

# Plenty

It's fun in the sun as Craig Phillips talks about pirates and the orsative process, Matt Mortimer goes back to the future with a Rotorua supercar, we learn about the good oil, Alexandra Piekles meets writer Lee Murray, and Plenty gets the word on the street about burgers and oheese, while the humble kōmara prepares to enter the limelight.

culture :: media :: art :: food

ahurea    ao pāpāho    toi    kai

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What is the most important

he tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata.

? 'pārom eha ni bingha

He aha te mea nui o te ao.

It is people, it is people, it is people.





*Baker's bird;*  
how the Heron took flight

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HISTORIC IMAGES HERONCARS.CO.NZ

ROTORUA-BASED  
LUXURY SPORTS CAR?  
BEEN INHALING A BIT TOO  
MUCH BURNT RUBBER INTO  
THE OLD DOUBLE-BARREL  
INTAKE HAVE WE?!  
NOPE. THIS IS A TRUE STORY.

**T U R N I N G  
B A C K  
T H E C L O C K**

To get under the skin of this story we need to turn the clock back to well before the eighties began. Ross Baker moved to Rotorua as a wee lad and began building trolleys soon after, starting each masterpiece on a Saturday morning and finishing it on a Sunday arvo, with the wood, steel and rope he found strewn about the place. As you do. He was lucky enough to later power these works of art with a Villiers motor from Dad's lawnmower, in addition to the steering wheel, brakes, lights and horn that were all donated from the local rubbish tip.

Fast forward a few years and his need for speed was realised when Baker hit the ripe old age of 19 and he and his brother Tony (who had been a mechanic in the Air Force) opened a workshop on Old Taupō Road in 1960. Ross Baker followed in his brothers' footsteps, earning his 'A-Grade' mechanic certificate under the guidance of his brother; at the time, the Apprenticeship Board required apprentices to be working for someone else, not for themselves, but permission was sought and received which set the wheels in motion.

It was during these years that Ross first dabbled in building a kit car – someone else's – when he put a Mistral together. These were vehicles originally from England that a New Zealand company in Christchurch, Elmsly and Flockton, took moulds of and sold fibreglass bodies and steel-tube chassis for. Over time, Baker built his Mistral up from having the recommended Ford Ten engine to a Humber 80 engine and wider wheels and tyres. The adage of a big engine in a small car paid dividends as he thrashed it about on hill climb events and the like, always managing a Top 3 finish.

Ross Baker's Heron MJ1 Prototype outside Polynesian Pools in Rotorua



**P**ETROL HEADS often spend their time trawling the interweb, drooling over pictures of sports cars from around the globe – Italy has the Ferrari, Germany has the Porsche, and Rotorua, well Rotorua has the Heron. Okay, Rotorua-based luxury sports car? Been inhaling a bit too much burnt rubber into the old double-barrel intake have we?! Nope. This is a true story.

As all of us around the Bay know, in the mid-eighties, we were all wearing pastel colours and watching Miami Vice on TV. The women wore shoulder pads and too much eye make-up, and most wanted to be like Diane

from Cheers. And the men were about cars; watching a talking car called KITT on Knight Rider, and the General Lee off Dukes of Hazard that left the ground far too often to be believable. For us back home, owning Magnum PI's Ferrari wasn't an option, so while sporting a dirty big mo and some oversized aviators we were working on older model Holdens, Fords and the like which were abundant. But why, you may ask, would anyone think of making their own supercar?

Enter Ross Baker. With a plan. Unlike the plans we all talk about after necking one too many lagers, Ross followed through and set about producing his own line of cars, initially with racing in mind, and the story of one of these in particular caught our eye: the Lotus-esque Heron MJ1.





Heron MJ1 prototypes



THE FRONT WINDSCREEN OF CHOICE WAS ACTUALLY A REAR ONE – OUT OF A MARK I FORD ESCORT SPORT – MARRIED TO A HOLDEN CAMIRA DASHBOARD SET-UP AND SOME LEATHER INTERIOR

1983 Motor show with the first three Herons on display

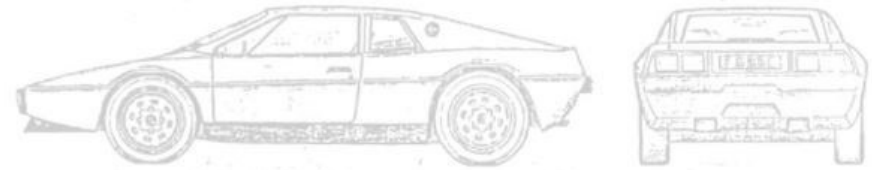


As Kivi's, we love this. You know most people would settle for a bog-standard, drive your mum to town, regular Joe standard one – but there's something to be said about taking it a step further. But remember this was before the days of cars needing certification; imagine trying to get something like this over the line now!

