

ALLAN DICK PAYS TRIBUTE TO GRAHAM McRAE

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# CLASSIC DRIVER



## HERON MJ1 *THE KIWI SUPERCAR FROM ROTORUA*

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# A BUNCH OF WINNERS

*Five years prior to the Heron MJ1's public debut, Ross Baker had been involved in a serious motorboat accident and it was touch and go as to whether he would live, never mind walk again – but he overcame that obstacle and went on to design and build the MJ1 sports car.*

Words: **PATRICK HARLOW** | Photos: **CAMERON LEGGETT**









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The day before the opening of the 1983 Motor Expo in Auckland, Ross Baker and his wife Bev, the directors of Heron Developments Ltd, along with a few loyal friends, finished setting up a display of three Heron MJ1 fibreglass monocoque sports cars. The red one was drivable; the yellow car was mocked up to look as if it was drivable – minus its doors, as they had not been finished in time – but it was a good excuse to display the car's interior. A third bare body was mounted up high to show off the Heron's fibreglass monocoque chassis, and a mock-up of the drivetrain and front suspension had been placed on the floor beneath it.

Ross had no idea what would happen when the public were allowed into the show.

### AMBITIOUS PROJECT

The Heron MJ1 was not the first car that Ross had built, but it was the most ambitious. People in New Zealand have designed cars in the past but never attempted to market a car that had almost no steel in its construction. Ross Baker, a mechanic from Rotorua, with the help of a few enthusiastic friends, believed that

he had come up with an affordable supercar and that people would buy it.

Unlike most other fibreglass cars, the MJ1 has hardly any steel plates or metal members moulded into its body, nor is the bodywork mounted onto a steel chassis. The only concessions to this largely 'steel free' design are the steel roll bars glassed into each door pillar in order to give a solid mount for the door latches and seatbelt mounts, while a patented stainless-steel mesh system bonded into the fibreglass provides the greater strength required for the suspension-mounting points.

Mechanically the motor was from a Fiat, with the suspension and drivetrain componentry provided by Skoda. This included the transaxle and gearbox. Skoda parts were used as they were simple yet very robust and relatively inexpensive.

When the 1983 Motor Expo opened to the public, the 800kg Heron MJ1 became one of the success stories of the show. From the time the doors opened until the end of the show, there was a crowd around their stand. Over 350 people expressed an interest in buying a

car and 33 placed a \$1000 deposit for a car that was not yet in production. It was clear to Ross and those around him that he had a winning design on his hands. Ross believed that, along with Peter Guilford and Paul McDiarmid, he could build between four and five cars a year.

### PRODUCTION REALITIES

Right from the start, demand was outstripping what Ross could supply. He was going to need to employ more staff, which meant he would somehow have to cover all their wages until the money from completed cars started to roll in. Ross needed an investor so that they could handle the final development work and gear up for mass production. Fortunately, another Rotorua company, Summit Engineering, suitably impressed by Ross's vision, agreed to go into partnership with him and provide the funding to get the car into production.

The next time the nation heard of the car came in 1984 when a Heron MJ1 was offered as the jackpot prize in the Cascade Lottery. Many people bought a ticket hoping to win the sensational yellow sports car that was featured on the lottery posters.





Production was also fully underway in 1984. Prospective owners could choose whether they wanted leather or cloth upholstery, with the Fiat 1.6-litre engine featured in the prototype having been replaced with a more powerful Fiat 2-litre twin-cam engine. The four-speed gearbox was converted by Ross into a five-speed 'box, in line with the rising popularity of five-speeders in cars of the era. Other design changes included replacing the original custom instrument binnacle with one from a Holden Camira.

The future looked rosy; there was even talk of exporting cars to Australia. However, by 1985 it was all over after a total of only 26 cars had been built.

