

New Zealand Classic Car

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KITS AND PIECES

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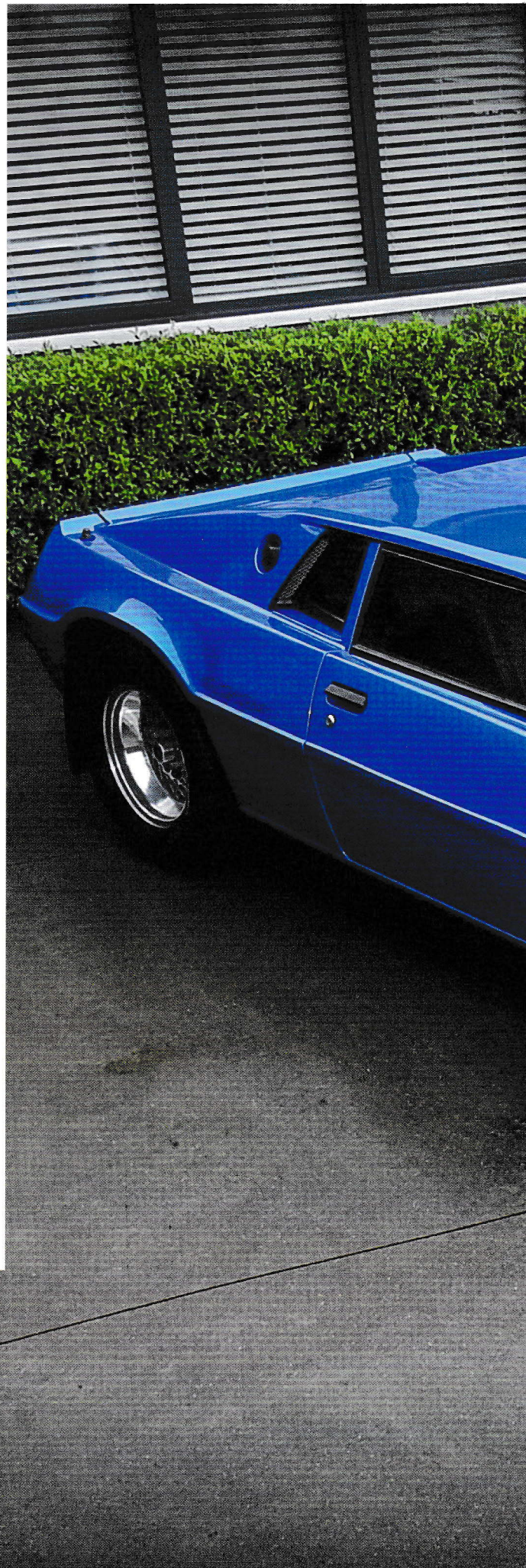
Many people think of the Trekka as being New Zealand's only production car. They are wrong. At best, it is one of four farm-utility vehicles produced as turnkey products, the others being the Terra, the Trailmaker, and the Duzgo. But the crown for New Zealand's most successful production car should belong to, in my opinion, the Heron — a supercar manufactured in Rotorua.

Some will disagree with my calling the Heron a supercar. However, it is very hard to define what a supercar is, and, in this instance, I have gone with a definition put together by Jeff Glucker, an automotive correspondent: "Supercars are mystic creatures that stalk empty back roads where they can't be bothered by lesser machines. They inhabit our hearts, our minds ... and the posters of the walls belonging to our younger selves."

Judged by the above definition, the Heron ticks all the boxes. In the first half of the 1980s, if you wanted to look good, go fast, and drive a car that handled well, you had a choice: you could buy European — Lamborghini, Ferrari, Porsche — go British with Lotus; or go Japanese with the ummm ... But when the Heron MJ1 came on the scene, New Zealand buyers had an alternative option, and it was New Zealand made!

Having said that, for many who read this story, this will be the first time that they have seen or even heard of the Heron MJ1. It was a car designed by Ross Baker, an A-grade mechanic based in Rotorua, who could not only fix cars but also create them using processes that were outside conventional thinking, and innovative for the day. For a brief time during the early '80s, this incredible sports car was manufactured in a small factory in Rotorua. Paul MacDiarmid, who was one of the principal people involved in the manufacture of its fibreglass monocoque body, remembers it "as a wild ride." Sadly, this amazing car is all but forgotten.

Unlike most other fibreglass cars, hardly any steel plates or metal members are moulded into the body, nor is the bodywork mounted onto a steel chassis. Ross believed that the two materials were incompatible, in terms of their different expansion and contraction rates and degree of flexibility. The only concessions to this are a steel roll bar glassed into each door pillar — which also gives a solid mount for the door latches and seat-belt mounts — and, where greater strength is needed for suspension-mounting points, a patented stainless-steel mesh system bonded into the fibreglass. All this at a time when fibreglass monocoque cars were unheard of.





HERON MJ1

A FACTORY-PRODUCED NEW ZEALAND
SUPERCAR



The Heron is considered by many to be this country's most successful production car



Mechanically, the motor is Fiat, with the suspension and drivetrain componentry provided by Skoda. This includes the transaxle and gearbox. Skoda parts were used as they are simple yet very robust and relatively inexpensive. The instrument cluster comes from the Holden Camira.

Confirmed buyers

It was a sensation at its public debut at the 1983 Motor Expo. Ross had promised his team that if 10 people showed interest in the car, he would shout them dinner. By the end of the show, he had 350 names of people who had expressed an interest. This would eventually turn into 32 confirmed buyers, complete with deposits, and dinner was duly provided!

Ross had intended that the car be sold as a kit or built in his factory for around \$16K, using mechanical components provided by the car's owner. However, before he started gearing up for production, he was convinced by Frank Hart, of Summit Engineering, that a car this good should only be sold brand new, and turnkey. Frank even offered to become the project's main financial backer and to purchase two-thirds of the Heron company. At the

time, the offer seemed too good to be true, and although Ross would later regret it, he agreed to Frank's terms.

