

SPARE PARTS



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Heron MJ 2+2

By Patrick Harlow



Heron MJ 2-This Heron was inspired by the Lotus Esprit

It has been a while coming but it was worth the wait. I first muted the idea of taking the Heron for a test drive as early as Christmas 2003. At the time details of the computer and the cars, new supercharger were still being sorted out. When Alan Stott mentioned at a club night that he would like to do a couple of issues on Spare Parts with a car being the theme. I had just been to visit

This car looks just as good from the back as it does from the



Paul MacDiarmid in Rotorua to find out the Heron story. (See elsewhere in this magazine) After Paul offered to send something in about his own Heron, an MJ1, I thought it would be great if we could also feature the Heron MJ 2+2. A phone call later, Roy had said that the car was fully sorted and when did I want to do it.

So far this year it has been a lousy winter so I was not too hopeful about getting a fine day to do the test but as the pictures confirm, it could not have been better. The sun was shining with hardly a cloud in the sky and it felt like spring was just around the corner.



The Heron is actually the second car that Roy has built. The first was a scratch built called the Urbacar on the plans but nicknamed Apollo due to its shape. Roy was looking for another project in the early '90s and he wanted a challenge. In 1989 he had worked on and driven a Heron MJ1. This car was actually featured in our first big public show in the centre of the Nissan Mobil 500 race track in Wellington. My recollection of this car is sitting in the passenger seat with Roy driving, gazing through a mailbox slot called a windscreen and wondering just how close my buttocks were to the highway bitumen.

Roy however was interested in other things such as its fibreglass monocoque construction and the way it had been designed. Also, he was a great fan of the Lotus Esprit which was the car that inspired the Heron. Hence a few phone calls were made to Ross Baker the owner of Heron Developments and designer of the car. Roy was sufficiently enthused that he decided to buy a motor for the car. Never one to do things the easy way. (Actually, I don't think that the word "easy" is in his vocabulary.) If you ever hear Roy say

A very cramped engine bay. The only part visible when you open the hatch is the supercharger.

that a job was "bit of a challenge", you can be certain that any normal person would have taken a gas axe to it long ago or in the case of the Heron a single match. The first step in making what would have been a complex job virtually impossible was buying a Mitsubishi V6 motor to go in a space that could barely fit a Fiat 4 cylinder. The V3000 motor was chosen because it was one of the most available and powerful V6's of the time. Roy believed that 4 cylinder supercars were for the '80s and that the '90s required something more impressive. Why not a V8, well that would have been just silly, he had already played with V8s and they were old technology. Injected alloy V8's were very rare back then. Besides Roy was already thinking of ways of improving the V6 even more.

When Roy visited the factory to see Ross and the Heron he said, "I will take that one over there." Pointing to a bogged up custom wood buck. This naturally caused Ross' eyebrows to go up a fraction because the car he was



Telstar Ghia gauges suit the car interior.

MJ 2- Rear spoiler is functional and has been tested at speed.

pointing to was still a long way from finished. It was not an MJ1 but the buck for the new MJ 2+2. Ross did not know Roy very well at that time and it was not until he was standing beside Roy gazing at the finished Heron, many years later, that he told him the words like "full of it" and "what a dreamer" had been in his mind. As a matter of fact, Ross had not taken Roy very seriously at all and did not see any need to push hard on the buck as he was doubtful that Roy would ever proceed with it. Also at this time Ross had a lot of other interesting projects in hand, he had done the "fibreglass car thing" and moved on.



It was not until Roy put a considerable amount of money upfront to cover development costs that work on the buck truly progressed. It was intended that Ross would pay this back out of sales from the new car. Even so, it would be about two years before Roy went to Rotorua to pick up the first body in 1993. The MJ 2+2 had been designed to take the Ford Telstar as a donor car but the only Telstar part that would go into this car would be the Ghia dashboard. Darrell Blewitt, Roy's brother-in-law now came on board the project. The two had worked together for several years building the Urbacar.

Grey leather seats are custom made for comfort. A full racing harness has also been fitted to this car.



Boot is small but functional.

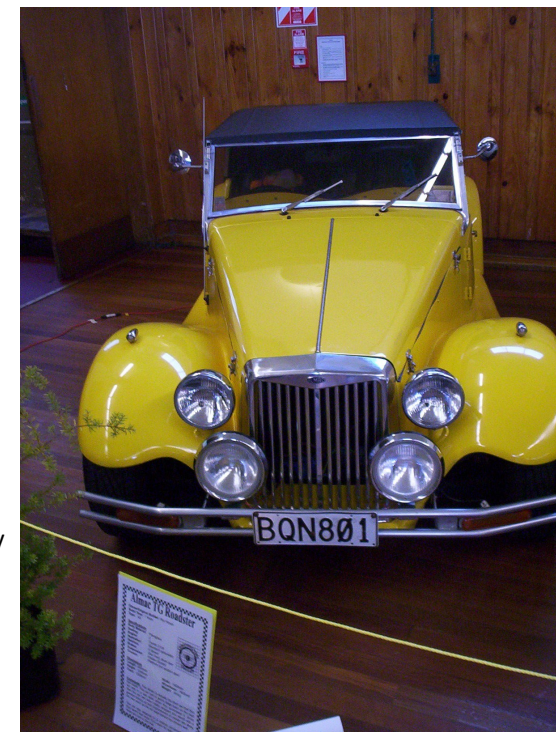
The last car to be built by Roy was this equally superb A/mac TG

Neither of them could even spell the word "easy" and "getting it right the first time" was something that happened otherwise it belonged to myth and folklore. It was only appropriate that they would spend many happy Sundays working on the car over the next six or seven years. Sometimes the air was a little blue but generally it was filled with a lot of hilarity and appropriate comments. In the end, they got most things right the first time which probably explains the fairly weird tides that were happening in those days.

