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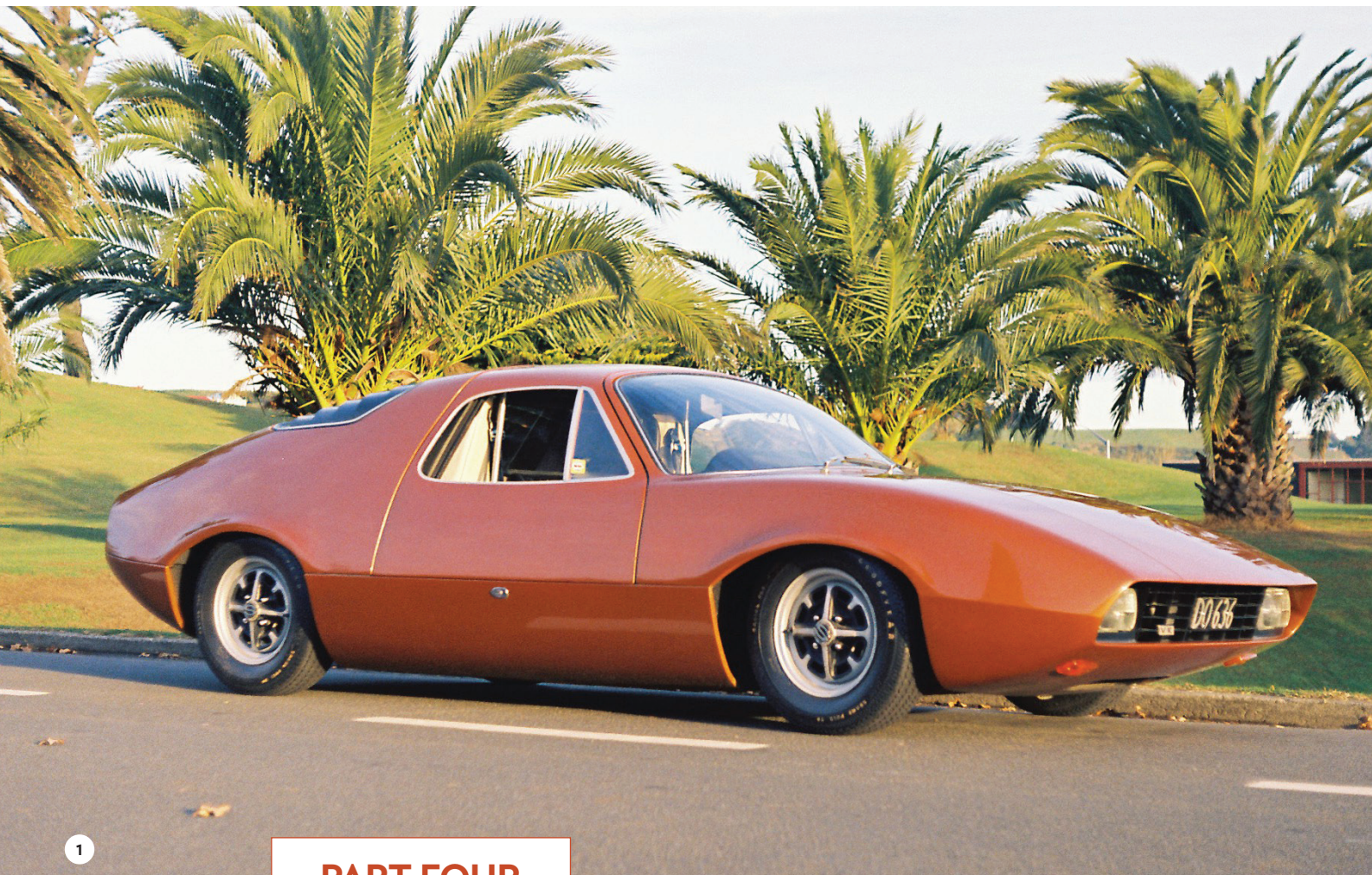
ISSUES

ALLAN DICK ON NZ CLASSIC DRIVER'S ORIGINS & THE CARS OF OUR LIVES
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CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF JAGUAR ORIGINS

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PART FOUR

NEW ZEALAND'S SUPERCARS

In the last of this series featuring New Zealand supercars, Patrick looks at three concept cars. Two were produced by A-grade mechanics and one by a farmer looking for a challenge. All three were intended for production, but none progressed beyond the prototype stage.

