

**EXCLUSIVE BOOK OFFER: CLASSIC JAGUARS IN NEW ZEALAND**

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# NZ **CLASSIC** **DRIVER**



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**LEFT:** The EMW shows off its BMW M1-inspired styling (Photo S Kirkpatrick).

## PART TWO

# NEW ZEALAND'S SUPERCARS

*In the second part of this series detailing cars that are unique to New Zealand, Patrick Harlow rounds up another trio of locally designed and built supercars.*

Words and Photos: **PATRICK HARLOW**

New Zealand is an amazing country, with many of us – using a limited number of skills, but plenty of enthusiasm – creating something that is way out of our comfort zones. In this issue, we will be looking at the creations of a panel beater, a mechanic and a Rolls-Royce trained engineer.

Some may query my inclusion of the Hulme in this series as it never made it into production. However, as Maxwell Smart has been known to say, “He missed it by this much.” Therefore, in future I will be including prototypes that were built with the intention of going into production. As we look at the prototypes, we can only wonder, “What if...?”

Each of the cars featured this time caused quite a sensation when they were first unveiled in their local community. The Hulme went even further, appearing in many overseas automotive magazines as it travelled the world looking for sponsors to fund its manufacture.

All were created thanks to the support and help of friends.

Many New Zealanders were of the opinion that a supercar could not be designed, never mind constructed, in New Zealand, and if it was then the car would probably be flawed and doomed to failure.

The 1967 Formula One champion, a New Zealander by the name of Denny Hulme, summed up this attitude when he said, “New Zealand is like a lawn. If one blade of grass is higher than the rest, New Zealanders get 50,000 lawn-mowers and chop the whole lot level again.”

Of the three car creators in this issue, one got a car into production but ran out of money; another couldn't raise the wherewithal to start production; and one succeeded in getting both and became New Zealand's most successful car manufacturer.

Not all heroes play rugby!

**EMW6 (1983 TO 1989)**

This is another ‘what if’ car. It is a brilliant design, it handled well on the racetrack and it’s powered by a 6-litre Chevrolet V8. This aluminium-bodied car is the brainchild of a highly skilled car-builder by the name of Cliff Everson. The ‘E’ in EMW is for Everson, with the ‘MW’ being a nod to the car that inspired it – the BMW M1. The number ‘6’ came about as it was the sixth, and possibly the best, car that Cliff designed and built.

At the start of the ’70s, Cliff sold his panelbeating business and decided to head out for the big OE. He packed up his family and headed for the USA. In Los Angeles he was able to get his dream job working for a car restoration company. It was here that Cliff honed his sheet metalworking skills by creating from scratch various panels for a range of very rare cars. He helped build a few AC Cobras and even worked on the all-alloy Shelby Cobra that featured in the famous movie *The Gumball Rally*. Cliff was also called upon to build a fully functioning rear wing for a Lamborghini Countach as the standard wing seemed to be more for show than go. Using a wind tunnel to perfect the shape, the resulting aerofoil kept the Countach from lifting off the road at high speeds.

Just before returning to New Zealand, Cliff entered three cars that he had restored in the New York motor show and his cars took out the first three places.

Once back in New Zealand, Cliff purchased the family business, Everson Welding Works, and managed to get a contract converting Chevrolet trucks into ambulances. With a steady source of income, he turned his attention to creating his own supercar. All the panels were hand-beaten, with most



1. Rear three-quarter view (Photo S Kirkpatrick); 2. The EMW's mid-mounted Holden Commodore powerplant (Photo S Kirkpatrick); 3. The EMW's chassis laid bare (Photo Walter Wing).

of the mechanical parts – apart from the ZF transaxle and motor – coming from the Holden Commodore. Although the prototype resembled a BMW M1, the production cars were all Cliff Everson utilising a Commodore windscreen, taillights, styling for the bumpers and various other sundry parts. The production car was only sold in turnkey form.

Cliff believed he needed to sell three cars to break even but, at around \$100,000 each in 1980, they were not cheap. However, with the prototype on the road and demonstrating what it could do on the track, there was a lot of interest in the car. With two buyers lined up, Cliff was confident that he could sell at

least five. He made enough panels for five cars but only built three, intending to use the profit from them to fund the next two.

Unfortunately, once the contract for the ambulance conversions was completed, the cash flow dried up. Work on assembling the three cars that were without buyers stagnated while Cliff scrambled to find work to cover his overheads. Progress would continue to be made on these cars but only when time and finances permitted. As well as the prototype, three production cars were finished. A fourth production car (which would have been the fifth EMW) was started but, unable to find a buyer, it was later scrapped.





1. Mellow yellow – MJ1 trio (Photo Alan Wichman); 2. Outside the Heron factory in June 1984, with Ross Baker in the striped jersey; 3. Not all MJ1s are yellow – on display at the Ellerslie Intermarque Concours show in Auckland (Photo Scott Brearly).

### HERON MJ1 (1983 TO 1985)

No New Zealand supercar story would be complete without the inclusion of the Heron MJ1. This was a supercar that came totally out of left field. Powered by a mid-engined 2-litre Fiat motor, it had a more than adequate performance for its era. Unlike other cars that either had steel monocoque bodies or a steel chassis, the MJ1 had a fibreglass monocoque body with a unique patented system to attach the steel drive train to it. A first for New Zealand, and almost unheard of in the world at that time.

