

# Sleek sports car made in local workshop

By Pinion

A smart two seater sports car with design features reminiscent of Jaguars, Maseratis and Ferraris of the classic

1950s era, has come from a Rotorua workshop.

Called the Spyder, the sleek car comes from the design and building skills

of Ross Baker and Heron Developments Ltd, who built the Heron MJ1 sports car back in 1983, and in the years before that a number of successful racing cars.

Showing me the car last week Ross Baker explained that it is the property of Auckland sportscar driver, Jim Short who commissioned Heron Developments to

carry out a specific project.

He said Short wanted a car to replace his E-Type Jaguar, one which would have the grace and elegance of his Mk2 3.8

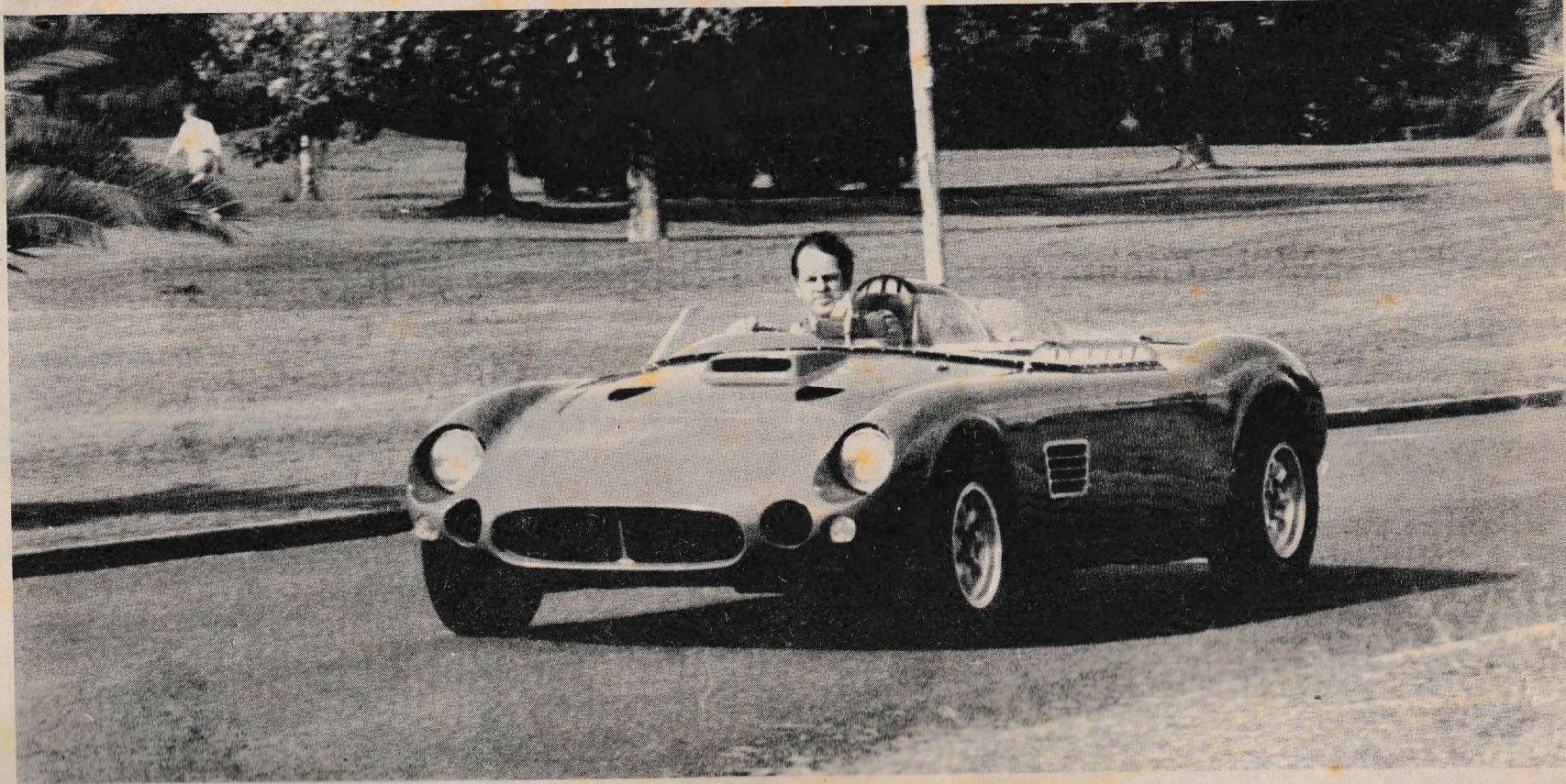
Coombs Jaguar saloon and the performance of the 2.8 litre RSR Porsche he had owned and raced successfully for some years.

He said: "I want a car

that I, and many others, have desired and never been able to afford at today's prices."

Baker told me that Heron Developments

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The Spyder on the road through Kuirau Park with Ross Baker at the wheel.