I don't intend to go into the reasons for the car's demise here, but one that did not help was the lack of contemporary media interest. The first time a motoring magazine did a road test on the car was in 1990, five years after production had ceased. Even then, it was an Australian magazine that took the time to examine the Heron. Mike McCarthy, who wrote the review, said, "everything works as you'd expect in any modern big name factory car. It is

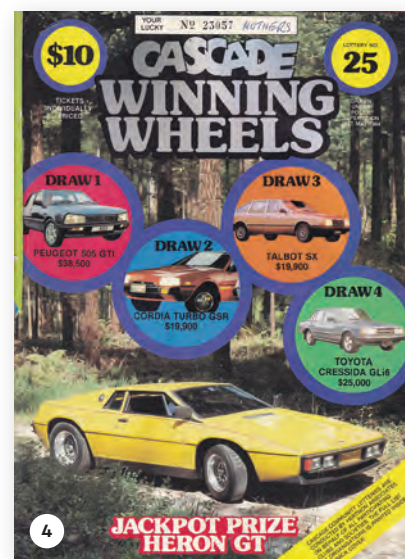
well designed, well built, and well mannered, a distinctly wrapped package that can hold its own. A contemporary classic at its best."

### KIWI ICON

Like the Lotus Esprit that had inspired Ross with the design of the Heron, the cars were not perfect, and like all bespoke, low volume cars, they were not without their quirks. For instance, Summit Engineering's sudden decision to upgrade to the more powerful 2.0-litre engine meant that Ross had to design a new bell housing to adapt the mid-mounted engine to the Skoda transaxle. It worked fine but unless the mechanic working on the car knew what he was doing, incorrect adjustment of the clutch could result in slippage. On the positive side, the Heron could match all the performance figures of the Lotus, the car it is often compared to, yet the Kiwi car cost half as much to buy.

Over 35 years later almost all the cars still exist, although two cars were stolen by joyriders and destroyed. The original red prototype still exists and is currently being restored by its owner in Dunedin. At least two

1. A flock of Heron owners (left to right): Walter Wing, Bryce Glidden, Alan Wichman, Taylor Wichman, Tom Wichman, Brady Wedding and Scott Brearley; 2. The Heron stand at the 1983 Motor Expo in Auckland; 3. The Heron assembly line in Rotorua, 1984; 4. The Heron MJ1 jackpot prize lottery.







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cars have made it across the ditch to Australia, while the rest are owned by a bunch of enthusiasts who believe that they are winners because they own a very unique piece of Kiwi automotive history.

The Heron MJ1 is New Zealand's most successful production car. Many claim this title should go to the Trekka, but the Trekka was a truck. In addition, the Heron is the only New Zealand production car that can boast of a planned replacement model, the Heron MJ2+2, a car that was under development when production of the MJ1 ceased.

The MJ1 could easily have faded into obscurity, but the pretty little sports car has acquired a small and enthusiastic following.

The Museum of Transport and Technology, in recent years, has taken a strong interest in New Zealand-designed cars. In 2016, it added an MJ1 to its collection. In addition to the Heron MJ1, in 2020 it also acquired one

of two Heron electric cars – the PC80. Even more recently, over the last couple of months, MOTAT purchased a Heron Spraymaster. Both the PC80 and the Spraymaster are currently undergoing restoration. Not only is MOTAT keen to archive any possible history on these unique cars, but it provided the backdrop for our photoshoot. [↗](#)

*Readers wanting to know more about these terrific Kiwi-built sports cars should grab a copy of Patrick Harlow's book, Heron MJ1. Many thanks to the Heron owners who took their time to drive to MOTAT 2 for our photo-shoot. Also thanks to Saskia van Well, Senior Communications Advisor at MOTAT, for allowing us to photograph within MOTAT's grounds – and special thanks to Makayla Wallace-Tidd of MOTAT for her help; we hope she wasn't too bored hanging around while we snapped photos and talked cars!*

1. Ross Baker stands by one of his creations; 2. The Ross Baker designed PC80 EV – a car before its time; 3. A Heron Spraymaster is currently under restoration at MOTAT.

**The Heron MJ1 is New Zealand's most successful production car. Many claim this title should go to the Trekka, but the Trekka was a truck.**





## SCOTT BREARLEY'S HERON MJ1

Along with his dad, Scott Brearley was one of the thousands who saw the Heron at the 1983 Motor Expo. Scott has lived and breathed cars since high school, and at that first glance he knew that the Heron was something special. Indeed, in 1992, after seeing a Heron for sale in a car yard, and despite the car having already been sold, Scott managed to convince the salesman to let him take the Heron for a test drive. Over the years, his interest in the marque remained undiminished.