Ross Baker was a successful A-grade mechanic in Rotorua. Keen on motorsport, he had already built and driven several racing cars on tracks around the North Island, with enough successes to know he was doing something right. After scratch building a Ford GT Mk4 replica racing car called the Heron, he was frustrated when race officials changed the rules, effectively making the car obsolete before the engine had been turned over.

Later, while recovering from a near-fatal boat accident, Ross started working on a car that would be road legal and different to any car ever constructed in New Zealand before.

It caused a sensation when it was launched at the Auckland Motor Show in 1983, even making it onto TVNZ news. Indeed, Ross was caught off guard by the number of people willing to put cash upfront to ensure a place in the queue for one of these cars.

Initially, he intended to sell the car as a kit only: a situation in which the client provided the engine, drivetrain and suspension. The factory would then assemble the car with

whatever options the client wanted. After the show, Ross was visited by Frank Hart, of Summit engineering, and they discussed his becoming involved in building the Heron MJ1. Frank convinced Ross that a car this good should only be sold brand new, and in turnkey form. Better still, Frank offered to form a partnership with Ross and provide the funding to get the car into production.

Excited about the future of the car, Ross started gearing up for mass production. Selling a brand-new car is very different from selling one with second-hand parts provided by the client. Several changes had to be made, including the procurement of engines, instruments and running gear. Ross took care of the body development and anything required to make production easier. Summit covered the employee salaries and refurbished any part that could not be bought brand new.

Due to development costs required to modify the car so that it could be sold as a brand-new vehicle, the first few cars were sold at a loss, and, although the last cars were sold at a profit, the price had risen to \$27,000 – relatively cheap when you consider that a top-of-the-range Holden Commodore was selling for \$31,000 (about \$70,000 in today's money). In my opinion this was a good value supercar for the day, but Summit was not happy about the time it took for the car to break even; believing the market for this car would not generate enough cash in the future, Summit pulled the plug after only a couple of years of production.

Including the five cars that were built to use up parts once production had ended,



around 25 cars were produced. Of these, one was stolen and driven into the Waikato river in 1987, while another was torched by vandals. It is believed that the remaining 23 or so still survive to this day.

New Zealand was a different country then. These days it would be impossible to prove to the authorities that a car with a fibreglass monocoque chassis was safe without spending a fortune on engineer reports and crash testing.

Despite being the right car for the right time, the Heron did not gain enough traction to stand on its own merit. Some discussions were initiated with a view to gaining compliance to sell the car in Australia, but they never came to fruition.



**HULME: ALMOST BUT NOT QUITE**

This car is the only car on this list that got plenty of publicity around the world. It even made it onto an episode of the Australian version of the *Top Gear* TV series. It was first conceived in 2002 by Jock Freemantle, an engineer for Rolls-Royce, and award-winning industrial designer Tony Parker of Massey University.

After travelling the world, a large chunk of it done on a motorcycle, Jock came upon New Zealand and decided to make it his permanent home. Jock had been considering buying a Saker SV1 (see the September/October 2021 issue of *NZ Classic Driver*), but after seeing some sketches drawn by Tony Parker he thought it would be more fun to create a new supercar from the ground up.

Most of the who's who in the New Zealand homegrown motoring industry had some sort of involvement with this creation. Tony Parker designed the body and Bruce Turnbull did a lot of work with the chassis. *NZ Classic Driver's* founder, Allan Dick, suggested that it should be called the 'Hulme', and Greta Hulme, wife of Denny Hulme, gave Jock the

rights to use her late husband's name on the car. Initially, the car was to have boasted a carbon-fibre chassis and be powered by a BMW V8.

The first full-scale mock-up of the car appeared in 2004 in coupé guise, looking more like a 'Hot Wheels' concept than a road-going supercar. The mock-up lacked an interior, window glass and an engine. It was displayed all around the world but struggled to find a major investor. However, hundreds of everyday people did invest time and money into the project. Jock even sold his house to find extra funds in the early stages of the project.

By 2009, the first driveable prototype was released to the public. This was a cheaper roadster version of the car. The roadster, known as the Hulme CanAm, strongly resembled the original coupé but, to reduce production costs, many changes had been made. The BMW engine had been replaced by a simpler yet highly tuned GM LS V8. This was a nice nod to the past and the wins that Denny Hulme had notched up driving a Chevrolet-powered McLaren back in the '60s.

With this engine, the car had a 0-100km/h time of a little under three seconds, easily permitting the CanAm's entry into the supercar class. The prototype featured a steel space-frame chassis. Although a lot of work had been done on the carbon-fibre chassis, it is not known if any were produced.

Jock believed there was a better chance of finding an investor to get the roadster into production and that sales of the roadster would eventually help fund the coupé. The roadster prototype was the car that was driven on *Top Gear*. However, once again, despite being driven and praised by great names such as Chris Amon and Paul Radisich, Jock continued to struggle to find major investors.

In 2013, Jock was diagnosed with cancer. Despite this, he was still enthusiastic about the Hulme. As late as April 2016, he told Allan Dick that he and his team were now pushing ahead with stage two, the coupé version. Despite the many setbacks, Jock and his team never lost sight of the dream but, sadly, Jock Freemantle quietly passed away in December of 2016. ☹



1, 2 and 3. Hulme supercar (Photo Patrick Harlow); 4. Jock Freemantle's original full size coupé mock-up; 5. Amanda McLaren (left) stands with a group of friends admiring the original Hulme F1 concept, March 2005 (Photo B Worboys).