One of the many changes that Summit made was to have the original 1.6-litre motor changed to a brand new 2.0-litre Fiat engine. Ross had designed the car around the 1.6-litre unit, and the 2.0-litre meant that parts would have to be beefed up and possibly changed to take the greater power. Summit was looking for a quick return on its investment, so any development work had to be done while the car was in production. As a consequence of this imperfect design/development process, cars left the factory that Ross knew would return under warranty. He was not happy with this situation, but Summit was now the majority shareholder: Ross had lost control.

Eventually, including the prototypes, a total of 20 production cars were built, but with the in-production design changes, sales tax — once it became a new car, it immediately attracted the 20 per cent 'luxury items' tax in place at the time — and the additional burden of the warranty claims, the price of the Heron kept on increasing. By the time production ceased in 1985, the cost for a new Heron was \$27,500

(about the same price as a new Commodore), and although at this price it was profitable, it could not compete with other acceptable sports cars, such as the Japanese import Mazda RX-7s, which were now selling for \$18K. With the rapid increase in price, many of the people who had paid a deposit for the Heron asked for their money back.

On top of this, Summit decided to back out of the car business, as it was not getting a reasonable return, so Ross opted to buy back the rights to the Heron and the moulds. Production officially stopped in 1985. Although a few more cars were sold as kits, to use up parts that had been accumulated, its day was done. As a testament to the quality of the initial design, most of the cars still exist, although one car caught fire and another was stolen and ended up in the Waikato River.

Something special

Scott Brearley from Auckland has been a fan of the marque ever since he went to the 1983 Motor Expo with his dad, and, despite having limited knowledge of cars, he knew that the Heron was something special. Indeed, in 1992, after seeing a Heron for sale in a car yard, and irrespective of



the fact it had already been sold, Scott managed to convince the salesman to let him take it for a test drive. Over the years, he would see Herons pop up for sale and be tempted but never had the cash to follow through.

That was, until 2015. By then, with all his children grown up, Scott decided that he could afford to invest in a hobby car, so he started looking seriously. The two cars he was considering were the Series 3 Mazda RX-7 and, of course, the Heron.

To help find a suitable Heron, Scott enlisted the help of an expert, Walter Wing. Walter — along with Mike van Bokhoven — manages the heroncars.co.nz website and knows the location and condition of almost all the Herons that were produced. Thirty-one years on, the Herons that were for sale at the time either required a lot of work or were in various stages of restoration. Walter said that one car, in good condition, was owned by Anthony Williams in Rangiora. Scott liked the pictures he saw, but, at the time, Anthony was not really interested in selling it.

A number of years later, after viewing several RX-7s and Herons, Scott tried Anthony again. This time he hesitated, and that was Scott's

opportunity to convince him to sell it. He then had the unenviable task of telling his wife that he had bought a car that he had yet to actually see 'in the flesh'.

In January 2016, Scott became the third owner of a unique piece of New Zealand history. The first owner had been Colin Morman, who had also been to the car show and one of the many who had paid a deposit. Interestingly, Colin had ordered the car in 1983, but it did not

get delivered or registered until 1985.

When Anthony bought the Heron in 2004, it had been parked up for 10 years, and it needed a lot of work. The motor and brakes had seized, and the carpet was damp. As the registration had lapsed, it also needed certification. Despite all these issues, the car was back on the road by the end of the year. Over the following years, it would receive a new paint job and upholstery. Scott says that Anthony did a great job on it.

Anybody who buys a second-hand car should expect to do some mechanical repairs to it during the first year of ownership. Being a realist, Scott knew that he would need to do something, and he had already noticed a water leak from the radiator. When he took the car to his mechanic to see what was involved in getting it fixed, the cam-belt broke. It had only covered 19,000km, but it had not liked being parked up.

Unfortunately, it had broken with a loud bang, as several valves decided to bury themselves untidily in the tops of pistons that found themselves in the same space at the same time. A simple radiator fix became an engine rebuild. This was quite a job, as the Heron is a mid-engined car with an in-line engine, meaning the whole rear has to be disassembled to get it out.

Scott had been driving his dream car around Auckland for around a year when he was given the opportunity to meet its creator. Ross Baker was back in New Zealand, helping the Museum of Transport and Technology (MOTAT) build a display about Heron cars. Scott heard about this and arranged with Walter Wing to collect Ross from his hotel and take him to MOTAT in the Heron — how cool is that? The expression on Ross' face when he was picked up in the 30-year-old Heron made it all worthwhile. Scott says he felt as if he was transporting the Enzo Ferrari of Heron motor cars, as Ross shared with him more of the history of this amazing Kiwi-designed supercar.

The sun may have set on this model, but, thanks to an enthusiastic bunch of owners, the memories will live on. ■



VEHICLE DETAILS	HERON	LOTUS ESPRIT
BODY/CHASSIS	Fibreglass monocoque body/chassis	Fibreglass body on steel-backbone chassis
KERB WEIGHT	720kg	1100kg
HEIGHT	1m	1.11m
LENGTH	4.01m	4.19m
WIDTH	1.67m	1.85m
MID ENGINE	2.0 litres	2.2 litres
POWER	89kW (120bhp)	127kW (170bhp)
POWER TO WEIGHT	127kW/ton	126kW/ton
TRANSMISSION	Five-speed transaxle	Five-speed transaxle
0-100KM	6.7 seconds tested	6.7 seconds tested
0-400M	14.5 seconds tested	15.2 seconds tested
TOP SPEED	210kph	267kph
PRICE IN 1985	\$27,500	\$70K approx.