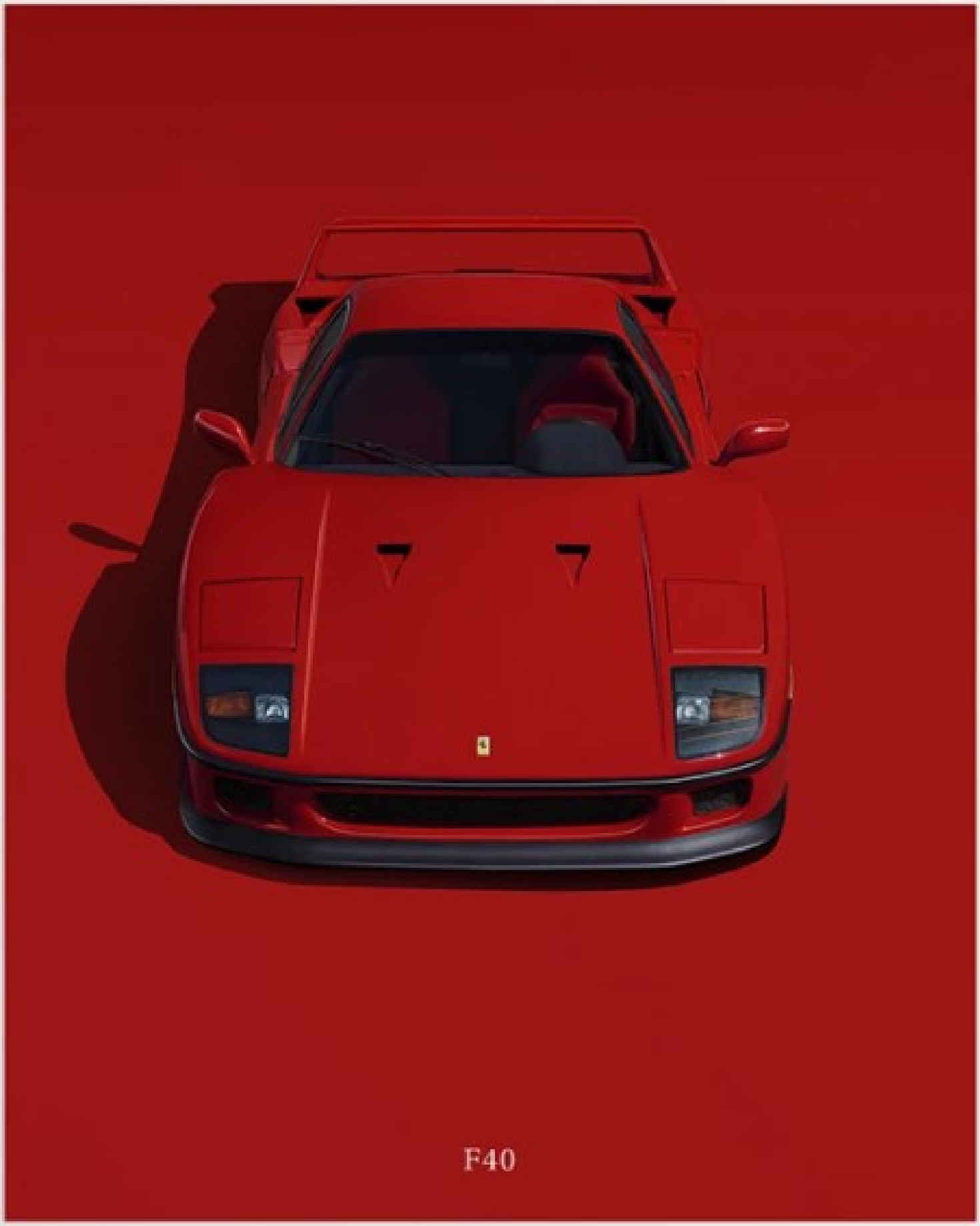
RETROMOTIVE

VOLUME SIX



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HERON

MJ1

WORDS **PATRICK HARLOW**

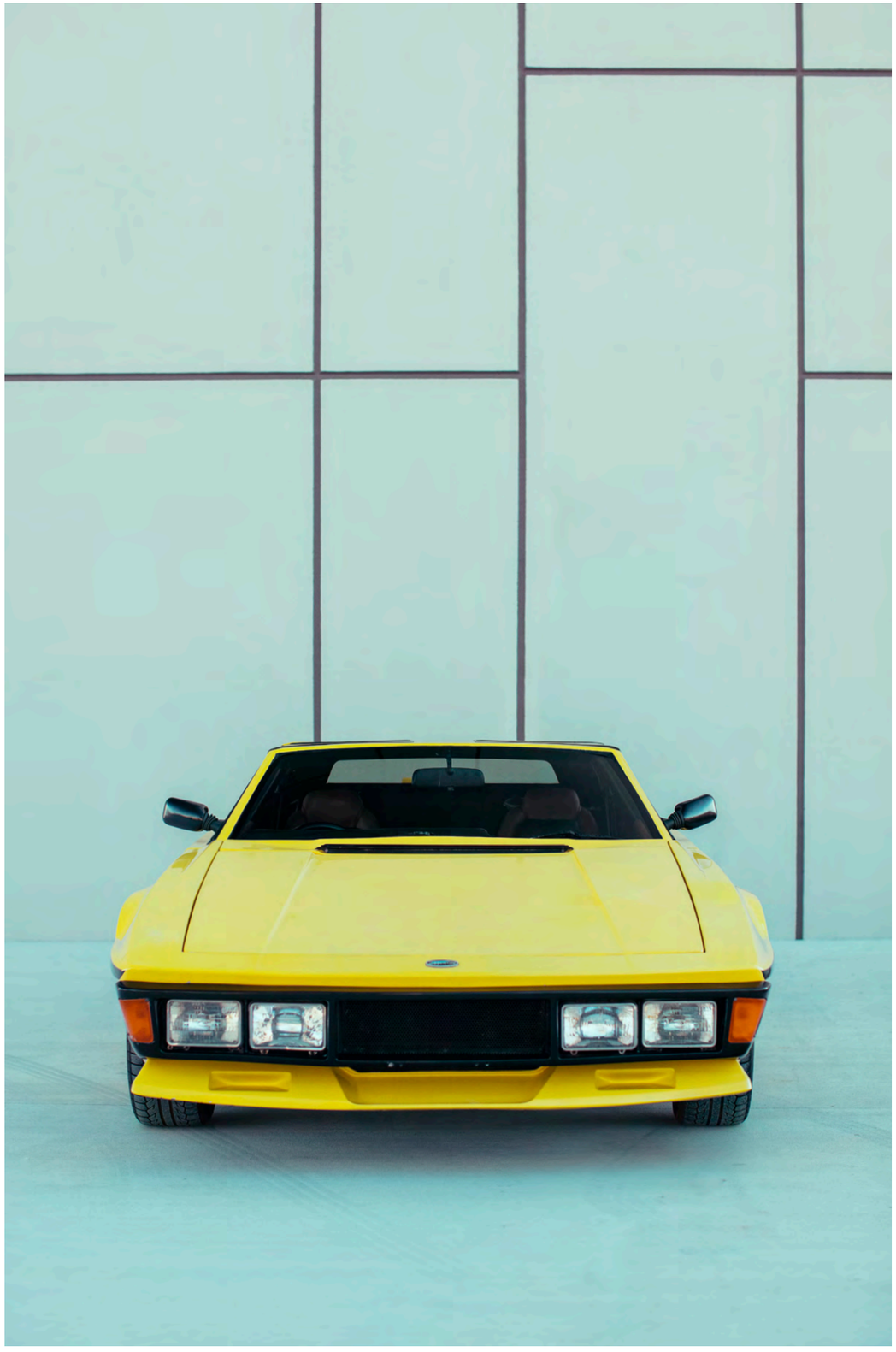
PHOTOGRAPHY **NATHAN DUFF**

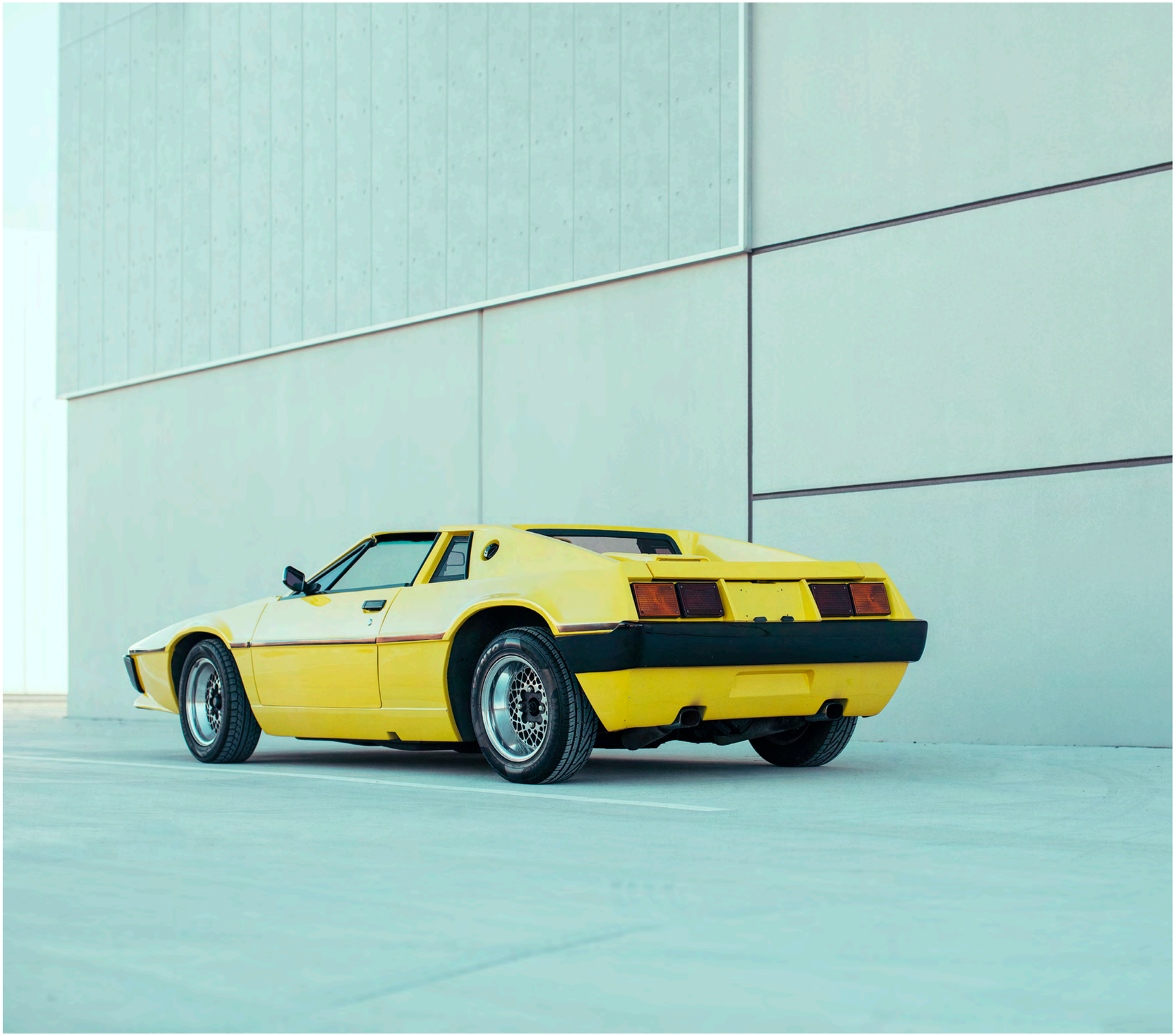
Many people wrongly think of the Trekka as being New Zealand's only production car. It is one of four farm utility vehicles produced as a turn-key product, the others being the Terra, the Trailmaker and the Duzgo. The crown for New Zealand's most successful production supercar is, in my opinion, the Heron – a supercar manufactured in Rotorua.

Some will disagree with me 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 backroads 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 Japanese with the ummm... But when the Heron MJ1 came on the scene, NZ buyers had an alternative option and it was NZ made!