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# MOTORSHOW

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had had 30 years in building many successful road and race cars, including the MJ1, and he and the company has had a long association with Short's cars. That included the rebuilding and prepared the "Paton Ford," one of New Zealand's most beautiful classics of the 1950s and 1960s. It won the 1982 Ohakea Re-Union Classic meeting the 1983 Ardmore Re-Union.

## Prepared

He and the company had prepared and tuned Short's Coombs Jaguar for the 1983 Ardmore Re-Union at which it took fastest time of the day, heading off Ray Archibald's works car.

Then there was the RSR Porsche, which needed a lot of work after attacks by a couple of cars and a fence at Pukekohe.

So, said Baker, after many years of successful racing in that variety of mounts, Short thought he

would like a car designed and built to suit his own personal tastes.

He wanted a true sports car, of an era that he had always admired, and that he had grown up with.

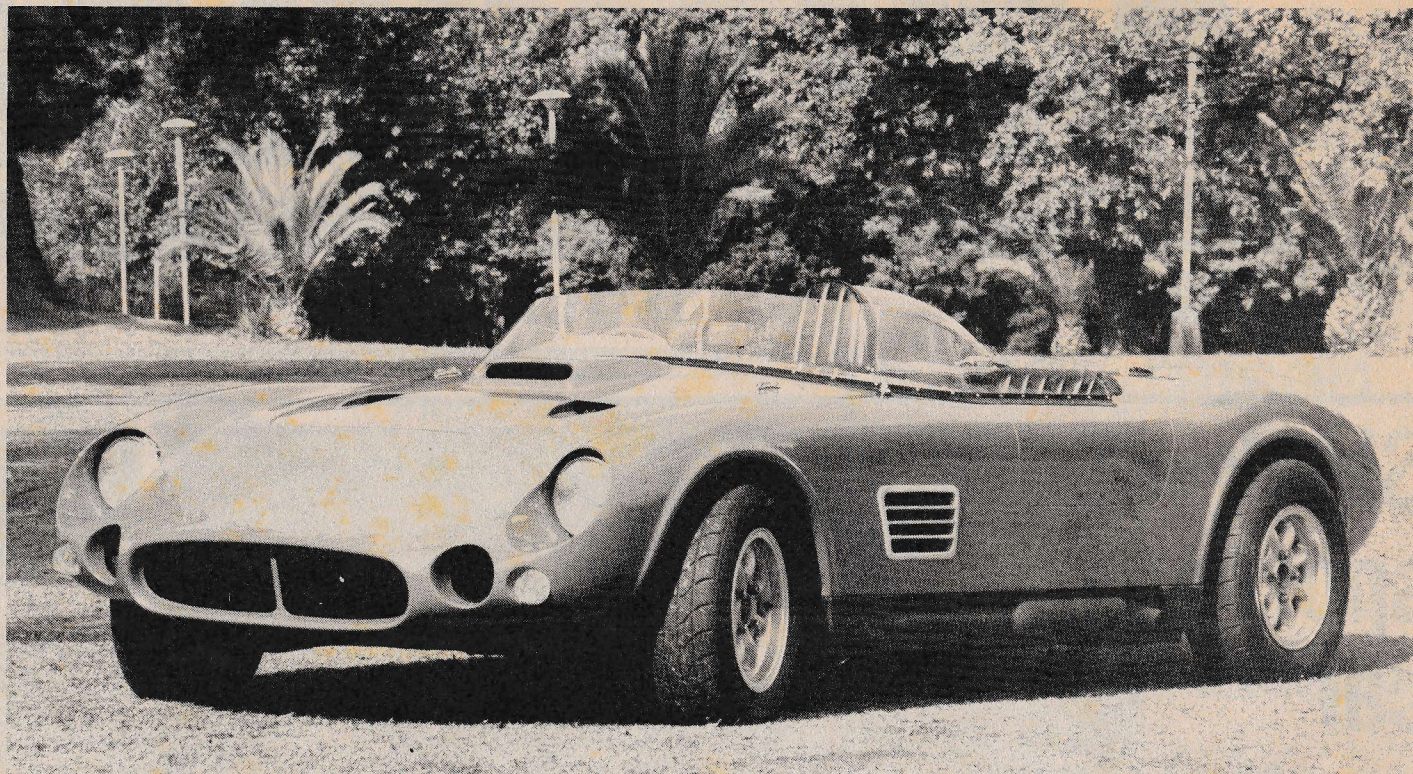
"Armed with a huge pile of books and papers he came to Rotorua to see me, and we talked about the car he wanted, and I agreed to do the design and then to build the car once the design was finalised.

"We decided that the car would be built from easily obtainable components, with a very strong, safe and durable chassis, and that we would clothe it in a beautiful, aggressive fibreglass body, reminiscent of the Ferraris and Maseratis of the era, with performance to match."

## Powered

The end result? A two seater sportscar built on Mark 4 Ford Cortina components, powered by a 3.5 litre V8 Rover, driv-

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The left side three quarter profile of the Spyder, showing the low race-style windscreen.

