

## MOTORTIMES

# Sad end for this Heron

By DAVE LEGGETT

Ross Baker couldn't help but feel a little sad when he saw what was left of a Heron MJ1 in Hamilton.

The Rotorua car builder inspected the 1984 Heron after it had been hauled out of the Waikato River along with two other vehicles. All had been dumped in the river after they had been stolen.

The yellow Heron was minus its front body section and wind screen but was still basically intact and superficially didn't give the impression it had been in the water for some years. But Baker said the fibreglass monocoque body shell showed the results of sitting on the river bed for so long. The fibreglass had absorbed water and had started to swell like sodden particle board.

It was sad, said Baker, but the car, already long written-off by a Hamilton insurance company since its theft in 1987, was unrestorable.

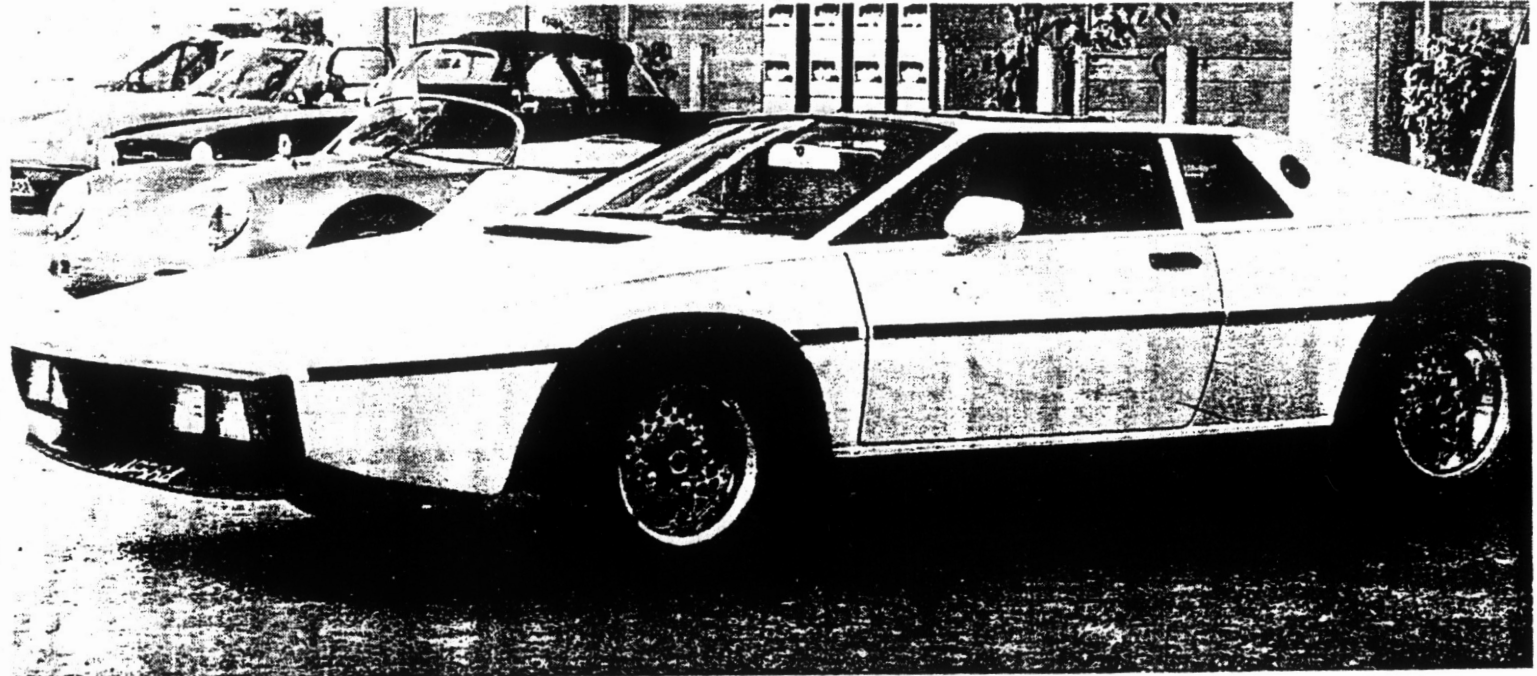
And Baker should know. He designed and built the car along with 26 other Heron MJ1s.

The Heron found in the river was the fourth in the line and first registered to a Tokoroa man in 1984.

"You feel a little sad when you see a car like that because there is a little bit of me in all of them," he said.

But most Herons still survive. Baker said 19 of the cars are still on the road, a tribute to their styling and their construction at Baker's Rotorua factory.

The Heron MJ1 wasn't Baker's first attempt at car construction.



HERON MJ1: A sports car from Rotorua.

He has always had an interest in designing and building fast sporting cars.

From car racing he went into car design in the mid-sixties.

First there was the Heron Mk1, a Cortina-engined car with a fibreglass body over a spaceframe. And this was followed by a more powerful Mk2.

A number of specials followed but it was Baker's replica Ford GT40, the Heron MkIV, which really turned the heads.

But it was never

raced although that's what it was designed to do. It was converted for street use following rule changes on the track.

By the late 70s Baker was thinking along the lines of a mid-engined sport GT coupe. He opted for a car driven by the popular Fiat twin-cam engine sitting ahead of the transaxle.

The body styling was in the style of similar mid-engined two coupes of the period, resembling the Fiat X1/9 and the Lotus Esprit.

Baker is conscious

of a general resemblance to the Lotus but says if the two cars are placed side by side there is nothing similar.

The prototype MJ1 went on display for the first time at the 1983 Auckland motor show. It received rave reviews, hundreds of inquiries and with 28 firm orders it went into production.

Initially the early cars were powered by the 1.6 litre Fiat engine but later models had the 2 litre unit from the Fiat 132. This gave the 750 gm Heron a more

than adequate 83 kW of power.

The secret of the lightweight Heron is in its eight piece fibreglass monocoque body, one of the few cars in the world to use this form of construction.

Glass bodies are usually fixed over a steel chassis because of the difficulty in finding suitable hard points for mounting suspension, transmission and engine.

But Baker solved the problem with a technique he later

patented.

His method is to embed stainless steel mesh between the glass laminations. Each layer of mesh becomes part of the laminate and the glass fibres are worked through the mesh so it is locked in every direction.

Because the mesh is made of stainless steel it doesn't rust and it also flexes with the laminate.

The MJ1 used mechanical components from a multitude of sources.

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Tom Evans