Rotorua Fibreglass, pulled the first fibreglass component from its finished mould. Ross freely admits, that without Paul's willingness to have a go at something many thought was impossible the first car would never have existed.

Right: Patrick driving the last manufactured Heron MJ1. Pic Credit: Pete Guilford

Below: Scot Brearley's MJ1 is very low when compared to the Mitsubishi EVO behind it. Pic Credit: Chad Wichman



way back Ross Baker would be sitting in his place. In front of me was the Heron driven by its young 25-year-old owner Tom Wichman. Behind was another Heron MJ1 driven by a retired school teacher, Bryce Gliddon.

Pic Credit: Chad Wichman



Left: 40 years later, Pete Guilford (*left*) and Ross Baker stand beside another incomplete Heron body.

supposed to do with no rattles or whistling around leaking seals.

Ross was the guest of honour for the day. Walter Wing, the club's chairman gave his apologies through Suzie Tickle the club's secretary. Walter takes the flag of owning a Heron for the longest number of years and driving it the least. Alan Wichman is hands down one of the car's most enthusiastic owners with at least five cars sitting in his shed, one of which is the second of only two Heron MJ 2+2s. Brady Wedding also sent in his apologies. He had bought his Heron because he liked the idea of a low slung sports car. Having now met other Heron owners and learned the full history of the car Brady is also determined to restore his.

The weather was kind to us on the day and we had a good opportunity for a photoshoot. My claim to being a part of the group was through the book I had written about the creation of the Heron. The first and last time I met Ross Baker was back in 2017. At the time he wanted me to write his story. Initially I was reluctant to do so as I did not believe I was capable of such a daunting task.

In Pukekohe, we would be met by Scott Brearley, his father had taken him to the show as a boy to see the Heron and he had wanted one ever since. At the house we were heading to, was a Heron MJ1 undergoing a full nut and bolt restoration by Craig and Suzie Tickle. The reason for this venue was because their MJ1 body had just come back from the painters.

Emanating from both Pete and Ross was a sense of wonderment and disbelief that something they had worked on together 40 years ago was not only still on the road today but now there was a club of enthusiasts who were keen to preserve them. The only time they had seen more Herons in the same place at one time had been in the Heron Developments factory. Decades later they were looking at cars that not only had survived, but the fibreglass was showing no signs of starrng or aging, doors were still doing what doors were

Right: We have been reading of the awesome job the Tickle's have been doing with their Heron restoration. Ross Baker (with cap) was stunned to see the care and detail being put into something he started in his garage 40 years ago.



Right: Some of the CCC members who own Herons. Bryce Gliddon (*top*), Alan Wichman (*middle*), Craig Tickle (*bottom*) and of course Ross Baker (*far left*).

Watching Ross in Pukekohe talking about the car, it became clear to all that he still had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the gestation of every part that was on the car. He knew the story behind every hole and bolt and why they had to cut a hole in a specific place. I saw glimpses of the charisma and drive that brought this unique car into being.



Now, thanks to the creation of the club and their enthusiastic drivers more will see these cars where they were supposed to be, which is on our roads.

Others will live on in museums like the one at MOTAT in Auckland, pampered but seldom driven. Also, I know that at least two of these cars have found their way across the ditch to Australia.



Below: Tom Wichman runs out of petrol, in his Heron, by an off ramp 300 metres from a petrol station on the return trip. Every outing needs an adventure.

Pic Credit: Chad Wichman