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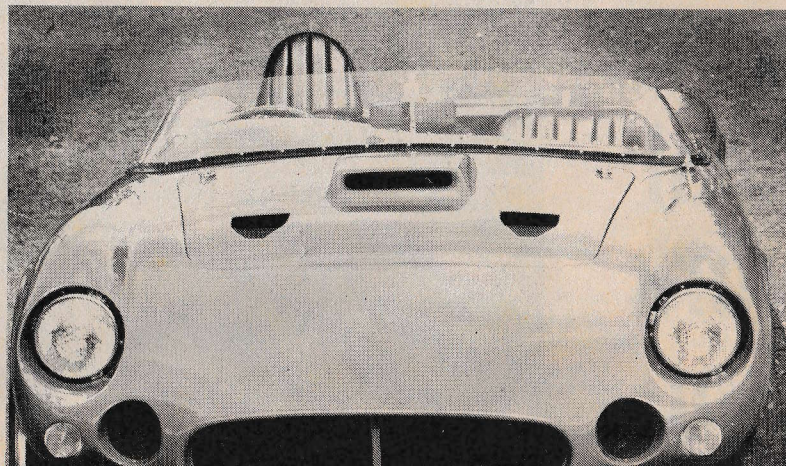
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ing through a five speed manual box.

Asked why the 3.5 Rover, Baker said he had always felt the motor was one of the best V8s to come from anywhere. It was originally designed and built by Buick in America and then discarded as unsuitable for American cars.

It was seen by Rover engineers on a visit to the Buick plant, they liked it, asked if it was going spare. The Americans said it was, and from that point Rover took over and with development produced the engine that has powered several Rover cars as well as the Land and Range Rover models, building an enviable reputation for smooth easy power in doing so.

Baker said the chassis for the Spyder he built with Chris Cooke of Heron Development, used thin wall, large diameter tubing for extreme strength for very little weight. Such a chassis configuration also suited the Cortina suspension components it was planned to use, and also allowed for a variety of motor options.

With the chassis done to their satisfaction Baker and Cooke went to work on the "plugs" and moulds for the fibreglass body and interior.

## Fitted

The actual "play-up work" was done by Rotorua Fibreglass, and after the running gear, motor and gearbox were fitted, the Spyder went to French's Auto for trimming.

Baker said the project

from drawing board to road took eight months.

The Spyder weighs in at around 800kgs, is 3.7m in length, sits on a wheelbase of 2.2m and has a maximum height at the top of the driver's head rest of 97cm.

The engine, as stated is a Rover V8 of 3.5 litres, with bore and stroke measurement of 87 by 87mm. It has a compression ratio of 10:1 in this car and Baker said it will likely develop around 175bhp and 283 foot/pounds of torque.

Baker used a Nissan five speed box for the car, and described the drive layout as the classic front engine rear drive. The brakes are disc/drum, the steering rack and pinion. The front suspension is by wishbones and coils, the rear uses a four bar system with coils.

The seat width is 484mm and the adjustment is 100mm.

## Planned

Baker said this car was Shorts and he intended to race it... hence the design was without doors, but it was planned to build road-going models of the car, which would of course have doors and also both hard and soft tops available. The cars would be built in Rotorua and I gather the marketing will likely be done in Auckland. No prices are as yet available.

Baker, an A Grade mechanic, turned to car building as far back as 1964 when he designed the Heron Mk1, a little racing car which competed at Pukekohe that year. It was followed by the Mk2 and Mk3 cars, all of which did well in compe-

tion... Baker was a fast, competitive driver.

Then came the Mk4 Heron... this one was a beautiful thing, a replica of the famous Ford GT40 which made its name at Le Mans... including a win in 1966 with the late Bruce McLaren and Chris Amon, who while not in competition driving now, still does a lot of development work centred on Manfeild.

However Baker's GT40 did not get its chance, as the racing rules here were changed, so it was completed as a road car, and made a big mark on the sportscar

stand at the 1983 Motor Expo in Auckland.

## Modified

Baker built a number of racing sedans, and also went into the modified sportsman class in stockcars where he did particularly well. Then came the MJ1. Completing in 1983 it made its debut at the Motor Expo of the year, and for a time it was almost necessary to queue to even get a look at it.

The MJ1 was also in fibreglass, and I recall when talking to Baker

about the car, that he expressed himself as convinced that fibreglass was excellent as a versatile material for car bodies, with both strength and resilience.

That car was designed to take the engine of the buyer's choice, and the first models were fitted with 1600 engines from Fiat 125s... one of them turbo-ed. Mid-engined, the cars were long, low and very sleek indeed.

Since the MJ1 Baker has designed and built a big orchard sprayer and a range of battery-powered golf cars.

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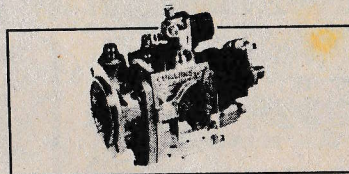
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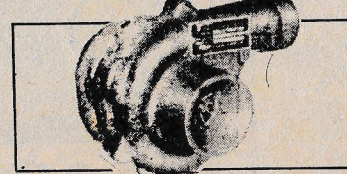
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