Words: **PATRICK HARLOW**

The automotive entrepreneurship of the last century is almost non-existent in this new millennium. The idea of creating an automotive dream car has just about been lost in a sea of legislation and paperwork that requires more of a lawyer's skill to navigate than creative flair. With the ever-increasing

amount of high-tech, computerised safety features that are now required in cars by most people, creating a piece of automotive art is simply too high a mountain to climb.

While it is still possible to develop a unique, exotic-looking car on a tight budget, as far as I know none are being developed in New Zealand at the present time.



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VAMPIRE VK (1972)

The Vampire is an original car and looks as if it would have been quite comfortable on the set of the 1960s *Thunderbirds* TV series, or even better on the set of *UFO* – a Gerry Anderson live-action, sci-fi TV series of the same era.

In the mid-1960s, Vince Keats was working as an A-grade mechanic in Whanganui (or Wanganui, as it was known at that time). Up to that point, most of his life had been spent repairing cars but one morning it occurred to him that it might be fun to build a car completely from scratch. If that was not enough of a challenge, he decided to build it with a midship-placed engine.

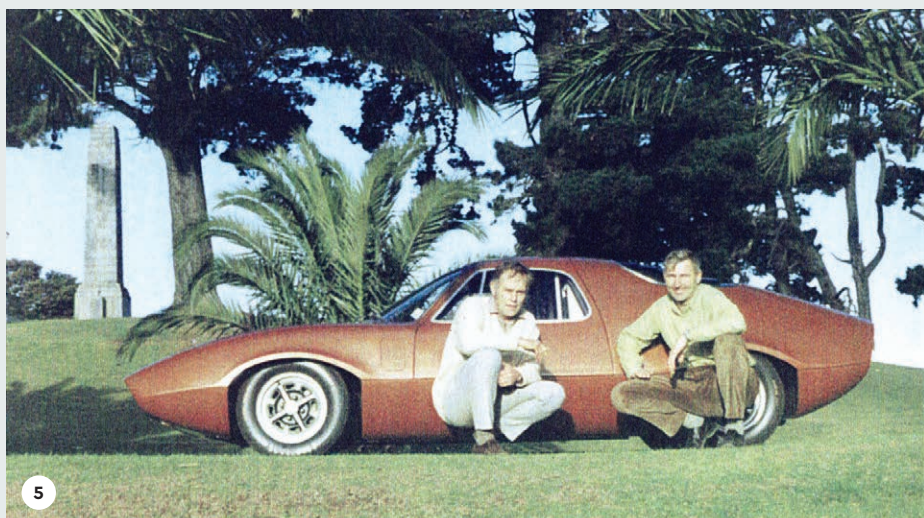
With only a vague idea of what the completed car would look like, Vince got on with the job of building the chassis. Conveniently, at the time he was helping well-known local racing driver Graham Lawrence with his racing car. Because Graham was racing Cortina GTs, it made sense for Vince to use a Cortina 1500 GT engine in his car as well.

It took about three years to complete the chassis and suspension, but once everything was plumbed in, Vince decided to see how it handled on the road. At the time the car was a

bare chassis, so the driver was fully exposed to the elements – which is how a wasp that had been minding its own business found itself up his right trouser leg! Naturally, as any bloke would do in such a situation, an emergency test of the brakes was performed, followed by a quick exit and a lot of jumping about to make sure the wasp got nowhere near any vital areas!

Nick Grotenhuis, a draughtsman who

1. Looking like something from the '70s TV show, *UFO* (Photo Vince Keats); 2. The Vampire chassis ready for a run. Note the jaunty angle of the rego plate – times were simpler back then! (Photo Vince Keats); 3. The Vampire's interior (Photo Vince Keats); 4. Overhead shot shows the Vampire's configuration (Photo Vince Keats); 5. The Vampire's creators, Nick Grotenhuis with Vince Keats (Photo Vince Keats).



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1. Elegant rear three-quarter view (Photo Vince Keats); 2. The Vampire's gull-wing doors (Photo Vince Keats); 3. The Vampire VK shows off its futuristic lines (Photo Vince Keats).

worked for New Zealand Railways, happened to be driving past at that moment. Nick was a passionate car designer and, by the time Vince had dealt with the wasp, he had decided that he wanted to put one of his body designs on Vince's chassis. This initial roadside contact marked the beginning of a friendship that would last until Nick passed away in the 1990s.