It is also important, and downright imperative, to note here in the land of the long white cloud that we still produce kit cars of different persuasions, all made pretty damn well to be fair. But you've probably gathered by now that this isn't another cereal-box shaped Trekka (seriously, look it up) from the sixties, that although was fit for purpose, was dog ugly.

## TAKING FLIGHT

In 1962, Baker decided it was time to do a different kind of DIY and design and build his own racing car. With an Applied Mechanics course from his secondary schooling in New Plymouth, Baker understood the details of building a space frame chassis, and inspired by the Lotus 23B sports car and a very good book called *Racing and Sports Car Chassis Design* he set to work. As Baker tells it, the book explained roll centres, anti-dive, centres of gravity and a hundred other things to be considered when building a sports car – who needs wind tunnels and rolling roads?! – and he put in many long hours designing and drawing before he started any fabrication. Like many visionary designers, Baker seems to have had the uncanny knack of seeing the finished design in his head before he set pen to paper, and when you don't have the luxury of an automotive design team and workshop at your fingertips this really is where the rubber meets the road in the process, just as much as rolling your sleeves up does.



EACH ONE IS A TIGHTLY ENGINEERED AND CAREFULLY CRAFTED SPORTS CAR THAT IS THE REAL DEAL. THEY LOOK GREAT, THEY GO GREAT, AND THEY MAKE ALL THE RIGHT NOISES.

1963 Heron MK1 Sports Racing Car - Based on the Lotus 23B Sports racing car. Design Ross Baker, built by Ross Baker and Bob Gee



1967 Heron MK4 GT Sports Racing Car - replica of the Ford GT MK4 Sports racing car. Design Ross Baker, built by Ross Baker, Bob Gee and Chris Cooke



## LOSING ALTITUDE

Rather than being simply a one-off race car though, Baker dreamed of having his own production car, and not another kit car. He developed a partnership with a company called Summit Automotive and the concept moved from a vehicle semi-made up for the customer to a car with a Fiat 2-litre engine, married up with Skoda running gear and a full fibreglass composite monocoque body. The front windscreen of choice was actually a rear one – out of a Ford Escort Sport – married to a Holden Camira dashboard set-up and some leather interior added to make a grand total of approximately 740kg ready to go. The MJ1 Heron was truly starting to take flight.

Summit came and went however, with the introduction of the Fiat engine not being a great fit. Essentially it led to excessive vibration at higher RPMs, so Baker fitted a fifth gear to give the Heron longer legs (sorry) in the form of overdrive. The costs of these mods simply didn't make the business cost-effective however, and being a man who didn't want to compromise build quality, Baker purchased the moulds back from Summit and they parted ways.

Ross Baker went on to build many more variations, mostly in the form of race cars, and while the Heron may have been relatively short lived, the result of Baker's labours is a thing of beauty. From the stunning lines to the all important eye for detail, a Heron is no kit car. Instead, each one is a tightly engineered and carefully crafted sports car that is the real deal. They look great, they go great, and they make all the right noises.





## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

We had to see one of these up close and personal, and in true Plenty style we trawled around until we stumbled across a beautiful example of one in Taupō.

The owner, retired secondary teacher Bryce Gliddon, is a top bloke and proud Heron owner. His yellow MJr carries a menacing low look about it, as all of the aforementioned pieces come together to sit on some machined rims with Halliday performance centred wheels.

The original Fiat imported 'crate' engines are great, but as Bryce explains he has a couple of points of interest (and in fact difference) on his car.

"Mine has the Fiat 2-litre engine with twin 45mm Webers on it and has Alquati cams," he says. For those not in the know, that's 45mm carburettors, which are a thing of beauty to any old school petrol-head. Alquati, on the other hand, is not so well known, an Italian manufacturer who used to supply engine components to a reasonably successful sportscar brand in the Fiat whānau, namely Ferrari, as well as other brands too, like Lancia and Alfa Romeo.

There is so much more to this story. Ross is still designing cars today in his seventies, with a project taking shape on a Commodore chassis, made with his grandkids in mind. He's kicking back in Maroochydhore on the Sunshine Coast of Queensland, Australia now, and we reckon this is one hell of a cool way to spend your retirement.

As remarkable as a Rotorua-based sportscar is, it's all the more remarkable for the fact that it still looks just as great 30+ years on. This is an awesome story that should play a bigger part in our history, but after seeing the mighty Heron with our own eyes, we would have excused you if you just looked at the pictures!

## WHAKATANE GOLF CLUB



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