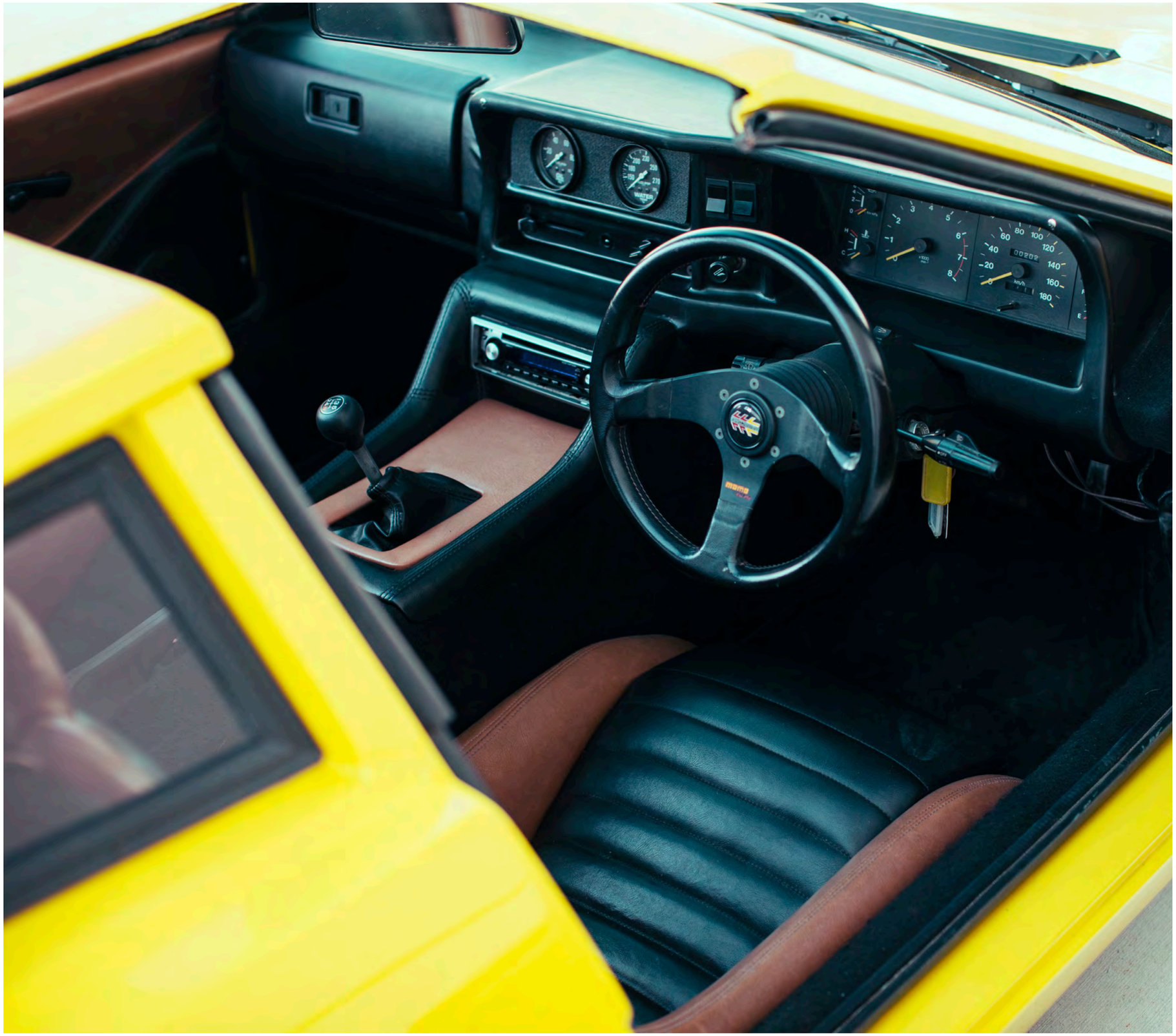
Having said that, for many who read this story it will be the first time that they have seen or even heard of the Heron MJ1. It was a car designed by Ross Baker, an A-grade mechanic, based in Rotorua, who could not only fix cars but also create them using processes that were outside conventional thinking, 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.

