

Heron wins Red Stag award

23-9-95 ROTAWA DAILY POST

"I don't commit myself to a new project unless I'm really interested in it," says Ross Baker of Heron Developments Limited — the winner of this year's Forestry Corporation Red Stag Award for innovation.

"If I'm interested in the project I'll put 100 per cent of my energy into it and can turn my clients' dreams into reality," he says.

Ross Baker started building racing cars as a hobby 35 years ago — today he and his wife Bev run a company which designs, develops and manufactures a wide range of special vehicles for industry, people with disabilities and general use.

Helped by a good technical background gained at New Plymouth Boys High School, Ross built a range of very successful race cars, winning many New Zealand championship races in a number of

different classes.

Nowadays they're too busy building vehicles and running a 24-hour service station.

In 1960, Ross and Tony Baker joined forces to open Baker Brothers Garage on Old Taupo Road. Ross became a very versatile mechanic, modifying and building a wide range of cars and engines.

Ten years later the present service station was built in association with Mobil Oil NZ Ltd, across the road from the garage on the corner of Old Taupo and Sunset Roads.

Ross managed the service station while Tony managed the workshop until 1977 when Ross sold his shares and moved to White Street where he and Bev founded Heron Developments Ltd.

They also opened Road and Track Autos at the same location, servicing most of the Rotorua

taxi fleet and specialising in racing cars and boats.

Their first foray into industrial vehicle design and manufacturing was the Spraymaster vehicle. They were approached by local orchardist Bob Gee who wanted a self contained, self propelled, air conditioned spraying vehicle.

The radical bullet-shaped Spraymaster prototype was born and shortly afterwards they received an order to build 17 more for the NZ Fruit Federation.

Since they they've designed and built over 100 different types of special vehicles.

All the vehicles are hand built. Vehicles include a range of electric industrial trucks, electric farm utilities, go-carts and two models of sports car which are all built to order.

They also design and build equipment, and adapt vehicles for people with disabilities.

With a number of elec-

tric trucks running at the Tasman Pulp and Paper Mill, Heron Developments recently secured another large contract to supply Carter Holt Harveys Whakatane mill with the vehicles.

The main project currently taking up most of Ross's time is an electric commuter car. Two prototypes have been built in association with PowerCo Wanganui.

Ross spends a huge amount of time researching and sourcing new technology available around the world.

He continues his work in the evenings drawing designs and working through ideas. "That part of the process is my hobby," says Ross.

In 1990, Bev and Ross decided to return to the service station on the corner of Sunset and Old Taupo Roads renaming it the Heron Auto Centre. This now provides the day to day cashflow for Heron Developments.

They reopened the

workshop, restocked the shelves, opened a takeaway bar and twisted Mobils arm to build a truckstop — which has proved very successful.

Over the last five years, through good marketing and planning, turnover and litres of fuel sold has doubled until now it's too small.

Next month it will be demolished and Mobil will build a new service station with six lanes, a bigger and better stocked retail area and a car wash.

As for the future...

"Well that's exciting," says Ross. "We never know what's going to turn up next or what the next challenge will be, but that's what we find so satisfying about this business."

"Winning the Forestry Corporation of New Zealand award for business innovation has capped off a very successful year for Heron Developments," comments Ross.