The design that the pair eventually agreed upon was well ahead of its time. To ensure that they got everything in proportion, Vince constructed a 1/12 scale model of the finished car. An interesting feature of Nick's design is the inclusion of gull-wing doors. However, as this was before the days of gas struts, Vince had to come up with a spring-and-cable contraption to open the doors and hold them up.

Up until Nick got involved, Vince had been calling the car the VK as in 'Vince Keats'.

Around 1971, Nick proposed a couple of ideas; the first was to call it the 'Vampire' – a catchy name that would get more attention. Vince warmed to the idea and the car became known as the Vampire VK.

Nick's second idea was to put the car into production. He believed that if they used the more powerful Cortina 1600 GT motor, they could build it for about \$4,000 (around \$63,000 in today's money). For a little extra, the Vampire VK could be offered with a 2.0-litre motor.

Secrets were hard to keep in Whanganui, with the local community already becoming aware of the car. The organisers of the up-and-coming Whanganui-based New Zealand Motor Show heard about the Vampire VK and wanted the car to be the centrepiece of their event. Vince and Nick's car was something of a sensation with show-goers. However, like all sensations, it was not

long before it was replaced with something else; its last public appearance came just a few months later in November, at the Auckland Motor Show.

Sadly, the car never went into production. The Vampire was very much a concept car, and a lot of development needed to be done to address some of its shortcomings, not the least of which was the manufacture of a curved rear windscreen. The gull-wing doors sort of worked but were not good enough for a production car.

For the last 35 years, the Vampire VK has been owned by Bernard Matthews of Invercargill. He began to restore it recently, and the car is now back to its original copper-bronze colour. Since 1972, the Vampire has only covered 25,700km (16,000 miles) and, hopefully one day, this one-off Kiwi special will once again be doing the rounds at automotive shows.

HERON MJ 2+2 (1987)

To date, only two New Zealand car manufacturers went as far as to design a replacement model for an existing production vehicle. All of our other locally produced cars have been one-hit wonders, with no thought given to a replacement model.

By the end of 1984, production of the Heron MJ1 was underway in a small factory in Rotorua. Ross Baker, an A-grade car mechanic, had single-handedly designed this supercar with a unique fibreglass monocoque chassis. With cars now rolling out of the factory, he started to think about the next generation of Herons.

When you are manufacturing a supercar, the car that supersedes another has to be not only better looking but also endowed with better performance and comfort.

By day, Ross was heavily involved in sorting out all the production problems involved with producing the MJ1 for the New Zealand market. Work on its replacement, known as the MJ 2+2, could only happen in the evenings. In the US, Chevrolet were able to budget hundreds of millions of dollars for the development of their next Corvette, employing lots of people in white coats who had plenty of clever ideas – but things were a little different in Rotorua. The Heron design studio was an oversized garage under the Baker family house. His assistant was Chris Cooke, a gentleman who had neither qualifications nor a white coat, just a lot of common sense and enthusiasm. The budget was whatever cash Ross could find in his pockets, and they were not very deep.

The MJ 2+2 shared nothing in common with the MJ1 other than the design premise of having a fibreglass monocoque body. Every dimension was different, and it was an all-round bigger car. The straight-edged lines of the MJ1 had given way to curves. The hardest choice was which donor car to use; it had to be reasonably common, cheap, reliable, and easy to upgrade with go-faster bits.

The Japanese Mazda 626/Ford Telstar ticked all the boxes. However, like the Skoda 110 parts used in the MJ1, the Mazda lacked sports-car street cred. Unlike the Skoda 110, it was one of New Zealand's best-selling cars in the 1980s and 1990s. It was also very popular on the Japanese home market, which naturally generated a considerable range of aftermarket parts that could be added to improve performance.

The wooden buck took shape quite quickly, but disaster would strike when Summit Engineering decided to stop production of the Heron MJ1 sports car in 1986. With no money coming in from MJ1 sales, Ross had to scramble to find other design jobs and



1. Spoilers and side skirts were not part of Ross Baker's original design (Photo Patrick Harlow); 2. Dramatic rear three-quarter view of the 2+2 Heron (Photo Patrick Harlow); 3. Cramped engine bay filled with a supercharged 3.0-litre Mitsubishi V6 (Photo Patrick Harlow); 4. Telstar instrument cluster finishes the Heron's supercar look (Photo Patrick Harlow).

further work on the MJ 2+2 buck became a low priority, with progress continuing as time permitted. In 1988 the MJ 2+2 was pushed to the back of the shed and Ross moved on to other projects. All the plugs had been completed, including the interior, boot and doors.