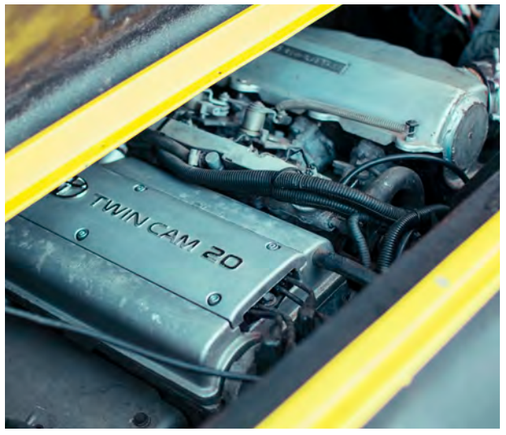
Unlike most other fibreglass cars, hardly any steel plates or metal members are moulded into the body, nor is the bodywork mounted onto a steel chassis. Ross believed that the two materials were incompatible with different expansion and contraction rates and in degree of flexibility. The only concessions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

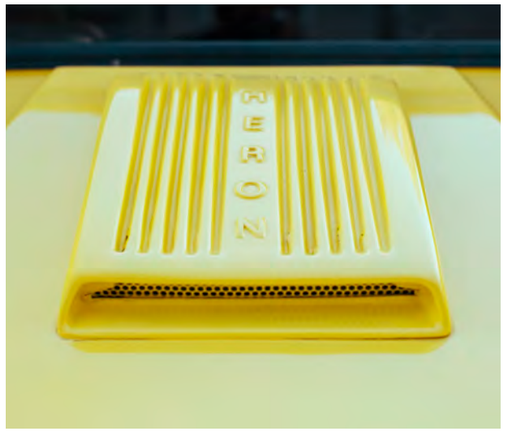
Mechanically, the motor was Fiat, with the suspension and drivetrain componentry provided by Skoda, including the transaxle and gearbox. Skoda parts were used as they were simple yet very robust and relatively inexpensive. The instrument cluster comes from the Holden Camira.

At its public debut at the 1983 Motor Expo, it was a sensation. 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 from 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 their factory for around $16,000, 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 turn-key. Frank even offered to become the project's main financial backer and offered 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. Once it became a new car, it immediately attracted the 20% 'luxury items' sales tax in place at the time.







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 motor. 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 Engineering 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