Finally, after much searching, he was able to purchase his own Heron – a car that had been lovingly restored by its previous owner and with less than 18,000 original kilometres on the clock. Despite the amazing work to get the car through compliance, registered and warranted, on taking possession of the car Scott found that his first task was to rebuild the engine, gearbox and radiator to ensure its drivability. The Heron, like all cars parked up in a garage for a long time, is not immune to deterioration when not regularly driven.

Scott had been driving his dream car around Auckland for about a year when he was given the opportunity to personally meet its creator, Ross Baker. As mentioned earlier, MOTAT had purchased a Heron MJ1 that it wanted to display along with the moulds. Walter Wing had contacted Ross, who, with his wife Bev, had retired and moved to Australia to be with their family. Together, Ross and Walter were going to help MOTAT by donating photos, documents and drawings of the car to be stored there for future automotive historians. Scott heard about this and arranged with Walter Wing to collect Ross from his hotel and take him to MOTAT in his Heron – how cool is that? The expression on Ross's face when he was picked up in a fully restored, 30-year-old Heron made it all worthwhile. Scott says he felt like he was transporting the Enzo Ferrari of New Zealand.



Scott's beautifully restored, Fiat-powered MJ1 is featured on the front cover of Patrick Harlow's book, *Heron MJ1: The story of a New Zealand supercar and the man who created it*.







Many years ago, Brady's Fiat-powered MJ1 was the subject of a road-test feature in Australian motoring magazine, *Sports Car World*.

### BRADY WEDDING'S MJ1

The red car shown in these pictures is the actual car once test-driven by Mike McCarthy and featured in the Australian *Sports Car World* magazine. Once production had ceased, Ross bought this car back from a customer so that he could give it as a 21st birthday present to his daughter, and it was later used as her wedding car. His daughter moved to Australia and the car was sold, changing hands until it came into the possession of Brady Wedding.

When Brady bought this car he did not initially know its history but liked the idea of a low-slung sports car that could be driven under parking barrier arms. Having now met other Heron owners and learned the full history of the car, Brady is determined to restore it.







Note the east-west location of the engine in Alan's MJ1, which has been modified to take the running gear from a more modern Ford Telstar/Mazda 626.



## ALAN WICHMAN'S HERON COLLECTION

Alan Wichman bought his first Heron in 1987. He was 19 at the time and had spotted the MJ1 in a local sales yard while on the way home from work one day. He would become the car's second owner. In those days, all cars came with physical ownership papers listing all previous owners and, needless to say, Alan tracked down his car's first owner and got the full story on this New Zealand-built car.

That first owner was Peter Guilford, one of Ross Baker's friends and one who had spent many hours in the Baker basement constructing the wooden plug that would eventually become the Heron MJ1. Not only that, but the car Alan bought was only the second Heron MJ1 produced. It was the

yellow Heron with no doors displayed at the 1983 Motor Expo – and also the car featured on the Cascade raffle poster.