Right from the outset, Roy was only interested in building a car that fitted under the umbrella of an exotic supercar. Therefore it not only had to be fast, but it also had to be able to stop and getting around corners would

not be an optional extra. To achieve this Roy designed, fabricated and fitted his own MacPherson strut system and all the components attached to it. A long time and a lot of research went into things as small as wheel offsets. Cardboard mockups were made of the fuel tank, air conditioning ducting, mechanisms for popup headlights, engine subframes etc. Yes, it had to have air conditioning and electric windows.

It was with the side glass that Roy struck their first major hiccup as Ross had designed it to have a nice curve but he had not used any existing cars glass to form the mould. The windscreen was Mitsubishi Cordia, the rear quarters and rear glass were flat so they were not a problem. A full-scale aluminium pattern was made. Roy and Darrell spent some time walking around car parks offering





Baker had pulled out and sold his own MJ 2+2 to Tim Hutchinson. Roy now owned the rights and the moulds to the MJ 2+2. Still, Roy was not worried as he was having a ball. One day somebody may wish to buy a third MJ 2+2 and he will start to recoup some of his investment in the meantime that is water under the bridge.

Meanwhile work on the car progressed. Seats were hacked around and modified to improve lumbar support. A lot of design work went into the huge back wing and front air splitter to ensure that the car produced good downforce at speed. Wheel arches were widened to allow for bigger rubber and side skirts were added to modernise the look slightly.

By 2000 it was finished and the V3000 certainly pushed the 300kg body along adequately for a car of this type. Roy thought he could still do better as it was not yet quite fast enough. Within a year of the car being put onto the road, Roy was pondering about how he could fit a supercharger onto it. This involved numerous changes in the engine bay including a new engine hatch.

Since getting the car on the road one of Roy's biggest thrills has been driving

the pattern up to existing cars trying to find a close match. Occasionally this involved a bit of fast-talking with the odd security guard. After much frustration, they were unable to find a suitable window that was even slightly close. Left with no alternative, Roy constructed a mould for the side glass and Pilkington Glass did him a special favour and produced the final product. Compared to that mission, designing the electric windup mechanism was a piece of cake.

All this development work was a bit excessive for a car that was now not going to ever go into production. Ross

The difference in size between a MJ1 and an MJ 2+2 can be clearly seen in this picture



to Rotorua to Ross Bakers house and parking it beside the MJ1 for side by side comparison. Needless to say, Ross was pretty impressed. The only other Heron MJ 2+2 lives in Wellington waiting for Tim to have time to work on it.

And now I was going to drive it. As always I must admit to a lot of nervousness when driving a homebuilt car, being a builder myself I can appreciate the amount of time and effort that has gone into each project. Something which the average Joe in the street has no idea about. The first couple of kilometres are always driven cautiously until I get the hang of the gearbox, brakes and any quirks the car may have. In this instance, I felt very much like "Joe 90" as Roy after hopping into the passenger seat flips open a laptop that is connected to the engine management system, "to make a few adjustments along the way."

Driving through Wainui my first impression of the car was how easy it is to drive at city speeds. The car does not rattle and bang as so many cars do. Instead, it rides the bumps better than many street cars. The second

The Urba Car as it is now before it finally goes to the great Wainui Parts bin in the sky.

impression is just how comfortable I feel in a homebuilt car. The dashboard is easy to see, indicator stalk is a bit far away but still within easy reach. The gearbox is easy to use if albeit slightly vague. The only complaint was the heaviness of the steering being non-power assisted. At the time Roy considered power steering to be a bit wussy but he is now having second thoughts. On the open road, it is pretty good but you have to have a pretty firm grip on the wheel around town. Still, it was never intended to be a shopping basket. Conversations are not a problem engine noise is not intrusive.

Storage space in the car is a bit of a premium but the boot has adequate space for several days away and there is plenty of additional storage space on the back seats. Although this car is a two plus two, it is two adults plus two small children or a moderately sized dog. The interior finish is excellent as befits a car of this time. The predominant colour is grey leather with black carpeting.



speeds, the car is like any other manufactured car to drive. However, if you drop it down a couple of gears and plant your welly things change. Under full power, the engine is louder but it is still possible to hold a conversation, but why would you bother. On flat windy corners there is plenty of traction and the car shifts up and down through the gears easily. In short, it is a very well constructed and nicely balanced car.

In the years that I have been in the Constructors Car Club, I have been fortunate enough to drive many midengined cars and Roy's would rank up there with the best of them in finish and quality of construction. Apart from the heavy steering, it would have been the nicest car to drive and had the best vision.

Many people would have thought that once Roy had built his second car that would be it. Not so, since then he has also built an Almac TG which he uses for his everyday transport. His current

project is converting a bus that he has bought into a mobile camper. Roy has a great outlook on solving problems. An expression I have heard him use several is, "Hey, it could be fun." That kind of sums him up really.



On the open road, it was a different car altogether. Steering is direct. The car is far quieter than I thought it would be. There is a very slight whine from the supercharger which is not annoying and it tells you that it is doing its job. The car pulls away like a steam engine and keeps on pulling consistently through each gear. Footwell is a little cramped because it is a midengined car and the passenger compartment is further forward over the wheel arches. Amazingly there is a good view out the back window. The huge tail wing can be seen but it is not obstructive. At legal