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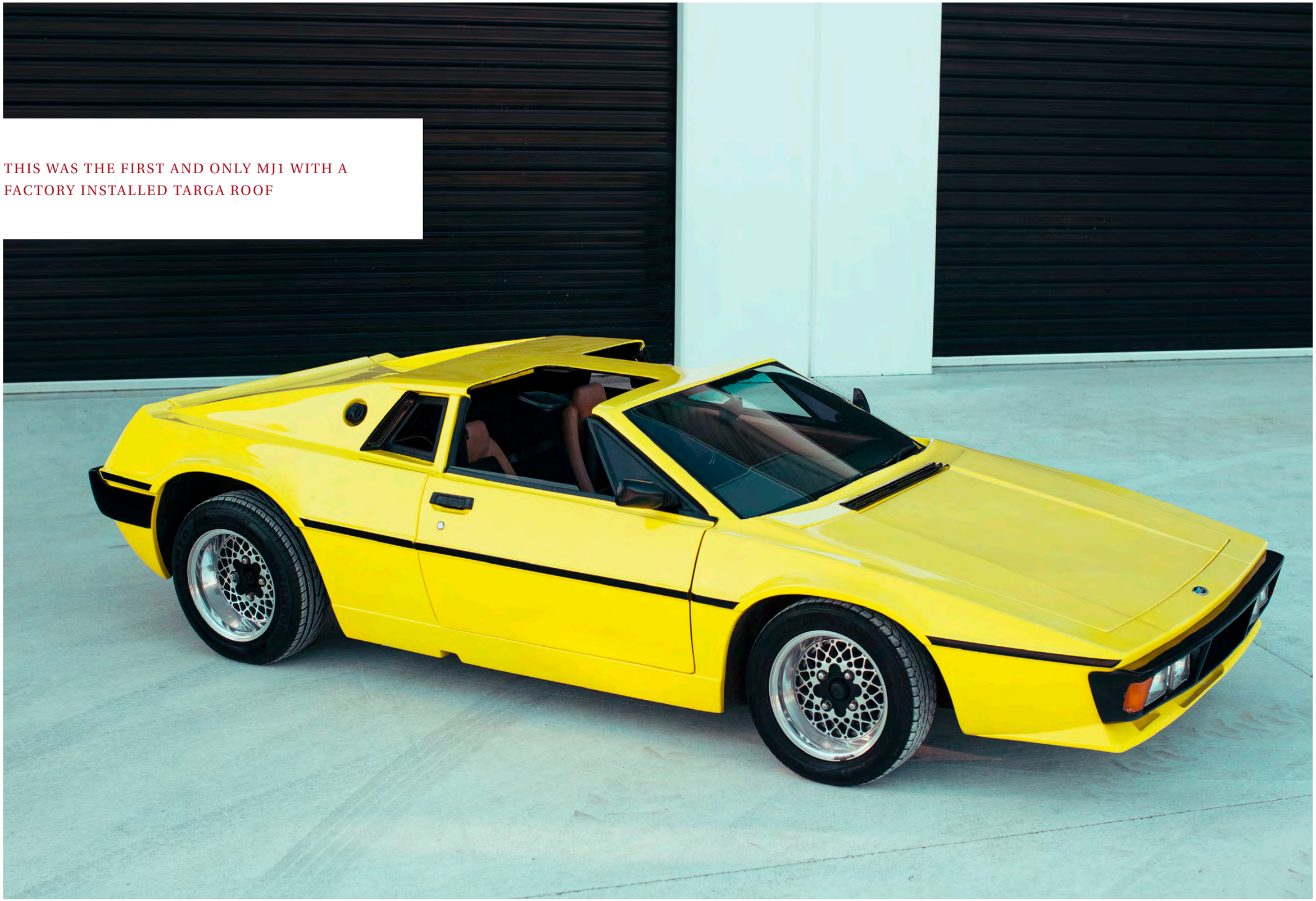
of this imperfect design/development process, cars left the factory that Ross knew would return under warranty. He was not happy with this situation but Summit Engineering was now the majority shareholder: Ross had lost control.

Eventually, including the prototypes, a total of 20 production cars were built but with the in-production design changes, sales tax, 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 then selling for $18,000. 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.

What is not so well known is that 'Heron' was not the first choice of name for the marque. Ross Baker's first preference had been to give the cars he designed and produced the name 'Banshee'. It was on top of his list

THIS WAS THE FIRST AND ONLY MJ1 WITH A FACTORY INSTALLED TARGA ROOF



until he discovered that a banshee was a female spirit whose high-pitched wailing warns of death. Legend states that a banshee can be heard wailing nearby when someone is about to die. Possibly not the best name for a car. It was changed after Ross heard of a plane, called the Heron, which had completed some amazing feat on the South Island. Heron is also the name for a native New Zealand bird known in Maori as a Kotuku. He liked this name better and he went on to build several racing cars, farm machinery and electric vehicles under the Heron banner.

Besides cars, Rotorua-based Ross Baker has manufactured about 60 electric trucks, 50 electric golf carts, 150 go-carts and – just to be different – 100 bumper boats. But this story is about his unique electric car called the PC80.

The Heron MJ1 featured here is number 23 of 24 built. During 1991, Bob Adler bought one of the cars that were built up from parts after production had finished and its was the last Heron body to be manufactured by Paul MacDiarmid at Rotorua Fibreglass. This was the first and only MJ1 with a factory installed Targa roof as per an original early '80s concept sketch by Ross Baker. The other notable variation was a Honda 1500 drivetrain instead of the Fiat one. It has since changed hands a number of times and is now part of a collection owned by Carl and Grant Amor. The Honda engine has been swapped out for a Toyota 20V 4AGE Toyota Twin Cam and has undergone extensive restoration work since crossing the ditch. The Amor brothers have plans to open a museum on the Gold Coast hinterland in 2020 where you'll be able to see this piece of super car history up close.

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For a more detailed dive into the world of Ross Baker and Heron cars - Check out Heron MJ1 – The story of a New Zealand Supercar and the Man that Created it, by Patrick Harlow Available from Wilson Scott publishers in New Zealand www.willsonscott.biz

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