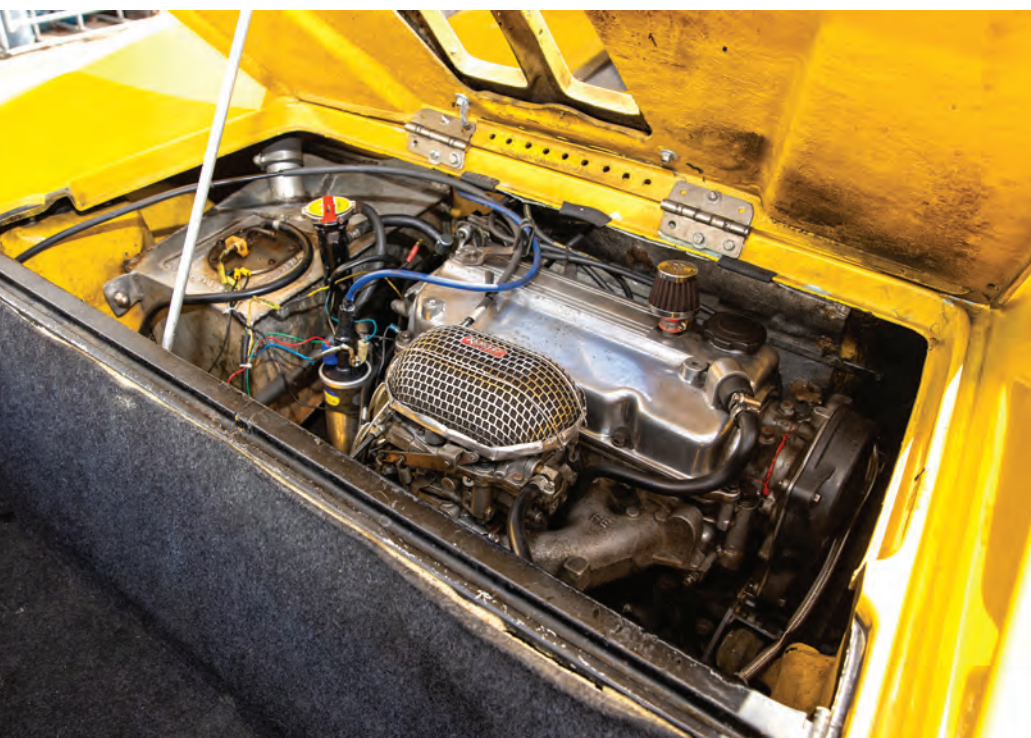
This Heron became Alan's daily driver and when his first son was born, a child's safety seat was bolted to the centre console.

In the early 1990s, Alan took the car back to Rotorua to have some improvements and upgrades carried out. As these were going to take a while, Alan needed another car to get around in while the work was being carried out. Hearing of another MJ1 being sold at auction in Auckland, he went along, outbid everybody and won the car. This red Heron was the second Heron to be produced by the Summit/Baker partnership and the seventh in total.

Fast forward to 2021 and many Herons have come and gone in the Wichman house. His first Heron, #2, was discovered in pieces in the South Island and is now not only back in Wichman's possession but also back on the road again. The red Heron, #7, was stolen but recently found in the upper North Island on the back of a rusting truck in a farmer's paddock. At last count, of the 26 Herons produced, Alan and his sons own six!

Early in this story, I mentioned the Heron MJ2+2. Only two of these cars were ever produced. Alan owns the second of these and also the moulds. This second MJ2+2 was not much more than a rolling body and, if time permits, Alan will have it road legal by the end of the year.





As well as its east-west Mazda engine and gearbox, this MJ1 – seen here with Tom Wichman – also has more cabin room following modifications to the rear bulkhead, while a curved roof means more headroom. Note also this car's one-piece tail-lights.



## HERON MJ1



### BRYCE GLIDDEN'S MJ1

Bryce has owned his Heron since 2016 and he has been a keen follower of the marque since he first heard about them in the mid-1980s. The fact that such a revolutionary fibreglass monocoque car could be made in this country helped ensure that the car stayed on his dream car list. Hence, when the opportunity came for him to purchase this yellow example, he was not going to let the opportunity pass him by.



Bryce has updated many areas of his MJ1, including changes to improve cooling for the Fiat engine. Note the neat placement of the spare wheel in the car's front compartment.



### WALTER WING'S MJ1

Like Scott Brearley, Walter Wing first saw the MJ1 at the 1983 Motor Expo but could not afford it at the time. However, in 1987 he saw one of the five prototype cars fitted with the earlier 1.6-litre engine up for sale by tender – a tender he successfully won.

Despite being only a few years old, the Heron he acquired had been poorly looked after. The wheels had been stolen and the gearbox was stuffed. After doing some essential repairs, he drove it for a while before taking it off the road for a full restoration. Right from the start, Walter was determined to find out all he could about the car to preserve its history and, eventually, with the expertise of Mike van



Bokhoven, he created the Heron website – check it out at: [www.heroncars.co.nz](http://www.heroncars.co.nz).

Walter also managed to prevent the original MJ1 moulds from being destroyed and personally covered the cost of their storage for several years. Later, after getting in touch with Ross Baker, he also arranged

for the moulds to be entrusted to the care of MOTAT in Auckland.

His silver Heron, which he still owns, was going to be at our photoshoot but unfortunately did not make it, although Walter turned up to cheer on his fellow Heron owners.