That would have been the end of it had Ross not received a visit from Roy Hoare three years later. Roy had driven up from Lower Hutt to convince Ross to build him another Heron MJ1 body. However, when he saw the MJ 2+2, he decided that he wanted to build one. Ross tried to talk him out of it as he had no moulds for the MJ 2+2. But Roy was adamant and agreed to fund the manufacturing cost of the moulds.

When Roy picked up his body in 1992, Ross was certain that he would never see the car again. He knew that a lot of research was still required to sort out suspension, wheel offsets, steering, wiring, the fuel tank and even such things as pop-up headlight

mechanisms still had to be sorted. Although it had a windscreen, the curved side windows were unique to the MJ 2+2 and, at that point, did not exist. If that was not enough, Roy would still have to get a fibreglass monocoque body through the newly instigated LVVTA certification system if he wanted to drive it on New Zealand roads.

Ross would meet Roy again in 1999, when he was crossing a street in Rotorua. Naturally, Ross had to ask how the project was progressing. With a big grin on his face, Roy asked Ross if he wanted to go for a ride in it. The car even had air-conditioning. The only difference between the car Ross envisioned and the car shown in the pictures are the front and rear spoilers, along with the side skirts that were added by Roy.

A second MJ 2+2 body was pulled from the moulds during the 1990s. In 2020 the still-bare shell was purchased by a gentleman in Hamilton and is on track to being finished, hopefully by the end of this year.





GOODWIN GT MK2 (1974)

The Vampire VK was not the only Kiwi concept car on display at the 1972 Wanganui Motor Show. Parked in a different corner was another concept car – the Goodwin GT. Despite years of hunting, I have not been able to find any information about this car and only knew of its existence due to a grainy black-and-white photo I have from the now-defunct *Motorman* magazine. Then, *NZ Classic Driver* ran the first story in my series on forgotten Kiwi cars. John Lee read the story and sent a letter to the editor.

“Brian Goodwin built a car called the Goodwin GT back in the 1970s/'80s. We were both sheep and beef farmers back then. Brian was an interesting guy; when we first met, he had a VW with a Porsche industrial engine in it. I was into VWs and Porsches at the same time, and we developed a friendship. I remember seeing the Wanganui Show car in Tauranga, years ago. This was a one-off car based on a VW chassis but a step on the way towards another car, the Mk2 that he was going to put into production.”

Thanks to John Lee, I was able to track down Tony Gilbertson in Hastings who had further information on the Goodwin GT Mk2. When Tony met Brian, Brian was temporarily living as a townie in Havelock North. The Mk2 was 70 per cent finished, with most of the mechanical bits and 1.6-litre engine being sourced from a 1964 Porsche 356SC. Brian, being a bit of a perfectionist, wanted the Mk2 to be fully sorted before it went into production. Hence, the road-legal Wanganui Motor Show car was sold to help fund the Mk2's manufacture.

Tony said that Brian was forever modifying the car. One example of this was that he

believed if he shortened it by an inch, it would greatly improve its road presence. This involved the construction of another set of moulds. Later, even when the car was in its final paint, something would catch his eye and out would come a jigsaw or a can of bog to tweak the design just that little bit more. When Tony saw the car, he thought it was production-ready with a modern interior, wind-up windows and a full set of instrumentation, but to Brian it was still not quite right.

Later, Brian bought another development kiwifruit block and moved to Katikati. Tony and John lost touch and it would be years before they met up again. Over that time Brian had become disillusioned with the Mk2; it was either sold or scrapped and he had moved onto other projects. The colour photos shown here are the only images known to be in existence. We may never know what happened to this beautiful looking car unless another reader of this story can shed more light and add another piece to the puzzle. ☺



1. Goodwin GT Mk2 almost ready for production (Photo John Lee); 2. The Goodwin GT on display at the show (Photo *Motorman*); 3. The Goodwin GT and the Vampire VK both appeared at the 1972 Wanganui Motor Show; 4. The Goodwin GT Mk2 (Photo Tony Gilbertson).