

THE HOUSE OF HERON

1987 Heron MJ1 – A pretty special Daily Driver

Words by P HARLOW. Pics by T Wichman

This year celebrates the 40th year of the Heron MJ1 since it was launched at the July 1983 Auckland Motor Expo. For those that need a reminder, the Heron was a sportscar that was manufactured in limited numbers in Rotorua in the mid-'80s. What makes it unique is that despite its small production run, it is the country's most prolific mass-produced car. If that was not enough, Heron is one of only a few companies that mass-produced monocoque fibreglass sports cars in the world. It was not a kit car, people who bought it were given the keys and most were driven, by their new owners, straight out of the factory.

The stories of Alan Wichman and his Herons have been featured regularly in this magazine. This story is about his son Tom who has his own Heron MJ1. A car that is his daily driver.

Tom Wichman grew up just like any other boy in Hamilton. As a pre-schooler, his dad drove him around in a car that Tom has no memories of, but his father talked about it often. It was a Heron MJ1; the second Heron (#2) to be built. When Tom was old enough to be aware of cars, the Heron was long gone but it was clear that his father was still keen on the car.

One day, in 2017, Tom's brother Taylor, found a Heron for sale on the



Tom heads off to the Auckland photoshoot with his dad in the front Heron.

Internet. It was their dad's old car. The brothers, along with his mother Bernadette, decided to buy the car for his dad as a surprise present for his 50th birthday. Towards the end of the auction, only two people were bidding, and Tom found out the competing bidder had a Heron already, and lived just south of Hamilton. Tom won the auction, and his dad got a Heron MJ1. The story of how Tom drove down to the South Island and picked up his father's car is written about in Spare Parts, May 2020. Sometime in the near future, Alan's car will be back on the road.

Once Tom won the auction, he was curious about the other bidder and found out his name was Malcom. Amazingly, he only lived about 10 minutes south of their home in Hamilton.

Taylor was keen to see Malcom's Heron and talked Tom into going around to see the car. Tom arranged with Malcom a time that he and Taylor could go and visit him. On arrival, he discovered another car enthusiast who had in his collection,

beside the Heron MJ1, three Jensens. Malcom had been bidding on the #2 Heron as he thought it would be nice to add another Heron to his collection. At the time Tom had been saving up to buy a Honda S2000 and had his eye on one in Auckland. After he had seen Malcom's MJ1 he was going to Auckland to buy it.

When they arrived at Malcom's place, it did not take long to see that the Heron had been sitting for some years. Malcom had owned his Heron for about five years. When he bought the car, it had been bought as a running car. However, it had a problem with the engine overheating, Malcom decided to fix the problem and while he was doing that, he would fit an air-conditioning system into the car. As many will know, it is far easier to pull a car apart than it is to put it together again.

Visually it was a car, but it had no interior and several mechanical parts had been pulled out of the engine bay. It appeared to be a basket case. Inside and around the car were 15 or 16 boxes of parts. On the positive side, Tom could see





that the car was in better condition than the #2 car he had picked up for his dad and believed that it could be made roadworthy again.

Talking with Malcom they learned that Malcom's car was car #25 and one of the last cars built after the Heron MJ1 had finished production in 1987. This car had been built by Paul McDermant, the owner of Rotorua Fibreglass and manufacturer of all the Heron bodies. Unlike all the other Herons that had gone before it, this Heron had been

built to take the running gear out of an '80s Ford Telstar or Mazda 626 with the engine installed in its standard east-west configuration. Earlier Herons used Fiat 1.6-litre or 2.0-litre engines in the north-south configuration using a Skoda transaxle.

The more he looked at the car, the more Tom wanted it, so he asked Malcom if he wanted to sell the car. Malcom said no, but as a courtesy took down Tom's phone number. As they were driving away Tom told his brother



All pictures on these two pages are by Cameron Leggett Photography and were taken at the photoshoot mentioned on the next page.

to keep an eye on Malcom, saying, "If he walks towards his garage, where the Heron is parked, he is going to sell me the car but if he walks into his house then he won't." Just before they lost sight of Malcom and his house, Taylor saw Malcom walking towards his garage.

radiator so it got sufficient air to keep the water cool. Alan also decided to rewire the car completely from scratch. Meanwhile, Tom started reassembling the interior and was very pleased to discover that all the parts were still with the car. Two weeks after bringing the car home on a trailer, the engine was fired up and Tom took it for a drive.



Fortunately, Malcom had kept the registration of the car on hold, so the car did not have to go through the certification process. All they had to do was get a current WoF for the car and pop down to the local Post Office and pay the registration fee.

Just twenty minutes later Tom received a phone call and at 24 years of age became one of the youngest people to own a Heron. When Tom went to pick up the car he told Malcom that he estimated it would take him about 9 months to get the car mobile again. Malcom thought Tom was dreaming and doubted that he would ever see the car on the road again.

It was quite an emotional moment when Tom drove the #25 Heron around to Malcom's place to offer him a drive of the car that Malcom had not driven in years.

Six years have now passed, and the car has proven to be reliable and an attention-getter. Tom remembers he was pulled over by the local police, not

Once the car was home, Tom showed the car to his dad and the pair decided to do a father-son project to get it back on the road. Almost immediately they solved the overheating problem by repositioning the



Tom enters the Auckland tunnel. The exit would not be easy.

because he was in trouble but because they were genuinely curious about the car.

The only time the car did let him down was when he was driving to MOTAT in Auckland for a photoshoot. Going through the Auckland tunnel Tom's car lost power. It is never a good idea to break down in a tunnel, in this instance it would be a long push uphill to get it out. Fortunately, he was with his dad and Alan reversed his Heron back into the tunnel and used his back bumper to shunt him out of the tunnel. Once out of the tunnel, an Auckland truck driver gave them one of his strops and they were able to tow Tom's Heron to a nearby Caltex gas station, just across the road from MOTAT.

Eventually, the problem was traced back to the distributor. When they took the distributor cap off the metal contact on the rotor fell out. The cause of failure was a simple oversight as they rushed to get the cars ready for the Auckland



photoshoot. Back in Hamilton, Tom had designed and installed new custom headers but had not replaced the heat shield... so the extreme heat from the headers melted the plastic rotor nipples that holds the contactor in place. Hence it fell off in the housing, a new rotor fixed the problem, and the car was carefully driven back to Hamilton.

The greatest moment Tom had with the car was in 2022 when the car designer and creator, Ross Baker, hopped in the passenger seat and Tom took him for a ride. The way Tom felt, it might as well have been Enzo Ferrari in the passenger seat. Ross was very chuffed by the enthusiasm shown by a youngster who had not been even born when the car was manufactured.

Needless to say, like his dad, Tom is a Heron enthusiast and will not sell the car.



One of Tom's best days was driving from Hamilton to Auckland with Ross Baker riding shotgun.